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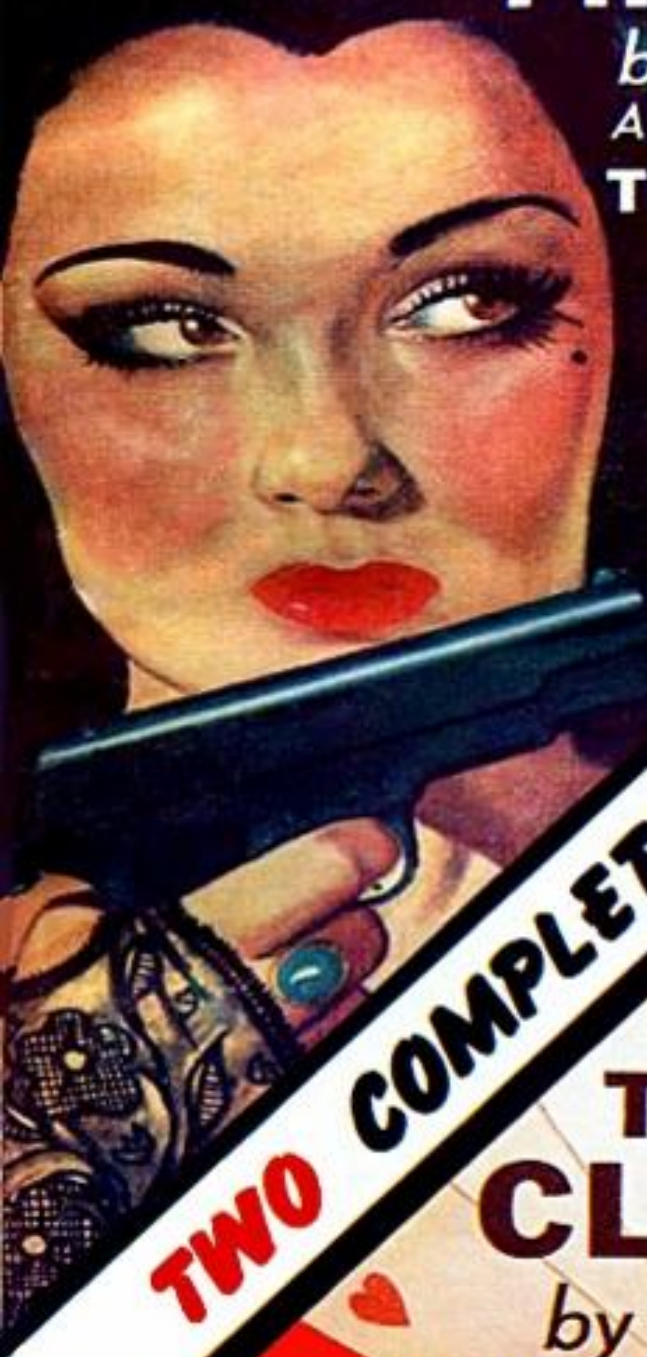
No. 69  
WINTER

## PHANTOM LADY

by WILLIAM IRISH

Author of

THE BRIDE WORE  
BLACK



**TWO COMPLETE BOOK-LENGTH MYSTERIES**

## The CLEAN-UP

by JOE BARRY

A Rush Henry crime adventure







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# PHANTOM LADY

**By WILLIAM IRISH**

An orange hat one night. A stocking seam and the heel of her shoe another night. When, in heaven's name, would they have a whole woman to fit between the two? The woman who could save a life in the death cell . . . the phantom lady whom Scott Henderson escorted the night his wife was murdered . . . the elusive, frustrating female who made up his one and only alibi??????

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## THE CLEAN-UP

**By JOE BARRY**

Even the voices of the courageous were hushed in fear as they pleaded for a clean-up of their festering city. When tough Rush Henry took on the job (he never avoided a challenge) he swaggered into graft-ridden, corrupt Forest City with fingers crossed and his luck in his pocket, for the Grim Reaper was already firmly perched on his shoulder.

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T. T. SCOTT, President

MALCOLM REISS, Gen. Mgr.

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# PHANTOM LADY

By WILLIAM IRISH

An orange hat one night. A stocking seam and the heel of her shoe another night. When, in heaven's name, would they have a whole woman to fit between the two. The woman who could save a life in the death cell . . . for Henderson's one and only alibi was this elusive, frustrating phantom lady.

*The Hundred and Fiftieth Day  
Before the Execution*

THE NIGHT was young, and so was he. But the night was sweet, and he was sour. You could see it coming from yards away, that sullen look on his face. It was one of those sustained angers, pent-up but smoldering, that last for hours sometimes. People glancing at him as he strode by wondered what he had to be that ill-tempered about. It wasn't his health. Anyone that could swing along at the gait he was, must be in the pink of condition. It wasn't his circumstances. His clothes had that carelessly expensive hang that can't be faked. It wasn't his age. If he had thirty beat at all, it was by months, not years. He wouldn't have been half bad-looking if he'd given his features a chance to unpucker.

He hadn't intended going in where he finally did. You could tell that by the abrupt way he braked as he came opposite to it. He probably wouldn't have even noticed the place if the intermittent neon over it hadn't glowed on just then, as he was passing. It said "Anselmo's" in geranium-red, and it dyed the whole sidewalk under it as though somebody had spilled a bottle of ketchup.

He swerved aside, on what was obviously an impulse, and went barging in. He found himself in a long, low-ceilinged room, three or four steps below street-level. It wasn't a large place nor, at the moment, a crowded one. It was restful on the eyes; the lighting was subdued, amber-colored, and directed upwards. There was a line of little bracketed nooks with tables set in them running down both walls. He ignored them and went straight back to the bar, which was semicircular, facing toward the entrance from the rear wall. He didn't look to see who was at it, or

whether anyone was at it at all. He just dumped his topcoat on top of one of the tall chairs, dropped his hat on top of it, and then sat down on the next one over.

A blurred white jacket approached just above the line of his downcast vision and a voice said, "Good evening, sir."

"Scotch," he said, "and a little water. I don't give a damn how little."

The water stayed on untouched, after its companion-glass was empty.

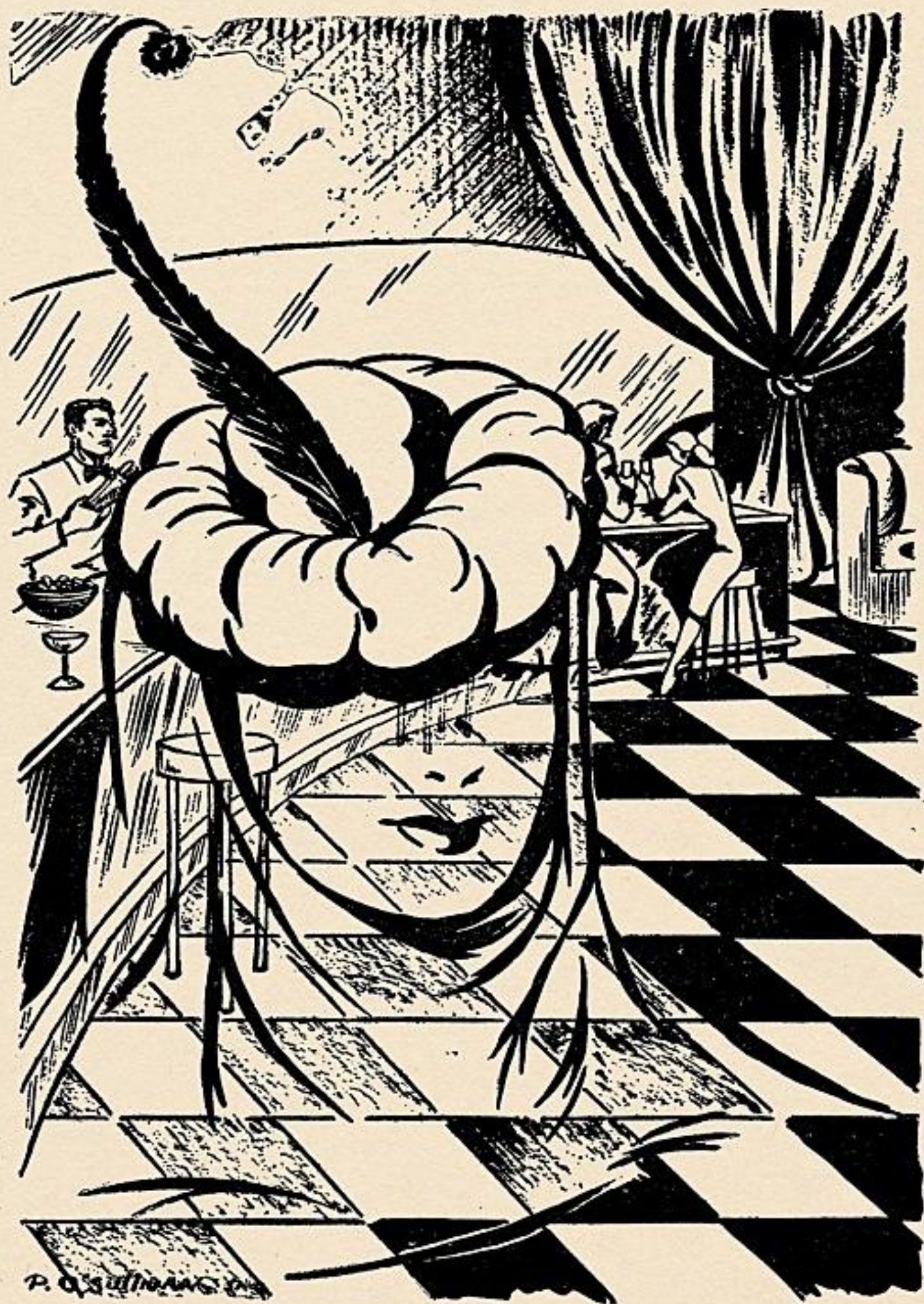
He must have, subconsciously at the moment of sitting down, glimpsed a bowl of pretzels or some sort of accessory like that over to his right. He reached out that way without looking. His hand came down, not on a twisted baked shape but on a straight smooth one that moved slightly.

He swung his head around, took his hand off the other one that had just preceded his into the bowl. "Sorry," he grunted. "After you."

He swung his head around to his own business once more. Then he turned again, gave her a second look. He kept on looking from then on, didn't quit after that. Still in a gloomy, calculating way, though.

The unusual thing about her was the hat. It resembled a pumpkin, not only in shape and size but in color. It was a flaming orange, so vivid it almost hurt the eyes. It seemed to light up the whole bar, like a low-hanging garden-party lantern. Stemming from the exact center of it was a long thin cockrel feather, sticking straight up like the antenna of an insect. Not one woman in a thousand would have braved that color. She not only did, she got away with it. She looked startling, but good, not funny. The rest of her was toned-down, reticent in black, almost invisible against that beacon of a hat.







Meanwhile, she was nibbling a pretzel and trying to seem unaware of his steady scrutiny. When she broke off nibbling, that was the only sign she gave of being aware that he had quitted his own chair, come over, and was standing beside her.

What he had to say, with terse directness, was: "Are you doing anything?"

"I am, and I'm not." Her answer was well-mannered, but not encouraging. She didn't smile nor commit herself to receptiveness in any way. She carried herself well; whatever else she was, she wasn't cheap.

There was no trace of the masher in his own manner, either. He went on, briskly impersonal, "If you've got an engagement, just say so. I'm not trying to annoy you."

"You're not annoying me—so far." She got her meaning across perfectly: my decision is still held in the balance.

His eyes went to the clock up over the bar, facing both of them. "Look, it's ten after six, right now."

Her own eyes sought it in turn. "So it is," she agreed neutrally.

He had taken out a wallet, meanwhile, extracted a small oblong envelope from one of the compartments. This he opened in turn, and prodded forward two salmon-colored pasteboard strips, forking them apart as he did so. "I have two perfectly good tickets here for the show at the Casino. Row Double-A, aisle-seats. Care to take it in with me?"

"You're abrupt about it." Her eyes went from the tickets to his face.

"I have to be abrupt about it." He was scowling as deeply as ever. He wasn't even looking at her at all, he was looking at the tickets, with an air of resentment. "If you have a previous engagement say so, and I'll try to find somebody else to share them with me."

A flicker of interest showed in her eyes. "These tickets must be used up at all costs?"

"It's a matter of principle," he said sullenly.

"This could be mistaken for a very crude attempt at, shall we say, striking up an acquaintanceship," she let him know. "The reason I don't think it is, is it's so blunt, so unvarnished, it couldn't be anything but just what you say it is."

"It isn't." His face was still set in flinty

lines.

She had veered slightly toward him on her chair by now. Her way of accepting was to remark, "I've always wanted to do something of this sort. I'd better do it now. The chance mayn't recur—at least not in a genuine form—for a long time."

He armed her down. "Shall we make an agreement before we start? It may make it simpler afterward, when the show is over."

"That depends on what it is."

"We're just companions for an evening. Two people having dinner together, seeing a show together. No names, no addresses, no irrelevant personal references and details. Just—"

She supplied: "Two people seeing a show together, companions for an evening. I think that's very sensible, in fact necessary, understanding, so let's abide by it. It does away with a great deal of self-consciousness, and perhaps even an occasional lie." She offered him her hand, and they shook briefly on it. She smiled for the first time. She had a rather likeable smile; reserved, not too sugary.

He motioned the barman over, tried to pay for both drinks.

"I'd already paid for mine before you came in," she told him. "I was just coasting along on it."

The barman took a small tablet out of the pocket of his jacket, pencilled "1 Scotch—60" on the top leaf, tore it off and presented it to him.

They were numbered, he noticed, and he saw that he'd drawn a large, beetling, black "13" in the upper corner. He gave a wry grin, handed it back with the requisite amount, turned and went after her.

She had preceded him toward the entrance.

He forefingered a taxi waiting a few car-lengths away. One cruising past at the moment, for whom the signal had not been intended, tried to chisel in on the hail. The first one frustrated it by rolling up into position ahead of it, but not without a slight scraping of fenders and snatches of belligerent repartee. By the time the competition had sidled off again and the first driver had cooled sufficiently to turn his attention to his fares-to-be, she was already ensconced inside.

Her host had waited a moment by the



driver's seat to give him the destination. "Maison Blanche," he said, and then followed her in.

The light was on, and they let it stay that way.

Presently he heard her give a little gratified chuckle, and following the direction of her eyes, grinned sparingly in accompaniment. Cabmen's license-photos are seldom examples of great portrait-beauty, but this one was a caricature, with its pitcher-ears, receding chin, and pop-eyes. The name identifying it was memorably curt and alliterative: "Al Alp."

His mind took note of it, then let it go again.

The Maison Blanche was an intimate-type dining-room, renowned for the excellence of its food. It was one of those places over which a hush of appreciation seems to hang, even at their busiest hours. No music nor distraction of any other sort was allowed to interfere with its devotees' singleness of purpose.

In the foyer she separated from him. "Will you excuse me a moment while I go in and repair the ravages of Time? Go in and sit down awhile, don't wait, I'll find you."

A headwaiter greeted him at the dining-room entrance. "One, sir?"

"No, I have a reservation for two." And then he gave the name. "Scott Henderson."

He found it on his list. "Ah, yes." He glanced over the guest's shoulder. "Are you alone, Mr. Henderson?"

"No," Henderson answered noncommittally.

It was the only vacant table in sight. It was in a secluded position, set back into an indentation in the wall, so that its occupants could only be seen frontally, were screened from the rest of the diners on three sides.

When she appeared at the dining-room entrance presently, she was hatless, and he was surprised at how much the hat had been able to do for her. There was something flat about her. The light had gone out; the impact of her personality was soggy, limp. She was just some woman in black, with dark-brown hair; something that blocked the background, that was all.

Not a head that turned remained turned a second longer than necessary, or carried back any continuing memory of what it

had seen.

The headwaiter, momentarily engaged in tossing a salad, was not on hand to guide her. Henderson stood up to show her where he was, and she did not strike directly through the room, he noticed, but made her way unobtrusively around two sides of it, which was the longer but the far less conspicuous way.

The hat, which she had been carrying at arm's length beside her, she placed on the third chair of their table, and partly covered it with the edge of the cloth, possibly to protect it from stains.

"Do you come here often?" she asked.

He pointedly failed to hear her.

"Sorry," she relented, "that comes under the heading of personal background."

Their table-waiter had a mole on his chin. He couldn't help noticing that.

He ordered for them without consulting her. She listened attentively, gave him an appreciative glance when he had finished.

It was uphill work getting started. There were heavy restrictions on her choice of topics, and she had his leaden mood to combat as well.

"Don't you want to take your gloves off?" he said at one point. They were black, like everything else about her but the hat.

She stripped the right one off immediately. She took a little longer with the left.

He carefully refrained from seeing the wedding-band, looked out and across at something else. But he could tell she knew that he had.

She was a good conversationalist, without being spectacular about it. She was dexterous, too, managed to eschew the obvious, the banal, the dry; the weather, the newspaper-headlines, the food they were engaged with.

"This crazy South American, this Mendoza, in the show we're seeing tonight: when I first saw her a year or so ago, she had hardly any accent at all. Now, with every engagement she has up here, she seems to unlearn more English, acquire a heavier one than the time before. One more season and she'll be back in pure Spanish."

He gave one-third of a smile. She was cultured, he could tell that about her. Only someone cultured could have gotten away with what she was doing tonight and not



made a ghastly mess of it.

Toward the end, he caught her studying his necktie. He looked down at it questioningly. "Wrong color?" he suggested. It was a solid, without any pattern.

"No, quite good, in itself," she hastened to assure him. "Only, it doesn't match—it's the one thing that doesn't go with everything else you—Sorry, I didn't mean to criticize," she concluded.

He glanced down at it a second time, with a sort of detached curiosity, as though he hadn't known until now, himself, just which one it was he had put on. Almost as though he were surprised to find it on him. He destroyed a little of the tonal clash she had indicated by thrusting the edge of his dress-handkerchief down out of sight into his pocket.

He lit their cigarettes, they stayed with their cognacs awhile, and then they left.

It was only in the foyer—at a full-length glass out in the foyer—that she finally put her hat on again. And at once she came alive, she was something, somebody, again. It was wonderful, he reflected, what that hat could do to her. It was like turning on the current in a glass chandelier.

A gigantic theatre-doorman, fully six-four, opened the cab-door for them when it had driven up, and his eyes boggled comically as the hat swept past, almost directly under them. He had white walrus-tusk mustaches, almost looked like a line-drawing of a theatre-doorman in the *New Yorker*. His bulging eyes followed it from right to left as its wearer stepped down and brushed past him. Henderson noted this comic bit of optic by-play, to forget it again a moment later. If anything is ever really forgotten.

The completely deserted theatre-lobby was the best possible criterion of how late they actually were. Even the ticket-taker at the door had deserted his post by now. An anonymous silhouette against the stage-glow, presumably an usher, accosted them just inside the door, sighted their tickets by flashlight, then led them down the aisle, trailing an oval of light backhand along the floor to guide their advancing feet.

Their seats were in the first row. Almost too close.

They sat patiently watching the montage of the revue, scene blending into scene with the superimposed effect of motion-

picture dissolves. She would beam occasionally, even laugh outright now and then. The most he would do was give a strained smile, as though under obligation to do it. The noise, color, and brilliance of lighting reached a crescendo, and then the curtains rippled together, ending the first half.

The house-lights came on, and there was a stir all around them as people got up and went outside.

"Care for a smoke?" he asked her.

"Let's stay where we are. We haven't been sitting as long as the rest of them." She drew the collar of her coat closer around the back of her neck. The theatre was stifling already, so the purpose of it, he conjectured, was to screen her profile from observation as far as possible.

"Come across some name you've recognized?" she murmured presently, with a smile.

He looked down and found his fingers had been busily turning down the upper right-hand corner of each leaf of his program, one by one, from front to back. They were all blunted now, with neat little turned-back triangles superimposed one on the other. "I always do that, fidgety habit I've had for years. A variation of doodling, I guess you'd call it. I never know I'm doing it, either."

The trap under the stage opened and the orchestra started to file back into the pit for the second half. The trap-drummer was nearest to them, just across the partition-rail. He was a rodent-like individual, who looked as though he hadn't been out in the open air for ten years past. Skin stretched tight over his cheekbones, hair so flattened and glistening it almost looked like a wet bathing-cap with a white seam bisecting it. He had a little twig of a mustache, that almost seemed like smudge from his nose.

He didn't look outward into the audience at first; busied himself adjusting his chair and tightening something or other on his instrument. Then, set, he turned idly, and almost at once became aware of her and of the hat.

It seemed to do something for him. His vapid, unintelligent face froze into an almost hypnotic fascination. His mouth even opened slightly, like a fish's, stayed that way. He would try to stop staring at her every once in a while but she was on



his mind, he couldn't keep his eyes away.

Henderson sent such a sizzling glare at him that he turned back to his music rack forthwith and for good. You could tell, though, even with his head turned the other way, that he was still thinking about her, by the rather conscious, stiff way he held his neck.

Midway through the second half the main attraction of the show, Estela Mendoza, the South American sensation, appeared.

A sharp nudge from his seat-mate reached him even before he had had time to make the discovery for himself. He looked at her without understanding, then back to the stage again.

There was a distinct glitter of animosity visible in the expressive black eyes of the figure onstage, over and above her toothsome smile, as they rested on the identical replica of her own headgear, flaunted by his companion there in the very first row, where it couldn't be missed.

"Now I understand where they got the inspiration for this particular creation," she murmured ruefully.

"But why get sore about it? I should think she'd be flattered."

"It's no use expecting a man to understand. Steal my jewelry, steal the gold-fillings from my teeth, but don't steal my hat. And over and above that, in this particular case it's a distinctive part of her act, part of her trademark. It's probably been pirated, I doubt that she'd give permission to—"

"I suppose it is a form of plagiarism." He watched with slightly heightened interest, if not yet complete self-forgetfulness.

Her art was a simple thing. As real art always is. She kept rolling her eyes from side to side, throwing one hip out of joint at every step she took, and throwing little nosegays out to the women-members of the audience from a flat basket she carried slung at her side.

By the time she had run through two choruses every woman in the first two or three rows was in possession of one of her floral tokens. With the notable exception of Henderson's companion. "She purposely held out on me, to get even for the hat," she whispered knowingly. And as a matter of fact, every time the hitching, heel-

stamping figure on the stage had slowly worked her way past their particular vantage-point, there had been an ominous flash, an almost electrical crackling, visible in her fuse-like eyes as they glided over that particular location.

"Watch me call her on it," she remarked under her breath for his benefit. She clasped her hands together, just below her face, in vise-formation.

The hint was patently ignored.

She extended them out before her, at half arm's length, held them that way in solicitation.

The eyes on the stage slitted for a minute, then resumed their natural contour, strayed elsewhere.

Suddenly there was a distinct snap of the fingers from Henderson's companion. A crackling snap, sharp enough to top the music. The eyes rolled back again, glowered maniacally at the offender. Another flower came out and winged over, but still not to her.

"I never know when I'm beaten," he heard her mutter doggedly. Before he knew what she meant, she had risen to her feet, stood there in her seat, smiling beatifically, passively claiming her due.

For a moment there was a deadlock between the two. But the odds were too unequal. The performer, after all was said and done, was at the mercy of this individualistic spectator, for she had an illusion of sweetness and charm to maintain at all costs in the sight of the rest of the audience.

The alteration in the stature of Henderson's seat-mate also had an unforeseen result in another respect. As the hiphiker slowly made the return trip, the spotlight, obediently following her and slanted low, cut across the head and shoulders of this lone vertical impediment, standing up on the orchestra floor. The result was that the similarity of the two hats was brought explosively to everyone's attention. A centrifugal ripple of comment began to spread outward, as when a stone is dropped into heretofore still waters.

The performer capitulated and capitulated fast, to put an end to this odious comparison. Up came a blackmail-extorted flower, out it went over the footlights in a graceful little curve.

Henderson's companion had deftly



caught the token and subsided into her seat again with a gracious lip-movement. Only he detected the wordage that actually emerged: "Thank you—you Latin louse!" He choked on something in his throat.

At the final curtain, as they rose to go, he tossed his program onto the seat.

To his surprise she reached down for it, added it to her own, which she was retaining. "Just as a memento," she remarked.

"I didn't think you were sentimental."

"Not sentimental, strictly speaking. It's just that—I like to gloat over my own impulsiveness at times, and these things will help."

Impulsiveness? Because she had joined forces with him for the evening, without ever having seen him before, he supposed.

As they were fighting their way toward a taxi, in the melee outside the entrance, an odd little mischance occurred. They had already claimed their cab, but before they could get into it, a blind beggar approached, hovered beside her in mute appeal, alms-cup all but nudging her. The lighted cigarette she was holding was jarred from her fingers in some way, either by the beggar himself or someone nearby, and fell into the cup. Henderson saw it happen, she didn't. Before he could interfere the trustful unfortunate had thrust probing fingers in after it, and then snatched them back again in pain.

Henderson quickly dug the ember out for him himself, and put a dollar bill in his hand to make amends. "Sorry, old timer, that wasn't intentional," he murmured. Then noting that the sufferer was still blowing ruefully on his smarting finger, he added a second bill to the first, simply because the incident could have been so easily misconstrued as the height of calloused mockery, and he could tell by looking at her it hadn't been intended as such.

He followed her into the cab and they drove off. "Wasn't that pathetic?" was all she said.

He had given the driver no direction as yet.

"What time is it?" she asked presently.

"Going on quarter of twelve."

"Suppose we go back to Anselmo's, where we first met. We'll have a night-cap and then we'll part there. You go your way, and I'll go mine. I like completed

circles."

The bar was considerably more crowded now, when they got there, than it had been at six. However, he managed to secure a stool for her all the way around at the very end of the bar, up against the wall, and posted himself at her shoulder.

"Well," she said, holding her glass just an inch above bar-level and eyeing it speculatively, "hail and farewell. Nice having met you."

"Nice of you to say so."

They drank; he to completion, she only partially. "I'll remain here for a short while," she said by way of dismissal. She offered him her hand. "Good night—and good luck." They shook briefly, as acquaintances of an evening should. Then just as he was about to turn away, she crinkled her eyes at him in remonstrative afterthought. "Now that you've got it out of your system, why don't you go back and make up with her?"

He gave her a slightly surprised look.

"I've understood all evening," she said quietly.

## II

### *The Hundred and Fiftieth Day Before the Execution*

TEN MINUTES later and only eight blocks away he got out of the cab in front of an apartment-house.

He opened the vestibule-door with his own key.

There was a man hanging around in the lobby waiting for somebody.

Henderson passed him and pushed the elevator button.

The other had found a picture on the wall now, and was staring at it far beyond its merits.

The car arrived and he stepped in. He thumbed the six-button, the top of the rack. The lobby started to drop from sight, seen through the little diamond-shaped glass insert let into the shaft-door. Just before it did so he saw the picture-gazer, evidently impatient at being kept waiting this long by his prospective date, finally detach himself and take a preliminary step over toward the switchboard. Just a vignette, that was no possible concern of his.



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He got out on the sixth floor and fumbled for his latchkey.

He fitted it into his own door and opened it. The lights were out, it was pitch-dark on the other side of it. At this, for some reason or other, he gave a sound of scornful disbelief, deep in his throat.

He snapped a light-switch, and a small neat foyer came into existence. But the light only took care of just this one cubicle. Beyond the arched opening facing him across it, it was still dark.

He closed the door behind him, flung down his hat and coat on a chair out there. The silence, the continuing darkness, seemed to irritate him.

He called out a name, "Marcella!" He called it imperatively, and not particularly friendly.

The darkness didn't answer.

He strode into it, speaking in that same harsh, demanding tone as he went. "Come on, cut it out! You're awake, who do you think you're kidding? I saw the light in your bedroom-window from the street just now. Grow up, this isn't going to get us anywhere!"

The silence didn't answer.

He cut diagonally through the dark, toward some particular point on the wall, known by him by heart. He was grumbling in a less strident voice now. "Until I come back, you're wide awake! The minute you hear me, you're sound asleep! That's just dodging the issue!"

His arm was reaching out before him. The click came before it had touched anything. The sudden bath of light made him jump slightly; it had come too soon, before he was expecting it.

He looked along his own arm, and the switch was still inches out past it; they hadn't come together yet. There was a hand just leaving it, sidling away from it along the wall. His eyes raced up the sleeve the hand protruded from and found a man's face.

He gave a startled half-turn, and there was another one looking at him from that direction. He gave an additional turn, still further rearward, having nearly reversed himself now, and there was a third, directly behind him. The three stood impassive, motionless as statues, in a half-circle around him.

He was so stunned for a minute that

he stared questioningly around to see if it was his own apartment he'd entered.

His eyes came to rest on a cobalt-blue lamp-base on a table over by the wall. That was his. On a low-slung chair cocked out from a corner. That was his. On a photograph-folder standing on a cabinet. One panel held the face of a beautiful, pouting, doe-eyed girl with masses of curly hair. The other held his own face.

So it was his own home he'd come back to.

"What're you men doing in my apartment?" he rapped out.

They didn't answer.

"Who are you?"

They didn't answer.

"What do you want here? How'd you get in?" He called her name again. This time parenthetically, as though demanding of her an explanation of their presence here. The door toward which he'd turned his head as he did so remained obviously closed.

"Are you Scott Henderson?" They narrowed the semi-circle about him a little now.

"Yes, that's my name." He kept looking around toward that door that didn't open. "What is it? What's up?"

"And you live here, is that right?"

"Certainly I live here!"

"And you're the husband of Marcella Henderson?"

"Yes! Now listen, I want to know what this is about."

One of them did something with his palm, made some sort of a gesture with it that he failed to get in time. It only struck him after it was already over.

He tried to get over to that door and found that one of them, somehow, was in his way. "Where is she? Is she out?"

"She's not out, Mr. Henderson," one of them said quietly.

"Well if she's in there, why doesn't she come out?" His voice rose exasperatedly. "Talk, will you? Say something!"

"She can't come out, Mr. Henderson."

"Wait a minute, what was that you showed me just now, a police badge?"

"Now, take it easy, Mr. Henderson."

"Take it easy? But I want to know what's happened! Have we been robbed? Has there been an accident? Was she run over? Take your hands off me. Let



me go in there, will you?"

But they had three pairs of hands to his one. Each time he'd get rid of one pair, two more would hold him back somewhere else. He was rapidly working himself up into a state of unmanageable excitement. The next step would have been blows. The rapid breathing of the four of them filled the quiet room.

"I live here, this is my home! You can't do this to me! What right've you got to keep me out of my wife's bedroom—"

Suddenly they'd quit. The one in the middle made a little sign to the one nearest the door, said with a sort of reluctant indulgence: "All right, let him go in, Joe."

The obstructive arm he had been pressing against dropped so suddenly, he opened the door and went through almost off-balance, careening the first step or two of the way.

On the two beds were blue satin coverlets. One flat and smooth as ice, the other rounded over someone's hidden form. Someone sleeping, or someone ill. Covered up completely from head to foot, with just a stray wisp or two of curly hair escaping up at the top.

He'd stopped short. A look of white consternation crossed his face. "She's—she's done something to herself! Oh, the little fool—!"

He took sagging steps over to the bedside. He leaned down, touched her through the coverlet, found her rounded shoulder, shook it questioningly. "Marcella, are you all right—?"

Three pairs of eyes in a doorway, watching. Watching him fumble with a blue satin coverlet. His hand whipped down a narrow triangular corner of it.

There was a hideous, unbelievable moment, enough to scar his heart for life, while she grinned up at him. Grinned with a cadaverous humor that had become static. Her hair was rippling about her on the pillows in the shape of an open fan.

Hands interfered. He went backwards, draggingly, a step at a time. A flicker of blue satin and she was gone again. For good, forever.

"I didn't want *this* to happen," he said brokenly. "*This* wasn't what I was looking for—"

Three pairs of eyes exchanged glances, jotted that down in the notebooks of their

minds.

They took him out into the other room and led him over to a sofa. He sat down on it. Then one of them went back and closed the door.

He sat there quietly, shading his eyes with one hand as though the light in the room was too strong.

The ceiling of leaden silence began to come down closer, to weigh oppressively. Finally the one sitting across from him said, "We're going to have to talk to you."

"Will you give me just a minute more, please?" he said wanly. "I'm sort of shaken up—"

The one in the chair nodded with considerate understanding. The one by the window kept looking out. The one by the table kept turning the pages of a woman's magazine.

Finally Henderson pinched the corners of his eyes together as if to clear them. He said, quite simply: "It's all right now. You can begin."

It began so conversationally, so off-handedly, it was hard to tell it had even begun at all. Or that it was anything but just a tactful chat, to help them fill in a few general facts. "Your age, Mr. Henderson?"

"Thirty-two."

"Her age?"

"Twenty-nine."

"How long were you married?"

"Five years."

"Your occupation?"

"I'm in the brokerage business."

"About what time did you leave here tonight, Mr. Henderson?"

"Between five-thirty and six."

"Can you come a little closer than that?"

"I can narrow it for you, yes. I can't give you the exact minute the door closed after me. Say, somewhere between quarter of and five of six. I remember I heard six o'clock striking, when I'd gotten down as far as the corner; from the little chapel over in the next block."

"I see. You'd already had your dinner?"

"No." A split second went by. "No—I hadn't."

"You had your dinner out, in that case."

"I had my dinner out."

"Did you have your dinner alone?"

"I had my dinner out, without my wife. We'd arranged to take dinner out to-



gether tonight. Then at the last minute she complained of not feeling well, of having a headache, and—I went alone."

"Having words, anything like that?" This time the question was inaudible, it was so minor-keyed.

Henderson said, in an equally minor key, "We had a word or two, yes. You know how it is."

"But nothing serious, that right?"

"Nothing that would make her do anything like this, if that's what you're driving at."

"You're a very neat dresser, Mr. Henderson," the one in the chair observed at random.

Henderson gave him a half-disgusted look, didn't answer.

"It's great the way everything you've got on goes together."

"That's an art in itself," the former magazine-reader chimed in.

"Socks, and shirt, and pocket-handkerchief—"

"All but the tie," the one by the window objected.

"Why do you have to discuss anything like that at a time like this?" Henderson protested wearily.

"It should be blue, shouldn't it? Everything else is blue. It knocks your whole get-up silly. I'm not a fashion-plate, but y'know just looking at it does something to me—" And then he went on innocently, "How'd you happen to slip up on an item as important as the tie, when you went to all the trouble of matching everything else up? Haven't you got a blue tie?"

Henderson protested almost pleadingly, "What're you trying to do to me? Can't you see I can't talk about trifles like—"

He'd asked the question again, as tonelessly as before. "Haven't you got a blue tie, Mr. Henderson?"

Henderson ran his hand up through his hair. "Are you trying to drive me out of my mind?" He said it very quietly, as though this small-talk was almost unendurable. "Yes, I have a blue tie. Inside, on my tie-rack, I think."

"Then how'd you come to skip it when you were putting on an outfit like this? It cries out for it." The detective gestured disarmingly. "Unless, of course, you did have it on to begin with, changed your mind at the last minute, whipped it off and

put on the one you're wearing instead."

Henderson said, "What's the difference? Why do you keep this up?" His voice went up a note. "My wife is dead. I'm all cracked-up inside. What's the difference what color tie I did or didn't put on?"

It went on, as relentlessly as drops of water falling one by one upon the head. "Are you sure you didn't have it on originally, then change your mind—?"

His voice was smothered. "Yes, I'm sure. It's hanging from my tie-rack in there."

The detective said guilelessly, "No, it isn't hanging from your tie-rack. That's why I'm asking. You know those little vertical notches running down your tie-rack, like a fish's backbone? We found the one it belongs on, the one you usually kept it strung through, because that was the only vacant one on the whole gadget. And that was the lowest one of all, in other words all the ties on the upper ones overlapped it as they hung down straight. So you see, it was removed from *under* all the other ties, which means you must have gone there and selected it originally, not just pulled it off at random from the top. Now what bothers me is why, if you went to all the trouble of lifting up all your other ties and selecting that one from underneath, and withdrawing it from the rack, you then changed your mind and went back to the one you'd already been wearing all day at business, and which didn't go with your after-dark outfit."

Henderson hit himself smartly at the ridge of the forehead with the heel of one hand. He sprang up. "I can't stand this!" he muttered. "I can't stand any more of it, I tell you! Come out with what you're doing it for, or else stop it! If it's not on the tie-rack, then where is it? I haven't got it on! Where is it? You tell me, if you know! What's the difference where it is, anyway?"

"A great deal of difference, Mr. Henderson."

There was a long wait after that; so long that he started to get pale even before it had come to an end.

"It was knotted tight around your wife's neck. So tight it killed her. So tight it will have to be cut loose with a knife to get it off."



## III

*The Hundred and Forty-ninth Day  
Before the Execution*

A THOUSAND questions later, the early light of day peering in the windows made the room look different, somehow, although everything in it was the same, including the people.

One of them was in the bathroom, freshening up at the cold-water tap. You could hear him snorting through the open door. The other two kept smoking and moving restlessly around.

The one in the bathroom, his name was Burgess, came to the door. He was pressing drops of excess water out of his hair, as though he'd ducked his whole head in the washbasin. "Where're all your towels?" he asked Henderson, with odd-sounding commonplaceness.

"I was never able to find one on the rack myself," the latter admitted ruefully. "She—I'd always be given one when I asked for it, but I don't know to this day just where they're kept."

The detective looked around helplessly, dripping all over the doorsill. "D'you mind if I use the edge of the shower-curtain?" he asked.

"I don't mind," Henderson said with a sort of touching wistfulness.

It began again. It always began just when it seemed to have finally stopped for good.

"It wasn't just about two theatre-tickets. Why do you keep trying to make us believe it was that?"

He looked up at the wrong one first. He was still used to the parliamentary system of being looked at when spoken to. It had come from the one who wasn't looking at him.

"Because it was that. What should I say it was about, if that's all it was about? Didn't you ever hear of two people having words about a pair of theatre-tickets? It can happen, you know."

The other one said, "Come on, Henderson, quit stalling. Who is she?"

"Who is who?"

"Oh, don't start that again," his questioner said disgustedly. "That takes us back an hour and half or two hours, to where we were about four this morning.

Who is she?"

Henderson dug wearied fingers through his hair, let his head droop over in futility.

Burgess came out of the bathroom, tucking his shirt in. He took his wrist-watch out of his pocket, strapped it on. He scanned it idly, then he drifted aimlessly out into the foyer. He must have picked up the house-phone. His voice came back. "All right now, Tierney." Nobody paid any attention, least of all Henderson. He was half-asleep there with his eyes open, staring down at the carpet.

Burgess sauntered in again, moved around after that as if he didn't know what to do with himself. Finally he ended up at the window. He adjusted the shade a little, to get more light in. There was a bird on the sill outside. It quirked its head at him knowingly. He said, "C'mere a minute, Henderson. What kind of a bird is this, anyway?" And then when Henderson didn't move the first time, "C'mere. Hurry up, before he goes away." As though that were the most important thing in the world.

Henderson got up, and went over and stood beside him, and thus his back was to the room. "Sparrow," he said briefly. He gave him a look as if to say: That wasn't what you wanted to know.

"That's what I figured it was," Burgess said. And then, to keep him looking forward, "Pretty decent view you got from here."

"You can have it, bird and all," Henderson said bitterly.

There was a noticeable lull. All questioning had stopped.

Henderson turned away, then stopped where he was. There was a girl sitting there on the sofa, in the exact place where he'd just been himself until now. There hadn't been a sound to mark her arrival. Not the creak of a doorhinge, not the rustle of a garment.

The way the eyes of the three men dug into his face, all the skin should have peeled off it. He got a grip on it from the inside, held it steady. It felt a little stiff, like cardboard, but he saw to it that it didn't move.

She looked at him, and he at her. She was pretty. She was the Anglo-Saxon type, more so even than the Anglo-Saxons themselves are any more. Blue-eyed, and with



her taffy-colored hair uncurled and brushed straight across her forehead in a clean-looking sweep. The part was as distinct as a man's. She had a tan camel-hair coat drawn over her shoulders, with the sleeves empty. She was hatless, but was clutching a handbag. She was young, at that stage when they still believe in love and men. Or maybe she always would, was of an idealistic temperament. You could read it in the way she looked at him. There was practically incense burning in her eyes.

He moistened his lips slightly, nodded barely perceptibly, as to a distant acquaintance, whose name he could not recall, nor where they had met, but whom he didn't want to slight.

He seemed to have no further interest in her after that.

Burgess must have made some esoteric sign in the background. All of a sudden they were alone together, there was no one else in the room with them any more.

He tried to motion with his hand, but it was too late. The camel-hair coat was already propped up empty in the corner of the sofa, without her inside it. Then it slowly wavered and collapsed into a huddle. She had flung herself against him like some sort of a projectile.

He tried to get out of the way, sidestep. "Don't. Be careful. That's just what they want. They're probably listening to every word—"

"I have nothing to be afraid of." She took him by the the arms and shook him slightly. "Have you? Have you? You've got to answer me!"

"For six hours I've been fencing to keep your name out of it. How did they come to drag you into it? How did they hear of you?" He smacked himself heavily on the shoulder. "Damn it, I would have given my right arm up to here to keep you out!"

"But I want to be in things like this with you, when you're in them. You don't know very much about me, do you?"

The kiss kept him from answering. Then he said, "You've kissed me before you even know whether or not—"

"No I haven't," she insisted, breathing close to his face. "Oh, I couldn't be *that* wrong. Nobody could be. If I could be that wrong, then my heart ought to be

put in an institution for mental defectives. And I've got a smart heart."

"Well, tell your heart for me it's okay," he said sadly. "I didn't hate Marcella. I just didn't love her enough to go on with her, that's all. But I couldn't have killed her. I don't think I could kill anyone, not even a man—"

She buried her forehead against his chest, in a sort of ineffable gratitude. "Do you have to tell me that? Haven't I seen your face when a stray dog came up to the two of us on the street? When a dray-horse standing at the curb—Oh, this is no time to tell you, but why do you suppose I love you?"

She raised her face at last, and her eyes were all wet. She glanced over at the oblivious door, and the light on her face dimmed a little. "What about *them*? Do they think—?"

"I think it's about fifty-fifty, so far. They wouldn't have kept at me this long—How did they come to drag you into it?"

"Your message was there from six o'clock, when I got in last night. I hated to go to sleep without knowing one way or the other, so finally I called you back here, around eleven. They were already here in the place, and they sent someone right over to talk to me. I've had someone with me ever since."

"That's great, keeping you up all night long!" he said resentfully.

"I wouldn't have wanted to be asleep, knowing you were in trouble." Her fingers swept the curve of his face. "There's only one thing that matters. Everything else is beside the point. It'll be straightened out, it's got to be. They must have ways of finding out who actually did it—How much have you told them?"

"About us, you mean? Nothing. I was trying to keep you out of it."

"Well maybe that's what the hitch has been. They could sense you were leaving out something. I'm in it now, so don't you think it's better to tell them everything there is to know about us? We have nothing to be ashamed or afraid of. The quicker you do, the quicker it'll be over with. And they've probably already guessed, from my own attitude, we're pretty off-base about each—"

She stopped short. Burgess was back in



the room. He had the pleased look of a man who has gained his point. When the other two followed him in, Henderson even saw him give one of them the wink.

"There's a car downstairs that'll take you back to your own address, Miss Richman."

Henderson stepped over to him. "Look, will you keep Miss Richman out of this? It's unfair, she really has nothing—"

"That depends entirely on yourself," Burgess told him. "We only brought her over here in the first place because you made it necessary for us to remind you—"

"Anything I know, anything I can tell you, is yours," Henderson assured him earnestly, "if you see that she's not annoyed by newspapermen, that they don't get hold of her name and make a big thing of it."

"Always providing it's the truth," Burgess qualified.

"It will be." He turned to her, said in a softer voice than the one he'd been using, "You go now, Carol. Get some sleep, and don't worry, everything'll be all right in a little while."

She kissed him in front of all of them, as though proud to show the way she felt toward him.

Burgess went to the door with her, said to the cop posted outside it: "Tell Tierney nobody is to come near this young lady. No name, no questions answered, no information of any kind."

"Thanks," Henderson said fervently when he'd come back, "you're a regular guy."

The detective eyed him with acknowledgment. He sat down, took out a note book, ran a wavy cancellation line down two or three closely-scribbled pages, turned over to a fresh one. "Shall we start in?" he said.

"Let's start," Henderson acquiesced.

"You said you had words. Does that stand?"

"That stands."

"About two theatre-tickets? Does that stand?"

"About two theatre-tickets and a divorce. That stands."

"Now that comes in it. Then there was bad feeling between you?"

"No feeling of any kind, good or bad. Call it a sort of numbness. I'd already

asked her for a divorce some time ago. She knew about Miss Richman. I'd told her. I wasn't trying to hide anything. I was trying to do it the decent way. She refused the divorce. Walking out was no good. I didn't want that. I wanted Miss Richman for my wife. We stayed away from each other all we could, but it was hell, I couldn't stand it. Is all this necessary?"

"Very."

"I had a talk with Miss Richman night-before-last. She saw it was getting me. She said, 'Let me try, let me talk to her.' I said no. She said, 'Then you try again yourself. Try in a different way this time. Talk to her reasonably, try to win her over.' It went against the grain, but I gave it a spin. I telephoned from work and reserved a table for two at our old place. I bought two tickets to a show, first row on the aisle. At the last minute I even turned down an invitation from my best friend to go out on a farewell party with him. Jack Lombard, he's going to be in South America for the next few years; it was my last chance of seeing him before he sailed. But I stuck to my original intention; I was going to be nice to her if it killed me.

"Then when I got back here, nothing doing. She wasn't having any reconciliation. She liked things the way they were, and she was going to keep them that way. I got sore, I admit. I blew up. She waited until the last minute. Let me go ahead and shower and change clothes. Then she just sat there and laughed. 'Why don't you take her instead?' she kept needling me. 'Why waste the ten dollars?' So I phoned Miss Richman from here, right in front of her.

"I didn't even have that satisfaction. She wasn't in. Marcella laughed her head off. She made me know it.

"You know how it is when they laugh at you. You feel like a fool. I was so sore I couldn't see straight any more. I yelled: 'I'm going out on the street and invite the first girl I run into to come with me in your place! The first thing in curves and high heels that comes along, no matter who it is!' And I slammed on my hat and slammed out the door."

His voice ran down like a clock that needs winding. "And that's all. I can't do



any better than that for you, even if I tried. Because that's the truth, and the truth can't be improved on."

"And after you left here, does that timetable of your movements you already gave us still go?" Burgess asked.

"That still goes. Except that I wasn't alone, I *was* with someone. I did what I'd told her I'd do: stepped up to someone and invited her along. She accepted, and I was with her from then until just about ten minutes before I came back here."

"What time did you meet her, about?"

"Only a few minutes after leaving here. I stopped in at some bar or other, over on Fiftieth Street, and that was where I met her—" He did something with his finger. "Wait a minute, I just remembered. It was ten after six, to the dot."

"What bar was this?"

"I couldn't say, exactly. It had a red come-on over it, that's all I can remember at the moment."

"Can you prove you were in there at ten after six?"

"I've just told you I was. Why? Why is that so important?"

Burgess drawled: "Well, I could string you along, but I'm funny that way. I'll give it to you. Your wife died at exactly *eight after six*. The small wristwatch she wore shattered against the edge of the vanity-table as she fell to her death. It stopped at exactly—" He read from something: "6-08-15." He put it away again. "Now nothing with two legs, or even wings, could have been here at that time, and over on Fiftieth Street one minute and forty-five seconds later. You prove you were over there at ten-past, and all this is over."

"But I've told you! I looked at the clock."

"That isn't proof, that's an unsupported statement. Can this woman you say you met in the bar corroborate you on what time it was?"

"Yes. She looked at the clock when I did."

"All right, then that's all there is to it. Providing she satisfies us, her corroboration is given in good faith, and you didn't put her up to it. Where does she live?"

"I don't know. I left her where I first met her, back at the bar."

"Well, what was her name?"

"I don't know. I didn't ask, and she didn't give it to me."

"Not even a first name, not even a nickname? You were with her for six hours, what did you call her?"

"You," he answered glumly.

Burgess had got out his notebook again. "All right, describe her for us. We'll have to send out after her ourselves and have her brought in."

There was a long wait.

"Well?" he said finally.

Henderson's face was getting paler by the minute. He swallowed hard. "My God, I can't!" he blurted out finally. "I've lost her completely, she's rubbed out." He circled his hand helplessly in front of his own face. "I could have told you when I first came back here last night, maybe, but now I can't any more. Too much has happened since. The shock of Marcella— And then you guys pegging away at me all night. She's like a film that's been exposed to too much light, she's completely faded out. Even while I was with her I didn't notice her very closely, my mind was too full of my own affairs." He looked from one to the other of them, as if in search of help. "She's a complete blank!"

Burgess tried to help him out. "Take your time. Think hard. Now, her. Eyes?"

Henderson flexed his clenched hands open, in futility.

"No? All right, hair, then. What about hair? What color hair?"

He plastered hands to his eye-sockets. "That's gone too. Every time I start to say one color, it seems to me it was another; and then when I start to say the other, I think it was the first again. I don't know; it must have been sort of in-between. Not brown, not black. Most of the time she had it under a hat." He looked up half-hopefully. "I can remember the hat better than anything else. An orange hat, will that do any good? Yeah, orange, that's it."

"But suppose she's taken it off since last night, suppose she don't show up anywhere in it for the next six months? Then where are we? Can't you remember anything about *her* herself?"

Henderson kneaded his temples in brain-agony.

"Was she fat? Skinny? Tall? Short?" Burgess peppered at him.



Henderson writhed his waist, first to one side, then the other, as if to get away from the questions. "I can't, that's all, I can't!"

That did it. Burgess' face had turned good and red. He shrugged into his long-discarded coat, pulled the knot of his tie around frontward.

"Come on, boys," he said surlily, "let's get out of here, it's getting late."

He stopped a moment at the arched opening leading out to the foyer, eyed Henderson flintily. "What do you take us for anyway?" he growled. "Easy-marks? You're out with a woman, for six solid hours, only last night, and yet you can't tell us what she looked like! You're sitting shoulder-to-shoulder with her at a bar, you're sitting across a table from her for a whole table d'hôte meal from celery to coffee, you're in the seat right next to her for three full hours at a show, you're in the same taxi with her coming and going—but her face is just a blank space under an orange hat! You expect us to swallow that? You try to hand us a myth, a phantom, without any name or form or height or width or eyes or hair or anything else, and we're supposed to take your word for it you were with *that* and not home here when your wife was getting killed!"

#### IV

THE CAR was standing waiting there by the corner when the unseen belfry somewhere close at hand began tolling the hour.

"Here it comes," Burgess said. They'd been waiting about ten minutes for this, motor running.

Henderson, neither free nor indicted yet, sat on the rear seat between him and one of the other two headquarters men who had taken part in the questioning up at his apartment the previous night and morning.

A third man whom they referred to as "Dutch" stood outside the car, on the sidewalk, in a sort of fatuous idleness. He had been kneeling crouched in mid-sidewalk tightening up his shoelaces just before the first stroke sounded. He straightened now.

It was the same kind of a night as the one before. The get-together hour, the sky with its make-up on in the west, everyone going someplace all at one time. Henderson gave no sign, sitting there between two of his captors. It must have occurred to him, though, what a difference a few hours can make.

His own address was just a few doors behind them, at the next corner to the rear. Only he didn't live there any more; he lived in a detention-cell in the prison attached to police headquarters now.

He spoke dully. "No, a store-length further back," he said to Burgess. "I'd just come up to the lingerie-store window when the first stroke hit. I can remember that, now that I'm looking at it—and hearing the same sound—over again."

Burgess relayed it to the man on the sidewalk. "Back up one store-length and take it from there, Dutch. That's it. All right, start walking!" The second stroke of six had sounded. He did something to the stop-watch he was holding in his hand.

The tall, rangy, red-headed man on the sidewalk struck out. The car at the same time eased into gliding motion, keeping abreast of him out beyond the curb.

"Dutch" looked self-conscious for a moment or two, his legs worked a little stiffly; then it wore off gradually.

"How is he for pace?" Burgess asked presently.

"I think I was a little faster than that," Henderson said. "When I'm sore I walk fast, I notice, and I was going at a pretty good clip last night."

"Quicken it up a little, Dutch!" Burgess coached.

The rangy one accelerated slightly.

The fifth stroke sounded, then the last.

"How is it now?" Burgess asked.

"That's about me," Henderson concurred.

An intersection sidled past under them. A light held the car up. Not the walker. Henderson had disregarded them the night before. The car caught up with him midway down the next block.

They were on Fiftieth now. One block of it ticked off. Two.

"See it yet?"

"No. Or if I have, it doesn't click. It was awfully red, redder than that one.



The whole sidewalk was like red paint."

The third block. The fourth.

"See it?"

"It doesn't click."

Burgess warned: "Watch what you're doing, now. If you string it out very much longer, even your theoretical alibi won't be any good. You should have been inside it already by now; it's eight-and-a-half past."

"If you don't believe me anyway," Henderson said drily, "what's the difference?"

"It don't hurt to figure out the exact walking-time between the two points," the man on the other side of him put in. "We might just happen to find out when you *actually* got there, and then all we do is subtract."

"Nine minutes past!" Burgess intoned.

Henderson was holding his head low, scanning the slowly-moving belt of sidewalk-fronts from under the car-ceiling.

A name drifted by, colorless glass tubes unlighted. He turned quickly after it. "That's it! I think that's it but it's out. Anselmo's, it was something like that, I'm almost sure of it. Something foreign—"

"In, Dutch!" Burgess hollered. He drove the plunger down, killed his stopwatch. "Nine minutes, ten and a half seconds," he announced. "We'll give you the ten and a half seconds to allow for variations, such as the density of the crowd you had to buck and the cross-traffic at intersections, which is never the same twice. Nine minutes flat, walking-time, from the corner below your apartment to this bar. And we'll give you another minute from the apartment itself down to that first corner, where the first chime-stroke caught you. We've already tested that lap out. In other words—" He turned and looked at him, "you find some way of proving that you got into this bar as late as *six-seventeen*—but no later—and you'll still clear yourself automatically, even now."

Henderson said: "I can prove I got in here as early as six-ten, if I can only find that woman."

Burgess swung open the car-door. "Let's go inside," he said.

"Ever see this man before?" Burgess asked.

The barman held his chin in a vise. "Looks kind of familiar," he admitted. "But then, my whole job is just faces,

faces, faces."

They gave him a little more time. He took an angleshot at Henderson. Then he went around the opposite side and took it from there. "I don't know," he still hesitated.

Burgess said, "Sometimes the frame counts as much as the picture. Let's try it differently. Go on back behind the bar, barman."

They all went over to it. "Which stool were you on, Henderson?"

"Somewhere along about here. The clock was straight over, and the pretzel-bowl was about two up from me."

"All right, get on with it. Now try it, barman. Forget about us, take a good look at him."

Henderson inclined his head morosely, stared down at the surface of the bar, the way he had the other time.

It worked. The barman snapped his fingers. "That did it! Gloomy Gus. I remember him now. Only last night, wasn't it? Must have been just a one-drink customer, didn't stick around long enough to sink in."

"Now we want the time."

"Sometime during my first hour on duty. They hadn't thickened up yet around me. We had a late start last night; sometimes happens."

"What is your first hour on duty?"

"Six to seven."

"Yeah, but about how long after six, that's what we want to know."

He shook his head. "I'm sorry, gents. I only watch the clock toward the *end* of my shift, never around the beginning. It might have been six, it might have been six-thirty, it might have been six-forty-five. It just wouldn't be worth a damn for me to try to say."

"Tell us about this woman that was in here at that time."

"What woman?"

"You didn't see him get up and go over and speak to a woman?"

The barman said, "No sir, I didn't see him get up and go over and speak to anyone. I can't swear to it, but my impression was there was no one else at the bar at that time *for him to speak to*."

"Did you see a woman sitting here by herself, without seeing him get up and go over to her?"



Henderson pointed helplessly two barstools over. "An orange hat," he said, before Burgess could stop him.

"Don't do that," the detective warned him.

The barman was suddenly becoming irritable, for some reason or other. "Look," he said, "I've been in this business thirty-seven years. I'm sick of their damn faces, night after night, just opening and closing, opening and closing, throwing the booze in. Don't come in and ask me what color hats they had on, or if they picked each other up or not. To me they're just orders. To me they're just drinks, see, to me they're just drinks! Tell me what she had and I'll tell you if she was in here or not! We keep all the tabs. I'll get 'em from the boss' office."

They were all looking at Henderson now. He said, "I had Scotch and water. I always have that, never anything else. Give me just a minute now, to see if I can get hers. It was all the way down near the bottom—"

The barman came back with a large tin box.

Henderson said, rubbing his forehead, "There was a cherry left in the bottom of the glass and—"

"That could be any one of six drinks. I'll get it for you. Was the bottom stemmed or flat? And what color was the dregs? If it was a Manhattan the glass was stemmed and dregs, brown."

Henderson said, "It was a stem-glass, she was fiddling with it. But the dregs weren't brown, no, they were pink, like."

"Jack Rose," said the barman briskly. "I can get it for you easy, now." He started shuffling through the tabs. It took a few moments; he had to shift his way through them in reverse, the earlier ones were at the bottom. "See, they come off the pads in order, numbered at the top," he mentioned.

Henderson gave a start, leaned forward. "Wait a minute!" he said breathlessly. "That brought something back to me, just then. I can remember the number printed at the top of my particular pad. Thirteen. The jinx-number."

The barman put down two tabs in front of all of them. "Yeah, you're right," he said. "Here you are. But not both on the same tab. Thirteen—one Scotch and water.

And here are the Jack Roses, three of them, on number seventy-four. That's one of Tommy's tabs, from the shift before in the late afternoon; I know his writing. Not only that, but there was some other guy with her. Three Jack Roses and a rum, this one says, and no one in their right mind is going to mix those two drinks."

"So—?" Burgess suggested softly.

"So I still don't remember seeing any such woman, even if she stayed over into my shift, because she was Tommy's order, not mine. But if she *did* stay over, my thirty-seven years' experience tending bar tells me he didn't get up and go over and speak to her, because there was already a guy with her. And my thirty-seven years' experience also tells me he was with her to the end, because nobody buys three Jack Roses at eighty cents a throw and then walks out and leaves his investment behind for somebody else to cash in on." And he took a definitive swipe to the counter with his bar-rag.

Henderson's voice was shaking. "But you remember *me* being here! If you can remember me, why can't you remember her? She was even better to look at."

The barman said with vicious logic: "Sure I remembered you. Because I'm seeing you now over again, right before my eyes. Bring her back in front of me the same way, and I'll probably remember her too. I can't without that."

He was hanging onto the rim of the bar with both hands, like a drunk with unmanageable legs. Burgess detached one of his arms, grunted, "Come on, Henderson."

THE MAN Burgess had sent out on the assignment came in, reported: "The Sunrise Company has two drivers on the line outside Anselmo's. I brought them both down. Their names are Budd Hickey and Al Alp."

"Alp," Henderson said. That's the funny name I've been trying to think of. That's the name I told you we both laughed at."

"Send Alp in. Tell the other guy never mind."

He was as funny-looking in real life as on his license-picture; even funnier, for he was in full color in real life.



Burgess said, "Did you have a haul last night from your stand to the Maison Blanche Restaurant?"

"Mason Blantch; about sixty-five cents on a dry night," he mumbled. He went back into full-voice again. "Yeah, I did! I had a sixty-five cent haul last night, in between two thirty-cent pulls."

"Look around you. See anyone here you gave it to?"

His eyes slid past Henderson's face. Then they came back again. "It was him, wasn't it?"

"We're asking you, don't ask us."

He took the question-mark off. "It was him."

"Alone or with somebody else?"

He took a minute with that. Then he shook his head slowly. "I don't remember noticing nobody else with him. Alone, I guess."

Henderson gave a lurch forward, like somebody who suddenly turns an ankle. "You must have seen her! She got in ahead of me and she got out ahead of me, like a woman does—"

"Sh, quiet," Burgess tuned him out.

"Woman?" the driver said aggrievedly. "I remember you. I remember you perfect, because I got a dented fender picking you up—"

"Yes, yes," Henderson agreed eagerly, "and maybe that's why you didn't see her step in, because your head was turned the other way. But surely when we got there—"

"When we got there," the driver said sturdily, "my head *wasn't* turned the other way, no cabman's ever is when it comes time to collect a fare. *And I didn't see her get out either.* Now how about it?"

"We had the light on, all the way over," Henderson pleaded. "How could you help seeing her, sitting there in back of you? She must have shown in your rear-sight mirror or even again your windshield—"

"Now I *am* sure," the driver said. "Now I'm positive—even if I wasn't before. I been hacking eight years. If you had the top-light on, you were by yourself. I never knew a guy riding with a woman to leave the top-light on yet. Any time the top-light's on, you can bet the guy behind you is a single."

Henderson could hardly talk. He was feeling at his throat as though it bothered him.

They hit the Maison Blanche at the dis-mantlement stage. The cloths were off the tables, the last long-lingering gour-mets had departed. The help was eating in the kitchen, judging by the unbridled sounds of crockery and silverware in work that emanated from there.

They sat down at one of the denuded tables, drawing up chairs like a peculiar ghost-party of diners about to fall to with-out any visible utensils or comestibles.

The headwaiter was so used to bowing to people that he bowed now as he came out to them, even though he was off-duty. The bow didn't look so good because he'd removed his collar and tie, and had a lump of food in one cheek.

Burgess said, "Have you seen this man before?"

His black-pitted eyes took in Henderson. The answer came like a finger-snap. "Yes, surely."

"When was the last time?"

"Last night."

"Where did he sit?"

He picked out the niche-table unerringly. "Over there."

"Well?" Burgess said. "Go on."

"Go on with what?"

"Who was with him?"

"Nobody was with him."

There was a line of little moist needle-pricks starting out along Henderson's forehead. "You saw her come in a moment or two after me, and join me. You saw her sitting there during the whole meal. You must have. Once you even passed close by and bowed and said, 'Everything satisfactory, m'sieu?'"

"Yes. That is part of my duties. I do it to each table at least once. I distinctly recall doing it to you, because your face was, how shall I say, a little discontented. I also distinctly recall the two vacant chairs, one on each side of you. I believe I straightened one a little. You have quoted me yourself. And if I said 'monsieur,' as I did, that is the surest indication there was no one with you. The correct inquiry for a lady and gentleman together is 'm'sieu-et-dame.' It is never altered."

The black centers of his eyes were as steady as buckshot fired deep into his face and lodged there. He turned to Burgess. "Well, if there is any doubt, I can show you my reservation-list for last night. You can see for yourselves."



Burgess said with an exaggeratedly slow drawl that meant he liked the idea very much, "I don't think that would hurt."

The headwaiter went across the dining room, opened a drawer in a buffet, brought back a ledger. He didn't go out of the room, he didn't go out of their sight. He handed it to them unopened, just as he had found it; let them open it for themselves. All he said was, "You can refer to the date at the top."

They all formed a cluster of heads over it but himself. He remained detached. It was kept in impromptu pencil, but it was sufficient for its purpose. The page was headed "5-20, Tues." Then there was a large corner-to-corner X drawn across the page, to show that it was over and done with. It cancelled without impairing legibility.

There was a list of some nine or ten names. They went like this, columnarly:

Table 18—Roger Ashley, for four. (Lined out)

Table 5—Mrs. Rayburn, for six. (Lined out)

Table 24—Scott Henderson, for two. (Not lined out)

Beside the third name was this parenthetic symbol: (1).

The headwaiter explained, "That tells its own story. When a line is drawn through, that means the reservation has been completed, filled up. When there is no line drawn through, that means they never showed up. When there is no line drawn through, and a number is added, that means only part of them showed up, the rest are still expected. Those things in the little brackets are for my own guidance, so I will know where they go when they do show up, where to put them, without having to ask a lot of questions. No matter if they come only at the dessert, so long as they come at all, the line goes through. What you see here means, therefore: m'sieu had a reservation for two, m'sieu showed up by himself, and the other half of his party never reached here."

Burgess traced hypersensitive finger pads over that particular section of the page, feeling for erasures. "Texture unmarred," he said.

Henderson pronged his hand, elbow to tabletop; let it catch his head as it toppled

forward.

The headwaiter shovelled with his hands. "My book is all I have to go by. My book says—to me—Mr. Henderson was alone in this dining-room last night."

"Then your book says that to us too. Take his name and address, usual stuff, case wanted further questioning. All right, next. Mitri Maloff, table-waiter."

A change of figures before Henderson's eyes, that was all. The dream, the practical joke, the whatever it was, went on and on.

"You waited on this man at twenty-four last night?"

He was going to make a social introduction of it. "Ah, surely, certainly!" he lighted up. "Good evening! How are you? You coming back again soon, I hope!" He evidently didn't recognize them as detectives.

"No he isn't," said Burgess brutally. He flattened his hand, to kill the flow of amenities. "How many were there at the table when you waited on him?"

The waiter looked puzzled, like a man who is willing to do his best but can't get the hang of what is expected of him. "Him," he said. "No more. Shust him."

"No lady?"

"No, no lady. What lady?" And then he added, in perfect innocence, "Why? He lose one?"

It brought on a howl. Henderson parted his lips and took a deep breath, like when something hurts you unbearably.

"Yeah, he lost one all right," one of them clowned.

The waiter saw he had made a hit, batted his eyes at them coyly, but still, apparently, without any very clear idea of how he had chalked up his success.

Henderson spoke, in a desolate, beaten-down sort of voice. "You drew out her chair for her. You opened the menu-card, offered it to her." He tapped his own skull a couple of times. "I saw you do those things. But no, you didn't see her."

The waiter began to expostulate with Eastern European warmth and lavishness of gesture, but without any rancor: "I draw out a chair, yes, when there is a lady there for it. But when there is no lady there, how can I draw out a chair? For the air to sit down on it, you think I'm going to draw out a chair? When is



no face there, you think I'm going to open bill-of-fare and push it in front of?"

Burgess said, "Talk to us, not him. He's in custody."

He did, as volubly as ever, simply switching the direction of his head. "He leave me tip for one-and-a-half. How could there be lady with him? You think I'm going to be nice to him today, if is two there last night and he leave me tip for only one-and-a-half?" His eyes lit with Slavonic fire. Even the supposition seemed to inflame him. "You think I forget it in a horry? I remember it for next two weeks! Hah! You think I ask him to come back like I do? Hah!" he snorted belligerently.

"What's a tip for one-and-a-half?" Burgess asked with jocular curiosity.

"For one is thirty cents. For two is sixty cents. He give me forty-five cents, is tip for one-and-a-half."

"Couldn't you get forty-five cents for a party of two?"

"Never!" he panted resentfully. "If I do, I do like this." He removed an imaginary slaver from the table, fingers disdainfully lifted as if it were contaminated. He fixed a baleful eye on the imaginary customer, in this case Henderson. Sustained it long enough to shrivel him. His thick underlip curled in what was meant for a lopsided leer of derision. "I say, 'Thank you, sor. Thank you very motch, sor. Thank you *very very* motch, sor. You sure you able to do this?' And if is lady with him, he feel like two cents, he stick in some more."

"I kind of would myself," Burgess admitted. He turned his head. "How much do you say you left, Henderson?"

Henderson's answer was forlornly soft-spoken. "What he says I did; forty-five cents."

"One thing more," Burgess said, "just to round the whole thing out. I'd like to see the check for that particular dinner. You keep them, don't you?"

"Manager got them. You have to ask him." The waiter's face took on an expression of conscious virtue, as though now he felt sure his veracity would be sustained.

Henderson was suddenly leaning alertly forward, his licked listlessness was gone again.

The manager brought them out himself. They were kept in sheaves, in little oblong clasp-folders, one to a date, apparently to help him tally his accounts at the end of each month. They found it without difficulty. It said "Table 24. Waiter 3. 1 Table d'hote—2.25." It was stamped in faint purple, "Paid—May 20th" in a sort of oval formation.

There were only two other checks for Table Twenty-four in that day's batch. One was "1 tea—0.75," from late afternoon, just before the dinner hour. The other was dinner for four, a party that had evidently come in late, just before closing.

They had to help him get back into the car. He walked in a kind of stupor. His legs were balky. Again there was the dream-like glide of unreal buildings and unreal streets moving backward past them, like shadows on glass.

He broke out suddenly, "They're lying—they're killing me, all of them! What did I ever do to any of them—?"

THERE was a show going on outside, and the music, and laughter, and sometimes handclapping, would trickle into the small, cluttered office, diluted.

The manager was sitting waiting by the phone. Business was good, and he tried to look pleasantly at all of them, savoring his cigar and leaning far back in his swivel-chair.

"There can be no question that the two seats were paid for," the manager said urbanely. "All I can tell you is that nobody was seen going in with him—" He broke off with sudden anxiety. "He's going to be ill. Please get him out of here as quickly as you can, I don't want any commotion while there's a performance going on."

They opened the door and half-carried, half-walked Henderson toward it, his back inclined far over toward the floor. A gust of singing from out front surged in.

"Chica chica boom boom  
Chica chica boom boom—"

"Ah, don't," he pleaded chokingly. "I can't stand any more of it!" He toppled onto the back seat of the police sedan, made a knot of his two hands, gnawed at them as if seeking sustenance for his



sanity.

"Why not break down and admit there was no dame with you?" Burgess tried to reason with him. "Don't you see how much simpler it would be all around?"

Henderson tried to answer him in a rational, even voice, but he was a little shaky at it. "Do you know what the next step would be after that, if I did, if I *could*, make such an admission as you're asking me to? My sanity would start to leave me. I'd never be sure of anything again in my life. You can't take a fact that you know to be true, as true as—as that your name is Scott Henderson—" He clapped himself on the thigh; "—as true as that this is my own leg, and let yourself begin to doubt it, deny it, without your mental balance going overboard. She was beside me for six hours. I touched her arm. I felt it in the curve of my own." He reached out and briefly tweaked Burgess' muscular underarm. "The rustle of her dress. The words she spoke. The faint fragrance of her perfume. The clink of her spoon against her consomme-plate. The little stamp of her chair when she moved it back. The little quiver of the shaky taxi-chassis when she stepped down from it. Where did the liquor go to, that my eyes saw in her glass when she raised it? When it came down again, it was empty." He pounded his fist against his knee, three, four, five times. "She was, she was, she was!" He was almost crying; at least his face was wreathed in those lines. "Now they're trying to tell me she *wasn't*!"

The car glided through the never-never land it had been traversing all evening.

## V

### *The Ninetieth Day Before the Execution*

"**W**ILL the accused please rise and face the jury?

"Will the foreman of the jury please stand?

"Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, have you reached a verdict?"

"We have, your honor."

"Do you find this defendant guilty or not guilty of the charge made against him?"

"Guilty, your honor."

Strangled voice from the direction of

the prisoner's dock: "Oh my God—no—!"

"Prisoner at the bar, have you anything to say before this court passes sentence upon you?"

"What is there to say, when they tell you you have committed a crime, and you and you alone know you haven't? Who is there to hear you, and who is there to believe you?"

"You're about to tell me that I must die, and if you tell me I must, I must. I'm not more afraid of dying than any other man. But I'm just as afraid of dying as any other man. It isn't easy to die at all, but it's even harder to die for a mistake. I'm not dying for something I've done, but for a mistake. And that's the hardest way to die of all. When the time comes, I'll meet it the best I can; that's all I can do anyway."

"But I say to you now, all of you, who won't listen and don't believe: I didn't do that. I didn't do it. Not all the findings of all the juries, not all the trials in all the courts, not all the executions in all the electric chairs—in the whole world—can make what isn't so, so."

"I'm ready to hear it now, your honor. Quite ready."

Voice from the bench, in a sympathetic aside: "I'm sorry, Mr. Henderson. I don't think I've ever heard a more compelling, dignified, manly plea from anyone who has stood before me for sentence. But the verdict of the jury in this case gives me no alternative."

Same voice, slightly louder: "Scott Henderson, as you have been tried and found guilty of murder in the first degree, I hereby sentence you to die in the electric chair, in the State Prison at—, during the week beginning October 20th, said sentence to be carried out by the warden of the prison, and may God have mercy on your soul."

### *The Twenty-first Day Before the Execution*

Voice outside the cell in the Death House corridor:

"Somebody here to see you, Henderson."

Henderson doesn't speak or move. Gate is opened, then closed again. Long awkward pause, while they look at one another.

"Guess you don't remember me."



"You remember the people that kill you."

"I don't kill people, Henderson. I turn people who commit crimes over to those whose job it is to try them."

"Then you come around afterward to make sure they haven't gotten away, to satisfy yourself they're still there where you put them, getting it rubbed into them, day by day and minute by minute. It must worry you. Well take a look. I'm here. I'm safe on ice. Now you can go away happy."

"You're bitter, Henderson."

"It doesn't sweeten you any to die at thirty-two."

Burgess didn't answer that. No one could have, adequately. He shuttered his eyes rapidly a couple of times to show that it had hit.

Burgess took something out of his pocket, stopped before the bunk the other was sitting crouched on. "Cigarette?"

Henderson looked up derisively. "What's the matter with them?"

"Ah, don't be like that," the detective protested throatily. He continued to hold them out.

Henderson took one grudgingly at last. He wiped the small cylinder insultingly on his sleeve before putting it to his mouth.

Burgess gave him a light for it. He said finally, "I understand your appeal's been turned down."

"Yes, my appeal's been turned down. Now there are no more hitches, no more impediments, nothing further to interfere with the ceremonial bonfire. Now I can skid straight down the chute without anything more to stop me. Now the cannibals won't have to go hungry. Now they can make a nice, swift, clean-cut job of it. Streamlined." He turned and looked at his listener. "What're you looking so mournful about? Sorry because the agony can't be prolonged? Sorry because I can't die twice over?"

Burgess made a wry face as though his cigarette tasted rotten. He stepped on it. "Don't hit below the belt, Henderson. My dukes aren't even up."

Henderson looked at him intently for awhile, as though noticing something in his manner for the first time through the red haze of anger that had hovered over his perceptions until now. "What's on your

mind?" he asked. "What brings you around here like this, anyway, months afterward?"

Burgess felt the back of his neck. "I don't know how to put it myself. It's a funny thing for a dick to do," he admitted. "I know my job with you ended when you were indicted by the Grand Jury and bound over for trial—It's sort of hard to bring out," he ended lamely.

"Why? It shouldn't be. I'm just a condemned guy in a cell."

"That's just why it is. I came up to—well, what I'm here to say is—" He stopped a minute, then blurted out: "I believe you're innocent. Well, there it is, for what it's worth, and it's not worth anything—to you or me either. I don't think you did it, Henderson."

Long wait.

"Well, say something. Don't just sit there looking at me."

"I don't know what to say when a guy digs up the corpse he helped to bury and says, 'Sorry, old man, I guess I've made a mistake.' You better tell me what to say."

"I guess you're right. I guess there's nothing to say. But I still claim I did my part of the job right, on the evidence there was to go by. I'll go further than that. I'd do the same thing over again tomorrow, if it had to be done a second time. My personal feelings don't count; my job is to work with concrete things."

"And what brought on this profound change of conviction?" Henderson asked, with a dull sort of irony.

"That's as hard to explain, to make clear, as any of the rest of it. It's been a slow thing, it's taken weeks and months to soak through me. About as slow as water soaking through a stack of blotters. It started in at the trial, I guess. It worked by a sort of reverse process. All the things that they made to count against you so heavily, they seemed to point the other way around, to me, later on when I ran over them in my own mind.

"I don't know if you can quite get what I mean. Framed alibis are always so clever, so smooth, so chock-full of plausible details. Yours was so lame, so blank. You couldn't remember a single thing about this woman. A ten-year-old child would have been able to do a better job of description. As I sat in the back of the



courtroom listening, it slowly dawned on me: hey, that must be the truth he's telling! Any lie, any lie at all, would have more meat on its bones than that. Only a man who was *not* guilty could frustrate his own chances as thoroughly as you did. The guilty are smarter than that. Your life was at stake, and all you could muster to protect yourself was two nouns and an adjective. 'Woman,' 'hat,' and 'funny.' I thought to myself, 'How true to life that is.' A guy is all riled up inside from a row at home, he picks up someone he's not interested in in the first place. Then right on top of that comes the mental cloud-burst of finding out there's been a murder in his house and hearing himself accused of it—" He gestured expressively. "Which is more likely: that he'd remember such a stranger in exhaustive detail, or that what little impression remained of her in the first place would be completely washed away, leaving the slate blank?"

"It's been on my mind a long time now. It's kept coming back to me with more and more pressure each time. Once before I already started to come up here, but then I turned around and backed out again. Then I talked to Miss Richman once or twice—"

Henderson elongated his neck. "I begin to see light."

The detective said, sharply and at once: "No you don't, at all! You probably think she came to see me and finally influenced me— It was the other way around. I first looked her up, and went to have a talk with her—to tell her pretty much what I've told you today. Since then, I admit, she's been to see me several times—not at Headquarters but at my own place—and we've had several more talks about it. But that's neither here nor there. Miss Richman nor nobody else can put anything in my mind if it wasn't in there already. If there's any changing with me, it's got to be done on the inside, and not from the outside in. If I'm up here to see you today, it's on my own hook. I'm not here at her suggestion. She didn't know I was coming up here. I didn't myself—until I did."

He started to walk back and forth. "Well, I've got it off my chest now. I still won't retract. I did my part of the job the only way it could have been done, the way

the evidence called for it to be done. And you can't ask any more of a man than that."

Henderson didn't answer. Burgess' voice said: "You've got to get hold of someone that can help you. That can work at it full-time for you."

He jingled some more. "I can't, I've got work of my own. Oh, I know in movies and such, there are these glorified detectives that chuck everything just to go off on some sideline of their own. I've got a wife and kids. I need my job. And you and me are strangers, after all."

Henderson didn't move his head. "I didn't ask you to," he murmured quietly.

Burgess quit jingling finally, came part of the way back to him. "Get someone that's close to you, that's all for you—" He tightened his fist and hoisted it in promise, "—and I'll back him up all I can."

Henderson looked up for the first time, then down again. He said one word, dispiritedly. "Who?"

"It needs someone that'll put a passion into it, a belief, a fervor. Someone who isn't doing it for money, nor for his own advancement. Someone who's doing it for you, because you're Scott Henderson, and no other reason. Because he likes you, yes even loves you, because he'd almost rather die himself than have you die. Someone that won't be licked, even when he is. Someone that won't know it's too late, even when it is. That's the kind of flame it needs, that's the kind of juice. That and only that'll swing it."

His hand had come to rest on Henderson's shoulder while he spoke, in an accolade of insistence.

"You've got a girl that feels that way about you, I know. But she's just a girl. She's got the flame, but not the experience. She's doing what she can, but it isn't enough."

For the first time Henderson's bleak expression softened a little.

"There was a guy once, he and I were as close as brothers," Henderson admitted. "But that was in the past—"

"There's no time-limit on friendship."

"He isn't here right now, anyway. The last time I met him he told me he was leaving the next day for South America. He had a five-year contract with some oil



company."

He quirked his head at the detective. "For a fellow in your line of work, you seem to have quite a few illusions left intact, haven't you? That would be asking something, wouldn't it? Expect someone to come back three thousand miles and can his whole immediate future, to go to bat for a friend at the drop of a hat. And not a current friend either, mind you. Remember, you get thicker-skinned as you get older. Some of the idealism peels off. The man of thirty-two isn't the same pal to you the lad of twenty-five was, and you're not to him."

Burgess cut across his objections. "Just answer one thing. Would he have once done it?"

"He would have once done it."

"Then if he would have once done it, he'll still do it. I tell you again there's no age-limit on that kind of loyalty. If he had it, then he has it. If he hasn't it, then that only proves he never did have it."

He took a memorandum-book out of his pocket, tore off a blank leaf.

#### NLT JOHN LOMBARD

Compania Petrolera Sudamericana  
Head Office, Caracas, Venezuela

Have been sentenced for Marcellas death since you left a certain key witness can clear me if found my lawyer here has reached the end of his resources this is to ask you to come up and help me have no one else to turn to and no other chance of pulling through sentence set for third week October and appeal has been turned down give me a hand will you

SCOTT HENDERSON

#### *The Eighteenth Day Before the Execution*

HE still had some of the tan on him from warmer latitudes.

He looked about the age Scott Henderson had once been; the former Scott Henderson of five or six months ago, not the pinched death-mask lingering on in a cell, who counted years by hours.

He was still wearing the clothes he'd put on in South America. A snowy panama that was out of season up here right now, and a gray flannel suit that was too light, both in shade and weight, for an

American autumn.

He was moderately tall, and easy-moving with it. He was anything but a natty dresser, in spite of his vernal clothes. His small mustache could have stood a touch of the scissors, and his necktie needed steaming, it kept curling around on itself all the way down, like a spiral of spun-sugar candy. The impression he gave, in short, was what used to be called, in the days of simpler cataloguing, a man's man.

He went into the cell with a wry grin on his face and an outstretched hand leading the way. As though he was running into him in the lounge of the Savoy-Plaza.

"Well lookit old Hendy," he drawled. "What're you doing, trying to be funny?"

There was none of the bitterness present in Henderson's reaction there had been the day the detective had visited him. You could tell this man was an old friend. His drawn face lighted up. He answered him in kind. "I live here now. How d'ye like that?"

They pumped hands as if they'd never get through. They were still working away at it after the guard had locked up and gone off again.

That link of hands carried messages for them, unspoken but plainly understood. Henderson's was a warmly grateful: "You came. You showed up. So that stuff about a real friend isn't the bunk."

And Lombard's was a fervent, encouraging: "I'm with you. I'm damned if they're going to do it."

After that, they steered clear of the subject the first few minutes. They said everything but what they really wanted to. A sort of skittishness, a diffidence, that a particular topic, when it is too vital, bleeding, and raw, will sometimes bring about.

Then finally he edged up to it; the *it* that was on both their minds. He quit looking at his friend, looked somewhere else instead. "What about this thing anyway, Hendy?"

Henderson tried to smile. "Well, there's a member of the Class of '30 going to take part in an electrical experiment two and a half weeks from today. What was it they gave me in the year-book? 'Most likely to get his name in the papers.' Good prophecy. I'll probably make every edition



that day."

Lombard's eyes turned to stare at him truculently. "No you won't. Let's quit horsing around. We've known each other half our lives; may as well kick off our shoes and drop the company-manners."

"Sure," Henderson agreed forlornly. "What the hell, life's so short." He belatedly realized the unintentional appropriateness of that, grinned sheepishly.

Lombard slung one hip across the rim of the washbowl in the corner and relieved the leg that supported it of floor-duty. He took it by the ankle with both hands and held it up. "I only met her once," he said thoughtfully.

"Twice," Henderson corrected. "There was that time we ran into you on the street, remember?"

"Yeah, I remember. She kept pulling you by the arm, from behind, to break it up."

"She was on her way to buy some clothes, and you know how they are when that's in the wind. Neither time nor tide—" Then he apologized still further, in behalf of someone who was dead and gone, apparently without realizing how perfectly unimportant it was now. "We were always going to have you up for dinner, but I dunno—somehow—you know how those things are."

"I know how it is," Lombard agreed with diplomatic understanding. "No wife ever yet liked her husband's pre-marriage friends." He took out the pow-wow cigarettes, threw them across the narrow cell. "Don't mind if they make your tongue swell up and your lips blister. They're from down there; part gunpowder and part insecticide. I haven't had time to change back to ours yet."

He took a thoughtful drag. "Well, I guess you better give me the dope."

Henderson pulled up a sigh from way in. "Yeah, I guess I better. I've been over it so many times already, I think I could reel it off backwards, or in my sleep."

"To me it's like a blackboard without anything written on it yet. So don't skip anything if you can help it."

"That marriage of mine and Marcella's was just a prelim, not the main event it should have been at all. A guy don't usually go around admitting that, even to his friends, but this is the death house and it

seems foolish to have reticences here. A little over a year ago, the main bout suddenly came up. And too late for me to take part in. You never met her, don't know her, so there's no reason for me to mention her name. They were decent enough to do that for me at the trial too. All through it they just called her The Girl. I'll do that here, I'll call her My Girl to you.

"It was a clean little thing. I told My Girl about Marcella the second time I saw her. That was supposed to be the last time we saw each other. The twelfth time we saw each other we were still trying to make it the last time. We tried to steer clear of each other—like steel-filings try to steer clear of a magnet.

"Marcella knew about her within thirty days after it had started. I saw to it that she did, I went and told her. It wasn't a case of any sudden shock, get that. She just smiled about it a little, and she waited. Like someone watching two flies under a tumbler turned upside-down.

"I went to her and asked for a divorce. This was at about mid-point. That slow, thoughtful smile came out on her again. She hadn't seemed to set any particular store by me until then, that I could notice. Just that thing that dropped shoes in the next aisle over from her. She said she'd have to think it over. She thought it over. The weeks went by, the months. She took her time thinking it over, she kept me dangling like that. I'd get that slow, mocking smile every now and then. She was the only one of the three of us having a good time out of it.

"It was pulling me inside-out. I'm a grown man, and I wanted My Girl. I wasn't going to let myself be gypped, I didn't want any affair, I wanted my wife. And the woman in my house, she wasn't my wife."

The hands before his face that he stared down through, they shook a little even at this late day.

"My Girl said to me, 'There must be some way out. We're in her hands and she knows it. This sullen silence on your part, that's the wrong attitude. That brings out an equally sulky opposition on her part. Go to her as a man goes to a friend. Take her out some night, have a heart-to-heart talk with her. When two people



once loved one another, as you and she did, there must be something left of it, if it's only a memory in common. There must be some vestige of good will, of kindly feeling for you, you can reach in her. Make her see it's the best thing for her own sake, as well as yours and mine."

"So I bought tickets for a show, and I reserved a table for us at our old place, where we used to go in the days before our marriage. And I went home and said, 'Let's go out together again, shall we? Let's go out tonight like we used to.'"

"Came that slow smile again, and she said 'Why not?' As I stepped into the shower, she was sitting there at the glass beginning to get ready. All the old ways I knew by heart, the first little touches here and there. I whistled in the shower. I liked her very much in the shower. I realized what the trouble was; I saw I'd always liked her, and I'd mistaken it for love."

He let the cigarette fall from his hand, flattened it. Then kept looking there. "Why didn't she refuse at once? Why did she let me whistle in the shower? Watch me in the glass take pains with the part in my hair? Get satisfaction out of the way my handkerchief looked in the breast-pocket of my coat? Be happy all over for the first time in six months? Why did she pretend she was going, when she knew from the first she didn't intend to? Because that was her way. That was her. Because she loved to keep me dangling in suspense. Even about that smaller matter, as well as the larger one."

"I caught on little by little. Her smile, reflected in the glass. The way she wasn't really getting anywhere with those little touches of hers. I was holding my necktie out in my hands, ready to sling it on. And finally even the little touches had quit, she was sitting there not moving her hands any more, just sitting there doing nothing. Only the smile stayed on, the smile at a man in love. A man in love and at your mercy."

"There are two stories, theirs and mine. And both are identical up to that point; not a hairsbreadth variation between the two. They didn't bring out a single detail that wasn't true. Every slightest motion I made, up to there, they had down pat. They did their research-work well, perfect."

And then, as I stood behind her looking into the same glass with my necktie stretched out between my hands, the two stories split as far apart as the hands of a clock at six. Mine goes all the way over this way, theirs goes all the way over that.

"I'm telling you mine now. I'm telling you the true one."

"She was just waiting for me to ask her. That's all she was sitting there for like that. The smile, the still hands, demurely folded on the table-edge. Finally I did, after I'd watched her for a moment. I said, 'Aren't you going?'"

"She laughed. Gee how she laughed. How hard, how long and hearty. I'd never known until then what a terrible weapon laughter can be. I could see my face, over there above hers in the glass, getting white."

"She said, 'But don't waste the tickets. Why throw out good money? Take *her* instead. She can have the show. She can have the dinner. She can have you altogether. *But she can't have you in the only way she wants you.*'"

"That was her answer. That was always going to be her answer, from then on, I knew it then. Forever, for the rest of our lives. And that's an awful long time."

"Then here's what happened next. I clenched my teeth and drew my arm back, in a line with the side of her jaw. I don't remember what happened to the necktie I'd been holding. It must have dropped to the floor. I only know it *didn't* go around her neck."

"I never let fly. I couldn't. I'm not that way. She even tried to get me to. I don't know why. Or maybe because she knew she was safe, I was incapable of doing it. She'd seen me in the glass, of course, she didn't have to turn her head. She jeered, 'Go ahead, hit me. Casey at the bat. That won't get it for you either. Nothing will get it for you; whether you're sweet or whether you're sour, whether you're gentle or whether you're rough.'"

"Then we both said things we shouldn't have, like people do. But it was just mouth-fireworks, that was all. I never laid a hand on her. I said, 'You don't want me; then what the hell are you hanging onto me for?'"

"She said, 'You might come in handy, in case of burglars.'"

"I said, 'You bet that's all there'll be



to it from now on!"

"She said, 'I wonder if I'll be able to tell the difference?'"

"I said, 'That reminds me. You've got something coming to you,' I took two dollars out of my wallet and I threw them on the floor behind her. I said, 'That's for being married to you! And I'll pay the piano-player on my way downstairs.'"

"Sure, it was low, it was rotten. I grabbed my hat and coat and I got out of there fast. She was still laughing there at the glass when I left. She was laughing, Jack. She wasn't dead. I didn't touch her. Her laughter followed me through the door, even after I'd closed it. It drove me down the stairs on foot, without waiting for the car to come up. It drove me nuts, I couldn't get away from it fast enough. It even followed me all the way down to the next landing, and then finally it faded away."

He stopped for a long time, while the scene he had rekindled slowly cooled and died again, before he could go ahead. There were traces of sweat in the creases running across his contracted forehead.

"Then when I came back," he said quietly, "she was dead and they said I did it. They said it happened at eight minutes and fifteen seconds after six. Her watch told them. It must have happened within ten minutes after I'd slammed the door behind me. That part of it still gives me the creeps, even now, when I think of it. He must have been lurking right there inside the building already, whoever he was—"

"But you say you went down the stairs yourself?"

"He might have been hidden up on the last stretch, between our floor and the roof. I don't know. Maybe he heard the whole thing. Maybe he even watched me go. Maybe I slammed the door so hard it rebounded instead of catching on, and he got in that way. He must have been in on her before she knew it. Maybe the very sound of her own laughter helped to cover him up, kept her from hearing anything until it was late."

"That makes it sound like some sort of a prowler, doesn't it?"

"Yes, but what for? The cops were never able to figure out what for, that's why they wouldn't give it any serious

consideration. It wasn't robbery; nothing was taken. There was sixty dollars in cash right in the drawer in front of her, not even covered over. It wasn't attack, either. She was right where she'd been sitting, and left right where she'd been killed."

Lombard said, "One or the other could have been intended, and he got frightened off before he carried out the object of the intrusion. Either by some outside sound or by the very act he had just committed itself. That's happened a thousand and one times."

"Even that won't do," Henderson said dully. "Her diamond solitaire was lying there loose on the dressing-table the whole time. It wasn't even on her finger. All he had to do was scoop it up as he ran out. Frightened or not, how long would that take? It stayed behind." He shook his head. "The necktie damned me. It came out from underneath all the others on the rack. And the rack was fairly deep within the closet. And that particular tie went with every stitch I had on. Sure, because I took it out myself. But I didn't twist it around her. I lost track of it in the heat of the quarrel. It must have fallen unnoticed to the floor. Then I grabbed up the one I'd come home with, and whipped that around my collar, and stormed out. Then he came creeping in, and it caught his eye as he advanced unsuspectingly on her, and he picked it up—God knows who he was, and God only knows why he did it!"

Lombard said, "It may have been some impulse without rhyme or reason, just an urge to kill for the sake of killing, unleashed in some stray mental case hanging around outside. It may have been whipped up by the very scene of violence between you, especially after he had detected that the door wasn't securely closed. He realized he could commit it almost with impunity, and you'd be blamed for it. There have been things like that, you know."

"If it was anything along those lines, then they'll never get him. Those kind of killers are the hardest to track down. Only some freak or fluke will ever open it up. Some day they may get him for something else entirely, and then he'll confess this one along with it, and that's the first inkling they'll have. Long after it'll do me



any good."

"What about this key-witness you mentioned in your message?"

"I'm coming to that now. It's the one slim ray of hope in the whole thing. Even if they never get on to who really did it, there's a way for me to be cleared of it. The two findings aren't necessarily one and the same, in this case; they can be separate and distinct, and yet equally valid each in its own right."

He began punching one hand into the flat of the other, over and over while he spoke. "There's a certain woman, somewhere or other, right at this moment, as we sit here in this cell talking it over, who can clear me—simply by telling them at what time I met her at a certain bar eight blocks from where I lived. That time was ten minutes after six. And she knows it just as I know it; wherever and whoever she is, she knows it. They proved, by reenacting it, that I couldn't have reached that bar at that time and still have committed the murder back at my house. Jack, if you hope to do anything for me, if you want to pull me through this, you've got to find that woman. She and she alone is the answer."

Lombard took a long time. Finally he said, "What's been done about finding her, so far?"

"Everything," was the devastating answer, "everything under the sun."

Lombard came over and slumped down limply on the edge of the bunk beside him. "Whew!" he said, blowing through his clasped hands. "And if the police failed, your lawyer failed, everyone and everything failed, right at the time it happened and with all the time they needed—what a chance I have, months after it's cold and with eighteen days to do it in!"

The guard had showed up. Lombard stood up, let his hand trail off Henderson's slumped shoulder as he turned away to be let out.

Henderson raised his head. "Don't you want to shake hands?" he said falteringly.

"What for? I'll be back again tomorrow."

"You mean you're going to take a fling at it anyway?"

Lombard turned and gave him a look that was almost scathing, as if irked by the obtuseness of such a question.

"What the hell gave you the idea I wasn't?" he growled surlily.

## VI

**L**OMBARD made several more visits to Henderson's cell, squeezing every last detail from the harassed prisoner about that fatal evening.

Toward the close of one of these wearying interviews Lombard said. "It won't hurt for me to check. We're not passing up anything in this, understand, anything? If a *blind man* was anywhere near you that night, I'd want—What's matter?"

"Hey," Henderson had said sharply. "You just brought something back to me then. One was. A blind pan-handler tagged us as we were leaving—" Then as he saw Lombard's pencil briefly scrawl something, "You're kidding," he protested incredulously.

"Think so?" Lombard said levelly. "Wait and see." He cocked his pencil once more.

"That's all there is, there isn't any more."

Lombard put the list away in his pocket, stood up. "I'll make a dent in that somewhere along the line!" he promised grimly. He went over and whacked at the grate, to be let out. "And keep your eyes off that wall!" he added, catching the direction of Henderson's inadvertent glance, over to where the erased box-score had once been kept. "They're not going to get you in there." He thumbed the opposite direction along the corridor from the one he was about to take.

"They say they are," was Henderson's ironically-murmured answer.

## PERSONAL COLUMNS, ALL NEWSPAPERS:

"Will the young lady who was seated in a wall-booth at Anselmo's Bar with a companion, at or around 6.15 in the evening, May 20th last, and who may recall an orange hat that caused her to turn her head as its wearer was leaving, kindly get in touch with me. She was facing toward the back. If she remembers this it is vital that I hear from her without delay. A person's happiness is involved. All replies held in strictest confidence. Communicate J. L., Box 654, care of this newspaper."



No replies.

*The Fifteenth Day  
Before the Execution*

A blowsy woman, with her graying hair in her eyes and an aura of cabbage around her, opened the door.

"O'Bannon? Michael O'Bannon?" Lombard inquired. "I wish to speak to the Michael O'Bannon who worked as door-man at the Casino last Spring."

"Someone to see you, Mike!" she bel-lowed. And then to Lombard, "You better go in to him yourself, he's got his shoes off."

Lombard advanced down a "railroad" hall that threatened to go on indefinitely, but didn't. It ended finally in a room whose center was occupied by an oilcloth-covered table.

Sidewise to this lolled the object of his visit, stretched across two straight-backed wooden chairs in a suspension-bridge arrangement, the unsupported part of him curving downward. He laid aside a pink racing-form and a rancid pipe as Lombard entered. "And what can I do for you, sir?" he rumbled accommodatingly.

Lombard put his hat on the table and sat down without being asked. "A friend of mine wishes to get in touch with someone," he began confidentially. It would be poor policy, he felt, to overawe these people ahead of time with mention of death-sentences, consultations with the police, and all that; they might become intimidated and chary of telling him anything, even if they were able to. "It means a lot to him. It means everything. Now. This is why I'm here. Can you recall a man and woman getting out of a taxi in front of the theatre, while you were working there, one night in May? You held the door for them, of course."

"Well now, I held the door for everybody that drove up, that was my job."

"They were a little late, probably the last people you greeted that particular night. Now this woman had on a bright orange hat. A very peculiar hat, with a thin tickler sticking straight up from it. It swept right in front of your eyes as she got out, she passed so close to you. Your eyes followed it like this: slowly, from one side over to the other. You know, like

when something passes too close to you, and you can't make out what it is."

"Leave it to him," his wife put in challengingly from the doorway, "if it was anything on a pretty woman he'd do that anyway, whether he could make out what it was or not!"

Neither of the men paid any attention. "He saw you do that," Lombard went on. "He happened to notice it at the time, and he told me about it." He pressed his hands to the oilcloth, leaned toward him. "Can you remember? Does it come back to you? Can you remember her at all?"

O'Bannon shook his head ponderously. Then he gnawed his upper lip. Then he shook his head some more. He gave him a reproachful look. "D'ye know what you're asking, man? All those faces night after night! Nearly always two by two, lady and gent."

Lombard continued leaning across the table toward him for long minutes, as though the intensity of his gaze would be enough to bring it back to him of itself. "Try, O'Bannon. Think back. Try, will you, O'Bannon? It means everything in the world to this poor guy."

O'Bannon shook his head once more, this time with finality. "No," he said. "Out of my whole season there, out of all them people I opened car-doors for, I can only recall today one single individjule. A fellow who showed up by himself one night, full of booze. And that was because he fell out of the cab face-first when I opened the door, and I had to catch him in me arms—"

Lombard stemmed the flow of unwanted reminiscence that he suspected was about to follow. He got to his feet slowly and left.

*The Fourteenth, Thirteenth, Twelfth  
Days Before the Execution*

SHE'D already been perched on the stool several minutes when he first became aware of her. And that was all the more unusual, in that there were only a scattering of others at the bar as yet; her arrival should have been that much more conspicuous. It only showed how unobtrusively she must have approached and settled into place.

It was at the very beginning of his



turn of duty, so her arrival must have occurred only moments after his own taking up of position behind the bar, almost as though she had timed it that way: to arrive when he did. She had not yet been there when he first stepped out of the locker-room in freshly-starched jacket and glanced about his domain-to-be, that much he was sure of. At any rate, turning away from waiting on a man down at the other end, he became aware of her sitting there quiescently, and immediately approached.

"Yes, miss?"

Her eyes held his in a peculiarly sustained look, he thought. It was a personalized look. A look in its own right, with the giving of the order the adjunct, and not just an adjunct to the giving of the order. It was a look at *him*, the *man* to whom she was addressing the order, meant for him in his own right. It was a look that said: "Take note of me. Mark me well."

She asked for a little whiskey with water. As he turned away to get it, her eyes remained on him to the last. He had a trivial and fleeting feeling of being at a loss, of being unable to account for her bizarre scrutiny.

He brought her drink, and turned away immediately to wait on someone else.

An interval elapsed. An interval during which he did not think of her again, had forgotten her. An interval during which there should have been some slight alteration in her position, if only a shift of her hand, a raising or edging of her glass, a look elsewhere about the room. There wasn't.

He had never seen a human being sit so still. Nothing about her moved. The drink remained as neglected as though he had not brought it at all. She sat there like a young, feminine Buddha, eyes gravely, uninterruptedly on him.

Discomfort was beginning to deepen into annoyance. He approached her at last, stopped before her.

"Don't you care for your drink, miss?"

Her answer was toneless, told nothing. "Leave it there."

He drew away from her again, worsted, looking back at her all the way down the curve of the bar, and her eyes followed him as persistently as ever.

Discomfort was settling into something chronic now.

He upset a small chaser of beer as he was knifing it atop the sieve. He punched a wrong key in the cash-register.

At last, driven almost beyond endurance, he tackled her again, trying to come to grips with what she was doing to him.

"Is there anything I can do for you, miss?" he said with husky, choked resentment.

She spoke always without putting any clue into her voice. "Have I said there is?"

He leaned heavily on the bar. "Well, is there something you want from me?"

"Have I said I do?"

"Well, pardon me, but do I remind you of someone you know?"

"No one."

He was beginning to flounder. "I thought maybe there was, the way you keep looking at me—" he said unsteadily. It was meant to be a rebuke.

This time she didn't answer at all. Yet neither did her eyes leave him. He finally was the one had to leave them again, withdraw as discomfited as ever.

He longed to see her go. He began to pray for it. And yet it was obvious by now, had been for a long time past, that she had no intention of going of her own accord, would only go with the closing of of the place.

And then finally, when he thought it was never coming any more, the minute-hand notched twelve, and it was four o'clock and closing-time had arrived. Two men engaged in earnest conversation, the last of all the other customers, rose unbidden and sauntered toward the entrance, without interrupting their flow of amicable, low-voiced talk. Not she. Not a muscle moved. The stagnant drink still sat before her, and she sat on with it. Looking, watching, eyeing, without even a blink.

"Good night, gentlemen," he called out loudly after the other two, so that she would understand.

She didn't move.

He opened the control-box and threw a switch.

She moved at last. She moved quietly off through the darkened tavern toward the street-entrance.

He turned from keying the door locked, and she was standing there quietly on the



sidewalk, only a few yards off. She was turned expectantly facing toward the doorway, as if waiting for him to emerge.

He was forced to go toward her, because it was in that direction his path lay on leaving here of a night. They passed within a foot of one another, for the sidewalk was fairly narrow and she was posted out in the middle of it, not skulking back against the wall. Though her face turned slowly in time with his passing, he saw that she would have let him go by without speaking, and goaded by this silent obstinacy, he spoke himself, although only a second before he had intended ignoring her.

"What is it ye want of me?" he rumbled truculently.

"Have I said I want anything of you?"

He made to go on, then swung around on his heel to face her accusingly. "You sat in there just now, never once took your eyes off me! Never once the live-long night, d'ye hear me?" He pounded one hand within the other for outraged emphasis. "And now I find you outside here waiting around—"

"Is it forbidden to stand here?"

He shook a thick finger at her ponderously. "I'm warning you, young woman! I'm telling you for your own good—!"

She didn't answer. She didn't open her mouth, and silence is always so victorious in argument. He turned and shambled off, breathing heavily with his own bafflement.

An up-and-down intersection glided by beneath him like a slightly-depressed asphalt stream-bed. Then presently another. Then still another. And through it all, as the town slowly veered over from west to east, came that unhurried *tick-chick, tick-chick*, behind him in the middle distance.

He turned his head, the first time simply to warn her off. She came on with maddening casualness, as though it were three in the afternoon. Her walk was slow, almost stately, as the feminine gait so often is when the figure is held erect and the pace is leisurely.

He went on again, briefly, then turned once more. This time his entire body, and flung himself back toward her in a sudden flurry of ungovernable exasperation.

She stopped advancing, but she held her ground, made no slightest retrograde

move.

He closed in and bellowed full into her face: "Turn back now, will ye? That's enough of this now, d'ye hear? Turn back, or I'll—"

"I am going this way too," was all she said.

Again the circumstances were in her favor. Had their roles been reversed—But what man has sufficiently stout armor against ridicule to risk calling a policeman to complain that a solitary young girl is following him along the streets? She was not reviling him, she was not soliciting him, she was simply walking in the same direction he was; he was as helpless against her as he had been in the bar earlier.

Ten paces, fifteen, twenty. Behind him, as at a given signal, it recommenced again, steady as slow rain in a puddle. *Tick-chick, tick-chick, tick-chick*. She was coming after him once more.

They both went down Twenty-seventh Street toward Second, he on one side of the street, she on the other. He maintained a lead of about four doorways, and she let him keep it. The stalk had now become a purely mechanical thing, with its only remaining unknown quantity the why. But that was the dominant factor.

He went in, was inked from sight, within one of the black door-slits down near the corner. He must have heard that remorseless, maniacally-calm *tick-chick, tick-chick* behind him on the other side of the street to the very last, but he refrained from looking back, gave no sign. They had parted company at last, for the first time since early evening.

She came on until she had used up the distance there had been between them, stood even with the house. Then she took up her position there, and stood in full sight on the sidewalk opposite, watching a certain two of the dozen-odd darkened windows.

Presently they had lighted, as in greeting at someone's awaited entry. Then within a moment they blacked out once more, as if the act had been quickly countermanded. They remained dark after that, though at times the grayish film of the curtains would seem to stir and shift, with the elusiveness of a reflection on the glass. She knew she was



being watched through them, by one or more persons.

She maintained her vigil steadfastly.

An elevated train wriggled by like a glow-worm up at the far end of the street. A taxi passed, and the driver glanced at her curiously, but he already had a fare. A late wayfarer came by along the opposite side of the street, and looked over at her, trying to discern encouragement. She averted her face angularly, only righted it again after he was well on his way.

A policeman suddenly stood at her elbow, appearing from nowhere. He must have stood watching, undetected, for some little time before.

"Just a minute, miss. I've had a complaint from a woman in one of the flats over there that you followed her husband home from work, and have been standing staring at their windows for the past half-hour."

"I have."

"Well, y'd better move on."

"I want you to take hold of my arm, please, and walk me with you until we get around the corner, as though you were running me in." He did, rather half-heartedly. They stopped again when they were out of sight of the windows. "Here." She produced a piece of paper, showed it to him. He peered at it in the uncertain light of a nearby lamppost.

"Who's this?" he asked.

"Homicide Squad. You can call him and check on it, if you want to. I'm doing this with his full knowledge and permission."

"Oh, sort of undercover work, hunh?" he said with increased respect.

"And please ignore all future complaints from those particular people about me. You're apt to get a great many of them, during the next few days and nights."

She made a phone-call of her own, after he had left her.

"How is it working out?" the voice on the other end asked.

"He's already showing signs of strain. He broke a glass behind the bar. He nearly gave in to an impulse to throw me off the elevated platform just now."

"That looks like it. Be careful, don't go too close to him when there's no one else around. Remember, the main thing is, don't give him an inkling of what the

whole thing's about, of what's behind it. *Don't put the question to him*, that's the whole trick. The moment he finds out what you're after, it goes into reverse, loses its effect. It's the not knowing that keeps him on edge, will finally wear him down to where we want him."

"What time does he start out for work, as a rule?"

"He leaves the flat around five, each afternoon," her informant said, as though with documentary evidence at his fingers to refer to.

"He'll find me on hand tomorrow, when he does."

THE third night the manager suddenly approached the bar to one side of her, unasked, and called him over.

"What's the matter, why don't you wanna wait on this young lady? I been watching. Twenty minutes she's been sitting here like this. Couldn't you see her?"

His face was gray, and the seams were shiny. It got that way whenever he had to come this close to her now.

"I can't—" he said brokenly, keeping his voice muted so that others wouldn't hear it. "Mr. Anselmo, it's not human—she's torturing me—you don't understand—" He coughed on the verge of tears, and his cheeks swelled out, then flattened again.

The girl, less than a foot away, sat looking on at the two of them, with the tranquil, guiltless eyes of a child.

"Three nights she's been in here like this now. She keeps looking at me—"

"Sure she keeps looking at you, she's waiting to get waited on," the manager rebuked him. "What do you want her to do? You quit talking crazy, and take her order," the manager said brusquely. He turned away, with a single verifying glance at her to confirm how well-behaved, how docile, how harmless she was.

The hand that set down the drink before her shook uncontrollably, and some of it spilled.

They neither of them said anything to one another, though their breaths all but mingled.

IT WAS his day off, and he had been attempting to shake her off for well over an hour now.

He was going to halt again. She saw



it coming before it had even occurred, she already knew the signs so well by now. He halted in full sunshine this time, stood back against a building-wall, with shoppers streaming to and fro before him. He had already halted two or three times before this, but each time it had ended inconclusively. As it always did. He had gone on again; she had too.

This time she detected a difference. This time the halt almost seemed to be involuntary. As though some main-spring of endurance had finally snapped. As he backed to the wall the small flat parcel he had held bedded under his arm slowly overbalanced, slapped to the ground, and he allowed it to lie there unrecovered.

She halted a short distance from him, making no pretense, as usual, that her halt had anything to do but with him. She stood looking at him in her usual grave way.

The sun was streaming whitely into his face, and he was blinking his eyes against it.

Tears appeared unexpectedly, and suddenly he was weeping abjectedly, in full view of all the passersby, his face an ugly, brick-red, puckered mask.

Two people stopped, incredulous. The two became four, the four, eight. He and the girl were both contained in the hollow core of the crowd that in no time at all had ringed them.

"Ask her what she *wants* of me!" he bawled soddenly. "Ask here what she's *after*! She's been doing this to me for days now— Day and night, night and day! I can't stand it any more, I tell ya, I can't stand it any more—!"

"What is he, drunk?" a woman asked another.

She stood there unshrinking, making no attempt to escape from the attention he was forcing her to share with him. She was so dignified, so grave, so fetching to the eye, and he was so grotesquely comical, it could have had only one result; the sympathies of the crowd could have gone only one way. Crowds are more often sadistic than not, anyway.

Grins appeared here and there. The grins became snickers. The snickers guffaws and outright jeers. In another moment the whole crowd was laughing pitilessly at him. Only one face in all that

group remained impassive, sober, clinically neutral.

Hers.

He had only worsened his situation instead of bettering it, by making this spectacle. He had thirty tormentors now, instead of one.

"I can't stand it any more! I tell ya I'll *do* something to her—!" Suddenly he advanced on her, as if to strike her, beat her back.

Instantly men leaped forward, caught his arms, flung him this way and that with surly grunts. For a moment there was a confused floundering of bodies around her. His head suddenly forced its way through, lower than normal, straining to get at her.

It might easily have developed into a multiple onslaught—on *him*.

She appealed to them, self-possessedly but loudly enough to be heard, and the calm clarity of her voice stopped them all short. "Don't. Let him alone. Let him go about his business.

He went *running* away from the scene full tilt, padding ponderously down the street.

Now would be the time, now would be the moment Burgess would approve of, she felt sure. Now he was like wax as he ran through this bright midday sun. That crowd back there had taken away his last prop.

The curve of his resistance might start upward again from here on, if she didn't act now while she had the chance.

Now was the time; it was simply a matter of pinning him against the nearest wall, putting in a quick call to Burgess, and having him take charge in time to be in at the death. "Are you ready to admit now that you did see a certain woman at the bar that night in company with the man Henderson? Why did you deny having seen her? Who paid or coerced you to deny it?"

He had stopped for a moment, down there ahead at the next corner, looking all about him for a way of escape like a trapped, scurrying animal. Panic was on him at white heat. She could tell by the abortive, zig-zag, false starts he kept making, looking for sanctuary. To him she was no longer a girl, something he could have buffeted senseless with one arm if



he chose. To him she was Nemesis.

She threw up her arm again, as the distance rapidly closed between them. It only stung him like the flick of a whip to an added spurt of frenzied disorientation. He was walled in there on the corner by a thin but continuous line of people waiting to cross over, standing elbow to elbow along the curb. There was an adverse light on above.

He gave one last look at her, rapidly nearing him now, and then plunged through them like a circus-performer tearing through a paper hoop.

She stopped short, as short as though both her flailing feet had caught simultaneously in a hidden crevice along the sidewalk. A brake keened out along the asphalt, scorching itself to death.

She flung up both hands, ground them into her eye-sockets, but not before she had seen his hat go up in the air, in a surprisingly high loop, clear over everyone else's head.

A woman screamed for prelude, and then a vast bay of horrified dismay went up from the crowd in general.

## VII

### *The Eleventh Day Before the Execution*

LOMBARD had been following him for the past hour-and-a-half, and there's nothing slower to be followed on the face of the earth than a blind mendicant. He moved like a tortoise that counts its lifespan by centuries, instead of a man that counts his by years. It took him an average of forty minutes to traverse each block-length, from one corner to the next. Lombard timed it with his watch several times.

It couldn't keep on forever, he kept reminding himself. It couldn't last through the whole night. That figure up ahead of him was a human being in a human being's body. He had to sleep sometime. He'd have to turn in out of the open and go behind walls and lie down to rest *sometime*.

And finally it came. Lombard had thought it never would, but it did at last. He turned aside, went within walls, and quitted the open. His burrow was a mouldering tenement. Lombard had had to be

careful, although he hadn't realized even yet that the end was this close at hand.

He stopped at the doorway and cautiously entered in turn, just deep enough within to be able to listen.

The cane-taps were still going up, with infinite slowness. He counted four breaks in them, changes of tempo, one for each turn of the stairs. They were duller on the level-landings than on the incline of the stairs themselves. Then they dwindled off to the back of the building.

He waited until he'd heard the faint closing of a door, then he started up.

There were no sounds of voice. He must be in there alone. He knocked.

The flooring creaked timidly. A voice close to the doorseam, asked: "Who's out there?"

"A friend."

The voice became more frightened at that, instead of less. "I haven't any. I don't know you."

"Let me in. I won't hurt you."

"I can't do it. I'm alone in here and helpless. I can't let anyone in." He was worried about his day's gleanings, Lombard knew. You couldn't blame him for that.

Lombard took out his wallet finally, scanned it thoughtfully. The largest denomination in it was a fifty-dollar bill. There were some smaller ones he could have taken out in place of it; he chose the larger one instead. He dropped to his heels, worked it through the crack under the door until there was nothing left of it to hold onto any more.

He straightened up again, said: "Reach down and feel along the bottom of the door. Doesn't that prove I don't want to rob you? Now let me in."

There was a postscript of hesitancy.

The door opened grudgingly, and the sightless black lenses that he'd first marked out on the streets hours ago stared at him. "Anyone else with you?"

"No, I'm alone. And I haven't come here to harm you, so don't be nervous." The room was invisible in the darkness.

"Put on a light, can't you?"

"No," the blind man said, "this makes us more even. If you just want to talk, what do you need a light for?"

"Well at least I can smoke, can't I? You don't object to that, do you? You



smoke yourself, don't you?"

"When I can get it," the other voice said warily.

"Here, take one of these." There was a click, and a small lighter-flame peered out in his hand. A little of the room came back.

The blind man was on the edge of the bed, his cane crosswise on his lap.

Lombard's hand came away from his pocket holding, instead of cigarettes, a revolver. He held it in close, but pointed directly at the other. "Here, help yourself," he repeated pleasantly.

The blind man became rigid. The cane rolled off his knees and hit the floor. He made a spasmodic warding-motion of the hands, up toward his face. "I knew you were after my money!" he said hoarsely. "I shouldn't have let you in—"

Lombard put the gun away again, as calmly as he had taken it out. "You're not blind," he said quietly. "I didn't need that stunt to prove it to myself either. But I needed it to prove to you that I was already on to you. The mere fact that you opened the door for a fifty-dollar bill was proof enough. You must have struck a match for a minute and scanned it. How could you know it wasn't a one-dollar bill, if you weren't a fake?"

He saw a misshapen remnant of candle, went over and touched the lighter to it.

"What do you want with me?"

"I want you to remember something you saw—Mr. *Blind Man*," he added ironically. "Now listen to this. You were hanging around outside the Casino Theatre, working the audience as it came out, one night last May—"

"But I've been around there lots of times."

"I'm talking about one night only, one particular night. This night that I mean, a man and a woman came out together. Now here's the woman: she had on a bright orange hat with a tall black feeler sticking up from it. You put the bite on them as they were getting into a taxi, a few yards down from the entrance. Listen carefully, now. Without thinking what she was doing, she dropped a lighted cigarette into the cup you shoved at her, instead of the donation she intended. It burned your finger. The man quickly dug

it out for you, and to make it up to you, gave you a couple of dollars. I think he said something like this: 'Sorry, old man that was a mistake.' Now surely you remember that. It isn't every night your finger gets burned by a live cigarette landing in your cup, and it isn't every night you get two dollars in a lick from just one passerby."

"Suppose I say I don't remember?"

"Then I'm going to haul you out of here with me right now and turn you in at the nearest police station as an impostor. You'll get a stretch in the work-house, you'll be down on the police-blotted from then on, and you'll be picked up each time they see you trying to work the streets."

The man on the bed clawed at his own face distractedly, momentarily displacing the dark glasses upward past his eyes. "But isn't that like forcing me to say I remember, whether I do or not?"

"It's only forcing you to admit what I'm sure you do remember anyway."

"Then suppose I say I do remember, what happens then?"

"First you tell me what you remember, then you repeat it to a certain plainclothesman, a friend of mine. I'll either bring him down here or take you up there with me to see him—"

The mendicant jolted with renewed dismay. "But how can I do that, without giving myself away? Especially to a plainclothesman! I'm supposed to be blind, how can I say I saw them? That's the same as what you were threatening to do to me if I *didn't* tell you!"

"No, you'll just be telling it to this one guy, not the whole force at large. I can strike a bargain with him, get him to promise you immunity from prosecution. Now how about it? Did you or didn't you?"

"Yes, I did," the professional blind man admitted in a low voice. "I saw the two of them together. I usually keep my eyes closed, even behind the glasses, when I'm near bright lights, like there were outside that theatre. But the cigarette-burn made me open them good and wide. I can see through the glasses, and I saw them both, all right."

Lombard took something out of his wallet. "Is this him?"



The blind man hitched his glasses up out of the way, scrutinized the snapshot critically. "I'd say it was," he said finally. "Considering how short a glimpse I had of him, and how long ago it was, it looks to me like the same guy."

"What about her? You'd know her again if you saw her?"

"I already have. I only saw him that one night, but I saw her at least once more after that—"

"What!" Lombard was suddenly on his feet, leaning over him. The rocker swayed emptily behind him. He grabbed him by the shoulder, squeezing as if trying to get the information out of his skinny frame in that way. "Let me hear about it! Come on, quick!"

"It was not very long after that same night, that's how I knew it was she. It was in front of one of the big swanky hotels, and you know how bright *they* are. I heard a pair of footsteps coming down the steps, a man's and a woman's. I heard the woman say, 'Wait a minute, maybe this'll bring me luck,' and I knew she meant me. I heard her footsteps turn aside and come over to me. A coin went in. A quarter. I can tell the different coins by the sounds they make. And then the funny part of it happened, that made me know it was she. It's such a little thing, I don't know if you'll be able to catch on like I did. She stood still for just a tiny minute there in front of me, and they never do. The coin was already in, so I knew she must be looking at me. Or something about me. I was holding the cup in my right hand, the one with the burn on it, and the burn was one of those big water-blisters by that time. I think it must have been that she saw, on the side of my finger. Anyway, here's what happened. I heard her say under her breath—not to me, but to herself—'Why, how very odd—!' And then her footsteps turned and went back to where the man's were. That was all—"

"But—"

"Wait a minute, I'm not finished yet. I opened my eyes just a slit, to look down at the cup. *And she'd added a dollar-bill to the original quarter she'd put in the first time.* I knew it was she, because it hadn't been in there until then. Now why should she change her mind and add a

dollar-bill after she'd already put in a quarter? It must have been the same woman; she must have recognized the blister, and remembered what had happened a few nights be—"

"Must have, must have," gritted Lombard impatiently. "I thought you said you saw her, could tell me what she looked like!"

"I can't tell you what she looks like from the front, because I didn't dare open my eyes. The lights were too bright around there, it would have been a give-away. After she turned away and I saw the dollar-bill, I peered up a little higher under my lashes and saw her from the back, as she was getting into the car."

"From the back! Well, tell me that at least, what was she like from the back!"

"I couldn't see all of her even from the back, I was afraid to look up that high. All I saw was just the seam of a silk stocking and one heel, as she raised it to step in. That was all that was in focus with my downcast eyelids."

"An orange hat one night. A stocking-seam and the heel of her shoe another night, a week later!" Lombard gave him a fling onto the bed. "At this rate, after about twenty years we'll have a whole woman to stick in-between the two!"

He went over to the door, flung it open. He looked back at him balefully. "You can do a lot better than that, and I'm sure of it! What you need is the professional touch, to bring it out. You certainly did see her full eye-width the first night, outside the theatre. And the second time you must have heard the address given to the driver of the car, as she stepped in—"

"No I didn't."

"You stay here, get it? Don't move from here. I'm going down to call up this fellow I told you about. I want him to come over here and listen to this with me."

"But he's a bull, isn't he?"

"I told you that's all right. We're not interested in you, either one of us. You've got nothing to be nervous about. But don't try to run out before I get back, or then we will make it hot for you."

He closed the door after him.

The voice at the other end sounded surprised. "You got something already?"

"I've got something already, and I want



you to hear it for what it's worth. I think you can probably get a lot more out of it than I can. I'm way up here at 123 St. and Park Avenue, the last house short of the railroad tracks. I'd like you to get over here as fast as you can, and see what you think of it. I've got the beat-cop posted at the door watching it for me until I can get back. I'm talking from around the corner, nearest phone I could find. I'll be waiting down there by the street-entrance for you."

BURGESS dropped off a patrol-car with a running slow-down a few minutes later. The car went on without stopping and he came over to where Lombard and the cop were standing waiting in the doorway.

"In here," Lombard said, turning to go in without any further explanation.

"Well, I guess I can get back on the line," the cop said, turning away.

"Thanks a lot, officer," Lombard called out to him. They were already in at the stairs by that time. "All the way up at the top," he explained, taking the lead. "He's seen her twice, *that* night and another time, a week later. He's a blind man; don't laugh, phoney of course."

They made the first turning, one behind the other, hands coasting along the rail. "Wants immunity—about the blindness. Scared of cops."

"We can work something out, if it's worth it," Burgess grunted.

Second landing. "One more," Lombard checked off gratuitously.

They saved their breath for climbing on the next.

Third landing. "What happened to the lights from here on up?" Burgess heaved.

A hitch snagged the rhythm of Lombard's ascent. "That's funny. There was one still on when I came down. Either the bulb died, or it was tampered with, turned off."

"You sure it was still on?"

"Absolutely. I remember he had his room dark, but light from the hall came in through the open door."

"Better let me go first, I've got a pocket-light." Burgess detoured around him, took the lead.

He must have been still in the process of getting it out. At the middle turn, be-

tween floors, where the stairs changed direction, he suddenly went floundering down on all fours. "Look out," he warned Lombard. "Step back."

The moon of his torch sprang up, bleaching the little oblong between end-wall and bottom-step. Spanning it lay an inert figure, grotesquely contorted. Legs trailing downward off the last few steps, torso proper on the level landing-place, but head bent backward at an unnatural and acute angle by the impediment of the end-wall at the turn. Dangling from one ear, but miraculously unbroken, was a pair of dark glasses.

"That him?" he muttered.

"It's him," agreed Lombard tersely.

Burgess bent over the figure, probed while. Then he straightened up again. "Broken neck," he said. "Killed instantly." He shot his light up the stair-incline. Then he went up there, jittered it around on the floor. "Accident," he said. "Missed his footing up here on the top step, went all the way down head-first, and crashed head-on into that wall backing the turn. I can see the skid-marks up here, over the lip of the top step."

Lombard climbed slowly up to where he was, blew out his breath in a disgusted snort. "Fine time for an accident! I no sooner contact him—" He stopped short, looked at the detective searchingly in the batterylight-rays. "You don't think it could have been anything else, do you?"

"Did anyone pass you or that other guy, while you were waiting down there at the door?"

"No one, in or out."

"Did you hear anything like a fall?"

"No, we would have come in and looked if we had. But at least twice while we were waiting for you long trains went by on those overhead tracks, and you couldn't hear yourself think until they'd gone by. It might have been during one of those times."

Burgess nodded. "That's what probably kept others in the building from hearing it too. Don't you see, there's too much coincidence in it for it to be anything but an accident. He could have hit his head against the same wall down there ten times over and still lived; just been stunned without breaking his neck. He just *happened to be killed instantly*, but it



couldn't have been counted on."

"Well, where does the bulb come in? I think that's too much coincidence, isn't it? I know what I'm saying, that light was still in working order when I tore down those stairs to phone you. If it hadn't been, I would have had to pick my way down, and I didn't; I went pretty fast."

Burgess shot his light along the wall until he'd found it; it was on a bracket, sticking out from the side. "I don't get what you mean," he said, staring up at it. "If he was supposed to be blind, or at least went around most of the time with his eyes closed, which amounts to the same thing, how does the bulb enter into it one way or the other? How would darkness be any disadvantage to him? In fact he'd be more sure-footed in the dark, probably, than with the light left on; because he wasn't used to using his eyes."

"Maybe that's just it," Lombard said. "Maybe he came out fast, trying to make his get-away before I got back, and in his hurry forgot to close his eyes, left them open. With them open, maybe he was no better off than you or me."

"Now you're getting yourself all tangled up. For his sight to be dazzled, the light would have had to be on. And your whole kick has been that it isn't. What would be the point, either way? How could anyone count on his missing a step, any more than they could count on his hitting in such a way that his neck snapped?"

"All right, it was a freak accident." Lombard flung his hand out disgustedly as he turned to go down. "All I say is, I don't like its timing. I no sooner catch up with him—"

"They will happen, you know, and they usually pick their own time for it, not yours."

Lombard went thumping frustratedly down the stairs, letting his whole weight down at each step. "Whatever you might have been able to drill out of him is gone for good now."

"Don't let it throw you down. You may be able to turn up somebody else."

"From him, it's gone for good. And it was practically there, waiting to be found out." He'd reached the landing where the body lay by now. He turned suddenly to look back. "What happened? What was that?"

Burgess pointed to the wall. "The bulb lit up again. Your vibration on the staircase jarred it on. Which explains what happened to it the first time: his fall broke the current. The wiring must be defective. That takes care of the light." He motioned him on. "You may as well clear out. I'll report it by myself. No sense of you getting all mixed up in it, if you want to keep working on the other thing."

### *The Tenth Day Before the Execution*

IT WAS on a slip of paper that Burgess had given her.

Cliff Milburn

house-musician, Casino Theatre, last season, current job, Regent Theatre.

And then two telephone-numbers. One a police-precinct, up until a certain hour. The other his own home-number, in case she needed him after he'd gone off duty.

He'd said to her: "I can't tell you how to go about it. You'll have to figure that out for yourself. Your own instinct will probably tell you what to do, better than I can. Just don't be frightened, and keep your wits about you. You'll be all right."

This was her own way of going about it, here in front of the glass. This was the only way she could figure out, sight-unseen. The clean, tomboyish look was gone from her. The breezy sweep of the hair from an immaculate part over to the other side of her face, that was missing. In its place was a tortured surface of brassy rolls and undulations, drenched with some sort of fixative and then hardened into a metallic casque. Gone too was the youthful, free-swinging, graceful hang there had always been to her clothes. Instead she had managed to achieve a skin-tight effect that appalled her, even alone here in her own room. Excruciatingly short, so that when she sat down—well, she would be sure to catch his eye in a way that would do the most good.

The marquee-lights were on when she got out of the cab, but the sidewalk under them was fairly empty yet. She wanted to get in good and early, so she'd have time to work on him before the house-lights went down.

She stopped at the box-office. "I have a



reservation for tonight. First row orchestra, on the aisle. Mimi Gordon." She took out the money and paid for it. "Now you're sure of what you told me over the phone? That's the side of the house the trap-drummer is on, and not the other?"

"That's right, I checked on it for you before I put it aside." He gave her the leer she'd known he would. "You must think quite a lot of him. Lucky guy, I'd say."

She went inside. The ticket-taker at the door had just come on duty, the usher had just come up from the locker-room downstairs, she was so early. Whatever the status of the balcony, where the unwritten rule of being fashionably late did not hold sway, she was definitely the first patron on the orchestra-floor.

She sat there alone, a small gilt-headed figure lost in that vast sea of empty seats. Most of her gaudiness was carefully concealed, from three directions, by the coat she kept huddled about her. It was only from the front that she wanted it to have its full lethal effect.

Seats began to slap down behind her more and more frequently; there was the rustle and slight hum that always marks a theatre slowly filling up. She had eyes for one thing and one thing only: that little half-submerged door down there under the rim of the stage. It was over on the opposite side from her. Light was peering through the seams of it now, and she could hear voices behind it. They were gathering there, ready to come out to work.

Suddenly it opened and they began filing up into the pit, each one's head and shoulders bent acutely to permit his passage. She didn't know which one was he, she wouldn't know until she saw him seat himself, because she'd never seen him. One by one they dropped into the various chairs, disposing themselves in a thin crescent around the stage-apron, heads below the footlights.

The trap-drummer, you might know, came in a good five minutes after all the others.

The conductor gave him a sizzling look. He hadn't seen her yet. He was too busy fiddling with his rack, adjusting his instrument. Her hand dropped to her side and her skirt crept up her thigh an unnotice-

able fraction of an inch more.

He got through arranging his set-up. "How's the house tonight?" she heard him ask. He turned and looked out through the pit-railing for the first time since he'd come in.

She was ready for him. She was looking at him. She'd hit him. There must have been an elbow-nudge beyond her radius of downcast vision. She heard the other man's slurred answer. "Yeah, I know, I seen it."

She'd hit him hard. She could feel his eyes on her. She could have made a graph of the wavy line they traveled. She took her time. Not too fast now, not right away. She thought: "Funny how we know these things, all of us, even when we've never tried them before." She concentrated on a line on her program as though she could never get enough of its mystic import.

She let her lashes come up slowly and unveil her eyes.

They met his. They stayed with his. His had expected them to turn away, frost-over. Instead, they accepted his glance, sustained it for as long as he cared to give it. They seemed to say: "Are you interested in me? All right, go ahead, I don't mind."

He was a shade surprised for a moment at this ready acceptance. He kept on looking for all he was worth. He even tried a tentative smile, that was ready to be rubbed out at a moment's notice too.

She accepted that in turn. She even sent him one back, of about the same degree as his. His deepened. Hers did too.

The preliminaries were over, they were getting into—And then, damn it, the buzzer signalled from back-curtain. The conductor tapped out attention, spread his arms holding them poised. Flounced them, and the overture was under way, he and she had to break it off.

He turned and spoke to her at the start of the intermission, when they were filing out for a rest and a smoke. He was the furthest over, so he was the last to go; that gave him the chance to do it undetected behind the others' backs. The people next to her had gotten up and gone out, so he could tell she was alone, even if her conduct had left him any doubts on that point until now, which it certainly should not have



"How do you like it so far?"

"It's real good," she purred.

"Doing anything afterwards?"

She pouted. "No, I only wish I was."

He turned to go out after his fellow-bandsmen. "You are," he assured her smugly, "now."

She gave her skirt a corrective downward hitch with considerable asperity as soon as he was gone. She felt as though she could have used a scalding shower and plenty of Lifebuoy.

After the final curtain, after everyone had left, he called through the railing, "Wait for me around at the stage-alley, lovely. Be with you in no time."

There was ignominy attached even to the simple act of waiting for him outside, for some reason she couldn't quite ascertain. Perhaps it was something about his personality that tinged everything that way. She felt crawly, walking up and down out there. And a little afraid.

Then before she'd even seen him coming, he had her arm possessively under his and was towing her along with him, without even breaking stride.

"How's my new little friend?" he began breezily.

"Fine, how's mine?" she gave him back.

"We'll go where the rest of the gang goes," he said. "I'd catch cold without 'em." She got the idea. She was like a new boutonniere to him, he wanted to show her off.

This was at twelve.

By three o'clock she decided he'd been softened up enough by beer for her to begin to go to work on him. They were in the second of two identical places by then, the gang still in the offing. A peculiar sort of etiquette seemed to govern things of this sort. He and she had moved on when the rest of them moved, and yet once they were in the new place they continued their separateness, at a table by themselves.

She'd been watching carefully for her opening for some time. One offered itself finally, just what she wanted, in one of the rancid compliments he'd been shoveling at her.

"You say I'm the prettiest thing ever sat in that seat. But there must have been other times you turned around and saw someone you liked sitting there right behind you. Tell me about some of them."

"Not in it with you, wouldn't waste my breath."

"Well, just for fun, I'm not jealous. Tell me: if you had your choice, out of all the attractive women you ever saw sitting behind you, in that same seat where I was tonight, since you've been playing in theatres, which was the one you would have rather taken out?"

"You, of course."

"I knew you'd say that. But after me; which would your second choice be? I want to see just how far back you can remember. I bet you can't remember their faces from one night to the next."

"Can't I? Well just to show you. I turn around one night and there's a dame sitting there right on the other side of the rail from me. This was at the other house, the Casino. I don't know, something about her got me—"

A succession of attenuated shadows slipped across their table one by one; the last one of all stood still for a minute. "We're going to pitch a jam-session downstairs in the basement. Coming?"

Her gripping hand relaxed its hold on her arm, fell away frustratedly down by the side of her chair. They'd all gotten up, were piling in through a basement-entrance at the back.

"No, stay up here with me," she urged, reaching out to hold him. "Finish what you—"

He'd already risen. "Come on, you don't want to miss this, snooks."

"Don't you do enough playing all evening at the theatre? Let's got to your place." She was desperate.

"That would be better, lovely. Let's go."

They went over in a cab. It was in one of a row of old houses done over into apartments, a single one to a floor. He took her up to the second floor and unlocked it and turned on the lights for her. It was a depressing sort of place; age-blackened flooring underneath a thin application of varnish, remote ceilings, high, coffin-like window-embrasures. It wasn't a place to come to at four in the morning. Not with anyone, much less him.

She shivered a little and stood still, close by the door, trying not to be too aware of the over-elaborate way he was securing it on the inside. She wanted to keep her thinking as clear and as relaxed



as she possibly could, and that thought would only muddy it.

He'd finished locking her in.

"What're you going to do, just stand there?"

"No," she said with absent-minded docility, "no, I'm not going to just stand here."

She kept looking around. Desperately looking around. What would start it? The color. Orange. Something orange.

She'd found it at last. A cheap rayon shade on a lamp far over at the other end of the room. She went over to it, turned it on. It cast a small glow in the shape of a halo above itself against the wall. She put her hand on it, turned to him. "I love this color."

He didn't pay any attention.

She kept her hand on it. "You're not listening. I said this is my favorite color."

This time he looked bleakly over. "All right, what about it?"

"I wish I had a hat this color."

"I'll buy you one. T'morrow or the next day."

"Look, like this, this is how I mean." She picked up the small base bodily, held it riding on her shoulder with the light still on inside the shade. Then she turned toward him so that the shade seemed to be topping her head. "Look at me. Look at me good. Didn't you ever see anyone wearing a hat this color? Doesn't this remind you of someone you once saw?"

He blinked twice, with owl-like solemnity.

"Keep looking," she pleaded. "Just keep looking like that. You can remember if you want to. Didn't you ever see anyone sitting right behind you in the theatre, in the same seat I was in tonight, wearing a hat this color?"

He said, quite momentarily, quite incomprehensibly. "Oh—that was that five hundred smackeroos I got!" And then suddenly shading his eyes with one hand as if in perplexity, "Hey, I wasn't supposed to tell anyone about that." Then he looked up and asked with a sort of trustful blankness, "Have I already told you?"

"Yes, sure." That was the only answer to give. He might balk at telling her the first time, but not at repeating it, if the damage was already done.

She had to grab it on the fly, she daren't let it go by, even though she didn't know if this was it yet, or what this was. She put the lamp down fast, moved toward him equally fast, yet somehow managing to give an impression of leisureliness. "But tell me about it over again. I like to listen to it. Go on, you can tell me, Cliff, because you know I'm your new friend, you said so yourself. What harm is there?"

He blinked again. "What are we talking about?" he said helplessly. "I forgot for a minute."

She had to get his drink-disconnected chain of thought in motion again. It was like a feeder-line that slips its cogs every once in awhile and dangles helplessly. "Orange hat. Look, up here. Five hundred—five hundred smackeroos, remember? She sat in the same seat I did."

"Oh yeah," he said docilely. "Right behind me. I just looked at her." He gave a maniacal laugh, stilled it again as suddenly. "I got five hundred smackeroos just for looking at her. Just for looking at her and not saying I did."

She saw that her arms were creeping slowly up his collar, twining around his neck. She didn't try to stop them.

"Did *she* give you the five hundred dollars, Cliff? Who gave you the five hundred dollars? Ah, come on, tell me."

"A *hand* gave 'em to me, in the dark. A hand, and a voice, and a handkerchief. Oh yeah, and there was one other thing: a gun."

Her fingers kept making a slow sweep to the back of his head, and then returning each time. "Here's what happened. I came home late one night, after the show, and when I come in the hall downstairs, where there's usually a light, it was dark. Like the bulb went out. Just as I feel my way over to the stairs, a hand reaches out and stops me. Kind of heavy and cold, laying on me hard."

"I backed against the wall and says, 'Who's there? Who are you?' It was a man, I could tell by the voice. After awhile, when my eyes got a little more used to it, I could make out something white, like a handkerchief, up where his face should be. It made his voice sound all burry. But I could hear him all right."

"He gave me my own name first, and what my job was; he seemed to know



everything about me. Then he asked me if I remember seeing a certain lady at the theatre a night ago, in an orange hat.

"I told him I wouldn't have if he hadn't reminded me, but now that he'd reminded me of it, I did.

"Then he said, still in that same quiet voice, without even getting excited at all: 'How would you like to be shot dead?'

"I couldn't answer at all, my voice wouldn't work. He took my hand and put it on something cold he was holding. It was a gun. I jumped, but he made me hold my hand there a minute until he was sure I got what it was. He said, 'That's for you, if you tell anyone that.'

"He waited a minute and then he went on speaking. He said, 'Or would you rather have five hundred dollars?'

"I hear paper rustling and he puts something in my hand. 'Here's five hundred dollars,' he says. 'Have you got a match? Go ahead, I'll let you light a match, so you can see it for yourself.' I did, and it was five hundred dollars all right. Then when my eyes started to go up to where his face was, about, they just got as far as the handkerchief, and he blew the match out.

"'Now you didn't see that lady,' he said. 'There wasn't any lady. No matter who asks you, say no, keep saying no—and you'll keep on living.' He waited a minute and then he asked me, 'Now if they ask you, what is it you say?'

"I said, 'I didn't see that lady. There wasn't any lady.' And I was shaking all over.

"'Now go on upstairs,' he said. 'Good night.' The way it sounded through that handkerchief, it was like something coming from a grave.

"I couldn't get inside my door fast enough. I beat it upstairs and locked myself in and kept away from the windows."

Her purse was lying on the table, and before she could get over and stop him he'd opened it and strewn everything out.

"Lookin' for a cigarette," he said.

"No," she cried out in sudden alarm, "that isn't anything, don't look at it!"

He'd already read it before she could pull it away from him. It was the forgotten slip of paper from Burgess. His surprise was guileless for a moment, he didn't take in its full meaning at first. "Why, that's me! My name and where I

work and ev—"

"No! No!"

He warded her off. "And to call the precinct house number first, if not there call—"

She could see the mistrust starting to film his face, cloud it over. "They sent you on purpose, you didn't just happen to meet me. Somebody's after me, and I don't know who, if I could only remember who—Somebody's going to shoot me with a gun, somebody said they'd shoot me with a gun! If I could only think what I wasn't supposed to do— You made me do it!"

She began moving slowly backward, a surreptitious step at a time. She had placed her hands behind her back, so they would be in a position to find the door, try to unlock it, before he could realize her purpose.

She floundered to the door. The key still projected, had been left in. Then she had to go on past it, he gave her no time to do anything with it.

She screamed a name. The one name of all that was most powerless to help her right now. "Scott! Scott darling!"

The little lamp was still there, the one she'd tried to light his memory with before.

It was too light to be able to harm him much, but she picked it up and flung it back at him. It failed even to hit him, dropped futilely wide of the mark, and the bulb in it didn't even shatter against the dingy carpeting. He came on undeterred.

And then something happened. His toe must have caught in something. She didn't see these things at the time, but remembered about them later. The unbroken lamp bucked violently on the floor behind him, there was a flash of bright blue from the foot of the wall, and he went sprawling down full-length between the two, arms at full reach.

There was a channel of clearance left between him and the blessed door. She could feel her hands wrangling the key. Like something in a dream; they didn't seem to belong to her at all. He was rippling his belly along the floor, trying to close the couple of inches gap between them from where he lay, without getting up; trying to grab her by the ankles and bring her down to him.



THE KEY clicked, she pulled, and the door swung in. Something pecked futilely across the rounded back of her shoe, it was like the tapping of fingernails, as she plunged out through the new-made opening.

Then the rest was a blurred welter of mingled horror and relief; horror at anticipated pursuit that didn't come. She was careening down dimly-lighted stairs, more by impetus than any clear sight of them. She found a door, opened it, and it was cool, and it was night, and she was safe, but she kept staggering on, away from that place of evil, that would haunt her a little bit forever. She was zig-zagging along an empty sidewalk, like a drunk, and she *was* drunk—with overpowering terror.

She remembered turning a corner, and she wasn't sure where she was any more. Then she saw a light ahead and went toward it, running now, in order to get to it quick, before he had a chance to overtake her. She went in and found herself looking at glass cases holding salami and platters of potato-salad, so it must have been an all-night delicatessen.

There was no one in it but a man dozing behind the counter. He opened his eyes and found her standing there dazedly, her dress still diagonally down off one shoulder where he'd torn it. He jumped, came forward, peered, palms to counter.

"What's the matter, miss? You been in an accident? Something I can do for you?"

"Give me a nickel," she sobbed brokenly. "Please give me a nickel—to use your phone."

She went over and dropped it in, still sobbing by reflex-diaphragm action.

The kindly old man called inside to the back: "Mamma, come out front, yess? Is here a child in zome kind of trouble."

She got Burgess at his home; it was nearly five in the morning by now. She didn't even remember to tell who she was, but he must have known. "Burgess, will you please come here for me? I've just had a terrible time, and I don't think I can manage it the rest of the way by myself—"

The delicatessen-keeper and his wife, the latter in curl-papers and bathrobe, were holding a diagnostic consultation over her in the background, meanwhile. "Black

coffee, you think?"

Burgess came in alone, collar up around his ears, to find her huddled over a thick mug of steaming black coffee. Shivers that had nothing to do with the temperature had set in, but were now waning again. He'd come by himself because this was not official; it was personal, off-the-record stuff as far as he was concerned.

She greeted him with a little whimper of relief.

He sized her up. "Ah, poor kid," he said throatily, shoving out the chair next to her and sitting down on it sidewise. "Bad as all that, huh?"

"This is nothing; you should have seen me five or ten minutes ago." Then she brushed that aside, leaned over toward him absorbedly. "Burgess, it was worth it! He saw her! Not only that. Somebody came around afterward and bribed him. Some man, acting on her behalf I suppose. You can get all that out of him, can't you?"

"Come on," he said briskly. "If I don't it won't be for lack of trying. I'm going up there right now. I'll put you in a taxi first and—"

"No, no, I want to go back with you. It's all right now, I'm over it."

Burgess moved stealthily up the stairs, well ahead of her, motioning her back-hand to go easy. By the time she'd caught up to him he'd already been listening intently at the door for several moments, head bent over motionless against it.

"Sounds as if he's lammed out," he whispered. "Can't hear him. Get back a little, don't stand too close, in case he starts up with something."

She retreated a few steps lower down on the staircase, until only her head and shoulders were above floor-level. She saw him take something to the door and worked it carefully, with little sound if any. Suddenly a gap showed, he thrust his hand back to his hip, held it there, and trod guardedly forward.

She came on up in his wake, followed him into a gleaming white-surfaced bathroom. She was in a straight line with it and him; for a moment she could see into it. She could see an old-fashioned four-legged tub. She could see the rump of a figure folded like a clothespin over the rim of it. The soles of its shoes were



turned back and up, she could see them too. The tub could not have been marble, in such a place, and yet it gave a curious optical illusion of being marbled even on the outside. That might have been due to the thin red vein or two discernible down its outside surface. Red-veined marble—

For a moment she thought he'd gotten sick and passed out. Then as she moved to go in after him, Burgess's sharp "Don't come in here, Carol; stay where you are!" stopped her like the crack of a whip. He came back a step or two, gave the door a corrective push-to, narrowing it enough to keep her from looking in any more, without closing it entirely.

He stayed in there a long time. She remained where she was, waiting. She noticed her own wrist was shaking a little, but it wasn't due to fear any more, it was with a sort of emotional tension. She knew what that was in there, now. She knew what must have brought it about. The door widened grudgingly and Burgess came out.

"Is he—?"

For answer he poked a finger up under one ear, then swept it all the way around his neck to the other.

She drew in her breath sharply.

"Come on, get out of here," he said with kindly-meant gruffness. "This is no place for you." He was closing the outside door after the two of them, the way he'd found it just now. "That tub," she heard him murmur under his breath, as he guided her down the stairs to the fore of him with both hands to her shrinking shoulders. "I'll never be able to think of the Red Sea again without—" He realized that she was listening to him, and shut up.

He put her in a taxi around the corner. "This'll get you home. I've got to get right back and break out with the notification."

"It's no good now, is it?" she said almost tearfully, leaning toward him through the cab-window.

"No, it's no good now, Carol."

"Couldn't I repeat what he told me—?"

"That would be just hearsay. You *heard* somebody say he'd seen her, been bribed to deny it. Second-hand evidence. It's no good that way; they won't accept it."

He'd taken a thickly-folded handkerchief out of his pocket, opened it in the palm of his hand. She saw him looking

at something resting within it.

"What's that?" she said.

"You tell me what it is."

"A razor-blade."

"Not enough."

"A—a safety-razor blade?"

"That's it. And when a man takes a swing at his throat with one of the old-fashioned open kind—such as I found lying under him at the bottom of the tub—what's one of these doing overlooked under the shelf-paper in the cabinet? A guy uses either one type or the other, not both." He put it away again. "Suicide, they'll say. And I think I'll let them—for the present. You go home, Carol. Which-ever it is, you weren't here tonight, you're staying out of it. I'll see to that."

## VIII

### *The Ninth Day Before the Execution*

IT WAS one of those incredible luxury-hotels, its single slender tower rising to disdainful heights above the mass of more commonplace buildings like a tilted aristocratic nose.

This, he knew, was going to require a finesse all its own. It needed just the right touch, just the right approach.

He sought out the flower-shop first, therefore, entering it from the lobby itself through a curved door of blue glass. He said, "What would you say are Miss Mendoza's favorite flowers? I understand you deliver a great many to her."

"I couldn't say," the florist demurred.

Lombard peeled off a bill, repeated what he'd just said, as though he hadn't spoken loudly enough the first time.

Apparently he hadn't. "Callers are always sending up the usual sort of thing, orchids, gardenias. I happen to know, though, that in South America, where she comes from, those flowers aren't highly regarded, they grow wild. If you want a tip of real value—deep salmon-pink sweet peas."

"I want your whole stock," Lombard said immediately. "I don't want a single one left over. And let me have two cards."

On one he roughed out a brief message in English. Then taking out a small pocket-dictionary, he transcribed it into Spanish, word for word, on the second card. Then



he threw the first away. "Put this in with them, and see that they go right up. About how long should that take?"

"They should be in her hands within five minutes. She's in the tower and the page will take an express up."

Lombard returned to the lobby and poised himself before the reception-alcove, head bent to his watch.

"Yes, sir?" the clerk inquired.

"Phone Miss Mendoza's suite and ask if the gentleman who sent the flowers may come up for a moment. Lombard's the name, but don't leave out about the flowers."

When the clerk came back again he seemed almost stunned with surprise. "She said yes," he reported limply. Apparently one of the unwritten laws of the hotel had just been broken. Somebody had been received at first try.

Lombard, meanwhile, was shooting upward like a rocket into the tower. He got out slightly shaky at the knees, and found a young woman standing waiting at an open door to receive him. Evidently a personal maid, judging by her black taffeta uniform.

"Mr. Lombard?" she inquired.

"That's me."

There was evidently a final customs inspection to be passed before he was cleared for admission. "It is not a press-interview, no?"

"No."

"It is not for an autograph, no?"

"No."

"It is not to obtain a testimonial, no?"

"No."

"It is not about some bill that has, er—" She hesitated delicately; "—escaped the senorita's mind, no?"

"No."

This last point seemed to be the crucial one; she didn't go any further. "Just a moment." The door closed, then in due course re-opened again. This time all the way. "You may come in, Mr. Lombard. The senorita will try to squeeze you in between her mail and her hairdresser. Will you sit down?"

He was by now in a room that was altogether remarkable. Not because of its size, nor the stratospheric view from its windows, nor the breath-taking expensiveness of its decor, though all those things

were unusual; it was remarkable because of the welter of sounds, the clamor, that managed to fill it while yet it remained unoccupied. It was in fact the noisiest empty room he had ever yet found himself in. From one doorway came a hissing and spitting sound, that was either water cascading from a tap or something frying in fat. Probably the latter, since a spicy aroma accompanied it. Mingled in with this were snatches of song, in a vigorous but not very good baritone. From another doorway, this one of double width and which opened and closed intermittently, came an even more vibrant blend. This consisted, to the best of his ability to disentangle its various skeins, of a program of samba music coming in over short waves, admixed with shattering shots of static; of a feminine voice chattering in machine-gun Spanish, apparently without stopping to breathe between stanzas; of a telephone that seemed not to let more than two-and-a-half minutes at a time go by without fluting. And finally, in with the rest of the melange, every once in a while there was a nerve-plucking squeak, acute and unbearable as a nail scratching glass or a piece of chalk skidding on a slate. These last abominations, fortunately, only came at widely-spaced intervals.

He sat patiently waiting. He was in now, and half the battle was won. He didn't care how long the second half took.

The maid reappeared at long last, announced, "The senorita will see you now." He found, when he tried to stand up, that his legs had gone to sleep.

He had no more than glimpsed a figure stretched out Cleopatra-like on a chaise-longue, when a soft furry projectile of some sort shot through the air at him and landed on his shoulder with a squeaking sound. One of those same nail-on-glass squeaks that had reached him outside every now and then. He shied nervously at the impact. Something that felt like a long velvet snake coiled itself affectionately around his throat.

The figure on the chaise beamed at him, like a fond parent watching its offspring cut up. "Don't be alarmed, senor. Is only little Bibi."

Giving it a pet-name was only partial reassurance as far as Lombard was con-



cerned. He kept trying to turn his head to get a look at it, but it was too close in. He managed a grin of strained geniality, for the sake of furthering his own cause.

"I go by Bibi," his hostess confided. "Bibi is, how you say it, my welcoam-committee. If Bibi don't like, he duck under sofa; I get rid of them queek. If Bibi like, he jomp to their neck; then is all right they stay." She shrugged disarmingly. "You he must like. Bibi, come down off the man's neck," she coaxed insincerely.

"No, let him stay, I don't mind him in the least," he drawled tolerantly.

"Sit down," she urged cordially. He walked rather stiffly to a chair and sank into it, careful not to disturb his head-balance. He got his first good look at her. She had on a shoulder-cape of pink marabou over black velvet pajamas, each trouser-leg of which was the width of a full skirt. A somewhat horrifying arrangement that looked like molten lava had been deposited on top of her head by the sweet-pea fiend who had been in here before him. The maid was standing behind her fanning at it with a palm-leaf as if to cool it off. "I have a minute while this sets," the wearer explained graciously. He saw her surreptitiously consult the card he had sent up with the flowers a while ago, to remind herself of his name.

"How nice it was to get my flowers in Spanish for a change, Senor Lombard. You say you have just come up from *mi tierra*. We met down there?"

She had, fortunately, glided past this point before it was necessary for him to commit himself outright. Her large dark eyes took on a soulful expression, went searchingly upward toward the ceiling; she made a cushion of her hands and pressed one cheek against them. "Ah, my Buenos How I miss it! The lights of the Calle Florida shining in even-ning—"

"I have come to you because you are known to be as intelligent as you are talented and beautiful," he said, laying it on with a shovel.

"It is true, nobody has ever said I am a doll," the celebrity admitted with refreshing unselfconsciousness, studying her fingernails.

He hitched his chair slightly forward. "You recall a number you did in last

season's show, in which you threw nose-gays, little flowers, to the ladies in your audiences?"

She poised a warning finger toward the ceiling. Her eyes sparkled. "Ah, *Chica Chica Boom!* Si, si! You like? Wasn't it good?" she agreed warmly.

"Perfect," he assented, with a concealed fluctuation of his Adam's apple. "Now one night a friend of mine attended a performance with a certain woman. That is why I have come to you."

"Ah?"

"I am trying to find her for him."

She misunderstood. Her eyes corruscated with renewed zest. "Ah, a romance! I loave a romance!"

"I'm afraid not. It's a matter of life and death." As with all the rest, he was afraid to give her too many details, lest she shy away from it.

She seemed to like this even better. "Ah, a mees-tirry! I loave a mees-tirry—" She shrugged. "—as long as it don't happen to me."

"I realize how hopeless it is to expect you to remember any particular individual, out of that sea of faces before you each night. I realize you played six nights a week and two matinees, all season long, to packed houses—"

"I have never play to an empty house in my hull career," she contributed, with more of her characteristic modesty. "Even a fire cannot compete with me. Once in Buenos Aires the theatre start to burn. You think they left—?"

He waited until that was out of the way. "My friend and this woman were sitting in the first row, on the aisle." He consulted something on a scrap of paper taken from his pocket. "That would be on your left, as you faced the audience. Now, the only help I can give you at all is this. She stood up in her seat, oh along about the second or third chorus of the song."

A speculative glint flickered across her eyes. "She stood opp? While Mendoza was onstage? This interests me very much. I have never known it to happen before." Her shapely fingers, he noticed, were beginning to claw tentatively at the velvet of her trouser-leg, as if whetting themselves for reprisal. "She did not care for my singing, perhaps? She had a train to catch, perhaps?"



"No, no, no, you don't understand," he reassured her hastily. "Who could do that to you? No, here's what it was. It was during the *Chica Chica Boom* number. You forgot to throw one of the little souvenirs to her, and she stood up to attract your attention. For just a moment or two she stood there right in front of you, and we were hoping—"

She shuttered her eyes rapidly two or three times, trying to recapture the incident. She even poked one long finger just behind her ear, careful not to disturb the hair-do. "I see if I can remember it for you." She obviously was doing her best. She did all the things likely to be conducive to memory-quickening. She even lit a cigarette, although she was not, judging by the stiff way she handled it, an habitual smoker.

"No, I cannot," she said finally. "I'm sorry. I try hard. For me last season is like twenty years ago." She shook her head morosely, clicked her tongue compassionately a couple of times.

He started to return the futile scrap of paper to his pocket, glanced at it as he did so. "Oh, and here's another thing—although I suppose it's no more help than the first. She had on the same hat that you did, my friend tells me. I mean a duplication of it, an exact copy."

She straightened suddenly, as though she were on the point of getting something from that. He obviously had her whole undivided attention at last, if he hadn't before. Her eyes narrowed speculatively. Then they glittered behind their thread-like constriction. He was almost afraid to move or breathe. Even Bibi looked at her curiously from a fur-huddle on the carpet at her feet.

Suddenly it came. She stabbed her cigarette out with a single vicious lunge. She emitted a strident, macaw-like cry, that wouldn't have been out of place in a jungle. "A-a-ai! Now I remember! Now!" A flash-flood of Spanish swept her off his conversational-track. Finally, after a lot of eddying around, she got back onto it in English again. "That *thing* that stood up there! That *criatura* that stand in front of the hull house, in *my* hat, to show she is wearing it! She even stop the spotlight, clip some of it off from me! Hanh! Do I

recall? You bet I recall! You think I'm going to forget a thing like that in a hurry? Hanh! You don't know Mendoza!"

She climbed down the chaise-longue toward Lombard. "Look how I get! Look how angry it still make me, even sotch a long time after! Look what it do!"

After which she rose to her feet, squeezed herself tightly around the waist with both arms in a belligerent embrace.

"And what you want her for, you and this friend of yours?" she demanded suddenly. "You haven't told me yet!"

"He is in serious trouble, believe me, senorita. I won't bore you with the details, but she is the only one who can get him out of it. He has to prove that he was with her that night, and not where they say he was. He only met her that night; we don't know her name, we don't know where she lives, we don't know anything about her. That's why we're looking high and low—"

He could see her mulling it over. After a moment she informed him: "I like to help you. I give anything to tell you who she is." Then her face dropped, she spread her hands helplessly. "But I never see her before. I never see her after. I just see her stand opp like that. That's all, I can't tell you no more about her than that." At least facially, she seemed to be even more disappointed than he was about it.

"Did you notice him at all, the man with her?"

"No, I never even give him a look. I couldn't say who was with her. He stay in the shadow down below."

"You see, there's as big a link as ever missing, only it's the other way around now. Most of the others remembered him, but not her. You remember her, but not him. It's still no good, wouldn't prove anything. Just that a woman stood up in a theatre one night. Any woman. She might have been alone. She might have been with someone else entirely. It doesn't mean a thing. I've got to get the two linked up together by *one* witness." He clapped his hands to his knees frustratedly, rose to leave. "Looks like it ends there, where it began. Well, thank you for your time."

"Wait. Wait a minute, senor, I just remember something. About the hat. Yes, the hat."



He waited, shifting one foot out toward her in leashed intensity.

She shook an explanatory finger at him. "So that night, when that woman do like that to me, I go back to my dressing-room and, immh—" She inhaled deeply. "I nidd to be tied opp. I take everything on the table and I go like this!" She made a clean horizontal sweep with one arm.

"You think anyone is going to do that to me in front of a houseful of people? You think I, Mendoza, let them get away with that? They have to huld me back by both arms, the stage manager and my maid, to keep me from rushing out the stage-door in my wrapper just like I am, to see if I can find her in front of the theatre, for to pull her to pieces betwinn my two hands! The next day I'm still sore. With me it lasts. So I go to the modiste, the designer, that make opp the hat for me, and I blow off stimm there instead. I throw it in her face in front of hull room full of customers. I say, 'So you make *me* an original for my production-number, ha? The only one of its kind, ha? Nobody else is going to have one like it, ha?' And I wipe it all over her face, and when I leave she is still spitting out pieces of the material, she can't talk."

She shovelled her hands at him inquiringly. "So that's good for you, is no? That helps you, no? This cheat of a designer, she must know who is the person she sell the copy to. You go to her and you find out who this woman is you look for."

"Swell! Great! At last!" he yelled, so enthusiastically that Bibi dove head-first under the chaise and pulled his tail in after him. "What's her name? Give me her name!"

"Wait, I dig it opp for you." She tapped the side of her head apologetically. "I work in so many different shows, I have so many different costumers, I can't keep track." She called the maid in, instructed her: "Look among my bills for a hat, from last year's show, see you can find one."

"But we don't keep them that long, do we, senorita?"

"You don't have to go all the way back to when it start from, stupid," said the star, as unselfconsciously as ever. "Look it opp among last month's, it probably still kipp coming in."

The maid came back after a moderately lengthy—and to Lombard, excruciating—wait. "Yes, I found it, it did come in this month again. It says, 'One hat, a hundred dollars,' and the letterhead reads 'Kettisha.'"

"Good! That's it!" She passed it to Lombard. "You got it?" He copied the address, returned it to her. Her hands went into hysterics, and a blizzard of tiny pieces of paper snowed all over the floor. Then she ground her foot down into the middle of them. "I like the nerve! Still sending me bills a year later! She's got no shem, that woman!"

She looked up to find him already crossing the adjoining room on his way out.

**H**E FELT like a fish out of water when he walked into the place, but he didn't let it deter him.

He'd walked in right in the middle of a showing. Or maybe they had one every day at this hour, for all he knew. It didn't help to put him at his ease. He was the only man there, or at least the only one of service age.

A young woman came and rescued him at last. "Madame Kettisha will see you in her private office, upstairs on the second floor," she whispered. A girl-page showed him the way, knocked for him, then departed below again.

There was a buxom, middle-aged, red-headed Irishwoman sitting facing him from behind a large desk when he went in. She not only had nothing of the chic couturier about her, she even leaned slightly to the horsey, dowdy side. "Well, mike, what can I do for you?" she grunted brusquely without looking up.

He was all out of tact by now. It was still the same day as the Mendoza interviews, and he hadn't had time to recuperate from them yet. It was getting late, anyway; nearly five in the afternoon.

"I came straight down here from one of your former customers. The South American actress Mendoza."

She did look up at that. "Better use a whiskbroom," she suggested dourly.

"You did a hat for her, for the last year's show, remember? One hundred bucks, and I want to know who got the chaser on it."

Her hand came down on the desk-top with a bang like a hand-grenade. "Don't



you gimme any of that!" she roared. "I've had enough trouble out of that hat! I said then there was no copy made, and I still say now there was no copy made. When I produce an original, it stays original! If there was a copy made, it wasn't run up in this establishment or with my knowledge, and I'm not responsible! I may soak 'em, but I don't doublecross them!"

"There was a copy made," he insisted. "It showed up in a theatre, face to face with hers across the footlights!"

She leaned down heavily over the desk, both elbows in air. "What does she want me to do, sue her for slander?" she shouted. "I will if she keeps this up! She's a liar, and you can go back and tell her I said so!"

Instead he took his hat and pitched it onto a chair over in the corner, to show her he intended staying until he had what he'd come here to get. He even unbuttoned his coat, to give himself plenty of free arm-action. "She has nothing to do with it, so let's just forget her. I'm here for purposes of my own. There was a copy, because a friend of mine was with the very woman that had it on in the theatre. So don't tell me there wasn't. I want to know who she is, I want her name from your list of customers."

"It isn't on it. It couldn't be, because there was no such transaction entered into by us. What're you going to do, keep this up all day?"

He hitched his chin out into second, brought his own hand down in an answering blow to hers that made the whole desk-structure jar. "For the love of God, there's a man counting his life by hours! What the hell do I care about your business ethics at such a time. You're not going to sit there and head me off, not if I've got to lock this door and stay in here with you all night! Don't you understand me? There's a man going to be executed in nine days' time! The wearer of that hat is the only one can save him. You've got to give me her name. It's not the hat, it's the woman I want!"

Her voice suddenly dropped to reasonable level. She'd evidently turned her temper off. He'd caught her interest. "Who is he?" she asked curiously.

"Scott Henderson, for killing his wife."

She wagged her head in recognition. "I remember reading about that at the time."

He struck the desk again, less shatteringly than before. "The man's innocent. It's simply got to be stopped. Mendoza bought a certain specially-designed hat here, that couldn't have been reproduced elsewhere. Somebody popped up in the theatre with an exact copy of that same hat. He was with this somebody, he was with her all that evening, but he never found out her name or anything about her. Now I've got to find that person, at all costs. She can prove that he wasn't home when it happened. Is that clear enough for you? If it isn't I can't make it any clearer!"

She gave him the impression of being a person with few, if any, moments of indecision. She was having one of them now, but it was of brief duration.

"Very well then. Here's something that I wouldn't admit to Mendoza for the world, that I can't afford to, understand? There must have been a leak around here someplace. The copying did originate here. But not officially; on the sly, by some member of the organization. Now I'm telling *you* this, but I don't want it to go any further. I'd have to deny it, of course, if it was ever brought out publicly. My designer, the girl that does the sketches, is in the clear; I know it wasn't she who sold us out. She's been with me ever since I first opened my own place, she's bought into it. It wouldn't pay her, for a measly fifty, seventy-five, or whatever it was, to peddle around her own ideas like that. She'd be competing against herself. The two of us, she and I, investigated on the q.t. after Mendoza was down here raising an uproar that day, and we found that particular sketch gone from her album, missing, when we went to look. Somebody had deliberately swiped it, to use over again. We figured it for the seamstress, the girl who did the actual needlework on that number in the shop. She denied it naturally, and we had no evidence to prove it. She must have run the thing up at home on her own time. I suppose we caught her before she'd had time to slip the borrowed sketch back into the album again. Well, to be on the safe side, to make sure we didn't get into hot water like that again, we shipped her." She thumbed



over her shoulder.

"So you see, Lombard—that your name again?—as far as the sales records here in the office go, there never was any second buyer for that particular hat. That's dead on the level. I couldn't help you there if I wanted to. All I can suggest is, if you want that woman, your best bet is to tackle that former sewing-apprentice of ours. As I say, I can't guarantee that she actually does know anything about it. All I know is we ourselves felt strongly enough convinced that she did, at the time, to dismiss her. If you want to take that chance, it's up to you."

Again it had jumped a lap ahead of him, just when he thought he was safely up to it at last. "I have to, I haven't any choice," he said dismally.

"Maybe I can give you a hand with it," she said helpfully. She snapped open a ledger.

"That was Madge Peyton. The address on record for her when she worked here is four-nine-eight Fourteenth Street."

"Yeah, but which Fourteenth Street?"

"That's all it says here: Fourteenth Street."

"Never mind," he said, "there's only two to choose from, east and west."

A ROOMING-HOUSE keeper opened the door. "Un?" she said.

"I'm looking for a Madge Peyton."

"Not here any more. Used to be, but she's gone quite some time now."

"Any idea where she moved to?"

"Just left, that's all I can tell you. I don't keep strings on 'em."

"But there must be some sort of a trace. People don't just go up in smoke. What took her things away?"

"One arm and both her feet." She jerked a thumb. "Down that way, if it's any good to you."

It wasn't very much. There were three more intersecting avenues "down that way." And then a marginal thoroughfare. And then a river. And then fifteen to twenty States. And then an ocean.

*The Eighth, Seventh and Sixth Days  
Before the Execution*

HE got off the train at the end of a three hour ride from the city. This

was one of those small outlying hamlets close to a large center that, for some reason or other, often give an impression of far greater sleepiness and rusticity than places that are actually much further out.

He consulted the back of an envelope, with a list of names jotted down it perpendicularly, each with an accompanying address. They were all approximations of one another, although in two different languages. All but the last two had been lined-out. They ran something like this.

Madge Payton; millinery (and address)  
Marge Payton, millinery (and address)  
Margaret Peyton, hats (and address)  
Madame Magdax, chapeaux (and address)  
Madame Margot, chapeaux (and address)

He crossed the tracks to a filling-station, asked the grease monkey: "Know of anyone around here make hats and calls herself Marguerite?"

"There's a boarder down at old Mrs. Hascom's got some sort of sign in the window. I don't know if it's hats or dresses, I never noticed it very closely. It's the end house, on this side of the road. Just keep going straight down."

It was an unlovely-looking frame building, with a pitiful hand-printed placard in a corner of one of the lower windows. "Marguerite, hats." A trade-name, for a whistle-stop like this.

He went up under the gloomy porch-shed and knocked. The girl who came out was she herself, if Kettisha's description was to be trusted. Plain and timid-looking. Lawn shirtwaist and dark-blue skirt. He caught sight of a little metal cap topping one of her fingers; a thimble.

He said, "Miss Peyton, I had quite a time finding you."

Instantly she was frightened, tried to withdraw and close the door. He blocked it with his foot. "I don't think you have the right person."

"I do think I have." Her fright alone was proof enough of that, although he couldn't understand the reason for it. She kept shaking her head. "All right, then I'll tell you. You used to work for Kettisha, in their sewing-room."

She got white as a sheet, so she had. He reached down and caught her by the wrist, to keep her from running in even



without being able to close the door, as he saw she was about to do.

"A woman approached you and induced you to copy a hat that had been made for Mendoza, the actress."

She kept swinging her head faster and faster; that was all she seemed capable of doing. She was straining terrifiedly away from him, at an acute backward slant. His grip on her wrist was all that was holding her there in the door-opening. Panic can be as stubborn as courage, its opposite.

"I just want that woman's name, that's all."

She was beyond reasoning with. He'd never seen anyone plunged head-long into such depths of terror. Her face was gray. Her cheeks were visibly pulsing, as though her heart were in truth in her mouth, as the expression went. It couldn't be the design-theft that was doing this to her. Cause and effect were too unrelated. A major apprehension for a minor infraction. He could sense, vaguely, that he'd stumbled on some other story, some other story entirely, lying across the path of this quest of his. That was the most he was able to make out of it.

"Just the name of the woman—" He could tell by her fear-blurred eyes that she didn't even hear the words. "You're in no danger of being prosecuted. You must know who it was."

She found her voice at last. A strangled distortion of one, anyhow. "I'll get it for you. It's inside. Let me go a minute—"

He held the door so that she couldn't close it. He opened the hand that had been choking her wrist, and instantly he was alone. She'd gone like something wind-swept, blown from sight.

He stood there waiting for just a moment, and then something that he was unable to account for, some tension that she'd left behind her in the air, made him spurt forward, rush down the gloomy central hallway, fling open the door to one side she had just closed behind her.

She hadn't locked it, fortunately. He swept it back just in time to see the shears flash in air, a little over her head. He never knew how he got over in time, but he did. He managed to deflect the blow with an outward fling of his arm, slashing his sleeve and drawing a fleshy cut for his pains. He pulled them away

from her and threw them over in the corner with a tinkle. They probably would have gone in deep enough to get her heart, at that, if she'd hit the right place.

"What was that for?" he winced, stuffing a handkerchief down his sleeve.

She caved in like a stepped-on ice cream cone. She dissolved into a welter of tears and incoherence. "I haven't seen him since. I don't know what to do with it. I was afraid of him, afraid to refuse him. He told me just a few days and now it's been months—I've been afraid to come forward and tell anyone, he said he'd kill me—"

He clamped his hand across her mouth, held it there a minute. This was that other story, the one he didn't want. Not his. "Shut up, you frightened little fool. I only want the name, the *name* of the woman for whom you made a plagiarized hat at Kettisha's. Can't you get that through your head?"

The reversal was too sudden, the prospect of renewed security too tantalizing for her to be able to believe in it fully at once. "You're just saying that, you're just trying to trick me—"

A muted wailing, almost unnoticeable it was so thin, had started in somewhere nearby. Everything seemed to have power to frighten her. He saw her cheeks get white all over again at that, although it was scarcely loud enough to penetrate the ear-drum.

"What faith are you?" he asked.

"I was a Catholic." The tense she gave it held some kernel of tragedy, he could tell.

"Have you a rosary? Bring it out." He saw he'd have to convince her emotionally, since he couldn't through reasoning.

She offered it to him resting in her hand. He placed his own two over and under it, without removing it. "Now. I swear that all I want of you is what I've told you. Nothing else. That I won't harm you in any other matter. That I'm not here on any other matter. Is that enough?"

She'd grown a little calmer, as though the contact of the object was a steadying influence in itself. "Pierrette Douglas, Six Riverside Drive," she said unhesitatingly.

The wailing was beginning to grow louder little by little. She gave him one last look of dubious apprehension. Then



she stepped into a small curtained alcove to one side of the room. The wailing stopped short. She came back as far as the entrance, holding a long white garment or garments trailing from her enfolded arms. There was a small pink face topping it, looking trustfully up at her. She was still frightened, vastly so, when she looked at Lombard. But when she looked downward at that face under her own, there was unmistakable love in the look. Guilty, furtive, but stubborn; the love of the lonely, that grows steadily stronger, more unbreakable, day by day and week by week.

"Pierrette Douglas, Six Riverside Drive." He was shuffling out money. "How much did she give you?"

"Fifty dollars," she said absently, as if speaking of a long-forgotten thing.

He dropped it contemptuously into a reversed hat-shape she'd been working on. "And next time," he said from the doorway, "try to use a little more self-control. You're only laying yourself wide open this way."

It had taken him three hours to ride out. It only took thirty minutes to ride back. Or so it felt. The wheels racketed around under him, talking out loud the way train-wheels do. "Now I've got her! Now I've got her! Now I've got her!"

## IX

### *The Fifth Day Before the Execution*

THERE was no sound of arrival. There was a sound of departure, the faint hum of a car drawing away outside past the glass doors. He looked up and there was someone already standing there in the inner entrance, like a wraith against the glass doors. She'd partly opened them to step through, was standing there half-in, half-out, head turned to look behind her at the receding vehicle that had brought her.

He had a feeling that it was she, with nothing further than that to substantiate it for a moment. The fact that she was coming in alone, like the lady free-lance he'd gathered she was. She was stunningly beautiful, so beautiful that all delight was taken from her beauty by its excess amount, as anything overdone is apt to. She was a brunette, and tall;

her figure was perfection. Her gown was like a ripple of fluid silver running down the slender gap between the wings of the door, as she stood there between them. Then, the car having gone, she turned her head forward again and finished entering.

She had no look for Lombard, a wan "Good evening" for the hallman.

"This gentleman has been—" The latter began.

Lombard had reached her before he could finish it.

"Pierrette Douglas." He stated it as a fact.

"I am."

"I've been waiting to speak to you. I must talk to you immediately. It's urgent—"

She had stopped before the waiting elevator, with no intention, he could see, of allowing him to accompany her any further than that. "It's a little late, don't you think?"

"Not for this. This can't wait. I'm John Lombard, and I'm here on behalf of Scott Henderson—"

"I don't know him, and I'm afraid I don't know you either—do I?" The "do I?" was simply a sop of urbanity thrown in.

"He's in the death-house of the State Penitentiary, awaiting execution." He looked across her shoulder at the waiting attendant. "Don't make me discuss it down here. Out of common ordinary decency—"

"I'm sorry, I live here; it's one-fifteen in the morning, and there are certain proprieties— Well, over here then." She started diagonally across the lobby toward a small inset furnished with a settee and smoking-stands. She turned to him there, remained standing; they conferred erect.

"You bought a hat from a certain employee of the Kettisha establishment, a girl named Madge Peyton. You paid her fifty dollars for it."

"I may have."

"In this hat you accompanied a man to the theatre, one night. You went with him without knowing his name, nor he yours."

"Ah no." She was not indignant, only coldly positive. "Now you can be sure you are mistaken. My standards of conduct are as liberal as anyone else's, you will find. But they do not include accompanying anyone anywhere, at any time, without the



formality of an introduction first. You have been misdirected, you want some other person." She thrust her foot out from underneath the silver hem, to move away.

"Please, don't let's split hairs about social conduct. This man is under sentence of death, he's to be executed this week! You've got to do something for him—I!"

"Let's understand one another a little better. Would it help him if I falsely testify I was with him, on one certain night?"

"No, no, no," he breathed, exhausted, "only if you rightly testify you were with him, as you were."

"Then I can't do it, because I wasn't."

She continued to gaze at him steadily. "Let's go back to the hat," he said finally. "You did buy a hat, a special model that had been made for somebody else—"

"But we're still at cross-purposes, aren't we? My admitting that has no bearing on my admitting that I accompanied this man to a theatre. The two facts are entirely unrelated, have nothing to do with one another."

That, he had to admit to himself, could very well be. A dismal chasm seemed to be on the point of opening at his feet, where he had seemed to be on solid ground until now.

"Give me some more details of this theatre-excursion," she had gone on. "What evidence have you that the person accompanying him was myself?"

"Mainly the hat," he admitted. "The twin to it was being worn on the stage, that very night, by the actress Mendoza. It was an original made for her. You admit that you secured a duplication of it. The woman with Scott Henderson was wearing that duplication."

"It still does not follow that I was that woman; your logic is not as flawless as you seem to believe." But that was simply by way of an aside; her thoughts, he could see, were busy elsewhere.

Something had happened to her. Something was having a surprisingly favorable effect on her. Either something that he had said, or something that had occurred to her in her own mind. She had suddenly become strangely alert, interested, almost one might say feverishly absorbed. Her eyes were sparkling watchfully.

"Tell me. One or two more things. It was the Mendoza show, is that right? Can you give me the approximate date?"

"I can give you the exact date. They were in the theatre together on the night of May twentieth last, from nine until shortly after eleven."

"May," she said to herself, aloud. "You interest me strangely," she let him know. She motioned, even touched him briefly on the sleeve. "You were right. You'd better come upstairs with me a minute, after all."

During the ride up in the car she only said one thing. "I'm very glad you came to me with this."

They got out at the twelfth floor or so, he wasn't sure just which one it was. She keyed a door and put on lights, and he followed her in. The red fox scarf that had been dangling over her arm she dropped carelessly over a chair. Then she moved away from him over a polished floor that reflected her upside down like a funnel of fuming silver being spilled out across it.

"May the twentieth, is that right?" she said over her shoulder. "I'll be right back. Sit down."

Light came from an open doorway, and she remained in there awhile, while he sat and waited. When she returned she was holding a handful of papers, bills they looked like, sorting them from hand to hand. Before she had even reached him, she had apparently found one that suited her purpose more than any of the rest. She tossed all but one aside, retained that, came over to him with it.

"I think the first thing to establish, before we go any further," she said, "is that I was not the person with this man at the theatre that night. Suppose you look at this."

It was a bill for hospitalization, for a period of four weeks commencing on the thirtieth of April.

"I was in the hospital for an appendectomy, from the thirtieth of April to the twenty-seventh of May. If that isn't satisfactory, you can check with the doctors and nurses there—"

"That's satisfactory," he said, on a long breath of defeat.

Instead of moving to terminate the interview, she joined him in sitting down.

"But it was you who bought that hat?"



he said finally.

"It was I who bought the hat."

"What became of it?"

"The story of the hat is simply this. I'd glimpsed it, it took my fancy, and I wangled a copy of it out of a girl down there. I'm a creature of impulse that way, when I can afford to be. I wore it once, I think, not more than that, and"—her shoulders glittered in a corruscating silver shrug—"it wasn't meant for me. It just wasn't, that was all. Something wrong about it. Then, a friend of mine was up here one day, just before I went to the hospital. She came across it, happened to try it on. She fell in love with it at sight, and I let her have it."

"Who is she?" he asked quietly. Even as he spoke the simple, casual words, he knew they were both fencing with one another, that the answer wouldn't be given readily, that this was bargaining.

"Do you think that would be fair of me?"

"There's a man's life involved. He's dying Friday."

"Is it because of her, is it through her in any way? Is she to blame, has she caused it? Answer me."

"No," he sighed.

"Then what right have you to involve her? There can be a form of death for women too, you know. Social death. Call it notoriety, loss of reputation, whatever you will. It isn't over with as quickly. I'm not sure it isn't worse."

His face was getting continually whiter with strain. "There must be something in you I can appeal to. Don't you *care* if this man dies? Do you realize that if you withhold this information—"

"After all, I *do* know the woman and I don't know the man. She is my friend, he sin't. You're asking me to jeopardize her, to save him."

"Where does the jeopardy come in?" She didn't answer. "Then you refuse to tell me?"

"I have neither refused, nor agreed to, yet."

He was suffocating with a sense of his own helplessness. "You're not going to do this to me. This is home-base. It ends here. You know, and you're going to tell me!" They had both risen to their feet.

"I'm a free agent in the matter. What're

you going to do about it?"

"This."

Her face changed for a minute at sight of the gun, but it was just the flicker of shock that would have crossed anyone's. It changed right back again to normal. She even sat down slowly, but not in the crumpled way of the vanquished; in a way that expressed patient assurance: as though this would take some time and she intended sitting it out.

He stood over her with it, trying to bear down on her mentally if nothing else. "Aren't you afraid to die?"

She looked up into his face. "Very much," she said with perfect composure. "As much as anyone, at any time. But I'm not in any danger right now. You can't afford to kill me. People are killed to *keep* them from telling something they know. They are never killed to *force* them to tell something they know. For then, how can they tell it afterward? That gun still leaves the decision with me, not with you. I could do many things. I could call the police. But I won't. I'll sit and wait until you put it away again."

She had him.

He put it away, scrubbed a hand across his eyebrows. "All right," he said thickly. "All right, you win."

He sat down at a small table-desk. He took something out of his pocket and snapped it open. He carefully tore out something along a punctured line. Then he snapped the folder closed again and returned it to his pocket. A blank oblong remained before him. He uncapped a fountain-pen and began to write across it.

He looked up once to ask: "How do you spell your name?"

"B-e-a-r-e-r."

He gave her a look, then bent to his task once more. "Not quite phonetic, is it?" he murmured deprecatingly.

He had written the numeral "100." She had come closer, was looking down on the bias. "I'm rather sleepy," she remarked, and yawned artificially and tapped her hand over her mouth once or twice.

"Why don't you open the windows. It may be a little close in here."

"I'm sure it isn't that." She crossed over to them, however, and did so. Then came back to him again.

He had added another cipher. "How



do you feel now, better?" he questioned with ironic solicitude.

She glanced briefly downward. "Considerably refreshed. You might almost say revived."

"It takes so little, doesn't it?" he agreed acidly.

"Surprisingly little. Next to nothing at all." She was enjoying her own pun.

He didn't go ahead writing. He allowed the pen to flatten against the desk without taking his hand from it. "This is preposterous, you know."

"I haven't gone to you for anything. You've come to me for something." She nodded. "Good night."

The pen upended again in his hand.

He was standing in the open doorway, facing inward in the act of taking leave of her, when the car arrived and the elevator-door opened in answer to his ring. He was holding a small tab of paper, a leaf torn from a memo-pad, folded once and held within the pronged fingers of one hand.

"I hope I haven't been rude," he was saying to her. A rueful smile etched into his profile for a minute. "At least I know I haven't bored you. And please overlook the exceptional hour of the night. After all, it was rather an exceptional matter." Then in answer to something that she said, "You don't have to worry about that. I wouldn't bother writing a check if I were going to stop payment on it afterward. That's a pretty small dodge, any way you look at—"

"Down, sir?" the attendant reminded him, to attract his attention.

He glanced over. "Here's the car." Then back to her again. "Well, good night." He tipped his hat to her decorously and came away, leaving the door ajar behind him. She closed it lingeringly in his wake, without looking out after him.

In the car he raised the tab of paper and glanced at it.

"Hey, wait a minute," he blurted out, with a stab of the hand toward the carman. "She only gave me one name here—"

The operator slowed the car, prepared to reverse it. "Did you want to go back again, sir?"

For a moment he seemed about to assent. Then he scanned his watch. "No, never mind. I guess it'll be all right. Go ahead down."

The car picked up speed again and resumed its descent.

In the lobby below he stopped long enough to consult the hallman, flashing the paper at him for a moment. "Which way is this from here, up or down, any idea?"

On it were two names and a number. "Flora," the number, and "Amsterdam."

"IT'S finally over," he was telling Burgess breathlessly on the phone a minute or two later, from an all-night drug-store on Broadway. "I thought I had it, and there was one last link, but this time it's the last. No time to tell you now. Here's where it is. I'm on my way there now. How soon can you be there?"

Burgess, overreaching himself in the headlong sweep of the patrol car that had brought him over, recognized Lombard's car standing out by itself in front of one of the buildings, at first sight empty; jumped hazardingly off in full flight and came back. It was only when he'd gained the sidewalk and approached from that direction that he made him out sitting there on the running board, screened from the roadway by the car-body at his back.

He thought he was ill at first, the way he was sitting there in a huddle on the car-step; bowed over his own lap, head lowered toward the sidewalk underfoot. His posture suggested someone in the penultimate stages of being sick to his stomach; everything but the final climax.

A man in suspenders and undershirt was standing a few steps off, regarding him sympathetically, arrested pipe in hand, a dog peering out from around his legs.

Lombard looked up wanly as Burgess' hastening foot-fall drew up beside him. Then he turned his head away again, as though it were to much effort even to speak.

"Is this it? What's the matter? You been in there yet?"

"No, it's that one back there." He indicated a cavernous opening, occupying almost the full width of the building it was set into. Within, to one side, could be made out a glistening brass upright, set into the bare concrete flooring. Across the facade, in gilt letters backed with black sandpaper, was inscribed the legend: "Fire Depart-



ment, City of New York."

"That's Number—," Lombard said, flourishing the tab of paper he still held in his hand.

The dog, a spotted Dalmation, edged forward at his point to muzzle at it inquiringly.

"And that's Flora, these men tell me."

Burgess opened the car-door and pulled it out behind him, forcing him to his feet to avoid being unseated.

"Let's get back," he commented tersely. "And fast."

## X

HE was flinging himself bodily against the door, with futile wrenches of breath, when Burgess came up with the passkey and joined him outside it.

"Not a sound from in there. Has she answered them below on the announcer yet?"

"They're still ringing."

"She must have lammed."

"She can't have. They would have seen her leave, unless she went out some round-about way— Here, let me use this. You'll never get in that way."

The door opened and they floundered inside. Then they stopped short, taking the scene in. The long living room, which was a continuation of the entrance-gallery with simply a one-step drop in height, was empty, but it was mutely eloquent. They both got it right away.

The lights were all on. An unfinished cigarette was still alive and working, sending up lazy spirals of bluish-silver from the rim of an ash-stand with a hollow stem. The floor-length windows were open to the night, showing an expanse of black, with a large star piercing it in one corner, a smaller one in another, like a black-out cloth held in place by a couple of shiny thumbtacks.

Directly before the windows lay a silver shoe, turned on its side like a small, cap-sized boat. The long narrow runner of rug that bisected the polished flooring, from just past the drop-step to just short of the windows, showed corrugated ridges, frozen "ripples" that marred its evenness, at one end. As though a misstep had sent

a disturbance coursing along it.

Burgess went to the window, detouring around the side of the room to get there. He leaned out over the low, inadequate, decorative guard-rail on the outside of it, stayed that way, bent motionless, for long minutes.

Then he straightened, turned back into the room again, sent a quiet nod across it to where Lombard had remained, as if incapable of further movement. "She's all the way down below there. I can see her from here, in the service alley between two deep walls. Like a rag off a clothes-line. Nobody seems to have heard it, all the windows on this side are still dark."

He didn't do anything about it, strangely enough, didn't even report it at once.

There was only one thing moving in the room, outside himself. And it wasn't Lombard. It was the skein from the cigarette. It was that fact, perhaps, that attracted his eye to it. He went over to it, picked it up. There was still enough to hold, a fraction of an inch. He murmured something under his breath that sounded like: "Must have just happened as we got here."

The next thing, he had taken out a cigarette of his own, was holding the two upright side by side, their bases even, with the fingers of the same hand. He took a pencil, notched off the length of the remnant against the intact one.

Then he put the latter into his own mouth, lit it, and took a single, slightly ritualistic puff to get it going. After which he carefully set it down in the same curved trough the former one had occupied, left it there, and glanced at his watch.

"What're you doing that for?" Lombard asked in the listless voice of someone for whom nothing holds any interest any more.

"Just a home-made way of figuring out how long ago it happened. I don't know if it's reliable or not, if any two of these things burn down at the same rate of speed. Must ask some of the guys about that."

He went over, glanced closely at it once, moved away again. The second time he came back he picked it up, looked at it in air like a thermometer, looked at his watch, then tapped it out and discarded it, its purpose served.



"She fell out exactly three minutes before we got in here. That's taking off a full minute while I was looking out the window, before I got over to it and measured it. And that's giving her just one puff, as I took. If she took more than that brings it down even closer."

"It may have been King-size," Lombard said, from a great distance away.

"It's a Lucky, there's enough of the trade mark left down at the mouth end to be visible. Think I would have wasted my time doing it if I hadn't seen that before I started?"

Lombard didn't answer, was back in the distance again.

"This makes it look as though it was our very ring on the downstairs announcer that killed her," Burgess went on. "Startled her and caused her to make that false move in front of the window that sent her over. The whole story's here in front of our eyes, without words. She'd gone over to them and was standing there looking out, possibly in an expansive mood, drinking in the night-air, making plans, when the ring came from downstairs. She did something wrong. Turned in too much of a hurry, or with her weight thrown badly. Or maybe it was her shoes did it. This one looks a little warped, unsteady from overlong wear. Anyway, the rug skidded over the waxed flooring. One or both of her feet shot out from under her, riding the rug. The shoe came off completely, went up in the air. She overbalanced backwards. It wouldn't have been anything, if she hadn't been that close to the open windows. What would have been otherwise just a comical little sit-down became a back-somersault into space and a death-fall."

Then he said, "But what I don't get, is about the address part of it. Was it a practical joke, or what? How'd she act; you were with her."

"Nah, she wasn't kidding," Lombard said. "She was serious about wanting that money, it was written all over her."

"I could understand her giving you a spiked address that would take you a long time to investigate, so she'd have time to cash the check and beat it. But a thing like this, only a few blocks from here—she might've known you'd be back in five or ten minutes. What was the angle?"

"Unless she figured she could get more from the lady in question herself, more than I was offering, by warning her, tipping her off, and just wanted to get me out of the place long enough to dicker with her."

Burgess shook his head, as though he found this unsatisfactory, but he contented himself with repeating what he'd said to begin with. "I don't get it."

Lombard hadn't waited to listen. He'd turned away and was moving listlessly off to the side, with the dragging shamble of a drunk. The other man watched him curiously. He seemed to have lost all interest in what was going on around him, to have gone completely flat. He arrived at the wall and stood there for a moment before it, sagging, like someone who has been disappointed too often, is finally licked, finally ready to quit.

Then before Burgess could guess his purpose, he had tightened one arm, drawn it back, and sent it crashing home into the inanimate surface before him, as though it were some kind of an enemy.

"Hey, you fool!" Burgess yelled in stupefaction. "What're you trying to do, bust your hand? What'd the walls do to you?"

Lombard, writhing in the crouched position of a man applying a corkscrew to a bottle, his face contorted more by helpless rage than pain even yet, answered in a choked voice while he nursed his flaming hand against his stomach: "They know! They're all that's left that knows now—and I can't get it out of them!"

### *The Third Day Before the Execution*

HE passed the back of his hand slowly across his mouth as he trudged after the guard up to the second-floor tier. "Am I going to get drunk tonight after I leave here!" he swore bitterly to himself. "I'm going to get so full I'll be an alcoholic case at one of the hospitals until it's over and done with!"

And now the guard was standing by, and he went in to face the music. Funeral music.

This was the execution right now. A bloodless, white one preceding the other by three days. The execution of all hope. The guard's footsteps receded hollowly.



After that the silence was horrible. Neither of them could have stood it for very long.

"So that's it," Henderson said quietly at last. He'd understood.

The rigor mortis was broken, at least. Lombard turned away from the window, came over and clapped him on the shoulder. "Look, fellow—" he started to say.

"It's all right," Henderson told him. "I understand. I can tell by your face. We don't have to talk about it."

"I lost her again. She slipped away—this time for good."

"I said you don't need to talk about it," Henderson urged patiently. "I can see what it's done to you. For the love of Pete, let's drop it." He seemed to be the one trying to buck Lombard up, instead of vice versa.

Lombard slumped down on the edge of the bunk. Henderson, being the "host," let him have it, got up and stood leaning the curve of his back against the wall opposite.

The only sound in the cell for awhile after that was the rustle of cellophane, as Henderson kept continuously folding over the edge of an emptied cigarette-package back on itself, until he'd wound it up tight, then undoing it again pleat by pleat until he had it open once more. Over and over, endlessly, apparently just to give his fingers something to do.

No one could have stood it for long in that atmosphere. Lombard said finally, "Don't, will you? It's making me go nuts."

Henderson looked down at his own hands in surprise, as though unaware until then what they'd been up to. "That's my old habit," he said sheepishly. "I never was able to break myself of it, even in good times. You remember, don't you?" Any time I ever rode a train, the time-table would end up like that. Any time I had to sit and wait in a doctor's or a dentist's office, the magazines would end up like that. Any time I ever sat in a theatre, the program—" He stopped short, looked dreamily across at the wall, just over Lombard's head. "That night at the show with *her*, I can remember doing it that night too— It's funny how a little thing like that should come back to me now, this late, when all the more important things it might have helped me to remember all along— What's the matter, what are you

looking at me like that for? I've quit doing it." He threw the tormented wrapper aside, to show him.

"But you threw it away, of course? That night with *her*. You left it behind you, on the seat or on the floor, as people usually do?"

"No, she kept both programs, I can remember that. It's funny, but I can. She asked me to let her have them. She made some remark to the effect of wanting to glory in her impulsiveness. I can't recall just what it was. But I know she kept them, I distinctly saw her put them in her bag."

Lombard had risen to his feet. "There's a little something there, if we only knew how to get at it."

"What do you mean?"

"It's the only thing we know for sure she has in her possession."

"We don't know for sure she still has it in her possession, do we?" Henderson corrected.

"If she kept it to begin with, then it's likely she still has it. People either do or don't keep such things as theatre-programs. Either they throw them away at once, or they keep them indefinitely, for years after. If there was only some way we could make this thing the bait. What I mean is, it's the only common denominator linking her to you—because it will have its upper right-hand corners neatly winged back from cover to cover, without missing a page. If we could only get her to come forward with it, without guessing—she will stand revealed to us automatically."

"By advertising, you mean?"

"Something along those lines. People collect all sorts of things; stamps, seashells, pieces of furniture full of wormholes. Often they'll pay any price for things that to them are treasures but to others are trash. They lose all sense of proportion, once the collector's lust get hold of them."

"Well?"

"I'm a collector of theatre-programs, say. A freak, an eccentric, a millionaire throwing my money away right and left. It is more than a hobby, it is an obsession with me. I must have complete sets of programs for every play produced at every theatre in town, all the way back, season by season. I suddenly appear from nowhere, I open a little clearing-depot, I advertise. Word spreads around.



"I'm a nut, I'm giving away something for nothing. There's a free-for-all to get in it while it lasts. The papers'll probably puff it up, with pictures; one of those screwball incidents that pop up every now and then."

"Your whole premise is full of flaws. No matter how phenomenal the prices you offer, why should that attract her? Suppose she's well-off?"

"Suppose she no longer is well-off?"

"I still don't see how she can fail to smell a rat."

"To us the program is 'hot.' To her it isn't. Why should it be? She may never even notice those tell-tale little folds up at the corner, or if she does, never dream that they'll tell us what we want to know. You didn't remember about it yourself, until just a few minutes ago. Why should she? She's not a mind-reader; how is she going to know that you and I are here together in this cell talking about it right now?"

"The whole thing is too flimsy."

"Of course it's flimsy," Lombard agreed. "It's a thousand-to-one shot. But we have to take it. Beggars can't be choosers. I'm going to try it, Hendy. I have a strange feeling that—that this'll work, where everything else has failed."

He turned away, went over to the bars to be let out.

"Well, so long—" Henderson suggested tentatively.

"I'll be seeing you," Lombard called back.

As he heard his tread recede outside behind the guard's, Henderson thought: "He doesn't believe that. And neither do I."

**Boxed Advertisement, All Morning and Evening Papers:**

**Turn Your Old Theater-Programs Into Money**

wealthy collector, in town for short visit, will pay over-generous amounts for items needed to complete his sets. Life-long hobby. Bring them in, no matter how old, no matter how new! Specially wanted: music-hall and revue numbers, last few seasons, missing because of my absence abroad. Alhambra, Belvedere, Casino, Coliseum. No joblots nor second-hand dealers. J. L. 15 Franklin Square. Premises open until ten Friday night, only. After that I leave town.

## *THE Day of the Execution*

AT nine-thirty, for almost the first time all day, the line had dwindled to vanishing-point, a straggler or two had been disposed of, and there was a breathing-spell, with nobody in the shop but Lombard and his young assistant.

Lombard slumped limply in his chair, thrust out his lower lip, and blew breath exhaustedly up across his face, so that it stirred the disarranged hair overhanging his forehead. He was in his vest, shirt-collar open. He dragged a handkerchief out from the pocket he was sitting on and popped it at his face here and there. It came away gray. They didn't bother dusting them off before they dumped them in front of him. They seemed to think the thicker the dust, the more highly they would be valued. He wiped his hands on the handkerchief, threw it away.

He turned his head, said to somebody hidden from view behind him by towering, slantwise stacks of programs: "You can go now, Jerry. Time's about up, I'm closing in another half-hour. The rush seems to be over."

A skinny youth of nineteen or so straightened up in a sort of trench left between two parapets of the accumulation, came out, put on his coat.

Lombard took out some money. "Here's the fifteen dollars for the three days, Jerry."

The boy looked disappointed. "Won't you be needing me any more tomorrow, mister?"

"No, I won't be here tomorrow," Lombard said broodingly. "Tell you what you can do, though. You can have these to sell for waste-paper; some rag-picker might give you a few jits for them."

The boy looked at him pop-eyed. "Gee, mister, you mean you been buying 'em up for three days straight just to get rid of them?"

"I'm funny that way," Lombard assented. "Keep it under your hat until then, though."

The boy went out giving him awed backward glances all the way to the sidewalk. He thought he was crazy, Lombard knew. He didn't blame him. He thought he was crazy himself. For ever thinking that this would work, that she'd fall for



it, show up. The whole idea had been harebrained to start with.

A girl was passing along the sidewalk as the boy emerged. That was the only reason Lombard happened to notice her, because his eyes were on his departing assistant and she cut between them. She came in slowly, warily.

A prickling sensation lightly stirred the fuzz below the hairline on his neck. He tried not to stare at her too blatantly, looked down again after one all-comprehensive sweep of the eyes, so she wouldn't detect anything on his face.

His composite impression was this: she must have been pretty until just recently. It was rapidly leaving her now. There was an air of sub-surface refinement, perhaps even culture, still emanating from her, but there was a hard crust, a shell of coarseness and cheapening, forming on the outside that would soon smother it, extinguish it for good.

She looked as though she hadn't been eating regularly. There was a shadowed hollow in each cheek, and the whole bone-structure of the face showed through the thin covering. She was entirely in black, but not the black of widowhood nor yet the black of fashion; the rusty black of slovenliness, adhered to because it doesn't show soil. Even her stockings were black, with a white crescent of hole showing above the back of each shoe.

She spoke. "You got any jack left to pay out on programs, or am I too late?"

"Let's see what you've got," he said guardedly.

There was a snap of her shoddy, oversized handbag, and a pair of them were planked down. Companion-pieces, from the same night. A musical show at the Regina, season before last. I wonder who she was with that night, he thought. She probably was secure yet and comely, she didn't dream—

He pretended to consult a reference-list giving his needs, the gaps that remained to be filled in his "sets."

"I seem to be short that one. Seventy-five," he said.

He saw her eyes glitter. He'd hoped that would get her.

"Got any more?" he suggested craftily. "This is your last chance, you know. I'm closing up this place tonight."

She hesitated. He saw her eyes go to her bag. "Well, do you bother buying just one at a time?"

"Any number."

"As long as I'm in here—" She opened the bag once more, tilted the flap over against her so that he couldn't look down into it, pulled an additional program out. She snapped the bag shut again, first of all, before she did anything else. He noted that. Then she spaded the folder at him. He took it, reversed it his way.

#### CASINO THEATRE

It was the first one that had showed up in the full three days. He leafed through it with pretended casualness, past the preliminary filler columns to where the play-matter itself began. It was dated by the week, as all theatrical programs are. "Week beginning May 17th." His breath log-jammed. That was the week. The right week. It had been on the night of the twentieth. He kept his eyes down so they wouldn't give him away. Only—the upper righthand corners of the pages were untouched. It wasn't that they'd been smoothed-out, that would have left a tell-tale diagonal seam; they'd never been folded-over in the first place.

It was hard to keep his voice casual. "Got the mate to it? Most of them come in twos, you know, and I could make you a better offer."

She gave him a searching look. He even caught the little uncompleted start her hand made toward the snap of her pocketbook. Then she forced it down again. "What d'you think I do, print them?"

"I prefer to buy duplicates, doubles, whenever possible. Didn't anyone go with you to this particular show? What became of the other pro—?"

There was something about it she didn't like. Her eyes darted suspiciously around the store, as if in search of a trap. She edged warily backward a step or two from the table. "Come on, one is all I got. Do you wanna buy or don't you?"

"I can't give you as much as I could have given you for a pair—"

She was obviously in a hurry to get outside into the open again. "All right, anything you say—" She even arched over to reach for the money from where she



was standing, he couldn't get her to close in toward the purchasing-table again.

He let her get as far as the door with it. Then he called after her, but in a quietly-modulated voice, unwarranted to cause alarm: "Just a moment. Could I ask you to come back here a moment, there's something I forgot."

She stopped short for a single instant, cast a look of sharp distrust back over her shoulder at him. It was more than just the look of automatic response one gives to a summons; it was a look of wariness. Then as he rose, crooking his finger at her, she gave a stifled cry, broke into a scampering run, rounded the store-entrance, and fled from sight.

He flung the impediment of the table bodily over to one side to get quick clearance, dashed out after her.

She was chopsticking it down toward the next corner when he got out on the sidewalk, but her high heels were against her. When she glanced back and saw him coming full-tilt behind her, she gave another cry, louder this time, and was stung into an added spurt of velocity that carried her around into the next street before he had quite halved the distance.

But he got her there, only a few yards past where his own car had been standing waiting all day, in hopes of just such an eventuality as this. He overlapped her, blocked her off, gripped her by the shoulders, and then swung her in with him against the building-front, pinning her there.

"Lemme see that bag. Open the pocket-book! Come on, open up that pocketbook or I'll do it for you!"

"Take your hands off me! Leave me alone!"

He didn't waste any more time arguing. He yanked it so violently from under her arm that the frayed loop-strap she had it suspended by tore off bodily. He opened it, plunged his hand in, crowding her back with his body so that she couldn't escape from the position he had her backed into. It came up again with a program identical to the one she had just sold him in the store. He let the pocketbook drop to free his hands. He tried to flutter the leaves to open it, and they adhered. He had to pry them away from one another. All the inner ones, from cover to cover, were notched,

were neatly folded over at their upper right-hand tips. He peered in the uncertain street-light, and the date-line was the same as the other.

Scott Henderson's program. Poor Scott Henderson's program, returning at the eleventh hour, like bread cast upon the waters—

### *The Hour of the Execution*

10:55 p.m. The last of anything, ah, the last of anything, is always so bitter. He was cold all over, though the weather was warm, and he was shivering, though he was sweating, and he kept saying to himself over and over, "I'm not afraid," more than he was listening to the chaplain. But he was and he knew he was, and who could blame him? Nature had put the instinct to live in his heart.

He was stretched out face downward on his bunk, and his head, with a square patch shaved on the top, was hanging down over the edge of it toward the floor. The chaplain was sitting by him, one hand pressed consolingly against his shoulder as if to keep the fear in, and every time the shoulder shook the hand would shake in sympathy with it, although the chaplain was going to live many more years yet. The shoulder shook at regular-spaced intervals. It's an awful thing to know the time of your own death.

The chaplain was intoning the 23rd Psalm in a low voice. "Green pastures, refresh my soul—" Instead of consoling him, it made him feel worse. He didn't want the next world, he wanted this one.

The fried chicken and the waffles and the peach short-cake that he'd had hours ago felt like they were all gummed-up somewhere behind his chest, wouldn't go down any further. But that didn't matter, it wouldn't give him indigestion, there wouldn't be time enough for it to.

He wondered if he'd have time to smoke another cigarette. They'd brought in two packs with his dinner, that had been only a few hours ago, and one was already crumpled and empty, the second half-gone. It was a foolish thing to worry about, he knew, because what was the difference if he smoked one all the way down or had to throw it away after a single puff? But he'd always been thrifty about things like



that, and the habits of a lifetime die hard.

He asked the chaplain, interrupting his low-voiced chant, and instead of answering directly the chaplain simply said, "Smoke another, my boy," and struck the match and held it for him. Which meant there really wasn't time.

His head flopped down again and smoke came out of the hidden gray gash of his lips. The chaplain's hand pressed down on his shoulder once more, steadying the fear, damming it. Footsteps could be heard coming quietly and with horrible slowness along the stone-floored passage outside, and a sudden hush fell over Death Row. Instead of coming up, Scott Henderson's head went down even further. The cigarette fell and rolled away. The chaplain's hand pressed down harder, almost riveting him there to the bunk.

The footsteps had stopped. He could sense they were standing out there looking in at him, and though he tried not to look, he couldn't hold out, his head came up against his will and turned slowly. He said, "Is this it now?"

The cell-door started to ease back along its grooves, and the warden said: "This is it now, Scott."

**SCOTT HENDERSON'S** program. Poor Scott Henderson's program, returning like bread cast upon the waters. He stared at it. The handbag he had wrenched from her lay unnoticed at his feet.

The girl, meanwhile, was writhing there beside him, trying to break the soldered grip of his hand on her shoulder.

He put it carefully away in his inside pocket first of all. Then he took two hands to her, trundled her roughly along the sidewalk and over to where his car stood waiting. "Get in there, you heartless apology for a human being! You're coming with me! You know what you've nearly done, don't you?"

She threshed around for a moment on the running-board, before he got the door open and pushed her in. She went sprawling knees-first, turned and scrambled upwards against the seat. "Let me go, I tell you!" Her voice went keening up and down the street. "You can't do this to me! Somebody come here! Aren't there any cops in this town to stop a guy like

him—!"

"Cops? You're getting cops! All the cops you want! You'll be sick of the sight of them before I get through with you!" Before she could squirm out at the opposite side, he had come in after her, yanked her violently back so that she floundered against him, and crashed the door shut after him.

He took the back of his hand to her twice to silence her; once in threat, the second time in fulfilment. Then he bent to the dashboard. "I never did that to a woman before," he gritted. "But you're no woman. You're just a bum in feminine form. A no-good bum." They swerved out from the curb, straightened and shot off. "Now you're going to ride whether you want to or not, and you better see that you ride quiet. Every time you howl or try anything while I'm bucking this traffic I'll give you another one of those if I have to. It's up to you."

She quit wilddcatting, deflated sullenly against the seat-leather, glowered there while they cut around corners, by-passed car after car going the same way they were. Once, when a light held them up for a minute, she said defeatedly, without renewing her previous attempts to escape. "Where're you heading with me?"

"You don't know, do you?" he said cuttingly. "It's all news to you, isn't it?"

"*Him*, hunh?" she said with quiet resignation.

"Yeah, *him*, hunh?! Some specimen of humanity you are!" He crushed the accelerator flat once more, and both their heads went back in unison. "You ought to be beaten raw, for being willing to let an innocent man got to his death, when you could have stopped it at any time from first to last, just by coming forward and telling them what you know!"

"I figured it was that," she said dully. She looked down at her hands. After awhile she said, "When is it—tonight?"

"Yes, tonight!"

He saw her eyes widen slightly, in the reflected dashboard-light, as though she hadn't realized until now it was that imminent. "I didn't know it was—going to be that soon," she gulped.

"Well, it isn't now!" he promised harshly. "Not as long as I've got you with me at last!"



Another light stopped them. He cursed it, sat there wiping his face with a large handkerchief.

"You must be something made of sawdust, without any insides at all!" he told her once.

She answered, unexpectedly and at length. "Look what it did to me. You haven't thought of that, have you? Haven't I suffered enough for it already? Why should I care what happens to him, or to anyone else! What is he to me, anyway? They're killing him tonight. But *I've* been killed for it already! I'm dead, I tell you, dead! You've got someone dead sitting in the car next to you."

Her voice was the low growl of tragedy striking in the vitals; no shrill woman's whine or plaint; a sexless groan of suffering. "Sometimes in dreams I see someone who had a beautiful home, a husband who loved her, money, beautiful things, the esteem of her friends, security; above all, security, safety. That was supposed to go on until she died. That was supposed to *last*. I can't believe it was me. I know it wasn't me. And yet the whiskey-dreams, sometimes, tell me that it was. Do you know what it means to be thrown out into the street? Yes, literally thrown out, at two in the morning, with just the clothes you have on your back, and to have the doors locked behind you and your own servants warned not to admit you again on pain of dismissal! I sat on a park-bench all night the first night. I had to borrow five dollars from my own former maid the next day, so that I could get a room."

"Why didn't you come forward then, at least? If you'd already lost everything, what more did you have to lose?"

"His power over me didn't end there. He warned me that if I opened my mouth, did anything to bring notoriety or disgrace on his good name, he'd sign me over into an institution for alcoholics. He could easily do it too, he has the influence, the money. I'd never get out again. Strait-jackets and cold-water treatments."

"All that's no excuse. You must have known we were looking for you; you couldn't have avoided knowing it. You must have known this man was going to die. You were yellow, that's what you were. But if you never did a decent thing

in your life before, and if you never do a decent thing in your life again, you're going to do one now. You're going to speak your piece and save Scott Henderson!"

She was silent for a long moment. Then her head went over slowly. "Yes," she said at last, "I am. I want to—now. I must have been blind all these months, not to see it as it really is. Somehow I didn't think of him all along until now, I only thought of myself, what I had to lose by it." She looked up at him again. "And I *would* like to do one decent thing at least—just for a change."

"You're going to," he promised grimly. "What time did you meet him at the bar that night?"

"Six-ten, by the clock in front of us."

"Are you going to tell them that? Are you willing to swear to that?"

"Yes," she said in an exhausted voice, "I'm going to tell them that. I'm willing to swear to that."

They raced on in silence, just the two of them in the faint dashlight. They were out past the city limits, flying along the sleek, straight artery that led upcountry.

"Why are we going this far out?" she asked presently, with only dulled awareness. "Isn't the Criminal Courts Building the place where—"

"I'm taking you straight up there to the penitentiary," he answered tautly. "It's the quickest in the end. Cut through all the red tape—"

"It's right tonight—you said?"

"Sometime within the next hour-and-a-half. We'll make it."

"But suppose something happens to delay us? A tire goes out or something? Wouldn't it be better to telephone?"

"I know what I'm doing. You sound quite anxious all at once."

"Yes, oh yes, I am," she breathed. "I've been blind. Blind. I see which was the dream, now, and which the reality."

"Quite a reformation," he said grudgingly. "For five months you didn't lift a finger to help him. And now all at once, within fifteen minutes, you're all hot and bothered."

"Yes," she said submissively. "It doesn't seem to matter, all at once. About my husband, or the threat of being put into an institution, or any of the rest of it. You've



made me see the whole thing in a different light." She drew the back of one hand wearily across her brow, said with infinite disgust: "I want to do at least one brave thing, I'm so sick of being a coward all my life!"

They rode in silence after that. Until presently she asked, almost with anxiety, "Will just my sworn testimony be enough to save him?"

"It'll be enough to postpone—what they have scheduled for tonight. Once that's been accomplished, we can turn it over to the lawyers, they'll see it through the rest of the way."

Suddenly she noticed they had swung off left, at a fork, onto a desolate, poorly-surfaced cross-country "feeder." It had already occurred several moments before, by the time she became aware of it. The motion of the car had become less even. The occasional passing road-mate had diminished to none. There was no sign of life on it.

"But why this? I thought the north-and-south highway we were on was the one that takes you up to the State Prison. Isn't he at—?"

"This is a short-cut," he answered briefly. "A sort of shuttle that'll save time."

The humming of the wind seemed to rise a little, take on an apprehensive moaning quality, as they rushed through, displacing it.

He spoke again, chin almost to wheel, eyes motionless and emotionless over it. "I'll get you where we're going in plenty of time."

**T**HERE were no longer just two of them in the car. At some indeterminate point in the previous silence, a third presence had entered it, was in it now, sitting between them. The icy, shrouded shape of fear, its unseen arms enfolding the woman in cold embrace, its frigid fingertips seeking out her windpipe.

There hadn't been any lights but their own for ten minutes past now. There hadn't been any word between them. The trees were a smoky, billowing mass on each side of them. The wind was a warning message, unheeded until too late. Their two faces were ghosts reflected side by side on the windshield before them.

He slowed, backed, turned aside once

more, this time onto an unpaved dirt lane, little better than a defile through the trees.

She said in a smothered voice, "No, what're you doing—?" Fear locked its embrace about her tighter, breathed glacially down her neck. "I don't like the way you're acting. What're you doing this for?"

Suddenly they'd stopped, and it was over. The sound of the brakes only reached her senses after the fact had been accomplished. He killed the engine, and there was stillness all around. Inside the car and out. They were motionless, all of them: the car, and he and she, and her fear.

Not quite; there was one thing moving. The three fingers of his hand, that had remained upon the wheel-rim, kept fluttering restlessly, rising and falling in rotation, like somebody striking successive keys on the piano over and over.

She turned and began to pummel at at him, in impotent fright. "What is it? Say something! Say something to me! Don't just sit there like that! What did we stop here for? What are you thinking, why are you looking like that?"

"Get out." He gave the order with a hitch of his chin.

"No. What are you going to do? No." She sat there staring at him in ever-widening fright.

He reached across her and unlatched the door on that side. "I said get out."

"No! You're going to do something. I can see it on your face—"

He flung her before him with one stiffly-locked arm. A moment later they were both standing there beside the car, toe-deep in sandpappy tan and yellow leaves. He cracked the car-door shut again after him. It was damp and penetrating under the trees, pitch-black around them in all directions but one: the ghostly tunnel ahead made by the projecting headlight-beams.

"Come this way," he said quietly. He started walking down it. He held her by the elbow, to make sure that she accompanied him. The leaves sloshed and spit under them in the unnatural quiet. The carfender fell behind them, they were clear of it now, walking ahead. She went turned unnaturally sidewise, staring into his unanswering face. She could hear her own breath, echoing under the canopy of



the trees. His was quieter.

They walked like that in silent, unexplained pantomime until they'd reached a point where the projected headlight-shine thinned out, was about to disappear. On this boundary-line between light and shadows he stopped, took his hand off her. She went down convulsively a few inches, he caught her, straightened her, took his hand off her a second time.

He took out a cigarette and offered it to her. She tried to refuse. "Here," he insisted roughly, thrusting it at her mouth. "Better take one!" He lit it for her, holding his hands cupped over the match-flame. There was something ritualistic about the little attention that only struck redoubled fear into her, instead of reassuring her. She took one puff, then the cigarette dropped from her unmanageable lips, she wasn't able to retain it. He made a precautionary pass at it with his foot, ground it out because of the leaves.

"All right," he said. "Now go back to the car. Walk up that pathway of light from here, and get back in the car, and wait for me in it. And *don't look around*, just keep walking straight ahead."

She didn't seem to understand, or else was too undone by terror to be able to move of her own volition. He had to give her a slight push away from him to start her off. She tottered a few uncertain steps through the shuffling leaves.

"Go ahead, keep walking straight back along those lights like I told you," his voice came after her. "*And don't look back!*"

She was a woman and a frightened one. The admonition had an opposite effect to that intended; it brought her head around, uncontrollably.

He already had the gun out in his hand.

Her scream was like a bird, clawed and dying, that manages to spiral up through the trees for one last flutter before it drops down dead. She tried to close in toward him again, as though nearness was a guarantee of immunity and the danger lay in being detached from him.

"Stay there!" he warned flintily. "I tried to make it as easy for you as I could, I told you not to look back."

"Don't! What for?" she wailed. "I told you I'd tell them everything you want me to! I *told* you I would! I will, I will—!"

"No," he contradicted with horrifying calm, "you won't, and I'll make sure you don't. Tell it to him instead, when he catches up to you in the next world, about half-an-hour from now." His arm stretched out at firing-position with the gun.

She made a perfect silhouette against the fuzzy head-light-glare. Trapped, unable even to flee aside into the protective darkness beyond the beams in time, for they were so wide, she floundered around where she stood in a complete, befuddled circle, that brought her around facing him once more as she had been before.

That was all there was time for.

Then the shot echoed thunderously under the ceiling of trees overhead. Her scream was its counterpoint.

He must have missed, as fairly close to one another as they were. There was no smoke at his end, as there should have been, though her mind had no time to reason about that. She felt nothing; she stayed up, too dazed to run or do anything but waver there, like a ribbon-streamer before an electric fan. He was the one stumbled sideways against a nearby tree-trunk, leaned there inertly for a minute, face pressed against the bark, as though in remorse for what he had just attempted. Then she saw that he was holding his shoulder with the other hand. The gun winked harmlessly from the bed of leaves where he had dropped it, like a lump of coal in the light-flare.

A man's figure glided swiftly past her from the rear, went down the path of light toward him. He was holding a gun of his own, she saw, centered on the crumbling figure against the tree. He dipped for a minute, and the wink was gone from the leaves underfoot. Then he stepped in close, there was a flash of reflected light down by their wrists, and something made the sound of a twig snapping. Lombard's sagging figure came away from the tree, leaned suddenly against him, then straightened itself.

In the leaden quiet the second man's voice reached her clearly.

"I arrest you for the murder of Marcella Henderson!"

He put something to his lips, and a whistle sounded with doleful, long-drawn-out finality. Then the silence came down on the three of them again.



Burgess leaned down solicitously and raised her from the kneeling position she had collapsed into on the bed of leaves, hands pressed tightly over her sobbing face.

"I know," he said soothingly. "I know it was pretty bad. It's over now. It's over. You did the job. You've saved him. Lean on me, that's it. Have a good cry. Go to it. You've got it coming to you."

Woman-like, she stopped then and there. "I don't want to now. I'm all right, now. It's just that—I didn't think anyone would get here in time to—"

"They wouldn't have just by tailing the two of you. Not the way he drove." A second car had braked somewhere further up the lane only moments before; its occupants hadn't even reached the spot yet. "I couldn't take any chances on that. I was riding right with you the whole way out, didn't you know that? I was right in the trunk-compartment. I heard the whole thing. I've been in it ever since you first walked inside the store."

He raised his voice, shouted back to where flashlights were winking fitfully under the trees as the second party descended. "Is that Gregory and the rest of you fellows? Go back—don't waste time getting out and coming over here. Get over to the highway fast and get on the nearest telephone. Get the District Attorney's office. We only have a few minutes. I'll follow you in the other car. Tell them I'm holding a guy named John Lombard, self-confessed killer of Mrs. Henderson, to get word to the warden—"

"You haven't got a bit of evidence against me," Lombard growled, wincing with pain.

"No? What more do I need than what you've just given me? I caught you in the very act of murdering in cold blood a girl whom you never even set eyes on until just an hour ago! What could you have possibly had against her, except that her evidence was the one thing that could have still saved Henderson, absolved him of the crime? And why were you determined not to let that happen? Because that would have meant reopening the whole case, and your own immunity would have been endangered. That's my evidence against you!"

A State Trooper came thudding up to

them. "Need a hand here?"

"Carry the girl over to the car. She's just been through a pretty rocky experience and needs looking after. I'll take care of the guy."

The husky trooper picked her up bodily, cradled her in his arms. "Who is she?" he asked over his shoulder, as he led the way back along the glowing headlight-carpet.

"A pretty valuable little person," Burgess answered from the rear, jarring his prisoner along beside him, "so walk gently with her, officer, walk slow. That's Henderson's girl, Carol Richman, you're holding in your arms. The best man of us all."

## XI

### *One Day, After the Execution—*

THEY were together in the living-room of Burgess' small flat in Jackson Heights. That was the scene of their first meeting, following the release. He'd arranged it that way for them. He'd had her there waiting for Henderson, when the latter came down on the train. As he expressed it to her, "Who wants to meet outside a prison-gate? You two have had enough of that stuff already. Wait for him over at my place. It may be only instalment-plan furniture, but at least it's non-penal."

They were sitting close together on the sofa, in soft lamplight, in a state of profound—if still somewhat dazed—peace. Henderson had his arm around her, and her head was resting in the notch of his shoulder.

Something about the two of them gave Burgess a choking feeling in the throat, when he came in and saw them. "How's it coming, you two?" he asked gruffly, in order not to show it.

"Gee, everything's so *good-looking*, isn't it?" Henderson marveled. "I'd almost forgotten how *good-looking* everything is. Carpets on the floor. Soft light coming from a lampshade. A sofa-cushion behind me. And look, the best-looking thing of all—" He nudged the top of her head with his chin. "It's all mine, I've got it all back again, and it's good for another forty years yet!"

Burgess and the girl exchanged a side-



glance of unspoken compassion.

"I just came from the District Attorney's office," Burgess said. "They finally got the full confession out of him down there. Sealed, signed, and delivered."

"I still can't get over it," Henderson said, shaking his head. "I still can hardly believe it. What was in back of it? Was he in love with Marcella? She'd never met him more than twice in her whole life, as far as I know."

"As far as you know," Burgess said drily.

"You mean it was one of those things on the side?"

"Didn't you notice she was out a lot?"

"Yes, but I didn't think anything of it. She and I weren't living on cordial terms any more."

"Well, that was it, right there." He took a turn or two about the room. "There's one thing I think ought to be made clear to you, though, Henderson. For what it's worth at this late date. It was strictly a one-sided affair. Your wife was not in love with Lombard. If she had been, most likely she would still be alive today. She was not in love with anyone but herself. She liked admiration and flattery; she was the type that likes to flirt and string people along, without meaning it seriously. That's a harmless game with nine men. And with the tenth it's dangerous. To her he was just someone to go out with, and a handy way of getting back at you in her own mind; to show herself that she didn't need you. Unfortunately, he was the tenth man. He was the wrong type for it altogether. He'd spent most of his life around the oil-fields in God-forsaken parts of the world; and he hadn't had much experience with women. He didn't have any sense of humor about things like that. He took her seriously. And of course she liked that part of it all the better, that made the game more real."

"There's no question about it, she gave him a raw deal. She led him on until the very last, long after she must have seen where it was leading. She let him arrange his whole future around her, knowing darn well she wasn't going to be there to share it with him. She let him sign for five years with this oil company in South America. Why, he even had the bungalow they were going to live in down there

picked out and furnished up for them. The understanding was she was to divorce you as soon as they got there, and marry him. After all, when a guy's that age, and not a kid any more, he takes it hard when you kick his heart around like that.

"Instead of tapering off, breaking it to him by degrees, giving him a sporting chance to get over it, she went about it the worst possible way. She hated to give up her cake any sooner than she had to; his rings on the phone, their luncheon-meetings, their dinner-dates, his kisses in a taxi. Her ego needed all that. She'd got used to it, and she would have missed it. So she put off and put off. *She waited until the very night they were due to sail together to South America*; waited until he called for her at the flat—as soon as you'd gone—to take her to the pier with him.

"I'm not surprised it cost her her life. I would have been surprised if it hadn't. He says he got there even before you left, side-stepped you by waiting on the upper flight of stairs past your floor, until after you'd come storming out. It just so happened there was no hallman on duty that night; the former one had just been drafted, and they hadn't gotten a replacement yet. So no one saw him come in. And as we all very well know, no one saw him leave again either."

"Well anyway, she let him in, went back to her mirror again, and when he asked her if she was all packed and ready, laughed at him. That seems to have been her day for laughing at people. She asked him if he'd really seriously believed she was going to bury herself in South America, place herself at his mercy, to marry or not as he saw fit, once her bridges were burned behind her? Above all, free you to go to someone else? She liked the situation the way it was. She wasn't giving up a sure thing for a gamble."

"But more than anything else, it was the laughter that did it. If she'd cried when she told him all this, or even if she'd just kept a straight face, he says he thinks he would have let it go at that. Just gone out and drunk himself stone-blind, maybe, but she would still have been alive behind him. And I think so too."

"So he killed her," Henderson said quietly.



"So he killed her. Your discarded necktie was still lying there on the floor behind her, where you'd dropped it. He must have absently picked it up at one point or another just before this, been holding it in his hands without noticing it, when the snap came." He gave an expressive snap of his own fingers.

"I don't blame him altogether," Carol breathed, looking down at the floor.

"I don't either," Burgess admitted. "But that was no excuse for doing what he did next. For deliberately turning on the man who had been his life-long friend, going out of his way to see that he was framed for it."

"What did I do to him?" Henderson asked, without any trace of rancor.

"What it amounts to is this. He didn't understand then, and he still doesn't today yet, even this long after, what it really was that made her act the way she did. Jilt him so heartlessly. He failed to see that it was in perfect keeping with her own character to do so, that that was the way she was built. He mistakenly thought it must be because of a renewal of her love for you. Therefore he blamed you for it. You were responsible for his losing her. That made him hate you. He wanted to take it out on you. A distorted form of jealousy, that was only made more insane by the coveted one's death, is about the closest you can get to it."

"Whew," said Henderson softly.

"He came out of there, unseen, and he deliberately set out after you, to try and overtake you. That quarrel which he'd overheard from the stairs was too good an opportunity to be passed up. Too good an opportunity of saddling you with what he'd just done. His original idea, he says, was to join you as if by accident, as if he'd just happened to run into you, and stick around with you long enough to give you a chance to convict yourself out of your own mouth. At least implicate yourself seriously. He would have said, 'Hullo, I thought your wife was going to be with you.' And then, quite naturally, you would have answered, 'I had a fierce row with her before I left.' It was necessary for that row to come out. He wanted it to. He couldn't bring it out, otherwise, without implicating himself as having been within eavesdropping distance out on the stairs.

It had to come through *your* telling *him*, in the first person, do you understand?

"He would have seen to it that you got quite tanked—if you still needed any additional encouragement—while he was with you. Then he would have accompanied you back to your own door. So that when you made the grim discovery, he'd be there; he on hand to reluctantly repeat to the police what he'd heard you say about having a terrific blow-up with her just before leaving. You would have been acting as a shock-absorber for him. That's a neat little touch there, that idea of accompanying the husband back to where he's just finished murdering the wife. Automatically relegating himself to the position of innocent bystander at someone else's crime. It would have been practically foolproof as a suspicion disinfectant.

"All this he tells quite freely—and I've got to admit quite unremorsefully even yet—in his confession."

"Nice," said Carol somberly.

"He thought you'd be alone. He already knew two of the places you'd said you'd be. You'd mentioned that afternoon, when you ran into him, that you were taking the missis to the Maison Blanche for dinner, and then afterward to the Casino. The bar he didn't know about, because you didn't yourself until you turned and went in there on the spur of the moment.

"He went straight to the Maison, and he cased it cautiously from the foyer, without showing himself. He saw you in there. You must have just arrived. He saw you were with someone. That changed things around. He not only could not join you now with any hope of profiting from any possible revelation on your part, but this unknown third person might even provide you with a degree of immunity altogether, depending on just how soon you'd met her after leaving your own door. In other words, that early, almost at sight, he sensed her paramount importance in the matter, both from his point of view and your own. And acted accordingly.

"He withdrew, and hovered around outside on the street, far enough away to command the entrance without any danger of being caught sight of himself. He knew your next stop was slated to be the Casino



Theatre, but he couldn't be sure, of course. Couldn't afford to take it for granted.

"THE two of you came out, taxied over, and he taxied over in your wake. He followed you *into* the theatre. Listen to this, it's an exciting thing. He bought a standing-room ticket, as people often do who have only time to catch one act. He stood up back there, at the rear of the orchestra, sheltered by a post, and kept the back of your heads in sight throughout the performance.

"He saw you leave when you did leave. He almost lost you in the crowd when you left, but luck was with him. The little incident of the blind man he missed altogether, for he dared not tread that closely behind you. Your taxi had such a hard time pulling clear of the jam that he was able to keep you in sight from another.

"You led him back to Anselmo's finally, although he still didn't know that that was the pivot of the whole thing. Again he loitered outside, for in the closer quarters of the bar he couldn't have hoped to avoid your spotting him. He saw you leave her there, presently, and could guess by that fact alone, if he hadn't already, that you'd carried out the threat he'd heard you yell back at the apartment: that you'd invite the first stranger you met along in your wife's place.

"He had to decide quickly now whether to keep on after you, and run the risk of losing her in the shuffle, or to switch his attention to her, find out just how much good she could do you, how much harm she could do him.

"He didn't hesitate long. Again his good luck held, and he did the right thing almost by instinct. It was too late to attach himself to you any more with any degree of plausibility. Instead of helping to incriminate you, he'd only be incriminating himself. His ship was being warped out of the pier at that very minute, and he should have been on it by this time.

"So he let you go and he chose her, never dreaming how unerringly right he was, and he bided his time outside, watching her covertly, knowing she could not stay in the bar all night, knowing she would have to have some final destination.

"Presently she emerged, and he drew back out of sight to give her leeway

enough. He was shrewd enough not to accost her then and there; he would only be identifying himself to her. In case it turned out she could absolve you, he would only be incriminating himself indelibly for later on by the mere fact of having questioned her on the subject at all, shown any interest in it. So he wisely decided that this was the thing to do: learn her identity and destination first of all, so that he would know where to find her again when he wanted her. That much done, leave her undisturbed for a short while. Then discover, if possible, just how much protection she was able to give you. This by retracing your steps of the evening, seeking to ferret out if possible your original meeting-place, and above all how soon after your leaving the apartment the meeting had taken place. Then thirdly, if the weight she could throw in the matter was enough to count, take care of it by a little judicious erasing. Seek her out wherever it was he had traced her to the first time, and ascertain whether or not he could persuade her to remain silent. And if she proved not amenable, he admits there was already a darker method of erasure lurking in the back of his mind. Immunizing one crime by committing a second.

"So he set out after her. She went on foot, for some inscrutable reason, late as the hour was; but this only made it easier for him to keep her in sight. At first he thought it might be because she lived in the immediate vicinity, a stone's throw away from the bar, but as the distance she covered slowly lengthened, he saw that couldn't be it. Presently he wondered if it mightn't be that she had become aware there was someone following her, and was deliberately trying to mislead them, throw them off the track. But even this, he finally decided, couldn't be the case. She showed absolutely no awareness nor alarm about anything, she was sauntering along to aimlessly, almost dawdling, stopping to scan the contents of unlighted showcases whenever she happened upon them, stopping to stroke a stray cat, obviously improvising her route as she went along, but under no outward compulsion whatever. After all, had she been seeking to rid herself of him, it would have been simple enough for her to have hopped into a cab, or stepped up to a policeman and said a



word or two. Several of them drifted into sight along the way and she didn't. There was nothing left for him to ascribe her erratic movements to, finally, than that she had no fixed destination, she was wandering at random. She was too well-dressed to be homeless, and he was completely at a loss what to make of it.

"She went up Lexington to Fifty-seventh, then she turned west there as far as Fifth. She went north two blocks, and sat for some time on one of the benches on the outside of the quadrangle around the statue of General Sherman, just as though it were three in the afternoon. She was finally driven off from there again by the questioning slowing-up of about every third car that passed her on its way in or out of the park. She ambled east again through Fifty-ninth, absorbedly memorizing the contents of the art-shop windows along there, with Lombard slowly going mad behind her.

"Then at last, when he almost began to think she intended going over the Queensborough Bridge on foot into Long Island, she suddenly turned aside into a very grubby little hotel at the far end of Fifty-ninth, and he detected her in the act of signing the register when he peered in after her. Showing that this was as much of an improvisation as all the rest of her meandering had been.

"As soon as she was safely out of sight, he went in there in turn and, as the quickest way of finding out what name she'd given and what room she'd been assigned to, took one for himself. The name immediately above his own, when he'd signed for it, was 'Frances Miller' and she'd gone into 214. He managed to secure the one adjoining, 216, by a deft process of elimination, finding fault with the two or three that were shown him at first until he'd secured the one he had his eye on. The place was in the last stages of deterioration, little better than a lodging house, so that was excusable enough.

"He went up for a short while, chiefly to watch her door from the hallway outside his own and convince himself that she was finally settled for the rest of the night and would be here when he came back. He couldn't have hoped for more proof than he obtained. He could see the

light in her room peering out through the opaque transom over the door. He could, without any difficulty in that weatherbeaten place, hear every move she made, almost guess what she was doing. He could hear the clicking of the wire hangers in the barren closet as she hung her outer clothing up. She had come in without any baggage, of course. He could hear her humming softly to herself as she moved about. He could even detect now and then what it was she was humming. *Chica Chica Boom*, from the show you had taken her to earlier that night. He could hear the trickle of the water as she busied herself preparing to retire. Finally the light went out behind the transom, and he could even hear the creak of the springs in the decrepit bed as she disposed herself on it. He goes into all this at great and grim length in the final draft of his confession.

"He crossed his own unlighted room, leaned out the window, which overlooked a miserable blind shaft, and scrutinized what he could see of her room from that direction. The shade was down to within a foot of the sill, but her bed was in such a position that by straddling the sill of his own and leaning far out, he could see the glint of the cigarette she held suspended over the side of the bed in the darkness in there. There was a drain-pipe running down between their two windows, and the collar-like fastening which held it to the wall offered a foot-rest at one point. He made note of that. Made note it was possible to get in there in that way, if he should find it necessary, when he came back.

"Sure of her now, he came out of the place again. This was a little before two o'clock in the morning.

"He hurried straight back to Anselmo's in a cab. The place was going into the death-watch now, and there was plenty of opportunity to become confidential with the bartender and find out what, if anything, he knew. In due course he let drop some casual remark about her, you know the sort of thing. 'Who was that lonely-looking number I saw sitting up at the end there all by herself a little while ago?' or something on that order. Just as an opening wedge.

"They're a talkative race anyway, and that was all the barman needed to go the



rest of the way under his own speed. That she'd been in there once before, around six, gone out with someone, he'd brought her back, and then he'd left her.

"An adroit further question or two brought out the point he was mainly interested in. That you had accosted her without any time-lag, immediately upon coming in, and that it had been only a very few minutes past six. In other words, his worst fears were exceeded. She was not only a potential protection to you, she was your absolute, unqualified salvation. It would have to be taken care of. And without delay." He broke off to ask, "Am I boring you by rehashing it at this length?"

"It was my life," Henderson observed drily.

"He didn't let any grass grow under his feet. He made the first deal then and there, under the very eyes of the few remaining customers still lingering in the place. The barman was the type that bribes easy, anyway, as the saying goes; he was ripe and ready to fall into his hand. A few guarded words, a palming of hands across the bar, and it was done. 'How much would you take to forget you saw that woman meet that fellow in here? You don't need to forget *he* was in here, just forget she was.' The barman allowed he'd take a modest enough sum. 'Even if it turned out to be a police matter?' The barman wasn't quite so sure after he'd heard that. Lombard made up his mind for him with a sum of fifty times larger than he'd expected to get out of it. He gave him a *thousand dollars in cold cash*. He had a considerable wad of it on him, ready at hand, the stake he'd been intending to use to set the two of them up in South America. That cinched it as far as the barman was concerned, of course. Not only that, Lombard cemented it with a few quiet-spoken but blood-chilling threats. And he was evidently a good threatener. Maybe because his threats weren't idle, they were the McCoy, and his listener could sense that.

"**T**HAT barman stayed fixed from then on, long after he knew all the facts in the case, and nothing we nor anyone else could do could get a word out of him. And it wasn't entirely due to the thousand dollars by any means. He was

good and frightened, and so were all the rest of them. You saw the effect it finally had on Cliff Milburn. There was something grim about this Lombard. He was a man with absolutely no sense of humor. He'd stayed too close to nature all his life.

"The barman taken care of, he went on from there, backtracking over the route you had taken not very many hours before. There's no need of giving you all the details at this late date. The restaurant and the theatre were closed, of course, by that time of night, but he managed to learn the whereabouts of the individuals he was after and seek them out. In one case he even made a quick trip all the way out to Forest Hills and back, to get one of them out of bed. By four o'clock that morning the job was complete; he'd contacted three more of the key figures whose collusion it was necessary for him to have: the taxi-driver Alp, the headwaiter from the Maison Blanche, and the box-office man from the Casino. He gave them varying amounts. The taxi-driver simply to deny having seen her. The headwaiter to give a split to the table-waiter, whose job depended on him after all, and make sure that he stayed in line. The box-office man he fixed so liberally he practically made him an ally. It was through him that Lombard learned one of the house-musicians had been heard shooting his mouth off, bragging what a hit he'd made with this particular woman—as he saw it—and added a suggestion that perhaps he'd better be taken care of too. Lombard wasn't able to get around to that until the second night after the murder, but luckily for him, we had overlooked the man entirely, so there was no harm done by the delay.

"Well, now it's an hour before day-break and his job's done, he's caused her to disappear from view, as far as it's humanly possible. The only one who remained to be taken care of was she herself. He went back there where he'd left her, to attend to that part of it. And he admits, his mind was already made up. He wasn't going to buy her silence, he was going to make sure of it in a more lasting way—by death. Then the rest of his structure wouldn't be in any danger. Any of the others could welsh, but there wouldn't be any proof left.

"He let himself back into the room he'd



taken next to hers, and sat there in the dark for a moment or two, thinking it out. He realized that he ran a far greater risk of being detected as the murderer in this case than in the case of your wife, but only as an unknown man who had signed the register downstairs under an assumed name, not as John Lombard. He intended overtaking his ship, he would never be seen around here again, so what chance was there of identifying him later? It would be suspected that 'he' had killed her, but it wouldn't be known who 'he' was. See what I mean?

"He went outside and listened at her door. The room was quiet, she was asleep by now. He tried it very carefully, but as he'd half-expected, the door was locked, he couldn't get in that way. There remained that drainpipe-stepping-stone outside their two windows, which had been in the back of his mind all along anyhow.

"The shade was still down to within a foot of the sill, as it had been before, when he looked out. He climbed quietly and agilely out the window, rested his foot on the necessary drainpipe support, and was able without very much difficulty to swing himself onto her sill and lower himself into the room under the shade. He didn't take any thing with him, he intended using just his bare hands and the bedclothes.

"In the dark he edged his way to the bed, and he poised his arms, and he gripped the tortured mass of the bed-clothes tight to prevent any outcry. They collapsed under him; they were empty. She wasn't there. She'd gone. As erratically as she'd come into this place, she'd gone again, in the hour before dawn, after lying in the bed awhile. Two cigarette-butts, a few grains of powder on the dressing-stand, and the rumpled bedclothes, were all that was left of her.

"When the worst part of the shock had worn off and he went downstairs again and asked about it more or less openly, they told him she'd come down not long before his return, handed in her key, and calmly walked out to the street once more. They didn't know which way she'd gone, nor where she'd gone, nor why she'd gone; only that she'd gone—as strangely as she'd come.

"His own game had boomeranged on

him. The woman whom he had spent all night and hundreds of dollars in trying to turn into a ghost as far as you, Henderson, were concerned, *had* turned into a ghost—but as far as he himself was concerned now. Which wasn't what he'd wanted at all. It left things too dangerously indefinite. She might pop back into the picture at any moment.

"He went through hell in those few short hours that were all he could spare before he had to plane out, if he was still to overtake his ship. He knew how hopeless it was. He knew, as you and I know, what a place New York is to find someone in, on short order.

"He hunted for her high and low, with the remorselessness of a maniac, and he couldn't find her again. The day went, and the second night went, and his time was up, he couldn't stay behind any longer. So he had to let it go under the heading of unfinished business. An axe hanging over him from then on, threatening to fall at any moment.

"He planed out of New York the second day after the murder, made the short over-water hop from Miami to Havana that same day, and was just in time to board his own ship when it touched there on the third day out. His excuse to the ship-board officials was that he'd got drunk the night of sailing and missed it.

"That was why he was so ripe for that come-on message I sent in your name; that was all he needed to drop everything and come back. He'd been panicky all along, and that gave him the finishing-touch. They talk about murderers being drawn back to the scene of their crime. This pulled him back like a magnet. Your asking for help gave him just the excuse he needed. He could come back openly now and help you 'look' for her. Finish the death-hunt he hadn't had time to complete the first time. Make sure that if she was ever found, she'd be found dead."

"Then you already suspected him when you came to my cell that day and drafted that cable in my name. When did you first begin to suspect him?"

"I can't put my finger on it and give you the exact day or hour. It was a very gradual thing, that came on in the wake of my change of mind about your own guilt. There was no conclusive evidence



against him from the first to last, that's why I had to go at it in the roundabout way I did. He left no fingerprints at the apartment; must have wiped the few surfaces he touched off clean. I remember we found several doorknobs without any marks on them at all.

"To start off with, he was just a name you'd dropped, in the course of being questioned yourself. An old-time friend, whose invitation to join him in a farewell tour of the town you'd conscientiously passed up, much to your regret, on *her* account. I had a routine inquiry made for him, more to have him help us fill in a little of *your* background for our record than anything else. I learned he'd sailed, as you'd mentioned he intended to. But I also found out, quite unintentionally, from the steamship line, that he'd missed the sailing here and caught up with his ship at Havana three days later. And one other thing. That he'd originally booked passage for two, himself and a wife, but that when he'd overtaken the ship he was alone, and had finished out the rest of the trip unaccompanied. Incidentally, there was no record of his ever having been married or having had a wife up here, when I checked a little further.

"Now there was not necessarily anything glaringly suspicious in all that, you understand. People do miss ships, especially when they celebrate too copiously just before sailing-time. And people's brides-to-be do change their minds at the last minute, back out, or the contemplated marriage is postponed by mutual consent.

"So I didn't think any more about it. And yet on the other hand I did. That little detail of his missing the ship and then overtaking it alone, lodged in the back of my mind and stayed with me from then on. He had, a little bit unluckily for himself, managed to attract my attention. Which seldom turns out to be beneficial, with cops. Then later, when my belief in your own guilt began to evaporate, there was a vacuum left behind. And a vacuum is something that has to be filled, or it will fill by itself. These facts about him began to trickle out, and before I knew it, the empty space had begun to fill up again."

"You sure kept me in the dark," Henderson admitted.

"I had to. There wasn't anything definite enough, until just recently. In fact until that night he drove Miss Richman into the woods with him. Confiding in you would have been a bad risk. Most likely you wouldn't have shared my feelings about him, and for all I knew might have warned him off in some burst of misguided loyalty. Or even if you had strung along with me, had shared my belief, knowledge of what was up might have made you a poor actor. He might have detected something in your manner toward him, and our hands would have been tipped. You were under a terrific strain, you know. I felt the safest thing to do was to work *through* you, using you as a sort of unconscious medium, without letting you realize the purpose of what you were doing yourself. And it wasn't easy. Take that stunt with the theatre programs, for instance—"

"I thought you were crazy—or I would have if I was normal myself—the way you rehearsed me and rehearsed me and rehearsed me, every little act, every little word, that was to lead up to it. You know what I thought you were doing it for? As a pain-killer, to keep my mind off the approaching deadline. So I fell in with it, and did as you told me, but with my tongue in my cheek."

"Your tongue in your cheek, and my heart in my mouth," Burgess chuckled grimly.

"Did he have anything to do with those peculiar accidents that kept dogging you along the way, as far as you were able to find out?"

"Everything. The strange part of that is, the one that seemed most like a murder, the Cliff Milburn affair, proved to be a bona fide suicide when we got through investigating it; and of course the barman was killed accidentally. But the two that seemed most like accidents turned out to be murders. Murders that he committed. I'm speaking of the deaths of the blind man and Pierrette Douglas. Both were murders without weapons, in the usual sense. The death of the blind man was a particularly horrible piece of business.

"He left him there in the room for a moment or two, ostensibly to chase down to the street and call me. He knew the man had an aversion to the police, typical



of his kind of fraudulent panhandling. He knew the first thing he'd do would be to try to escape from there. He counted on his doing that. As soon as he was on the other side of the door he attached a strong black thread, the kind tailors use, across the top step, at about ankle-height. Knotted it around the bannister-leg on one side, a projecting nail-head on the other. Then he turned out the light, knowing now the blind man had the use of his eyes, made a receding drum-beat of his footsteps, you know that old stunt, and crouched there waiting on the lower flight, just out of sight below the landing.

**"T**HE blind man came out fast and incautiously, in a hurry to put himself out of reach before Lombard returned with his police-friend, and the thing worked just as he'd intended it to. The thread caught him short and sent him toppling down the whole flight, and into the foreshortened landing-wall head-first. The thread had snapped, of course, but that didn't save him. The fall didn't kill him, he simply got a nasty crack on the skull and lay there stunned. And so Lombard hurriedly came back up to the landing again, stepped over him, went on to the head of the stairs, removed the tell-tale ends of loose thread from both sides.

"Then he went back to the senseless man, explored with his hands, found he was still breathing. His head was forced back at an unnatural angle by the wall against which it rested, and there was a strain on his neck. It was like a suspension-bridge, you understand, between his shoulders flat on the floor and his head semi-upright against the wall. He located the position of the neck, and then he straightened up, raised one leg so that his heavy shoes was poised just over it, and—"

Carol turned her head sharply aside.

"I'm sorry," Burgess murmured.

She turned back again. "It's part of the story. We should know it."

"Then and only then he went out and called me. And when he came back he stayed down at the street-door, and was careful to engage the cop on the beat in conversation the whole time he was waiting for me, to establish that he'd remained down there in full sight, if it became necessary."

"Did you get what it was right away?" Henderson asked.

"I examined the body down at the Morgue later that night, after I'd sent him home, and I saw the little red nick across each shin the thread had made. I saw the traces of dust on the back of his neck too. I figured what it was then. It was just a matter of building it up from those two points. It would have been hard to get him on it, though. It might have been done. I preferred to wait and get him for the main thing. I couldn't have got him for the main thing on the strength of that blind man incident, that was a cinch. And I didn't want to grab him prematurely only to see him get away again. Once I had him, I wanted to hang onto him. So I kept my mouth closed and went on paying out rope."

"And the thing about the trap-drummer you say he had nothing to do with?"

"In spite of the discrepancy of razors, that was only what it seemed. Cliff Milburn slashed his own throat in a fit of depression and fear. The safety blade must have been a discard berthed under the shelf-paper either by a former tenant or by some friend of his who came in and used his bathroom to shave in. A behaviorist would be interested. Even when it came to suicide, he instinctively avoided using his own implement for anything other than what it was intended for. That's a trait common to all of us; that's why we get so sore when our wives sharpen pencils with them."

Carol murmured softly, "I'll never be able to go near one again, after that night."

**"B**UT the death of Mrs. Douglas was his doing?" Henderson questioned interestedly.

"That was even more adroit than the other one. A long strip or runner of carpeting ran across the highly-polished floor-surface, in her place, from the foyer step-down, at one end, to directly under the French windows, at the other. What first put the idea into his head was that he skidded slightly himself, on the quite dangerous flooring, a little earlier in the proceedings. Eye-measurement did the rest, while he was talking to her. The straight line-sweep of the rug, of course, was almost an invitation. He marked an invisible



X on it to show where she must stand in order to have the greater part of her length go outside the window when she was over-balanced, and carefully retained its exact location in his mind from then on. Which is not the easy feat it sounds, when you are engaged in moving about yourself and talking with someone, and can only give it part of your attention.

"This isn't a hypothetical reconstruction on my part, I have all this from him at first hand, in black and white. From that point on, there was a sort of minuet of death danced by the two of them, during which he delicately maneuvered her into just the right position. When he had completed writing out the check he stood up with it and returned toward the window, as if to have the fresh air hasten its drying. Then he shifted until he was precisely to one side of the position he wanted her to take, but off the rug. Then he drew her on from where she had remained by seeming to offer her the check. Passively extending it toward her, but without moving his own feet, so that she had to come forward for it. It's the same principle they use in bull-fighting. The bull follows the cape away from the fighter's body. She followed the check up to one side of his body. When she had fallen into the exact spot he wanted her to, he relaxed his fingers and let the check pass to her.

"Her attention was taken up in scanning it for a moment or two, she stood motionless. He quickly moved away from her, strode the whole length of the room, as if taking an abrupt departure then and there. Then when he'd reached the far end of it, and was on the step clear of it, he turned to look back at her and called 'Goodbye!' That brought her head up from the check, that caused her to turn toward him—and at the same time present her full back to the window. She was now in the exact position it was necessary for her to be. For if she'd gone out frontwards or sideways she might have been able to cling to the window-frame and arrest herself. Backwards it was an impossibility, the human arm-socket doesn't work that way.

"He dipped down, flung up the rug at full arm's length overhead, let it drop again; that was all he had to do. She

went out like a puff of wind. She didn't even have time to scream, he says. He must have caught her on the out-breath. She was already gone by the time her flown-off shoe ticked back again to the floor."

Carol crinkled up the corners of her eyes. "Those things are worse than the ones with knife or gun, there's so much more treachery involved in them!"

"Yes, but much harder to prove to a jury. He didn't lay a hand on her, he killed her from twenty or twenty-two feet away. The clue was still in the rug itself, of course. I saw it the minute I got in there. The ripples were at his end. Where she had stood it was smooth, only just shifted further back along the floor. If it had been an honest skid or misstep, it would have been the other way around. The pleats would have been at her end, where her feet kicked the rug back on itself. His end would have been flat and undisturbed, the agitation couldn't possibly have transferred itself that far over.

"THERE was a cigarette left burning there, as if by her. That was to make it seem that the fall had occurred just previous to our arrival, whereas he had telephoned me some fifteen minutes before. Or if I wanted to disregard that, he had been continuously in my company for fully eight to ten minutes before, counting from the time I met him in front of the fire-station.

"It didn't fool me for a moment, but the mechanics of how he'd done it gave me three full days' work before I could figure it out satisfactorily. The ashstand had an orifice in its center through which ashes were meant to drop, all the way down through the long stem into the hollow base which was meant for that purpose. There was supposed to be a trap, but he jammed that so it would stay open. He simply took three ordinary-size cigarettes, removed a little tobacco from the mouth end of the two foremost ones, and telescoped them together to form one triple the usual length but retaining the trademark of a small-size cigarette at the far end, in case there should be enough left to investigate. Then he lit it, left it spearing the top of the stand in a long inclined-



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plane, one end down into the open stem and resting against it. A cigarette left burning like that in a slanted position, and over an opening, will seldom go out, even when it's not fanned by the breath as in smoking. The slow ember simply worked its way back from cigarette to cigarette without a break. As the first two were consumed, they dropped off down the stem without leaving a trace. The third, which was resting wholly on the tilted perimeter of the smoke-stand, remained in place to the end, forming just what he wanted it to, a perfect one-cigarette butt by the time we got there.

"This alibi, however, handicapped him in another way. It would have been better if he'd skipped it. It limited how far away he could go on the fool's errand she was supposed to have sent him; he had to be sure of getting back soon enough for it to be of any use to him. He had to pick some place in the immediate vicinity, and he had to pick some place that would at sight be identifiable as a complete hoax, so there would be no excuse for the two of us to linger around investigating or asking questions. Hence the firehouse gag. One look was enough, and we beat it back again to her place.

"In other words, by tying himself down with that cigarette-alibi, he weakened the plausibility of his story in another respect. Why would she do a thing like that, send him just a stone's throw away and to a glaringly fake address? She would have either given him the real address, refused to give him any address at all, or—if she intended fleecing him out of the check—given him a fake address and name that would have taken him all the rest of the night and the better part of the next day to run down, thus giving herself a comfortable head-start. Well, he preferred to cauterize the murder-angle a little even at the expense of shooting the credibility of her behavior to hell. After all, there was the precedent of the blind man by this time, and I guess he was afraid to have the pitcher go to the well once too often.

"Apart from that one bad flaw, he did a fairly competent job. Let the elevator-boy overhear him talking to an empty room, even gave the door a delayed-action swing behind him so that she seemed to be closing it after he'd already left it.

"I suppose I could have pinned him down with it." Then he concluded: "But that still wouldn't have meant getting him for the killing of your wife, necessarily. So I played dumb again. It was just a matter of getting him to repeat himself—but on someone that we sicked onto him, and held the strings to, instead of on someone that he'd picked for himself, without our full knowledge."

"Was that your idea, to use Carol like that?" Henderson queried. "It's a good thing I didn't know about it ahead of time. If I had, you wouldn't have gotten me to—"

"That was her idea, not mine. I'd arranged to hire some outside girl to play the part of decoy. She muscled in on it. She came storming in to where we were posted, watching him in the magazine-shop, that last night, just before the deadline, and told me flatly she was going to be the one to go in there and tackle him, or else! She said she was going ahead whether she had my okay or whether she didn't. Hell, I couldn't stop her, and I couldn't afford to have two of them walking in there one behind the other, so I had to let her have her way. We called in a make-up expert from one of the theatres and had him give her a good going-over, and we sent her on in."

"Imagine," she said rebelliously to the room at large, "I should sit back on my hands, and take a chance on some two-dollar extra gumming the whole thing up with her hamminess! There was no more time left by then to go wrong any more, we'd used it all up."

"She never did show up, did she?" Henderson mused. "I mean the real one. Strangest thing. Whoever she is, wherever she is, she sure played out her little game of hide-and-seek to the end."

"She wasn't trying to, she wasn't even playing one," Burgess said. "That's what's stranger about it still."

Henderson and the girl both jolted slightly, leaned forward alertly. "How do you know? You mean you finally got wind of her? You've found out who she is?"

"Yes, I got wind of her," Burgess said simply. "Quite some time ago. I've known it for weeks, months now—who she was."

"Was?" breathed Henderson. "Is she



dead?"

"Not in the way you mean. But she's as good as, for all practical purposes. Her body's still alive. She's in an asylum for the hopelessly insane."

He reached slowly into his pocket, began to sift through envelopes and papers, while the two of them stared, transfixed.

"I've been up there myself, not once but several times. I've talked to her. You can hardly tell it in her manner. Just a little vague, dreamy. But she can't remember yesterday, the past is blurred, all fogged-out. She would have been no good to us, no good at all; she couldn't have testified. That's why I had to keep it to myself, play the thing out the way we did. It was our only chance, to get him to convict himself out of his own mouth, by substituting someone for her."

"How long—?"

"She was committed within three weeks after that night with you. It had been intermittent up to then, then the curtain dropped for good."

"How did you—?"

"In a roundabout way, that doesn't really matter now any more. The hat showed up by itself, in one of these bundle-shops. You know, thrift shops where they sell things for a few cents. One of my men spotted it. We traced it back link by link, just as he did later, working in the opposite direction. Some old hag had picked it up out of an ashcan, peddled it to the thrift-shop. We canvassed all the houses in the vicinity, after she'd pointed out the general site of the ashcan to us. It took weeks. Finally we found a maid who had thrown it out. Her employer had been committed to an asylum not long before. I questioned her husband, the members of her family. Nobody knew of the exact incident with you but herself, but they told me enough to show it was she, all right. She'd been behaving erratically like that for some time past, staying out alone all night, going to hotels by herself. Once they found her sitting on a park bench

at daybreak.

"I got this from them."

He handed Henderson a snapshot. A snapshot of a woman.

Henderson looked at it long and hard. He nodded finally, but more to himself than to them. "Yes," he said softly, "yes—I guess so."

Carol took it away from him suddenly. "Don't look at her any more. She's done enough to you for one lifetime. Stay as you are, keep her unremembered. Here, here's your snapshot back."

"It helped, of course," Burgess said, putting it away again, "when we were getting Carol ready that night, to go in and pinch-hit for her. The make-up man was able to give her a superficial resemblance to this person. Enough to fool him, anyway. He'd only seen her at a distance and in uncertain light that night."

"What was her name?" Henderson asked.

Carol made a quick pass with her hand. "No, don't tell him. I don't want her with us. We're starting out new—no ghosts."

"She's right," Burgess said. "It's over. Bury it."

Even so, they fell silent for a few moments, the three of them, thinking about her, as they would probably continue to think about her, every so often, for the rest of their lives. It was one of those things that stay with you.

At the door when they were leaving, Carol's arm linked to his, Henderson turned back to Burgess for a minute, his forehead querulously creased. "But there should be some lesson in the whole thing, some *reason*. You mean she and I went through all we did—for nothing? There must be some moral in it somewhere."

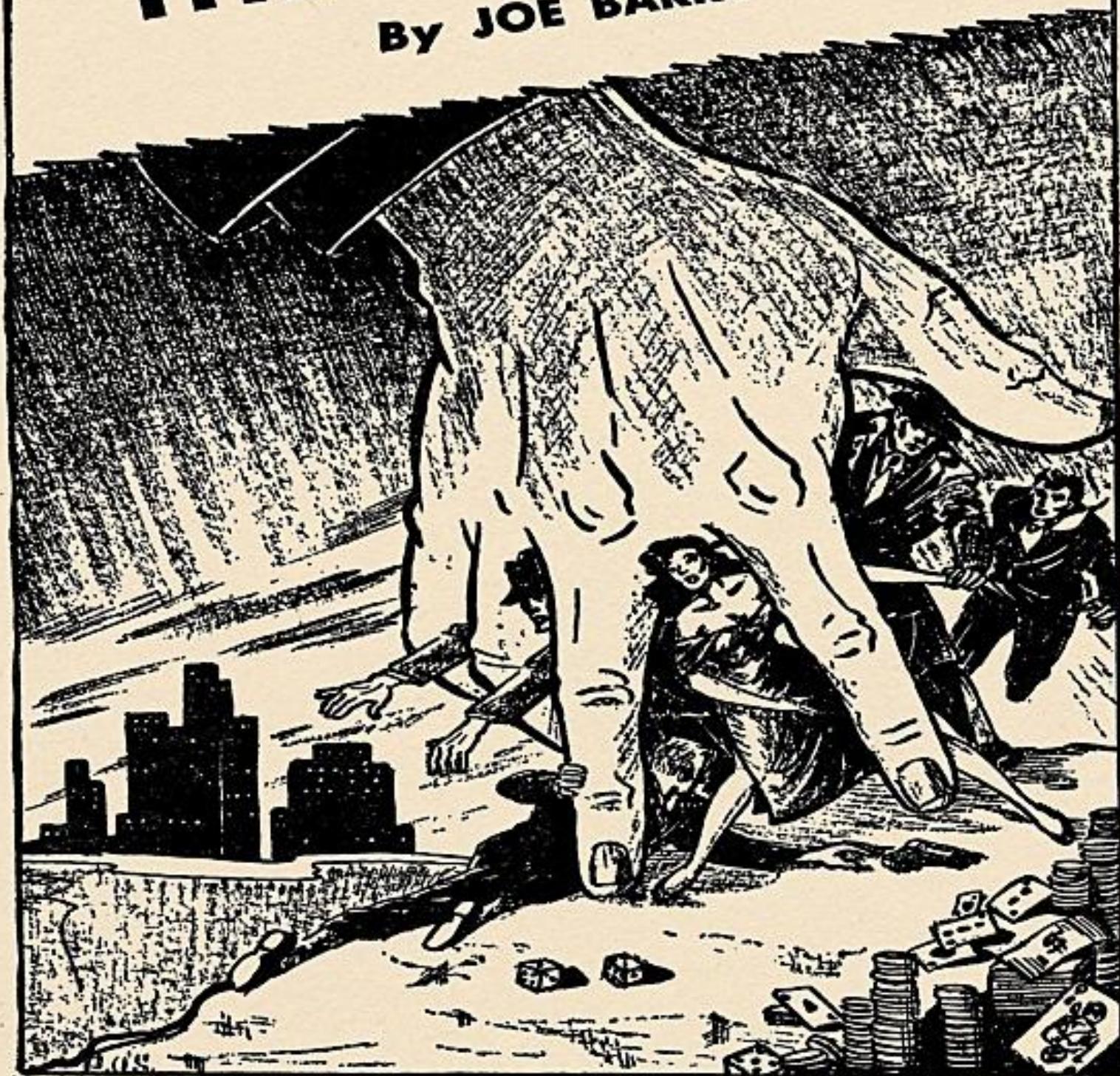
Burgess gave him an encouraging slap on the back to speed him on his way. "If you've got to have a moral, I give you this: Don't ever take strangers to the theatre unless you've got a good memory for faces."

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# THE CLEAN-UP

By JOE BARRY





# THE CLEAN-UP

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Even the voices of the courageous were hushed in fear as they pleaded for a clean-up of their festering town. When tough Rush Henry took on the job (he never avoided a challenge) he swaggered into graft-ridden, corrupt Forest City with his fingers crossed and his luck in his pocket, for the Grim Reaper was already firmly perched on his shoulder.

**R**USH CHECKED them off in his mind. Tom Macy was in Joliet. Meyer and Dorn were in a Federal clink somewhere. Gaust was dead and so was Vic Covici. Jago was in Joliet and Wilmer—where was Wilmer? He lifted his phone and dialed a number.

A voice answered, "Homicide."

"Carnahan," said Rush.

"Carnahan speaking."

"Rush Henry here. Sam, where is that Wilmer? Remember him? You juggled him on the Germaine thing. I know Jago, his boss, is still in Joliet. Merwin visited his uncle there last month and saw him. I'd like a line on Wilmer, though."

There was a silence on the line while Carnahan spoke to someone on an intercom system. Then his voice in the phone.

"He got ten to twenty. Still has at least six with good behaviour. He was in at last count."

"Thank, Sam," said Rush.

"Anything we can use?"

"No, I was just checking something." He hung up and looked off into the space beyond his window. That was the list so far as he knew. All present and 'best of all' accounted for. No one else, that he could name, wanted him on a spot badly enough to work at it. He looked back to his desk top and the slip of white paper. It had come in a plain white envelope. The typing was short and to the point.

If you wish to learn something to your advantage come to the corner of Fifty-fifth and Harwood at eight o'clock this evening. Further instructions will be given you at that time.

It was so obviously a trap that it couldn't possibly be one. Boredom took

the count in one round of sixty seconds. He called Gertrude, who helped run 'Rush Henry, Investigations.'

"Get me Merwin. I want him to do some shadowing."

After careful reconnaissance at Fifty-fifth and Harwood Rush stepped forward to meet fate in the guise of something to his advantage. He stood in plain view on the corner and waited. It was a short wait. A limousine of ancient vintage drew up beside him and a dry brittle voice spoke his name.

"Mr. Henry?"

"Yes," said Rush taking a step toward the car.

The door swung open before him.

"Please get in, Mr. Henry."

Rush crossed his fingers and stepped into the back seat. Not until then did he realize that all curtains were drawn. He hoped Merwin could flag a cab. The crusty voice spoke in the darkness.

"Does anyone else know you are here?"

Rush felt it safe to ignore Merwin.

"Not a soul," he said.

"Good," said the dry old voice.

Apparently that was all for now. The limousine moved smoothly through Outer Drive traffic and headed north. They passed the loop and continued on the northern Outer Drive. Through Evanston, Skokie and into Winnetka. There they left the boulevard and traveled east toward the Lake. At last the car turned in a driveway and came to rest under the portico of what seemed to be at least a mansion. A servant opened the door and stood back as Rush left the car. His companion stepped out behind him and in the light shed from the entrance Rush saw that his companion was spryer than his voice had indicated, for he was up the steps ahead of Rush, white



hair showing under the back brim of a black homburg. A white scarf edged the top of a black caracul top coat. Rush gathered that he was to follow. The older man led him down a hall and through a door into a pleasant study lined with books. Rush, having worn only a hat, had time to study the books while his host removed his outer garments. They were all law books.

His host turned to him.

"I imagine there are many questions you would like to ask me, Mr. Henry."

Rush felt that was obvious so he sat waiting.

"I'll try and anticipate your questions. First, my name is Leach; Aaron Leach. I am a lawyer associated with the firm of Leach, Carruthers and Leach, of whom you may have heard."

Rush had. They were old line counselors. Rush would have used the word barrister. Their line was trusts and estate managements, wills and probates, family advisors to the long wealthy.

"I assure you that only a deep sense of loyalty to an old friendship brought me into the affair at all. I may as well tell you that I am acting at the request of a schoolmate of mine, now in practice in another city. Through him I represent one of his clients. We were asked to investigate you thoroughly and in the event we found you satisfactory we were to retain your services."

His voice droned on.

It was time, Rush decided, to come to the point.

"Look, Mr. Leach," he said. "I won't try to convince you that my time is valuable. It isn't unless I'm working. But you're a lawyer with a large practice and yours must be. All you've done so far is convince yourself that you want me to do something for you. Let me suggest that you try convincing me that I should do it. And as a first step, let me in on what it is you want done."

Mr. Leach ran a bony hand through thinning gray hairs and brought it back to rub his chin.

"You must forgive me, Mr. Henry," he said. "I'm a little out of my usual orbit. The request I have to make of you is a little breathtaking, I'm afraid. It was no precedent in my experience and I find

it hard to believe that anyone could seriously ask that it be done."

He took a deep breath. "Briefly," he said, "My client wishes to retain your services to the end that you clean up a city."

"Any particular city?" asked Rush. "Or can I choose my own?"

Mr. Leach looked startled.

"Forget it," said Rush. "I was joking. What city does your client have in mind?"

"I'm not at liberty to tell you that until you accept the commission."

"Okay. Then tell me this. Why does your client feel that his town needs cleaning up?"

"Why, the usual reasons. Graft, gambling, racketeering."

"Let me make a point," said Rush. "I am a realist where the running of cities is concerned. I'd have to be convinced that the place really needed a bath. Many a conscientious citizen innocently imagines that a few crap games and a slot machine or two mean that the mayor or the chief of police or both are getting rich. That is seldom the case. Mostly those crap games and slot machines are running because the authorities know the people are going to gamble and they'd rather have it out in the open where they can check it rather than under cover and getting away with murder. I'm afraid I would have to refuse to be the leading edge of a blow struck by a reformer who had been scared by a pair of dice."

"You surprise me," said Mr. Leach when he had digested that. "I hadn't expected to find a political philosopher in the person of a private detective. In regard to your remarks, however," said Mr. Leach. "I have certain facts to pass on that should remove all doubt as to the advisability of cleaning up this city. I am reliably informed that there are in the neighborhood of a hundred permanently established places catering to gamblers and offering all types of games of chance. There are protective associations for every type of merchant, retail or wholesale, with standard rates for non-existent services. There are no figures on the profession called the oldest but its practitioners are numerous and available in all grades."

"Dope?" asked Rush.



"So I am told."

"Okay," Rush said. "It sounds like a nice operation. It should be a pleasure to kick it over. Who is offering how much to get the job done?"

"I can only tell you half of that," said the older man. "Your employer must remain anonymous. As a matter of actual fact I haven't the faintest idea as to his identity myself. As I told you I was brought into the affair by an attorney in the city in question."

"How much is he offering?" said Rush.

"Ten thousand dollars plus unlimited expenses."

Rush lit a cigarette and blew smoke at the ceiling.

"That's a lot of money. Those unlimited expenses are liable to run high. It seems like a fairly sizeable wad for a citizen to blow on public spirit. Are you sure there isn't a gimmick in it somewhere? Your unknown client must have an angle. I'd like to know what it is."

"I was told you'd ask that question."

"Were you given an answer?"

"I was. My client had a son just past twenty-one but holding a responsible job. Rather large sums of money were available to him. Other people's money, I should say. He managed to lose considerable amounts of it and, I am told, owed even more. He was found dead in circumstances that suggested suicide. The police called it that and there the matter rests. My client doubts it a little since he is very wealthy and could have refunded the money had it been brought to his attention."

"Does he want me to dig the truth about that?"

Leach shook his head.

"No. He feels that the general evil is responsible rather than any individual and he wants the whole thing pulled out by the roots."

"A large order," said Rush. "A very large order."

"You'll accept then?"

"Yes," he said, "I'll make a stab at it. Are you sure it's wise for me to have no way to get to Mr. X?"

"That's the way he wants it."

"It should be an easy thing for a detective to run him down through his son," said Rush.

Leach smiled faintly.

"I'm told that one of the few advantages of a setup such as exists in this city is that money can buy anything and Mr. X has a great deal of money. I'm under the impression that no one suspects that his son's death was anything but natural."

"So be it," said Rush. "Now, what's the name of the sinful city?"

"Forest City. Do you know it?"

Rush shook his head.

"No," he said. "I don't know it. I know where it is though and I rather suspect that I'll get to know it quite well."

Leach rose from his seat with obvious relief.

"I'm glad this is out of my hands now," he said. "It isn't at all the kind of thing I like to handle."

Rush grinned.

"I can imagine," he said. "There's one other thing. Am I to go it blind or will X give me some background information? I'd like to know who runs what and who works for who, also where do I get expense money? I expect to need a lot of it."

"A letter will be delivered to you in Forest City with a complete history of the setup there with names and spheres of influence. As to expenses, five thousand dollars will be deposited to any name you wish at the First National Bank of Forest City. When you are through you may call on me for your fee."

"Satisfactory," said Rush. "Eminently satisfactory. Just tell him to deposit it to the account of Rush Henry. I'm quite fond of my own name and it gives me one less thing to remember."

## II

"WHY all the mystery?" asked Pappy Daley.

"There you've got me. He got me to his house in such a way that I expected to meet emissaries of some foreign power. It was straight out of E. Phillips Oppenheim. So, as a matter of fact, was he."

Pappy looked at Rush through a blue haze of cigar smoke. He added up the chances of success for Rush. He'd known



him ten years—five of them as a member of his reportorial staff on the *Express*. He looked at the sum and decided that if he wanted a city cleaned up he'd call on Rush Henry. He said as much.

"Thank you, Pappy," said Rush. "Now, can you do me a little concrete good? I need to know something about Forest City. What can you get me?"

"It just happens that I can. Smoky grew up not ten miles from there in a place called Walker's Landing. It's on a river. I'll get him."

He lifted a phone and asked for Smoky. Somebody found him in a bar and fifteen minutes later he was in Pappy's office.

"Forest City?" He put a pair of well fatted fingers to his nose. "It stinks. I worked a summer there for Bill Prime on the *Chronicle*. They're organized there. Hell, they've got things so well organized that the public doesn't even know they're there. Sure they've got gambling and they know it. But they don't think it's really harmful, 'people will gamble, you know.' They know that some of the merchants pay off a little but it doesn't come out of their pockets so what the hell. Everything works nicely and there's no crime that anybody can find, so they keep on electing the same guys. It's a gravy train. The guys running the place are in it for the long haul so they aren't trying to get rich over night. It's a tight little setup that nobody can put a finger on."

Rush stood up.

"I've got to go. I'm catching a plane for this modern Gomorrah in an hour. Have Smoky loose when I call. You might send Joe for pix. If I can blow this one up it ought to be good."

AN HOUR later Rush leaned back in his plane seat and opened the envelope Gertrude had handed him during his quick trip to his office on the way to the airport. In a matter of seconds he was so engrossed in the data she had gathered that they were airborne before he realized it. The vital statistics on Forest City were interesting but not amazing. Two hundred thousand citizens called it home. It was basically an industrial city, manufacturing among other things a vacuum cleaner, a truck and

a popularly priced line of furniture. There were three golf courses, seven parks, four municipal swimming pools, and a zoo. The only newspaper was the *Chronicle*, publishing both morning and evening editions. Listed as Mayor was one Patrick Gunn. A Mark Carver was Police Commissioner with a Mr. Thomas Hacker as his Chief of Police.

That was all. Rush glanced briefly back through the notes then tore them into very small pieces and put them in the ashtray inset in the arm of his seat. He leaned back and closed his eyes. He was sound asleep when the wheels touched the runway at Forest City's municipal airport.

A cab took Rush to a hotel whose sign named it the Carter. A doorman helped him out of the cab and a bellhop carried his bag into the lobby. It was more than adequate, it was in fact a very nice hotel. He registered and the clerk handed the bellhop the key to 715. The hop performed the usual ritual of opening a window an inch, lighting the lights in the bathroom, and opening the door to the closet. Rush flipped him a quarter.

"Anything else?" he asked.

"What would you suggest?" asked Rush.

"That depends on what you want."

"Entertainment," said Rush, "I'll be here a week or ten days and I want something to kill time."

"Blonde, brunette or redhead?" asked the hop.

"Just like that, huh?"

The bellhop snapped his fingers.

"Just like that. We got a million of 'em."

"I'll make a note of it," said Rush. "I usually like to pick my own women though. How about an extra dollar I might hold. Can I make it grow?"

The bellhop looked at him oddly.

"You are new here, aren't you?"

Rush nodded.

"Well, man, you can risk a dollar in every joint in town. This is the gambling-est place you ever saw."

"Got any recommendations?"

"Sure. I'm an honest boy just trying to get along. It'll be worth a fast buck to me if you go to Carlo's and tell them I sent you."



"You'll get the buck," said Rush. "I'll make it tonight."

The bellhop left then and Rush unpacked his bag. He picked up the telephone directory and looked through the classified section. He counted two hundred and some bars, taverns, and night-clubs which made it about one per thousand population. Besides being a gambling town this must also be quite a city for entertainment.

The lobby clock gave the time as six o'clock as he crossed it to the street door and walked down the main street. He walked slowly, taking in the flavor of the town. Several times he stopped in a bar or cocktail lounge for a drink and each time found the inevitable Bingo table, nearly always punchboards on the bar and always at the back of the room were a bank of slot machines handling all denominations of silver coin up to a half dollar. He wasted forty dollars in one of the half dollar machines. It paid ten once, five twice, and two four times. He wondered if all the gambling in town was rigged to the same percentage. It didn't seem likely. They wouldn't get much play after very little of that.

Seven o'clock found him in front of a restaurant built on rather lavish lines with a cocktail bar and floor shows advertised at ten, twelve and two. The inner man rang a gong and he turned in the door. The cocktail bar, a tricky arrangement, down two steps from the level of the restaurant proper was too tempting to miss. Rush straddled a stool and ordered rye in an old fashioned. As it came a soft voice at his shoulder spoke to the bartender.

"Another of the same, Tommy."

Rush turned his head to find red hair flaming down a bare back turned full in his direction. Below the hair an evening gown of a brilliant green poured in the direction of the floor. A white arm rested its elbow on the bar. As he looked the elbow left the bar and the head came slowly around to look him full in the face. Eyes as green as the dress looked directly into his. There was a nose, faintly tilted which Rush missed as he looked into the eyes. There were also lips—full and red with a humorous twist in the corners. The eyes slanted a little and

the mouth said:

"Hello."

Rush took a deep breath and grinned.

"That," he said, "is the neatest trick of the week."

The mouth smiled.

"I thought you'd like it."

"I do. I like it very much. I doubt, though, if very many women could get away with it. You've got a lot, but you need it all for that approach."

"I think you're pretty, too."

Her drink came then and she sipped it, looking over the rim at Rush. The amber in the glass doing strange and wonderful things to her eyes. Rush drained his glass and turned to the bartender.

"Two more of the same, Tommy," he said.

Rush lit a cigarette and puffed a cloud at the ceiling.

"Look," he said. "Let us say that I know the rules of the game. Let us also say that while my intentions may not be strictly honorable that I am easily handled. Now. How firmly are you tied to this joint?"

Her eyes stated all the question necessary.

"I mean, do you have to stay here all evening and if so when are you through, and can I meet you then?"

"Yes, four o'clock, and no."

Rush checked those off.

"You do have to stay here. You're through at four and I can't meet you then."

She nodded over the rim of her glass.

"Okay. Is that last 'no' a final one? There's always Thursday and Friday and all those other days."

She shook her head.

"Quit being mysterious and feminine. What does that mean?"

"It means that the no is not final and yes, there are other days. Everybody knows that."

"I'm glad you're one of them. Tell me something else. Are all the other business girls in town in your class?"

She smiled and it lit a very pleasant light in the green eyes. Then she shook her head. No.

It appeared that the rules didn't bar eating dinner with a customer. In fact they encouraged it. So Rush bought a pair



of steaks. Over coffee he looked across at the girl, whose name was Gay Wimberly.

"Look," he said. "I have quite a few things I have to do this evening so you lose me from here on out."

"I wonder if I'll live," she said.

"You will," said Rush, "because I will be back. You'll find yourself stumbling over me. Plan on it."

He left then and walked along the main street till he found a cruising cab. He hailed it and asked to be taken to Carlo's.

"The M Club is better, buddy," said the cabbie.

"That's nice," said Rush and settled back in his seat.

"Still want to go to Carlo's?"

"Yes," said Rush.

The cab started with a jerk and whirled around a corner. It was only a ten minute ride just past one end of the business district to Carlo's. He paid his driver and walked through the door into a Hollywood set. A man in a Tuxedo met him in the lobby and inquired if he had a reservation.

"I'm not eating," said Rush. "I'm gambling. A hop in the Carter sent me."

It seemed to be standard procedure.

"Of course. You'll find the game rooms at the end of this corridor." He pointed to a wide door on his right.

Rush walked down the short hall and into another cinema set. He had cast lots of odd dollars in casinos from Reno to Florida but this had them beat. Everything was mahogany, or chromium, or leather. It all gleamed richly. A small service bar was placed against one wall and Rush instinctively headed for it. He wanted a moment for orientation. Over his glass of rye he counted four roulette wheels, all doing a good business, four crap tables, half a dozen blackjack dealers with a sprinkling of chuckaluck cages. There were slot machines and even these were in the Hollywood tradition, gleaming like a roadhouse jukebox.

His drink done Rush decided to risk a dollar on the dice. He bought chips at a cashier's cage and elbowed his way into the rim of a table. He watched the roll for a moment or two then tossed five dollars on the come strip. The dice gave

him five for a point. Across the table he saw a brief movement and noted a man leaving the table quite hurriedly. Something familiar in the set of the retreating shoulders made him back away for a moment and follow the man with his eyes. He got a sight of the profile for an instant and his memory clicked. It was Sam Percy of the Chicago Percys. Sam dealt in various powdered products whose sale was considered highly illegal by the federal law. Rush grinned at his speedy departure and turned back to the table. It had been some time since one glimpse of his face had sent anyone hightailing it in exactly that way. Well, the horn was blown now. Somebody would know he was in town inside of ten minutes. He looked down at the table. A stack of bills was resting where his five had been. He looked at the dealer.

"Pull down, buddy," said the dealer. "Limit's a hundred on this table."

"What happened?" asked Rush.

"He made your five and four elevens in a row."

Rush took sixty dollars of his pile, leaving a hundred to bet. The dice came out on nine. The line point appeared to be six and the thrower couldn't come close. He rolled a five, an eight, a ten and a four. The sidebet money on the come strip piled high. Watching the stickman rake in the dice, pick them up and toss them to the shooter, Rush caught a flicker of movement that didn't belong. He didn't watch the shooter, he watched the dealer for an instant, and as the dice rolled he saw him put a pair of dice in the box in front of him. Then a groan told Rush what the roll had been. A seven. He got it then. He pushed back out of the crowd and strolled to the bar.

It had been the simplest of riggings, yet one of the most effective. If the stickman is expert enough it will make a lot of money for the house. With a pair of honest dice the thrower builds up a lot of money on the line and on the come strip in sidebets. If he keeps shooting without a seven he's going to make a side point for several betters and eventually his front line point. When there is enough money bet to make it worthwhile the stick man drops in a pair of ringers loaded or shaved to roll seven. That wins



all bets for the house. Another neat trick, thought Rush. He ordered a double rye.

As he got it halfway to his lips he heard voices raised at the nearest roulette table. He drained his drink and moved closer to catch the argument. A red faced man was insisting to the croupier that he had had a hundred dollar chip on eighteen. The ball had dropped into eighteen and his chip had turned up on fifteen, one square nearer the wheel. He insisted that the croupier's stick had moved it. Rush figured the odds that he was right were about twenty to one. He wondered what would be done about it. He found out immediately. From a door in one side of the room two men moved purposefully toward the table. Rush figured that they had gotten a signal from a foot button pushed by the croupier. They converged on the red faced man and ten seconds later had him out of another side door without his feet having touched the ground. Rush looked at the door as it closed and realized that it opened onto an alley. Swiftly, yet without seeming to hurry, he got his hat and left the building. He turned away from the alley and walked to the opposite corner of the building. A narrow passageway ran toward the rear. He looked around and seeing no one in sight, ducked into the passageway, running noiselessly to the back of the building. At the back corner, he paused and listened. He could hear heavy breathing broken by dull thuds. He poked a cautious head around the corner and in the dim light he could see the two men administering a solid beating to the man with the red face. As he looked a fist lashed out catching the man on the point of the chin. He crumpled to a limp heap on the ground. A gruff voice spoke in the gloom.

"Pour some whiskey on him, Charley, while I get a car."

Rush left then. There was nothing he could do for the red faced man. He'd turn up in police court tomorrow morning and pay a fine for drunkenness. Nobody'd ever believe his story, least of all a judge who didn't want to.

Rush caught a cab to the Carter. It had been a long day and bed was very inviting. So inviting in fact that he had his coat half off as he walked through

the door into his hotel room. He stopped in mid-motion and slowly shrugged his coat back on. Then he went slowly to his bed and sat on one edge.

"I hope you don't mind if I look over your shoulder," he said to the man who was calmly searching his suitcase.

### III

"NOT at all," said the man and continued his methodical search.

Rush watched him with interest. He finished the suitcase and continued to a briefcase on the dresser. He finished off with a quick once over of the drawers of the dresser and the clothes that Rush had hung in the closets. When he was through he walked to the door and turned with his hand on the knob.

"Thanks," he said and turned the knob.

"Just a moment, old boy," said Rush. "You're not going off without some kind of explanation, are you? I don't think I could stand the strain of the curiosity."

"Yes," said the man.

"There are such things as police," said Rush. "I'd love to have them in. They're always interesting."

"Aren't they?"

"Very. Would you mind talking things over with them?" Rush reached a hand for the bedside phone.

"That won't be necessary," said the man pointing a finger at the phone. "You've got all the law you need here in the room." He reached in a vest pocket and drew out a shield which he showed to Rush.

"This is very interesting," said Rush. "Is it a courtesy you extend to every visitor to Forest City?"

"Only to private dicks. We don't like them and when they show here we like to know what they are doing."

"Do you know now?"

"No, but we will."

"Would it help if I told you?"

The man turned back into the room.

"I'll listen," he said. "I'll check everything, but I'll listen first. What are you doing here?"

"This will amaze you," said Rush. "Before I got to be a private detective I was a reporter. I'm here on an assignment. I'm doing a series of articles for a Chicago Newspaper on Forest City."



"A reporter? That's worse. We hate reporters."

"I'm quite harmless as a reporter," said Rush.

"What paper?"

"Express. I used to work for them."

"Why articles on Forest City?"

"I never thought to ask." Rush looked at his hands. "Is there anything special I should look for?"

The man looked at him carefully for a minute.

"No," he said. "But there are some things you should not look for. And if you start looking for them, you'll find yourself in some important trouble. We don't like snoopers."

"You made that very clear. I'll try hard not to snoop."

The man walked to the door.

"Whom do I have to thank for this visit?" asked Rush.

"I'm Detective Lieutenant Marks," the man said and opened the door.

"You're not leaving?" said Rush. "I have a lot of questions I'd like to ask."

"No," said the man and disappeared through the door. His head reappeared an instant later. "If this article gag is a phony, let me tell you one other thing. We don't have a private eye in the city. We don't issue them licenses, and your Chicago license is no good here. So no investigations. Here you're just another guy named Joe, and we don't like you." This time he was gone for good.

Rush spent no time mourning his unpopularity. He went to bed.

Rush's passage across the lobby the next morning was interrupted by the desk clerk who handed him a thick envelope. He carried it to his room and opened it. It was his promised background information on the organization of Forest City. The covering note was typewritten and unsigned.

In anticipation of your wish and possible attempt to learn my identity I want to make it entirely clear that you will not be able to obtain that knowledge. Beyond that, I ask that you complete your task as quickly as possible and leave the city. Your fee will be waiting for you in Chicago. The expense money you requested is now on deposit at the First National Bank.

The report was as concise:

"First, there are three main divisions ruled by three different men. Max Carney has liquor and rackets, Beau Marr has women and Card Sully has dope. All have gambling. A list of properties owned by each of these men is appended. They are in complete cooperation with each other and are associated in business ventures outside the realm of vice. Each is in a different phase of construction work and no contract is let in Forest City without their being given first call. Together they own Mayor Gunn, Commissioner Carver and Chief Hacker body and soul. Through them they operate the city as a private concern. While they do not personally operate every gambling and drinking establishment in the city they oversee them and take a percentage from each operation. All slot machines are the property of Carney. Each has a retinue of followers reminiscent of the gangs in Chicago except that it has not been necessary in many years for a gun to be carried or used. Appended is a list of these men together with the man for whom they work. No figures are available on income but it can be assumed that it is large. There is little friction for the reason that each of the men named above is prospering sufficiently and can look forward to long and continuous success under present circumstances. Money is available in quantities more than sufficient to grease any difficulties."

There was a little more covering interlocking of influences and methods of collection in the matter of percentages and protections. Appended, as promised, were the lists mentioned. Rush folded them and put them under a corner of the rug. The body of the note he read again and then burned, flushing the ashes down the drain in the bathroom bowl.

He went to the window and stared down at the street for a long minute. On the face of it there was no crack, no crevice to insert a chisel and start wrecking. On the face of it, then, he'd have to make his own crack and that looked like dynamite. It took him all of a half hour to decide what kind of dynamite. At the end of the half hour he picked up the phone and placed a call for Pappy Daley at the Express office in Chicago.







It was through in a pair of minutes.

"Rush talking, Pappy. I need some help."

"Want Smoky to come down?"

"Not yet. I want you to send me some things. Got a pencil?"

"Just a minute. Say. A guy's been in looking for you. Says he wants a job. Just got out of the army."

"What's his name?"

"Twist, Robin Twist."

"The hell. Where is he?"

"At a hotel right-now. Who is he?"

"You should remember him, Pappy. He was in G-2 with me. We worked together most of the time."

"You got a job for him?"

"Any time he wants it. Call him up and tell him he's on the payroll as of right now. Give him some money and ship him down here. I can use him."

"Can do. Any instructions?"

"No. Just tell him to find me without too much fuss. I'm in 715 at the Carter. He'll know how to go about it. Now, have you got the pencil."

"Shoot."

Rush dictated a list of things to Pappy and said good-bye. With the phone in its cradle he looked off into space. Of all the men in the world he could think of no other one he would rather have at his side in the next ten days than Robin Twist. Small, cocky, tough, loyal, and with all the know-how that only Uncle Sam's Military Intelligence can give. He could use the mighty mite, but good.

THE SUN was bright over Forest City's streets as Rush walked through cool morning air to the First National Bank. Without any fuss he withdrew one thousand dollars from his new account.

He then headed for the offices of the Forest City *Chronicle*. There he asked for Bill Prime. Rush was shown into a corner office. A man with a shock of white hair over a ruddy, rugged face was working behind a desk. He looked up as Rush entered.

"Mr. Henry?" said Prime.

"Yes," said Rush.

"What can I do for you?"

"Quite a little, I hope," said Rush.

"I'm doing a series of articles on in-

dustrial cities of the size of Forest City. Trying to show what they're doing in the way of reconversion with a picture of sorts of how the changeover period hits the general public, the merchants, and the factory workers themselves."

"Free lance or assignment?" asked Prime.

"I'm doing them for the Chicago *Express*," said Rush. "I used to work for Pappy Daley and when this came up I was at a loose end and he sent me."

"I asked because if the articles were in our line, I'd like a chance at them. An outsider's views might be news for the *Chronicle*."

"I suspect that Daley would be willing to release them after he's used them," said Rush. "I'll ask him."

"Okay, now what can I do for you?"

"Well, I'd like to borrow a man now and then to steer me a little. I'll figure my own slant but I'll miss a lot of angles if I just push around alone. I'd like a little help from the political angle. That is about city government and its relation to industry and merchants themselves."

Prime spent a deliberate minute lighting a cigar.

"We have a rather unusual political set up in Forest City. It might be wise to leave it alone. Or at least cover it from a distance."

Rush raised a polite eyebrow.

Prime looked at the end of his cigar, then, satisfied with his light, he looked back at Rush.

"Your name is familiar. Haven't I heard of you somewhere before?"

"Possibly," said Rush noncommittally.

"You know, of course, that I can get a rewrite on your history in something less than an hour from our Chicago correspondent."

Rush looked up to find Prime grinning at him. He grinned back.

"Yes," he said, "I know that. As a matter of fact I would rather have let that slide so that my history wouldn't influence you either way in giving me the help I want." He leaned back in his chair and looked at the ceiling for a moment. "Your Chicago correspondent would tell you that I haven't worked for the *Express* for better than five years. Outside of the time I spent in the army,



he'd tell you that I have been a private detective with my own agency in Chicago. I am, however, a reporter too. My guild card is still up to date and I can go to work in Chicago tomorrow if I want to.

Prime smiled a little.

"I remember now. There was something about some emeralds. Old Germaine's kids got in trouble over them some way and you cleaned it up. I cubbed in Chicago a long time ago, and I've still got some good contacts there. So now you're writing articles on industrial cities." His smile was now one of polite disbelief.

"Yes," said Rush ignoring the smile.

"You wouldn't have a side angle on local politics? You mentioned that."

"That's always pertinent," said Rush.

"You'll never find it as pertinent as it is here. I wonder if you know what you're getting into."

"Maybe you could tell me," said Rush.

"I could, indeed. But I won't. You look as though you could take care of yourself but let me make a point. I've run a newspaper in this town for over twenty years. I know it as well as any man can under those circumstances. It's a stinking hellhole of a city. You remember Chicago in the twenties. That's Forest City in the forties, in the thirties, too. The boys here are smarter. They make it look good. Nobody can put their finger on a thing so the voters keep sending the same people back every year. It's damn near a dictatorship. It's a vicious, violent, sinful city and if I were raising a family I'd move. I'm a bachelor and I'm old enough to sit around and see what happens. Something will sometime and I want to be there. It'll be great news. In the meantime I'm just sitting here watching, keeping my nose clean, and keeping quiet. I don't want a bomb in my plant or an 'accident' in my car. I want to be around for the pay-off. Now, if these articles of yours just happen to be aimed at an expose of Forest City, that's fine. I'll sit back and watch. Anything I can do without being caught I'll do, but you're on your own." He grinned at Rush.

"Of course, if it looks like you were getting anywhere I might help a little more. I've got an intense feeling of civic pride but it's not half as intense as my

love of my own hide. I'm too old not to have odds when I start to fight."

"That's very interesting, Mr. Prime. Sidelights like that are what make an article interesting. However, expose is a pretty big term. If anything turns up I'll put it in the articles."

"You're not putting out a thing, are you?"

"No," said Rush. "Not a thing."

"Okay, I've got just the man to help you. He knows this town inside out."

He lifted a phone and spoke briefly.

"Ask Matt Pedrick if he'll come in," he said. He cradled the phone and looked back at Rush. "Matt's one of our columnists. He hasn't a regular beat, he just covers what he likes, gossip mostly. Actually he's working for laughs. I pay him a lot of dough but he doesn't need it. He came in here five or six years ago and offered to do a column for free. I paid him a little something to have some kind of control over him. It was good. It sold a lot of papers so I've paid him more for it through the years. He's dug up contacts and sources that nobody else in town can touch. He's a nice guy, too. You'll like him. I have an idea you talk the same language."

The office door opened and a man stepped out of the pages of *Esquire* and into the room. So there is someone on whom those clothes look good, thought Rush. His eyes made its habitual photograph of the man. Five ten to eleven, medium brown hair, gray eyes, smooth skin stretched nicely over cheekbones that just missed being high. One eyebrow grew into what might be a permanent lift. The shoulders were not broad but there was enough narrowness at the hips to give an impression of strength and physical condition. A deep tan completed an impression of health. The man walked over and stood beside the desk.

"Matt, this is Rush Henry. Henry, Matt Pedrick," said Prime.

They shook hands and Pedrick's grip was solid.

"Henry's doing a series of articles on Forest City for the Chicago *Express*, Matt. He wants some background—social and political and I told him you were the man for the job."

Pedrick's eyebrow lifted higher at the



word 'political.' He repeated it. "Political?"

Prime nodded.

"Yes. Naive, isn't he? About Forest City, that is."

"That's quite an assignment, Bill," said Matt Pedrick. "Who's going to write my column for the next week or so while I tell him?"

Rush got into the conversation.

"I'm afraid you're over-estimating what I want. I mainly want someone to come to with questions I can't get answered anywhere else. There are a lot of things I want to know that I could probably dig out alone, but someone on the ground floor could tell me in a matter of minutes what it might take me days to get by myself."

Pedrick grinned at him.

"I was kidding, Henry. I'll do anything I can for you." Prime shuffled some papers on his desk. "Come on down to my office. Bill has to make like he's working. We can talk there."

He led the way down a hall lined with glazed glass doors to a corner office. He opened the door and motioned Rush ahead of him. Rush took two steps into the room and stopped. Pedrick came to stand at his shoulder. Rush looked for a pair of minutes, his eyes wandering over the room. If Pedrick's clothes were Hollywood, his office was strictly Cecil B. DeMille. He looked around for an onyx bathtub. He let his head turn slowly till his eyes met Pedrick's. They were narrowed in a pleased smile.

"Gaudy, isn't it?" he said.

Footsteps tapped lightly down the hall behind them and a girl walked past them and sat at the second desk in the room. She completed the picture. Pure MGM.

"Kit, this is Rush Henry," said Pedrick. "My girl Friday, Henry. Kit English."

Rush took a deep breath.

"Things have changed," he said in a dazed voice. "The newspaper business was never like this when I was a leg man."

"Now, let's get to your problems," said Pedrick, after mixing drinks for the three of them. "You want to know about Forest City. Bill said something about politics. In the normal sense of the word, there is no such thing as politics in Forest City. That is, we have no political par-

ties. Oh, there's usually a reform ticket in elections. I believe there is one with a slate for the elections due in the next week or so. But they never have a chance. The incumbents never lose. They've been in so long they've grown roots. They'll be there for another twenty years, or until they die. Then they'll have someone just like them to move in and graft on to the same roots. It's perpetual motion. They just sit, collect and get re-elected."

"You wouldn't want to put a name to several of those 'theys'," said Rush.

"Which ones?" asked Pedrick.

"These incumbents you mentioned and the 'they' you suggest are behind them. They interest me."

"I can do better than name them. I can introduce them to you. I'm having a kind of party at my apartment tonight and quite a few of them will be there. How about you, can you come?"

"I certainly can," said Rush, "and thanks a lot."

"Think nothing of it." He looked at Kit. "Maybe we can fix him up with a lady. Nothing's too good for a visiting newspaperman."

Kit looked thoughtfully at Rush.

"I don't think I'd have any trouble," she said. "Let me make a few calls."

Rush remembered the girl named Gay Wimberly.

"Don't bother," he said. "That is, if it's all right if I bring my own guest."

Pedrick looked at him in surprise.

"When did you get in town?" he asked.

"Yesterday afternoon," Rush said. "Why?"

"That's fast work, son."

Kit looked at him and Rush could see her appraisal undergoing a slight revision.

#### IV

RUSH learned via Mr. Bell's admirable invention that Miss Wimberly would be both charmed and available, but not until some time after ten o'clock. The Blue Goose, that being the name of the establishment that required her presence, could dispense with her after that time. Rush promised to call for her and spent the rest of the day nosing around, getting the feel of Forest City. He placed



bets on horses at a pair of places with no success. In passing he noted that the horse parlors did a hell of a business.

Rush kept track of the odds paid on half a dozen races, making a note on the back of a scratch sheet. There was something wrong somewhere. He also noted odds quoted on all the horses in several races. It didn't figure. The bookies were running something close to a hundred and twenty-five percent book. Seldom did a horse draw as much as 20-1 odds and often two horses in a race were at even money. The odds were shaved all down the line to a point where the house was a lead-pipe cinch in every race. It could only happen in a closed corporation. There had to be cooperation between all bookmakers or competition would give the bettors a better break. If everybody stuck together they could put odds where they wanted them and to hell with the betting public. They only had to be careful to give long enough odds on an outsider or two to tempt long money bettors. The odds on the favorites were short enough to cover almost any combination of winners.

Rush stopped in his room for a drink before dinner and placed a call to the *Express* in Chicago. He asked for the sports editor.

"Tommy, this is Rush Henry," he said when his call came through.

"What's on your mind, Speedy?" asked the editor.

"I want some track odds on some races run this afternoon. Give me the mutual payoff on them." He named a half dozen races. Tommy had them for him in a matter of seconds.

"Thanks, Tommy. Buy yourself a drink and I'll pay for it when I get back."

He hung up and compared figures. He had been right. In almost every case the mutual odds paid were higher by as much as eight dollars than those paid in Forest City. It was a nice racket. A new one, too. It was the same as shooting craps with loaded dice, or playing poker with marked cards. The only weakness was that you had to have a spot like Forest City to work it.

He showered, shaved, changed clothes and ate in the hotel coffee shop. At eight-thirty he caught a cab to the address

Pedrick had given him. Kit English met him at the door. She wore a hostess gown of black velvet that made her blonde hair gleam like the flame on a candle. She seemed very much at home, almost as though she lived here. Rush figured the odds that she did in practice if not in fact were about twenty to one, even by Forest City standards.

"Come in, Mr. Henry," she said.

Pedrick came up to stand with his arm around her shoulders.

"Where's your young lady, Henry?" he asked. "I hope you're not going to spoil the picture I had built up of you. A Casanova from Chicago."

"I can spoil that picture in about thirty seconds," said Rush. "Women think of me as a brother. But I do have a girl. She's busy till ten. I'll pick her up then."

"Take my car," said Pedrick. He tossed a leather folder of keys to Rush. "It's the Buick convertible at the curb."

"Thanks a lot," said Rush. "I'll be very impressive in a Buick convertible."

"Yes," said Kit English, "maybe she'll think of you as only a half brother."

"Put your tongue back in its sheath, dear," said Pedrick. "Come on, Henry, meet some of my guests."

In the next fifteen minutes Rush met people at the rate of a new name every thirty seconds. Only three of them were familiar. Mayor Patrick Gunn, Police Commissioner Mark Carver, and Max Carney. Rush searched his mental files on Carney. He came up with the two words, Liquor and Rackets.

This rather mild looking Irishman might have just walked off a construction job.

His voice had the hoarseness associated with bellowing orders over the noise of riveting machines.

"Articles, eh?" he said. "That's good. Forest City is a nice little place. Clean. We're proud of her. Give us a good story, young man. Let those people in Chicago know that we're up and coming."

Mark Carver had been standing in another conversational circle, but the word 'articles' caught his ear. He did an about face and was part of the group around Carney. He looked at Rush.

"You're writing an article about Forest



City, young man?" He asked. Rush nodded.

"I understood you were working for a Chicago paper. What would they be interested in here?"

Rush patiently explained that it wasn't Forest City alone. That he was doing a series on towns similar to Forest City. By now he had told the story so many times that he had to stop and think to realize that it wasn't true.

"Pat should be interested in this," said Carver. "Pat!" he called across the room. The mayor, a stock character if Rush had ever seen one, came across the room, pausing only to pick up a fresh drink.

"What's on your mind, Mark?" he asked.

"Henry here is doing an article on Forest City for a Chicago paper. I think we ought to give him all the cooperation we possibly can."

"Sure," said His Honor. "I'll cooperate. I think it would be a good idea to send a man around with him. He's new in town and one of our boys could show him the ins and outs of the place and save him a lot of time."

And be sure I saw the right things, thought Rush. Aloud he said, "Mr. Pedrick has offered to help me out. I appreciate your offer, though."

Carver looked briefly at Carney and back to Rush. Rush wondered if he read the glance correctly. To him it said, let's watch this guy. Carver said:

"That's fine. You couldn't get a better guide than Matt. He knows the town inside out. He helps bury all the skeletons. If you come up against anything we can give you, feel free to ask." Pedrick came up and put a hand on Rush's shoulder.

"Ten o'clock, Henry," he said. "Don't keep your young lady waiting."

Rush thanked him for the reminder and made his excuses. He drew up in the No Parking zone in front of the Blue Goose and killed the engine.

Gay Wimberly met him almost at the door. She had a white wrap thrown loosely over bare shoulders. The green gown of the evening before had been replaced with a russet creation. There, to Rush's masculine eyes, the difference ended. It clung with the same faithfulness to each curve. It was held up, minus straps, by the same

miracle. It fell in the safe flowing lines to the floor. She walked across the entrance way to meet Rush with grace, yet with a freedom that spoke of long slender legs that had to be lovely. The rest of her was impossible otherwise.

Rush led her to the car, feeling very grand.

"Where is it we're going?" she asked.

"Matt Pedrick's apartment. He's partying for quite a mob."

"Yes, there would be a mob. I've been there before. I don't think he invites everybody but everybody hears about it one way or the other and they all come."

"Don't worry about us. We were invited."

"Does Kit English know you're bringing me?"

"She knows I'm bringing somebody. I don't think I mentioned who."

Gay's nose wrinkled in a sly smile.

"We'll have a lot of fun then. Kit loves me like a sister. A step sister named Cinderella."

"What does she have against you?"

"A date I had with Matt Pedrick once. He is special reserved property and well posted. No trespassing."

"You be very attentive to me," said Rush, "and it'll throw her off the track."

"You're tricky, aren't you?" said Gay. "Do you ever figure out a scheme where you lose?"

"Almost never," said Rush, maneuvering the convertible to the curb. He helped her out of the car and the elevator carried them to Pedrick's apartment. Again the door was opened by Kit English. For a moment, and for the first time, she was almost nonplussed, but only for a moment.

"YOU have excellent taste, dear," she said looking at a point directly between Rush and Gay. Rush couldn't for the life of him tell to whom she was talking. She turned to Rush. "Come in—we're just about to play a game."

She was wrong. Nobody played any games. The phone rang. Pedrick answered it and handed the receiver to Mark Carver. Carver answered briefly before hanging up.

He turned to Mayor Gunn.

"That was Hacker," he said. "We've got to leave right away and meet him."





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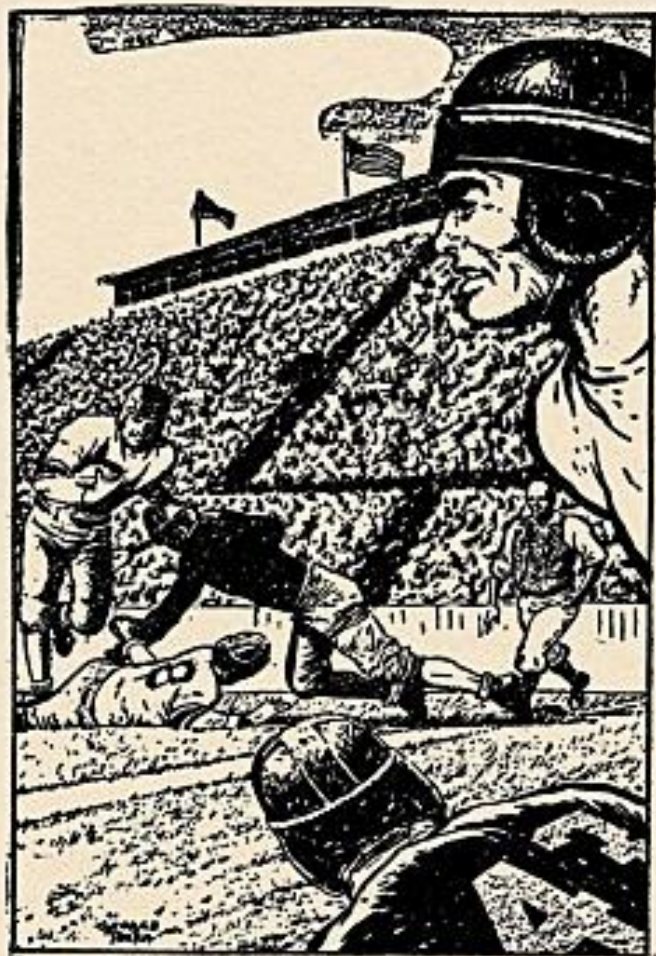
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"To hell with him," said Gunn. "I'm just beginning to have fun." Carver looked around.

"Somebody just killed Beau Marr. They shot him through a window at his home," he almost shouted.

Gunn's jaw dropped. Carney came across the room. "Who did it?"

"They don't know," said Carver.

Carney bit off an upper case oath and made a motion with his mouth as though he wanted to spit on the floor.

"Women," he said. "I knew those damn women would get him in trouble some time." He turned to Gunn and Carver. "Well, what're we waiting for? Let's go."

They left in what was almost a rout, walking on each other's heels in their hurry. Rush steered Gay to the bar where Pedrick was standing.

"What was that?" asked Rush.

"Hello, Gay," said Pedrick. "How did this Rush-street Romeo hook you?"

"It was easy. I dropped my handkerchief. He never had a chance."

"That," said Pedrick, turning back to Rush, "was a bombshell such as you never saw lit under two more surprised men. I'll make it three. Tom Hacker, our worthy Chief of Police, is probably giving birth to his third set of broken dishes by now. We haven't had a murder for three years. And it had to be Beau Marr. That's no joke, son."

"Could we just possibly go peek over their shoulders and look through their magnifying glasses?" asked Rush.

"We could but it's not necessary. There's a guy at headquarters that'll give me everything they get in the morning. Come around. We'll look him up together." He looked speculatively at Rush. "That is if you're really interested."

"Oh, I am," said Rush. "The smell of fresh blood brings out the hound in me every time. Tell me something," he added, "what did Max Carney mean when he said the women got him? Did your Mr. Marr have a fast way with females?"

"Yes and no," said Pedrick. "He made many a fast dollar out of them. But he dealt in them as a commodity. I was under the impression that his personal tastes lay in another direction. I might be wrong, even though everybody else thought the

same thing."

Rush looked around at the room behind him and turned back to Pedrick with surprise. Pedrick smiled.

"Empty, isn't it. Everybody had the same idea at the same time. Get out of here and go where somebody might know something." Pedrick looked at his watch. "We can just catch the show at Carlo's."

They caught the show at Carlo's—the first five minutes of it. Then a shadowy figure slipped into a chair beside Pedrick at the table and whispered into his ear. Pedrick leaned toward Rush and spoke under his breath.

"I'm getting my lowdown a little early. Want to catch this?"

Rush shifted his chair to face away from the floor and toward Pedrick. The girls looked over their shoulders briefly and turned back to the floor.

"This is Little Pete Maxon, Rush. He tells me things now and then. It's okay, Petey," he said at the little one's look of suspicion. "He's okay. What's up?"

"Marr got it through his window. A thirty-eight. They's some footprints, all men's. He leaves no traces."

"Any suspects?"

"Naw. That Hacker couldn't find his nose in a bright light."

"What do the boys downtown think?"

"They got the time on the nose. Murphy, Marr's butler, hears the shot and is winding his alarm clock at the same time. It is exactly ten-oh-one."

Pedrick dropped something into Petey's palm which lay open on the table.

"Thanks, Little Pete. Keep in touch with things."

Pete slipped out of his chair and was gone as the lights came up signaling the end of the floor show. The girls turned back to the table and finished drinks at their elbows. It had been, it seemed, a good show. They told Pedrick and Rush what they had missed. They also had one last drink for the road.

In the car driving home there was little talk. Rush's mind seethed with conjecture. The gunning of Beau Marr had not been listed on his agenda. It was an edge, a fingerhold, if he could figure out how to use it. He was still figuring when Pedrick stopped the car before a large apartment house. Gay dug a finger in his ribs.



"You can wake up now. I always insist on being taken to the door."

Gay turned in the dim light from the entrance way and looked at Rush. Her eyes were wide and looked straight into his. Her eyebrows were raised just the faintest fraction of an inch and her mouth looked very soft. "You're a very nice boy," she said. "I hope you manage to stay out of trouble. I don't suppose you will but I wish you would. Now I think you'd better kiss me good night."

She moved a step forward and looked up at Rush. To hell with questions, thought Rush. I'll find out later why she thinks I'll get in trouble. He kissed her. It was a strange kiss. There was certain passion, but the predominant emotion was contentment, a luxurious, peaceful contentment. Gay's were the softest lips in his memory and they moved faintly under his. Time seemed to fall away and he was surprised and a little embarrassed when she moved away.

"That will have to do for now," she said.

"Thank you," said Rush knowing she would know for what he was thinking her. He turned and walked down the flagstone path to the street and was surprised that his breath came faster than before.

## V

**P**EDRICK let Rush out at his hotel and he walked through the lobby to the tap room. There he took a stool at the bar and ordered a double rye. He drank it in slow silence. Looking at but not seeing his own reflection in the mirror. The murder of Marr had no place in his picture. They didn't murder people in Forest City. It was too well organized. He scouted briefly the idea that a suddenly outraged father of one of Marr's ladies for hire had decided to avenge his daughter's honor, and discarded it. It was Rush's experience that if the ladies had fathers, they were probably being kept in booze by their daughters. Somebody wanted Marr out of the way and that fact in itself pointed to a rift in the lute. All was not well among the men who ran Forest City.

It also pointed a path for Rush. Nothing boils a pot like suspicion. It seemed that suspicion was indicated and it was

obviously up to Rush to supply it. An idea sprang full blown into his brain and he grinned at his face in the mirror. He tapped his glass on the bar for the bartender.

"Another double," he said.

The bartender looked at him, then shrugged and poured the drink. He turned back to the cash register to ring up the sale. Rush poured the rye in the spittoon at his feet. Rush ordered double ryes as fast as he could pour them out without being seen. He became noisy. He became semi-insulting when the bartender was slow. He finally half fell off his stool. When he ordered another double rye after that the bartender looked at him in some disgust. He pointed a finger past Rush's shoulder at the door.

"Out," he said.

With hurt dignity Rush pushed himself off the stool, steadied himself against a table and stalked in a roundhouse curve out of the bar. In the lobby he managed to collide with a potted palm, a bellhop and a divan. He became entangled in the leash of a dog led by an elderly female. He mumbled under his breath and finally allowed the bellhop to point him at the elevators after having gotten his key for him. The elevator operator wakened him at his floor and led him down the hall to his room where he opened the door and helped Rush to the bed.

Rush relaxed on the bed and mumbled that he was all right. The operator took off his shoes and quietly left the room. Rush waited till he heard the clang of the elevator door then tiptoed to his own door and locked it. He went to the bottle on his dresser and poured a drink. He downed it and looked owlshly at his reflection in the mirror. It had been a good job, he thought, good enough at least. Some five or six people would testify that he was stinking drunk. The elevator boy would remember having poured him into bed. His alibi was prepared in advance. At the bed table he flipped the pages of the directory and made a brief mental note.

Then Rush dug a flashlight out of his suitcase and slipped it into a side pocket. A small leather covered blackjack went into his hip pocket and a small steel jimmy hung over his belt with the long part inside his pants at the hip. He used the stairs to descend the seven floors to the



ground level. It was an uninterrupted trip. His footsteps were loud in the 3 A.M. silence as he walked for almost a mile. The sign he expected to see hung against the dull late night sky. It was unlit now, but an hour earlier it had glowed its neon brightness in the letters *Sully's*.

Rush retraced his steps a half block to the alley and turned right. A few more steps brought him to an areaway and a door marked with a sign. It said 'employees entrance.' His jimmy was out of his belt and almost to the door when footsteps sounded somewhere behind him. Instantly he faded into the recessed shadow of the door and brought his blackjack from his hip pocket. A figure turned the corner into the areaway and walked to the door. With some regret Rush took a step forward and laid his blackjack expertly alongside the temple of the man who came toward him. He caught him as he slumped. With probing fingers he felt the spot he had slugged. It was a neat job. The man would sleep quite peacefully for an hour or two and waken with nothing but a bad headache and probably a lost job. Rush searched farther with his fingers and felt better about slugging the man. In a shoulder holster was an ugly short nosed .38, a belly gun. He was, in fact, glad he had slugged first and felt afterwards. He was der holster was an ugly short-nosed .38, a pulled the man into the shadow of the building and returned to his task of opening the door.

In a matter of seconds he split wood from wood and the door sprung open. He stepped inside and his nose told him he was in a kitchen. Shading his flashlight with his fingers to leave a thin wedge of light he stepped past ovens and tables toward a pair of double swinging doors. On the other side of them was his destination, Mr. Card Sully's pride and joy, a thing of beauty indeed. As neat a night club as Rush had ever visited in the dead of night. He looked around him at the gleaming tables, at the back bar with its pyramided glass sparkling in the dim light of his flash. From the ceiling swung a mammoth glass chandelier, a magnificent object. Rush looked at it and decided to save it for last. With a sigh of pure joy he moved behind the bar and found a bottle of Old Overholt. He lifted the bottle to his lips

and drank deeply. Then he swung around to look at the back bar. He kissed the bottle lightly and heaved it with all his might at a towering stack of glasses. They rained to the floor in a thousand pieces and a tremendous star appeared in the large mirror behind them.

Again the sigh of almost boyish glee and then Rush went to work seriously. He smashed every glass and every mirror behind the bar. The whiskey bottles he heaved at the chandelier, chipping away at its garish magnificence. With his jimmy he loosened the bar itself from the floor and turned it over on its side. From the kitchen he brought a can of lye well mixed with hot water. This he sloshed over the midget dance floor. Chairs and tables he stacked at one side of the room, and poured more of the lye over the rich carpeting. Drapes came tumbling down to be sprinkled with a rich mixture of bourbon, scotch and gin. He opened bottles of champagne and fizzed them at the oil paintings with which Sully had decorated the few bare walls. Then at last he turned to the chandelier, now not so beautiful. Standing on a chair on a table he pried it loose from its moorings with his invaluable jimmy and watched with deep satisfaction as it crashed to the floor. Then he stepped back into the doorway and threw the full beam of his flashlight over the room. A flock of locusts with the aid of Lil' Abner's turnip termites couldn't have done a better job. It was a complete, a total and final wreck.

Let Mr. Sully figure out who did that, thought Rush. That should prove enough suspicion to last for at least twenty-four hours. Then he could stir up another batch. Coupled with Beau Marr's murder it should start the ruling gentry of Forest City to wearing armored vests and carrying knives. It seemed a shame, but the only way to upset the nice, even comfortable pretty city was to blast a little open hell at it.

With the consciousness of a job well done Rush left Sully's and a half hour later was in his room in the hotel. To all appearances he might never have left it. He carefully stowed his jimmy in the reservoir of his toilet and hung the blackjack on a nail outside his window. Then he peacefully undressed and as peacefully slept until nine o'clock.



He might have slept longer but a dream finally got too much for him. He was under Niagara Falls with his mouth open trying to swallow all the water coming at him. He awakened to find a small wiry man with tight curly hair calmly pouring a glass of water into his open mouth.

**"ROBIN TWIST, you son of an ancient dog!"** he shouted.

"Hi, Rush," said Robin.

"Put that water down, you Scotch termite. Are you trying to drown me?"

"Why, no, Boss. I'm just improving employee-employer relations."

Rush sat up on the edge of the bed and looked at him.

"That's right, you are working for me now. I'm glad to see you, you blasted mid-get. I think I'm going to need you bad."

While Rush shaved, showered and dressed he gave Robin a fill-in on what had gone before, ending with a once over on his raid of the previous evening. Robin was unhappy.

"You get all the fun. Why couldn't you wait till tonight? All my life I've wanted to wreck a bar and the bouncers were always too big. Now you wreck one with not a bouncer in sight. It should happen to a pig."

"You'll get plenty of wrecking of your own to do. Maybe when you grow up, I'll give you a bar of your own and you can go all out."

Robin's oath was unseemly on the lips of such a harmless looking little man.

"When did you leave Uncle Sam?" asked Rush.

"A week ago. We parted the best of friends."

"Did you see the Colonel?"

"I had lunch with him the day I shed my military bearing. He sent his best to you." Robin lit a cigarette. "A great guy," he said.

"Yes," said Rush. That took care of the Colonel, their late superior in G-2. The Colonel himself couldn't have asked for a better farewell.

"What do you want me to do?" asked Robin.

"You, my miniature Dr. Gallup, are going to feel the pulse of Forest City. You are going to influence people and form public opinion."

"A task for which I am eminently fitted. I'll find me a blonde pulse and feel it all afternoon. There'll be no charge for this service."

"You will stay away from blondes. You will seek the company of middle aged business men, at a bar preferably when they have relaxed. Find out what they think about Marr's death and about the wrecking of Sully's joint when it gets out. Intimate that you have inside information that gang warfare has come to Forest City. Say you have heard that Max Carney imported gorillas from Chicago to do the work. Be a little dark cloud on the horizon. Go about spreading gloom about the fair name of Forest City and how it is about to be dragged through the mud of a nasty gang war."

"Should I do all that this afternoon or should I save some of it for tomorrow?" asked Robin.

"I estimate that you should spend at least three days at it. In the meantime keep away from me. Here," he threw a wad of money on the bed. "Take this and get a room at another hotel. Let me see." He picked up the directory and looked up Hotels. "Register at the Plains Hotel. Use your own name. Write me a letter every day and send it care of General Delivery. Only phone in case of emergency. And for Pete's sake keep out of trouble. Pick your spots. Don't try and tell Max Carney himself that he's importing torpedoes. Watch it as never before."

"Can do," said Robin. "And in this same meantime you'll be doing what? Squirring blondes?"

"I'm glad you reminded me. I'm taking a ravishing blonde to the dog races this afternoon."

Rush picked Robin up under one arm and opened the door with the other. He deposited the little man in the hallway outside.

"On your way, pixie," he said and shut the door in Robin's face.

Rush finished dressing with care. Robin's chance remark about blondes reminded him that he had contracted to escort Kit English to the dog races. Pedrick and Gay were both engaged, not with each other, Rush hoped, and the two spares made it a date.

He ate in the coffee shop and called a



cab which deposited him on Kit English's doorstep at two o'clock sharp. The doorstep belonged to a small cottage set well back from a quiet street. Kit herself met him at the door. Her hat was on her head and her bag was in her hand. She shut the door behind her and walked down the steps to the street.

"Mother's resting or I would have invited you in," she explained.

Rush looked at her again. He had never imagined her with parents. She was of the highly polished, tough, sharp, new breed of girls that seem to spring into the world full blown.

"We'll take my car," said Kit. "It's around in the garage."

She led the way to the rear of the house and motioned Rush into the driver's seat of the modest coupe sitting in the driveway. They were rolling toward the coliseum before a word broke the silence.

"You're an odd person," said Kit.

"I'm glad you think so," said Rush. "I've made it a point to rise above the herd."

"You'd have done that anyway," she said. "But it's hard to picture you as a writer of articles. You're more the adventurous, man of action type."

Rush wondered what she was getting at. Pedrick must not have told her of his background, or did Pedrick know yet? Maybe Prime hadn't told Pedrick. Maybe Miss English was just digging. He decided it wouldn't hurt to give her something to chew on.

"Well, as a matter of fact, I'm not a full time writer of articles. I'm just doing a favor for an old friend. I used to be a leg man on the *Chicago Express* and when Pappy Daley needed a man for this job he called me. He was a man short and needed help."

"What did he call you from?"

"I run a detective agency in Chicago. I wasn't detecting at the minute and my organization pretty well runs itself so I told Pappy I was available."

"That fits much better. You could be a detective, all right."

Lady, I am a detective, thought Rush. I'm real strong, but I'm smart, too.

They parked in the lot and by-passed a line at the ticket windows, Kit's press pass taking them into the press box. The

first race was ten minutes away and Rush filled the time inspecting the track and the crowd. Kit studied a form chart and marked choices on a scratch sheet. Then she handed Rush her bets and money to cover them. Rush handed the money back.

"I'm on an expense account. It'll stand a little minor betting."

He shouldered his way through the crowd to the bookmakers' windows. It was an odd situation. It was not mutual betting. Bookmakers made bets from behind windows. Their odds were chalked on a slate outside the window. A short inspection told Rush that the same thing happened here as happened in the horse parlors. Odds on for two favorites and short odds for all other entries. Heads I win tails you lose. He placed Kit's bets with a bet or two for himself on the longest shots he could find.

Back in the box he tried a little pumping of his own.

"Tell me about Pedrick. In all my long and varied newspaper experience, I've never met a columnist like him."

"He's odd, too," said Kit. "He doesn't have to work. His father was a pioneer in Forest City. He made a lot of money in lumber and contracting. Matt went to school at Princeton and stayed on in New York. He was quite a young man about town there for several years. Then his father died and he was the last Pedrick alive so he came back here to live. To keep from dying of boredom he started the column. His name gave him an entry all over town. Outside of that he writes a darn good column. Read it some time. You have to respect the guy. He gets by on ability and hard work when he doesn't need to turn a hand."

It was a long speech and the first race was started before it was through. The rabbit won as usual and Kit's choice was a poor fourth. She tore up her tickets and started to talk but stopped at activity in the box behind them. A short stocky man with graying hair and a permanent twist that was almost a sneer at one corner of his mouth was entering the box. Behind him came a retinue. That was the only way Rush could describe it. First the armed guard, their arms bulging at their shoulders. They spread and sat, one in each corner of the box. Then the palace



favorites. They surrounded the short man and helped him to his seat and saw to his comfort. Then the hangers on. They filled the box and tried to get a word in edgewise to the great man.

Rush looked him over carefully and turned back to Kit.

"That would be our Mr. Sully," he said.

"It would."

"He's heard about Mr. Marr and he's taking no chances." Rush indicated the men in the four corners of the box.

"If you were Mr. Sully, wouldn't you?" she asked.

"If I were Mr. Sully I'd be in my house with the blinds drawn and a squad of tanks on the front lawn. I'd be scared to death."

"A big bold detective like you?" she asked.

"I'd rather be a big old detective if I have my choice."

The second race was being called and they turned their attention back to the track. The rabbit got its head start and the dogs were off. In the semi silence following the initial roar Rush heard further commotion to the rear. He turned and saw a man forcing his way through the hangers—on to Sully's side. The King's messenger, he thought. The excited voice of the man penetrated the crowd noise briefly and Rush caught two words. Joint and wrecked. Sully's face turned to stone. He spoke briefly to the men on each side of him. The word was passed and the exodus began. First the hangers—on then the favorites and last King Sully with two armed guards fore and two aft. They were gone in a matter of sixty seconds.

"Now, I wonder what that was," said Rush to Kit who was also watching with a puzzled look on her face.

"I don't know, but I'd be a damn poor newspaperman's girl Friday if I didn't try and find out. Come on."

She led the way out of the coliseum. On the street they looked both ways, but they were too late. Sully et al were gone.

"Let's find a phone," she said. "I've got to find Pedrick."

That's for me, thought Rush. I'd like a native son's opinion of things as they are and things as they seem to be in Forest City. He followed her without another word.

**K**IT FOUND Pedrick at his apartment. He agreed to meet them at Carlo's in an hour for a drink. He was inclined to minimize the importance of Sully's actions but he had finished his work and felt like company.

Rush drove Kit's car to Carlo's and parked in the lot reserved for customers. It seemed that there were a lot of customers, even on Sunday. He wondered if they gambled on Sunday, too. Kit said they did. Gambling was on a seven-day week and in some places on a twenty-four-hour day. Inside they found a table and ordered drinks. Pedrick slipped into the booth before the drinks had come.

"Well, let's have it," he said. "What happened to Sully?"

Rush described the exodus of the Sully Entourage. He also added the two words he had heard, elaborated only slightly.

"I don't know whose," he said, "but I got the impression that somebody's joint got wrecked."

Pedrick shook his head.

"I doubt it," he said. "It doesn't make sense. Nobody'd have any reason to wreck any joint in this town. It's too well organized." He thought a moment. "Let me use the phone for a minute. Order me a scotch and water."

He slipped out of the booth. Kit's and Rush's drinks came and Rush relayed Pedrick's order. It came back to the booth before Pedrick. The ice in the drink was well on its way to melting before he returned. Rush saw him coming across the room, walking slowly, shaking his head in stubborn disbelief. He sat down and gulped half his drink before he spoke.

"They wrecked it, all right," he said finally.

"Sully's?" asked Kit.

Pedrick nodded his head. "Sully's" he said. "But good, if my contact has it straight." He downed the rest of his drink. "Do you want to go over there?" he asked.

"As a practicing newspaper man, wouldn't it be more interesting to interview the competition?" asked Rush.

"Not a bad idea," said Matt, "especially since he just came into the room." He raised a hand to wave at a figure standing in the doorway. Max Carney came across the room and slipped into the booth be-



side Pedrick.

"What do you think, Max?" asked Pedrick. He had no need to explain the question.

Carney was silent for a long time.

"Is this for publication, Matt?" he asked.

"Not if you say not."

"Then, I'll be damned if I know. If this were for publication I'd say that it was an act of vandals or attribute it to juvenile delinquency. But it isn't that at all. I just came from there. Whoever did that wanted the place wrecked. He didn't just mess it up a little, he wrecked it so that it'll be three months before they can reopen it, if then. Whoever did it had a reason, and if you can figure the reason I'll give you a piece of this joint. That's what bothers me. The reason. It bothers Sully, too. He doesn't give a damn about the joint, especially. He can afford to shut up and he can afford to redecorate. He'll make it back in another three months. But why? I don't like it. I don't like it at all."

Rush gave himself a mental pat on the back, a hard one. This was exactly what he had wanted. He threw another hammer in the cogs.

"Do you think it has anything to do with the shooting last night?" he asked.

Carney turned to look at him.

"I don't know, Henry. It doesn't seem possible. There's no reason for either of them. Damn it, it worries me." He stabbed his cigarette viciously into the ashtray. Then more calmly, "We're not giving you a very good picture of our usually peaceful city, are we, Henry?"

"You forget I come from Chicago. We've grown used to this kind of thing." He swallowed his drink and looked up at Carney. "If you ask me this looks like somebody was trying to muscle in. It has all the earmarks. One of the boys gets shot. Another boy gets his joint messed up. That's the way it happens in Chicago. It looks very much like a muscle."

Carney looked at him disbelievingly.

"In this town?" he asked. "Look, you're grown up. Let me give you one of the facts of life in Forest City. We're so well organized here that Capone and his torpedoes couldn't muscle in with the help of the fifth air force. Forget it."

"Those are mighty fine trees," said

Rush, "but take a look at the forest. You're organized but good. But for how long? How long do you think citizens in a town the size of Forest City are going to sit still if you get noisy. The way I hear it is that they keep the mayor and his chief of police and police commissioner in because they keep the town quiet. No crime, no shootings, no nothing. What'll they do if they find a nice loud gang war in their laps? And did you ever stop to think that somebody might have that idea and be pushing it?" Rush liked the idea so well that he filed it. The idea of electing a reform government appealed to him. It would be the easiest way out if he could do it. The idea, however, didn't appeal to Carney.

"That's a lot of hop," he said. "Anybody big enough to swing a deal like that wouldn't be interested in Forest City."

Rush knew that Carney believed that now. But the germs were well planted. Later he'd remember and think about it again. Rush figured it as another good day's work. He could relax now. Carney was through, too.

"I've got an appointment with Gunn and Hacker and Carver in a few minutes. Maybe they've got some ideas. They've been talking to Card and maybe they've picked up something. Call me tomorrow, Matt. Maybe I'll have something for you."

He lifted his bulk out of the booth and left them. Pedrick looked quizzically at Rush.

"You don't care what you say, or to whom, do you?" he said.

Rush raised his eyebrows.

"Did I say something wrong?" he asked.

"No," said Matt. "You didn't say anything wrong. You might even have been right. But didn't you ever learn never to tell people things that they didn't want to hear?"

"Sure, but what do I care what a comparatively small time gambler in a comparatively small town wants to hear?"

Pedrick grinned.

"You're very refreshing, Henry," he said. "And very naive if you peg Carney as a small time gambler. Capone should clear as much in his best year as Max Carney does in a bad year."

They drank up then and Rush drove Kit home in her car. Pedrick followed and picked him up to take him to the hotel.



At the door of the hotel Pedrick opened the door of the car for Rush.

"Look, my fearless friend from the big bad city. Leave me offer you a piece of advice. You're here to write some articles. It says here in fine print. Good for you. But don't let the bloodhound in you lead you up the wrong alley. Carney, Sully and company don't play rough very often but when they do it's very rough, and nobody ever knows about it. You can do that when you own everything and they own everything."

"Thank you," said Rush, "thank you sincerely. I probably won't pay any attention to you, but thanks anyway."

He closed the door behind him and went into the hotel.

Rush bent over to put his key in the lock of his room door but he didn't get it in. The door swung away from his probing key. He straightened and found himself staring across eighteen inches of space into what he could only describe as a mug. The jaws in the mug worked and sounds come out.

"Come in, Mr. Henry," the sounds said in a grotesque imitation of gentility. He stepped around the body attached to the mug and walked into his room. Seated in a chair was a slightly refined counterpart of the mug.

"Shut the door, Junie," said the one in the chair. The door was shut. "You Rush Henry?" the man in the chair asked.

Rush nodded.

"That's me," he said brightly.

"We got a word for you, buddy. You been in town too long. Why don't you leave?"

"But, I like it here," said Rush even more brightly.

"You won't." It was a statement of accepted fact.

"Oh, but I will. Besides I'm not finished with my business here," Rush obstinately refused to understand.

"You won't. And besides you got no business here."

"This is amazing," said Rush. "How did you find that out?"

"I didn't find it out. I'm telling you. You got no business here. I'm also telling you, get out." The man in the chair went all out to make it obvious, also to make it tough. Rush wondered if the corner of

his mouth got tired from so much talking.

"I don't think I understand," he said, understanding quite well but wanting it made very plain.

"I'll fix it so you understand, buddy," said the man in the chair. "I'm telling you to get out of town. If you ain't gone in twenty-four hours it'll be just too bad."

"What'll be just too bad?" asked Rush. He had an idea but he wanted to know.

"Maybe we better give you an idea. Take him, Junior."

He reached out a hamlike paw for Rush. Rush caught it by the wrist, twisted, came under it, pulled the elbow to his shoulder and threw his weight forward, hard. Junior came forward in a flying arc. He lit in a bundle in the lap of the man in the chair. The chair collapsed and they made a writhing heap in the middle of the floor. Rush picked up a leg of the chair which splintered off at his feet.

"Get up, Junior," he said.

Junior showed fight for as long as it took Rush to slug him alongside the temple with the chair leg. He rolled him off the man who had been in the chair and issued directions.

"Get some water and wake that ape up. Get him out of here. And when you get back to whoever sent you tell him you're playing with the older boys now."

## VI

THERE was a package from Chicago for him at the desk in the morning and he opened it in his room after breakfast. He leered at its contents for a moment and decided the time was ripe to talk to Bill Prime again. His suspicion campaign could use the facilities of the press. He thought he could convince Prime that the time was come for all good men to take sides. He whistled as he hid the contents of the package and left the hotel for the offices of the *Forest City Chronicle*.

Bill Prime was in and would see him. He found the white haired editor behind his desk. Prime stopped him before he opened his mouth.

"Let an old man do a little guessing."

"Sure," said Rush. "I'll lay a little six to one you're right. Guess ahead."

"I'm not really guessing. I'm deducting." He held up his hand with the fingers



spread. He tabbed one finger. "First you get in town. The next day Beau Marr gets shot. The next night Card Sully's joint gets wrecked. Tonight I'll lay you six to one Max Carney's spot has an accident."

"I'd have a man there if I were you," said Rush. "The odds are in favor of it. But, you're not accusing me of shooting Beau Marr, are you?"

"No, I don't think you shot Beau. But you might know who did, or why somebody did. My guess, the one I mentioned, is that you are stage managing a blow off in Forest City. I've got a faint idea of how you work. And I'm damned if I'll swallow that goop about a series of articles."

"I'LL stick my chin out an inch or two. I don't know who shot Beau Marr. I don't even have a suspicion of why he was shot. Sully's place in another thing. Off the cuff I might hazard a guess about that. As to a blowoff in Forest City, let's let that slide for a while. Maybe yes, maybe no."

"Why let it slide?" asked Prime. "I'd like to know."

"There are a few things I have to know before I say anything about myself or why I'm in Forest City. Until I find them out I'm writing articles."

"Okay. Maybe I can tell you what you want to know."

"As a matter of fact," said Rush, "you are the only person who can tell me. Assuming the hypothetical blowoff, I'd have to know where you stand before I light the fire. With a good militant paper behind me I'd be a long way on the road to a blowoff, assuming that there was a blow-off on my mind."

"Let's put all those bushes away and stop beating around them," said Prime. "What you want to know is will I go along with you and how far." He raised his eyebrows in question at Rush. Rush nodded. "Okay. I'll tell you. When you first walked in here I told you that I was waiting around to see what happened. I could have gone on to say that I was also waiting around for somebody with enough guts to upset the apple cart. Since I didn't say it then I'll say it now. If you'll guarantee to stick it out I'll get behind you. I'll

back you to the hilt. I'll be a private in your army. But you have to come through, too. I haven't crawled out on a limb alone in years and I'm too old to form any new habits." He looked quizzically at Rush. "Is that what you wanted?" he asked.

"That," said Rush, "is enough. Consider yourself enlisted."

"There's only one thing," said Prime. "Why are you doing it?"

"It's a funny thing," said Rush. "I'm doing it because somebody is paying me ten thousand dollars."

"Who, for Pete's sake?" cried Prime.

"I haven't the faintest idea. A firm of lawyers, a very respectable firm by the way, approached me in Chicago and offered me the job. That's all I can tell you. There's a little more but it's not pertinent. Yet," he added.

Prime wrinkled his head and stared off into space for a long minute.

"That loses me," he confessed. "I can't figure anybody who'd do that. But as long as they did I'm glad. It should be a nice brawl. I'm glad it came along before I was too old to enjoy it. Now, what do you want me to do?"

"Not much. Mainly a matter of treatment. I want you to approach the things that have happened and are about to happen from a certain angle. I want you to suggest that there may be gang warfare in the offing. Exaggerate things a little. Incite a little friction between factions if possible. I want everybody to be suspicious of everybody else, and I want the common garden variety of citizen to worry about what's happening to this peaceful little city. We might even elect a reform candidate. That'll settle everything." He paused and thought a moment. "One other thing, as I suggested, you might have a man at Carlo's tonight. Your guess wasn't far off."

"Will do. But do you think a reform mayor can do the trick?"

"With a little help he can and I'll give him the help."

"Will he take it?"

"I'll make sure of that before I get him elected. Election's only a week off, I'll talk to the guy this afternoon and make a deal. We'll clean this rat's nest out as slick as a whistle with a little cooperation."

"Oh, happy day," said Prime. "How



about Pedrick. Are you going to tell him?"

"He's a pretty sharp guy. I think he's guessed. I'll tell him when the time comes."

"Okay. I'll have a man at Carlo's tonight."

Rush said good-bye then and left the building. Around the corner he stopped in a bar and entered the phone booth. He looked in the directory and dialed the number listed as Sully's. He put a handkerchief over the mouthpiece of the phone and spoke only a few odd sentences to the voice that answered.

"Tell Sully that if he's smart he'll have a couple of guys at Carlo's tonight. He'll want to know what goes on there."

THE HANDS of Rush's watch read ten-fifteen as he escorted Gay into Carlo's. The waiter took them to the table Rush had reserved that afternoon. Across the room Matt Pedrick waved at them. At his side Kit English looked up and nodded without too much enthusiasm. Rush ordered drinks and took Gay to the dance floor while waiting for them. After the dance they returned to the table to find Pedrick waiting for them.

"Evening, children," he said. "Is this an item or are you two just doing research for Mr. Henry's articles?"

"Oh, please don't put it in your paper, Mr. Pedrick," begged Gay. "Mr. Henry's wife and five children would just die."

"My," said Pedrick looking at Rush, "prolific, isn't he? Didn't know you were a family man."

"I'm not. At least I wasn't."

Pedrick turned to look at Gay.

"Well, he acts like a father to me. You can't blame me for being fooled."

"Touche," said Pedrick.

"Touche," answered Rush. "But then, she reminded me so much of a maiden aunt of mine that I have to think twice or I'll remind her to take her liver pills."

"Touche, you louse," said Gay.

Pedrick opened his mouth to laugh aloud and suddenly closed it.

"That's funny," he said.

"I thought so too," said Rush.

Gay had followed Pedrick's eyes.

"He doesn't mean your nasty crack, you boor. He means what just came in."

"What came in?" asked Rush.

Pedrick spoke to Rush but his eyes followed two men around the edge of the room to the bar.

"A couple of guys who never come in here. Card Sully's two right hand men."

"Is Mr. Sully a freak, with two right hands yet?" asked Rush.

"Ha ha", said Gay. "That Chicago humor is excruciating."

"I forgot that you are a non-native," said Pedrick. "It's nothing really outlandish except that those two guys never come here. They're always at Sully's place. Of course," he added, "Sully's place is out of order at the moment. Maybe they're just relaxing. On vacation as it were and seeing what the other boys are doing."

"This is all very interesting," said Rush, "and no doubt it fascinates the habitués of this dive. Me, I have a call to make." He stood beside his chair. "Will you entertain Clara Bow here till I get back?" He left the table before Gay could throw the glass she picked up.

He walked to the back of the room and followed the path toward the bar taken by the two men who had so interested Pedrick. The room was crowded and he had to force his way through slow moving masses of people. He seemed in no hurry. In fact he stopped almost dead still several times. Each time he reached in his pocket and did something to a small object he held in his two hands. Then he dropped it to the floor only to hurry on several yards and repeat the performance. He stopped at the bar for a quick straight shot of rye and returned to the table. Pedrick looked up.

"That was a short call," he said.

"Hardly worth making," said Rush. "The line was busy."

He sat down and picked up the drink Pedrick had ordered in his absence. As he drank the band stopped playing and the M.C. walked out onto the small square of floor to start the floor show. A spot centered on him and he raised his hand for silence. He got it for about ten seconds. Then a murmur started on the far side of the room. It grew till the M.C. looked angrily in that direction and stopped talking. The murmur grew and with the murmur came the noise of chairs being shoved back from the tables and angry voices



began to be heard over the murmur. A door beside the bar opened and a tall dark man with broad shoulders came out. He looked in the direction of the disturbance. He looked for a moment then moved purposefully toward the center of it.

Pedrick looked puzzled.

"I wonder what the hell—" he started, then he sniffed. He breathed in deeply through his nostrils. Rush sniffed. Gay sniffed. Something was dead. Either that or an army of shunks had visited Carlo's. The smell caught in the air conditioning and spread around the room. It was overpowering.

"I'm a son of a—," said Pedrick, "a stink bomb. I wonder—" He stopped in mid sentence. "This is news," he said. "Be seeing you." He was out of his chair and gone in a flash.

"I don't think I can stand much more of this," said Gay, her handkerchief to her nose. "Let's get out of here."

"Just a minute," said Rush. "This is like old times in Chicago. I'd like to see what they do. Any way, you'd play hell getting out of here right now." He pointed to the doorway where a mass of people stampeded the check room in an effort to get out.

Rush looked to the bar. Only one of the two men was there now. The tall dark man walked up to the other one and spoke to him. Across the width of the room Rush could tell that his words were angry ones. The other man held up a hand and answered. A moment later his companion came back to join him and the three of them spoke together, the tall dark man looking at them from under heavy brows. Rush looked back at the mob struggling to get out and in its midst saw one figure struggling to get in. It was Carney. He broke away from the mass and stalked angrily across the floor to the three men at the bar. Rush watched as the same scene repeated itself. Then from the crowd came another late entry. Card Sully broke through the crowd and came across the room to stand beside Carney. That was all Rush wanted to see. He was also becoming conspicuous for his failure to leave. He took Gay by one arm and led her to the now thinning crowd at the exit. They were in the fresh air outside before he spoke.

"I've been in glue factories that smelt like a rose compared to that," he said.

"What was it?" asked Gay.

"Pedrick guessed it," he said. "A stink bomb. I've smelled them before. They were quite the thing in Chicago at one time. If you didn't want to be protected you got a stink bomb from the protective association. A neat trick."

"But why should anybody drop a stink bomb in Carlo's?"

"Maybe they thought he needed protection."

After dropping off Gay, Rush stopped to look at a figure he had penciled on the back of an old envelope.

In the street he walked four blocks north, three west and a half north again. There he found a sheltering clump of bushes and crouched behind them, his eyes on the entrance of a large new house standing some fifty feet back from the street. Once he took a gun from his pocket and examined the load. Satisfied he returned the gun and resumed his vigil. A half hour passed and the muscles of his legs cramped. He half rose to stretch them when an automobile turned the corner south of him and swept up to stop beside the house Rush had watched. A man stepped out of the back seat, leaned in to speak to someone in the front seat and turned to walk toward the house. The car gathered momentum in a rush and was a half block away by the time the man was halfway to the house.

Rush stood up behind the bushes and pointed his gun at the man. He pulled the trigger three times in fast succession and turned and ran with all his might. He was eight blocks away in fifteen minutes having twisted and turned through alleys and gardens and back yards. Breathing heavily he slowed to a walk which took him ten minutes later into the lobby of his hotel. In his room he poured a drink of rye and grinned at his reflection in the mirror. He thought that suspicion should really be rife now. Card Sully would look twice at anyone who might possibly have shot at him. Card Sully of course would never know that the shots had come from blank cartridges.

Rush sat on the edge of his bed and picked up the phone. He gave the operator a number in Chicago and lit a cigarette while he waited. His call was through before the cigarette was half smoked, and a familiar voice helloed him.



"Hello, Pappy," he said. "Glad I caught you at home."

"And you're still alive?" asked Pappy.

"And well," said Rush. "I need some help, though."

"Who do you want?"

"You'd better send Smoky. Tell Gertrude to send Merwin. Tell her to tell him to mind Smoky till he gets here. Also I'd like one other. Ask Jim Todd at Continental if he can let me have Duffy for a few days. He's worked for me before. Gertrude will give the boys some dough and I'll take care of them after they get here."

"When do you need them?"

"Better have them fly. I can use them right away."

"They'll be in at five tomorrow afternoon then." Pappy paused a moment.

"Did you get my package?"

"I got and passed it on."

"That must have been a panic. Where did you use the bombs?"

"In a joint. It belongs to one of the bigger of the big shots here."

"That should make you real popular."

"I'm not trying to be the most popular man in Forest City. Just the oldest."

"I hope you make it. Good-bye, Rush. I'll have the boys there tomorrow afternoon."

**R**USH'S cohorts duly arrived in Forest City and met in Rush's hotel room. There was Smoky, crack newspaperman; Merwin, Rush's loyal segundo; Duffy, the Continental Detective Agency's ace; and Robin Twist.

Rush breathed easier. He felt a lot better with this bunch around him. Quickly he outlined the problems confronting him, and what had taken place the last few days. He told each one what he wanted done, wished them luck, and sent them on their way. Rush himself headed for the *Chronicle* office and Bill Prime. He wanted some information on the reform candidate for mayor. The time was come to meet that gentleman and tell him fate was about to tap him on the shoulder. Mr. W. C. Covington, Rush had gotten his name from a campaign poster, was about to be visited by destiny.

He found Prime in his office and stated his mission.

"I think we'd better have Pedrick in. He knows more about people in this town than they know about themselves."

Rush was hesitant.

"Won't that involve telling him my innermost secrets?"

"I think you'd better expect that anyway. In the first place he is one smart guy and if I start slanting news, he'll catch it in two editions. In the second place he can do a lot of good along that line in his column. You'd be amazed at how religiously people read it and how oracle-like they consider it. Pedrick can tell no lies. George W. was not in it with him."

Rush gave in then and Prime phoned for Pedrick who came into the office. Rush let Prime tell him the story. Pedrick sat it out in an unaccustomed silence. When Prime was through he looked at Rush.

"You know, my secretive friend, I suspected you from the first. You didn't look like an article writer to me. They wear glasses and ask dull questions. Your questions are far from dull and they never even remotely touch upon such article-like subjects as economics and population trends and such stuff."

Rush grinned at him.

"I tried," he said. "Next time I'll be more dull."

"It'll be an effort, I'm sure." Rush nodded his acceptance of the compliment. "Now, what can I do for you?"

Prime explained Rush's idea about slanting news. Pedrick got it at once and was enthusiastic.

"Propaganda fascinates me. Ever since I read Dale Carnegie I've had an uncontrollable yen to influence somebody. My time has come."

"You can influence people to your heart's content," said Rush. "I'll give you some ammunition daily. Right now I want a word about the life and times of one W. C. Covington. I'm going to approach him this afternoon."

"Willie?" said Pedrick. "A nice guy. Comparatively harmless but with a strong civic conscience. He's got a pretty thick hide or he wouldn't expose himself to the beating he's going to take."

"Want to bet?" asked Rush.

Pedrick looked at him through narrowed eyelids.

"Are you considering tampering with the ballot boxes?" he asked.



"Not at all. I'm going to elect him mayor by the will of the people."

"You," said Pedrick, "talk like a man with a paper head. My uncle's horse has just as good a chance as he has."

"I'll take bets," said Rush. "Look. While you are busy influencing Carney and Sully and their boys into thinking that they're at each other's throats, you'll be influencing the common people into thinking the same thing. I'm convinced that there are enough unenlightened common people in Forest City to swing the election once they get the word."

"What word is that?" asked Pedrick. "Could I hear it?"

"You can. The word is that they have been taken for a municipal ride like nobody I ever heard of ever got taken for before. Beyond that their fair city has been a profitable plaything for a group of selfish, evil, grasping men for many years. When they find that out they aren't going to like it. They are even going to do something about it. Like electing Mr. W. C. Covington."

Pedrick shook his head.

"It's a dream," he said. "Maybe you can sell your bill of goods. I doubt it. But if you can, power to you. You may count me as one of your loyal supporters. And, brother, if you put it over make that read lifetime admirers."

"You're in," said Rush. "Now about W. C."

"Okay. Fiftyish, independently wealthy, wife and two kids of high school age, upright, member of the First M. E. Church, pillar of conservative society, and a pretty nice guy."

"Any guts?" asked Rush.

"Unknown quantity. Maybe if pushed enough."

"How far has he been pushed?"

"Figure it out for yourself. He doesn't have to run for Mayor. He knows it's a losing battle yet he sticks his chin out. There must be something there."

"Good," said Rush. "I'll push him the rest of the way. Where can I find him?"

Pedrick looked at his watch.

"At this moment he should be in his office in the Exchange Building. All he does there anymore is clip coupons but he keeps the office open. As a matter of fact I think it is now his campaign headquarters."

"Thanks, Matt," said Rush. "I think

maybe he's my man. I'll give him a quick trial run."

RUSH bypassed a pair of secretaries busy doing nothing and a roomful of people unenthusiastically addressing envelopes. The feeling of uselessness was heavy in the room. He found Mr. Covington seated behind a desk looking out of his window at the streets of residential Forest City spread out beyond the business district that lay directly below. He introduced himself. Mr. Covington was glad to see him but obviously curious about his reason for being there. Rush was very direct.

"Why do you want to be mayor, Mr. Covington?" he asked.

"You're not a resident of Forest City, are you?" asked Covington.

Rush shook his head.

"If you were you'd understand. I'm very fond of this city. I grew up here and I made what money I have here. My children are going to spend their lives here. I want it to be the kind of city they can be proud of. I want to be proud of it myself. It isn't that kind of city. If you lived here you'd know how far it misses being the kind of place you can be proud of."

"All right," said Rush. "How strongly do you want to be mayor?"

"I should think that would be obvious. I'm spending a good deal of money and more time. I'm bucking a machine that's old in intrigue and practical politics. Isn't that an answer?"

"That's one kind of answer," said Rush. "It didn't quite answer my question. Let me be hypothetical for a moment. If it were possible to guarantee your election would you countenance certain activities that might not look too well in the cold light of day? In other words are the means or the end more important to you?"

Covington swung full around in his chair to face Rush.

"I think you'll have to qualify that hypothesis. You sound very much like somebody who wants something. What is it?"

"You're quite right, Mr. Covington. I'll qualify and expand. I'll even lay my cards on the table. I am a private detective from Chicago. I once managed to clean up a city that was almost as



bad as Forest City. Someone has engaged me to do the same thing for Forest City. To me, it looks like the easiest and most permanent way would be to elect you mayor. That is what I propose to do. But only on one condition."

"Which is?"

"That you accept my advice as to how to keep it clean. Reform mayors are a dime a dozen. Only one in a hundred really reforms anything. I don't want to go to the trouble of electing you only to have you let things slide as much as they are now."

Covington looked at him very curiously.

"You have a strange faculty for making very extraordinary statements sound ordinary, Mr. Henry. How do you propose to elect me?"

"That should be obvious," said Rush. "Your biggest handicap is the fact that almost nobody realizes what a hell of a state things are in Forest City. You can talk to them for a thousand years and it'll be just that, talk. I propose to show them. I have already started as a matter of fact. You may not know it but there is a gang war going on in Forest City. The gangs don't even know it yet, but they will. You see, the odd thing about your bosses in Forest City is that they don't look, act, or sound like bosses. There is no strife, nothing. They are too well organized. So I'll fix it so they sound like bosses. I've almost got them at each other's throats now. In a day or so Joe Public, Forest City brand, is going to think hell has popped in his town. If I can help it no one will get hurt. It'll be sound and fury with no body blows struck, only I'm afraid it won't be quite that clean. Somebody's going to get hurt. I hope it's only those who have it coming but an innocent bystander may get caught before I'm through."

Covington had sat silently through Rush's long speech. He looked at his hands lying flat on the desk for a long moment before he spoke.

"Who hired you to come here?"

Rush shook his head.

"I don't know. I was retained by a highly respected firm of lawyers in Chicago. My client prefers to remain anonymous. The lawyers will pay me when and if I'm through."

"And what is my alternative. What will

you do if I fail to cooperate?"

"Oh, I'll elect you anyway probably. The difference will be that I'll sic the boys on each other till they run each other out of business. I'll be nastier that way but surer unless I have complete cooperation from you after you are elected."

"You don't leave me much choice."

"I didn't intend to," said Rush. "I just wanted to look you over and see if you were worth fighting for."

Covington smiled for the first time during the interview.

"What have you decided?" he asked.

"I think you'll do," said Rush.

"What do you want me to do now?"

"Nothing that you wouldn't do anyway. You'll recognize my ammunition as it appears. Use it. I would suggest a public statement by yourself that the gangs which have ruled Forest City are becoming unmanageable. Read your papers; you'll find things to point the finger of shame at in quantity. I'll give you more to back up anything you want to say about Carney and Sully."

Covington took a deep breath.

"All right, Henry. If I'm elected Mayor I'll listen to you. In the meantime I don't want to know anything you are doing. I want to be completely disassociated from you. You go your way and I'll go mine and you come see me after the election."

## VII

**T**IRING of looking for cabs Rush hired a car by the week and drove it on its maiden voyage as far as he was concerned to Gay Wimberly's apartment.

"Look," he said as he stepped through the door. "It just occurred to me. Don't you work anymore? This is the third night in a row you've been free. Don't tell me you're giving up everything for Henry."

"No," said Gay, "I just have a new job. I've been meaning to tell you."

"Fine. What are you doing now?"

"This'll kill you. I'm working for Max Carney."

"Doing what, for God's sake?"

"That's the part that will kill you. I'm keeping an eye on you."

Rush looked at her for a moment, a long moment.

"That has its advantages," he said.



"Yes, I don't have to work very hard and the pay is excellent."

"I'll see to it that you work harder, my love," said Rush. "I hope you enjoy it."

"I'm sure I will."

Rush turned at the tone of her voice and Gay was smiling at him. He smiled back at her.

"How did Carney get ahold of you?"

"Didn't you know? He owns the Blue Goose. I just changed jobs not employers."

"Did he explain why he wanted me watched?"

"No, except that you were a stranger and a reporter. He wanted a line on what you were writing."

"In that case I'll have to write something right away so you can tell him about it."

"At least tell me something to tell him. I want him to think I'm earning my money."

"Look, Gay," he said finally. "You'd better not make up things about my writing to feed to Carney. He's liable to find out I'm not writing and he doesn't like people to fool him."

"No," said Gay as seriously as Rush, "he doesn't. What would you suggest that I tell him?"

"Tell him exactly what I do do. So far you haven't seen me do anything he wouldn't like. There may be a few things I'd want you to forget but I'll warn you about those."

"Okay," said Gay. "Now, if a girl isn't too forward, could she ask what the hell you are doing here if you're not writing?"

"I'm afraid it might not be safe for you if you knew."

Gay looked at him suspiciously.

"I'll take a chance on that," she said. "Come on, tell mother. What are you doing as if I couldn't guess."

"Guess," said Rush.

"You're trying to run Sully and Carney and Gunn and Carver out of town. I don't know why but damned if I don't think you are."

"That's a good guess. That's approximately what I'm doing. I'm doing it because I get paid for it."

"By whom, for heaven's sake?"

Rush told her as much of the story as he wanted her to know. It took a stiff drink to make it. When he was through

he set down an empty glass.

"How long do you estimate this will take, Mr. Henry?"

"Not long the way things are going."

"Do you think you'll have to kill anyone else?"

"You mean Marr?" Rush grinned. "I didn't kill Marr. Somebody did me that favor. One more favor like that and the job'd be almost done."

"I'll see if I can't arrange it," said Gay. "Then maybe you could spend a little time with me without your mind being a couple blocks away."

Rush looked at her and his smile was slightly forced.

"My big trouble is keeping my mind off you when I'm a couple blocks away."

Gay's eyes became very big.

"Why, Mr. Henry. What you said."

"Yes," said Rush. "What I said. Also what I'll do if I stay here much longer."

"Is that bad?" asked Gay.

"No, it's swell but first things first, damn it."

"I'm going to do some tinkering with your idea of what things come first," said Gay. "We don't see eye to eye there."

Rush grinned and kissed her very quickly then he left without another word.

In the car he drove slowly, thinking. The fact that Carney had set Gay to watching him was interesting. It needed thought. Only half consciously he turned left in the direction of Sully's house. The chances were good that Carney held high suspicions of him. There were too many coincidences for a man as smart as Carney to miss connecting him with the turn of things in Forest City. He'd have to take the gloves off soon. He made a turn to the right and drove three blocks slowing and parking fifty feet from the intersection in the shadows of a mammoth elm. Sully's house was a hundred feet north of the same intersection. Now might be the time to cast another stone in the troubled waters. He got out of the car and walked across the street to the shelter of bushes that edged the sidewalk around Sully's house. There was a light in the lower front room and he wanted a look inside before he made any move.

He made a cautious survey of the terrain and found it vacant. He took one step toward the house then halted and faded back into the bushes. A car whirled



around the corner on two wheels and drew up with screaming brakes in front of Sully's house. The door of the house flew open and Sully came running down the steps throwing a topcoat around his shoulders. He got to the sidewalk and halfway across the parking when the silence fell apart in a sudden thunder of gunfire. From the open window of the car spits of flame shot at Sully. He stopped dead still for a moment, put out a hand toward the car, took a half step and fell. An arm reached out of the car and pumped two more shots into his body. Then the car roared away from the curb.

Rush didn't wait a second. Already lights were coming on in the neighborhood and doors were flying open. He turned on his heel and ran full tilt to his rented car. In a matter of seconds he was a block away. He drove fast for another block or two then slowed his pace to a respectable speed and finding no one in pursuit turned back toward town. He garaged the car in the hotel garage and went directly to his room. There he speedily undressed and got into bed.

Sleep was not easy to woo, nor did he try very hard. There was too much on his mind. When he finally relaxed it was with the conviction that somebody else was operating in Forest City with the same end as his in view. Operating, not for the same reason, but to the same end. He couldn't see Carney in the role, he was too smart and had too much to lose. His last thought before drifting to sleep was that it would be ironic indeed if his mythical Chicago gangsters had come to life and were truly trying to take over the town. It was logical enough. Forest City would be a neat plum, and ripe for the picking of the big city trouble boys.

When he awoke in the morning Smoky was sitting in his easy chair with a glass of his whiskey in his hand.

"Damn it," said Rush, "I wish you guys would stop picking my door lock, especially when I'm home."

"Do you want me to wake up the whole floor? I knocked twice but you were asleep and didn't hear me so I just eased in."

Rush got up and washed. He was busy shaving and Smoky came to stand in the door.

"Read the papers yet?" he asked.

"In my sleep?" asked Rush.

"You should. There's news."

"What's happened now? Did Sully get shot?"

"You guessing or do you know?"

"Guessing," said Rush shortly. "Did he?"

"Yeah, right in front of his house last night about two. Wife's statement says he got a phone call that his joint was burning down and that someone would pick him up. He ran out and somebody gunned him and drove away."

"Is that all they've got?"

"According to the papers that's the lid. I've got a cop I buy a drink for now and then. He says headquarters is a madhouse. These two shootings are the only crime they've had in this town in ten years and nobody knows what to do. They got cobwebs on all their investigation equipment. He's not even sure that anybody down there knows how to check ballistics. They may have to call in somebody to check Sully's slugs with Marr's."

"That'll be a nice item for the papers. The voters'll love it."

"Won't they. What are you going to do about it?"

"About what, the killings? Nothing. They're not my business."

"Got an alibi?"

Rush turned slowly till he was facing Smoky.

"Do I need one?"

"Not with me, chummy. But you might with the law. You'd be a neat way out of their troubles if they could stick them on you." He looked at Rush closely. "Hey, why so jumpy? Do you need an alibi?"

Rush looked at him for a minute then slowly grinned.

"Yeah. I was there. In the bushes. I saw whoever it was let him have it."

"The hell. You're lucky you didn't get caught."

"Don't tell me. I'm still breathing hard."

"Don't let it get you down, Twist or I will alibi you if you need it. Just let us know."

"I'll think up a good one and set it with you. Call me or have Robin call me in an hour."

"Okay, anything else?"

"I want all you guys up here tonight at ten. I've got a deal cooking and I'll need



some help."

"Okay. I'll lower the boom on the boys. See you tonight."

Smoky was gone as silently as he had come. His phone rang and he picked it up. The voice was slightly muffled.

"Mr. Henry?" it asked.

"Speaking," said Rush.

"This is X. Do you know to whom I refer?"

"If you know a man named Leach in Chicago, I do."

"I know him. He offered you ten thousand dollars to do a job for me."

"I know you," said Rush. "I didn't expect to hear from you though."

"I didn't expect to have to call. However, your methods force me to get in touch with you."

"My methods?"

"The killing of Marr and Sully. I realized when I hired you that I was asking for violence but I didn't expect outright murder."

"Do I understand that you think I killed Marr and Sully?"

"I do. And it's got to stop."

"You're wrong and I doubt if it will. You don't have enough money. Mr. X, whoever you are, you don't have enough money if your name turns out to be Rockefeller to hire me to kill anybody. Let's get that straight right now. Whoever is shooting up your citizens is doing me a favor, it makes my job that much easier, but it isn't me."

"I didn't expect you to admit it. However, it must stop. If it doesn't I'll be forced to place what information I have in the hands of the police."

"Just what information do you have?"

"I'm fully aware of the fact that you have no alibi for either murder. Also the police will be interested to know that you were hired to clean up this town."

"You amaze me, X," said Rush. "I have alibis, very good ones. And while I'm at it let's clear up another point. I'm going to clean up your city. I'm going to do it my way. When I'm through I'm going to Leach and ask for ten thousand dollars. I expect to get it. If I don't I'll sue Leach and that'll smoke you out into the open. In the meantime don't sit around and stew about the killings. Those guys had it com-

ing. They earned it years ago. If it'll make you feel better I'll dig around and find out who did kill them and throw it in with the original price. I like to give full value. Now, good-bye, Mr. X. It's been a pleasure meeting you."

RUSH had hardly replaced the phone when it rang again. It was Robin.

"Smoky says you might need a front for last night," he said.

"That isn't all. I just remembered I had a blank space in my diary at the time Marr was shot. Cover me for both of them, will you?"

"Sure. Where were we?"

"I met you just outside Pedrick's apartment house the night Marr was gunned and you rode downtown with me. We had business to talk over. I'm covered after that. Last night you waited for me outside Gay Wimberly's apartment and rode downtown with me. More business."

"What was that time last night?"

"From about one-thirty to two-thirty. We talked a lot."

"That's good. I'm clear for those times. I wasn't with anybody who could make a liar of me. Consider yourself alibied."

Rush ate a fast breakfast and went to the offices of the *Chronicle*. He had business with Bill Prime and he wanted a word with Pedrick. He found Pedrick in his office, going over a batch of copy.

"What are the wild winds whispering about our Mr. Sully and his sudden demise?" asked Rush.

"It's a strange thing about that. My sources are all dried up. It isn't that they won't talk, it's that they don't know anything to talk about."

"My sources," said Rush calmly appropriating Smoky's cop, "say that the law doesn't know anything either. I also have an angle for you."

Pedrick reached for a scratch pad.

"Give," he ordered.

"I'm told that the city department of police is so out of date that they don't have a ballistics man capable of comparing the bullets that killed Sully with those that killed Marr. The voters should know that. You could put in the form of a question, Winchellwise—'what city police department et cetera?'"

"I could indeed. Anything else?"



"You might relay a random thought of mine."

"Which is?"

"Wouldn't it be too poetic if there really were outside gangsters moving in to take over the town?"

"Do you really believe that?"

"It might be. It fits all the facts. They operate that way."

Pedrick shook his head.

"I'd hate to see that. It'd be into the fire from the frying pan."

"Don't worry about them. If they're really here I'll scare them off. I have a few connections in Chicago that might do me some good here."

Pedrick looked up to see if he was joking. He decided he wasn't.

"I'll give the angle a play tonight."

"Say," said Rush. "There is something else. I have to talk to Bill Prime first, but if I sell him on a deal I'd like to use you and your car tonight. Kit and hers too if possible."

"I think I can arrange it. What've you got in mind?"

"I'll let you know after I talk to Prime."

"I'll hold myself at attention till I hear from you."

Rush left Pedrick's office then and walked through the city room to Prime's office. The whitehaired editor was dictating. He waved Rush to a seat while he finished then dismissed his secretary and turned to face Rush. Rush stopped him before he could speak.

"No, I didn't kill Sully. I don't know who did. I wish I knew so I could thank him. I didn't kill Marr either. I have alibis to prove it."

"You wound me, boy. I wasn't going to accuse you. The idea had never occurred to me."

"It will. It's already occurred to my Mr. X. He called to tell me to stop killing people."

"What did you tell him?" asked Prime.

"The same thing I told you and a few other well chosen words. I also intimated I had alibis."

"Do you?"

"I do now."

"Fine, now what's on your mind today?"

"I have a chore I want you to do as privately as possible."

"Anything within reason. What have

you dreamed up now?"

Rush leaned across the desk and took a scratch pad and a pencil. As he spoke he sketched rapidly on the pad.

"I want a thousand posters about twelve by eighteen printed by ten-thirty tonight. I want something like this on them." He shoved the scratch pad across to Prime. It read as follows:

**DO YOU KNOW WHAT IS HAPPENING  
IN YOUR CITY?**

The MACHINE which controls your city  
is beginning to break up.

The men who run the machine are at war  
with each other.

Outside gangsters are 'chiselling in'.

**THE WORST IS YET TO COME!!!**

There will be more shooting, more blood  
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"I want that set in as startling type as you can make it. I want to focus attention on what's going on in Forest City and you can't do that in the paper without trouble. Then when the things are up all over town you treat it as a news item and make it sound like there might be something in the charges. It'll start people talking and that's the only way you can win elections."

Prime nodded slowly.

"It's a good idea," he said. "I'd hate to get caught printing the damn things but I'll do it. I'll run them off myself on an old hand set press we never use anymore. The pressroom will be empty after eight and I can get them out in an hour or so."

"Okay, I'll pick them up myself at ten." Rush grinned. "I can see Carney's face when they turn up in the morning."

"How are you going to get them out?"

"I've got four men of my own in town and I'm borrowing several cars. Pedrick will help me. We'll start after everybody's in bed and plaster them all over the residential district. It shouldn't take over three or four hours. We can sleep late in the morning."

"Okay. Drive up to the rear entrance and I'll hand them out to you."

"There'll be another little act going on about the same time or just afterwards. Keep your ears open and give it a play."

"Should I have a man anywhere?"



"No, it might leak. You'll get it soon enough anyway. It'll just point up the other story."

"I'll keep an eye open and I'll cover the poster story myself. I'll treat it editorially. It should be fun."

Rush left then and walked out of the door into the noon sunshine. He was looking down the street ahead of him for a restaurant sign when he began to notice a heavy afterbeat to the sound of his own footsteps. He listened for a few steps, then identified the sound. Someone was walking close behind him and slightly out of step with him. He turned as he walked and looked over his shoulder. There five feet behind him was Junior as big as life and twice as ugly. He looked over the other shoulder and there was Junior's pal. They increased their stride and walked beside him, one on either side.

"Good morning, boys," said Rush. "Did you come back for another lesson?"

Junior grunted offensively. His partner was more verbose.

"This is a short trip, chum," he said. "We're taking you to see a guy."

"Anybody I know?" asked Rush.

"You'll know him all right," said Junior.

"Quiet, Junior. Now, chum, are you gonna give us trouble or are you coming along like a good boy."

Rush thought it might be interesting to meet their boss on his own terms.

"No," he said, "no trouble. I'll be a good boy this time. Where are we going?"

The smaller man held up a hand and by obvious prearrangement a car swung into the curb beside them. The black door swung open and Rush stepped in. Junior and his pal took seats on either side of him and the car moved off. It went through the business district and into a factory section stopping at last by a large warehouse.

Rush got out and was guided through a side door down a lane through cases of whiskey piled high to the ceiling. At the end of the lane he was motioned to the right and came up to a door with a sliding panel. Junior knocked and the panel slid open only to shut immediately. The door swung open and Rush was prodded through. He found himself in a neatly fitted ante room. His captors motioned

him through the ante room to another door which opened on a more sumptuous office with a large mahogany desk behind which sat Max Carney. Carney looked up as he came through the door and motioned him to a chair. Junior and his pals took seats on either side of the door. Carney reached to a cabinet behind him and brought out a bottle of whiskey. Rush noted the label and grinned. Carney was watching him carefully.

"I've investigated you very carefully, Henry. That bottle should prove it. I even know you prefer Old Overholt Rye whiskey."

Rush stood up and went to the cabinet behind Carney. There he found a glass. He opened the bottle and poured an inch in the glass. He drank it down and poured another long inch which he took around to his chair and sipped.

"I'm complimented, Carney," he said. "Why this unusual interest in me?"

"I also found that you are the kind of man who doesn't like to beat around the bush so let's not kid each other. All I want to know is how much."

Rush raised his eyebrows.

"How much what?" he asked.

"How much to lay off Forest City."

"You'll have to put that in easier words than that," said Rush. "I'm not with you."

"Okay," said Carney, "I'll spell it out. I dug up what you once did in that other city, Weston. I used to know Nose Gaust. I know that if you could knock him over you could cause me a lot of trouble. We're much better organized here than Nose was in Weston and I can take care of you if I have to. The only thing that really bothers me is why you're nosing in here. The only thing I can figure is that some reformer is paying you to blow the lid off. Okay. I'll pay you more."

"You ought to check your information a little," said Rush. "Whoever gave you the dope missed something."

Carney was honestly surprised.

"What did I miss?" he asked.

"They should have told you that I never sell out. Supposing I was here for the reason you say and that somebody was paying me, you haven't got enough money to buy me off. Nobody has."

"That's a little silly, Henry," said Car-



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ney. "I won't give you the old guff about every man having a price, but when it comes to a choice of your neck or a large chunk of dough, any man's going to think twice."

"Not any man and I'm not worried about my neck."

Carney's face was immobile. His eyes were rock hard.

"I'd start worrying about it."

Rush grinned a slow infuriating grin.

"Is that a threat, Maxie?" he asked.

"That," said Carney, "is a threat."

"Who's going to be after my neck, these two bit thugs you sent after me today?"

There was a deep growl behind Rush and Carney held up a hand.

"Don't you think they could take care of you?" he asked.

"No, and besides you're too smart to send them after me." He drained his whiskey and stood up. He lit a cigarette and flicked the match at the ash tray on Carney's desk. "Let me make a speech, Maxie," he said. "Let me issue a couple of threats. I'm going to run you out of town so far it'll take three weeks to reach you by cable. I'm going to bust up your neat little monopoly into such little pieces they'll think somebody split an atom in your lap. I'm going to do it in about one more week. You're licked, Carney. You're licked bad and you'll know it after the city elections next week. I'd start pricing tickets for Timbuctoo and figuring how much dough I could take with me." Rush stopped and looked around at Junior and his friend.

"As far as your dime store comics back there are concerned, let me leave you with this thought. If anything happens to me the *Chicago Express* will spend fifty thousand dollars finding out what. They'll give this town so much publicity you'll never dare show your face again. And one more thing, Maxie. I have a friend in town who worked with me in the war. He was one of Uncle Sam's smarter boys. We're very fond of each other and if I turn up missing he won't wait for the judge and jury; he'll shoot you like a dog and all your thugs won't help you. And while I'm at it I'd better warn your boys to be careful with those rods they're toting. If they should happen to knock over my friend you'd be in the same spot because I'd have

to take care of you myself."

Rush walked toward the door till he stood between Junior and his friend.

"Sleep on it, Maxie," he said.

He turned, flipped ashes on Junior's lap and went out the door without a word said to stop him.

## VIII

IT WAS quite an army that Rush mustered at three o'clock in the morning. He had picked up a thousand posters from Prime's own hands at the delivery door of the *Chronicle* several hours earlier and marshalled his crew at the back door of Pedrick's apartment house at three. They divided the posters and the crew among the three cars. Rush and Gay went in Rush's rented car. Smoky and Merwin who amused Pedrick greatly were in Pedrick's car and Robin and Duffy were in Kit English's car. Earlier, Rush, with the help of Pedrick, had mapped out the residential district in three sections and each car headed for a section.

Three hours later as the first glow of the sun faded the darker blue of the eastern night they met again in Pedrick's apartment. Pedrick opened a bottle of rye and poured heavy shots in highball glasses. He proposed a toast.

"To ourselves, of course. Hard liquor for hard men and damnation to the foe."

They drank and Rush looked thoughtfully at his glass.

"After that toast I feel as though I ought to smash this on the stone floor," he said.

"Smash ahead," said Pedrick, "but you'll clean it up."

"I've just reconsidered," he said. "I'm also dead on my feet. Let's to horse and away. Robin, you drive Kit's car to her house and I'll follow and pick you up. The rest of you call a cab."

In the alley behind Pedrick's where they had parked the car Rush and Robin held a brief conference following which they spent a moment smearing mud over the license plates of the two cars. Then Robin drove off with Rush and Gay close behind him. Out of the alley in the street Robin turned right.

"Does he know where he's going?" asked Gay. "That's not the way to Kit's



house and she'll be needing her car in an hour or two."

"She'll get it in plenty of time," said Rush. "Just hang on, we're going for a little ride."

Robin's car picked up speed and headed through the residence districts. As they reached thirty miles an hour Rush reached in his shoulder holster and took out a thirty-eight revolver. He spun the cylinder once and looked out of the corner of his eye at Gay. Her eyes were on the gun in wide amazement.

"Have I given you the idea that you need protection from me?" she asked.

"No, I always figured my innocence was armor enough," said Rush.

He rolled down the window beside him and with the gun in his left hand reached out of the window and fired at the car ahead.

"Are you crazy?" asked Gay and for the first time she was shaken out of her customary poise. Her voice rose an octave. "Rush! That's Robin in the car ahead. He's your friend, remember?"

Rush emptied the gun at the car ahead and answering flashes came as Robin shot back. The night was torn into screaming fragments with the sound of the guns. Rush drew in his hand and tossed the gun to Gay. From his pocket he took a box and handed it to her.

"Fill it again," he said. "You can't have a gun battle without ammunition. Go on," he said as Gay stared at him, "fill it."

Slowly Gay's fingers opened the box. She pried at a shell with a fingernail. It came loose and fell in her palm. She looked at it a long second then smiled against her will.

Her fingers went busily to work filling the gun.

"Here you are, you rat," she said. "I should have known you weren't man enough to shoot a sure enough bullet. Blanks are about your speed."

By this time Robin was firing again and Rush emptied the gun out of the window in his direction.

"This," said Rush, "is what is known as an object lesson. We're proving to the citizens of Forest City that the place is going to hell. We're giving them a gun battle right in their laps. I'm going to wake up this joint if it takes dynamite."

Robin and Rush continued to give the citizens a gun battle for just over twenty minutes, then in the silence while Gay reloaded his gun Rush heard the distant howl of a squad car. He gave two loud blasts on the horn and waved as Robin looked over his shoulder. Five minutes later they were a mile away and a mile from each other. Rush drove sedately to the door of Gay's apartment house and opened the door. He followed her up the walk, through the hall and to the door of her apartment.

"Do you suppose," he said at the door, "that I could steal an hour's sleep on your davenport?" He lowered his eyes demurely, as if embarrassed by the words.

"My mother told me this would happen some day," said Gay. "I wish she'd told me what to do."

"I'm sure your mother would approve. My intentions are so honorable they hurt. I need an hour or so's sleep and I don't want to come in to the hotel at this time in the morning. Too many people would wonder where I'd been."

Gay tapped her toe on the wood floor. "You'd rather they thought you'd been here all night," she said.

"Say, they will, won't they? That's fine. You can report that to Carney, too. He'll think you're really working at your new job."

"Go to hell," said Gay. "Come on in and get your sleep."

Fifteen minutes later Rush minus shoes, coat and shirt was stretched on Gay's davenport. She came out of the bedroom in a long white and very flowing negligee. Her red hair flamed over her shoulders and cascaded in a thousand waves against the white silk. She pirouetted once and stood before him.

"I hope you like this negligee. I bought it for exactly this kind of a situation. I'm damned if I thought it would be like this though."

She came to the davenport and sat on its edge. She leaned forward and kissed Rush full on the lips. Her hair fell forward and made a curtain on either side of her face and she and Rush were in a tiny space in time alone. It was a space lit with the glow of a lamp sifting through her hair.

Then she stood up and looked down at



him. She looked down at him for a long time.

"Damn you," she said at last, "if I fall in love with you, you'll regret it till the day you die."

She turned and walked back into her bedroom closing the door after her.

The smell of coffee and the sound of bacon frying wakened Rush. He stretched muscles back into their original shape, swung his feet off the davenport on to the floor, scratched his head and ran his hand over sleepy eyes and down across a stubby chin. He stood up and walked to the door of the kitchen. Gay, dressed briefly in a halter and shorts looked up from a frying pan full of bacon.

"It's through the door to your right and across the bedroom," she said. "There's a razor on the top shelf of the cabinet."

Twenty minutes later, shaven, washed, and combed Rush knotted his tie and sat down across from Gay in the breakfast nook. He poured a cup of coffee and drank it black and hot before he spoke.

"Where's the morning paper?" he asked.

"Don't be so damn domestic," said Gay. "Last night was bad enough without you acting like a bored husband this morning."

Rush got up, walked around the end of the table, kissed her thoroughly and returned to his seat.

"Have you seen the morning paper, dear?" he asked.

"That's more like it. Not quite, but almost," said Gay.

She reached a hand down to the bench beside her and tossed the paper across the table. Rush spread it and poured a cup of coffee as he read the headlines. They were almost hysterical.

#### FOREST CITY IN GRIP OF CRIME WAVE

That was the banner. Column leads spoke of posters and of a running gun-battle through the streets at an early morning hour. The police were mystified. Rush read them all thoroughly including one he hadn't expected. When he was through he folded the paper, turned it around and laid it in front of Gay, his finger pointing at a subhead.

"You saved my life," he said accusingly.

"It was nothing that any girl scout couldn't do," said Gay. "How did I do it?"

"You let me stay the night with you. Look." His finger stabbed at the column he had indicated. The head read—

#### BOMB BLAST IN HOTEL ROOM

The room, Gay noted, was 715. She raised eyebrows at Rush.

"I call that home. A modest place, but mine own."

All joking was gone from Gay.

"This has stopped being funny," she said. "They're playing for keeps."

"Do you think I'm playing for fun?" asked Rush. "I asked for it and I got it, only I wasn't there on time to receive it personally. I even expected it. But, my dear," he looked seriously across the table at Gay, "I've got some very lovely things in store for them, too. And they'll get them personally. They're on their last legs. When the mob that runs this town begins to go in for actual violence, they're on the way out."

Gay lit a cigarette and puffed angrily.

"You're so damn sure of yourself," she said. "You think you're so damn invulnerable and all it will take is one bullet on a dark street and you're through. There's no more you. Where bullets are concerned you're like Achilles, only you're all heel."

Rush grinned.

"I hope I get what you mean," he said. "And let me point out the only error in your charge. I don't think I'm invulnerable. I've been shot at and shot often enough to know how much it hurts and how easy I am to get at if I'm not careful. Q.E.D. I'm always careful. Very careful."

He stood up from the table then and shrugged into his coat.

"Thanks for your hospitality and I'll see you this evening. I'll call about six and we'll eat somewhere."

"And spend the rest of the evening taking a long walk down dark alleys where no one can see us."

"You're inexperienced. We'll be much safer among the bright lights. People almost never shoot you there."

He kissed her solidly and left.

A cruising cab picked him up a block away and deposited him at the offices of the *Forest City Chronicle*. He found Bill Prime and Pedrick in Prime's office. Pedrick raised an eyebrow at him from a chair



across the room.

"Among a lot of guys who have been lucky in love, you are the luckiest I've ever known. I hope you thanked that red-head for saving your life."

"I did," said Rush. "I did indeed."

"What the hell is this deal?" asked Prime.

"What deal?" asked Rush.

"Start with the bomb."

"That's one that missed me in more ways than one. I don't know who put it there, but I'd hate to think I couldn't get it in three guesses."

Prime nodded.

"Yeah. You're setting new records for personal unpopularity in certain quarters. But how about the gun battle?"

"Now, that's something else again," said Rush. "That is a grade A sample of my own brand of dynamite. I think I bought about ten thousand votes for Covington for the price of four boxes of blank cartridges and a half hour of my time."

Prime leaned across the desk and stared at him.

"You staged that with blanks?" he asked.

Rush nodded.

Prime swore briefly under his breath.

"A phony," he said, "a goddam phony."

Rush narrowed eyes at him across the desk.

"I hope I can depend on you to keep it on the front page. I'd hate to have all this blow up in my face. I'd hate to do it but I'd throw you and your paper to the wolves in a minute if I thought you were backing out. Somebody hired me to come in here and it could have been you. I could think so and tell people that anyway."

"Put away your knife, Rush," said Pedrick. "Nobody's double-crossing you. It's you that the printer's ink in Bill's veins boils at the idea that he got taken in by a phony."

Prime swore again and then relaxed, his face loosening into a grin.

"Yes, damnit. I never thought I'd bite on a deal like that. But it was a good one and it ought to get you at least ten thousand votes." He chewed briefly on a fresh cigar, put a match to it and looked at Rush. "What next?" he asked.

"More dynamite," said Rush. "I don't know exactly what kind but I've got to

keep things blowing up or the story'll get cold by Tuesday."

"Don't worry about that," said Prime. "That's only four days away. I'll feed them gang war and crime wave till they're full up to here." His palm sliced across his throat.

"Fair enough," said Rush. "I think I'll keep plugging though. I've got a couple of cracks I want to blast open before I'm through."

"Just be sure you keep out of the line of fire," said Pedrick. "Next time you may be sleeping at home."

"Heaven forbid," said Rush. "Now, I think I'll see if I have any clothes left and have lunch. See you later."

He left and headed for the hotel.

A HARRIED hotel manager showed Rush to his room. It was a shambles. However, Rush's luck held. The blast had centered under the bed and his clothes in the closet were untouched. There was a good deal of dust and dirt showered on his shirts and linen in the dresser but a laundry would fix them good as new. The only real damage from Rush's standpoint was done to a bottle of rye. It had shattered and run over the desk.

He calmed the hotel manager by promising not to sue the hotel. When promised a new room he followed him down the hall. He went into the coffee shop and spread a noon edition of the *Chronicle* across the table while waiting for his order to come. Bill Prime had been as good as his promise. He played the various stories for all they were worth. They read like a Hearst sheet in full cry. As he read, Rush wondered what ammunition he could dig up to throw on the fire. He didn't wonder long, nor did he have to dig for ammunition. The waitress stood over him with a plate suspended waiting for him to move the paper. Simultaneously as he moved a shot rang out just outside the coffee shop—the girl dropped the plate and Rush jumped as though the shot had hit him. The paper save his clothes and he scrambled out of the booth and dodged around tables to the street door of the coffee shop. To his left, a matter of ten feet, a crowd of people were clustered around a huddled figure on the sidewalk. Rush shouldered his way in and looked down. There was



something familiar about the lean tailored length huddled around a puddle of blood on the sidewalk. He almost got it in the slick hair, mustache, and sideburns but not quite. He turned to the man beside him.

"Who is it?" he asked.

His neighbor didn't even look up.

"Joe Natale," he said. "Carney's right bower."

That was all Rush needed. He had seen the man in Carlo's the night of the great smell. He turned on his heel and elbowed his way out of the growing crowd. At its fringe he turned to go into the coffee shop when a hand fell on his shoulder.

"Mr. Henry?" said a voice like a saw in a pine knot.

He turned to face a shapeless man in rumpled clothes. Filmy eyes stared at him over pasty gray bags.

"What's on your mind?" asked Rusk shaking off the hand.

"Hacker wants to see you at headquarters," said the voice.

"How'd he know I was here?"

"Saw you." The man flipped a thumb over his shoulder. Rush followed it with his eyes and saw the Chief of Police sitting in a squad car directing the operations of his men. He left the shapeless man abruptly and walked over to Hacker.

"You want to see me?" he asked.

The chief looked out of the car window.

"Yeah," he said. "At headquarters. Get in."

"You're seeing me now," said Rush. "I'm eating."

"I'll see you at headquarters. Get in."

Rush looked at him for a moment then dropped his cigarette to the sidewalk and ground it out with his toe.

"I'm eating, Hacker," he said and turned away.

"Get him," said Hacker in a tired voice.

A pair of hands attached themselves to each of Rush's arms and he felt himself being forcibly moved back to the car. It was neatly done. Several pairs of eyes stared incuriously and turned back to the stretcher now being shoved into an ambulance. The car door opened and Rush was shoved into the back seat. Hacker issued orders to men through the door of the car, then waved the driver. The car shot away from the curb and headed for

the police station.

Rush sat quietly during the trip to the station and the brief walk to the Chief's office. In the office Hacker walked behind his desk and motioned Rush to a chair. Two men in plain clothes came into the office and took chairs behind Rush. A uniform cop came in to stand behind Hacker. Hacker took his time about lighting a cigar. When he was satisfied with the light he looked at Rush through the cloud of smoke.

"You went too far, Henry!" he said.

Rush looked at him.

"You been getting away with murder this last week but now you went too far. We got you cold."

Rush looked at him unbelievably.

"Are you going to pin this on me?" he asked.

Hacker nodded with satisfaction.

"It's cold," he said.

"Well, I'll be a name of a name," said Rush. "You big dumb hunk of lard. I've got an alibi as solid as your head. You couldn't hook me if you had an eye witness."

Hacker leaned across the desk.

"What kind of an alibi?" he asked softly.

"A cinch," said Rush. "I was—" he stopped dead. "Why, I believe you would," he said.

"Would what?" asked Hacker.

"Take care of my alibi. Book me, you big slob and I'll bring in my alibi. Until then you can sweat."

Hacker leaned back in his chair and surveyed the ceiling.

"Okay," he said in the general direction of the roof, "you got an alibi. At least we'll assume you got one for the moment. I got another charge for you. Conspiracy." He came forward in the chair and swung to face Rush. "If you ain't been doing these killings, you know who has. You hired them."

Rush laughed at him. Laughed loud.

"You know," said Hacker, "I wouldn't be surprised if you'd confess to something like that. And it'd sure be a load off my mind if you did." He nodded to the two plainclothesmen. "Why don't you boys arrange to take down Mr. Henry's confession." He shoved a sheet of paper across the desk. "It should be something along



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the lines I've indicated here on this paper. I'll be waiting for you." He grinned evilly at Rush.

The room was ten by ten with white-washed walls and a bare cement floor sloping to a drain in one corner. There was a straight chair in the center of the room and a shaded light hanging from a cord to the ceiling. There were straps attached to the back of the chair. Two of them. One for each arm. They tied Rush in the chair and went to work.

It was simple at first. Open palm slaps from meaty hands. A tap or two from a night stick on the shin. Rush laughed. It got tougher then. Little tricks with cigarette coals. A thorough workout with a leaded hose. Full fisted blows in the face. Rush's grin was crooked but it was still a grin. Then they brought out a hammer and a heavy piece of iron. They had his fingers on the iron and hammer raised when somebody pounded on the door. It was unlocked and a face peered into the room.

"Fix him up quick and get him up to Hacker's office."

There was a brief argument, briefer but violent cursing and Rush was unstrapped from the chair. They half led, half carried him to a lavatory where cold towels and more cold water revived him and reduced some of the swelling. He was on his own feet and maneuvering under his own power when he entered Hacker's office for the second time. Hacker was seated at his desk as though he might never have moved, but there was a difference. Hacker was a different man. He figuratively bowed and scraped in his effort to treat the whole affair as a joke, or at the most as an understandable error in judgment. He also writhed in spiritual agony. The reason for his abrupt reversal sat easily in a chair across the room.

"Take it easy, Hacker," said Matt Pedrick. "Mr. Henry knows you have the intelligence of a bright four year old. You don't have to prove it. Did the boys get rough, Rush?"

"They were about to. Consider me in your debt."

"Think nothing of it and let me apologize for our Chief of Police. He got the job because he could count to twenty without taking off his shoes. Police work remains a mystery to him."

"Now, Mr. Pedrick—" started Hacker. "I think it smells a little in here, Rush. Shall we go?"

"It stinks," said Rush. "Let's."

On the sidewalk, Rush refused Pedrick's offer of a ride.

"I've still got the rented car somewhere around here and I've a quick trip I have to make. I think the time has come for me to have further words with Mr. Covington."

Rush found Covington at his home. He waited while he finished lunch and then walked with him into the garden. There, surrounded by a high hedge, they sat in comfortable lawn furniture and talked. That is, Covington talked. His tone was a nice blend of sorrow and anger.

"I'm taking the lightest possible view of the things that have happened in the past week in Forest City, Henry, but even glossing over minor accidents such as the wrecked night club and the stink bombs in Max Carney's place things have come to such a state that I can no longer countenance them. There have been three murders and I personally heard a running gun battle in the streets. It has to stop."

"It will," said Rush. "It'll stop Tuesday evening when you're elected mayor. You'll stop it yourself."

"You can't contemplate more bloodshed."

"I didn't even contemplate the bloodshed you've had. Beau Marr was shot after I had been in town a bare half dozen hours. I'd never even heard his name. The man who was shot this morning was a complete stranger to me."

Covington frowned.

"Do you mean to say that none of this was your doing? After the things you told me when you first came to my office."

"Let me tell you again what I'm doing," said Rush. "I'm doing everything I can to arouse suspicion among the men who have been running your town. They have had such a smooth running operation that it was impossible to convince the average man that anything was wrong. I'm convincing them. I've tried to set them at each others throats. I'll admit that that is probably why Sully got killed. But you can't clean up a city like this without breaking a few dishes. Sully was just a soiled old plate and he had it coming. Beyond that I'm stage managing a few effects that may



not be quite what they seem. I had hoped that a little false sound and fury would be all that was necessary but somewhere along the line somebody else drew a hand. They play rougher than I do."

"Who could it be—not Carney surely?"

"I hardly think so. Max is smart enough to know that blood on the street is just the kind of thing that'll ruin him. He also knew there was no reason for shooting anybody."

"Then who for heaven's sake and why?"

"When you give me that answer I'll have a lot of other answers for you."

"Well, answers or no answers it's got to stop. I could never face myself or my friends if I knew that I climbed to the mayor's office through a pile of dead bodies. I must ask you to stop your efforts immediately and leave Forest City."

"I'm afraid that's out of your hands, Mr. Covington," said Rush. "I'm going to elect you in spite of yourself and then I hope you'll be—"

Rush broke off in mid word. A twig of the hedge had moved a fraction of an inch and no breeze stirred its neighborhood branches. Then just above that twig a darker shape appeared and for a second sunlight glinted against the green of the hedge. Rush was out of his chair in a diving lunge for Covington. He caught the older man full in the chest and rolled over him tumbling chair and all to the ground. In the same second a sharp report rang out, an echo rapped back and a branch of the hedge behind the spot where Covington had been seated fluttered to the ground. Rush roughly shoved Covington behind a tree, then in a crouching run, drawing a gun from his shoulder as he moved, he angled across the lawn to a corner of the hedge where a flagged path ran through a break.

He could have saved the steps. He lowered his head to the ground and looked around a corner of the hedge but his quarry had gone. In the distance a motor throbbed into life and roared away. Slowly he regained his feet and walked back to Covington who was now standing erect brushing himself off.

"What was that?" he asked angrily.

Rush told him.

"You were slated to be number four," he said.

Covington stared at him digesting the unpleasant truth. As he stood there he

seemed to grow in stature. His shoulders came back and his chin went up.

"I have been mistaken, Henry. You seem to know more about this thing than I do. Stay in Forest City. Elect me by any means you can. Then come around and tell me how to clean up my city. I'll listen to you then."

He turned and walked back into the house.

Rush watched his retreating back with a small grin. Silently he thanked the unseen gunman. The mayor-to-be had almost been a problem—the gunman had solved it for him.

Rush found Gay sitting by her telephone literally waiting for him to call.

"I've been just languishing here waiting for you to call, big boy," she said.

"Big boy?" said Rush. "Is this Westlake 4191?"

"Of course it is, you silly one. Who did you think it was?" Her voice was loaded with a false gaiety.

"Is this Gay Wimberly?" asked Rush.

"Of course. Who did you think it'd be—Lana Turner?"

"What in the hell has happened to you?" He had a sudden thought. "Are you drunk?" he asked.

"No, but it sounds like a good idea. Why don't you come up here? We'll have a party. Just us two. Isn't that cozy?"

Rush's brow furrowed and he looked at the receiver as if it were playing him tricks. Then he got it.

"Are you alone?" he asked.

"Of course not, silly."

"Are you trying to decoy me up there for somebody?"

"Oh, I'd love to."

"Carney?"

"Of course."

"Okay, Circe. Tell him you've made a deal. You've decoyed me. I'll be there in a half an hour."

"You're the sweetest boy," giggled Gay. "You be careful. I want you to get here in one piece."

"And leave the same way. Don't worry, I'll bring my G-Man detective badge. They'll leave me alone then."

Rush hung up then and immediately made another call. When he was through with that one he left the phone booth and walked through the lobby of the hotel to the bar.



## IX

RUSH pushed the button outside of Gay's apartment a punctual half hour later. She came to the door in person and looked up at him from under quizzically raised brows. He winked at her and put his arms around her and kissed her soundly. In her ear he whispered.

"Everything's okay. Don't worry."

Aloud, Gay said to him:

"The strangest thing, dear. Just after you called Mr. Carney dropped by. When he heard you were coming he insisted on waiting. He wanted to talk to you."

"Always glad to see an old friend," said Rush. He stepped around Gay and into the room. Carney was seated in the middle of the davenport, a drink in one hand and a cigar in the other. Seated strategically, in corners of the room were his two boys, Junior and his pal. "Hello, Maxie," said Rush. "Nice to see you again."

"Sit down, Henry," said Max Carney. His cigar pointed at a chair opposite the davenport.

"Sure, Maxie," said Rush. "How about a drink, Gay?"

Gay poured a drink and put it in his hand. He lit a cigarette and blew smoke at the ceiling.

"Well, what's on your mind, Carney?"

"I wanted to finish that talk we had."

"I thought it was finished. I thought when I told you to get out of town that there wasn't anything left to say."

"There is though. I got the same thing to say to you and I mean it."

"You mean you think I was joking?"

"You might as well have been. You aren't going to be able to do anything about it."

"You fascinate me, Carney. You're always so sure of yourself. How do you know I'm not going to be able to do anything about it?"

"Because I'm going to put you where you can't do anything at all."

Gay gasped behind Rush.

"Why, Maxie," said Rush. "That sounds very much as if you were thinking of having me knocked off. I warned you about that. It'd be the biggest mistake of your career. You'd think the roof fell in on you inside of twenty-four hours."

Carney smiled and his lips thinned to knife edges.

"It was nice of you to warn me about that, Henry. But I've got a way around that. I'm going to hang onto you till this is over then you can do anything you want to."

"Oh, but that would be the same as knocking me over. If the paper doesn't hear from me every twenty-four hours they get practically frantic."

"They'll hear from you all right. You'll call them. I'll make a point of seeing that you call them and—" he paused dramatically, "and tell them what I tell you to tell them."

"A brilliant scheme, Maxie," said Rush. "But what if I won't talk?"

"You'll talk all right," Carney let his eyes swing to his left and upward to Gay's face. "I think you'll talk, or sing, or stand on your head if I tell you to. All I'll have to do is turn Junior loose on your girl friend here and you'll turn over and play dead."

Rush smiled and it wasn't a pretty thing.

"You bastard," he said. "I think you'd really do that. I think you even think you could get away with it." He looked at the two uglies in the corners of the room. "Are these the troops you brought to take me in? Haven't they told you how I treat them? I wouldn't trust those two cretins to bring in Shirley Temple." He stopped and scowled in disgust. "Hell, this is silly. Let's get it over. Come on in, Smoky and Duffy."

The bedroom door opened behind Carney and Smoky and Duffy stepped into the room, guns in hand.

"Now, take your hired hands and get the hell out of here. Dammit, Carney. Can't you get it through your head that your methods went out with Al Capone? We've smartened up on our side of the street. Now blow and impress it on Junior and his pal there that if they get in my way again I'm going to beat the bloody bejesus out of them. I'm tired of stumbling over them everywhere I go, and that includes you. Go on, get out."

Carney nodded his head toward the door and without a word Junior and his friend walked out into the hall. Carney followed them in complete silence.

When the door had closed Rush turned to Gay.

"You were terrific," he said. "It would have been tough if I'd walked in here



cold. I'd have had to mess up your apartment to get rid of those termites."

"I was scared," said Gay, "scared to death."

"It was nothing. Just be damn thankful you have a fire escape that opens on your bedroom window."

Another head popped into the room from the bedroom.

"Can I come in?" asked Robin Twist.

"I thought I told you to stay under cover," said Rush.

"I was just bringing up the rear. In case things got out of hand I was going to pop in and save you. I always wanted to be a hero."

Rush looked around the room.

"Well we're all here but Merwin so we might as well have a brief council. I wanted to see you guys anyway. Where is Merwin by the way?"

"I stuck Merwin in your hotel room. I wanted to be sure it was clean when you came in tonight," said Robin.

"I don't think I'm going to come in tonight. I'd better get to Chicago by tomorrow morning."

They all looked at him.

"Something new, Rush?" asked Robin.

"Not exactly new," said Rush. "It's something that's been growing on me."

"I hope it looks nice on you," said Gay.

"I think I've had the same thought," said Robin. "You need Mr. X."

"I'm afraid I do. Somebody has gone trigger happy in this town. There have been three murders and this afternoon somebody took a pot shot at Covington. The only one of the big three left is Carney and for all his antique ideas of how to be a gangster, he's no fool. He had too good a thing to risk losing it all just to be the only boss. He could have sat still for years and milked a million dollars clear out of this town. So it has to be somebody else."

"And that leaves Mr. X," said Robin.

"It does indeed," said Rush. "I have tried and tried but I can't figure anybody else with a big enough stake in this town to start knocking off the citizens. It's either X or some other unknown quantity who wants to take things over."

"Or maybe both," said Smoky.

Rush turned his head very slowly and looked at Smoky. He looked at him for a long time before he spoke.

"Take a bow, Smoky," he said at last. "I should have thought of that myself. It's a perfect angle. X hires me to come in and clean up the town. Then when it gets around what I'm trying to do, he knocks off the head men in the rackets and I get blamed for it. Then when I leave he takes over where Carney and Sully and Marr left off. Very pretty. A neat scheme. But it won't work. When I get through with this town the combined efforts of Al Capone, Legs Diamond and Lucky Luciano couldn't get it organized again. I think X miscalculated. I don't think he figured on the election. I've convinced Covington that I can show him how to run a clean town, and I can. I also am going to get Covington elected. After that X is out in the cold."

"But, in the meantime," said Robin.

"That's the rub, Robin," said Rush. "In the meantime he may take another shot at Covington and not miss. He might even get me. So I've got to get X first if I can. That's why I'm going to Chicago. The trail started there so I'll go there to pick it up."

An hour later Rush was in a charter plane bound for Chicago and five hours later he was in his office lavatory removing the stains of travel.

**S**HARP at ten o'clock Rush was in the law offices of Leach, Carruthers and Leach. Five minutes later he was closeted with Aaron Leach. He laid his cards on the table. They were not pretty cards and Aaron Leach was visibly disturbed by them.

"I hope, Mr. Henry," he said, "that it is not in your mind that I am a party to any such conspiracy as you suggest."

"Not at all. I am sure the idea is as distasteful to you as it is to me. However, I am certain in my own mind that you have been used to further just such a conspiracy. A rather vicious thing is happening in Forest City and I want to stop it. I am convinced that the only way I can stop it is by reaching the man you represented in hiring me. I am quite willing to forfeit the ten thousand dollar fee but I must find that man and stop further and needless bloodshed."

"You need not worry about your fee, Mr. Henry," said Leach stiffly. "If you perform the task for which you were re-



tained, my firm will make good the fee you were promised."

"It isn't that," said Rush. "It's gone beyond money. Till now the men who have been killed have earned it one way or the other. It was part of the way they lived. But now innocent people are in danger and I don't propose to let anything happen to them if I can possibly stop them."

"You realize, of course, that I don't know the name of the man for whom I secured your services. My only contact with him was through his lawyer."

"But you know the lawyer. Give me his name. Through him I can find X."

Leach considered the request for a long moment. Finally he shook his head.

"In view of the absolute secrecy that was requested by my correspondent in Forest City, I'm afraid it would be unethical for me to reveal his name on such strictly circumstantial evidence as you have presented. You might be wrong, Mr. Henry."

"Of course I might. I might be right too and an innocent man may be killed while you wrestle with your conscience over ethics. That, if you'll pardon the expression, is a hell of a thing to have on your conscience."

"It is indeed, Mr. Henry. I pray you are wrong." The older man stood up as though to end the interview. "You are a detective, Mr. Henry, and by all reports a good one. You should be able to devise some means of learning my correspondent's name. After all. He learned mine."

The older man smiled and stepped around his desk to open the door for Rush. Rush was halfway out of the building before he got the hint in the old lawyer's last words. He turned instantly on his heel and went back to the outer office of Leach, Carruthers and Leach. There he found a faded spinster presiding over the combined switchboard and information desk.

"What was Mr. Aaron Leach's school?" he asked.

"He attended Harvard," she replied.

"And his class?"

"Mr. Leach graduated in 1906."

"Thank you," said Rush with feeling.

In the lobby of the building he found a phone booth and dialed the number of the *Express*. Seconds later Pappy Daley was on the phone.

"Rush here," he said.

"In Chicago?"

"Right."

"What are you doing here. Is the Forest City thing over?"

"Not till next Wednesday. Right now I need information and you can get it for me faster than anybody else."

"Shoot."

"I want a list of names of the graduating class of 1906 from the Harvard Law School and I want all of their present addresses."

"I'll put our New York bureau on it. They should be able to get it from the school in a couple of hours. What shall I do with it?"

"Shoot it to me airmail special registered at once. It's vital. Better yet. I'll call you sometime tonight. Take it with you and leave word where I can get you."

"Check. I should have it by six. What time is it now?"

Rush looked at his watch.

"It's eleven-thirty. I'll be in Forest City by four or four-thirty. I'll give you a call then on the chance that you'll have it. It's really important."

He hung up then and caught a taxi for the long ride to the airport. His watch showed exactly four o'clock as the wheels of the plane touched the runway in Forest City.

The cab ride to the hotel took thirty minutes. At exactly four-thirty he got Pappy on the phone again.

"Got it, Rush. Harvard was glad to oblige the New York office of the *Chicago Express*."

"Give," said Rush.

"Do you want them all, or do you just want the one from Forest City?"

"Give me the one from Forest City, mindreader. I'm in a hurry."

"A gentleman by the name of King S. Wellwood graduated in 1906 and at last report to the alumni committee was in practice in Forest City. Is that what you want?"

"That's it. Thanks, Pappy."

Immediately Rush called Matt Pedrick.

"I want to hire me a lawyer, Matt. I want some legal information."

"Will the attorney for the paper do?"

"No, I want a brand new lawyer, just out of law school."

"A fledgling?" Pedrick's voice mirrored his curiosity.

"Yes, it's a rather odd thing I want and



ingenuousness is a requisite. He can't seem too erudite."

"Try a young fellow named Curran. You'll find him in the book. His office is in the Merchant's Building. He's as new as they come."

"Thanks, Matt. I'll tell you about it later. I want to get onto him."

Ten minutes later Rush caught young Mr. Curran locking his door and found little difficulty in persuading him to reopen his office. The interior looked as though he could stand a paying client or two. Rush put his business before him with only a few sentences of explanation.

"It's very important to me and to the good health of several other people to know the names of everybody who keep King S. Wellwood on an annual retainer."

Rush felt that X, if he were a client of Wellwood's would be a permanent one and that X would never trust a lawyer with whom he had had no previous dealings. Curran was doubtful.

"I hardly think that would be ethical."

"To hell with ethics. I argued ethics with another member of your profession all morning. I want facts. Human lives are involved and the easier and quieter I get this information the better chance I have to save them."

"Can't you tell me a little more?"

"No," said Rush bluntly. "There's a hundred dollar bill waiting for the answer to my question." A little more kindly he said. "If it will ease your conscience any please take my word for it that it is desperately important that I get the information I want. Also that it will be used only as a lead to other information. Also, it will never be known that you gave me the information."

Rush couldn't decide which of his arguments won. But he won.

"All right," said Curran reluctantly. "I can give you a fairly complete list right away. I was something of a protegee of his and until I graduated I worked summers in his office preparing papers and that kind of thing."

"How soon is right away?"

"Say an hour."

"I'll be in my room at the hotel. Bring it there and I'll give you the hundred dollars."

Curran was punctual. Almost exactly an hour later he knocked on the door of

Rush's room. Inside he tossed a paper across the bed to him.

"That's just about it. I checked through the classified directory to refresh my memory and that is pretty complete. There may be a few small clients I've missed but all the big ones and the estates he handles are there."

Without looking at the list Rush took a hundred dollars from a wad of paper money on the dressing table and tossed it to Curran.

"Thanks, Curran, and if you begin to lose sleep about this just remember that you may have saved a life or two including mine. Come around in a week and I'll explain it to you. You'll feel better then."

Curran left, the bill still clenched tightly in his fist. Rush picked up the list and began to read. It was a long list. Mr. King S. Wellwood had a profitable clientele. It seemed a respectable one, too. So respectable that Rush didn't recognize a name on it. A few were familiar, their names being part of well known firm names in the city, but not a one had even touched the fringes of his path through Forest City. He sighed and tossed the paper away. It was a hundred dollars kicked away. It only told him that he had further digging to do.

Rush remembered that Pedrick had mentioned a party at his apartment that evening. He reached for the phone and again called Pedrick. This time at the apartment.

"What time is your party set to blow, Matt?"

"Why, I expect the small fry and hard drinkers to turn up about eight. The bigger shots and those who can afford their own liquor will start coming about ten."

"Who'll be there?"

"The people I laughingly call my spies. My sources in other words. I throw one of these every so often for everybody who ever gave me a tip on a story. I thought you'd enjoy it. It gets quite raucous before it's through."

"I'll enjoy it all right." He paused for a moment. "Matt, would it be inconvenient if Gay and I got there a little early, say seven o'clock. I'm at a dead end for some information and you're about the only one who can give it to me."

"You'll be welcome, both to come and to dig anything I'm carrying in this garbage can I call my mind. I'll have a drink ready



for your outstretched hand."

"Thanks, Matt."

PEDRICK answered Rush's ring with a glass in each hand. He handed one to Gay and one to Rush.

"Come in," he said. "Take the best chairs and be comfortable. When the mob gets here you'll be on your feet for an hour or two and the air will be thick enough to float the Queen Mary. Be comfortable while you can."

Rush and Gay sat on a low divan and Pedrick sat astraddle a straight back chair his arms folded on its back, a drink in his hand.

"Well, what do I know that you want to know?" he asked.

"This is pretty confidential, Matt, so I won't tell you why I want to know. You'll learn soon enough. I just want to know everything there is to know about a lawyer named King Wellwood."

"Wellwood?" asked Pedrick. "What on earth has King got to do with anything you're interested in?"

"That's just it, Matt. I can't tell you right now. I want some background on him."

"That's easy enough. Harvard Law in the early 1900's, back to practice in his father's firm. His father died in the twenties and he took in a young partner, a guy named Bell. He's kind of a drone—does most of the work, I'm told, while King does the court work and keeps up the front. Very successful. Married. No children. Big house in Country Club Place." He took a swallow of his drink and looked at Rush. "Enough?"

"No," said Rush. "That's not quite the sort of thing I want. How are his ethics? Is he greedy for anything? Does he have any complexes?"

"King? Hell, I don't know. He's an acquaintance. I meet him here and there and he always calls me Matt and I call him King but we're not personal friends. I can tell you this. He's never hit my column and if there were a screw loose there anywhere he'd have made it one way or the other. I don't even have a file on him."

"How's his bank account?"

"I don't know but I can find out." He went to the phone and dialed a number.

He talked for a moment in a low voice then hung up and came back to straddle his chair. "Excellent. No exact figures, but King S. Wellwood will never go hungry, not if he stops taking money for his work beginning tomorrow. He is in the bucks."

There was little more he could ask without giving away his reason for questioning and he didn't want to do that just yet. He closed the subject.

"Okay, Matt. I may be mistaken. Let it slide for now. I'll explain after I'm sure."

Matt shrugged his shoulders philosophically. At that moment a ring on the doorbell brought him to his feet and he opened the door to admit Kit English. Her arms were loaded with packages which she deposited on a table in the kitchen.

"I don't know why I go to this trouble. This mob of thugs won't know what they're shoving in their mouths. They'd be happy with pig knuckles and sauerkraut but you have to give them caviar." She looked up at Gay. "Come on, Wimberly, put on an apron, you're going to work."

The girls busied themselves making canapes and Rush and Matt went into the large living room. Matt looked quizzically over his newly filled glass at Rush. His mouth was open to ask a question when someone leaned on the bell with a heavy hand and gave it a loud shave and a hair-cut beep beep.

"Lord," said Pedrick. "They're starting early tonight. Get behind the bar, man. You've got to earn your booze tonight."

He went to the door and swung it open. From the open hallway Rush could hear mixed voices shouting hellos and Pedrick's lighter voice mingling with a greeting. From that time on he was busy mixing drinks. The doorbell was never still and the bar was never free of an outstretched hand waiting to be filled with a drink. He lost track of the time and was astonished when he looked at his wrist watch to realize it was twelve o'clock. He looked over the sea of heads and saw Gay passing a tray of hors d'oeuvres. Kit came to stand at his elbow.

"Has Matt left you here alone all evening?"

Rush admitted that that was the case.

"I'll fix that. Matt!" she called. Matt came elbowing his way through the crowd. "Get yourself behind this bar and work awhile. Rush has hardly had time to pour



himself a drink."

Rush knew better but he gladly accepted the hefty slug she poured him and let her lead him away as Matt took over at the bar.

"Come on," she said. "Get a breath of fresh air. That stuff in there has been breathed thirty times all ready." She led him through double glass doors to a small balcony projecting above the inner court of the apartment building. She closed the doors behind them and breathed deeply of the night air.

"That's better," she said. "Although I'm surprised that nobody else has discovered this spot. Last time Matt threw one of these parties he caught two couples in what amounted to flagrante delecto at one and the same time out here. One at each end of the balcony."

"That's pleasant," said Rush. "I imagine it was uncomfortable, though."

Kit took a cigarette from the package Rush offered, lit it, dragged savagely blowing the smoke out of both nose and mouth. She looked up at Rush and shrugged her shoulders. Then she let out her breath with a long sigh.

"I think I ought to tell you I brought you out here for a reason," she said.

"You flatter me," said Rush. "But what if Matt comes out again?"

"I don't see—oh, the flagrante delecto. No, I choose my spots better than that. No, I wanted to ask a favor."

"Again, you flatter me. What can I do for you?"

"I want to talk to you in private and just as soon as possible. It's very important."

"This is quite private," suggested Rush.

"No, somebody might come out here any minute. It has to be absolutely private."

"What would you suggest?" asked Rush.

"Could I possibly come to your room tonight?"

"The gallant thing for me to say would be that you could come to my room any night. But I don't think that's what you want." Rush considered. "Yes, you can go up there and wait for me if you wish. It may be some time. I'll give you my key and you can wait if you want to."

"Oh, thank you." She breathed another deep sigh. "That's a relief. I was afraid you'd put me off and it is so desperately

important that I see you tonight."

Rush looked at his watch. It was nearly one o'clock.

"What time does this mob clear out?"

"Oh, they'll be there for hours yet."

"Well, I think I'll take Gay home now. That'll shorten your wait and make it easier all around."

"I'll probably leave before the party's over. It usually gets pretty rough about this time. I'm not really fastidious but some of these people turn my stomach. I always say orgies are such personal things, don't you think? A crowd spoils a good one."

Rush had no answer to that. He opened the door to the living room and they stepped back into the heat and smoke and noise. He found Gay in the kitchen and put his arms around her untying her apron as he pulled her toward him. He kissed her briefly on the lips and turned her toward the door.

"We are blowing this fly trap," he said. "I've had a big day and I need sleep."

Rush made his need for rest stand up as an excuse and with a last drink and an almost brotherly kiss he left Gay's apartment. His watch gave him two-ten as he walked down the sidewalk toward his parked car. Fifteen minutes later he was outside the door of his room in the hotel. Having given his key to Kit he tried the door with his hand. The knob turned and the door swung away from him into the room. The light was on. He pushed the door away from him and stood just outside the door looking in. As the door swung open it revealed Kit lying on his bed holding a drink in one hand, a cigarette in the other.

"Welcome," she said. "Come into my parlor."

"You're no spider, and I'm no fly. As a matter of fact this is no parlor. But I'll come in."

He closed the door behind him and walked to the dressing table to pour himself a drink. He swallowed deeply and turned to the bed. He looked at Kit stretched on the spread. She made a pretty picture with her blonde hair spread in what much have been calculated folds on the pillow. He walked to the edge of the bed and sat down. He took the cigarette from her fingers and dragged on it.

"Well, what gives? I'm pretty sure it's



not my manly figure that has dragged you up here."

"Don't be too sure," she said.

"Thank you," said Rush.

Kit sat up in the bed and put a hand on Rush's as it lay on the spread.

"No, it wasn't your manly figure although it certainly has its points. I came up here to offer you fifteen thousand dollars to get out of town."

"Where did you ever get hold of fifteen thousand dollars and why do you want me out of town?" asked Rush.

"It isn't my fifteen thousand dollars," she said. She shut her eyes and squeezed the lids tightly together for a moment. "Oh, I'm doing this all wrong. I'm so mixed up I don't know what to do."

Rush looked at her thoughtfully.

"Look," he said finally. "You don't need to figure out an act to put on. Just tell me what happened. I'll figure it out for myself."

Kit opened her eyes and looked at him.

"Maybe that'd be the best. This evening before I started for Matt's I got a phone call. It was a man with a kind of muffled voice. He said he wanted me to run an errand for him. I was going to hang up when he said there was five thousand dollars in it for me if I did it right. I listened then—"

She broke off then and looked down at her hand on Rush's.

"I don't suppose I can explain what five thousand dollars would mean to me. I could get away from this town. I could travel a little. I could find a place I liked and live there. I hate this town!" Her voice rose and fell in what was almost a sob.

"What about Matt?" asked Rush.

"Oh, Matt's all right. I like him very much. But he has too much fun here. He'd never leave Forest City. But then Forest City has always been nice to him. I was born on the wrong side of the tracks. I can never go to all the homes Matt does. He could never marry me without losing his friends out in Country Club Place. I'd hate that, too, just like I hate the town. My dad drove a garbage wagon in the bottoms when I was a kid. Nobody'd ever forget that. I want to get away. Sometimes at night I wake up in a cold sweat and I've been dreaming about meeting some of Matt's society friends and hearing them ask who my father was."

Rush got up and poured them both a drink.

"Okay. Now I know why you want five grand. How were you supposed to earn it?"

"By getting you to leave town. I was to offer you fifteen thousand. Then if you accepted I'd get twenty thousand through the mail tomorrow and I was to keep five thousand."

"And if I refuse?"

Kit hesitated.

"I can answer that, I think," said Rush. "If I refused you were to tell me that I wouldn't last twenty-four hours. That I'd be taken care of for good."

Kit nodded, her eyes lowered, looking down at nothing.

"I think you'd better tell them I refuse," said Rush.

Kit's head jerked up. Her eyes were wide staring into his.

"Oh, but you can't."

"I'm afraid I can," said Rush.

He stood up and walked to the window. Kit was off the bed in a flash of silken limbs. She came to stand directly in front of him before the window. She moved very close and her hands rested on his hips.

"Look at me, Rush," she said and her voice was husky with emotion. Rush looked directly into her eyes. "I'll up the offer," she said. "I'll go with it. You can have me for as long as you like, only leave town. I'll go wherever you go and stay as long as you like." Her lips parted and her breath came quicker. "Don't think it will be hard to take. Your manly figure does have its points."

Her hands on his hips moved around him and pulled him to her. Her parted lips came up to meet his and her body flowed forward the inches that had separated them. Under his lips hers moved slowly and her body trembled against his then strained to him.

An unfamiliar pulse throbbed in Rush's temple—his hands tightened on her shoulders, and he took one stumbling step with her away from the window then slowly he relaxed his hold on her shoulders, slower still his hands dropped behind his back and grasped hers. He pulled her arms from around his back and stepped away from her.

"No, Kit," he said. "No. It won't go down. I can't swallow it."



She looked up at him through eyes in which tears brimmed to overflowing.

"You mean you don't believe me?"

"It doesn't matter whether I believe you or not. I don't know what I believe. It's my pride that won't go down. I can't swallow it no matter how hard I try. I'm afraid you'll have to hunt your five grand somewhere else."

Kit stared at him unbelievably for a long moment. Then turned blindly and stumbled to the bed falling on her face on the cover. Her shoulders shook in spasms of sobbing that was almost unbearable because it was totally silent.

Rush poured a drink and slugged it down straight. He poured another and lit a cigarette. He sat in the chair and waited. Minutes passed and the figure on the bed became still. Then abruptly she sat up, got to her feet and walked to the dressing table. She drank deeply from the neck of the bottle. She opened her purse and did feminine things to her face. Then she picked up her purse and turned around to face Rush. In her face was acceptance. Her eyes looked at him with no trace of rancor, rather with something that almost approached sadness.

"Well," she said. "I tried. It was a good try, too."

"Yes, Kit," said Rush, "it was a good try."

She walked to the door, opened it, and closed it behind her without a word.

## X

**R**USH was up at eight-thirty and hurried through breakfast in the coffee shop to make the nine-thirty meeting he had scheduled in his room. It was time for action. Things had been quiet for better than twenty-four hours. It was time to remind the public once more that things were not as they seemed in Forest City and that Tuesday was the time to change them at the polls. He contemplated various forms of dynamite as the elevator climbed toward his floor.

As he had expected his little group was in his room ahead of him. Smoky had picked the lock as usual. Knowing that Smoky would rather pick a lock than use a key, Rush was no longer surprised at finding the mammoth reporter on the other side of any door.

Rush stood in the door and surveyed his army. They were all there. Smoky stretched full length on the bed, Robin at the window, Merwin sitting on the edge of the bed studying a scratch sheet, his lips moving as he read. Duffy sat in the arm chair his short legs bent over one arm.

"Hy, Rush," said Duffy. "Come in."

"Thanks, Duff," said Rush.

"Nice bed you got here," called Smoky from his supine position. "A hell of a lot better than that plank I have to sleep on every night." He wriggled to his side and propped his head on his hand. "Got any booze? I'm a man who likes a drink in the morning."

"Right on the dresser. I'm surprised there's any left. Pour your own."

"You're closest, Duff, pour me a large hooker."

Duffy swung his feet to the floor and walked to the dresser. He uncorked the bottle of rye and poured a half inch in a glass.

"I got a bad taste myself. This ought to fix it." He poured the ounce of whiskey down his throat and shook his head. "Rot-gut," he said. He put the glass down and reached for the bottle. His hand hovered for a moment over the bottle, wavered, then flew to his collar. A gurgling sound grew deep in his throat. His knees buckled and he fell across the dresser. He retched twice and vomited on the dresser top. Then slowly almost deliberately his body tilted a little to the right and faded to the floor.

Rush was at his side kneeling over him before he hit the floor. His hand went inside Duffy's shirt over his heart. He held it there for a long time. Then he stood up very slowly and looked around the room. Every eye was on him. He shook his head slowly.

"Not a sign of heartbeat," he said. "It must have been cyanide." He looked down at Duffy. "Thanks, Duff," he said. "It should have been me. If I hadn't overslept, it would have been me. Nine mornings out of ten I take a slug of whiskey instead of a mouth wash. This morning I was late so I missed. So Duffy gets it."

Robin walked over to the dresser and examined the bottle carefully. He smelled it, poured a little in a glass and looked through it at the light.

"The bottle's half empty, Rush. How'd



the stuff get in it?"

Rush shook his head.

"That's what bothers me, Robin. I was drinking out of it last night just before I went to bed. When did you get in here?"

Robin looked at Smoky.

"It was about nine-fifteen, wasn't it?"

Smoky nodded.

"Maybe nine-twenty," he said.

"Then there was nobody in the room for three quarters of an hour. You aren't the only guy who can pick locks, Smoky. Also, there're always more keys to hotel rooms." He walked to the phone.

"What're you gonna do, Rush?" asked Smoky.

"Call the cops. We can't hide this one."

He put in a call to police headquarters and asked homicide to send a squad. Then he hung up and turned back to his gang.

"I want you all to scram, one at a time. Get out before the cops come. Go down a floor or up a floor before you take the elevator and don't know each other on the way out."

"But, Rush—" Smoky started to protest.

"No, Smoky. You'll do me more good on the outside. The cops'll try to hang this one on me and they may make it stick. If you were here they'd toss you in too. I need somebody outside to get some work done on my side. They'll just pick up that bottle, lift my prints and railroad me. I'll need help. The stuff was put there for me. It got Duffy, but it's liable to get me too if I don't get a break. That's your job. Get me a break."

They didn't like it but they recognized the logic of Rush's argument. They slipped out of the room leaving Rush with Duffy. Ten minutes later a hammering on the door announced the law. They ran absolutely true to Rush's predictions. They asked a question or two. Looked at the bottle, at Duffy then at Rush. Inside of five minutes they had handcuffs on Rush and he was out of the room and on his way to a cell.

It was different this time. No meeting with the Chief of Police, no visit to the whitewashed room. Just a quick trip to a cell, a clanging of metal doors and silence. They hadn't even booked him. Rush realized that he was buried, incommunicado. He could rot there for all Hacker cared. They'd hang everything they could on him, rush him through a fast trial and that's the

end of Rush Henry.

He lit a cigarette and grinned into the darkness. He didn't feel like grinning, but he forced the smile to his face. It was a morale measure. If he could smile at himself things didn't seem so bad. So he made himself smile at himself. Smile pretty, Mr. Henry.

A half a package of cigarettes later the door opened and a figure entered the half light of the cell. He sat on the single wooden chair that stood opposite the cot. Rush peered at him through the dimness.

"Hello, Max," he said as he recognized his visitor. "What brings you here?"

Carney lit a huge cigar with great deliberation.

"I came here because I'm scared stiff, Henry." He held up a hand to stop Rush from talking. "Let me finish. I know what you're in town for. You want to run me out. I also know that you're not going around knocking off everybody that gets in your way. You don't operate that way. You got too much to lose and the price isn't high enough to hire your gun. Even a five year old ape could tell that that setup in your hotel room was aimed at you and misfired. But it makes a nice frame. I think they could make it stick with a little help from a friendly judge and a packed jury."

"That's all old stuff, Carney," said Rush. "Get to the new part, about how you're scared stiff."

"Coming up," said Carney. "The only thing left to figure is that somebody else is going around with a fast rod and gunning everybody in sight. The way things are going I figure I'm next. Now I got all kinds of boys working for me, but they're just muscle boys. They do what I tell them and no more. I need somebody to find out who's doing the shooting and stop him before he gets around to me. That's you."

"Me?" asked Rush.

"You. I know you'll run me out of town if you can but I know that you won't gun me down doing it. I'll get you out of this can if you'll find out who's doing the shooting."

"I was working on that when Duffy swallowed the whiskey. I've got a couple of leads. But how are you going to get me out of here?"

Carney laughed.



"I'll tell Hacker to open the door. The rest is up to you. You just walk out."

Rush swung his feet over the edge of the cot.

"You know I'll still run you out of town, Carney," he said.

"Sure. If you can. But if I had the choice I'd rather be here to be run out of town then planted six feet under."

"Okay," said Rush, "tell Hacker to open the door."

An hour later Rush was in his room at the hotel. He had contacted Robin and was waiting for the little man. When he came he had nothing to offer.

"We've checked everybody in the hotel. There's no lead at all. Of course in a good sized hotel like this people can do a lot of wandering around without being seen. It could have been anybody."

"Okay," said Rush. "Keep on it. Maybe somebody'll remember something." He looked at his watch. It was three o'clock. "Damn, I've wasted almost a full day. It's Sunday, too. There's nothing more to do today. I've got to see Prime and Pedrick before tomorrow, then I'm going to relax. Tomorrow will be a full day. We've got to win an election tomorrow."

Prime and Pedrick were not available by telephone at any of their usual stands so Rush called Gay. She was both hungry and willing to relax. Rush took her to dinner at a roadhouse several miles out of town. They talked of everything in the world but Forest City and the job Rush was doing there. As they drove back in the cool of evening Rush felt renewed and fresh. He stopped the car in front of Gay's apartment and turned to her.

"You are getting to be a habit I'm going to find it hard to break," he said. "You're good for me."

"That puts me in a class with fresh vegetables, Old Overholt Rye and plenty of sleep. It's very romantic."

"My plans include a large bunch of romance. But the time is not yet ripe. I'm carrying too big a load to give it the attention it deserves."

"Well, don't let it slip your mind at the last minute," said Gay.

"You can count on it," said Rush. "Now, the time has come for me to blow. I have to run down Prime and Pedrick before I get to bed."

He leaned across Gay and opened the

door. She stepped out onto the grass parking. Rush slid across the seat and out of the car. He stood for a minute stretching his muscles then he took a step toward Gay. His hand was out reaching for her arm when something tugged at the sleeve of his coat and burned his arm with fiery heat. In the same second a shot rang out from across the street and down the block a hundred feet. In a flash Rush had thrown Gay to the sod and was lying across her. His hand shot to the holster at his shoulder and his gun was pointing in the direction of the shot. A motor roared and a car leaped away from the curbing, its motor straining at the gears. Rush stood up and looked after it but it was gone before he could even recognize its body type.

He reached down and pulled Gay to her feet.

"Get in the house fast," said Rush. "They may come around the block again and make another pass at me."

Gay's hand went to his sleeve.

"You're hurt," she said in a strained voice.

"Just a scratch. Now get going."

"But your arm—"

"I'll dress it at the hotel. I want you to get out of here."

The urgency in his voice got to her. Reluctantly she left him and entered the apartment house. Rush dove in the car and was instantly in motion. He drove to the hotel and left the car for the doorman to park. He took an elevator to his floor and hurried to his room.

He put his hand on the knob and stopped. It was unlocked and he could hear voices inside. The knob turned under his hand and the door came open. A uniformed policeman was standing in the doorway with a gun trained on his stomach.

"Come in, Henry," the cop invited. "Come in with your hands over your head."

RUSH slowly raised his hands over his head and advanced into the room. Inside the room sitting in the easy chair was the plainclothesman who had searched Rush's luggage on his first night in town. He looked at Rush as he came into the room and stood before him.

"Couldn't keep your nose clean, could you?"



"I didn't know it was dirty," said Rush. "What's up?"

"There's enough up to hang you three times."

"Has Hacker been hitting the pipe again or have you really got something?" asked Rush.

"This time we really got something."

"Could I know what it is?"

"I don't mind telling you," said the plainclothesman. "We got the gun that did the shootings." He shook his head. "An old hand like you leaving a gun right on top of a closet shelf. You should be ashamed of yourself."

Rush looked at him reflectively.

"I should be," he said, "and I would be if I'd left it there. How'd you happen to look for it?"

"You got a friend that phoned us a hint. We came right over."

"When was this?"

"Early this evening. About seven o'clock."

"Have you checked the gun through ballistics?"

"Check. It fits. It's the gun all right."

"Can I lower my hands and light a cigarette? Your boy seems to know what to do with his gun."

"Lower your hands. I'll light your cigarette." He pulled one from his own package, lit it and handed it to Rush. Rush dragged deeply.

"I don't suppose it occurred to any of the mental giants at headquarters that the gun might be a plant. Especially since someone was nice enough to call in and tell them about it."

The man in the chair grinned.

"You don't suppose Hacker would look an inch further than that gun, do you? It gives him a clean out on all the killings. He'll, he can be a hero." He laughed again. "You should of stood in bed. I told you we didn't like private eyes in this town."

"How do you figure the gun deal?" asked Rush.

"Oh, hell, it's a frame all right. It's a cinch somebody's trying to hang the killings on you. I figured you for them all the time till this came up. Now, I figure it has to be somebody else, unless maybe you're trying a double frame. Putting us on to the gun so it'll look like a frame." He peered closely at Rush. "No, I guess you wouldn't do that. That'd be silly in

this town with as much heat as there is on these killings."

"But you've still got to take me in."

"Sure, I'm a cop. I do what I'm told."

"It couldn't be that I forgot to come back to my room tonight. You could wait a while and then call in for instructions."

The man in the chair considered that.

"Well, you'd have to fix Fogarty there. I imagine fifty bucks'd do it."

"I'll make it a hundred. I'm on an expense account."

"That enough, Fogarty?" The uniformed cop nodded.

"You gotta keep your mouth shut though," he said.

"I'll clam up," said the plainclothesman.

"Okay," said Rush, digging for his wallet. "How about you?"

The man in the chair shook his head.

"It's the damndest thing but I just can't make myself take a nickel. I could have gotten well on my job years ago. But I can't make it go down. I guess I'm a softy."

Rush squinted at him.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Roswell," he said. "Bill Roswell."

"Stock around, Bill," said Rush. "Maybe I can get you well and you won't have any trouble with your conscience. You can even like private eyes if you want to when I get through with this town."

"That'd be very nice. Now scram and go out the back way. I don't want to have to explain how I missed you if half of Forest City see you in the hotel."

Rush left the hotel by the service door at the rear. By back streets and alleys he came to the back door of the Padgett House, Robin's hotel. Through its service door he entered the hotel and walked up the first steps to Robin's room. There he did a bit of lock picking of his own and entered the room locking it behind him. He picked up the phone and gave the number of the *Chronicle*. He asked for Bill Prime.

"This is the Chicago Kid," he told Prime.

"Where in hell are you?" asked the editor.

"Where I can't be found," said Rush.

"Has anything come in on me from the law?"

"Yeah, they've got a general order out to pick you up on sight. The warning says



that you may be armed and to shoot at the first sign of trouble."

"Are you carrying the story?"

"On page five and it sounds like you are a stranger from out of town. No connection with anything else. If anything it sounds like you are a part of the gang war now on in Forest City."

"Good. It'll bring in a thousand votes. How do you figure the story?"

"It's too obvious. But Hacker's calling it hanging evidence."

"Let him. I'll fix his wagon later. I've got a nominee for Chief of Police who'll run him out of town."

"Anybody I know?"

"No. Just an honest cop I ran into in my hotel room."

"What are your plans?" asked Prime.

"The same as before. Look, take notes on this, will you? I've got an idea for an election morning edition."

"Shoot."

"Two column pictures of Gunn, Carver and Hacker on the front page. Then in bold face type print a list of every shooting, every act of violence that happened in the last ten years plus every mistake they've ever made below the pictures. Then in headline type at the bottom of the page say DO YOU WANT THESE MEN TO RUN YOUR TOWN?"

"That's dynamite. They might be able to sue."

"If they lose the election they won't be around long enough to sue. I'll have the new Chief put them in the jug if they even open their mouths. He can dig up enough stuff to send them all over. He's been in the department long enough."

"Okay, I'll take a chance. When you came into the office I told you I'd go all out, but I hope to heaven you know what you're doing."

"I do. Now, on the back page print a half page spread of Covington. He's a big, honest, good looking guy. Below his picture print his record. Add a few of his better campaign promises and in the smallest type you can find and in one tiny corner say that it's a political advertisement. Bill me for it. I may even pay you if Covington wins and the line will put you in the clear."

"Man, you're just taking over my paper, aren't you?"

"Just for one edition. You can have it

back at noon Tuesday."

"Okay. Will do. If I get shot I'll die knowing I did my duty."

"Just don't let them see the whites of your eyes, they may never shoot then."

"How can I get in touch with you?"

"Are you sure your line is clean? No switchboard operator listening?"

"Not a chance. I train my people well."

"Okay, I'm in 823 at the Padgett House."

"How are you registered?"

"I'm not. The room belongs to one of my boys. A Robin Twist."

"Okay, I'll keep in touch with you. And for gosh sake be careful. Hacker's not fooling."

Robin came in at noon and was not surprised to find Rush.

"I heard the heat was on and figured that if you could cop a sneak you'd turn up here. I don't think anybody's made me as belonging to you."

He left with instructions to round up the boys for a meeting. At four o'clock Matt Pedrick knocked on the door and came in after Rush had surveyed him through the transom.

"Quite a spot you've gotten yourself in, old boy," he said. "I don't suppose you did push those guys off?"

Rush grinned at him.

"You know better than that, Matt. Now, have you got anything Bill can use in his first edition tomorrow morning? We're blasting the lid off of this town. I want him to print everything Patrick Gunn, Mark Carver or Tom Hacker ever did that missed the straight and narrow by even an inch. I want it on that front page if they ever matched coins to see who'd pay for a drink. What have you got?"

"If Bill's print it I have a lot. I'll dig in my files. One way or another I eventually find out everything that goes on in this town. I've picked up a lot of stuff I've never dared to use before. Maybe I can clean out my files on tomorrow's first edition."

"That should do the job. Here, let's have a slug of Robin's whiskey."

He went to the table and poured whiskey in two glasses. His hand was out holding a glass to Pedrick when the building shook and through the open window the sound of a blast poured into the room.



The two men looked at each other and as one man turned and ran to the window. Two blocks away and to their right a column of smoke rose slowly into the air, lazily drifting north on a slight breeze.

"Hell, that could be the *Chronicle* Building," said Pedrick. He dove for the phone but it rang before he could reach it. Rush pushed past him and picked up the receiver.

"Yes," he said.

"Prime here, Rush. I'm afraid your election morning edition is out. Some rat just dropped a pineapple in the press room. We won't get to press for a couple of days, I'm afraid."

"Any other damage?" asked Rush.

"Not much. It played hell with the presses but outside of a lot of smoke and broken windows that's the damage."

"Okay, we've got to work fast. Get the pics I wanted and all the dope you were going to use. Put them in an envelope and get them over here inside of a half hour. I'll get them printed."

"But how can—"

"Don't ask questions. Get me that dope and have your delivery boys around in the morning. We'll send out an edition of the *Chronicle* that'll really fix the mob that ran this town. You notice I said, ran. Now get with it."

Rush hung up and turned to Pedrick.

"You heard what happened. Now you get over to the paper and help Bill with the dope. I'll see that it gets printed."

Pedrick shook his head.

"You beat everything I ever saw before. You never give up, do you?"

"Not while I'm on my feet. Get going man. Time's awasting."

When Pedrick had gone Rush sat at the writing desk and covered several sheets of Padgett House stationery with closely written instructions. An hour later the envelope came from Prime and almost simultaneously Robin Twist returned to his room.

Rush put his own sheets of paper in the envelope with Prime's material and handed it to Robin. From his wallet he took some money.

"Take this to Pappy Daley in Chicago. Tell him to print it exactly as I've written it there. You can charter a plane at the airport. I'll call Pappy and have the press rooms ready. It'll take you two hours

to get there and two hours back with an hour and a half to and from the airports. That gives Pappy about three hours to print. You should get back here by three or three-thirty at the latest. Now, blow, son. You're carrying the ball for the next nine or ten hours."

PAPPY DALEY phoned Rush at midnight that Robin was on his way. Rush called Prime to send a truck to the airport. Then he left the hotel the way he had come and by more back streets and alleys made his way to the back door of the *Chronicle*. He slipped inside without having been noticed by a single person. He found Bill Prime in his office.

"Hello, fugitive," said Prime. "Did anyone see you come in here? I'd hate to have Hacker close my paper up because I was an accessory after some fact or other."

"I'm certain," said Rush. He looked at his watch. "It's two o'clock. Robin should be in within thirty minutes. When will you be ready to deliver?"

"The carrier boys come in at four. The trucks start for the newsstands at five."

"Is everybody all set?"

"They'll be here."

Rush walked down the hall to Pedrick's empty office and appropriated a bottle from his wall bar. He carried it back to Prime's office and poured drinks in spills of copy paper. They smoked for a half hour eyes constantly straying to their watches. Then the phone on Prime's desk rang. He answered it, spoke briefly then handed the phone to Rush.

"Yes," he said.

"Robin here, Rush. Bad news."

Rush held the mouthpiece away from him for a moment looking at it. Then he put it back to his ear.

"Bushwacked?" he asked.

"Bad. They shot the driver and we bounced off a tree. There must have been ten of them in a truck and two cars. I played dead till they unloaded the truck then I tried to catch numbers on the cars but they had them covered. No go. I hit for a phone and here I am."

"Come on into the *Chronicle* office," said Rush. "Don't feel bad. It was my fault. I should have figured on a leak somewhere and had you covered. See you in a little while."

Rush cradled the phone and looked



across at Prime.

"And I thought I was smart," he said bitterly.

"Don't let it get you. It was a damn near miss."

"Miss, hell. It drops the bottom out of a couple of weeks' work. It puts everybody who's been working with me on a spot. It loses the election for old Covington." He stopped and snapped his fingers. "How about the radio station? Can we buy some time or something?"

Prime shook his head.

"The Federal Communication Commission has put the fear of God into them. They don't handle anything that isn't straight news. They wouldn't touch it yet. It smells of politics."

"That does it then. We can just sit and cross our fingers and hope Covington makes it anyway."

Rush didn't sound as though he had much faith in the hope.

The phone rang again. Rush reached for it. It was Smoky.

"Lose something, chief?" he asked.

"Yeah, thirty thousand newspapers."

"They looked like they might be yours so I followed them."

Again Rush looked at the phone.

"Smoky," he said. "Do you know where those papers are?"

"Sure. I thought they might need a convoy so I followed them from the airport. They are now in a basement about three blocks from you. At least they were five minutes ago when I left to phone."

"Where are you?"

"In a cigar store corner of Eighth and Center."

"Stay right there. I'll be there with a truck in two minutes."

He hung up the phone and turned to Prime.

"Have you any huskies in the press-room?"

"We don't have a pressroom anymore, remember. But I've got some pretty tough truck drivers and they should be here now."

Five minutes later one truck carrying Rush and six truck drivers armed with clubs picked up Smoky at the corner of Eighth and Center. He directed them south on Eight Street for a block and a half. There he called for silence, lights out and a slow left turn. The truck rolled to

a stop in the canyon formed by the rear walls of buildings on either side.

Smoky led the way in a single file along one of the buildings. They came to a freight door set in the wall with its bottom at bed level with the truck.

"They're in there, Rush."

"Okay. Wait here."

Rush took a pencil flashlight from his pocket and a gun from his shoulder holster.

He crept ahead to the corner of the building and turned into a narrow passageway between two buildings. As he walked he played his flashlight on the wall of the building to his left. His light caught the corner of a window sill ten or fifteen feet above the level of the passageway. It was well out of hand reach. He surveyed the buildings for an instant, then, in the manner of a mountain climber in a crevice, placed his back against one building and his feet against the other and began to wedge his way up the walls of the narrow passageway. In a minute or two he was level with the window. Then wedging his feet more securely he reached across with the butt of his gun and knocked out a square of glass. Through the opening he unlatched the window and in a second or two was inside the building.

He stood for a moment absolutely still, listening. No sound came for five seconds. Then from below in the building somewhere a whisper of an echo of voices. Rush slowly relaxed his tense listening. Lightly, on the balls of his feet, a pencil of light flashing for a second now and then, he moved toward the sound of the voices. They came louder as he turned a corner and saw in a brief flash of light the yawning depths of a stairwell. Cautiously, stepping only on the sides of the steps he descended. At the bottom he looked left and right. To his right a line of yellow light shone under a door. He walked to it and put his hand on the knob. With infinite slowness and care he tried the knob. When it had turned full turn he pulled it a fraction of an inch toward him. The door was not locked. Then without hesitation he flung the door open and walked into the room, his gun fanning the room in front of him.

Two men, on either side of a rickety table sat dealing rubbery cards. Their faces, turned to meet Rush, were studies



in arrested emotions. Rush wasted no words.

"Open the freight door," he ordered.

They continued to stare at him. His finger tightened on the trigger and a bullet tore through the top of the table spattering cards on the floor.

"Open the freight door," he said.

In slow motion, sidling around Rush, the two men left the room. Behind them Rush followed with his gun in hand and the flashlight trained on their backs. A minute later the door was open and Smoky led the truck drivers into the building.

They found the papers still in their original bundles stacked in a corner fifteen feet from the door. Rush looked at his watch.

"It's three forty-five. The carriers will be ready for them in fifteen minutes. Get them to the *Chronicle* building fast. I want to look around here for a minute."

The truck drivers took the two men with them and left. Smoky stayed behind with Rush. They found lights and began a search of the building. Smoky found steps to the basement and went on a side trip alone. Rush was working toward the front of the building when he heard Smoky calling. He went to the steps and down into the basement. In a far corner behind a mammoth heating plant Smoky was on one knee bent over what looked like a pile of rags. He looked over his shoulder at Rush.

"I just found ten thousand votes," he said. "Somebody did in our Mr. Carney."

Rush walked over to the body and stood looking down at it.

"That's all of them," he said. "A clean sweep. Marr, Sully, and now Carney. If X did all this he was wasting his time hiring me. He's cleaned up his city by process of elimination."

He shook his head and turned away.

"Let's get out of here, Smoky. I'm getting sick of looking at stiffs. I want a drink."

He got it from the bottle he had extracted from Pedrick's bar. He drank straight from the neck swallowing until the warmth struck deep and started melting the cold greasy ball in the pit of his stomach. Bill Prime came back into the office.

"I just talked to the newsroom at the radio station. They'll carry Carney's death

on all newscasts. He'll get full coverage. It should give Covington a landslide."

"Yeah," said Rush and drank again from the bottle.

"Isn't it a little early to celebrate?" asked Prime. "The votes aren't counted yet."

"I'm not celebrating. I'm trying to drown a guilty conscience."

Prime stared at him.

"What are you doing with a guilty conscience?" he asked.

"I think I could have stopped all this killing. Oh, not right away, but soon. I should have figured the whole thing at the beginning. I should have seen through X long ago."

"You know who X is?"

Rush nodded.

"I think so. I'm not sure of anything right now. But there's only one way it could be."

"Then what are you waiting for? Go get him."

Rush shook his head.

"You forget I'm wanted by the cops. I have to wait till Covington is elected and installs a new police chief before I make a move. It's all right. He's knocked off everybody who was in his way. There's plenty of time." His voice stopped abruptly on the last word. "The hell there is."

He grabbed the telephone and dialed a number.

"Is Bill Roswell around the station?" he asked when he got his number.

"Just came in. Here he is."

Roswell's voice said, "Hello."

"This is the ex-resident of 715 at the hotel. Catch?"

"Catch," said Roswell.

"Can you find a half dozen honest cops, at least honest enough to do a job if they get paid for it?"

"Can do. Six but no more."

"Okay. Get them. Offer them fifty bucks for the night. Put them around W. C. Covington. If anybody looks cross-eyed in his direction for twenty-four hours, pick them up and bury them somewhere till I can get to them."

"Is that gun going off again?"

"It'll try, if I figure things right."

"We'll cover him like a blanket."

"Call me through the paper if anything happens."

He hung up then.



"Who was that?" asked Prime.

"Your next Chief of Police, if I have anything to say about it."

"Isn't there something you forgot?" asked Prime.

"What?" asked Rush.

"On the face of it you could use about six cops yourself. Your Mr. X might decide to dispense with your services the easiest way."

"Let him try. It'll save me the trouble of going after him."

**R**USH had lunch in Robin's room. From time to time during the early afternoon the phone rang and Prime or Robin would report on the election. By four o'clock it was all over but the final count. Covington was in by a landslide. Gunn had already issued a statement conceding. Robin called at four-ten.

"We've cased most of the spots, Rush. The word for what we find is confusion. Nobody knows who's going to do what or to whom. I think if one of them had the guts to step out and say I'm boss he could make it stick, but so far nobody's had the guts. Anyway nobody's made a move yet."

"I'm going to move fast before anyone gets the idea and the guts at the same time. Get my car from the lot and meet me at the service entrance in the alley behind the hotel. I'll be there in ten minutes."

Fifteen minutes later Robin was steering the car through the residential district toward the home of W. C. Covington. He braked it to a stop at the curb exactly at four-thirty. Rush got out of the car and headed up the flagged path to the door. He got about ten steps. A man stepped out from behind a low pine tree and stood in his way. One hand remained suggestively in the man's pocket.

"Not today, bud," he said. "No visitors."

"Is Bill Roswell around?" asked Rush.

"Could be. Why?"

"Let's go see him."

"In front of me. He's around on the north side of the house. Keep your hands at your side and walk slowly."

Rush followed directions till they came to another tree. Just beyond was a clump of bushes. Roswell stepped out from behind the bushes.

"I thought you'd be around," he said. "Okay, Mart. You can go back in front. Watch it." He turned back to Rush.

"Want to see the Mayor?"

"Right," said Rush. "So do you. Come on in with me."

"What for? I should stay out here."

"We'll be able to cover him from in there. I want you to meet him."

They walked around to the front of the house and rang the bell. A maid took them to Covington in his study. Covington came around the end of his desk to shake hands with Rush. He extended his hand to Roswell at Rush's introduction.

"Now, Mr. Covington, can I monopolize the conversation for a minute? There is something that has to be done immediately or you'll have the same problem on your hands you've always had."

"What do we have to do in such a hurry?"

"You have to appoint a new Chief of Police and get him to work tonight."

"But, I can't do that. The election isn't official till the ballots are counted."

"To hell with the ballots. You know and I know that you're in. So start acting like a mayor. Look, Mr. Covington. When Sully, Marr and Carney died they left a large organization behind them. That organization is flopping around now looking for a new head. Sooner or later somebody's going to recognize the vacuum that exists where those three were and move in. If he makes it stick you've got twice the job on your hands when it comes to cleaning up your town. If you move now, you can do it over-night."

"That's fine, Henry. But where am I going to find men I can trust to do the job? That's going to take time."

"It's going to take about thirty seconds. Here's your new Chief of Police." He turned to Roswell who had been silent during the conversation. Now he looked at Rush as though he had suddenly gone out of his mind.

"Me?" he said.

"You're honest, aren't you?"

"Reasonably, but—"

"Save it," said Rush. "This is no time for doubts. Mr. Covington, Bill is honest. I know. He's got six men he can guarantee as being honest guarding your house. There must be others in the department. How about it, Bill?"

"There are dozens but they never dared let anybody know they might be honest. They needed their jobs so they did what



they were told."

"Okay, there's your police force."

"Sure. But what do I do?"

"You have the time of your life. I want you to organize as many squads as you can muster. Send them to every dive in town and tell everybody who can't show a legitimate job that he's due out of town in twelve hours or he goes in the jug for vagrancy. Tell them the town's got religion and they're out. Put a padlock on the door of every gambling joint and horse book in town. Then tell the girls that it's all over now. Give them twenty-four hours to get out of town. Tomorrow morning send your squads out again and start hauling them in. Keep them on bread and water for a couple of days and then haul them to the city limits and start them walking. They'll get the idea right away. I've got some boys that nobody knows circulating downtown now. If anybody starts getting ideas they'll get the word. I'll pass it on to you and you pick up any would-be big shots before they get off first base. It's simple. By the time it's all over the votes will be counted and it'll be official. In the meantime you'll have prevented a tough situation from developing and Covington can start his term with a nice clean city and a reputation for cutting through red tape when the situation indicates it."

Rush stopped and lit a cigarette. Beside him Roswell drew a deep breath and looked at Covington.

"Do you think we can get away with it, Henry?"

"Of course. Pick up your phone and call the radio station. Issue a statement that Bill is now Chief of Police. Then tell what his orders are and say that he is starting to put them into force tonight. Bill, you go to headquarters and take over Hacker's office. Covington'll give you a letter. If Hacker makes any trouble have your boys throw him in the can. I don't think it'll be tough to dig up a charge. Then call in every cop you can trust and go to work. They ought to enjoy it after kissing the behinds of every tinhorn gambler in town for the past ten years."

"They'll love it," said Bill. He looked again at Covington.

Covington took a deep breath and reached for his telephone. He dialed the number of the radio station.

Ten minutes later Roswell was on his way to the police station. Covington looked troubled.

"I know what's on your mind, Mr. Covington," said Rush. "I'm going to take care of that right away."

"You mean the killer?"

Rush nodded. "Now, if you don't mind, I'll have to leave. I have an appointment with a man named X."

## XI

RUSH found Pedrick in his study seated behind his desk immersed in the study of several papers spread out before him. He looked up as Rush entered.

"Pour yourself a victory slug, pal," he said motioning to a bottle on a corner of his desk. "You did it and I'll bet you're glad."

Rush poured the drink and toasted Pedrick with a wave of the glass. He drank it and set the glass on the desk.

"I'm afraid I've only got half a victory so far," he said.

Pedrick pushed the papers back and leaned back in his chair.

"Yeah," he said. "I expect that's what you have. Got anything in mind to do about it?"

"I've got a lead," said Rush. "It may take some pressure but I think I can make it come through."

"What have you got?" asked Pedrick.

"You remember I asked you about a guy named Wellwood, a lawyer?"

Pedrick nodded.

"King Wellwood. I wondered what you wanted with him."

"He's my lead. Through a bit of fairly naive trickery I learned that he is the man who hired me to come to Forest City."

Pedrick came forward in his chair.

"King Wellwood!" he exploded. "What in the world would he hire you for?"

"Oh, I'm quite sure he didn't hire me for himself. He hired me for someone else. He hired me for the guy I keep calling X."

Pedrick relaxed back into his chair.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"It's a cinch," said Rush. "He made the deal all right. The big point is can I get him to tell me who X is. He can hide behind ethics and legal privilege till hell freezes over if he wants to. However, if I can convince him that his client is going



around knocking off people sort of ad lib, maybe he'll come through. What do you think?"

Pedrick scratched his head for a moment then let his hand fall into his lap.

"I don't know, Rush. I don't know what King would say. I'm pretty sure he'd be amazed at your story. He couldn't afford to be mixed up in something like that personally. In the first place he's above money and in the second he has an old family name to protect. I'm inclined to believe that he might at least hint a little."

Rush stood up.

"Okay," he said. "That's what I wanted to know. I'll go see him."

"Wait a minute," said Pedrick. "Sit down."

Rush came back and stood behind his chair. Pedrick looked up at him with a friendly smile.

"Is it really necessary to see Wellwood, Rush?"

Rush shook his head.

"Not really," he said. "I just need a little confirmation."

Pedrick nodded with a satisfied air as though something he had predicted had happened.

"I thought you had it pretty well taped. I guess I'll have to ask you to put up your hands."

Pedrick's hands came up from his lap. In his right hand was a .45 service revolver. Rush smiled slowly and raised his hands above his shoulders.

"Sorry, old boy," said Pedrick. "I hate to do this." He sounded very truthful. "I was afraid of it all the time. I thought maybe I could handle you at first but when I got to know you I knew it would end this way."

"What way is that, Matt?" asked Rush.

"Why, nobody hates the melodramatic more than I do, but I'm afraid you're for it. There's no other way out."

"The only trouble is that you can't cover this one like you did the others, Matt. A lot of people know I'm here and a lot of others know of my lead to King Wellwood. They'll get around to you sure as hell."

"I've got that figured out. I've decided that you're going to commit suicide. That'll be a tacit admission that you knocked off the other boys. I'll take the credit for driving you to it, of course. I'll say that the gun in your room was a bit of double

cover. You put it there and called the cops on the grounds that nobody would believe you were dumb enough to do such a thing. I think I've even got Wellwood figured out. I'll say that you asked me to ask Wellwood to hire you. Your excuse was that a friend of yours lost his shirt gambling in Forest City and you wanted to clean up the town. I'll say that I began to be suspicious of you when the killings started. I finally decided that you wanted to take over the town in place of the men running it. That way my motives become your motives and everything that points at me will point at you."

Rush grinned.

"Very neat," he said. "You might even make it stick. I like that about your motives becoming my motives. Very good. What I can't figure is why you had the motives in the first place. You look like a guy who had everything. What are you missing that you want a town like Forest City?"

"That's a tough question, Rush. I've asked myself often. I think I have it figured out. You remember we talked about life and urges and things. I gave you most of it that night. I came with a built-in urge for power. Under ordinary circumstances I expect I'd have made out by running a business of some kind and bullying my employees, but I was a kind of sickly youth and I got pushed around more than a little. Bullies used to love me. Some of the boys used to work out on me every time things got a little slow. I could have told my dad and he could have stopped it but I swallowed it and waited. It did something to me. It's a funny thing. I know what caused it and I still can't do anything about it."

He reached across the table with his free hand and poured two glasses of whiskey. He drained one and motioned Rush to take the other.

"It's a funny thing," he repeated. "I didn't plan to kill Beau Marr at all. The idea of killing anybody never occurred to me for a minute. Then that night of the party I all at once thought what would happen if he were dead. So I killed him. It's as simple as that. It took almost exactly fifteen minutes. It was easy and, this is the part I'm not sure I understand, it was wonderful. I think it's the feeling of power it gives you. You don't think



about right or wrong or justice or retribution. You just decide to kill a man, then you kill him. He's dead. He isn't there any more. And you did it." His voice was serious but without passion. His eyes were level and clear. "Do you understand a little of that, Rush?" For the first time there was a faint trace of emotion in his voice. He wanted Rush to understand.

"I understand all of it, Matt," said Rush slowly. "I think that there isn't a doubt in the world that with my testimony you could win a sanity plea hands down."

"I expect I could. I think I'm quite probably unbalanced although they say you're not insane if you think you are. The trouble is that I know right from wrong. They'd hang me, Rush. No, thanks."

"Okay, then," said Rush. "You'd better forget about killing me and start running. Take my word for it, I'm not going to commit suicide. If you kill me it's going to be quite obvious that it was murder."

Pedrick smiled.

"No, Rush. I'm going to knock you out and heave you over the balcony. I'll say you jumped."

"How are you going to get close enough to knock me out?" asked Rush.

Again Pedrick grinned.

"I don't have to. Kit will take care of that. Now, Kit," he said.

Rush whirled. He caught a flash of white, a blur of motion then something exploded below his ear and he fell like a log. He lay very still on the thick pile rug.

"Is he out?" asked Pedrick.

"I think so. Oh, Matt. I'm afraid."

"Don't be. I have everything figured out. Here, give me his hand. I want his fingerprints on this gun. I'm going to say he held the gun on us until he jumped so we couldn't stop him."

Pedrick knelt beside Rush and picked up a limp hand. He fitted the butt of the gun in Rush's palm and forced the fingers around it. The trigger finger he pushed through the guard. Then he started to push it back. It wouldn't push. The other fingers tightened around the butt.

"Thanks, Matt," said Rush. He sat up with the gun trained on Pedrick. With his free hand he massaged the bump swelling below his left ear. "That's the trouble with amateurs. They always slip on the simplest things. I doubt if it ever comes up again, Matt, but if it does, don't even give a

second's warning. When you said 'now, Kit' you gave me enough warning to let me fall with the blow. I admit I could have fallen the wrong way and really caught it but I didn't and all Kit did was graze me. Now, you walk over to that wall and stand facing it with your hands high and flat against the wall. You too, Kit."

Pedrick looked at him strangely.

"You know, Rush, I'm almost glad. Those other guys were fun, but I don't think I'd have enjoyed killing you. I can't remember having liked a man as a man since my father died. But I liked you."

"Thank you, Matt," said Rush. "I liked you, too. I wish you'd told me what you really wanted. I could have gotten you your town and you wouldn't have had to kill anybody. You'd have had to run it by my rules, but it would have been your town. Now, go over to the wall like a good boy. I have to make a call."

"No, Rush," said Matt Pedrick. "I like my prescription for you."

He turned and walked straight to the double doors behind his desk. He opened them and stepped out on to the balcony. Kit screamed.

"Aren't you going to stop him?"

"No," said Rush, "I'm not going to stop him."

"Thanks, Rush," said Pedrick. "Buy the boys in the back room one for me."

He turned and vaulted the railing without a backward glance.

The drink was tall. It was very dark. The davenport was softness itself and there wasn't a sound in the room. It was exactly ten o'clock. The silence lasted as long as the tall, dark drink. Ten minutes. Gay poured another. Still the silence. Finally.

"You're almost unbelievable, Gay. I've been here twenty minutes and you haven't asked a single question."

"I'm not going to. You're here and you're all in one piece. That means two things. That it's all over and that you're all in one piece. What more could a girl ask?"

"Don't you even want to know who did what to who and why?"

"No."

Rush came up from his almost prone position and looked at her.

"You don't?"

"No, I already know."



Rush's jaw dropped a quarter of an inch. Then it snapped shut.

"You called Bill Prime."

"No, Rush. I don't know a thing about what happened really. I just know that you must have caught Matt Pedrick and Kit English."

The jaw drop this time was a full inch. Rush was speechless. Gay smiled at him.

"It's partly a hunch. The other part is that so many things happened to you that shouldn't have happened unless somebody knew what you were up to. The only people that knew were Bill Prime, your boys, Matt Pedrick and me. I counted Bill Prime, your boys and myself out and that left Matt. I had it figured out a week ago but I didn't want to say anything. I know how men are about women."

Rush gazed at her in wonder.

"You," he said, "are wonderful. I only had one thing that you didn't. Kit came to my hotel room and tried to bribe me for some mysterious gent. He wanted to pay me fifteen thousand dollars to get out of town, so she said. I'm pretty sure she also left the poison that killed Duffy."

"So that's what she wanted."

"Huh?" It was all Rush could think of to say.

"I was standing outside the balcony door when she invited herself to your room." Gay frowned suddenly and looked straight into Rush's eyes. "You don't think I was intentionally eavesdropping, do you?"

Rush grinned.

"Strangely enough, I don't."

"Maybe I'd better tell you how I feel about that sort of thing. Her coming to your room, I mean. The only thing I want from you is what you want to give. Anything I could get by pressure wouldn't be worth having."

"You said it," said Rush.

"I wouldn't want it," said Gay.

"No. I meant when you said you knew how men were about women. You do." He looked at her across the length of the davenport. He looked down at his glass which was a third full. He drained it and put the glass on the coffee table. He stubbed out his cigarette. Then he looked up at Gay.

"Come here," he said.





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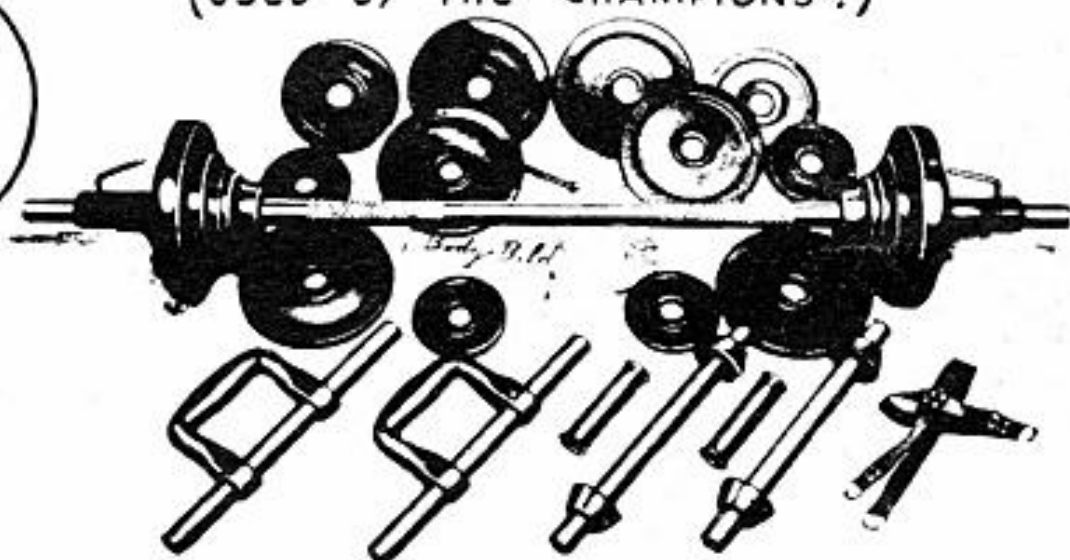
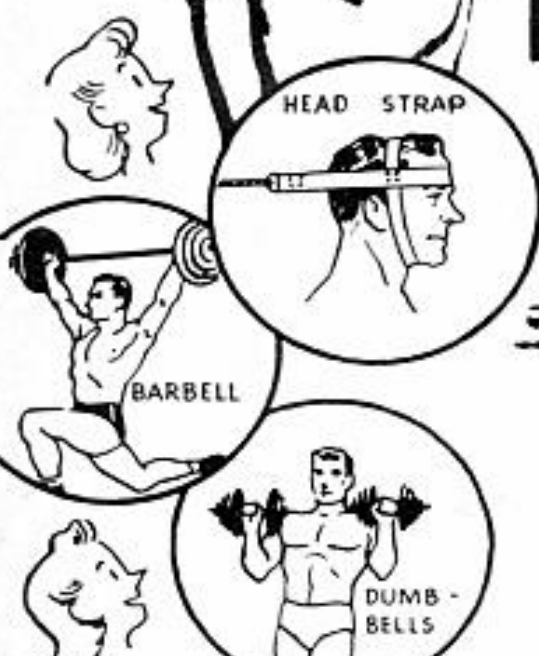


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