

**DETECTIVE BOOK MAGAZINE'S
\$2.00 BOOKLENGTH NOVEL**

THE TRIPLE CROSS

by **JOE BARRY**

Copyright, 1946, by Joe Barry

HE came to in a hospital, recovering from a bullet-crease. He learned he was Rush Henry, a private dick—and a fast man with a gun, a buck or a gal. It was all a little hard to believe. But, when he walked out into the street and the guns began to bang and the fists went smack and the knives flickered, he saw it didn't make any difference what he thought. He was up to his neck in a bucket of blood and, if he wanted to go on being anybody, his only chance was to make like Rush Henry, a private dick—but fast!

(Starting on Page Two)

And these three thrilling short stories

PASSPORT TO HELL by John Starr 78

Big John Stanislaw wanted out. The heat was on—and he had the perfect set-up for a first-class lam. All he needed was three corpses to offer the fickle gods of chance.

BLACKMAIL by Betty Cummings 96

Morg Epherson figured he could make the old Judge's secret shame pay off. He forgot his own, much deadlier secret!

PORTRAIT OF A MURDERESS . . . by John D. MacDonald 100

Tigress-like, she moved along the trail—silent, beautiful and deadly. None knew whom she hunted—least of all the victim, who marked her coming with kindling eyes. To him, she only seemed the loveliest prey ever to take his lure!

DETECTIVE BOOK *Magazine*

T. T. SCOTT, *President*

ARCH ROBINSON, *Asst. Mgr.*

MALCOLM REISS, *Ed. & Gen. Mgr.*

Spring Issue

Dec. 1949-Feb. 1950



Volume 6, No. 3

20c per copy

DETECTIVE BOOK MAGAZINE: Published quarterly by Fiction House, Inc., 670 Fifth Ave., New York 19, N. Y. The entire contents of this magazine are copyrighted 1949 by Fiction House, Inc. All rights reserved. Subscription rate for the U. S. A. is \$1.00 yearly. While due care is always exercised, the publisher will not be responsible for the return of unsolicited manuscripts. For advertising rates address: Advertising Director, Fiction House, Inc., 670 Fifth Ave., New York 19, N. Y.

Printed in U. S. A.

BLACKMAIL

By BETTY CUMMINGS

Morg Epherson figured he could make the old judge's secret shame pay off. He forgot his own, much deadlier secret!

JUDGE RICHARDS WALKED UP the street to his house with a singular sense of well-being. It was a warm summer evening, a nice night, and he had just eaten a good meal in a restaurant. But it was the reason for eating out that pleased him. He had gone to a restaurant because his daughter Jenny was off with a girl friend, someone she had known years ago, for supper and a movie; and that meant she was coming alive again. She was having fun.

The Judge stopped at the mailbox outside the house. He was a tall man, gray-haired, with a wide mouth and rimless glasses, behind which he squinted a little. His eyes were not good, but he was right about the mail box. There was something inside it—a sealed, unstamped letter that someone must have put in the box. The envelope was typewritten and addressed to him.

He went on into the house, tearing the envelope open. Then he read the typed slip of paper by the hall light; and more slowly, the lines of his face growing tense, he read it again.

Dear Judge,

This is very important. I advise you to do what I say. Meet me tonight around eight, near the hut by the quarry.

That was all. The letter was unsigned. Tom stared at it, with a cold, empty feeling going all through him. He glanced automatically at his watch, and saw that it was twenty of eight. The stone quarry was beyond the outskirts of the town, a good half hour walk, and he knew he had to go there; he could not ignore this letter. It might have something to do with Jenny. That was all he could think of. It was something about Jenny's past, from someone who knew had happened.

He stuffed the letter into his pocket, turned, and went out of the house again.

THERE were silver-edged clouds and a high-riding moon in the summer sky. It seemed cooler up here, on the grassy slope above the quarry, and quieter. The only sound was the vast, rhythmic background-song of the crickets, and an occasional swish of breeze through the trees.

The little hut showed black against the moonlit sky near the edge of the quarry, but there was no one in sight. The Judge was not surprised. Whoever had written the letter probably wanted to be sure he had come alone.

He stood near the hut, and after a moment or two he heard footsteps. He turned and saw a man emerging from a clump of trees into the moonlight. The man walked toward him over the grass, black-haired, black-moustached, perhaps forty years old, or a little younger; a slim man, with a thin, alert face. As he came closer, it seemed to Tom that he was dimly familiar, but very dimly, as though maybe he only looked like someone else that Tom had known.

"Judge Richards?" he asked politely.

The old man nodded, and said abruptly, "You the fellow wrote me that letter?"

"Yes, I wanted to speak to you alone. This seemed like a good place."

They stood facing each other. There seemed to be no place to sit down. His legs felt a little unsteady, and it had been a fairly long walk for him, with tiring, anxious thoughts rushing through his mind.

He was worried, almost frightened but he kept his voice firm. "What did you mean by that letter?"

The man shrugged deprecatingly, his dark eyes averted, the thin, moustached face expressionless. "Of course you know all about—your daughter's mistake," he said.

"Yes," the judge said. Everything in him seemed to tighten up, taut, and he felt suddenly sick. This was what he had expected, but his mind shrank from what might be coming next. He couldn't bear to have Jenny hurt anymore. He had hoped they would never have to talk about it again, or even think about it.

Nearly three years ago, at nineteen, Jenny had gone alone to Nevada for a couple of months of independence and sight-seeing. She had gotten a job there, and written home to her father ecstatically about all the fun she was having.

She had stayed on and on, still writing cheerfully; and then suddenly she had to write the truth, and it was the first the Judge knew of it. When she first went to Nevada, she had met a man who talked her into trying some gambling. She left out most of the details, but apparently she had managed to loose much more money than she possessed; and frightened, ashamed to ask help from Tom, she had stolen the money from her employer. In her confused panic, that had seemed the only thing to do.

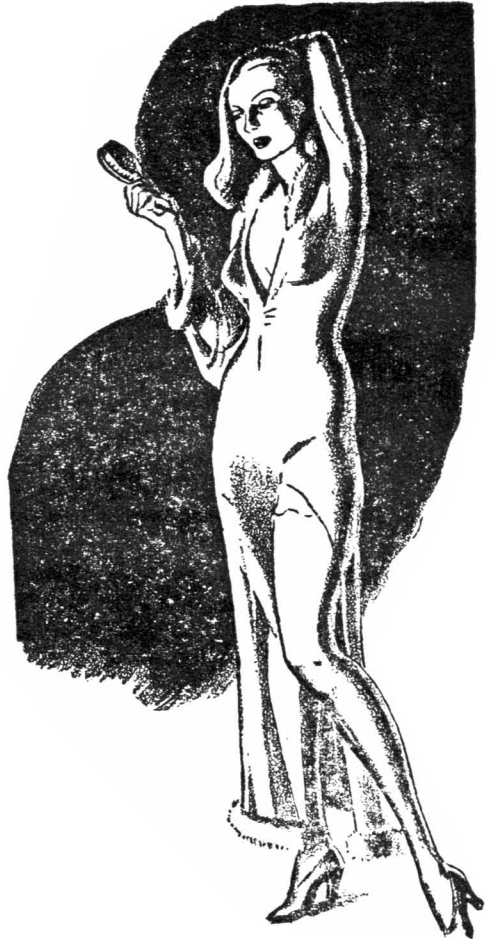
When she wrote her father about it, she already had been arrested, tried, and sentenced. She begged him to do nothing, to keep out of the whole thing. "I couldn't stand it," she wrote, "if they found out that I'm your daughter. It would ruin you back home. Dad, and I'll be all right. Please don't come or try to help me."

So old Tom Richards, feeling helpless and stricken as he never had felt before in his life, waited at home and told the town how happy Jenny was in Nevada.

Now, after two years, she was back again; brown-haired Jenny, thinner and paler and terribly nervous. She been home for only a month. But she was getting better, happier. Tonight she was out with a girl friend at the movies. Tom Richards couldn't stand the thought of any more happening to her, any further guilt and shame piling up on her.

"Yes, I know all about it," he repeated. He looked at the shorter man who stood in front of him; and again it seemed to him that the man was vaguely familiar.

"Well, then she probably told you about



me. I knew her when she first came to Nevada. We tried our luck, Jenny lost—"

"Yes." Tom cut him short, with distaste. This was the one who had introduced his daughter to gambling, and started her off on three years of hell. He went on curtly, "Let's get down to the present. You wrote me that letter, and I'm here. What do you want?"

The man hesitated, and then said coolly, "Apart from yourself, I'm the only one who knows all about Jenny. Who she is, and what she did. In spite of all the people who might be interested, I'm the only one who knows."

Fury rose in Tom. "That must make you very happy," he said evenly.

The man's face twisted in a faint smile. "Oh, it does. In this town, I could be considered quite a fascinating conversation-alist—if I started talking about it."

TOM'S blue eyes blazed behind the rimless glasses, and his whole body was trembling. "You want me to pay you to keep quiet."

"I think that would be a good idea, don't you? Jenny's a nervous girl. High-strung. If she found this town against her, your career cracked up because of what she did—" he shrugged. "It would be bad for her."

Tom's nerves crawled with fear and apprehension. He burst out against his will, "If you'll only leave Jenny alone, not go to her—I don't want her ever to know about this. She can't know anything about it."

"There's no reason to tell Jenny," the man said calmly, "if you and I work things out."

Tom sighed, shaking, almost unable to think coherently. His nervousness gave him a sense of unreality, so that he hardly could believe what he was doing. He looked down past the edge of the moon-drenched quarry that was only a few yards away, and the deep, rock-jagged place looked silvery and unreal to him, as though it were a huge floating thing in a basin of space. The dark grass seemed to melt away beneath his feet.

"Judge," the man said, drawing his attention back and using a falsely jovial voice, "You and I can get together on this with no trouble at all. Of course, I may have more to say about it than you will."

Suddenly the man laughed, as though he had everything figured out and was pleased with himself. At the sound of the laugh, Tom stared at him with complete concentration, caught in a swift current of memory. The laugh was strikingly distinctive, a peculiarly hoarse, yet resonant sound, incongruous to the man's smooth speaking voice; it was a laugh that Tom had heard before under strange circumstances.

All at once, he remembered. He remembered himself back in the city, as a young prosecuting attorney, arguing one of his first big cases. The defendant was a young man named Morg Epherson, a slim, black-haired boy of about twenty, who already had committed more crimes

than most people even know about. Epherson had killed a man finally, and Tom's work in the case had sent him up for life.

The Judge stood blindly by the quarry, remembering. He remembered the presiding judge on that case reading the sentence; and then, a clear echo in his mind, he heard Epherson's laugh, an oddly shocking sound in the solemn courtroom. It was a laugh that said, "You can't hold me!" and two years later the murderer had escaped and vanished without trace.

Tom turned his eyes dazedly on the man before him. He saw the addition of twenty years and a moustache but he whispered, with growing certainty, "Epherson . . . Morg Epherson."

There was a single, suspenseful moment, taut between them, as the two men stared at each other. Then Epherson's face changed, first to dawning realization of who this lined, grey-haired judge had been so many years ago; then to a white terror that shone in the moonlight like a tangible thing.

Epherson began to move, and at that instant Tom knew what he had done. He had let this man, this killer, realize his terrible danger, a danger that was a thousand times worse than a girl's exposure in her home town; a desperate peril, feared for eighteen years, and now suddenly facing him.

Epherson knew that Judge Richards had more on the blackmailer than the blackmailer had on him; and he seemed to understand that, no matter how it hurt Jenny, the Judge would not allow an escaped lifer to go free if he could help it.

With a sharp stab of panic, Tom saw these things in the man's terrified face, and in the quick way he moved forward. Then Epherson had flung himself on the old man and they were struggling, with Tom stumbling backward.

Epherson's fists were jabbing at his face, and for a moment Tom's face was turned, sideways against a blow. In that moment, with a sense of unbelieving horror, Tom saw the edge of the quarry, much nearer than it had been before, only a few feet away. Struggling, he was being pushed sideways and backwards toward it,

and the jagged rocks swam down there in a wash of moonlight, nightmarish, deathly.

All the strength in Tom's body gathered in a spasm of horror. He was closer to the knife edge of space, terrifyingly close; he could see straight over and below, and the rocks gleamed, and the moon shone down, and he was struggling, struggling—

He looked around wildly, and saw the dark branch of a tree, as Epherson's fists smashed at him. The tree was farther from the edge . . . and Tom grabbed at it, caught it, felt the leaf and bark firm in his hand. He wrenched away from Epherson, holding desperately onto the branch, pulling himself away from the rocks and onto the firm grass. He was free of Epherson. . .

BUT, as he glanced back over his shoulder, a new horror held him.

Epherson was there on the very edge, off balance, tottering—and then with frightful suddenness, he dropped off into space and was gone.

A long scream came up from the rocks. Then it was very quiet.

Judge Richards stood still, swaying hypnotized by the dreadful mental image of Epherson's broken body on the rocks. Finally he walked forward, and looked down into the moonlight, and then turned away again. He felt sick and desolate, incapable of any positive action. He went and leaned against the trunk of the tree, his mind aching and fogged.

After a few minutes the thought of the letter came to him, dimly as something that had happened a long time ago. He took it from his pocket, slowly, and burned it, scattering the soft crumbled ashes. He began to realize that nothing now could ever connect him with this night, this scene.

Judge Tom Richards was very tired, and he had a long, long way to walk home. He turned and started down the grassy slope, trying to think, but his thoughts still came numbly. It was as if everything had been decided by a judgement greater than his.
