



# BLACK MASK

VOL. XXXII, No. 2

NOVEMBER, 1948

K. S. WHITE, Editor

## CONTENTS



- OVERDOSE OF LEAD.....Curtis Cluff 8**  
 Chuck Conrad was no hoodlum, just a private eye trying to turn an honest penny—into a crooked buck.
- THE BLOODY BOKHARA...William Campbell Gault 36**  
 Cut-rate carpets were Kaprelian's business, but when an Oriental prayer-rug turned up with a corpse wrapped in it, that was more than he'd bargained for.
- GUN IN HIS BACK.....Coleman Meyer 67**  
 The Inspector couldn't see Patrolman Scoggins for dust, so the whole Department was dumbfounded when Scoggins got the best Emily Post treatment from the Chief.
- HARM'S WAY.....Tom Marvin 72**  
 Rex Tremain often said he wouldn't take a million for his wife, Maçcy, dead or alive. Now the time had come to prove it.
- ODDS ON DEATH.....Don M. Mankiewicz 92**  
 Nothing was left to chance on Rocco's gambling tables. But with the right odds, even a patsy can buck loaded dice and roll a natural.
- CRY SILENCE.....Fredric Brown 100**  
 Would you try to save your wife from a killer? Seems like a simple question, but to Mandy's husband, it was one to stump the experts.
- DEAD MEN CAN'T WELSH.....Mel Colton 104**  
 Jimmy Rock had always been a smart shamus—till he investigated the death of the senator's wife and damn near got a hole through that clever head of his
- CAN YOU TAKE THE WITNESS?.....Julius Long 6**  
 A quiz program for amateur legal lights.
- LIFTING THE JANUARY BLACK MASK..... 91**  
 A partial preview of our plans for the next issue.

Cover painted for Black Mask by Peter Stevens

All Stories New  
No Reprints



Next Issue  
On Sale November 19

Published bi-monthly by Fictioneers, Inc., a subsidiary of Popular Publications, Inc., at 2256 Grove Street, Chicago 16, Illinois. Editorial and Executive Offices, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Henry Steeger, President and Secretary; Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice-President and Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter May 23, 1946, at the Post Office, at Chicago, Illinois, under the Act of March 3, 1879. Copyright, 1948, by Fictioneers, Inc. This issue is published simultaneously in the Dominion of Canada. Copyright under International Copyright Convention and Pan American Copyright Conventions. All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction, in whole or in part, in any form. Title registered in U. S. Patent Office. Single copy, 25 cents. Annual subscription for U. S. A., its possessions and Canada, \$1.50; other countries, 88 cents additional. Send subscriptions to 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. For advertising rates, address Sam J. Perry, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts, enclose stamped, self-addressed envelope for their return, if found unavailable. The publishers will exercise care in the handling of unsolicited manuscripts, but assume no responsibility for their return. Any resemblance between any character, appearing in fictional matter, and any person, living or dead, is entirely coincidental and unintentional. Printed in the U. S. A.



# DEAD MEN

Jimmy Rock had always been a smart shamus—till he investigated the death of the senator's wife and damn near got a hole through that clever head of his.



*The .22 spat again, spun Sam around and he swung up with a gun in his right hand.*

# CAN'T WELSH

By MEL COLTON

**S**HE opened the door. She was dressed very neatly in a blue tailored suit. She was full-bosomed, but not heavy, seemed sure of herself, and a little less than thirty.

She hesitated, then asked: "Yes?"

"Miss Holmes?"

She frowned, then quickly picked up a smile. "Wrong room, sorry." But she didn't slam the door in my face. She seemed to sense there was more to it.

I said: "Room 24-C. Miss Jackson's?"

She said: "That's better—"

"Then you must be Miss Holmes?"

Her smile went away. She studied my face, each feature carefully, and then said: "Won't you come in?"

It was the average hotel room. There was a bed, a dresser, a chair by a window, a writing desk and a picture of roses framed above the bed. Steam from the laundry below was fogging the window outside.

When we were seated, facing each other—I was in the chair, she was on the corner of the bed—she said: "Now, what is this foolishness about a Miss Holmes?"

I said, quietly: "Who you kidding, sister?"

She crossed her legs, carefully, gracefully, and very lady-like, but not without giving me the impression that the movement was a practiced one; and that I should get the idea here was a desirable woman with class and nice legs under her skirt—and that I was a man.

I got the idea.

"My name is Helen Jackson," she insisted, as she watched with eyes that were hazel one second, a grayish-green the next, passing the light quickly like the eyes of a cat. "Who is this Miss Holmes?"

"This Dorothy Holmes," I explained, "doesn't know the first thing about getting lost in a big city. She lived at the Commodore Hotel on Sunset Boulevard, decided to get lost, so packed up and skidoed. But she made a mistake. She hired a taxi from the Commodore's stand. Cabbies have wonderful memories for such trips—especially girls with suitcases in a hurry, and shifting from one hotel to another at the other end of town. It's sort of a sideline for them. Sooner or later someone is going to come up and ask them: 'Buddy, happen to see a dame in a hurry, looks like this, dresses like that, appears to be either

frightened, mad or sick?' For a five spot they develop photographic memories.

"Now," I grinned, "we have the time of arrival, the hotel, and a few extra dollars here and there—"

"And Miss Holmes becomes Miss Jackson," she interrupted.

I said that was about the size of it.

"You're very clever," she said, her smile coming back. "You must be Jimmy Rock."

I said I was the clever Jimmy Rock.

**S**HE leaned back on her elbows and looked up at the cracked ceiling.

I guess that she was my clue to admire her. So I did. She possessed a fine, clear-cut face; one of those faces in which you feel passion hiding behind every feature. She was a tall girl, with finely molded shoulders, long delicate hands, and highly polished nails. She had shiny black hair, lacquered, parted severely in the middle, and drawn tightly to the scalp. Her eyebrows curved like new moons over the changeable eyes; a strong mouth with thin lips twisting up at the ends, Satanically mocking at the angelic dimples that dug deeply into her cheeks. Her chin was firm. Her expression was cocky.

I tried again: "What's the idea—this hotel hopping?"

She came back up, leaned slightly, laid a soft hand on mine, and said: "You wouldn't understand—Jimmy."

"Try me."

Her soft, cool hand stayed on mine. "He has a bad habit of welshing."

I ran a tongue between my teeth, said nothing.

"And he welshed on you, didn't he?" she added, moving those lips into a small, measured smile.

My teeth felt like sandpaper as my tongue made a return trip. I was becoming the big, silent type. She took her nice soft hand back. She re-crossed her

legs, this time a little carelessly, but it could have been accidental.

She said: "Suppose you tell me the angle—now that you've found me?"

"I'm a private investigator—"

"You work for Blaine Custer," she snapped. "Blaine hired you to dig me up."

"Not exactly—"

She smiled again, but her voice didn't match it. She said, bitterly: "Quit throwing dirt in my face, Jimmy Rock. I know all about Blaine Custer hiring you to get the goods on his wife—for five thousand dollars!"

"That's right, honey. I'm the guy whose pastime is digging up dirt and burying people in it for a fee. Nice, healthy work. I love it," I said harshly. "Just the kind of a guy that makes it easy for a dame like you to marry a Blaine Custer—when he gets rid of his wife!"

Her eyes sharpened: "You don't have to get nasty about it."

"O.K. Let's get back to first base. You intend ditching Blaine—?"

"That's right."

"That's great," I said in a low, padded voice. I could almost feel soft-slipped Chinamen, smoking long pipes, tipping off the end of my tongue. "So you run out on him." I waited for some kind of reaction, got none, wet my lips and continued: "Tell me, Miss Holmes, did you ditch him after his wife, Lilly Custer, was pushed out—or before—?"

She stiffened. Her eyes became saucers. She said in a whisper: "Pushed?" Then she took a long, trembling breath. Her eyes went vacant, foggy. Her face paled, small wrinkles of terror clutched at her mouth corners, and she muttered again: "Pushed? No. It . . . Was accidental. She fell out—"

Something in her voice, the way she uttered the words, made me feel she wasn't so sure.

"I don't suppose you'd like to—" I started.

Dorothy Holmes jumped to her feet—practically a spurt—faced me, and laid a hard hand across my face. I felt the blood rush to the spot.

When I got to my feet, she was over by the dresser fumbling in a drawer. By the time my hands were clenched, I was looking at a pearl-handled .22. She pushed it a few inches.

"Get out!"

I looked at her. I looked at the gun. It was like a toy pistol, this .22 target, but it did the trick. I went out the door, peacefully.

**B**LAINÉ CUSTER, seated in my favorite chair, tapped irritatingly on the arm. His florid face was pinched, creases lined his forehead, and his small, white mustache wiggled as his lips quivered. "For god's sakes, Rock," he cried, "why did you ever tell her that? That pushed angle. That's brutal, man—"

"I was testing a theory."

"Testing a theory, hell," he scowled. "I told you to find her, not persecute the kid. She's a nice kid, Rock. You shouldn't have—"

"All right. So maybe I made a mistake."

"*Maybe* you made a mistake!"

"But I found out one thing," I said bluntly. "She'll have no more of you."

Blaine Custer waved a disdainful hand. The small circular rubies in his cuffs sparkled a bright spot on the ceiling.

He said: "Just a misunderstanding. Nothing to it. She'll be back."

"What makes you so sure?"

His laugh was insulting. "You don't know that kind of a girl, Rock. They come back. They have to have their sulk."

"I'm not so sure."

He got to his feet—a heavy-set, broad shouldered man with eyes that hooded and a mouth that had a chronic agitation. He picked up his Malacca cane from the side of the chair, grabbed his bomburg, set it at a rakish angle on his white hair, and said: “Now look here—”

“Why’d she run away?”

“Why? Personal reasons, that’s why. Now look here. I hired you to find her, not ask me questions.”

“She ran away because she was scared,” I pushed in. “She’s still scared—only add confusion to it.”

“What are you getting at?”

My reply was careless: “She thinks you might have pushed Lilly.”

Red mottled his face and flamed against white temples. His cane dropped to the floor. He made a quick sweeping gesture in picking it up, attempting to cover whatever nervousness he betrayed at the moment. His knuckles showed white as he lifted the cane. He stammered: “Nonsense. Whoever—”

I said: “The records show Mrs. Lilly Custer died from an accidental fall from her second story apartment in the Las Palmas Apartment Hotel, landing on the cement auto driveway just below her window. Because of your connections it was accepted as accidental death instead of possible suicide—suicide because of what I found out about her and handed over to you. But it wasn’t advisable to have the senator’s wife publicized as a suicide. It would hurt your campaign. This way it gives sympathy . . .”

Custer’s lips twitched. His eyes told me nothing.

I continued: “The police accepted accidental death; we accepted it. But Miss Dorothy Holmes, the other woman in the case, doesn’t. She thinks maybe someone pushed Lilly—”

Blaine’s hand pawed at his mouth. “God! Man—”

“Now why would she think that?”

“Why?” Blaine Custer’s jaw sagged. “I’m asking you, Senator.”

Blaine Custer’s clenched hand relaxed and his face lost some of its redness. His eyes became quiet.

He said: “Did Dorothy tell you of her suspicions or is this all guess work on your part?”

“Guess work,” I admitted.

For the moment there was an icy silence. Blaine stood looking down at me, his face hard, his eyes beginning to take on light. Then he said quietly: “All right, Rock, you win the round.”

A mouth muscle twitched in his face. He hesitated, then continued: “The day Lilly fell out of the French window, we had a terrific squabble. She threatened to start divorce proceedings against me whether I had evidence against her or not. It upset me. Dorothy knew about the argument. She knew Lilly was making demands on me that, at the present, I couldn’t meet. Lilly was actually blackmailing me because of the coming election. A divorce action in court would have ruined me.”

I said: “How much did she want?”

“Two thousand a week. I—I haven’t that kind of money. I’ve been paying her two fifty—”

“Go on.”

“So I had to see Lilly to talk it over, come to some agreement. Well,” he shrugged, “Dorothy assumes maybe—”

He lifted his hands, dropped them, then turned and walked to the door. His hands was on the knob, when he said, “I want you to start working for me again. I want you to prove—to Dorothy—that Lilly fell out of that window.”

I managed a smile: “Suppose it turns out that she *was* pushed?”

His hand on the knob relaxed, then tightened. When he spoke, his jaw was set, his eyes were trained directly at me. His voice was a little louder than it should have been.

"Then you prove it wasn't me," he snapped. Then he lifted his cane, used it as a pointer. "And remember, Rock, the case is closed. You're on your own."

I said: "Yeah."

When he left I suddenly remembered he owed me five thousand for the evidence I dug up on Lilly Custer.

**T**HE Chief of Police, Sam Crowder, stood six-two, was two hundred and forty pounds of man, and about fifty. His hair was on the sides, the top was balding, and gray was beginning to show at the temples. His eyes were small with puffs hanging over them; his nose was short, stubby, and thick lips caressed a black cigar. A large oak desk was cluttered with papers and in front stood an onyx-base statue of a gold baseball player swinging a bat. Below was engraved: *Championship: Fireman-Policeman Baseball Contest. Won by Police Department—1947.*

He shook my hand once, pump-lever style, then waved me into a hard chair next to his desk. He then wheeled back behind the desk, smiled around the cigar, and asked: "How's the senator?" His smile was friendly, but his eyes were wary, a little mean, perhaps.

I came right out with it: "The senator thinks his wife was pushed out—"

The chief squeezed his eyes into dash marks. He opened them slowly, then slowly rocked back in his swivel chair. He said: "Yeah?"

I said: "Yeah. The senator asked me to see what I could do about the pushed angle." I hesitated, looked at him, added: "Undercover, of course."

Across the chief's face a scowl came and went. A smile followed and became lost as his inquisitive eyes drilled into mine. He snapped: "So the senator thinks his wife was pushed, does he? Now he gets around to thinking of that possibility. All of a sudden-like?"

I played it dumb.

His eyes moved over me. He came up in his chair, his cigar wiggling with the movement of his lips. He brought up another smile, but it was loose. He said: "And why does the senator want the case reopened, undercover—of course?" "Circumstances."

"Something just dug up, eh? By you, maybe?"

"Maybe—"

A thin, mocking smile played around his mouth. He said: "You're looking for trouble. All you shamuses ask for trouble. Not satisfied the way we handled it, Rock?"

"I wouldn't say that."

Sam Crowder leaned over the desk, his chin cutting into the air. "The ordinary private dick is a nuisance. They get in the way, make the road rougher than it is—but after a time, they crawl back into their holes and are satisfied with their fee. But you," he shook his big head, "you give me a pain. You've been in the department. You oughta know better. What's the matter, you trying to get even or something?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "The senator wants . . ."

"Tell the senator to go to hell!" He stormed. "This is a police department, not a political grab-bag." The desk trembled as he slammed his hand down. "The case is closed—finished."

A heavy silence blanketed the room. A typewriter was heard beating its staccato rhythm in another room. Somewhere outside an auto horn and a street car gong were battling it out. Ash dropped from Crowder's cigar and fell silently, covering the papers with a grayish powder.

Crowder filled his lungs with a long slow breath of smoke, then gently exhaled. Through the smoke, he said: "All right. Let's have it. What'd you dig up?"

"Nothing as yet, Sam."

A lot of tension was stocked in the chief and it showed mostly in his face. He stared at me, then got up, lumbered over to the window and peered out. He said without looking back: "You got a lot of guts, Rock. You always had a lot of guts, but it's all in your belly, not in your head." He came back, pointed a stubby finger at me. "You're playing around with dynamite. I want no part of it."

"Then you admit the possibility—"

"I admit nothing," he snarled. "Not a damned thing. It was accidental. Everybody says it was accidental. Everybody is satisfied. O.K., so it's politics. Listen, Rock, I'm a police officer, not a district attorney. Go ahead, play with him for a while."

I got up. "O.K., Sam. No cooperation—"

"I didn't say that," he fumed.

Sam was a big, heavy, good cop before he started to go up. Then politics stretched out its beckoning claw and a good cop became a wardheeler, a go-between, a member of the political board of directors.

I said, trying to get his goat: "You insinuated as much, chie—"

"I never insinuate," he barked. "I let you know exactly what's what." He came closer, his breath falling off at my ears. "And I'll let you know what's what—"

He did. I moved my head just as I saw his left shoulder lower. A flash of white—a fist—came up fast, skinned my beard, clipped my ear and ended going northeast.

**I** ROCKED back, swung my body around, and with the same lunge, my hand swept out, grabbed the baseball statue and held it up. I could feel my pulse quickening, my face redden with anger. We stood a couple feet apart

—a big, powerfully built police chief, his breath coming in short hisses, his eyes straining, his big hands tensed, ready to strike again; and a tall, lanky, hundred and eighty pounds of what I liked to think was coordinated muscle, waiting the next move.

I knew him to have killed a man with one punch. The minutes dragged, pulling the seconds with them. When I noticed his breath come easier, I relaxed, put the gold statue back on the desk, dropped my hands and stepped back. If he hit me again, I knew there never would be a chance for us again.

He finally rasped: "And I used to like you. Yeah, even when they dumped you off the force. I thought they might have been railroading you. Now, I'm not so sure—"

"I used to like you too, Sam—as a sergeant," I replied, rubbing my bruised cheekbone. "I used to like the way you suddenly developed a desire to work cross-word puzzles and went to night school," I added, "so you could get ahead—get a better vocabulary—make a better cop out of yourself. What happened, Sam—the string bust?"

Sam looked at me, his eyes had dulled, his breath was softer. He turned toward the window again, said: "Oh, nuts!"

Back at the window, he looked out again. Apparently nobody down below was committing any crime that needed the personal supervision of the police chief, so he came back to his desk and sat down a tired man; a man that had a lot more weight to carry on his shoulders than the odd two hundred and forty he carried for free.

He took a deep breath. "Look, Rock," he began. "I know all about your getting evidence against Lilly Custer. Evidence that made her fall look like suicide. I didn't think much of your tactics. I still don't."

"A buck's a buck, Sam."



He sat there with an unpleasant smirk on his face. He said: "Tell me something. Who's digging this pushed angle. You, or the senator?"

"The senator."

"Don't add up, Rick. It was Custer's insistence of accidental death that turned the case. Now he pops up with a murder angle. Why?"

"A dame."

That didn't faze him. His eyes remained dull. He said casually: "Dorothy Holmes?"

I wasn't giving away anything he didn't know. So I said: "Yeah. And she's plenty scared. And she carries a toy .22—"

The chief smiled like a man holding a fist of aces. "Dorothy used to work in the D.A.'s office. She has a permit for that gun."

"That wouldn't make her scared, Sam."

"I wonder what would make her scared?" Sam said almost in a whisper.

"This Holmes' dame and Senator Custer's pretty thick," I offered. "Unless she was playing him for sucker-bait, she intended to hook Custer if and when his wife would give him a divorce—after the election."

Sam's face was clean of expression. "So?"

"So Custer wants to get rid of his wife. So he hires me to dig into her past. It isn't pretty, but it isn't filthy either. She was a hotsy-totsy singer in a beer-joint years ago. That's a tough life, Sam. A gal can do a lot of things that appear bad, and yet, were not intended as such. But what I got on her should have kept her quiet—"

I paused, shifted in my chair, continued: "But apparently it didn't. She still told Custer she was going to squawk, election or no election, unless he came across with plenty—and they had a squabble."

Sam cleared his throat. "And what are you trying to tell me?"

"That Lilly Custer wasn't the type of a woman to go falling out of windows accidentally. Nor was she the type to get suicide-happy when she had the down-drag. She was pushed, Sam, pushed."

Sam didn't like that. It showed in red splotches on each side of his cheek bones. He was developing a lot of uneasiness. But his voice was under control.

"Get out of here, Rock," he said, almost gently. "You just tipped your hand. The senator, or nobody wants this case open—just you. A buck's a buck, is it? Well, you won't find scum money here. Scram, before—"

I turned, was at the door, when his voice came at me again. It wasn't gentle, it was hard and brittle, and had warning in it.

"You mess with this case, Rock, and I'll bust you—more ways than one. Consider that a favor from me—your old sergeant."

I took another look at the big man, figured he was pretty well tied up inside, and left.

**F**OR a guy that's been through life for thirty-three years with more downs than ups, I figured I was the average sort who wouldn't bend over backwards to save a nickel, nor lean forward to polish one. After I got kicked out of the department for what was termed ethics not in conformity with police regulations—whatever that meant—I opened a private investigation agency and tried my luck. I got a brand new license, had my old police special, a .38 on a .41 frame, ready for emergencies, and had an idea that I might be able to help somebody, somewhere, somehow for a few bucks. I tried to keep them honest bucks; but the line is thin,

and sometimes the results show a different picture.

So when Senator Custer, with an eye for the governorship, approached me with five thousand dollars for an investigation job on his wife, I thought I might be stepping over that thin line. Five grand is a lot of money.

But it wasn't so much when I discovered his wife could, and was, standing in his way to the governor's chair. She had threatened divorce, a big scandal, and a lot of other things a wife can throw in for good measure, which is sure death to a public officer.

I accepted the offer and checked up on Lilly Custer. What I found was this: Lilly Custer, before her marriage to Blaine Custer, was Lilly Langley, a torchsinger in a second-rate club called the Casa Carumba. She was a redhead with green eyes, not beautiful, but attractive as redheads can be. She had a figure that added up in the right spots and a personality that was loaded clear up to her ears. Above that she had a smart head.

And Lilly ran into trouble. A man was found shot dead in her apartment at two in the morning. Lilly pleaded self-defense and got away with it due to the efforts of the prosecuting attorney who believed her story. He was later to become the D. A., and later, senator—Blaine Custer. They were married one month after the killing. The officer on the case was a Sergeant Sam Crowder. All this was public property. No need for a private investigator to snoop.

But what I did find was that Lilly Langley had been married two years previously to a Ned Blake, a two-time loser, and had failed to divorce him when she married Custer. That made Lilly a bigamist. That should have stopped Lilly from doing anything rash against Custer—before or after the election. But it didn't.

So—what did Lilly have on Blaine Custer? And that's what kept prompting me to see this deal through. Not the money or the phoney wrong-must-be-righted attitude—but the fact that if Lilly Custer had committed suicide, then I was partially responsible for it—for bringing up her past. I did not want that on my conscience. The accidental fall theory was too weak to accept. People with suicidal intent are determined and practical. The second floor was not sure enough. She would have taken it from the roof.

And so my only other alternative, to clear my own feelings, was the pushed angle. And the word 'pushed' seemed to trigger a lot of emotion from Dorothy Holmes, Sam Crowder and Blaine Custer. I aimed to find out why.

My first stop was the Las Palmas Apartments. I parked my gray Plymouth coupe on the side street, walked to the corner, and through a striped gold and brown canopy that stretched from the building and rested on two poles at the curb. A brown mat and a wine colored rug, two inches thick, silenced my feet just as I entered the lobby.

Three people were in the lobby. There were two old ladies knitting, and a man with ankle-high shoes reading a newspaper. Four, if you counted the bald-headed, sandy-mustached man by the manager's sign, bending over and shaking his head at the cigarettes around the bottom base of the Majolica jar—a result of bad marksmanship.

He turned toad-like eyes on me as I advanced with a grin. I told him I was from the city's Power and Light Department and was checking up on electrical fixtures. I told him I would rather check on empty apartments so as not to bother the occupants. He thought that considerate.

"Is this a new procedure?" he asked.

I nodded. "Fire Department's on our tails."

Suddenly he seemed all upset. There were no empty apartments.

"How about apartments where the people are out of town, on vacation, or something?" I added.

He brightened, then the light faded fast on his face. I edged him on. "Well—I haven't all day. Either I get an apartment empty or bother the occupants. And maybe—" I threw in a devil look—"some may not like the intrusion . . ."

He decided. He reached back behind a swinging board and obtained a key on a tag. It had 206 on it. I liked that.

"This apartment," he muttered as he came from behind the desk and walked toward the elevator, "belongs—er—belonged to Mrs. Custer. You might have heard—accidental fall. Terrible. Terrible."

I said, "Tough," and let it go at that. The elevator was a two by four automatic affair. The manager pressed a button and we stopped opposite number 206.

**I**T WAS a three room, typical apartment house deal with the usual type of furniture, buffed walls and white, cracked ceiling. A row of windows ran across one side of the living room with drapes hanging like starched wall paper framing either side. Wall brackets furnished the light and I glanced at them with professional interest. The bedroom was to the right and contained a double-size bed, dresser and vanity. It had a window and curtains. I unscrewed a light bulb, looked into the socket, just to satisfy the manager who was breathing over my shoulder.

The small dinette, off the living room and part of the kitchen, occupied most of my observation. It was from this window, looking out over the concrete driveway, that Lucy Custer had acci-

dentally fallen. A new screen was already in.

I could see where it was possible for a person to fall out. It was a rather large window, sill about two feet from the floor, and a sudden trip or stumble and one might go through. There was no railing or protection. Once outside that window, one was out, period.

I looked out, forgetting my electrical duties, and discovered two important things. One—the fall, from the two stories was not too high a drop, but sufficient to kill a person because of the concrete; two—because of the high shrubbery by the walk, I could only see the tops of the parked cars, but from one of the cars I saw the tips of front and rear buggy-whips belonging to a police prowl car's communication system. I figured my search was about over.

I went back into the living room, looked in the bedroom, then back to the dinette. Something was wrong with this room! Somewhere in the back of my head, was the idea that this room—Lilly Custer's—was all wrong. Something just didn't fit.

But I didn't have time to sit down on the couch and play games with my brain. Any minute I suspected cops from the prowl car downstairs to do some checking up—on me.

So I told the manager everything was okeydoke, went out the back entrance, passed an appraising eye at the tall smoke stack used on the incinerator, and came out on the side street. I got into my car, wheeled it around, and headed in the opposite direction of the main street and where I had seen the prowl car parked.

Crowder hadn't wasted any time in having me tailed. Maybe I was supposed to know something.

I got home, noticed the dust on my one and only table an inch thick and

the sunlight trying to sneak in between the window and the shade I forgot to pull up when I left earlier in the morning. I pulled the shade up.

I went to the phone and dialed a number belonging to the D.A.'s office. I got Bob Anderson, an assistant D.A. and a friend of my department days. Bob seemed cordial—the first voice that sounded human all morning.

"This Dorothy Holmes, Custer's secretary," I prompted, "used to work in your office, years ago. Can you get some info on her for me?"

Bob's cordial voice tightened. "Depends, Rock."

"You must have it on your records," I added. "When she started to work for the D.A., what she did before, and when she quit?"

Bob said: "Guess we can supply that—"

"And where she lived at the time? O.K.?"

Bob said: "O.K."

I hung up, then noticed the rug—three feet away. It had two ankle-high shoes on it. My eyes climbed fast, stopped fast, looked into a hole owned by a .45 army gun, and hung. Gradually they crawled up, past a blue tie, white collar, small chin, knife-thin lips that gashed across a pasty face.

His eyes were gray, blurred by a cataract that made his left eye opaque. They were mean, determined eyes. I knew him. He was the man in the lobby at the Las Palmas apartments.

He was about forty-five, heavy and jerky, and business-like with the .45. His sideburns were clipped clean and his hair matted on top.

"You," he crackled. "You and me's gonna have a talk."

I swallowed. "Sit down and make yourself at home."

He didn't sit down or make himself at home. He made himself dangerous as

he wiggled that gun in my face; its sight looking into my eye. He was nervous enough to be formidable.

"You're a pretty nosey, joe," he said in a voice as dry as a popcorn burp. "Smart too. I liked that electrician's gag. Smart. I tried it here. It worked. That's how I got in here and waited for you in the kitchen—if you're interested—"

I didn't reply. He had the gun, the floor, and the right of way. But I figured I had him pegged.

Suddenly he got mad. He shoved the gun sight forward, two inches short of my nose. "Say something smart."

I said something smart. "You—Ned Blake?"

He hesitated. I didn't know whether the gun was coming through my nose or a bullet. Then he drew back, took a breath and wheezed it out stale and smelly.

"You got it, pal. Ned Blake. You're a cute one. Figure that one out for me, pal?"

I swallowed again. "Ned Blake, Lilly's husband and two-time loser. Checked up on him back in Illinois. First time in Stateville he tried jumping a wall. Result: two broken ankles. People don't wear high shoes nowadays unless they work in them or have weak ankles—"

His right eye—the good one—brightened. It might have been admiration, or it might have been determination. "You're smart all right. Smart and awfully funny. Funny as a louse, pal. You dug me up, eh? Had it thrown into Lilly's face—"

I knew what was coming. I felt a glob of perspiration drop into my clenched hand.

"Now Lilly's gone," he chuckled. The chuckle was more of a hangman's sneer. "And me pension's gone. Lilly had herself a nice set-up against somebody here, pal, and I had a nice set-up against Lilly."

But it's gone. You know why? Because some smart joe gets smart—"

"What was Lilly's set-up?" I ventured.

He shook his head. "I wish I knew, pal. I wish I knew." He wiggled the gun. "You tell me, pal—"

"I wish I knew, pal." I mocked. "I wish I knew."

"You don't scare easy, do you, pal?" he said softly.

My palms were perfectly wet by now.

Suddenly he went rigid. His hand clutched the gun, his trigger-finger seemed a claw. His eyes were round slates.

"You fingered me," he snapped. "For who? You wanted something on Lilly. So you got me. Who for, pal?"

I just kept looking at his eyes. It was the best place to look. Looking into the barrel made me sweat more; it was like looking into the next world.

I said: "Better put that gun away. You're a two-time loser."

I said the wrong thing. His face twitched. Both eyes fogged. It was hard to tell which had the cataract.

"You shouldn't have said that, pal," he whispered. "Lilly's gone, see. No more protection for me. I'm washed up. But I got one chance left. Just one. I gotta know Lilly's set-up. And you're gonna tell me, pal—now!"

I tried to look dumb. It was easy, but it wasn't successful. He didn't like the attempt. He showed his displeasure with a sudden lunge. I felt the cold gun rake against my nose. I heard it crunch. Then a shot of hot, searing pain. A black streak of nothing blinded my eyes and I felt my head blow up.

I didn't hear the shot.

I instinctively kicked out, contacted a shin, went forward and started swinging, hard.

Darkness—streaked with black and pinkish flares—possessed with madness.

My hands had him. I felt something soft, wooly like clothes, then spongy, like skin. The room was deep, endless—like a tunnel without a beginning or end—stale and smelly.

I clawed and punched and kicked and bit. Anything—in the dark. In spots like this you don't have time to think about rules and sportsmanship. No audience, just madness with pain; blood filled with hate and the instinct to strike back—to kill. It was strictly primitive.

There was something far away—like a small light at the end of a tunnel; only it wasn't light—it was feeling. It was contact with the brain. Something belonging to me—this body—was also attending pain. Dimly I began to realize I had lost my hands.

I felt my face against something sticky. My shoulders were too big for me, and my hands—where were they?

**M**Y MOUTH was full of blotters, and I was lying down, looking up through two slits in brown mounds. I saw a bluish sky with two suns—bluish suns—staring at me. I groaned, moved slightly and realized the sky had a whitish edging. I heard something in the distance—about two million miles away.

I strained my eyes—seemed to push them beyond the mounds. The vision cleared and through the mounds two blue eyes on bluish sockets were looking at me. There was a white cap framing black hair. I was looking up at a nurse. She was smiling buck teeth. She wasn't pretty at all.

The nurse bent over and said: "Take it easy—"

It was a silly remark.

It got all black again, and two days later I awoke to find out the score. I was in a hospital with a broken hand, a busted nose, severe lacerations about the head and bruises on the body. That was

the least of it. I was also under guard.

And I got it straight from the guard. He was a rosy-cheeked, flat-faced detective named Boots Shack. I knew him. The kind of a cop that carried ordinances in his head instead of ideas. And according to Shack it happened this way: I had a fight with Ned Blake, a man with a record, in an effort to force information from him. When he refused me there was a scuffle. The scuffle brought the police. I shot and killed Blake with a .38 bullet through his skull. The bullet was from my gun. When the police came, I tried to get away and ran in front of an oncoming prowling car.

It looked bad. But there wasn't much I could do about it, and I was too weak to care.

I went back to sleep.

The second awakening got me Bob Anderson of the D.A.'s office. Bob was a short, stocky chap, wore glasses, had a round face, and for a D.A. he looked happy. He had two wonderful kids and a swell wife. Maybe that did it.

He informed me that I was being held without bail, charged with the murder of Ned Blake, that the police department gave the D.A. a solid case, and what were my last words.

I said; "Go to hell!"

He laughed. He sat on my bed, out of earshot of the guard or nurse, and muttered: "Dorothy Holmes came to work for the D.A. in September of forty-six—as secretary to Blaine Custer . . ."

"That was just after the shooting affair of Lilly's, wasn't it?" I interrupted.

He nodded. "She used to work as cashier at the Casa Carumba in the evenings. Went to commercial school days—"

My head jerked up on that. My head reeled and slapped rivets into my brain. I slowly lay back on the pillow.

"—and she lives, or lived at the Las Palmas Apartments, apartment 606—"

I sat up again—quick. All the rivets in my brain pounded, then rolled around and settled. Nothing like a good knock on the head to give you an idea. I had an idea. A good one. I touched Bob's arm with my plastered hand.

"Let's get out of here, Bob," I gasped. "I think I got it . . ."

Bob placed a hand on my chest. "Easy, Rock—you can't—"

I said it again, "Go to hell! I'm getting out." I pushed Bob aside, got to the floor, stood up and then someone pulled the floor from underneath me. I fell into Bob's arms.

Ten minutes later I tried to do it over again.

"Bob, get me a writ, or something. I gotta get out of here."

"No can do. You're tight in here."

"How about Blaine Custer? He's got pull—"

Bob shook his head in negation. It was a nice frame. Blaine had said I was on my own; Crowder said he would bust me.

Boots Shack came over, cocked his head, and said: "Don't give me any trouble, Rock. I like you—but don't give me any trouble."

I was a nice guy. Everybody told me they liked me. But nobody was doing anything to prove it.

I sat on the edge of the bed, with my feet dangling. "Look fellas," I said. "This is a frame. I gotta get out of here. I want to see the senator." I addressed my blackened eyes toward Shack. "I work for the senator. He's a client of mine. That get me anything in your book, Boots?"

"Nothing."

I looked at Bob. "What happens, Bob, when I get released from this chop-house?"

"You're to be taken to jail and held incommunicado. Why?"

"In your custody?"

Bob said, cautiously: "Could be arranged."

"Now wait a minute—" Boots injected.

I yelled at the nurse. "Get me a doc. I'm leaving—"

Her blue eyes got bluer, her buck teeth jumped at me as her lips drew back. "Impossible," she snapped.

I yelled some more, much louder, and touched it off with a little high class swearing. It got the doctor.

He examined me. I said it didn't hurt when it did; I stood on my feet until I thought the walls would cave in on me—but I managed to keep up.

I got my release from the hospital.

When Boots went for my clothes, I took Bob aside and asked him to give me a break. To take me up to the Las Palmas apartment on the way to the jail. Bob didn't like the idea, but agreed finally.

Boots was all for taking me straight to jail. Bob threw some technical terms at him, which caused Boots to shut up.

I suggested we go to the police garage and pick up a car, just to satisfy some of Boots' feelings. It worked.

At the police garage, Boots was signing for a car as Bob and I walked through the damp, concrete spaces where the prowl cars were lined up, neatly, like obedient soldiers. We came to the one I was looking for.

It was over in a corner space, away from the rest and had a sign attached to its door. It said: Out of Service.

Its left fender in front was smashed. There were red-caked blood stains still on the fender, the bumper, and on the headlight and lens. My blood. Some of my hair, a few strands, was still sticking to the lens.

The attendant, a tall, gawky man in white coveralls, came sauntering over. He squinted at me and let out a whistle. "Cripes! That you, Rock?"

I smiled. My jaw felt like rubber bands stretching.

He waved a hand. "Well this is the baby you ran into, Rock. Being held as people's exhibit A." He laughed. It was a big joke to him.

I kept looking at the car. There was something wrong with it. Like there was something wrong in Lilly Custer's room. Then I knew what was wrong with this prop.

In an apparent fit of temper, I shoved the heel of my good hand against the lens with the blood on it. It smashed. I got a cut hand for my effort. I got something else, too. I got what I wanted to know.

The attendant's face took on red. He took a step forward and swore at me. I walked away with Bob and got into the waiting police car. Boots drove away.

In the car, Bob said: "Why did you do that?"

I grinned.

Bob sat back, folded his hands and thought it over. I don't think he was happy.

**T**HE lobby of the Las Palmas was empty. The manager was busily engaged in adoring a swatch of tapestry, when we shadowed his vision. He looked up, saw me, became startled.

"I touched a live wire," I explained. "Is 606 occupied?"

He said: "Yes, it is. I can't—"

Bob shoved his badge authoritatively under his nose. "I'm from the D.A.'s office. Anybody in 606 now?"

The manager's mustache twitched—all five hairs. "Anything wrong?" He clutched at the swatch, added: "Miss Holmes just returned from a trip. She is—"

All three of us were by the elevator by the time he finished stammering.

I said to Bob: "Automatic elevator."

We got in, I pushed a button and we stopped at two. I said: "Lilly Custer's apartment." The door closed, I pressed six. Bob kept looking at me, trying to figure my angle. Boots gave a good impression of impatience.

Apartment 606's door opened to our ring. Dorothy Holmes stood framed in the door. She looked, did a double-take, then stared.

Even as she stared she was beautiful. She appeared tall in the doorway and her black hair was changed from a severe hairdo to a slow curl resting upon her shoulders. Her dress was a grayish print with abstract black designs running all over, and it fitted her very affectionately around the curves. She had a reddish jacket with large pockets. Her eyes were grayish-green and she turned them on us, slowly, evenly; then they rested on me.

I said: "It's me. The clever Jimmy Rock."

She teetered on her heels for the moment. Her mouth opened, closed, opened again—wider.

"Oh!" she cried. "No!"

She seemed sincerely depressed by my condition.

By this time we were in her apartment, and this was an apartment! This set-up, structurally, was the same as Lilly Custer's, but the motif was different. The walls were chocolate and chartreuse in the living room. There was a low, modern chartreuse couch placed against the chocolate wall, with an easy chair of the same color near by. There were blonde end tables on either side of the couch with heavy, square, ceramic lamp bases with bas-relief figures and green shades. Very nice.

The windows were draped and corniced of cream and terra cotta with llama fringe. Very, very nice.

I sat down on the soft couch, looked at a silver Buddha for a cigarette lighter.

A teakwood cigarette box lay beside it on the blond cocktail table.

For some reason this room looked right. Just right. I looked at the windows again—French windows. That was the difference between Lilly Custer's set-up and this. And that was the answer I was after. French windows!

Bob had been talking to Dorothy Holmes and she glanced at me while he spoke. Boots was fascinated by a yellow Mexican mask hung on the wall.

Dorothy came up to me. "What happened?"

I said: "Suppose you tell me."

"I—I don't understand. Mr. Anderson just said you were being held for—" she hesitated—"murder." She didn't like the sound of the word any more than I.

She sank into the coral chair near me, put her hands together, and leveled her eyes to mine.

I worked my jaw a couple of times until I felt it could stand a few paragraphs of conversation. Then I said: "You know a Ned Blake?"

She shook her head. "No."

"You used to work at the Casa Carumba."

She whispered: "Yes."

"Tell me about it."

Her hands went up and down in a useless gesture. "There's nothing to tell. I studied typing and shorthand in the daytime, worked as a cashier later."

"You know Lilly Langley, then?"

"Certainly. She was the singer. I think she was a co-owner."

I eased back into the cushions. "Lilly Langley ran into trouble. A man was shot in her apartment at about two in the morning—after the show. According to records, one month later you applied for a position with the D.A.'s office and started to work as Blaine Custer's secretary." I watched her expression. There was nothing there. "Any connection?"



She got up, walked over to the teakwood box, extracted a cigarette, took the Buddha, twisted its head and flame spurted out. She said to Bob: "Is this questioning necessary?"

"No," he replied. "Just that Rock's in a tight spot and he thinks he can get out of it. I'm giving him that chance. Suit yourself."

She blew a lot of smoke and seemed interested in the thin ribbons that floated upward. Then she strode over to the door leading into her bedroom, turned, leaned against the door, folded her arms and her eyes played with me.

She was going to tell me something.

She didn't get the chance.

**A** KEY rattled in the door; it flung open and Blaine Custer appeared. His face was drained a marble white. Behind him—Sam Crowder. Crowder's bulk smashed into the room. His face was bathed in perspiration, his large hands were wet with sweat, and his breath was rapid, as if he had been running all the way from headquarters. When he spoke, his voice was loud, mixed with gravel and angry.

"How'd you get out of the hospital?" He shouted at me. He whirled on Boots. "I thought I told you—"

Boots' hand came up passively: "It's Anderson, Chief. I—I tried to get hold of you from the garage—"

Crowder turned on Anderson, hands clenched fast.

Anderson stood by the window, hands in pockets, eyes dead. Blaine Custer, Crowder, and Anderson looked at each other. Neither of them spoke.

It was a good spot for me to trigger an idea.

"Well, well," I managed. "The old story. Back to the scene of the crime."

That got their attentions. Custer's lip did its usual sag; Dorothy Holmes straightened up, slipped one hand in her

jacket pocket; Bob's eyes remained dead. Boots' mouth hung open, and Crowder's lips snarled back over his teeth.

He hissed: "Yeah? Yeah?"

I tried a grin. It was more of a sneer. "You've pulled too tight this time, Sam. The string broke—"

Sam's eyes jerked to slits. I reached my good hand for the teakwood box and a cigarette. Sam's hand swept out, knocked the box on the floor. Cigarettes bounced all over the rug.

"Say that again—" he warned.

Dorothy came over quickly, bent down, picked up the cigarettes and put them back in the box. She was between us. She took out a fresh cigarette, put it in my mouth, twisted the Buddha head and I got a light.

Then she turned to Sam. "This is my apartment, Sam. Jimmy Rock's my guest."

Sam sneered. "Guest?" He laughed and the tension passed. "Hell—he's the state's guest from now on."

So I said it once more: "The string's busted Sam. Your frame won't hold."

Dorothy stayed between us.

I said: "Look, Sam. This Ned Blake came to me with a gun—a .45 army deal. He was Lilly Custer's first husband. The guy she ditched for Blaine without the formalities of a divorce. The evidence I got for Blaine. It should have held Lilly in tow—but it didn't. Bigamy's a tough charge—but that didn't stop her—"

Custer came forward, breathing hard, his face now a damp plaster color. He was going to say something, changed his mind, just let his mustache quiver a bit.

I continued: "Anyway, this Blake, a two-time loser had something on Lilly—this bigamy charge. She was paying him to keep still, or keep away, or disappear, I don't know about that. But he

came here to protect himself. He wanted to know from me what Lilly's set-up was. It must have been a good one, Sam, because he seemed to think it was a ticket to paradise—"

Custer made a movement forward, but Sam brushed him aside. "Let him blow," Sam grunted.

So I blew some more. "Blake thought I was hedging on him. He smashed my nose with the gun. After that I don't remember much."

"You don't have to," Sam informed me. "We got it on record. You shot and killed him. Then you tried to get away and crashed into an oncoming police car that was coming to the scene."

I emptied a long exhale of smoke. My lungs felt filled with rust. I said: "It won't hold."

Sam stormed: "The hell it won't!"

Bob Anderson came up, his eyes showed a little life. "You got something better, Rock?"

"Yeah. I was told to lay off the Lilly Custer case by Sam. Sam said he'd bust me more ways than one. All right. So I don't lay off the case. So I'm tailed by the department when I come up to Lilly's apartment. Her apartment on the second floor doesn't look right to me. When I go home I meet this Ned Blake. After he smashed me with the gun I grabbed him and we have a fight. I didn't shoot him and I didn't run away. My gun was taken and used to kill Blake. Maybe I was roughed up more—a lot more. Then I was dragged out and laid in front of a prowl car to look like I was running away." I stopped and took another breather, then added: "And I can prove it!"

Bob exclaimed: "Prove it! How?"

"You remember the prowl car in the garage, Bob? You saw the dented fender and the blood—my blood, on the fender and bumper—some of my hair on the headlight lens. You remember me show-

ing my hand on that lens and it broke into pieces? O.K., Bob, tell me this. If I ran into the prowl car hard enough to dent the fender and my head hit the headlight—how come the lens wasn't busted?"

CUSTER turned to Sam. "Sam, you shouldn't have—"

Sam snapped. "Keep your damn mouth shut. I'll handle this punk . . ."

Custer froze. Sam took a heavy step forward. He stopped, stepped back surprised. Dorothy's back was in front of me—between Sam and me. Her elbow was bent and I think Sam was looking at her toy .22 that she had in her hand.

Without turning, she addressed me over her shoulder: "Go ahead, Rock—"

I said: "Suppose you tell me what you were going to—before we were interrupted."

She kept the gun on Sam. "O.K. I worked as a cashier at the Carumba. I met Blaine Custer there. He was there every night. He was mad about Lilly—"

"Was he there the night of the shooting?"

She hesitated. She cleared a lump from her throat. "He was at the club, but he left earlier. After the tragedy, the Carumba was closed and I looked for a full time job. I knew Blaine Custer, so I went up to his office and asked for a job. I got it."

"Tell me," I asked. "Why did you skip from his apartment to the hotel?"

Custer interrupted in a pleading, frightened voice. "Dorothy—you don't have to answer. You're not on a stand."

"Blaine called me by phone," she continued, disregarding Custer's plea, "and said he had a terrific quarrel with Lilly. That Lilly knew about us and she was going to cause trouble. He thought it best if I packed up immediately and left the apartment—until things blew over."

"This was the afternoon—the same

afternoon Lilly fell out of her window?"

"Yes."

Dorothy's back was still blocking my vision, but I could see Custer's pasty face mottled with fear.

I said: "Custer, you murdered your wife, Lilly Custer. Then pushed her out of the window to make it look like an accidental fall—or even suicide if need be. Only you didn't push her through her apartment on the second floor—you pushed her through this one! You slipped when you told me about the quarrel and said Lilly fell through a French window. There are no French windows in 206. But there are here.

"You strangled Lilly in 206, thought the fall from two stories wouldn't cover up your marks sufficiently, so you hurriedly phoned Dorothy, got her out of 606, took the elevator up with Lilly—"

Custer fell apart. "No!" He shouted. "No. It's wrong. I didn't touch Lilly. . . . I swear. We had a quarrel . . . Sam accidentally hit her—broke her neck . . ."

Sam yelled and tugging at his belt, lunged at Custer. "You weak-kneed, yellow Casonova! Dame-happy! Go on—spill your guts out. Go on! Tell about you and Ramsey—" Sam was smiling, thinly, tautly, his hand near his belt.

The .22 spit again, spun Sam around, and he swung up with a gun in his right hand. His thumb jerked the safety catch.

Sam's gun roared, Custer stiffened in a short, dynamic action.

Sam's gun caught him once more. Custer's face turned to suet. Blood trickled from his mouth, drooled in uneven threads down his chin. He slumped.

Dorothy's third shot got Sam in the temple. He turned horrible eyes on her. His big frame started to slowly revolve, then toppled, went down.

I got up and walked over to the bodies. I said: "Got enough, Bob?"

Bob scratched his head, took off his glasses, wiped them, put them back on,

and said: "Too much. This is going to raise the roof." He turned to Dorothy, smiled, and said: "Nice shooting."

Dorothy's eyes were a washed-out hazel. She was breathing hard, trying to pull herself together. The gun was still in her hand, hot as sin, and curling smoke. Her breasts were heaving.

She pulled herself together after a few minutes of taking long breathes. Then she said: "I always suspected Custer and Sam and Lilly to have something in common. The next day, after the killing, I went to the Club and saw the three of them in the office, and they were excited and slammed the door."

"This man—the one that was killed," Bob asked. "Did you know him?"

"Yes. Bill Ramsey. He was a young, good-looking waiter at the Club. Another of Lilly's conquests. She didn't care—as long as they wore pants. Custer was crazy about her and jealous."

"And later you went up to the office, asked Blaine Custer for a job, and got it—just like that?" Bob commented.

"Yes. It seemed Blaine thought I knew something."

"I think," Bob said, eyeing me, "that Custer shot this Ramsey when he caught him with Lilly, and Crowder and Lilly covered up for him. Only Lilly was using it as a bleed. Sam made chief out of it. But Lilly's hold was big enough to offset the bigamy charge you brought up, eh Rock?"

But a few things bothered me. How I was going to get my five thousand from Blaine Custer for evidence against Lilly? Dead men can't welsh. And why did Dorothy Holmes shoot at Sam Crowder so quickly when he turned on Custer, after Custer's accusation. I think she meant to get Sam on that first shot. I think she meant to save Blaine's hide, let Sam take the raps, because she had the sweetest black-mailing racket in the world—an old man's love!