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NEW DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

JOHN D. MacDONALD'S
HAUNTING NOVEL
OF THE UNDERWORLD

**FOR MURDER—
OR WORSE**

**MALCOLM
WALTON**
MANY
OTHERS

**DEATH
LIES
DREAMING**
by DAY KEENE





NEW DETECTIVE

BEST IN CRIME FICTION 25c

MAGAZINE

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Contents for November, 1950

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*With murder—or worse—in
his little black bag he roamed
the underworld—the timid
little salesman of eternity who
gagged at killing—yet killed
for a gag!*



A NOVEL BY
**John D.
Mac Donald**

CHAPTER ONE

The Wrong Corpse

IT HAPPENED just like this, and I want to state with the utmost emphasis that I was minding my own business. Except when I find it necessary to exert my rather unique gift of salesmanship, I am by nature shy and retiring.



Brenda said, "Drop that, you naughty boy!"

I have been employed for some time by the Idle Hour Novelties Company. Mr. Max Idelhaur, my employer, trusts me with the introduction of new products to our distributor areas.

At the time this trouble started I was on my way west to our distributor area

seven, which includes Pacific City and some fifty miles of coast line. I was traveling on the Red Chieftain, a train which I usually find to be very comfortable and suited to my purposes. I spent considerable time en route studying my 'gag' book. Mr. Max Idelhaur has frequently

criticised me on the basis that I seem to lack a sense of humor. He seems to feel that a person in my position—introducing novelties to the trade—should be somewhat of a jokester. Thus I have been attempting to remedy this deficiency by copying down what show people, I believe, call 'bits of business.'

I was fondly assuming that this trip would be a success. I was positive that our Mr. Darben would be entranced with the Wiggly, a glittering and life-like cockroach animated by a small and efficient rubber band motor. Indeed, I believed that our new Super-Dribble Glass would please him. It is based on a new principle. Instead of the fluid in the glass merely dripping through holes onto the user's necktie, the entire bottom of the glass is false and activated by a concealed spring, so that once the glass is tipped up the bottom slide up sharply, thrusting the entire contents of the glass into the user's face with considerable force. But the third item I was introducing seemed to have sure-fire possibilities for the small-fry trade. It is a very lifelike reproduction of the Army Colt .45 automatic pistol. When the trigger is pulled it fires eight of our loudest caps in rapid succession, makes a very lifelike reproduction of the sound of a fire siren, and gives off a sharp odor of cordite.

As usual I had a compartment. On the night before our arrival in Pacific City a most peculiar thing happened. Had I known then what I now know, I would most certainly have denied that peculiar man's request. He was a most unwholesome type.

Just as I was about to retire, he tapped at my door. I admitted him. He said, "Jack, I wonder if you'd do a guy a favor."

"My name," I said, "is not Jack. It is Omar Dudley."

"Omar, you look like a nice guy." I thanked him for that comment. He was

weaving a bit more than the motion of the train should have caused. He gave off a distinct odor of hard spirits. As I feel a salesman should keep his wits about him, I seldom drink. When I do, I prefer a white mint frappe after a good dinner.

"I saw you come in this compartment, Omar." Though he kept smiling, he seemed to be under considerable strain. "Some people I don't want to meet up with have got hold of my compartment number, Omar. Maybe they'll be piling on the train at the next stop to wake me up, and I'm a fella needs his sleep. Now if they can't find me, I'll be all set. I'm dead for sleep. So I wonder if you'd do a guy a favor and trade compartments."

"People who awaken other people are most inconsiderate," I said.

"They sure are," he agreed, "and here's twenty bucks for your trouble."

"My good man, I do not want to accept money for a little favor like this."

"As I said before, you are a nice guy, Omar."

He seemed to be the type that it is easier to humor than it is to get rid of, so we traded compartments with what seemed to me to be unseemly stealth. He brought his single bag to my compartment and I took my bag and my box containing our three new items to his compartment. When it was done, he seemed overcome with enormous relief.

Nothing would do but I had to accompany him to the club car for a nightcap. His compartment was near mine and the club car was four cars toward the head of the train.

I sat beside him in the club car and ordered a ginger ale. He had an offensive laugh. He was in gay spirits until suddenly two other men entered the club car. They seemed to be of the same type as my new friend, who had told me his name was Smith. As soon as they entered he became exceptionally nervous. He licked his lips repeatedly.

When he departed, he was most rude. He did not pause to say goodnight. He merely bounded up and scurried back the way we had come. The two men followed him quickly and quietly.

Without giving the matter any more thought, I retired to my compartment.

I awakened in the morning when the train had already stopped under its long shed in the yards of Pacific City. I whistled as I shaved at the compartment sink, because I was in high good spirits. Our Mr. Darben would expect me to address a meeting of all salesmen, and I was well prepared for the task.

There was a tap on the door and I reached over and unlatched it. Two rather frail looking young men came in. They both wore lurid examples of the more distasteful California style shirts.

"Yes?" I said politely.

They sat side by side on my unmake berth and one of them supplied cigarettes

for both. "Take your time," said the slightly more sallow one.

"I certainly shall, my good man. But I am slightly confused as to your purpose."

"You expected an escort, didn't you?" the other one said.

I said, "When my employment has taken me to other areas, an escort has not been considered necessary."

"This is hotter than you might think," the sallower one said.

"Really? I thought Pacific City was quite cool this time of year."

They both slapped their legs and guffawed. I blushed with pleasure.

THEY WATCHED me finish dressing. I put my toilet articles in my suitcase and fastened the straps. The sallower one said, "I didn't notice no artillery."

It took me a moment to figure out what

he meant. And then I was intensely disappointed. There had been a leak somewhere. Our Zing-Bang Pistol was to have been a complete surprise.

I tapped the box, and sighed deeply. "It's in there, gentlemen. I'm sorry you know about it."

They both stared at me. "Know about it! What you think we're playing out here? Marbles, maybe?"

"The turnover on marbles has been so disappointing that we've dropped the line," I informed them.

Again they both dissolved into helpless laughter.

"Geez, you're killin' me," the one with goldfish on his shirt said.

"Shall we go?" I asked.

They stood up.

One of them was kind enough to take my bag. I carried the package, of course. They accompanied me out through the station. One action struck me as quite peculiar. Just as we were about to go into the station proper, the goldfish one touched my arm and held me back while the other walked into the station, took a long look around, then turned and motioned to us.

"Can't be too careful," the goldfish one said.

I saw at once what he meant. Our strongest competitor in that area is the E-Z Fun Company. Though I have long know that any company which got its start through itching powder would probably stoop to any deviltry, I had not heretofore realized that they would employ actual violence in order to wrest from us our newest developments.

"Would they try anything right here in the station?" I asked.

"Brother, there's enough at stake so they'd pot you right off the governor's lap."

I can only say that this did not astonish me too much, because I realized that this was our major California sales area

—and in our business we have found that the residents of California, more than those of any other state, are willing to pay huge sums merely to disconcert and humiliate their fellow citizens. In one year alone we sold seventy-three thousand six hundred and forty rubber cocktail pickles in California.

They employed the same caution when they reached the street, and then they hustled me over into a long, dark blue sedan already occupied by a uniformed driver. The motor was running and the car slid ahead as the door closed.

The goldfish one rapped his knuckles on the window nearest him. "You can relax now," he said. It seemed an odd superstition, rapping on glass, but I ignored it.

"Any excitement out your way?" the other little man asked.

The only thing that seemed apropos was my recent survey of retail outfits instigated by Mr. Max Idelhaur.

"I personally eliminated eleven dealers," I said with quiet pride.

His jaw sagged and his eyes protruded a bit. I revised my estimate of him. Doubtless he was one of the dealers rather than one of our Mr. Darben's salesmen.

"Holy Moses!" he said. "Eleven! I didn't see it in the papers."

Doubtless he was referring to the trade papers. "We have ways of avoiding undue publicity," I said. He nodded sagely.

"I wish we had that kind of control out here," he said.

I then noticed that we were going in almost the exact opposite direction from our Mr. Darben's offices. Then I realized that it was quite early. Doubtless we were going to his home. This surprised me a bit, as I have always felt that Mr. Darben does not particularly care for me. I frequently criticize his expense accounts.

We rode in silence and at last turned into a winding street called Jacaranda Drive. The chauffeur turned into a drive-

way and blew his horn in front of a massive wrought-iron gate. I made a mental note to remove the expense item of this trip from Mr. Darben's next expense account. A man came running to the gate on the inside. He stared out at us, then activated the gate with some sort of a pushbutton. We could not see the house itself until we were inside the gate, and then it quite took my breath away. Our Mr. Darben was certainly doing very well indeed. I decided to caution him about going in debt. It was a huge structure of grey stone, redwood and plate glass. Beyond one corner I could see the end of a swimming pool, with bright mattresses laid out on the edge of it.

The car stopped and the goldfish one said, "Now we're really all right."

When he got out and took my bag out, I said, "Now look here! I am planning on residing in a hotel."

"Wait'll you hear the pitch," he said, "then decide."

I shrugged. I followed them to a side door, my package under my arm. We went into a hallway and then out onto a very pleasant little terrace with several tables. It overlooked the pool.

The chauffeur had come in. He rubbed his hands together. "I'll tell 'em in the kitchen what you want."

"That's very nice of you. Orange juice, toast and coffee, please."

"Coming up. He ought to be down in a half hour or so. Want a paper?"

"Yes, thank you." A fresh copy of the *Pacific City Courier* was given to me and I was left alone on the terrace. The morning breeze was fresh and quite comfortably cool. Soon a young man in a white coat brought my breakfast. He seemed to be some sort of an Oriental.

I inspected the breakfast most carefully. Our representatives have a somewhat annoying habit of trying to catch a man from the home office with some of his own merchandise. The butter was not

our hard yellow rubber special which has sold so well, nor did I find one of our green plastic Wiggli-Worms in the orange juice.

As I buttered my second piece of toast, a young woman came out through the wide doors and approached my table. I would hesitate to call her a lady. Her long yellow hair was not carefully combed, and there were remnants of yesterday's lipstick on her slightly over-heavy lips. She had an extremely sulky expression. But the thing which dismayed me most was her attire. She wore some sort of a wrapper, I believe they are called.

"He told me to come down and entertain you," she said somewhat bitterly.

I naturally held a chair for her.

"Soong!" she yelled, so loudly that I jumped. The Oriental put in his appearance. "Coffee, Soong. Black and lots of it," she demanded. When he left she pressed her palms against her temples and sighed. "Will I never learn?" she said. Then she looked at me steadily. Her eyes were so level and so frankly searching that I felt myself blush. "Do you know your business?" she asked. "You certainly don't look it."

"I think you should know," I said with dignity, "that I am well thought of in many quarters."

"Maybe I haven't seen everything," she said obtusely.

"Have you known Mr. Darben long?" I asked politely. This woman certainly bore no resemblance to Mrs. Darben, a short, heavily-constructed person who quotes Browning.

"I don't know any Darben," she said.

It did not take my agile mind long to recover from the surprise. I surmised that they were giving me what is called 'the buildup'. Evidently this was a rather topheavy 'gag', precisely the sort of thing you would expect from our Mr. Darben, a man of rather meager resources.

AS I WAS about to play along with her in an attempt to turn the tables on them, a strange man came out onto the terrace. He wore a pale yellow terrycloth robe and his brown feet were bare. I must say that he was a most handsome man. Though his hair was white, he seemed to be in the very flush of health. I was prepared to like him at once, yet when he stared at me I noticed that his eyes had an uncanny coldness about them. They were of that grey shade that icicles get in a soft coal region.

I stood up and reached my hand out to him. He came toward me to take my hand, saying, "Glad you made it okay." Just as he was about to take my hand I lifted it out of his reach, closing my fingers and pointing my thumb back over my right shoulder. It is one of those 'bits of business' that seem to be essential when one is out on the road selling our line.

He went white with fury and I beamed at him, because it is one of the tenets of our trade that a successful 'gag' always leaves the subject enormously angry. The woman at the table made a strangling sound. Then the stranger proved that he was no gentleman. Barely glancing at her, he backhanded her across the mouth. The blow was sufficient to split her lip and knock her over backwards. She scrambled to her feet and moved away from the white-haired man, obviously afraid of a second punishing blow.

It was the first time I have ever seen a woman brutally struck. Though she seemed to be a rather sordid type, she was still a woman. One might say almost too obviously a woman.

"That, sir," I said, stepping toward him, "was the act of a dastard."

"What did you say?" he asked me in a curiously small voice.

"The act of a coward and a bully!"

I detest violence, but in this case it was obvious that someone had to take a firm

hand. I am a veteran of three years of boxing lessons at the YMCA. I went up onto my toes and put my left fist out and danced around him in a deadly circle, my right hand coiled to strike. He turned and faced me as I circled him, utter amazement on his face. But he was sufficiently wise not to raise his hands. I imagine that he realized I could not hit a man who made no attempt to protect himself.

Then he threw his head back and laughed. He laughed until the tears squeezed out of his eyes and he sank weakly into the nearest chair. He was too far gone for several moments to talk.

"Okay, okay," he gasped, "they told me you were a handy man with a boffo, but I didn't know how good you really were. Sit down and finish your coffee."

I sat down, rather puzzled. "Just who are you, sir?"

"Hell, you can drop the gag now. I asked for you especially. You are Jumpy, aren't you?"

I considered the quivering condition of my hands, a residue of anger. "I certainly am," I said.

The woman was still dabbing at her mouth with a napkin. She had cautiously resumed her chair at our table. "Take a walk, Brenda," he told her. She got up without a word and went into the house.

Just as he leaned toward me to speak, the chauffeur appeared in the doorway and said, "Boss, phone."

"Be right back, Jumpy," he said.

I picked up the paper again to try to quiet my nerves. And then I saw the box on the bottom of page one. It was labeled *Special Release*. My mouth went dry as a buried bone as I read it.

MYSTERY SHEROUDS DEATH OF SALESMAN

At midnight last night the mangled body of Mr. Omar Dudley, Sales Manager of the Idle Hour Novelties Company, was found beside the right of way of the Middle Pacific Railroad just outside the village of Two-pence, Nevada, where the deceased had fallen

or been thrown from the crack streamliner the Red Chieftain. Phone contact with the conductor of the train after the discovery of the body resulted in positive identification when it was found that Mr. Dudley's compartment was the only one unoccupied. A telephone call to Mr. Dudley's employer in the east disclosed that Mr. Dudley was on a sales trip to Pacific City. Though it is not yet official, it is believed that Mr. Dudley was dead of stab wounds before he was dropped under the wheels. Every attempt was made not to alarm other passengers on the train, but the news that it was not suicide or accidental death came too late to enable the police to hold other occupants of the crack streamliner.

It is a proven fact that all successful salesman achieve their positions through an ability to think on their toes, as it were. Thoughts raced through my mind with unbelievable speed, and it was no time at all before I realized that my odd reception in Pacific City was due to the fact that I was believed to be the man who had called himself Smith and who, in tallness and slimness at least, bore a superficial resemblance to myself. Along with that decision, I also deduced that Smith had attempted to have me killed in his place. Had not the two men found him in the club car. . . . I shuddered.

I thought of the killing on the train and shuddered again. I hastily folded the paper as the white-haired man returned to sit with me. He was now fully dressed.

"Now, look," he said in a confidential tone.

I am afraid," I said, "that you must listen to me first. I am not your man. I am only . . ."

He looked beyond me and nodded. I turned around and saw the chauffeur standing not twenty feet away. He held a pistol in his hand and there was a bulky thing on the end of the muzzle which I took to be a silencer.

The words I was about to speak froze in my throat.

The white-haired man said softly, "Now get this, Jumpy, and get it very

straight. We're not fools out here. We know that there's a damn good chance that the other side got to you and greased you. We don't trust you any further than Brenda can throw that swimming pool. We asked Nicky for a good man for a special job and we requested you on account of your reputation. I'm going to tell you the job you're going to do and you're going to go through with it exactly the way I suggest. If you make one move we don't like—just one move—I'm going to have George there give you a spinal with that little toy he's got. It's something George enjoys doing. Any out-of-line move you make will be evidence to me that you're either trying to cross us on your own or Nicky is playing along with the other side. Now get on your feet and keep your back to George."

Much to my astonishment, my trembling legs obeyed the command.

"How much did Nicky tell you?" he demanded.

My legs had worked, but my voice wouldn't. I felt as though somebody had me by the throat. I felt the corners of my mouth lift. It was an instinctive grimace.

"Put your hands up and stop grinning at me," he roared.

I couldn't lift my arms. They hung by my sides like sacks of sand. I couldn't change the expression of my face.

"I'm boss out here," he said in a low dangerous voice, "Put those hands up and stop grinning or I'm going to tell George to shoot. One . . . two . . ."

I had heard that expression 'paralyzed by fright' but I had never believed that it was anything but the most gross exaggeration. With a respectable anatomical chart at hand I could have pointed to the precise vertebrae that would be separated by George's bullet.

"Hell, you *must* be all right," the white-haired man said. "I always heard

you've got your share of nerve. Sit down and have some coffee."

I sat down with an astonishing jolt that made my teeth click sharply. I reached for the coffee cup. My hand was oily with perspiration. My index finger slid through the handle on the cup. I lifted the cup to my lips and it chattered against my front teeth. The white-haired man looked at me sharply. Then he grinned.

"Say, that's a good act!"

A salesman is resourceful. I put the cup down. But I couldn't get my finger out of the handle. I tried to do so in an inconspicuous manner. The cup chattered against the saucer. I steadied the cup with my other hand and managed to pull my finger free.

"You can stop clowning," the white-haired man said. "How much did Nicky tell you?"

"Nothing," I answered truthfully.

Just then the little man with the shirt with the goldfish came out onto the porch. "Good morning, Mr. Artigan," he said politely to the white-haired man.

"Sit down, Fish. You met Jumpy Anderson didn't you?"

Fish sat down with a hurt expression. "Boss, I went with Artie and George and got him off the train, remember?" Fish shook his narrow little head sadly and clucked at me. "Boss, he smeared eleven guys lately and he don't worry none. He carries his rod around in a box under his arm. Are you sure he ain't nuts?"

CHAPTER TWO

Bloody Business

MY FUTURE course of action was clear to me. I would have to humor these most peculiar people until such time as I could place myself in the hands of the law. In the meantime I was miserable about what Martha, the

girl I shall marry someday, would be thinking. There is no nonsense in our relationship. We maintain a joint savings account and each month we deposit a stated amount from our mutual earnings. When the figure reaches the goal we have set, we shall marry. In the interim years Martha says that it is her duty to keep herself from being so attractive that I shall get overly impatient. Thus she dresses very plainly, uses no makeup and permits me to kiss her only on the cheek—though her cheek, I must admit, is quite interestingly warm and soft, that is for such a tall, thin girl.

She would undoubtedly be taking the day off from her work, prostrate with grief. It was my duty to escape from these odd people as soon as possible.

"Now then, Anderson," Mr. Artigan said, addressing me, "let's fill you in on the gaudy details. This is a semi-political pitch. We have had a sap on the string for some time, grooming him for the job of Mayor of Pacific City. The campaigns have already started and one month from today comes elections. This pigeon of ours is named Walter F. Dermody. He looks honest and reliable, which is what we want, but as soon as he's in, he'll start putting our people in the appointive slots, and before you know it, we'll be raiding the joints, dumping the old-time collection of crumbums and taking over the city, which, I might add, is a three million a year jackpot at the very least. It is much cleaner way of taking over a town than by going around shooting the people who already own the profitable concessions."

I had to think very fast to decipher the meaning behind his crudities of expression. "I see," I said.

"You don't see yet. We thought this Wally Dermody was clean as a whistle—until a few weeks ago. We found that he had been what the books call a bit indiscreet. There were some letters. To his

girl. We are very disappointed in Wally Dermody because it looked as though he would make us a fine mayor. The girl's name is Prissy Thorpe, and she is highly annoyed because it seems Wally cut her as soon as we tapped him for the Mayor's office. The letters she has are pretty emotional, from what Wally tells me. In few words, they are documents which do us no good printed in the paper. In fact, they amount to a kiss of death for our candidate."

"I see," I said.

"Not yet you don't see, Anderson. This Prissy is a smart dish. She's stashed the letters in the Harbor National Bank in a safety deposit box. She's sitting in an apartment on West Osceola with her hands crossed, waiting to see who comes through with the high bid for those letters, my organization or Russ Pardo's boys."

The last name—Russ Pardo—rang a bell. On one trip while in the company

of our Mr. Darben I had heard Mr. Pardo mentioned as being a hoodlum type and so-called boss of Pacific City. Obviously Mr. Artigan intended to contest his position through a clever political manipulation.

"Have you made a bid?" I asked weakly.

"No point in that. Pardo is in. He's got his hands on more cash than we can round up. But I have been able to stall her from making a deal with Pardo. If we can get the letters, we'll burn them, and our boy is in and, little by little, Pardo and his crowd will be eased out. If he gets them, you can bet they'll be spread all over Pacific City and Wally Dermody will be one dead political duck. It's too late to try to build up another candidate. We've got to sink or swim with Dermody, damn his peanut-sized brain."

"I see," I said.

"I wish, Anderson, you'd stop saying that. Now, here's the program. We've been back-checking on Prissy Thorpe. Thorpe isn't her right name. It was originally Kelly. We tried to get an angle on her folks and a big plum drops right in our lap. She's got a kid sister still going by the name of Kelly right here in town. She's a carhop at a place called the Turk Drive-in, four miles out Route 80. The first little job for you, Anderson, is to snatch the kid sister and bring her here. Because it's a federal rap, we had to get out-of-town talent."

I found myself almost incapable of words. "I'm to abduct a young woman?"

"None of that stuff," Fish said sharply. "You just grab her and bring her here."

Artigan gave Fish a look of deep contempt. "Never mind him. I might as well give you the whole plan. We've got to figure on what to do if this Prissy Thorpe-Kelly doesn't care what happens to her kid sister. This you'll love. If Prissy won't listen, then you're going to shoot a hole in Wally's head. We've got to a guy on Homicide. All we have to do is tip him and he'll spout to the press that it is obviously the work of Russ Pardo. With Wally dead, those letters won't do Pardo any good. You can't smear a dead guy. We'll be all ready to run in another pigeon named Francis A. Towner, who will immediately start screaming that Wally was a martyr to good government and the way the people can show their feeling about such gunman tactics is to elect him by a landslide vote. But we'd rather have it work out the first way, because I'm not too sure of this Francis A. Towner. He's a lawyer and he's a little smarter than Wally. He may be tough to handle once he gets in office and we've got nothing special on him to use against him. The stinker may get in and try to make a deal with Pardo."

"When shall I—ah—snatch the dam-

sel?" I asked, attempting to speak in the vernacular.

"That better be tonight," Artigan said, "Fish'll get a road map and spot the place on it for you. Georgie'll drive."

"I prefer to work alone," I said.

He stabbed me in the chest with his finger, leaning across the table. "You'll work like I say. You're getting enough for it, remember."

I smiled at him. "Well, I suppose I'm at liberty for the rest of the day, Mr. Artigan?"

"That's right. You can use the pool and play records. Any bets you want to get down, see George. The liquor isn't locked up, but don't get stinko. Stay away from the gate and away from the phone."

"A movie relaxes me," I said.

"Oh, Nicky told you, did he? Brenda can run the projector. I got a nice file of stuff. I'll tell her you want some movies."

Brenda came out and sat meekly at a table some distance away. Soong brought her some coffee. Artigan stood up. "I got to go in to the office. Fish, George, Artie and Brenda'll be around all day."

Two men I hadn't seen before appeared in the doorway. They looked at me coldly. Artigan left with them and I heard the car start up on the other side of the house.

IT DID NOT take me long to find that I was a virtual prisoner in the house.

Once I almost made it to the phone before George appeared like magic, leaning against a door frame, cleaning his fingernails. I found the record library but it did not contain any DeBussy, a type of music I find exceptionally restful.

Fish brought a map, properly marked, and spread it on a table for me. He pointed with a pencil. "Here we are. And there is where she works. She's on tonight. I checked. You're the boss, Jumpy."

To allay his suspicions I marked out a route, directly to the Turk Drive-in, then extending beyond it and zig-zagging back through narrow streets.

Fish nodded. "That's good. It'll look like we took her the other way. Now how about plates on the car? It's rigged so they can be switched from the inside. There's a lever on the dash."

"Have we Florida plates in stock?"

"Sure thing. Yeah, that should be okay. Then we switch back to the regular ones. Now for the girl, you think chloroform or ropes and a gag or what?"

I swallowed a faint feeling of nausea. "We won't need any of that, Fish. I'll handle that matter personally."

He bobbed his head. "You know, Jumpy, it sure is a treat to me to see how cool you boys operate."

"If the planning is adequate," I told him, thinking of the sales manual I had written back in what had begun to feel some other existence, "nothing can go awry."

"Can go what?"

"Awry. Askew."

"Sure, sure." He bobbed his head.

I am ashamed to admit that such adulation made me feel larger than life size. It is pleasant, I found, to be considered to be a desperado, a devil of a fellow.

I yawned. "I believe I'll take a nap to digest my lunch, Mr. Fish."

He showed me to a bedroom and closed the door gently. I went at once to the windows. I could see over the high wall and out into the street. Some children played there. A car went by slowly. So near and yet so far. I sat disconsolately on the bed. I lay down and tried to devise a plan. I shut my eyes to facilitate the thought processes. When I opened them again it was dark outside and somebody was knocking on the door.

Soong beamed at me and said, "Chow, boss."

After dashing cold water on my face

I went down. The evening meal was spread buffet style on the big table in the dining room. Some sort of a party seemed to be in progress. There were several girls and many trays of cocktails. A lot of them turned and looked at me as I came down the stairway. Brenda wore a pale blue frock and she seemed to be quite over her sullen attitude of the morning. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes danced. The other girls seemed to be of rather the same type. All too vivid, with their red, red lips and their shining eyes and their bold dresses.

Mr. Artigan came immediately to me. "Little party," he said in a low voice. "It'll make a good cover in case of trouble. Know what I mean?"

"I trust there won't be any trouble," I said.

He took a cocktail glass full of a pale amber fluid from Soong's tray and thrust it into my hand. Sleeping during the daytime always makes me exceptionally thirsty. Even the sight of a small pearl onion in the bottom of the glass did not deter me. A good salesman thinks of his customers and never eats onions in any form.

I drained the glass in three swallows. Just as I replaced it on Soong's tray the ingredient it had contained caught me by the throat. I gave a strangled gasp, I am sure, and something seemed to be bounding up and down in my stomach, emitting flame and sparks. It was instinctive to attempt to cool off the fire. Before I realized what I was going, I had grasped a second glass and done likewise with it. Too late, I realized my mistake.

Artigan whistled softly and said, "That's a hell of a way to drink Martinis."

"The only way," I said firmly. "More people should realize that."

It is apparently true that alcohol has a remarkable effect on the inhibitions. The room and the party swirled into a sort of

warm, smoky haze, and I was but intermittently conscious of my actions. At one point I went to my suitcase and brought out one of our standard items of the Idle Hour line, a lapel flower with blub attached. I have never cared particularly for the item, but it seemed an excellent idea to fill the bulb with Martini and wander through the group, aiming it at every handy face. I picked one stranger who took exception to my little game. I squirted him and he growled, "Cut that!" I smiled and gave it to him again. He balled his fists and took a step toward me, his nose practically against mine, and said, "You do that once more, tall and revoltin', and I'm gonna—" I couldn't hit him in the face with the stream, so I had to give it to him in the neck.

He actually seemed about to hit me when Mr. Artigan came quickly up and whispered something into the man's ear. His whole attitude changed. He gave me a wide, glassy smile. "That's a pretty good gag, is what I was trying to say," he said in a slightly shaky voice.

I squirted him with what was left in the bulb and he laughed uproariously.

I was finishing a large plate of cold ham and potato salad when Artigan tapped me on the shoulder and said, "The car's ready. Time to go."

The warm haze slid away from me as though it had never existed. I dropped down into that pit of bottomless despair which I have since learned is a Martini depression.

It was Arty who caught me at the door and handed me my box. "You don't want to forget this, do you?" he asked, grinning.

"Of course not. Thank you very much."

The motor was running. George was at the wheel. Fish was in back. Fish seemed highly nervous. I got in with Fish. The gates opened and the car slid forward.

"How fast, Jumpy?" George asked politely.

"As fast as you can make it," I said quickly, hoping that a prowler car would solve my dilemma.

"Sure thing," George said gayly, turning out onto the main road. For the next six minutes I had my eyes open only at intervals. Each time I opened them I would see the massive car leaping for a tiny gap in the thundering traffic and I would be forced to shut them again.

He turned into a gaily lighted drive-in. The amplified music of a juke box yammered across the wide parking area.

"Already?" I said timorously.

"Four city miles in six minutes," George said proudly. "Wait'll I get you on the open road some time. This'll do a hundred twenty-seven."

"Better unwrap that box," Fish suggested.

It could do no harm, and it might possibly do some good. I unwrapped the box. In the light inside the car the big gun looked deadly enough. I slid it under my belt and pulled my coat across it.

"That's a tough size cannon to use," Fish said with respect.

"It's all in becoming accustomed to it."

"Sure, sure."

A girl approached our car. I wondered how the poor thing must feel being forced to parade in front of all the munching hundreds of people in nothing but those little shorts with the military stripe down the sides and the skimpy halter.

"What'll it be, boys?" she inquired in a brassy voice.

"Say, do you come with the box lunch?" George asked.

"Sonny, you can't afford our box lunch, so you'll never find out, will you?"

Fish jabbed me hard with his elbow. I leaned forward, wet my lips, and said, "Would it be too much to ask to have Miss Kelly wait on this car?"

The girl seemed annoyed. The dollar I held out to her wiped away her expression. "Kelly coming up," she said and

strutted off. Martha would have disapproved.

"What'll we do when she shows?" Fish asked, "Just yank her in and roar out of here?"

"First," I said, "I believe I'd like to have her bring me a chocolate milk shake. I left the house before I had a chance to get dessert."

"You slay me," Fish said.

THE KELLY GIRL approached the car. Her uniform was as skimpy as the one on the previous girl, but she wore it with what seemed a trace of self-consciousness. Her hair glistened dark red in the floodlights and her face had a most cute, snub-nosed impudent look. A magazine illustrator would have painted her as a kid sister type.

"They tell me I have friends here," she said in a warm and throaty voice, peering in at us. "Do I know you?"

"You were recommended to us as providing excellent service, Miss Kelly," I said, "For me, a chocolate milk shake."

"Anna beer," said Fish.

"Anna beer," said George.

She went away. "Nice item," George said. I said nothing. Out of the corner of my eyes I had detected a prowler car parked not far away. I hoped that neither George nor Fish would see it.

We were silent for a moment. I made my plan. I said, "When we've finished, we'll give her a ten dollar bill. She'll take

away the tray and bring back our change. I'll be waiting outside the car for her. I shall push her in, climb in myself, and away we will go."

"Sounds okay to me," George said.

For the next ten minutes, until I could safely get out of the car, I was almost frantic for fear the officers of the law would finish their repast and drive away. As she left with the tray and the ten dollar bill, I opened the door and got out. As casually as I dared I walked away from the blue sedan, directly toward the police car.

A beefy officer licked grease from his fingers and stared at me as I bent to talk in the window.

"Officer, I wish to report that those men in that car are planning to help me kidnap our waitress, the little girl with the red hair."

He winked at me. "Mac, you got damn fine taste. I'll say that."

"You don't understand, Officer! I'm turning myself in!"

"That's damn white of you, Mac." He reached out and pinched my cheek with his big fingers. "Gee, you're a cutie," he said. "Maybe she'll go for you."

"Hey, Red," he shouted. I turned and saw the girl stop and then come over toward us.

"Hello, Dave," she said.

"Red, this taxpayer here wants a recommendation from the law. How do you like that? Mac, you ever been in jail?"

"Of course not!" I said hotly, "I'm trying to tell you—"

"I'll handle this. You shut up. Red, look him over. He looks harmless to me. And he has got a new angle. You go off pretty soon, don't you?"

"I should be off right now," Red said, moving around me so that she could look into my face in the light. "You are kinda cute, but I don't know you."

"Mac meet Red. Red meet Mac," Dave said. "Now you're all palsy. Red, Mac wants a date. You busy tonight?"

She had a dimple when she smiled. "I guess when the law recommends a guy."

The girl had taken the tray off the other side of the prowler car. The prowler car backed out. Dave leaned out the window and said, "Don't ever say we cops ain't on cupid's ball team, Mac. Have a good time, Red."

She handed me my change from the ten. She looked a little shy. "I won't be long, Mac." She turned and hurried off.

There was nothing to do but head back to the car. George and Fish looked at me. Their faces were white. "Just what the hell do you think—" Fish started.

"Kindly cease being so loquacious," I said firmly. "Why do things the hard way? I asked the officer to introduce me to the girl. He was glad to do it. I asked her for a date. She's in changing to her street clothes."

"You asked the cop to introduce you?" Fish asked weakly.

"Of course!"

"Brother!" George said softly.

"Mr. Fish, you will kindly sit up in front with George. I desire to be left alone here in back with the young lady."

"Anything you say, Jumpy," he murmured obediently. He got up in front.

My mind was racing, but I could find no solution, no adequate way to warn her. The police had left too quickly. My cheek still hurt where the oaf had pinched me.

In far too little time she came hurrying

out to the car. She was very cute in a green dress with a wide white belt, a brown coat over her arm. I got out to hold the door for her, more than half tempted to grab her wrist and run for it. But there was too great a distance to run. A shot at me might find her by accident. I could not ask her to take such a serious risk.

I handed her in and climbed in after her. "That wasn't much of an introduction, Mac," she said, with laughter in her voice. "Gee, I'm crazy to date a stranger like this. I guess there has to be a first time."

"My name isn't Mac," I said. "It's . . . Omar."

Fish turned around. "No wonder they call you Jumpy. Omar! What a handle! Don't I get a knockdown too?"

"My name really is Pat," she said. "Pat Kelly. Isn't that an awful name?"

"I rather like it. Pat, meet Fish and George."

"Hiya," said Fish.

"Hiya," said George.

"Where are we going, men?" Pat asked. There was a nervous note in her voice. I could see that she was not exactly impressed favorably by my companions. I did not find it within my power to blame her.

"To a very nice buffet supper," I said, as comfortingly as I could.

She seemed quite composed as we drove to Mr. Artigan's house. The gates shut behind the car. I took her up the steps and into the hallway. The party had disappeared as though it had never existed. Artigan stood, rubbing his hands and beaming at her. "Nice work, Jumpy," he said.

"He did it smooth," Fish said. "He just dated her. Boy, a smooth worker."

Pat stared at Artigan, at Brenda's ravaged face, at the two cold-eyed men who had accompanied Artigan to work that morning. She looked at Fish, then at

George. Last of all she looked at me, fright in her eyes. She was white to the lips and she backed toward the door. Fish slid around her and closed the door.

"Relax, honey," Artigan said softly.

"Who . . . who are you people?"

"Friends, I hope. We want to be your friends. I had you brought here for a reason. I sent those three men out to get you and bring you here, Miss Kelly."

Pat turned her blue eyes on me again and gave me a look of such ineffable contempt that I could almost feel my soul shrivel. "I've never been wronger about anyone," she said.

"We're quite prepared to be unpleasant if we must," Mr. Artigan said.

The color came back into Pat's face. "Stop talking like a cut-rate script, whoever you are. What do you want of me?"

Artigan flushed. "Don't give me too much mouth. I'll tell you why we want you. You have a sister named Prissy Thorpe. Prissy has something we want. This seems like a good way to get it from her."

Pat looked puzzled for a moment. And then she laughed. "That's good! That's really good! Pris is going to be all over-come by sisterly love, eh? This is going to be worth it for the laughs, if nothing else."

Artigan turned to Brenda. "Give her Dolly's old room. Lock her in. Help her, Anderson."

I tried to grasp Pat's arm as we went up the stairs. She pulled away from me. "Dandy date this is," she said.

CHAPTER THREE

Escape to Nowhere

DOLLY'S old room was large. It had a connecting bath. The windows had steel frames and very tiny sections that opened. Pat took cigarettes from her white purse, lit one, in-

haled and blew the smoke out of her nose. She looked very like a small, infuriated dragon. "You're the world's prize stinker," she said to me. "If you'd had any guts you'd have done it open and above-board—just yanked me into the car. But no, you have to sell me a bill of goods. I'm going to live to see you sitting in a gas chamber, Omar. That's what they hand out for this little game, or didn't you know?"

She was still talking as we closed the door and as Brenda locked it. I casually took the key out of her hand. "She's my responsibility," I said.

Brenda leered at me. "Come around when you want your face bandaged, sweetie."

When I went back down Artigan was waiting for me. He took me into his study and asked me to sit down. He took a rather characterless abstraction in a grey frame off the wall and set it on the desk chair. His body masked the dial of the small safe. He swung the round door open, took something out, clunked it shut again and replaced the picture.

He tossed the two thick packets over to me. They landed on the corner of the desk in the muted glow of the desk lamp. They were packets of currency, each wrapped in a wide brown paper band on which had been written \$5000, followed by the initials of a teller.

"That's for tonight. If it works out you get the balance. If it doesn't, we'll double that after the Dermody job. Not bad for a few day's work, eh?"

"All hundreds," I said. It sounded like somebody else's voice.

"You can have it in yards if you want," he said, "but I don't like 'em myself. Too many records of the serial numbers."

"No, no. This is fine," I said hastily. I picked them up and put them in the inside pocket of my suit coat. They made a large bulge.

"Fish told me how you worked it

out, Anderson. Sort of risky, wasn't it?"

I tried to laugh. It came out sounding like somebody breaking phonograph records. "Always attempt the unexpected," I said.

"All this is pretty important to me, Anderson. I own the Artigan Construction Company. Everything was fine up to two years ago. I was getting the Pacific City paving jobs, sewers, everything. Then the Pardo outfit got greedy and formed their own company. A dummy outfit. K and D Construction. Now they've got the City Engineer writing the bid specifications in such a way that K and D is the only outfit qualified to submit a bid. I tried to raise hell with the City Attorney, but he's one of Pardo's boys too."

All this was an astounding revelation to me. As so many other citizens, I had assumed that the criminal elements merely bribed police officials in order to continue their nefarious machinations. Now I was learning that chicanery extended through all departments of city government.

"But, hell," he said, "this is small time stuff compared with Nicky's operations. I'm probably boring you. Come on. We'll go pay a call on Prissy."

"But . . . but . . ."

He grinned at me and scooped the phone of his desk. He leaned back in the chair after dialing, the phone wedged between his jaw and shoulder to keep his hands free while he took a cigarette from his case and lit it.

"Miss Thorpe? Bob Artigan. Yeah. That's right. We want to make an offer. Check. If you've closed out with our friend, it might mean coming out on the short end of the stick. For you, that is. No, I'm not threatening you at all. All right to come over? Just the two of us. Myself and a friend. . . . That would be a little silly, wouldn't it? See you in fifteen minutes."

He hung up. "Let's roll, Anderson. Better stash the currency in your room. I'll be out in the car."

I went up to my room. With the odd people loose in that house, it hardly seemed safe to put such a quantity of currency in my suitcase or in the dresser. I went into the small private bath and looked around. I lifted the top off the back of the toilet and examined the float. As I had hoped, it was of the type constructed of two hemispherical shells screwed together. I believe I have mentioned that I have a mechanical turn of mind. Using a towel to prevent my hands from slipping, I quickly unscrewed the float, crimped the packets of bills and inserted them inside, and screwed the float back together. I flushed the toilet and watched the float. Even with the money it retained sufficient buoyancy to function in a normal manner.

GEORGE WAS again at the wheel of the big blue sedan. Mr. Artigan gave him the number of the apartment house on West Osceola. In spite of my apprehension at the course of events, I must admit that I found a certain pleasure in sitting back in that comfortable seat while George wheeled the big car through traffic, much like a shark cruising through a school of lesser fish. The tires purred on the slick asphalt. I wondered with a certain dismay whether this experience would give me a leaning toward a higher standard of living. If so, and if the leaning proved irresistible, the mutual savings account that Martha and I maintain would increase more slowly. I thought of her, beside me, on our brisk Sunday morning walks when the weather is pleasant. She carries our binoculars and I carry the notebook in which we record the bird life which we observe. Later in the day we usually transcribe the brief notes into our bird diary. As I thought of that I

suddenly realized, for the first time, that there is something exceedingly birdlike about Martha, with her small pointed nose and the quick movements of her head. Not the small, plump varieties, but something related to the genus stork or crane.

The car pulled up and stopped before a most modern looking apartment house. The doorway, beyond the trim rows of shrubbery rather garishly spotlighted, was a huge sheet of plate glass with a wide aluminum push-bar. The male clerk at the inner desk had long eyelashes and a chirping voice. He phoned up to Miss Thorpe and told us we could take the elevator up to the sixth floor, Apartment 6C.

As we stepped off the elevator, a self-service variety, sliding the door shut behind us, I saw a tall girl standing in the hall beside an open door, looking at us with a markedly insolent expression. She was of the type I have often observed in my infrequent visits to places of commercial entertainment. I understand that the pageboy coiffeur is out of fashion, but this young lady continued to wear it. Her hair was like freshly-melted silver, and the bangs in front curled down, almost touching jet black eyebrows. She wore a silver evening gown with what I suppose would be called a daring neckline.

She stood without a word of greeting. As we came close to her I saw that each forward step seemed to add a certain increment of age to her appearance.

"Who is he?" she said, pointing at me. Her voice had what I believe is most commonly called a whisky burr.

"Out-of-town talent," Artigan said.

She shrugged and walked ahead of us into her apartment. The dress fitted quite closely. I began to understand what had happened to Mr. Dermody.

She was a remarkably poor hostess. She sat down, leaving it up to us to close the apartment door and sit or stand as we chose. There was a half glass of

dark liquor on the table beside her chair. The room can only be described as littered. Apparently she had no talent for housekeeping.

"Make your play and watch the big wheel," she said.

"How high have they gone?" Artigan asked, sitting down and crossing his legs.

"One hundred and twenty-five thousand round, fat, happy little soldiers," she said, wrapping her lips deliciously around each syllable.

"A nice fee for a bunch of innocent letters," Artigan said.

"They mean a lot," she replied.

"We'll give you ten thousand for your time and trouble," Artigan said.

Her eyes narrowed and her long fingernails rattled out a fast tempo on the table top. "Anything I like," she said, "it's a good laugh. Walk over here and use a feather on the bottom of my foot, Bobby."

"I've got a house guest," Artigan said smugly.

"How happy for you! Faint light dawns far in the back of my dim, commercial little mind."

"A scrappy little redhead named Kelly, Pris."

The fingers stopped drumming. Prissy Thorpe shut her eyes. The room was very silent. Her heavy lips were compressed. When she opened her eyes again, they looked almost sleepy. "Just adding the pros and the cons, Bobby. I remember the girl. A sister of mine, I believe. It won't work, Bobby. To the rest of my mealy little family, I'm one dead chicken. The feeling is mutual. I'm a tired girl. I want to retire. The South of France will be nice. Pardo's payoff will last me for as long as I want to live—conservatively estimated at another ten years. Good years. Kiss the redhead on the forehead for me and tell her it couldn't happen to a nicer gal."

"Now, Pris. Use your head. You wouldn't want me to send her on one of

Dickie's entertainment tours through South America, would you?"

"It's more subtle than mailing me one of her ears, I suppose, and just as ineffective."

"You're a cold dish, Pris," Artigan said in a tired voice.

She nodded. Her smile was exceptionally ugly. "Once in a lifetime a girl like me gets her hands on a cold deck. When she does, she knows how to deal. You're sitting there with two little pair, Bobby, and I've got aces full of kings. This is a money game. Talk in Pardo's language and talk loud enough, and I'll fold my hand."

Artigan stood up. "Thanks for the chat. Those boys are probably getting tired of standing in the bathroom."

"You wouldn't want a girl to take chances, would you?"

She still sat there, the glass tilted to her lips, her eyes crinkled with amusement as we left.

On the way down in the elevator I said, without thinking, "I find it hard to believe that such people really exist."

He gave me an odd look. "I'd think being around Nicky would give you some fast lessons. Everybody knows he was the one rubbed out his two brothers."

"Of course, of course," I said faintly.

Back at the house we said goodnight at the foot of the stairs. I went up and shut myself in my room and sat on the edge of the bed with my face in my hands. From time to time I shivered, though the room was anything but cold. After a time I turned off the lights and sat, fully-clothed, in the dark. A long time later I heard somebody go down the hall and I heard the door shut. I pulled off my shoes. I opened my door silently. The key to Pat's room was chill in the palm of my hand. A light came up the stairwell. I tiptoed to where I could look over. Artie sat down there in the hall in his shirtsleeves, reading a comic book.

The most serious problem was how to enter Miss Kelly's room without unduly alarming her. I stood by her door for a long time, listening. I could hear no sound inside. Guiding the key noiselessly into the lock was a long, nerve-wracking process. The bolt slid over with a tiny click. I turned the knob, one millimeter at a time, and pushed the door open. A crack of lesser darkness widened between the door and the frame. I was afraid that the pounding of my heart would be audible all the way across the room. I gave my attention to closing and locking the door on the inside with the same stealth. To keep us from being disturbed, I left the key in the lock.

After standing for a long time with my back to the door, I was able to make her out. The poor frightened child had gone to sleep atop the spread. Five feet from the bed I stepped on a board which creaked. She stirred and made a sleepy sound in her throat. When at last I stood over her, I could see her quite distinctly.

With my hand in readiness, I whispered, "Pat! Pat!"

CHAPTER FOUR

You Kill Me!

I SAW THE gleam of her eyes as the lids shot up and I heard the harsh intake of breath. Before it could be expelled in a scream, I clamped my hand over her mouth. I imagine it was very like falling onto a live panther. I began to understand why she had felt relatively safe with a stranger. She had an amazing variety of muscles, all of them in excellent tone. She also seemed to be equipped with eight hands, all of them ending in claws, six knees which thumped me with sickening rapidity, while all the time she grunted and made muffled sounds and tried to sink her teeth into the palm of my hand. I protected my

face by burrowing it into her neck and whispering as loud as I dared, "Please don't fight. I want to talk to you."

Suddenly she lay quite still. I thought it was a ruse. Without removing my hand from her mouth I whispered, "I'm a prisoner in this house, too. I want to help you. I've got to talk to you. Please don't scream when I take my hand away."

I cautiously took my hand away. As I removed my face from its protected position, a hard little fist came out of nowhere and hit my jaw just under the ear. I sat abruptly on the floor beside the bed. Her face appeared above me. "If you want to talk, talk from there," she whispered.

The ringing in my ears slowly subsided. Organizing my thoughts in a coherent pattern, I recounted in detail all that had happened to me, starting with the stranger's request for a change of compartments. What I could not understand were the odd sounds that came from her at intervals during my recountal. It was absurd to think that a girl in her dire situation could giggle, thus it had to be sobs of panic.

I finished and she said, "You went over to Dave and tried to tell him that you were going to kidnap me?"

"Exactly."

Again she made that odd, muffled sound. I said, "And I do not believe that your sister is a very nice sort of person, Patricia."

She was silent for a moment. "Did I hurt you, Omar?"

"My face feels as though . . . considerable areas of it are missing."

We went into the bathroom. She shut the door and turned on the light. She clucked with sympathy as she saw my face. I sat on the edge of the tub while she washed the gouges. There was cotton and adhesive tape in the cabinet. She put small bandages over the more serious wounds. She stood and looked at me for

a moment. The impudent eyes went soft, suddenly. She put her hands on my shoulders and leaned over and kissed me full on the lips. It was a most odd sensation. I tried to cling to my loyalty to Martha, but in spite of my attempts at immobility I found that I was on my feet and my arms were wrapped around her small frame with a curious tightness.

She murmured, "Omar, you're kind of cute and silly."

My guilty conscience forced me to thrust her away. I said firmly, "This is hardly the time to go into character analysis. Tomorrow I shall be expected to shoot Mr. Dermody."

That sobered her. "But you can't!"

"That is the cause of the problem, Patricia."

We turned out the light and went back in and sat side by side on the bed, and I found that her fingers were tightly linked with mine. It was strangely pleasurable.

"What will they do with me?" she demanded.

"Since you are of no further use to him, Patricia, I shall suggest to him that it may be possible to force you to sign a release wherein you state that you came here of your own free will and left when you were ready. If it works, you will be released, and I suggest that you then hasten to the police and convince them that it would be wise to . . . ah . . . raid the joint."

"Gee, you're cute," she sighed, resting her head on my shoulder.

"Must you keep saying that?"

She seemed to radiate an air of intense vitality. Accustomed as I am to Martha's quiet ways, I found her aura most disturbing. In fact, after I had returned to my own room, the memory of her parting kiss kept me tossing with an odd restlessness.

Mr. Artigan, bristling with excitement and determination, joined me at breakfast. I said, "As to Miss Kelly, Mr. Artigan,

I feel it would be possible to work out—”

“Skip her, Anderson. What happened to your face?”

“Dull razor,” I said.

“We haven’t got any time to waste. Right now Dermody is in the City Hall on some business. We’ll get him as he comes down the steps. Rather, you will. Artie’s gone out to grab a car. He ought to be back any minute. Artie’ll drive for you. He’s better on a getaway than George is. George’ll be along to cover you just in case. George’ll have the rest of the dough with him. As soon as the job is done they’ll hand it over and drop you at the bus station. You’ll have time to take the first bus out before they clamp the lid on the town. That means I won’t be seeing you again, Anderson. Give my regards to Nicky. Better run up and get your bag. I think Artie’s out there now.”

“But Miss Kelly—”

“Skip that. That’s our problem. There won’t be any trouble about her. I can promise you that.”

I had no time to think, they hurried me so. Artie had stolen a small green sedan. George and my suitcase were in back. I had placed the box of our new items in the suitcase with the sole exception of the Zing-Bang pistol, which was tucked into my belt. I sat beside Artie. He seemed awfully nervous, but George, in the back seat, minus his chauffeur’s uniform, was humming happily, checking the load in his silenced pistol.

Artie drove fast and expertly, but without breaking any traffic laws. I had a difficult time swallowing a lump that kept coming up into my throat. They parked across from the wide marble steps of the City Hall. A small man standing on the corner made a furtive gesture with his hand and scurried away.

“Good,” said Artie, “He’s still in there.”

“Artigan says do it this way,” George said in his silky voice, “Get over there on

the other side like you were waiting for a bus. Dermody’s wearing grey slacks and a white sport jacket, a tan straw hat with a green and grey ribbon. He’s tall and heavy. When we spot him, we’ll roll the car forward a few feet. You keep watching us. We’ll be covering you every minute, baby. This would be a hell of a time to cross Artigan, believe me. Walk along the sidewalk and time it so you get him when he’s halfway down the steps. Empty that cannon of yours into his fat belly and then sprint for that corner down there. We’ll be going around the corner with the door open just as you get there. Pile in fast and we’ll dump you at the Greyhound Station in four minutes. There’s a bus to L.A. leaving at nine ten. You ought to make it okay.”

I WALKED woodenly across the street. It seemed that all colors were intensified. The sun shone brightly and it was a very poor day for dying. All the women were beautiful and the air smelled sweet, even impregnated as it was with gasoline fumes.

Sweat ran in streams down my ribs. In too brief a time the green sedan moved forward. I turned slowly and saw the man they had described coming out of the City Hall. He was smiling and chatting with another man of much the same type. No policeman had appeared to resolve my dilemma. My mind had ceased to function. All I could think of was the deadly weapon in George’s capable hand. I walked slowly along the sunlit sidewalk, stopped and turned, looking up the wide marble steps. Mr. Dermody glanced at me. I gave him what I guess must have been a painfully shy smile as I took our new product out. I pointed it at him. The man with Dermody gave a little yelp and scrambled back up the steps. Dermody stared at what I must admit is a most vicious looking weapon, his face slowly going grey.

The spring was wound tight, I knew. I pressed the trigger. I must admit that at that moment I felt a certain disgust with our new product. You might say that the brisk snapping of our loudest variety of caps was somewhat anticlimatic, and the built-in siren of which I was so proud sounded merely like a tin whistle. The entire eight caps exploded, however.

Mr. Dermody's eyes rolled back up into his head and he pitched forward down the steps. I was frozen with horror as I saw his head hit the steps, heard the sickening crack it made. The straw hat rolled down to my feet. Women screamed and men yelled hoarsely. A victim of real panic, I ran for the corner. The car was there, moving slowly, the door open, as George had promised.

I piled in, much too frightened to do anything except gasp for air. George reached over from the back seat and twisted our new product out of my slippery hand. He examined it and said a number of very bad words.

"Bus station ahead," Artie said.

"Skip it," George growled, "We're taking this screwball back to the house."

George and I dropped off as Artie sped on to dispose of the stolen car. George prodded me roughly in the small of the back with the gun he held as we went up the drive to the side door.

Artigan stood at the foot of the stairs and his eyes widened as I came in, winc-

ing each time George's gun jabbed me.

"Just what the hell is this?" Artigan demanded.

George handed him the gun. "Ask this guy, boss. This is what he shot Dermody with."

Artigan examined the weapon with an intensely bewildered expression. I said, using a portion of my planned speech, "You will notice that the caps can be easily inserted by sliding the butt plate down. The spring is of the best quality steel available and guaranteed to—"

"Shut your face," Artigan said. The hall phone rang. He picked it up. He listened for a few minutes and then roared, "How the hell do I know?" He slammed the phone back on the cradle and rocked from side to side.

"That," he said, "was our friend from Homicide. Dermody's dead. Heart attack. They got twenty witnesses some screwball fires at him with a cap gun and he drops dead. He wants to know what he should do next."

My heart sank. I knew that despite what legal interpretation was made of the matter, I was ethically guilty of murder—murder in the first degree.

"Take this clown in my office and hold a gun on him, George. I'm going to take a chance and phone Nicky."

We had a long and uncomfortable wait in the office. George hummed softly. The slow minutes crept by. When Artigan

came in he looked like a man who might drop any moment from weariness.

He stared at me. "All right. You're not Jumpy Anderson. You don't match the description. Just who the hell are you?"

"I am Omar Dudley, Sales Manager of the Idle Hour Novelties Company. I am afraid that your Mr. Anderson was killed in such a way that it was thought that I was killed. At least I experienced the rather extraordinary sensation of reading an account of my own death."

Artigan stared at me. He smiled, but there was something in that smile which had the same effect as a trickle of ice water down the spine. "I regret, Mr. Dudley, that you have become so well informed on our particular problems. You are a man of honor, I imagine."

"Of course."

"That makes it quite impossible for you to be released. Your honor would send you running to the law, wouldn't it?"

"Of course," I said.

"We saw no reason last night to keep you out of the Kelly girl's room. She was the dull razor, I imagine. I suppose you had a nice long chat with her."

"No," I said, too quickly and too loudly.

He still wore his smile. I wondered how I had ever managed to see him as a distinguished-looking man.

"I don't like to be crude, Mr. Dudley. I am going to have to keep you in this room under guard. We'll have the Kelly girl brought down and guarded here also. You can tell her, if you see fit, that your futures are pretty limited."

I could not get the dryness out of my mouth. "What do you mean?"

"Tonight we're going to take the two of you on a moonlight boat ride, complete with cinder blocks and wire."

"Isn't that a bit . . . extreme?"

"This is an extreme situation, Mr. Dudley."

He left and soon Patricia was thrust

forcibly into the room. She saw at once that I had been properly identified. George seemed quietly amused. He sat behind the desk with the gun on the blotter in front of him. Patricia and I were seated on straight chairs, some five feet apart, the chairs backed up against the wall some six feet from the desk. George had no objection to our talking with each other. I brought her up to date.

Contrary to what I had been led to believe, the condemned were not given a hearty meal. We were given no meal at all. Oddly enough it was this deliberate oversight which finally broke down the final barrier of disbelief in my mind. As I have mentioned, I am a mild man of even temper. Also, I am logical. Logic was difficult to achieve when I could look over and see the slender line of Patricia's throat, the stubborn little chin, the impudent nose. However, I managed. Logic said that if we were to die—and Artigan had no purpose in bluffing us—then any risk taken to avoid that dire end was justified. Also, following the same pattern, if Patricia were to be of maximum use to me, she should be informed of her fate-to-be. I told her. She turned as white as paper, then slowly the color came back. Her chin went up and her eyes narrowed. I managed to give her a long and solemn wink, hoping that it would infer to her that I intended to make some effort.

To test George's reactions I made a sudden movement. Even before I had completed it the ugly muzzle of the gun pointed at a spot between my eyes.

"Careful, baby," he whispered.

After considerable thought, I asked him if I might get a fresh handkerchief from my suitcase.

"Go ahead. But don't try anything."

HE WATCHED ME carefully and made me lift the suitcase up onto a chair where he could see more clearly. My box of samples was open. I

very casually took our new Super-Dribble Glass and set it on the edge of the desk. I palmed the Wiggly without any clear idea of how I would use it. Taking a fresh handkerchief I sat down.

After what seemed a suitable interval, I remarked that I was thirsty. Patricia said that she was thirsty also. George was inclined to ignore us. Patricia began to plead with him. The small bar was off to his left. He opened it, stuck glasses under the tap, then placed them on the edge of the desk. We drank, and I made myself drink noisily, a mannerism that I detested.

Opening the bar exposed the line of bottles. I saw George run his tongue along his lips. At last he reached out and took the glass that had come from my suitcase. As he did so, I slowly pulled my feet back under my chair, preparing to move with all the speed of which I was capable. He poured two fingers of whisky into the Super-Dribble, put in two ice cubes and filled it from the soda syphon.

As I was instrumental in suggesting the design and working with our technicians while they perfected it, I knew the precise angle which would activate the spring in the base.

George tilted the glass to his lips. He took two sips and then the glass reached the proper angle. The whisky and soda was hurled full into his face, forcing itself up his nose and flooding his eyes. As it did so, I lunged for the desk. His hand slapped for the gun, but his aim was bad. I had it first. I reversed it and in my haste I inadvertently pulled the trigger. The silencer was extremely effective. There was a tiny coughing sound and the slug removed the lobe of George's left ear before burying itself in the paneling behind him.

His hands went up as though they were tied to springs. He was still gasping and choking.

"Let's go, honey," Patricia said.

I backed to the door, keeping George

covered. I believe that is the correct expression. I found the knob behind me and opened the door. Much to my dismay, a hard object was prodded into my back and I recognized Brenda's voice as she said, "Drop that, you naughty boy."

My finger inadvertently convulsed on the trigger. The impact of the slug spun George in a half circle in the swivel chair. The gun slid out of my hand.

"Get back in there!" Brenda said.

George's back was to us, his chin on his chest. I wondered if he were dead. Oddly enough, I didn't seem to care. I put my hands over my head. The Wiggly was still in my left hand. With my hands in the air I wound it up.

Brenda went around the desk to take a look at George, the gun in her hand aimed in our general direction, her left hand resting on the desk top. I risked setting the Wiggly down on the desk top. It began to scuttle busily toward her hand.

She did not notice it until it actually touched her hand, its mechanical legs working busily, sliding on the smooth wood of the desk.

When she saw it she gave a strangled scream and fell back onto George.

It was then that Patricia proved that she had the true salesman's instinct for improvisation. She leaned across the desk and as Brenda came up, she swung that hard little fist the same way she had used it on me. But this time she had more elbow room and the light was better. Brenda stood for a fraction of a second, her eyes glazed and faintly crossed, and then she went down onto George again.

Patricia snatched up Brenda's gun and I took the one I had dropped on the floor. Soong met us in the hallway. He gave a high, thin cry and raced for the kitchen. We went down and out the door. The big blue sedan was there and I jumped behind the wheel. The key was in the ignition and the motor caught at once. As we streaked toward the big closed gate Pa-

tricia leaned out the window on her side, yelling, "Eeee-YAH-hoooo!"

The big gate offered only momentary resistance. The tires screamed on the street and I turned toward the shopping section.

Patricia stopped yelling long enough to give me advice. We decided against the police station due to the possibility of running into too many friends of Mr. Artigan. She said that as far as she knew, the *Pacific City Courier* was beholden to no one.

I made a slight mistake in judgment when I pulled up in front of the Courier building. The front bumper sheared off a city hydrant. The hard stream of water, as big around as a man's thigh, shot up through the motor and was deflected out through the grill in a series of fine, hard streams that reached pedestrians eighty feet away.

In the excitement we ran into the building and up the stairs to the news room on the third floor. In a remarkably short time we were closeted in a big office with the editor-in-chief.

In the extra that came out at six o'clock, our pictures appeared on the first page. It was all most confusing. All I wished to do was to clear myself of criminal intent. It was only incidental that, to quote the managing editor, my testimony should "smash Artigan, break the back of the Pardo mob and give the reform government its first chance in fifteen years."

They brought food up to us and we ate with enormous hunger. Every once in a while somebody would come in with more flash bulbs and take our pictures. It began to get very wearing. Our Mr. Darben managed to reach me by phone and inform me that he had contacted Mr. Max Idelhaur in the east and had given him the news. He stated that Mr. Idelhaur seemed most pleased over the publicity.

It was at that moment that I remembered the ten thousand dollars. A horrid

urge struck me with the force of a blow. If I should say nothing about that money . . . however that would not be honest. When for a few moments we were left alone, I told Patricia of my oversight, and of my intent to inform the authorities.

I had no idea that her blue eyes could get so hard. "You lunk, don't you think you ought to have a little payment for mental anguish? We can get in there and get the money."

"I would have to declare it on my income tax."

"Go ahead. Declare it. But if you tell these people, some cop is going to drag it home on a string to the wife and babies."

"How long do we have to stay here?"

"Until the whole crew is rounded up. So far, Artie is the only one missing. And George, bless his flinty little heart, is going to recover."

At that moment the door opened and a tall girl came in. She reminded me curiously of Martha. The same type.

She said, "You dear people, you! I must trouble you for material for a Sunday feature. Tell me all about your romance. When do you plan to be married?"

Patricia stood up. There was a glint in her eye. She said, "I must advise you that our romance, as you so inaccurately put it, is merely the product of a period of propinquity during which time we were in mortal danger, and as such should be discounted." It surprised me to find that she could speak so well and so clearly.

I stood up too. I thought of Martha. I thought of the bank account. I folded Patricia into my arms with a fervor that astounded me. Just before my lips met hers I murmured, "Cut the chatter, darlin'. Let's move onto the front burner."

From a great distance a very annoying voice kept saying, "Mr. Dudley! Wait! Mr. Dudley! Just a moment!"

A good salesman can ignore distractions.