

15¢

THE NEW MYSTERY MAGAZINE

SHOCK



Volume 1

March, 1948

Number 1

Exciting Shock-Mystery Novel

- DEATH IS A DAME**.....Frederick C. Davis 8
Was she really his wife? Or was she evil-souled Zelda—biding her time until her next murder?

Two Spine-Tingling Suspense Novelettes

- HELL'S BELLE**.....Robert Turner 42
Despising himself and exotic Roxy, Ben Harlow went all out to win her love with a grisly murder memento.
- HOMICIDAL HOMESTEAD**.....Bruno Fischer 84
Luscious Della's scarecrow husband bought a knife—and brooded on slaughter.

Six Gripping Short Stories

- NIGHTMARE MAN**.....John E. Harbaugh 28
His hog-fat wife jeered little Herman's dream into a hideous nightmare.
- HER BLACK WINGS**.....John D. MacDonald 32
Three men had loved her—and died violently. I was next. . . .
- SKULDUGGER'S LOOT**.....H. C. Malcolm 38
Human skulls grinned in the window—yet thick-skulled Dutch wanted in.
- A CENTURY OF THE KILLER CURSE**..D. L. Champion 63
An ancient kill-curse was crawling in the mind of a lovely heiress. . . .
- STRANGLER'S MOON**.....Curt Hamlin 73
Strange, garroted women were his stepping stones to heights of homicide.
- CRYPT OF THE JEALOUS QUEEN**.....Jack Bennett 78
She flew away on butterfly wings . . . strewing her vengeance with a cobra's venom.

Features and Departments

- WITHOUT WARNING**.....A Department 6
Preview of "Blood of the Vixen" by John D. MacDonald.
- THE PERFECT GIFT (A Storiette)**.....John Bender 72
Everything worked out perfectly—for no one.
- ADVENTURES INTO THE UNKNOWN**..... 82
The Secret of Glamis Castle. . . .Frederick Blakeslee

The next issue will be out March 19th.

Published bi-monthly by New Publications, Inc., at 2256 Grove Street, Chicago, 16, Illinois. Editorial and Executive Offices, 210 East 43rd Street, New York, 17, N. Y. Entry as Second-class matter pending at the Post Office, at Chicago, Illinois, under the Act of March 3, 1879. Copyright, 1948, by New Publications, Inc. This issue is published simultaneously in the Dominion of Canada. Copyright under the International Copyright Convention and Pan American Copyright Conventions. All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction, in whole or in part, in any form. Single copy, 15c. Annual subscription for U.S.A., its possessions and Canada, \$9.00; other countries 25c additional. Send subscriptions to 210 East 43rd Street, New York, 17, N. Y. For advertising rates, address Sam J. Perry, 210 East 43rd 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.



Homicidal

Dramatic Novelette of a
Macabre Triangle

By **Bruno
Fischer**

Luscious Della was a warm-blooded girl whose scarecrow husband—figuring she was two-timing with me—bought a knife . . . and brooded on classical slaughter.

CHAPTER ONE

Tuesday, 3 P.M.

LEAL FLOYD tested the sharpness of the six-inch blade with the ball of his thumb. "Murder," he said, "is justified only when the reason for it is as profound as the deed."

We lounged in the shade of the barn. Wearing only shorts and sneakers, Leal sat on the ground with his legs crossed like a skinny Buddha, contemplating his hunting knife.

"How much would be enough motive?" I drawled, suppressing a yawn. "A million dollars? Or would a mere fifty grand do?"

Leal snorted as he gently ran the blade over an oil stone. "Material gain is shabby motive for the most dramatic act of which man is capable—that of taking another's life. The noblest killers of literature murdered because of pride or self-respect. Hamlet killed for revenge, Othello smothered his wife out of jealousy."

The discussion didn't particularly in-



terest me, though I'd started it. I had come upon him sharpening the knife and had mentioned casually that it could be a deadly weapon. And he had started talking rather gloomily of murder.

I stood up. "What do you want it for?" I asked him suddenly.

"Want what?"

"That hunting knife? You don't hunt."

Homestead ♦♦♦



He lifted his eyes. They were black, deep-set, somber—a poet's eyes. "I scarcely know," he said. "I saw it in town yesterday. It fascinated me and I bought it."

"Didn't it come sharpened from the store?"

"I suppose so." He pulled one of the curly black hairs out of his thin, bare

chest and waved the blade at it. The hair parted neatly.

I found myself shivering slightly in spite of the heat.

"Have to get to work," I said and sauntered to the house.

Della Floyd was drying dishes in the big, old-fashioned kitchen. Being a woman, she wore one more garment than her

husband—a skimpy flowered halter. Between Della and Leal, I felt somewhat overdressed in white ducks and polo shirt.

She couldn't be called beautiful, though she had a figure that inevitably drew the male gaze. Her smile was warm and cozy, making almost every man feel that she liked him, without giving him exaggerated ideas about how much she liked him. And she had a verve and buoyancy that always made it pleasant to be in her company.

"How about going swimming, Harry?" she asked me.

"I've got to work," I said.

She threw down the dishtowel. "Leal is such a poor swimmer that he doesn't care for it, and I hate to go alone."

"Maybe later, Della," I said.

She grabbed my arm with both hands. "Come on, Harry," she pleaded, hugging my arm to her.

Those friendly physical gestures had no intimate significance. I was a friend of the family—a man to be kissed hello and good-bye in public, in front of her husband, and to have his arm hugged on occasion. Nothing more.

All the same, a man can't be completely objective about an attractive, inadequately clad woman clinging to his arm. I felt somewhat uneasy as her soft voice persisted: "It's too hot to shut yourself in your room, Harry."

Through the open kitchen door I saw Leal approach the house. Sunlight glistened on sweat beading like dew the curly black hair on his skinny chest. The hunting knife dangled from his right hand.

I pulled away from Della, mumbling, "I'm way behind on the book." I left the kitchen before Leal came in.

Thirty minutes later I had written just two sentences. So I sat at the window looking over Leal Floyd's farm. It was a typical New England farm, and, typically, no longer farmed.

Because Leal Floyd's great grandfather had established a successful shoe industry near Boston, Leal could afford to indulge his whims. One was writing poetry which nobody bought or read. Another was passing up all the aristocratic Boston girls who hankered for him—and his money—and marrying a New York waitress. Still another was buying this farm last spring and dragging me, who was a friend as well as an architect, here to remodel the place.

At that time I had been writing a book on small houses, but Leal had pointed out that I could do his plans and write the book at the same time.

So here I was after a week, and my book just about where it had been when I arrived—and not a line of the plans drawn.

I couldn't get myself set. Maybe it was just a plain case of midsummer listlessness. Instead of working, I kept wondering why on earth Leal had bought that knife.

Tuesday, 5:15 P.M.

I WAS still sitting at the window when Della came out of the house. She had changed into two strips of white cloth which current convention decreed was proper attire for a woman only if she appeared in it in public close to a swimming place. I liked the way her hips undulated as she walked toward the pond. With my arms on the ledge, I leaned out of the window to watch her.

Gradually I became aware of somebody else down there. He was so long and thin and motionless that he might have been part of the vegetation. He was staring fixedly up at me—watching me look after his wife.

Hastily I withdrew my head. A moment later I was angry at myself for acting as if I'd done something wrong. I turned back to paper and pen.

It was no good. After a while I gave up

trying. I got into my swimming trunks and went downstairs.

I was passing the barn when Leal appeared around the corner of it. He was absently whittling on a piece of wood with his new hunting knife.

"Going swimming?" he asked.

"Thought I'd take a dip."

"I'll go with you."

I offered to wait there for him while he got his trunks, but he shook his head. "I don't feel like swimming," he said. "I'll just go along."

We walked the thousand remaining feet to the pond without saying a word to each other. All the time he kept whittling on that piece of wood.

There was a small swimming dock and a float about a hundred feet out. Della was lying on the float, under the glaring sun a contrast of much tanned skin and a lot less white bathing suit. I kicked my shoes off and dove. I swam to the float.

As I climbed up the ladder, Della turned on her side to me and gave me her smile. I twisted my head. Leal was sitting on the dock, on his legs like a skinny Buddha, and the sun glistened on the bright keen blade of the knife with which he whittled pointlessly.

Wednesday, 11:40 A.M.

SOMETHING had come over Leal Floyd. He'd become quieter than usual. I sensed a charged brooding in him, as before a storm.

Leal can afford a dozen servants if he wants them, but he hasn't even one on the farm. He says that he can't feel free and unrestrained with servants around. The result is that Della has to do all the housework and cooking, but she doesn't seem to mind. She has too much buoyancy to let work bother her.

At breakfast this morning she asked me to drive her into town for shopping. About the only accomplishment she lacks is the

confidence and ability to drive a car.

"I'll drive you," Leal said quickly.

"But yesterday Harry said there were some things he wanted to buy in town," Della said. "It isn't necessary for both of you to go."

I recalled that yesterday at lunch I'd mentioned that I had to do a bit of personal shopping. It wasn't important. I should have stayed to work. But as Leal didn't say any more about it, I supposed that he preferred me to go, and it was the least I could do in return for his hospitality.

So I drove Della into town, and it was lots of fun being with her. She was good company. She did her shopping and I did mine, and then we had ice-cream sodas. We were walking from the ice cream parlor to the parked car when I saw Leal.

It was on the main street, and heat was rising in waves from the baked sidewalks and road, and for a moment he looked like a shimmering mirage standing across the street in a drugstore doorway. But there was nobody quite as tall or gaunt, and nobody else had as garish a Basque shirt as the one he was wearing. He was watching us.

I became aware that Della's hand was through my arm, that she held it tightly, that the way we walked and talked made us look like lovers on a spree. I opened my mouth to tell her that her husband was across the street, but I didn't. And neither did I let on to Leal that I had seen him. I walked on with Della to the car.

Leal has two cars on the farm—the sedan we'd taken and a jeep. He had followed us in the jeep, and he beat us back to the farm by taking back roads. I knew because the jeep was in the driveway when we got back. And when Della and I got out of the sedan, I saw a shadow in one of the downstairs windows, a faint stirring.

I got a little nervous when Della, turning suddenly, ran a soft, hot hand over

my cheek. "You're a darling for driving me in, Harry," she cooed, and gave my cheek another pat.

I wish she wouldn't do such things—especially when her husband is watching.

CHAPTER TWO

Wednesday, 10:30 P.M.

NOW I know that Leal— But wait. Let me put it down the way it happened and then look at it and try to retain a sense of proportion. I wouldn't be the first man who'd let imagination run away with him.

Our meals used to be sprightly, but at supper this evening Della had to handle the conversation practically alone. Lunch had been the same way. Leal's fault. The last couple of days he'd got moody, and I caught it from him.

"What's come over you men?" Della demanded when we reached dessert and coffee. "You're acting like your best friend just died."

"As if," Leal corrected. "I've told you time and again that like isn't a conjunction."

Della said tartly: "You should've known when you married a waitress that her grammar wouldn't be perfect."

That was the first time I'd ever known Della to show annoyance. Maybe the general mood was contagious.

Leal didn't bother to reply.

I stood up. I wanted to get away from both of them—from Leal who'd got a cockeyed notion into his head about his wife and me; from Della who was too obtrusively exciting in shorts and halter, into which she had changed shortly after we had returned from town. I said: "I think I'll do a sketch of the barn."

"I didn't know you were an artist too," Della said, turning a smile on for me. Her high spirits couldn't be downed for more than a minute at a time.

"An architect's sketch of what the barn will look like when it's remodeled," I explained.

I went up to my room and fetched a pad and drafting set, then I set a chair halfway between the house and barn and started the sketch. Leal wanted the barn converted into a recreation building, at the same time retaining the structure's basic appearance. I thought the idea rather corny, but he was paying the bill.

"How's it going?" Della asked.

She had come up from the house and was standing beside me, looking down at the pad on my knees.

"Okay," I said, hoping that she wouldn't pat my cheek or lean against me or anything like that.

She didn't. She walked on toward the barn. I forced myself to concentrate on the sketch instead of the sway of her hips. I started to sketch in the roof and then suddenly wondered if the ancient beams would be strong enough to hold up the roof when the support of the hayloft was removed. I put down the pad and went to the barn.

Della was in there. A few days ago her cocker spaniel had had three puppies in one of the stalls. Della was playing with them while the mother growled anxiously.

Della glanced up at me over a bare shoulder. "Aren't they adorable, Harry?"

I agreed that the puppies were adorable and examined the twelve-inch solid oak crossbeams. They had been put in a hundred years ago and looked as if they would last another hundred. I left the barn and started back to my sketch pad.

Leal was coming toward the barn. He walked with his head down, his narrow shoulders hunched—not rapidly, but something terrifically urgent in his long-legged stride. The naked hunting knife was in his hand.

When he saw me, he stopped. I stopped. He looked at me and I looked at the knife.

Good God, I thought, he's going to kill me!

It couldn't have been more than a couple of seconds that we stood facing each other, but hours had never seemed so long. Then he bent and picked up a twig and started to whittle it. His bony hand shook.

"I had a look at the barn timbers," I heard myself say. "They're still pretty strong."

Leal nodded abstractedly. There was practically nothing left of the twig, but he continued to slice at it.

I moved on to my chair. I picked up the sketch pad and a pencil, but I didn't draw another line.

My mind went back over the last few minutes. Della had come out of the house and said a few words to me and then had gone on to the barn. Very shortly after that I had followed her. And Leal, watching us as he had watched us for the last two days, had added that up to mean that we had arranged to meet in the barn. To make love, he'd thought, and he had grabbed up the knife and had gone after me.

Then my sudden reappearance had startled him, bewildered him. According to the crazy pattern his jealousy had evolved, I was supposed to be holding Della in my arms. If I had stayed in the barn a little longer, if he had come in on Della snuggling up to me as she so often did. . . .

I found myself shivering in the heat. Abruptly my head came up. Where was Leal now? I hadn't seen or heard him since I had returned to the chair. Maybe he had slipped up behind me. He and his knife.

I whirled so quickly that I almost fell out of the chair. Leal was nowhere in sight. But Della was coming from the barn. The sinking sun caught her honey-colored hair, and as she moved toward me her walk was all feminine.

I snatched up my drafting paraphernalia and went into the house and up-

stairs. I wanted no part of her at all.

In my room, I wondered if the whole thing was just my imagination. Leal was my friend. Perhaps was forcing upon myself the belief that he was out to kill me.

I scribbled the following list:

Item: he is spying on Della and me at every opportunity, and in particular he followed us to town this morning.

Item: for the last few days he has been unnaturally moody and indrawn.

Item: he bought a deadly knife for which he has no apparent use.

Item: yesterday beside the barn he justified murder under certain circumstances.

Item: he followed me to the barn this evening, when he thought I had gone there to make love to Della, and the knife was in his hand.

I read over this list. It could have meant nothing—or everything.

Then I heard Della and Leal coming up the stairs—but not together. First Della and then Leal. She went directly to her room, he to his.

It was too early to go to bed. I guess they'd had nothing else to do. Neither had I.

But before I went into bed, I'd make sure to lock the door.

Thursday, 2 A.M.

SOME time during the night I awoke covered with sweat. It was as if even in sleep I had been listening to something, and now, fully awake, I heard it—a sound not louder than the thumping of my heart. Moonlight flowed in through the window, and by it I saw the doorknob turn.

Killing a fellow human being is sometimes essential to one's pride and self-respect. That was what he had said yesterday afternoon as he had sharpened his knife.

The doorknob stopped turning. He had assured himself that the door was

locked. There was a soft rap. "Harry," Leal whispered in the hall.

I could imagine him standing out there, tall and gaunt in pajamas, and the razor-sharp knife held along his thigh. The locked door had defeated his purpose. Now he was trying to get at me through subtle means.

"Harry," he called again, so low that Della, in her room, would not hear.

I lay flat on my back without breathing.

I did not hear him move away, did not hear his bare feet on the hall floor, but I heard his own door open and close.

In the morning I was getting the hell out of this house.

Thursday, 11 A.M.

At breakfast I announced that I had to return to the city at once. And I watched Leal.

Across the table his eyes met mine, and I thought I detected mockery in their somber depths. "You've hardly started on the work you came here to do," he said.

"Something came up," I said. "I'll be back in a couple of days."

"Can't you attend to it by phone, Harry?" he argued.

This was another item in the balance sheet of evidence. Believing that I was having an affair with his wife, he should be anxious to get me out of his house. Instead, he wanted me to stay. To be available for his knife.

"A client needs my personal attention," I insisted.

Then Della spoke up brightly. "I've been planning to go to New York for a few days. I'm anxious to visit my sister and shop in the Fifth Avenue stores. Suppose I drive you to New York, Harry, and Saturday or Sunday you'll drive back with me."

I could have slapped her. Leal would be dead certain that we had arranged this

meeting in advance to get together.

I waited for him to refuse to let her go. But he just looked at her, then without comment finished his coffee and left the table.

"I'll be ready in an hour, Harry," Della told me, giving my shoulder a pat.

At that, I thought, I would get away from the house, which was all I wanted. She would chauffeur me to New York, and that would probably be the last I'd see of her and Leal. I went upstairs to pack.

I was snapping the lock on my bag when downstairs Della screamed. I started for the door, hesitated. Leal would have his knife, and I was unarmed.

Through the floor I heard Della groan. I ran my tongue over my lips, called myself a coward, plunged down the stairs.

They were in the kitchen. Della sat on the floor, rocking from side to side and clinging with both hands to her right foot. Leal knelt at her side.

"What happened?" I asked.

Leal turned his head to me. "I'm a clumsy idiot," he said tonelessly. "I was carrying a bottle of milk to the refrigerator and dropped it on Della's foot."

The bottle lay unbroken on its side. It hadn't been opened and the cap was still tightly on.

He had deliberately dropped the bottle on her foot to keep her from going with me.

"Let's look at your foot," I said.

Della took her hands away. She was still in housecoat and slippers, and the bottle had fallen on her bare instep. There was a bruise, but nothing seemed broken.

"We'll soak the foot," I said, "and then—"

"I'll attend to that," Leal burst out savagely. As if reminding me that he was, after all, her husband. "I thought you were in a hurry to leave for New York." One corner of his mouth lifted sardonically. "I'm afraid Della won't be able to

drive you in to New York now, Harry.”

I stood up. “I’ll call a taxi.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Leal said. “I’ll drive you to the station.”

Now he seemed anxious for me to go.

He reached down a hand to help Della up to her feet. When she rose and leaned against him for support, I saw something in his eyes that frightened me more than anything else that had happened in the last two days.

I knew that I couldn’t leave her here alone with him—and his knife.

I took out my handkerchief to wipe sweat from my face. It was real enough sweat. “Today will be another scorcher,” I said. “I hate to think of what it will be like in New York.”

“Then why go?” Della said it quickly, urgently, and I wondered if she too had guessed and was afraid to be alone with him.

Leal said nothing.

“I guess I really don’t have to,” I said. “After all, I’m supposed to be working for you, Leal.”

He turned expressionless eyes to me. I squirmed. I felt as if I’d just admitted my guilt. He had it down pat in his thoughts. I’d been ready to leave with Della, but when she was prevented from going because of her hurt foot, I changed my mind. Conclusive enough evidence to a jealousy-inflamed brain.

But what could I do? Della was no more to me than the wife of a friend—or of a man who had been my friend—but I couldn’t walk out on her and leave her to the mercy of his knife.

I went to my room. Della was soaking her foot in the living room, and Leal was with her.

Maybe I had my impressions crossed and all along she’d been his intended victim. Or both of us. Then at breakfast something had happened to concentrate his murderous jealousy on his wife, instead of her supposed lover. Her offer

to drive me to New York and stay there as long as I did must have seemed to him an intolerable flaunting of her supposed unfaithfulness.

Pride and self-respect justifying murder. And when he had said that outside the barn two days ago, he had called Shakespeare’s Othello—who had smothered his wife because he believed her unfaithful—a noble character.

So then Leal had wanted me out of the house so that he could attend to Della in his own way and time.

They were very quiet in the living room. My door was open and I could hear every sound down there. They had not exchanged a word in a long time.

Thursday, 10:20 P.M.

All the next day Leal whittled a boat with his hunting knife. Della, her foot bandaged, lay on the couch reading a novel. I sat at the table and worked on the house plans. What I designed wasn’t important; I was just occupying my hands and giving myself an excuse for staying in that room. Leal, hunched in a chair, whittled into the fireplace.

He had the knife and I had only my hands. Still, I think I could take him if I remained alert. I’m three inches shorter, but forty pounds heavier.

Possibly I could persuade Della to leave this house. I’d have to sneak up behind him and knock him out. Then what? Then he’d go after us—maybe not right away, maybe taking his time so that we’d never know where and when the blow would fall.

Better to wait for it right here. But waiting isn’t easy.

That night before I went to bed I got a hatchet from the tool shed. It’s at least as effective a weapon as a knife.

Della went to her room at eight o’clock. Leal carried her up the stairs. I hovered about until he left her room, which was

almost as soon as he placed her on her bed. Then he went to his own room.

Tonight I decided not to lock my door. I wouldn't go to bed. I'd sit in the darkness with the hatchet near my hand.

CHAPTER THREE

Friday, 1 A.M.

SOFTLY a door opened and closed. I heard the sound only because I was listening for it. I'd left my own door open a couple of inches. At the far end of the hall there was a small window which admitted enough moonlight to reveal a shadow crossing the hall.

My hand sweated on the hatchet.

The shadow didn't come toward my room. For a long moment it hesitated in the center of the hall, then swung quickly, as if in sudden determination, and headed toward Della's room. The door opened, and beyond it there was light—and in a hand I saw a hunting knife.

I leaped out of my room. An instant after I moved, the shadow became fully revealed. It wasn't tall and gaunt. It was an attractive woman in clinging blue pajamas.

Della heard me and turned. I had barely time to duck the hatchet out of sight behind my back. Then I just stood there. Now I was a shadow.

"Harry?" she whispered.

"Yes." As I moved toward her, I pushed the hatchet down the back of my pants. My belt held it.

I looked down at the knife in her hand, Leal's hunting knife.

She gave a nervous little laugh. "I stole it from him. I took it from his room just now. It was driving me mad."

"The knife?" I asked rather stupidly.

"Harry, I'm afraid of him." Her hand lay flat on my chest. "Do you know that he deliberately dropped that milk bottle on my foot?"

"I know."

Della was close against me. There was nothing intimate in that; merely a frightened woman clinging to a man she could trust.

"I don't know what's come over him these last few days," she said. "Sometimes I think—"

And suddenly her husband was in the hall . . . a gaunt, motionless shape in flappy pajamas. Light from his room across the hall flowed out to meet the patch of light in which we stood in front of Della's room.

She didn't spring guiltily away from me. That wasn't her way. She merely put an inch of distance between us.

"I thought my foot was better," she said calmly to her husband, "but when I came out of my room I fell and Harry heard me cry out. He came out and picked me up."

It wasn't a good lie, but no lie would have been convincing. As a matter of fact, what Leal believed was another lie—that he had caught us in an embrace. There was something sad in his face as he looked at us. I was glad that he didn't have the knife.

I had the hunting knife now. Della had slipped it into my pants pocket so that Leal wouldn't see that she had it.

"Are you all right now, Della?" Leal asked woodenly.

"Do you mind helping me into bed, darling?" she said.

Leal crossed the hall and lifted her and carried her into her room. I stood in the hall, watching them through the open door, until he came out. He closed her door.

"She's no good, Harry," he said. "She'll be no better for you than she is for me."

"What the hell are you talking about?" I said.

He ran his tongue over his lower lip. Then he said, "Good night," and went

rigidly and hurriedly into his room.

Back in my own room, I took the hatchet out of my pants and the knife out of my pocket. I sat down to wait out the night.

Friday, 2 P.M.

Again, as yesterday, I told them at breakfast that I had to return to New York. "I'm not getting any work done here," I said. "I may as well attend to my New York client."

Della was pouring my coffee. Her foot had got a lot better overnight; she limped, but she could move about. The coffee pot paused over my cup, and it was as if my words had washed her face of expression.

"Must you?" she asked quietly.

"I'll be back in a few days," I said.

As she moved away from my side of the table, I noticed the unnatural slump of her shoulders.

Leal only said: "I'll drive you to the station, Harry, as soon as you're ready."

I was ready in twenty minutes. As I came down the stairs, I heard Leal ask Della if she had seen his hunting knife.

"I'm sure I left it down here on the mantle," he said.

"You're always mislaying your things," Della said.

Fingering the hunting knife in my pocket, I descended the rest of the stairs. "I'm ready, Leal," I said.

Della didn't come along. She waved good-by to me from the door. On the way, there wasn't a thing Leal and I had to say to each other. When I got out of the car at the station, we muttered good-by without shaking hands.

I gave Leal's sedan a five-minute start and then got into a taxi. On the highway, some half-mile from the house, I paid off the driver. There was a driveway, but I took an overgrown footpath through brush. I transferred Leal's knife from my pocket to my belt.

The house was very quiet. I knew that

Leal had returned because I saw the sedan. I stood behind a Dutch elm and sweated in the city clothes I'd put on to go to New York. It was another sweltering day.

After a while I wondered what good I could do behind that tree. Whatever happened, wouldn't happen here out in the open. Or maybe it had happened already. I was trying to decide how I could get across the clearing and sneak into the house without being seen when Leal appeared.

He came out of the back door, and he wore swimming trunks. But where was Della? The day was hot enough to induce even Leal to go for a swim, but wouldn't Della also go?

Unless she couldn't. . . .

Then I heard her call gayly from the pond, "Leal?"

He replied, "Coming, Della." He disappeared into the apple orchard between the house and pond.

Sweating in my city clothes, I followed. The last of the apple trees was a hundred feet from the pond. I stood behind it, and my right hand was on the knife in my belt.

Della was standing on the float in the bright sunlight. She was a rich brown except where the two white strips of cloth covered it. "Come in, darling," she called to her husband. "The water's fine."

Leal didn't know how to dive. He climbed down the ladder and thrust himself toward the float with wildly flailing arms and legs. He could just about make that hundred feet.

Della dove cleanly off the dock and swam to meet him. When she reached him, she put her hands on his shoulders and lifted herself out of the water up to her hips. Leal's head disappeared.

It took me a couple of seconds to get it. Then I ran, shedding my jacket and shirt on the way. When I reached the edge of the dock, Leal's head reappeared for an

instant. Della leaped out of the water, seemed to fall on him.

I pulled off my shoes and dove. They were only fifty feet away. I came up within a foot of Della, and then suddenly for the first time she knew that I wasn't on the train to New York.

I struck her with my open hand.

FOR the next minute I was too busy with Leal to pay attention to her. He fought me as I brought him up, but when he saw that I wasn't Della he relaxed and let me tow him in. He had just enough strength left to climb the ladder to the dock. Then he flopped down on his face.

I looked back. Della was swimming leisurely toward the dock. She came dripping up the ladder and shook out her loose wet hair and turned a smile on me.

"It's a good thing you were here, Harry," she said sweetly. "I couldn't have got him out by myself."

Leal turned on his side, facing us. "You tried to drown me, Della." He said that without hate—just unutterable weariness.

"How ridiculous, darling," she said.

The knife was still in my belt. I looked down at it and then at her. "And I thought all along that it was Leal who was set on murder. That he was out to kill me or you or both of us. And I came back to protect you from him. Go on, keep smiling, Della. It's a good laugh."

She wasn't smiling now. She crossed her arms on her chest, as if the air had turned cold. "You—you saw?"

"Plenty," I said. "Leal and I both know you tried to drown him. I suppose last night you got his knife from downstairs to murder him. Maybe your idea was to frame me for it, but I broke it up when I came into the hall. And besides, this way was safer all around. Nobody would have been able to prove that he hadn't drowned by accident."

She tossed her hair. "You can't prove anything, anyway."

"Maybe not," I conceded. "I suppose it was Leal's money you wanted."

"I hate him!" she burst out with a fury that shook her. "I hated him when he asked me to marry him. All he had was money. I thought I could stand him—but I couldn't. I wanted to be free."

"Free with his money," I said dryly, "which you would inherit on his death."

She stared at me open-mouthed, then swung away and ran off the dock. Her limp was all gone. I started after her.

"Let her go," Leal said quietly.

He was sitting up with his head in his hands.

"I'm sorry, Leal," I said. "I had an idea that you—"

"That I intended to kill you?" He nodded slowly. "I heard you tell Della. Because I was spying on you and her, Harry? I admit it. You see, I suspected what she was. I didn't trust her. But I wanted to be sure before I kicked her out of my house. In fact, the other night I went to your room to talk it over with you, man to man, but your door was locked."

While I lay breathless in bed, sure that he had come to murder me. But why couldn't he have talked it over later?

I said: "Several days ago you justified murder under certain circumstances—circumstances like this."

His mouth twisted. "Words, Harry. You should know by now that a poet makes a game of words. A literary game."

"But this knife," I persisted, taking it out of my belt.

"I've always liked knives. That's the small boy in me. It meant nothing."

I thought: *Didn't it?* But I had no answer. I'll never have.

He bought that knife because he liked to whittle with a six-inch hunting knife. Maybe.