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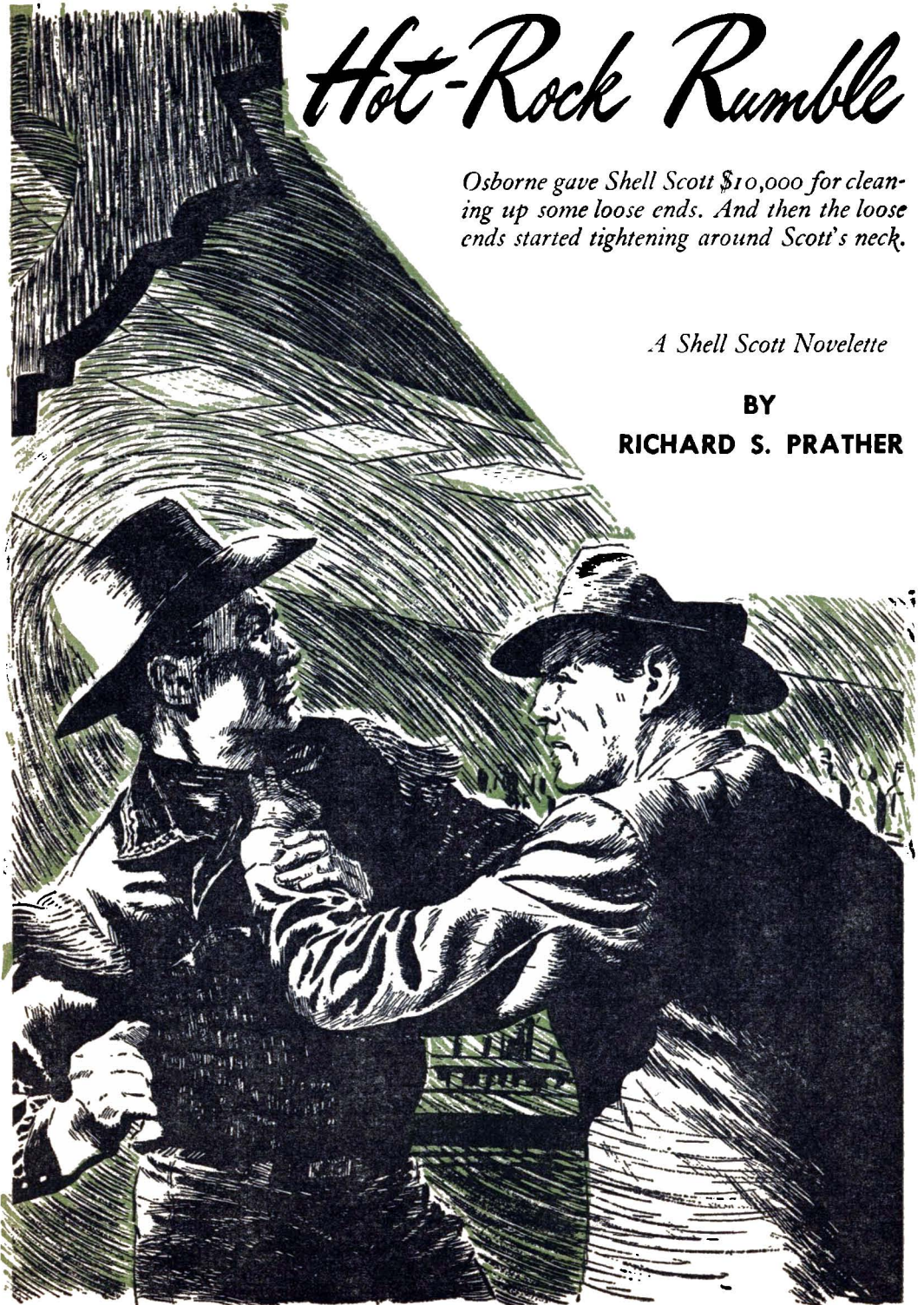
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Hot-Rock Rumble

Osborne gave Shell Scott \$10,000 for cleaning up some loose ends. And then the loose ends started tightening around Scott's neck.

A Shell Scott Novelette

**BY
RICHARD S. PRATHER**



SOMEHOW Mr. Osborne didn't look like the type. He was a tall, distinguished-looking guy of about fifty, with all his hair still on his head, rimless glasses over his blue eyes, and about three-hundred dollars worth of clothes on his short body.

He'd come in through the door marked "Sheldon Scott, Investigations" at ten this morning and he'd given me his whole story in five minutes, his sentences clipped and to the point. About every minute he'd gone to the window that overlooks Broadway and peered out to see if his wife were standing down there screeching.

I said, "Sounds O.K. I'll get on it right away, Mr. Osborne."

"Thank you." He got up, found a thousand-dollar bill in his fat wallet and dropped the bill on my desk. "I hope that's all right for now. I'll give you the other nine thousand in cash too, if you're successful. Is that satisfactory?" He went over to the window again.

"Perfectly." I was admiring Cleveland's picture and the number one and three zeros in the bill's corner when he said, "Ohmigawd. There she is. She didn't shop long. She can spend more money faster than anybody I . . ." He let it trail off, turned and went sailing out without another word.

In his haste he left my office door standing open. I shut it, then walked to the window where he'd been standing. I saw him appear beside a

plump woman in a fur coat. She put her hands on her hips and yacked something at him.

It seemed likely she was asking him where in the hell he'd disappeared to, because Mr. Jules Osborne had sneaked away from his wife to see me. I went back to my desk and looked at the notes I'd taken while he'd talked. Mr. Osborne had spent \$100,000 on jewelry which, unknown to his wife, he had given to what he described as "an, ah, er, young lady." Two nights ago the jewelry had been stolen from the girl's — Diane Borden's — home. Diane missed her rocks so much that she brought forth an ultimatum: If Julie boy didn't replace them, or at least get the "old" ones back, Mrs. Jules Osborne might start hearing from the little birds. So, with a possible outlay of \$100,000 staring him in the wallet, Jules was quite willing to pay me \$10,000 if I could recover the originals.

Osborne hadn't gone to the police because he didn't want any record of this deal anywhere. He'd checked on me, satisfied himself I could be trusted, and laid his problem in my lap. And time was important because he'd said to me, "I can trust the jeweler, I'm sure. The only one I'm worried about is Diane. She's apt to go berserk any day. Any —" he groaned — "hour. If my wife finds out about this she'll gouge me for a million-a-year alimony. What with alimony and taxes I'll have to borrow money."

Anyway, Osborne wanted action.

Diane lived in a rent-free house on Genesee Street. I put the thousand bucks in my wallet, got my black Cad out of the parking lot, and headed for Hollywood.

As soon as I saw Diane I knew she must have given Jules his hundred-thousand-dollars worth. There were several things about Diane that were obvious, the first one being that she was a woman. A lot of women these days look like thin men, but not this kid. She was dressed in red-and-black hostess pajamas with a silver belt tied around her tiny waist. The pajama bottoms were the black part, with full flowing legs slit up the side to her knees, which I automatically assumed were dimpled and the red part was a thin, shimmering blouse which was crammed either with gigantic falsies or one hell of a lot of Diane.

She peered around the door and up at me, letting a strand of red hair droop fetchingly over one eye, and she said, "Hello, hello, hello."

I looked behind me but there was nobody else around. "That all for me?" I asked her.

"Sure. You're big enough for three hellos. You're Scotty, aren't you?"

"Shell Scott. How did you know?"

"Daddy phoned me. He said you'd come and see me." She had the door about halfway open and she slid around it, one arm and leg on each side of it and her body pressed against the thin edge. She was silent for a few seconds, smiling at me,

then she said, "He told me you were big, and your nose was a little bent, and you had real short white hair that stuck up in the air, and I should be nice to you and help you any way I could." She laughed. "Come on in, Mr. Scotty. I'm Diane."

There was a chance conversation with this gal was going to be difficult. I walked by her but before I got past she said, "He didn't tell me about the funny white eyebrows. They glued?" She reached out and playfully tugged at one.

"No," I said. "They are not glued. And I —"

"You bring my jewels?"

"What the hell —"

"I know you didn't. I was just teasing. Don't be mad. Come in and sit down. You want a drink or anything?"

"Nope. I want some conversation. You sit down in a chair clear the hell across the room from me and let's talk. O.K.?"

She pretended to pout, which let me notice how full and sensually curving her lower lip was. While I sat down she plopped into a chair and crossed her legs. That black cloth parted at the slit and fell away from skin that looked white and soft as a cloud. Then she bounced up and sat on a long gray divan for half a second, then rolled over and lay on her stomach looking at me. She was a little fluffy bit of a thing, very young — maybe seventeen I figured, all curves and bounce and energy.

She was beginning to make me feel decrepit and full of hardened arteries at thirty.

Finally we got around to the jewelry. On my way here I'd stopped at Montclair Jewelers, where Osborne had bought the stuff, and picked up a typed list and description of the missing items. Osborne had arranged to have it ready for me. The pieces were mostly diamonds, with a couple of emerald brooches thrown in. I checked the list against Diane's memory, which was just as good as the list, then asked her to tell me what she could of the actual theft.

She rolled over onto her back, stretched her arms above her head, and presented such a charming picture that I hardly heard what she was saying. But she told me she'd gone with "Daddy" to an out-of-the-way spot and worn some of her diamonds. Back home, after Mr. Osborne had gone, she'd left the stuff on top of her bedroom dresser alongside the jewel box.

She said, "And when I woke up yesterday morning the little pretties were just gone. I'd locked the doors when Daddy left and they were still locked this morning. Windows too. But it was all just gone. Some robbers stole it all."

"You mean somebody walked right into your bedroom and lifted the rocks without your knowing anything about it?"

"Well, they must have. I sleep sounds enough, but if anybody was banging around and flashing lights

and things it should have awakened me." She giggled at me. "I wasn't very tired, anyway."

"Yeah. You know, I expected to find you all broken up, yanking your hair out and wailing. You sure you want these things back?"

"Well, I like that. You want me to run around bawling and yelling 'My jewels, my jewels'?" She was still smiling and didn't seem angry. "Now, wouldn't that be silly, really? I really feel bad, but Daddy said you'd get them back . . . or else he'd get me some more. So it's not like my little old pretties were gone forever."

"I was just thinking, wouldn't it be a big laugh if you still had those little old pretties around somewhere and I naturally can't find the robbers and you get another hundred grand's worth from Da — ah, from your father?"

She sat up straight on the couch. "Let me think about that a minute," she said. Then she laughed, flopped back on the couch and threw her legs up in the air. "Oh, how funny," she said. "That *would* be a scream. But I never thought of it — wish I had. And he's not my father, you silly. You know what I hope?"

"No, what do you hope?"

"That those robbers didn't see me." She swung her legs around to the floor, got up and scooted across the room and curled up on the floor at my feet. She put her arms on my knees, leaned forward and said, "If they saw the diamonds, right in my

bedroom there, and stole them, they must have been able to see me it seems like. And golly I hope they didn't. I don't sleep with anything on, nothing at all, you know, and I'm restless. I kick and turn and wallow around all night I guess. Almost always I wake up all uncovered." She shook her head and let red hair fly around.

I said in a voice that was practically normal, "And if those robbers did see you, you'd better lock and bar all the doors tonight, because they'll be here again come hell or high-water, jewels or no jewels. Now go back to your couch."

She laughed and said, "You're fun. You know, you're lots of fun. And you know what I meant. Well, what else do you want to know?"

"You got any picture of you wearing some of the rocks?"

"Just a minute." She got up, taking her arms and whatnot off my shaking knees, and trotted out of the room on bare feet. I hadn't noticed before that she was bare-footed, but then I've never been much of a guy to look at feet.

She came back with two snapshots and a nightclub photo in which she was practically sagging under the weight of diamonds and emeralds. The nightclub photo showed a necklace, pin, and bracelet clearly. The dress she'd been wearing was strapless, and the photo showed Diane clearly, and it was clearly all Diane.

"You can borrow the pictures," she said. "Daddy took the first two

snaps, and he was in the other — but he cut himself out. Well, what now?"

"Now I go look for these things. And I'd be awfully sad if there weren't any robbers."

"There you go again. Don't be so nasty. Somebody stole them, all right. You have to go right away?"

"Immediately." I stood up. I looked at her for a minute and said, "Aren't you being a little rough on the guy? I mean this business of either you get the rocks back or it costs him another hundred G's? The guy might collapse from anxiety, start selling his Cadillacs, get rocks in his head —"

"Wait a minute." She got about half sober, raised an arched eyebrow and looked me up and down slowly. Then she said, "Come on now. You know better than that. I'm doing him a favor. A lot of men think price is value. Daddy wouldn't have a Cadillac if it only cost five hundred dollars."

I blinked at her, thinking that maybe her brain wasn't as soft as I'd suspected. Then she went back to normal and wiggled a little and smiled at me, and I thought: Hang on, Scott, you'll be out of here in a minute and Jules isn't paying you for what you're thinking. I started for the door and Diane walked along with me, hanging onto my arm, which also started getting hot.

"If you find them," she said, "you bring them back to me. Don't take them to Daddy. They're mine."

"Don't worry. I'm not supposed to go within a mile of him. I'll bring them to you — if I find them."

She opened the door and slid around it again in that oddly interesting fashion. "All right," she said smiling, "just you don't sneak in at night like they did, and leave them on the dresser."

I grinned. "If I do, Miss, I'll look the other way."

"Sure," she said. "Away from the dresser." She giggled. "I bet you make lots of money."

"Not that much. And it all goes in taxes. Well, goodbye, Miss."

"'Bye, Mr. Scotty."

I went out onto the porch and just before she shut the door she said, "Don't call me Miss." I looked over my shoulder at her and she said, "Call me Diane." She took one arm off the door and kind of waved it at me, letting her hand fall limp from her wrist, then winked at me and said, "And listen, you. I'm older than I look."

Then she shut the door and I thought about sitting down on the grass and rolling around howling, and I thought about jumping up and running back and crashing through the door, but what I did was go out to the Cad and lean my head against the cool steering wheel for a couple seconds, then shiver spasmodically and put the buggy in gear thinking that Jules Osborne should have told me more about Diane, and offered me at least twenty thousand dollars.

At the office I reviewed what little I knew and phoned Burglary Division in City Hall to refresh my memory. Then I propped my Cordovans on the desk and thought for a couple minutes. Starting about three months back there had been a number of night burglaries in and near Los Angeles, ranging from Beverly Hills to Boyle Heights. This particular rash of burglaries totaled nine reported so far; the m.o. was the same in all of them and unlike any known gang which Burglary had any record of. The capers always came off between ten at night and two in the morning, there was never any sign that doors or windows had been forced. Nobody had ever reported any lights in the burgled houses though some of the jobs had been pulled off next door to houses in which parties were going on or in which the occupants were chatting or watching television. The doors were always still locked when the people got home to find their jewels, money, furs, silver gone. The jobs had been well cased and the hauls were always good ones, the loot taken from wealthy people. The burglars had never been seen or heard, and Burglary didn't have a solitary lead.

Homicide was interested too, because on one job, which both Burglary and Homicide agreed was obviously the work of the same ten-to-two gang, a wealthy attorney named William Drake had been murdered. And in messy fashion. It

was assumed that he'd left his wife at a party and come home alone while the gang was in his big house on San Vicente Boulevard—the coroner set the time of death at around midnight—and the attorney had been brutally beaten by what must have been an exceedingly powerful man. The attorney's face was a pulp, and one blow had broken his neck. He'd also been shot, a bullet from a .45 caliber automatic blowing away much of his brain.

Three of the jobs had been in the section between Wilshire Boulevard and Pico, the area in which Diane Borden lived, and there was a fair chance that Diane's pretties had been number five. The m.o. seemed the same in every particular.

I took my feet off the desk and made half a dozen more phone calls, then left the office and talked to a shoe-shine boy, two cab drivers, a bookie's runner, a bartender, and a barber. With several lines out I went back to the office and waited for a bite.

A lot of any private detective's time is spent in waiting, and more cases are broken with phones than with guns. At the core of any investigator's success, whether he's police or private, are his "sources of information," the informants, informers, stoolies, canaries. That's the unofficial staff. Over the years in Los Angeles I'd built up a long list of them and many of them were now, I hoped, out working for me—or night, already, know something that

would help. I'd dropped several words in several places, and sent out a thumbnail description of some of the most distinctive items I was interested in.

At three o'clock I got a nibble and, though I didn't know it then I landed a whale. The call was from an alcoholic hoodlum with the unlikely name of Joseph Raspberry, and he wanted me to meet him in the back booth of Manny's bar on Sixth. He also wanted me to bring him a sawbuck. I told him to order a shot on me, that I'd be there in ten minutes. On my way over I wondered if he had anything. Joseph Raspberry was a two-time loser who, when sober, was a good thief. I'd picked him up a year ago and found him carrying a gun, which isn't encouraged by parole boards—and he was on parole at the time. I gave him a break, which was illegal from the strictest point of view, but which if enforced strictly would put all the cops and private detectives in the clink. Since then Joe had stayed out of stir and passed along a dozen tips to me, about half of which paid off, and one of which helped me break a murder case. The other half-dozen tips were fakes, pure and simple, and he dreamed them up because he wanted money for his sweetheart, Old Crow and Coca Cola. I always gave him a ten or so, because there was always another time, another tip. Then, too, when he wasn't hitting the pot he was a likable character. I didn't

know much about him, and even the odd name might have been a fake or a monicker. Anyway, I usually got a charge out of him, kind of liked the guy for no good reason.

But this looked like one of the days when Joe needed money for his sweetheart. He was huddled in the gloom of a booth at the rear of Manny's, his thin face pinched, hands shaking, lips twitching once in a while. I sat down opposite him and he said, "Scott, Manny wouldn't gimme a drink. An' I ain't got a bean."

"You had any breakfast, Joe?"

"Sure. Alka Seltzer and alcohol. Tell him it's O.K., huh?"

I waved at Manny and he waddled over, wiping his hands on a reasonably white apron. "A beer for me, Manny," I said. "And a couple shots for Joe."

I always felt funny about buying a drink for Joe — or any of the others like him. But if he didn't get it from me he'd get it from somebody else, somehow. He was sick, but it wasn't my job to try healing all the sick people. When the shots arrived Joe started to lift one of them but his hand was shaking so much he knew he'd spill it. He put his fingers around the jigger, pressing his hand against the table, then bent forward and got his lips on the rim of the glass and sucked. He lifted the jigger then and tossed the whiskey down. He didn't spill a drop.

I sipped my beer and waited. Finally he shuddered, pulled the

other shot over in front of him and, looking at it, said, "I got something for you."

I put a ten-dollar bill in front of him. He licked his lips and said, "Gimme a pencil." I found a pencil stub in my pocket and gave it to him. He started drawing on a napkin. It took him three minutes, but he didn't touch the other shot till he'd finished. Then he lifted the glass, his hand not shaking so much this time, and tossed the drink off.

He pointed at the napkin. "Lupo seen me and says you been askin' for somethin' like that. If it's right, it's worth more'n a saw, ain't it?"

The drawing was crude: a bracelet with a lot of diamonds, and curving off from it a snake's head with the tongue licking out and two oversized eyes in its head. It could have been something to get excited about, because crude as it was it looked like the bracelet Diane had been wearing in the nightclub photo. I had the picture in my pocket, but I didn't take it out yet. Joe just might have made his drawing from the description I'd sent around.

I said, "Could be," took a twenty-dollar bill from my wallet and wrapped it around my finger. He reached for it, but I said, "The story first, Joe. The ice looks right, maybe, but give me what you've got. And don't make any of it up, even if you haven't got much."

"Sure. I'll level with you, Scott." He hesitated. "I give you some bum ones, but this one's the McCoy. I

seen it. Yesterday it was. It was on Wilcox, that's all I know for sure. I was . . . wasn't feelin' good."

That meant he'd been drunk. He licked his lips and looked at the empty shot glasses. I waved at Manny. And a minute later, over the filled glasses, with Joe's sharp whiskey breath in my nostrils, I got fragments of a story from him, the rest of it still lost somewhere in his drunkard's brain. There wasn't any sound in the quiet of Manny's except Joe's voice, and as he talked I could almost see what had happened through Joe's eyes, everything out of shape, part of a different world with darker shadows and brighter sun, a strange and unreal and exaggerated world that Joe often lived in.

I could see him on the street, his throat aching for a drink, his body hungry for it. He stumbled in off the street into a bar and there was this guy. "He was a tall guy," Joe said, "Jesus, he was clear up to the ceiling, ten feet tall he was and he was stooped over by this booth thing, a kind of funny little booth thing there that had a doll in it. He give her the hoop and she put it on. I was right inside the door a little, next to the dumb thing she was in, and I seen it good. The eyes was red like the snake was alive on it, just like it was alive there." He talked in a monotone, slowly twirling the shot glass. "She took it and put it on and the big guy took it off of her, squeezin' her a little, and stuck it in her purse

there. I was right up alongside them then, I thought she was at a bar but it wasn't no bar, and then the big guy seen me. He gimme a shove, for nothin', just shoved me back up on the wall and the whole place was goin' around. I tried to tell him I just wanted a drink and he picked me up and pushed me out. Like to ripped my head off."

"This guy, Joe. How big you say he was?"

"He was ten feet tall. Don't laugh, I'm not lyin'. He was at least twice as big as me, ten feet tall, clear up to the ceiling he was."

If it hadn't been for the crude drawing Joe had made I might have left then; if there was any truth in the story it seemed so distorted that it wouldn't help me. But I asked him, "What about the girl? What did she look like?"

"I dunno. But I seen her leave and I followed her."

"Why?"

He blinked at me and didn't answer for almost a minute. "I seen where she lived," he said finally.

That was enough, and it made sense to me. Joe was a good thief between cures, but when he needed a shot he'd steal anything. From a baby carriage — to a diamond bracelet. He went on, "I don't 'member what she looked like, but she had a walk like nothing I ever seen. It was a circus, Scott."

"Where'd she go?"

"Right acrost from Polly's. Right on the corner. You know it?"

Polly's was a beer joint where you could place a bet in the back room. I knew the spot. "You're sure, Joe? You got this straight?"

"Yeah," he said. "It don't seem real, does it?" He licked his lips again. "But it's straight, Scott. I give it to you straight."

I took out the nightclub photo and showed it to him. "On the doll's wrist. That look near enough?"

He bent over the print, then looked up at me, a pleased expression on his face. "That's it. I swear, that's it. But that ain't the doll. I'm pretty sure it ain't."

I gave him the twenty. "Anything else, Joe?"

He shook his head, spread the money out before him on the table. I stood up. "Thanks."

He nodded and waved at Manny.

"Joe," I said, "give a listen. Why don't you spend some of that for a big steak? Get yourself—"

He interrupted angrily. "Lemme be. I give you what you was after, didn't I? Now leave me be."

"Sure. See you. And the hell with you." I was sorry as soon as I said it, but Joe was a nice enough guy when he was sober. He'd made me laugh plenty of times, and there are too few things to laugh at. I didn't like seeing him slopped up most of the time, so I barked at him.

He laid a hand on my arm, shaking his head. "Don't get a heat on, Scott. Just lemme be."

"Sure, Joe. Cheers." I left. The sun was almost blinding after the

gloom in Manny's and I stood outside for a moment wondering if Joe had told me anything at all. The story was just crazy enough, though, that it was probably true — as true as Joe could get it. I got in the Cad and drove toward Hollywood and Polly's. A diamond bracelet with a snake's head and rubies for eyes, a guy ten feet tall, and a gal with a walk like a circus. I knew, from Joe's description, where to look for the gal: the left half of a duplex — if there was a gal. It was worth a check.

She was a tall, willowy tomato with dark hair and the unashamed curves of a modern Venus in white sweater, black skirt and spike-heeled pumps, and she came out of the duplex on Wilcox Street like a gal in a hurry. I hadn't got a good look at her since I'd staked out near the duplex on the corner, but in the hour I'd waited for her to show I'd deduced a few interesting things about her from the frilly black underthings hanging on a line behind her place. But not even the transparent and abbreviated step-ins hanging there, nor Joe's fuzzy words, had prepared me for her walk. Walk?

That wasn't a walk; it was a parade. Wilcox Street should have been curved into a horseshoe lined with bald-headed pappies chipping their choppers and falling down in dead faints while a band played "Put The Blame On Mame, Boys!" And there should have been a drum.

I fell in about fifteen yards behind her and followed, let's face it, grimly intent on my job and wondering how she made any forward progress at all.

After two blocks she still hadn't looked back. I was carrying a brown tweed coat over one arm and a hat in my hand, and there were dark glasses in my shirt pocket. In case she got a look at me I could put the stuff on and look a bit different except that I'd still be six-two. But my preparations for a cagy tail seemed wasted, because she apparently didn't expect anyone to be following her. Maybe there was no reason she should have. She certainly wasn't sneaking up the street.

She kept going like that for another block and I followed her happily. Just across the next street was a small cocktail lounge with a sign over the door: Zephyr Room. She went inside. I followed her in, stopped inside the door and looked around as my eyes got accustomed to the dimness. She'd disappeared somewhere, but there were booths on the left, four or five people in them, and a bar extending from the back halfway up the right wall. This side of the bar, at its end, was a small U-shaped table with a stool behind it. I felt a little tingle of exhilaration; that must be the "kind of funny little booth thing" that Joe had mentioned. He'd been in here, all right.

I went to the bar and climbed onto a stool next to a cowboy lean-

ing against the bar. At least he thought he was a cowboy; he was wearing high-heeled boots and tight blue jeans, a white-trimmed black shirt, and a black neckerchief looped around his neck and tucked through a small silver cow's skull at his throat. He was real quaint.

I ordered a bourbon and water and while the bartender mixed it I reached into my inside coat pocket and took out the neatly typed list of stolen items I'd got from Osborne's jeweler. I made a few random checkmarks on it with a pencil, not being careful about hiding the list from possibly prying eyes, and when the bartender brought my drink I turned the paper face down on the bar and asked him, "Did a sharp brunette just wobble in here?"

"Wobble?" He looked puzzled, then he grinned. "You must mean Lois. Yeah, she'll be out in a minute." He jerked his head toward the U-shaped table. "Dice girl."

"Thanks." I started to pull at my highball when the cowboy flipped me on the shoulder with the back of his fingers.

"What makes you so curious?" he said. His voice was soft and gritty, like sand running through an hour glass. I didn't say anything and he said, "Well?" and flipped me again with his fingers.

I wasn't even looking at the guy, minding my drink and my business, but just that fast I was mad enough to hit him with the bar. Maybe I'm touchy, maybe I'm even a little

neurotic about it, but this guy had done the wrong things — a couple of them. In the first place, I don't mind strangers blabbing at me or asking questions — if they ask them nice; he wasn't asking nice. And in the second place I don't like guys flipping me or grabbing me or even laying their paws on me.

I swallowed at my drink, then wheeled on my stool and looked at the foolish character just as he said, "I asked you a question, Pally."

I took a good look at him this time. He was about an inch under six feet and broad, big-chested, and with more hair sticking up from his shirt than I've got on my head. His face was square, and his eyes were narrowed, lips pressed together as he looked at me.

I said, "I heard you. Don't ask me questions, don't call me Pally, and keep your hands off me." I turned back to the bar and got the highball glass just to my lips when he latched onto my arm and pulled me around.

He started to say something, but I slammed my glass down on the bar and climbed off my stool as liquor squirted up and spread over the mahogany. I grabbed the guy by his scarf and said, "Listen, pardner, the next time you lay a hand on me you better take off those high heels and get your feet planted square on the floor, because I'll knock you clear into the men's room."

His mouth dropped open and for a moment he sputtered in surprise, then his chin snapped up and his

face got white. He wrapped a hand around my wrist and drew back his right fist so he could slug me, and I almost felt sorry for what was going to happen to the cowboy. Even if he couldn't know I was an ex-Marine crammed full of more judo and unarmed defense than I knew what to do with, he should never have tried hauling off while I still had hold of his pretty scarf and he was wide open from all directions.

But he was stupid, and he actually launched his right fist at me. I gave just a little tug on the scarf and he staggered maybe two inches and the fist missed me four inches, and he was so far off balance I had all the time in the world to grab his left arm above the elbow, then break his weakened hold on my wrist and force his wrist and arm behind him with my right hand. While he was still bending over and turning I locked his arm behind him, got some leverage from my hand on his shoulder, and he started to make noises. I was still trying to decide if I should break the arm for him, when the bartender swung a two-foot club against the bar top and yelled, "None of that! Shove it, boys, break it up."

He was pretty fast, because we'd been mixing it up for only a couple seconds — and I think he saved the cowboy's arm. I cooled off a little, nodded at the bartender, and pushed the cowboy ahead of me while I walked him four stools away. Then I let go of him.

"Maybe you better sit here, Cow-

boy. You must have thought I was kidding. I wasn't." I went back and got his drink and sat it in front of him. He didn't do anything more dangerous than glare at me, so I went back to my drink.

The bartender was squinting at me. I said, "Sorry," then finished the bourbon and ordered another. He made it silently and I noticed there hadn't been a peep out of any of the other half-dozen or so customers. Two of them left, but the others ordered more drinks. A little conversation started up again.

I asked the bartender, "Where is the men's room, anyway?" He pointed toward a door in the rear wall and I got up, leaving the list on the bar, and went back to the john. I went in, slammed the door, then cracked it and peeked through. The cowboy rubbed his arm, glanced at the paper on the bar then looked back toward the rest room. He was good and curious about me. Five more seconds and he got up, walked to my stool and said something to the bartender, then turned the paper over and studied it for half a minute before he slammed it back down on the bar and walked toward me and then out of my sight.

I went back to my stool. The bartender had mopped up my spilled drink and I said, "Freshen that up, will you? You got a phone booth in here?"

He nodded and pointed toward the back of the bar and around to the right. That was where my cowboy

had gone. I tucked the list back into my pocket, had a swallow of my drink. In another minute the cowboy came back. He walked up beside me and smiled stiffly.

"Say," he said. "I wanna apologize. About gettin' hot."

I grinned at him. "Sure. Maybe we're both a little touchy."

He looked damned uncomfortable, but he stuck out his hand. "No hard feelings?"

"O.K. by me." I shook his hand.

He lowered his voice a little and said, "I didn't mean to sound nosy, but the thing is, a good friend of mine is real innerested in Lois, see? So naturally I'm curious. You, uh, know Lois?"

I shook my head.

"You just think she's cute, huh?"

"That's right. I just think she's cute."

"Yeah," he said. "Uh, I'd feel bad if you didn't lemme buy you a drink. No hard feelings, you know, lemme buy you a drink."

I hesitated and he said to the bartender, "Hey, Frank, give my friend anything he wants, see? Gimme the same."

Right then I caught movement at the corner of my eye and turned to see Lois walking toward us from the rear of the club. Evidently there was a room back there where she'd changed because she now had on an ankle-length green gown. She walked past us and said to the bartender, "A cool one like this, Frank." She nodded at the cowboy, then her

eyes brushed briefly over mine. I grinned at her as she went by, and after a couple more steps she looked back over her shoulder, and she must have seen where I was looking, then she was at the dice table and reached up to turn on a bright light above it. I'd had a good gander at her as she walked past us and the view was even better with her under that bright light.

The green dress came clear up to her throat then swept down over her body, clinging to her skin like a thin rubber dress a size too small. I'd have given eight to five that she wasn't wearing a thing under that dress, not a thing, not even frilly things. The dress was like green skin and I decided I could even get used to green skin if it were on Lois.

The bartender mixed up a drink, also green, and sat it on the end of the bar, then gave the cowboy and me our highballs. I picked mine up, got the green thing from the end of the bar, and walked to the dice table.

I handed her the drink. "This must be yours."

She smiled. "Uh-huh. To match my dress. Pink Ladies for a red dress, creme de cacao for brown. This is creme de menthe."

I pressed my luck. "I thought for a minute the dress was made out of creme de menthe."

She didn't mind. She smiled and said. "You like it?"

"It's terrific. Clever idea, too. What do you wear with champagne?"

She laughed, and the laugh itself

was a little bit like champagne, a soft, bubbling sound that came from far down in her white throat. "That's a rhetorical question, isn't it?"

"Frankly, no." The overhead light burned soft red spots in her dark hair, hair that hung just above shoulder length. It wasn't quite black, as I'd thought at first, but an off shade like the bar mahogany, a shadow darkness with touches of deep red in it. I had known a couple of dice girls in Hollywood and several in San Francisco where they're more often seen. Some of them were near idiots, and some were brilliant women who could have been high-powered women executives but made so much at the tables that they stuck to the game. One thing, though, all of them had in common: they were beautiful women, the kind men would look at, women who could make men cheerfully lose a dime or a thousand bucks. Lois was no exception, and she didn't sound or look stupid. Her face was oval, with dark brown eyes and warm-looking red lips, lips that were still smiling now with white, even teeth behind them.

I reached for my wallet and started to take a buck out of it, then changed my mind and found a twenty, laid it on the green felt.

"What part of that?" she asked.

"All of it. I feel lucky."

"I like to tell the nice fellows they can't win in the long run."

"Thanks," I said. I looked at her, at the way the dice table fit just over her thighs as she sat on the low

stool, light pouring down over her shoulders and silvering the top of her breasts, highlighting their thrusting tips and leaving pools of shadow beneath them, and I added, "But they can't lose."

She looked at me for long seconds, her brown eyes half-lidded, then she said, "Shoot it all."

She shoved one of the leather shakers over to me and I rattled the dice then rolled them up against the board. She looked at them, called my points and picked up the other shaker, held it in front of her and shook the dice vigorously.

She rolled the dice. "See?" she said. "You lose."

I grinned. "That breaks me. What am I going to do for dinner tonight?"

"I don't know," she smiled. "Will you really go hungry?"

"Maybe I can bum a meal."

"Maybe. Are you really broke?"

"Huh-uh. Just fishing. Carefully."

"You don't look like the careful type."

"Depends."

I had noticed something block out the dim light coming in through the entrance. I'd been so interested in conversation that I hadn't looked around, but now the cowboy stepped up on my left.

"Hey, Pally," he said.

I very clearly heard him say "Pally." I looked at him.

There was a tight grin on his square face. "Remember, a friend of mine was innerested in Lois?"

"So he's innerested. So am I. So what?"

"So here's my good friend, Pally." He jerked a thumb.

I looked around at where I figured the guy's face would be and I was looking, so help me, at his tie clasp. I looked up. And up. And there it was. He wasn't a man, but a monstrosity. When I found his face I didn't recognize the features right away because I'd been too busy wondering when I'd get to it, but a few seconds after I saw the long thin head with the bony cheekbones and long sharp nose, the wide-spaced dark eyes and high forehead dwindling into wispy brown hair, I made him. Once you've seen a guy that big, you don't have much trouble remembering him.

Back in '45 you couldn't pick up a sports page without seeing his name and face. He'd been in college then, *the* basketball star of the States, center on the Indians, national high-scorer. Too big for any of the services, he'd made a name for himself on the courts. Maybe you remember his name: Tommy Matson, and they called him Cannonball Matson. Since then the nickname had been shortened to Cannon. In '46 he'd turned pro, finally been kicked out of the game because of excessive roughness, near brutality — and because he'd been questioned by the San Francisco D.A. about some fixed games; questioned and let go. After that he'd drifted. His name didn't hit the

sports pages any more, but I remembered he'd been picked up for battery, released, then did a bit for second-degree burglary, a daylight job on which he hadn't carried a gun. The last I heard he'd been arrested in San Francisco, this time for first-degree burglary, a night job, but again he'd been without a gun. Cannon had been sent to San Quentin for that one. I'd brushed against him a few times on cases of mine, but I'd never been on his tail. He knew me, though, and didn't like me; I'd helped put a couple of his friends away.

I could feel my throat tighten up. The guy wasn't ten feet tall, he was a long six-foot-nine and a lumpy three hundred pounds, but Joe's story wasn't so crazy any more. This was the boy Joe had seen in here yesterday. I turned around with my back to the dice table and said, "Hello, Cannon. I heard you fell from 'Frisco. Didn't know you were down this way."

"Now you know." He looked past me to Lois. "This chump bothering you, honey?"

"He's not bothering me, Cannon."
"I figure he is."

I butted in. "I think the lady knows more about it than you do, Cannon. And you know my name. It's not chump."

The cowboy said, "It's Pally. Ain't that right, Pally?"

I looked at him. "You got a short memory, friend. Next time I'll put a hinge in your elbow." Actually,

right at that moment, I didn't feel too happy about all this. Another guy had come inside with Cannon and was standing by him. He was a little short guy about six feet tall, slim, bald, about forty-five. There was a scar, probably a knife scar, on his forehead just where his hairline should have been. That made four guys lined up against me, counting Cannon as two.

"Move along, Scott," Cannon said.

"I'm busy." I turned my back on him and said to Lois, "Guess we were interrupted. And I was just about to ask you something."

She was frowning, biting her lower lip. "I know," she said.

From behind me Cannon said softly, "I want you should blow, Scott, and keep going, and don't come back."

I felt a hand yank on my arm. As it spun me around I saw that it was the cowboy pulling at me and I made a mistake and concentrated on him. He got hold of my coat sleeves with both hands just as I started to chop at his face with the edge of my palm and maybe cave his face in for him, but I was concentrating on the wrong guy.

I heard Cannon grunt on my left, and I saw the big fist swooping down at my head, and I rolled with the punch just a fraction of a second too late. I was rolling when he hit me, and I damn near rolled over the dice table into Lois' lap, and a gray film dropped down over my eyes.

My muscles were suddenly like jelly and when I felt Cannon's big hand bunch up my coat and pull me toward him I was having a hard enough time keeping my legs straight under me, much less getting a fist up to his chin. I fought to clear my head as I heard Cannon say huskily, "I said blow, and stay the hell gone," and then I saw the dim blur of his fist looming up in front of me again, and just as I rolled my head to the side my head finally cleared. Everything got very clear and very black.

I was in a booth. It seemed pretty sure that I was in a booth, but I didn't yet know where the booth was. I had just got my face up off the table and slowly I remembered what had happened. I wiggled my jaw, and pain cleared fog from my brain. I looked around. Lois was walking from the bar toward me, and because my eyes hadn't yet focused properly it was as though there were two of Lois walking at me, and the way just one of her navigated this was almost more than man could bear. But when she reached the table she was back to one, and it was one shot glass she put in front of me.

"Brandy," she said.

"Thanks." I drank it, waited half a minute, then started to stand up. "Where is that . . . that . . . that . . ."

I was coming out of the booth when she put a hand on my chest and said, "Sit down. I admire your

stupidity, but they've left. Hadn't you better relax for a while?"

"I've been relaxed for a long while." I sat down and as she slid into the seat opposite me I said, "What's going on out there now?"

"Nothing. All the customers left too."

"They show remarkable good sense."

"Cannon and Tinkle and Artie looked through your clothes and wallet, then put everything back and left."

"That's great." I thought a minute. "Tinkle?" I asked her. "Tinkle Miller?" It had to be; there wouldn't be another hoodlum with the same monicker.

"Uh-huh, the cowboy. And Artie Payne. And you're Shell Scott. A detective."

I looked across the table at her. "True. Is that bad?"

"I didn't say that. But it made me . . . wonder."

"Yeah. I suppose it would." I didn't add anything to that; I wasn't going to con the gal; she could take her chances or leave them. I said, "I didn't know you'd chosen Cannon."

"I didn't. He chose me. He's . . . after me, you might say. But he hasn't got me yet."

"I imagine he'd put on quite a campaign. He'd have to. You know, flowers, candy, pretty baubles, things like that."

"Things like that. He ordered me to stay away from you."

"I had you picked as a gal to ask, not to order."

"I am."

"Well, I'm asking."

"What and when?"

"Dinner. Tonight."

"Maybe." She glanced toward the door. "Couple customers," she said. "I have to get back to the table." She left. Naturally I watched her walk away.

I ordered and slowly drank a last water-high while I added some bits and pieces. Tinkle Miller. A hood who'd been lucky with convictions, but had been charged with half the book, mostly suspicion of burglary. A Jack-of-all-trades hoodlum, he'd been a dishwasher, bank clerk and burglar, labor goon and locksmith, soda jerk and short-con man, strike-breaker, and, of course, a cowboy. I filed the one important point in my aching head and added some more. Yesterday Joe had stumbled in here in an alcoholic haze, seen Cannon bestowing a pretty bauble on Lois. I wondered about Lois. Today Tinkle Miller had seen a similar pretty bauble among those on my typed list, called Cannon and Artie Payne, and Cannon had proceeded to knock me silly. It looked pretty good. I got up.

On my way out I stopped at the dice table. Lois was alone there and I said, "Well?"

She nibbled on the inside of her lip. "Where we going?"

"Grove O.K.?"

"Cocoanut Grove?"

"Uh-huh. Then the Strip, Ciro's, Mocambo, maybe catch Kay Thompson and the Williams Brothers."

"Your face is already swollen. Won't you mind?"

"I'll put ice packs on it."

"I'm supposed to work."

"Get a headache. Then we'll be even."

"All right."

"You got a long slinky dress you feel like trying out?"

She smiled. "Umm-hmmm. Long . . . and low."

"Wonderful." I grinned at her. "What color?"

She looked up at the ceiling, then slanted her eyes down at me, lips curving into an amused smile, slightly wicked. "Rum and coke."

"The time and the place?"

She scribbled on a paper and handed it to me. I looked at it and said, "So long, Lois. See you at nine."

"So long, Shell. Don't be late."

"You kidding?" I left. It was just getting dark.

I reached the Spartan Apartment Hotel, home, at seven P.M. Inside I mixed a weak drink, then settled on the oversized chocolate brown divan in the front room, winked at Amelia, the nude over my fake fireplace, and put in a call to Diane Borden.

"Hello-o?"

"Diane? Shell Scott. I want —"

"Ooooh, Scotty. How nice. You missed me. Really missed me."

"No. I want —"

"You didn't miss me? Scotty! Please!"

"O.K., I missed you. Now listen. Reserve two tables at the Ambassador tonight. The Grove, adjoining tables. If you need glasses, wear them —"

"I don't need glasses —"

"Keep quiet a minute. One table is for you; the other is for me and a gal. I'm hoping she'll be wearing some rocks. Maybe yes, maybe no, but just in case, I want you to be there to take a peek. If you see anything that looks like yours, just sit tight. I'll get the word from you; I'll table-hop or something. O.K.?"

"What are you talking about?"

I went through it again, more slowly and clearly, telling her to get the tables for nine-thirty, and she said, "Is she pretty?"

"Who?"

"The girl."

"Yeah, she's a beauty. What's that got to do with your bracelet and chokers and —" I broke it off. "Oh, hell, I forgot. Drink cokes or something till we get there."

"I'll drink anything I want."

"But you'll get in —"

"You dope. I'm twenty-one. I told you I was —"

"You're what!"

"Twenty-one. You can look it up if you want to, just like a detective. I was twenty-one six days ago. So there."

She hung up.

Well, I thought. Well, well.

It was nine sharp when I read the neat card, "Lois Sanders," and rang the buzzer. A gong went off inside, then she opened the door and a gong went off in my head. This time she was in a gown like deep-maroon skin, just the right size. The dress wasn't high on her throat like the green one; it was strapless, smooth, low on her high breasts, snug around her trim waist, gleaming over her curving hips, gracefully draped almost to the floor.

"Come in," she said. "You're right on time. And you know something? My headache is miraculously gone."

I stared at her. "You know something? I am miraculously gone. You look lovely, Lois." She held the door and I went inside.

"Thank you," she said. "You're rather pretty, too. You look right at home in a dinner jacket."

I'd showered and shaved and climbed into the old tux and black tie. If I'd had soup and fish I'd probably have worn the silly things. I wanted this to be "formal" enough so Lois would feel lost without some glittering jewelry. Funny thing, though, I was beginning to feel a little lousy about this deal.

Lois took both my hands in hers and backed across the room to a divan that faced a wide window.

"You sit there, Shell. Drink before we leave?"

"Swell."

"You'll have to take what I've got. But its not too bad."

She was still holding my hands, her back to the window and faint illumination behind her softly outlining the curve of her waist and hips. "Sounds delightful," I said, and tightened my hands on hers.

She slipped her fingers free and said, smiling, "I meant rum and coke."

"I was afraid you meant something like that."

I looked out the window until she came back with the drinks. We chatted about nothing in particular, pleasantly, so pleasantly that I didn't want it to end and decided I liked Lois perhaps a bit too well. It was nine-fifteen when we finished our drinks.

"Ready, Lois?"

"Uh-huh. I'll get my stole."

I followed her to the bedroom door. She picked what looked like a mink stole off the bed, draped it over her shoulders and walked back in front of me. She didn't have on a single diamond, ruby, bracelet or necklace. She wasn't even wearing a ring.

I opened my mouth to comment on that, and stopped. This wasn't at all clever or funny any more. But finally I said, "Here I am all decked out in studs and links and a hermaphroditic after-shave lotion, and you haven't so much as a watch. I'll have to buy you some baubles."

It came out flat, toneless, and cruelly obvious. I had no way of knowing what Cannon might have said to her earlier in the Zephyr

Room. Nor what he'd said yesterday when he gave her what I felt sure was Diane's bracelet. She could know Cannon had given her a stolen bracelet, she might even be in with him; she might suspect the thing was stolen, or she might even think it was a paste offering from a smitten suitor. And she might not even have it now, whether it was the one I was after or another one entirely — but I had to find out, and I was stuck now with the way I'd played it.

If Lois had wondered, during the evening or earlier, if I'd say anything about her wearing jewelry, she hadn't given any indication of it. She'd been sweet and happy and smiling, but now the half-smile went away from her face and something went out of her brown eyes.

"Maybe you're right, Shell," she said. "I suppose I should wear something."

She turned away from me and went to a dresser against the left wall, opened the second drawer and took out a square box. "Well, help me out," she said, not looking at me. "What should I wear?"

She opened the box and watched me as I walked over and looked down into it at the crystal-white stones, and the red ones, the bracelets and chains and pins.

And it was there. The bracelet with the snake's head, ruby-red eyes, and a forked gold tongue flicking out the of mouth. I picked it up.

"How about this?"

Right then, if it was all going to

come apart, was when it should have happened. But she went along with it, neither of us fooling the other. "All right," she said quietly.

I picked up a glistening choker, gems set into a thin black band. "This would be good."

"It's rhinestones. I bought it myself. Most of the others were given to me." She swallowed. "By men, of course."

I lifted her wrist. She'd already slipped the bracelet on and I asked, "More rhinestones?"

"I don't know. I don't think so." She hesitated. "Cannon gave it to me, Shell. I suppose you know that."

"I . . . I had a hunch, honey."

She was facing me, and she put the choker around her throat, her hands behind her neck to fasten it there. Her full breasts lifted and pressed against the edge of her dress. She said softly, "I don't know why I'm putting this on. I hope you didn't make reservations."

I winced. "Look, Lois. Let's get this straight. We might as well now. Cannon gave you the rocks. I think they're hot — stolen. O.K., there you've got it. I didn't know I was going to get into a screwed-up mess like this, but there it is. Now what about it? Anything you can tell me? Or should I keep on guessing?"

Her brown eyes were icy. "Cannon gave me this yesterday. I don't know where he got it or how — and up till now I didn't want to know. He's given me other things, but never anything so nice. He's been

trying to . . . buy something from me, by giving me things, but he hasn't bought anything yet because it's not for sale. Or . . . maybe he has bought something." She paused, looking at me, her oval face sober, then added, "And I don't like you at all, Shell."

Neither of us said anything after that for a while, but finally I said, "I wonder whatever made me think I was a detective? Hey, what say we have another quick one, then take off for the high spots?"

"You still want to go?" Her voice was dull.

"Sure."

We each had a short drink and some rather deadly and dragging conversation, then we left. She was awfully quiet going down in the elevator and I said, "Lois, honey, give me a grin. Let out a whoop or something. Come on, we'll have a big kick tonight, let down your hair."

She smiled slightly. "I suppose there's no sense wasting the evening."

"Of course not. We'll run around screeching, we'll get higher than rockets and yip at people. Baby, we'll dance in the streets —" The elevator stopped, so I stopped, but she shook her head at me and the smile was a little wider, a little brighter.

She looped her arm through mine and we went out onto Wilcox Street. I steered her toward the Cad, but just before we reached it I heard something scrape on the sidewalk

and Lois said, "Why Cannon! What —"

And then there was a grunt, and a great whistling and roaring and clanging of bells, and my last sad thought after that monstrous list landed like an artillery shell alongside my head was: There'll be no dancing in the streets tonight.

I came to this time in my Cad, slumped behind the wheel. The first time this had happened, I had been more than a bit peeved at Cannon. But now I was seriously considering killing the son. I was so mad that it felt as if the top of my head were going to pop off and sail through the roof of the Cad like a flying saucer. It was five minutes before I calmed down enough to start thinking about anything except smashing my fists into Cannon's ugly face.

Then I got out of the car and went back to Lois' apartment. She wasn't there; at least there was no response to my ringing the buzzer and banging on the door. I checked the Zephyr Room but Lois had "gone home with a headache" and hadn't come back. No, neither Cannon nor his pals had been in. Yes, I did have a black eye, and would you like a couple? I left the Zephyr Room and went back to my apartment, still burning.

It was a little after ten. I looked up Lois Sanders in the phone book and called her half-dozen times, but each time the line was busy. Finally I flopped on the bed, still in my

tux. The phone ringing woke me at midnight.

I woke up with everything still fresh in my mind, grabbed the phone and I suppose I snarled into it, "Yeah?"

"Scotty . . . Scotty. I'm plastered. Oh, woo, am I drunk. Scotty? That you, Scotty?"

I groaned. Diane. Oh, Lord, now Diane. I'd completely forgotten about her. I said, "Where the hell are you?"

"I'm at the Groove, Coc'nut Groove, an' you're not here, Scotty, you're not here."

She sounded moist. I said roughly, "For Pete's sake don't bust out bawling. I'll come down and get you."

"Will you? Will you, Scotty?"

"Yes, of course. Just hang on, I'll be there in fifteen or twenty minutes."

She said, "Goodie," and I hung up. Well, at least I was dressed for the Grove. Almost. I hadn't been wearing my gun up till now. I went into the bedroom, dug out the .38 Colt Special and shrugged out of my jacket, slipped on the gun and harness. With the jacket back on it bulged over the gun, but that was all right. Now I was dressed. If I saw Cannon, and he so much as sneered at me, I was going to aim at his right eye and pull the trigger. Then when he fell down I was going to aim at his left eye and pull the trigger. Then I was going to kick him in the head, real hard too.

In the bathroom I took a look at myself, and I looked terrible. The left side of my jaw was swollen considerably and my right eye was purple and almost closed. I could see out of it still; well enough to aim a .38, anyway. I headed back toward the front room and somebody outside pressed the buzzer. I opened the door and gawked at the guy in a gray suit and the cop in uniform.

"What's the matter?" I asked them. I know a lot of guys in the department, but these were strangers.

"You're Scott?"

"Yeah."

"Better come with us."

"Huh? What for? What is this?"

They were both medium height, both husky, one about twenty-five, the other in his forties. The older one was in plainclothes, the other in a patrolman's uniform.

The older guy showed me his shield and said, "Where'd you leave your Cad, Scott?"

"It's down in front. I parked it on the street, sure, so I get a ticket. I was pooped, and —"

He interrupted. "What happened to your face? You have an accident?"

"I was in a fight. I guess it was a fight. This some new kind of traffic citation?"

"No ticket, Scott. Hit and run. You didn't leave your car on the street. Not this street."

"What?" It hadn't even penetrated.

He smelled my breath. "Drunk?"

All sharpened up, too. You usually have fights in those clothes?" His voice hardened. "Come on with us, Scott. We want you to look at somebody. In the morgue."

We were in the prowl car and headed toward downtown L.A. before it hit me. Oh, my God, I thought. Not . . . not Lois.

They took me downstairs in the Hall of Justice and back into the morgue. The body was covered with the usual cloth and they stood me alongside the table and peeled the cloth back.

The plainclothesman said, "Well? You know who it is?"

I felt sick. I said, "I've told you twenty times you've got the wrong guy. I didn't do it." I looked at the battered corpse again. "But I know who it is. His name was Joseph Raspberry."

The next few hours were long ones, and lousy ones. It seemed that I answered a thousand questions a thousand times each, but finally the pressure eased off a little. About twenty of the cops I know in the department, all friends of mine, came around and they were on my side as much as they could be. Even Phil Samson, the Captain of Homicide and my best friend in L.A., climbed out of bed and roared down when word reached him. He threw his substantial weight about the place for half an hour; and I about half convinced the cops that I wouldn't slam into a guy with my car, then

leave the car out where it could be spotted.

The police story was simple enough once I got it. Calls concerning both the body lying at the side of a darkened road and the black Cadillac coupe convertible parked a mile away had come in at almost the same time, close to eleven-thirty P.M. The Cad's right front fender was caved in, with blood and bits of hair on it. My name, of course, was on the Cad's registration slip. The cops had looked into the trunk, too, where I keep all kinds of gadgets useful in my work, ranging from loaded grenades to an infra-red optophone, and not knowing me they'd figured I was either a master criminal or a mad scientist about to blow up the city. But that was all squared away when Samson and some of the other cops came around at Headquarters.

My story was simple enough, too: I told them exactly what I'd done all evening, except that I didn't mention the fact that Joe had given me the tip that set me off — I had a reason — and I didn't mention Cannon's name, just told them I didn't see who had slugged me and I figured it was a jealous suitor, which was true. My car obviously had been stolen and used to rub out Joe, apparently, I said, by somebody who wanted to give me trouble, and had.

It was long and wearisome, and the only break was when, at one-thirty in the morning, I sprang out of my chair and almost to the ceil-

ing yelling "Jesus, Diane!" It had come to me in a flash that she was probably lying under the table by now, her eyes glassy. Samson was ready to leave then, so he said he'd pick her up and see that she got home and — ha, ha — tell her I was in jail.

The upshot of it all was that I got mugged and printed, but out on bail shortly after eight A.M. Before nine I was back in my office without the thousand-dollar bill in my kick, all the morning papers spread on the desk before me, and the gripe, the anger, the fury in me feeding on itself and growing big enough to fill all Los Angeles and a substantial part of the Universe.

I had a good deal of information now, facts which satisfied me but wouldn't last two seconds in court, even though one fact led to another and another right up to the valid conclusion. Naturally the boy I wanted was Cannon. But I had to tie him up so tight he'd never wriggle out. And I had to do it my way, do it myself, and do it fast. And for several reasons.

If I didn't, I was probably through as a private investigator, at least in L.A. I've mentioned that a detective wouldn't last six months without his informants and stools. The guys in and around the rackets would know by now that Joe had tipped me, and that Joe had been given the canary treatment. I knew that right now in the "underworld" of Los Angeles, the word was spread-

ing, the rumble was going from bar to backroom to poker game to horse parlor: "They got Scott's canary." And the unspoken question would be, what was I going to do about it.

One of the things demanded of the guy tipped, is that he protect or cover for the tipster; canaries stop singing when it isn't profitable. If I sat still, most of my tips and leaks would slow and eventually stop. I could have told the cops what I thought and let them pick up Cannon and his chums, question them, and with nothing solid against them let them go — whereupon Cannon would sit back and laugh at me, and so would the rest of the hoods and hooligans. No, I had to get him myself, and get him good.

There was more reason, too. I looked at the newspapers on my desk. Only one of them had the story headlined, but all of them had something about it on the front page. The stories merely said I was being questioned — I'd still been in the can when the reporters got the word — but they all had my name spelled correctly. Too many people would automatically figure me for the hit and run, even though my friends would know better. Most newspaper readers never see the "alleged" and "authoritative source" and "suspicion of." They take the conjectures as facts and you're hung on the newspaper's banner. I was. A year from now a lot of people hearing the name Shell Scott would say, "Yeah, he run over that little guy."

My office phone rang and I grabbed it, feeling like biting off the mouthpiece. It was Jules Osborne.

"Mr. Scott? What's happened? Have you seen the papers? Diane phoned me last night, she was drunk, it was terrible. And I don't know what — this is —"

"Don't get giddy. And yeah, I've seen the papers. What the hell do you want?"

"Why. I . . ." he sputtered a little. "Naturally I was concerned. 'I . . .'"

"Look, Mr. Osborne. I've had a trying night. I know what I'm doing, and I'm getting close to what you want. Just relax for a while and read the papers."

I listened to him chatter for a bit, then I said, "No, I didn't mention you to the cops — I won't. Nobody knows a thing. And I won't put a word on paper, no reports or anything."

"But Diane — she's all upset. What —"

"I'll talk to Diane. I'll chew her ear off. She won't bother you. Goodbye." I hung up. I just didn't feel easy going.

And I was pooped. I'd had only about an hour and a half of sleep — not including the two short periods at the Zephyr Room and behind the wheel of my Cad, which didn't count. My jaw hurt, my right eye was damn near closed, and I was wandering around in broad daylight in that stupid tuxedo. My Cad

was being gone over by the lab boys and I wouldn't get it back till this afternoon, so I left the office, flagged a cab, and told the driver to take me out to Hollywood and the Spartan Apartment Hotel.

Diane's house wasn't out of the way, so I had the driver wait while I went to her door and rang. It took her so long to get to the door and open it that I'd almost decided she wasn't home. But finally dragging feet came unsteadily through the front room, the door opened, and a strand of red hair and one blood-shot blue eye peered out at me. There were no glad cries this morning.

"Oh," she said. "You."

"Me. I dropped by to tell you I'm sorry about last night."

"You're sorry!"

"Samson pick you up?"

"That old man?"

"He's not so old."

"That's what you think."

What I thought was that Samson, a happily married man who never looked at another woman unless she was about to be booked, must have had one hell of a time with this little tomato. But I said, "And I wanted to ask you to lay off Osborne. Every time you yak at him he yaks at me and I've got no time for yakking. I'll get your pretties back."

"Oh, foo," she said, then told me without humor what I could do with her pretties. She wasn't very gay this morning, either. I left.

After a shower and change to a

gabardine suit, complete with gun and holster, I phoned Lois at her apartment. No answer. I went back into downtown L.A., into the back rooms again, the smelly bars, and the horse parlors. I hit hotels and rooming houses, and I spent six hours and four hundred dollars, and sometimes I was a little brutal, but I was in a hurry. I got what I was after. Like the dope from Slip Kelly, for one thing.

I found Slip shooting pool in a dump on the wrong side of Main Street. I took him back into the men's room, shut the door and leaned against it.

"Slip, I guess you heard about Joe."

"Joe Raspberry?"

"Come off it. You know what Joe."

He licked his lips. "Yeah. It . . . was in the papers."

"Sure. So now you tell me every goddamn thing you know about Cannon and Tinkle and Artie Payne."

"Huh? I don't know nothin' —"

I didn't lay a hand on him, but I said, "Shut up, I know you do. You practically grew up with Tinkle and you did a bit at Quentin with Artie. Listen steady, Slip. Big Foster's back in town. He knows I puked on him at the trial, but he doesn't know who belched to me. He'd sure like to know."

It didn't take him long to figure that one out. He frowned and said, "You couldn't do nothin' like that."

"I could, Slip. And I would. The squeeze is on. I'm in a spot, man. I'm a little mad about Joe, too. And nobody would ever know I finked on you except you and me. And Foster. And then just me and Foster."

He told me what I wanted to know.

Dazzy Brown was a knocked-out, easy going colored boy who played trumpet so sweet it made Harry James sound like a man with a kazoo, and Dazzy inhaled marijuana smoke as if it were oxygen. He'd been in stir for stealing eight saxophones and a trombone, so he knew what stir was like, and I sidled up to him at a West-side bar, threw a friendly arm around his shoulders, planted my chops three inches from his and said softly, "Listen, Cat, I just learned you grow that gage in flower pots, so come along with me, boy, you're going to the house of many slammers where they don't play no blues," and it was remarkable the way he cooperated.

Then there was Hooko Carter, the long-nosed grifter with a heroin habit, who had never given me the time of day before this, but who was going to give me all twenty-four hours very soon now. I got him out of bed in his rooming house, and he didn't have anything to say either. At first. So I told him:

"Hooko, you're my pal, I want you to know that. You're also Artie Payne's pal; and there's a rumble you and Cannon used to be closer

than Siamese twins. Something else I know: it costs you forty skins a day for reindeer dust, and you need that steady supply. You get it from Beetle, but you don't know where he gets it. I do, but I don't have enough on the guy to put him away — just enough so he wouldn't like antagonizing me. He'd be glad to do me a favor. What's it like when you can't get your dynamite, pal?"

So I got a little more from Hooko. By four o'clock in the afternoon I'd made a few more enemies, and one gungel had spit through his teeth at me, and maybe he'd do it again, but he sure wouldn't do it through teeth. I'd been a real rip-roaring wildcat, all right, and a lot of the things I did I wouldn't have done on an ordinary day, but this was no ordinary day — and I'd got what I wanted, even more than I'd expected.

And one thing was sure: There was a new rumble in the back rooms and bars and hangouts now, the grapevine was twitching and hoodlums and hipsters were bending ears all over town. The question now wouldn't be: What's Scott going to do about it, but Who's gonna get killed? The canaries would feel a little better, and keep on singing, but I wondered what Cannon and Tinkle and Artie would be thinking now. Because they'd be on the grapevine too; they'd know I was throwing a lot of weight around, leaning on them, even though they wouldn't know for sure what I'd learned or what I was going to do

next. But Cannon would know by now that I figured on killing him.

I'd found out for damn sure what I'd already been sure of, that Cannon and Tinkle and Artie were the boys who'd been pulling the ten-to-two jobs — and most important of all I learned there was a job set up for tonight. If the job went through, there'd be four of us in on it; if it didn't, I'd try another way. From bits and pieces I'd made my plan. From Hooko I found out, among a lot of unimportant things, that Artie Payne was called the "Professor" because he had such a valuable think-pot, and because he'd been librarian at Folsom for three years; from Slip I learned the Professor had worked in the Westinghouse labs from the time he was twenty-six till he was thirty-four, and he'd naturally learned a lot about lighting, all kinds of lighting and lights. I already knew Tinkle, the Cowboy, had been a locksmith. And I figured, from personal experience, that Cannon could break a man's neck with one blow of his big fist if he hit him squarely with his three-hundred pounds behind it. It was adding up, fitting together.

At two-thirty in the afternoon I put in a third phone call to Lois. I'd called her a second time at one, but there hadn't been any answer then either. So I hadn't seen or talked to her since that sad moment when she'd said, "Why, Cannon. What —" and I'd heard Cannon grunt as he started to swing. But I'd done a lot

of wondering. I'd just about rejected any idea that she was "in" with Cannon on any of his capers — it was hardly likely she'd have showed me the hot rocks he'd handed her if she were — but whether she'd known the stones were stolen or not I didn't know. I kind of leaned toward the idea that what she'd told me last night was true: that she hadn't known and hadn't wanted to know; the implication being that the snake-eyed hoop was a damned handsome chunk of sparkles, and she hoped it was clean. And the word I'd got from the boys around town was that Lois was simply a solid tomato, on the up and up, whom Cannon was hot for. I liked it that way, because I'd begun getting somewhat steamed up about Lois myself — and I was more than a little worried about her. I thought again about how I'd felt starting for the morgue last night.

Then she answered the phone.

"Lois? Uh, Shell Scott here."

"Oh . . . hello, Shell."

"You all right?"

"Yes. How about you? I saw the papers."

"That was a frame. I'm O.K., a little stooped over, but on my feet. What happened to you after I — after I left?"

Her story was that she'd gawked at Cannon while he dumped me into my Cad, then tried to slap his eyeballs out, at least so she said, then they'd had a word battle during which she'd called him all kinds of

names. After a minute or two of this, they'd finally gone back into her apartment — were there when I'd banged on the door, Cannon ready to clobber her if she'd peeped — and after my departure the fireworks continued.

She went on, "It lasted about an hour, but when he left, I told him not to come back."

"I called you last night but your line was busy. What —"

"Even after Cannon left, he phoned me a couple times. He was so persistent, I took the phone off its hook and went to bed."

I was quiet for a minute, then, "Honey, I guess you haven't changed your opinion of me. Or, have you?"

"When I found out you were a detective I wondered if you wanted to take me out because you . . . let's say, just couldn't resist me, or if you had a detective's reason. So naturally I was a little disappointed last night. But then I realized you were right; I knew the kind of man Cannon was, but I took the things he gave me anyway. I feel better now, though; as long as I thought he might have bought those things for me I could enjoy them. But when I *knew* he probably stole them, naturally I gave them back."

"You what?"

"I gave them back to him. Last night."

"You what?"

"Well . . . he suggested it, and I was afraid not to. And I didn't want them any more, anyway."

I ground my teeth together. Right now I wasn't nearly as interested in the jewelry itself as I was in getting the guys who had lifted it, but I should at least have wrapped up that bracelet last night. I was even starting to wonder what could have made me so stupid as to leave the thing loose, when I remembered it was Cannon who'd made me so stupid. It was just another reason to hate him, and maybe before long it wouldn't make any difference.

I said, "Honey, listen. You shooed Cannon out last night, but do you think he'd jump at the chance to come back? If he has any sense he would."

"This might sound egotistical, but I'm sure he would. He was practically on his knees when he left. But —"

"What would you say if I asked you to get in touch with him, tell him you're sorry, that you'd like to see him tonight?"

It took her a while to answer that one, but she said, "All right, Shell. You're a very strange and thorough detective, aren't you?"

The same tone was in her voice now that had been there when I'd asked her last night to wear the bracelet. I started to explain everything, then made myself shut up. It wouldn't be any good that way. And I wondered for a moment if she could possibly be conning me. I said, "You'll do it then?"

"When am I supposed to see him and where are we going?"

"Never mind where you're going. But you want to see him around ten."

"All right. Goodbye."

"Hey, I called earlier this morning but couldn't get you. What —"

"Believe it or not, I was buying some rhinestones."

She hung up. I hung up. By four-fifteen I'd finished all the checking in town I was going to do. It was quite a trio I'd been checking on: The Professor was the brain, the Cowboy was the Houdini, and the Cannon was the muscle and boss. From Hooko, who had long known Cannon well, I'd learned that he should have been called No-Cannon Cannon, because he never carried a gun; Artie and Cowboy Tinkle always kept their arms warm with heaters. I had talked to a man named Sylvester Johnson, who lived next door to the attorney who'd been killed, beaten and shot during a burglary. Sylvester's story, condensed: "Yes, sir, that night we were sitting out back by the barbecue pit, drinking beer. No, we didn't see or hear anything till Mr. Drake came home. He parked his car and went inside. About a minute after he turned on the lights we heard a shot. Called the police. No, didn't see anybody leave. Glad to help."

I'd checked the dates of all nine reported robberies — and Diane's — against weather-bureau records. They'd all been pulled off on moonless or overcast nights. All between, roughly, ten and two. If people were

going to be out, they'd be gone by ten; and often they were home shortly after the bars closed. A heavy fog was predicted for tonight.

It was solid enough. I called Homicide and got Samson on the phone. After the hellos I said, "Sam, I'm coming down to get my Caddy in half an hour — boys said it would be ready. You're buddies with Turner in Scientific Investigation. How about having his infra-red flashlight, and the red-lensed goggles that go with it, in the back of my Cad along with all my junk?"

"What? Why in blue hell do you want that stuff?"

"I, uh, lost something in a dark cellar. I want to go look for it. I'd be awful happy if you didn't ask me any more."

"Goddammit, Shell, have you got something we need?"

"Nothing that's any good to anybody but me. And not a thing that's worth a damn as evidence — yet. That's straight, Sam. But go along with me and maybe there will be."

"I'd like to, Shell, but . . ."

"And, Sam, you saw the papers. Can't be helped, but I'd sure like some more stories in them tomorrow or the next day. A story that would rub out the smell before it sinks too far in. And besides, you don't know what I want the stuff for. Maybe I'm going out to Lover's Lane and spy on the high-school kids."

"Shell Scott shot in the head would make a nice story. And what the hell am I going to tell Turner?"

Well . . .” He was quiet for a few seconds. “I ought to put you in jail for sending me out to get that crazy woman last night.”

“Was she trouble?”

“When I got to the Grove she was singing. Into the bloody microphone. I like to never got her out of there. And when I did — let me tell you.”

I got my first good laugh of the day from his story. Then he said, “Well, hell, look in your trunk when you get down here. I can’t promise anything.”

“Thanks, Sam. See you.”

There was no trouble getting the Cad, and Sam had left what I wanted in the trunk. The goggles looked much like red-lensed glasses, but the light was a big sonovagun, well over a foot wide and long, perhaps four inches thick, with a curved metal handle on its top. I put them both in the front seat and drove to Eighth Street, parked before Porter’s Radio Shop and went inside. This was my second trip today; I’d been here about noon. Porter, a young studious-looking ex-G.I. came out.

“Hi, Shell. I just finished it up. That’s fifty bucks.”

“A hell of a price for one vacuum tube and a dry-cell battery in a beat-up cigar box.”

He grinned. “You’re paying, my friend, for my genius and brilliant know-how.”

“I’d have made it myself if I’d had the time.”

He sneered, then went into the back room and came out with the “squawk box” I’d ordered. He sat it on the counter beside the compact radio receiver complete with loop antenna. I gave Porter his fifty bucks and he frowned. “You know, I ought to have a deposit on that receiver,” he said. “Only one I got with a loop.”

“I’ll bring it back tomorr —” I stopped. “Maybe I’d better leave a deposit at that.”

I gave him some more money, then used his phone to call Lois again. She answered right away.

“Shell, honey. Well?”

“He . . . I guess I overestimated myself. He — well, he couldn’t make it. He was awfully apologetic, but he said he’d see me tomorrow instead.”

I laughed. I felt like a million. “Baby,” I said. “He won’t see you tomorrow — or the next day, or the next.”

“Shell, I’ve been just sitting here for almost an hour, thinking a lot. You knew he wouldn’t see me tonight didn’t you?”

“I knew he wouldn’t because if he tried I was going to clobber him with a tire iron. But I did have a hunch he wouldn’t try.”

“Shell! Darn you, can’t you let a girl in on anything?”

“I’ll tell you the truth, Sweetheart. I wasn’t sure I could trust you.”

“You sure now?”

“No. But sure enough.”

"Shell, darn you — *damn* you!"
"Still friends?"

"Oh, I suppose . . ." Then her voice dropped lower, softened, got like champagne again, and I remembered her at the dice table in her *creme-de-menthe* gown, the way she'd looked when I'd asked her what she wore with champagne. She said, "No . . . I don't think you and I can be friends." The "friends" was slightly accented. She went on, "Shell, it seems that every time I talk to you or see you, I learn more about you."

It seemed time to try pressing my luck again. "How much would you like to learn?"

A soft chuckle was her answer. Then, "Will I see you? Later maybe?"

I thought about that. "With any luck, honey, I'll see you later."

"Promise?"

"Sure, honey."

We hung up. I lugged the squawk box and receiver out to my Cad and sat it on the front seat alongside the flash and goggles I'd got from Sam. I was ready to go.

I drove to Artie Payne's first. During the afternoon I'd learned where The Professor and the other two lived, and where Professor Payne kept his '50 Chrysler — which was used on the trio's jobs. It was dark when I reached his place, and it took me only a couple minutes to tape the small squeal box to his car's rear axle. I brushed off my clothes and drove three miles to

Cannon's hotel on National Boulevard, went four blocks past it, made a U turn and parked, lit a cigarette and waited. The big light, red glasses, and radio receiver were on the seat beside me.

If the boys went ahead with their planned caper tonight, I knew Artie would pick up Tinkle and Cannon and they'd go from here to whatever spot they'd cased — and I couldn't think of anything else which would keep Cannon away from a repentant Lois. But they'd know what I'd been doing today, and they'd be even more jumpy than usual. A close tail was out; damn near any kind of tail was out. If they didn't find that squawk box, though, there was one tail that could work. The little cigar box on the axle of Miller's car was no more than a small and simple radio sending set which would put out a steady howl that I could pick up on the receiver beside me, locating the car's direction from me with the loop antenna.

I waited. The moon was barely past the crescent stage tonight, and it was cold. Fog had just started to drift in from the beaches a few miles away, mixing with the smog, dimming the street lights around me. I waited, smoking one cigarette after another.

I was wondering if the boys had been scared off, when I picked up a squeal while I was turning the loop antenna. It was eleven o'clock and The Professor was on his way.

The howl got louder in the radio receiver and I started the Cad's motor. In a minute I saw the fog-dimmed headlights of a car pull into the curb and stop four blocks away. At Cannon's Hotel. Two minutes later by my watch the car started up again and took a right at the corner. Immediately the howl in my radio receiver stopped. I threw my old cigarette away and lit another.

They wouldn't take a chance on a ticket the night of a job, so I estimated their top speed at thirty and gave them a full minute, then put the Cad in gear and swung left off National Boulevard at Sepulveda, where they'd turned. I figured they shouldn't be more than half a mile ahead of me. I pointed the loop antenna ahead, but there wasn't any squeal so I turned it around ninety degrees and kept going straight down Sepulveda, past Rose Avenue and Ocean Park Avenue and Charnock Road, and there wasn't a peep out of the radio. But at Venice Boulevard the howl came in strong and I swung left; it stayed steady so I knew they weren't going in the opposite direction. I gave the Cad more gas, closed the distance between us.

From there it was easy enough. They made only two more turns, a left at Cochran and a right at Twelfth. On Twelfth they stopped, and eight blocks after I made the last turn, I passed Artie's car, parked. Now it was going to start getting a little precarious.

I knew they wouldn't park in front of the house they'd cased, and maybe not even on the same street, but they wouldn't work too far from the car, and I at least knew where the Chrysler was. I could get them there if it came to that, but I wanted to catch them cold, right on the job. Right here was where I found out if I'd figured how they worked correctly; I didn't know for sure, but it was more than a hunch. I put on the red-lensed glasses and drove slowly ahead looking at the houses on both sides of the street. Nothing. After four blocks I went right a block then and headed back. There on Dockweiler Street, less than two blocks from where their car was parked, I passed a big two-story Georgian-type mansion dark except for a faint light showing at one upstairs window. When I took the goggles off, the house was completely dark; not a glimmer of illumination came from any part of the house. But with the glasses on again, the light was there. I'd found them.

I parked around the corner and cut the headlights and motor. Even now that I'd found them, it still seemed like magic to me. I'd worked with infra-red light before; I knew that New York Harbor boats were equipped with infra-red spotlights and binoculars, and that Army snipers picked off the enemy outlined in infra-red from scopes mounted on their rifles — but it still seemed like a trick of Merlin.

I knew my gun was ready, but I took it out of the holster and checked it again anyway, then slipped it back. My heartbeat speeded up involuntarily; my throat dried; I could feel a slight, cold shiver brush over my skin. I picked up the heavy light, shoved the goggles up on my forehead and got out of the car. Fog was damp against my face.

Near the house I slipped the glasses down over my eyes again and saw the light still visible above. I was damned careful getting to the house and walking to its front, my body pressed against the wall, but I made it without trouble to the front door. I switched the light on and in its glow I could see the door was slightly cracked. Tinkle, the locksmith, wouldn't lock it again till they left; there was always a chance the boys might want to leave in a hurry. The boys were pretty positive about this job. They didn't bother to leave a lookout. I loved them for it.

Before I went through the door I slid out the .38 and held it in my right hand, the burning flash in my left. I went inside, swung the flash around till I spotted a stairway leading above, then started walking up it. I couldn't see as well as I'd have liked, but I wouldn't bump into any chairs or walls — and Cannon, Artie, and Tinkle, working in infra-red above me, wouldn't be able to see any better. For a moment I thought of the attorney these bastards had killed, wondered

if he'd walked into a darkened room, unable to see a thing, while the three men above me now could watch his every movement, see to beat him, to kill him.

I followed a hall at the head of the stairs till I could see a glow from the room in which I knew they were, then I turned off my light. If I could see their light, they could also see mine. The door was ajar. I heard their soft movements, but I couldn't yet see them. I kept moving forward, slowly, my hand sweaty and slippery on the butt of my .38.

A yard from the door I pulled the Colt's hammer back on full cock and took the last step, spotted them inside the room, and then I moved through the doorway. For that first second none of them saw me. Cannon stood at the window, his back toward me; Artie was at a safe in the right wall, Tinkle holding a bulky light similar to mine, bathing Artie and the safe in infra-red light.

My heart had suddenly started racing and I could feel the blood tingling clear down in the tips of my fingers. It was as though the blood were hot inside me, warming my skin, my entire body. I could feel perspiration on my face and chest, in my armpits. I tightened my finger on the Colt's trigger and snapped on the beam of my flash just as Artie glanced over his shoulder, eyes behind the goggles like round black holes in a skull's head, and spotted me.

I saw his mouth open and I shouted, "Freeze, you sons, don't—" but that was all I had time for because a lot of hell broke loose in that instant. Artie yelled at the top of his lungs and leaped to the side as Tinkle spun around and the light he'd held thudded to the carpet, still burning. Cannon's huge bulk dropped to the floor. I flipped my gun over at Cannon, rolling now toward the wall, but flame jumped at me from Tinkle's hand and the room exploded with sound. I dropped to one knee, snapped a shot at Tinkle as I saw his gun leveling at me; I pulled the trigger once more and saw him stagger, but his gun boomed again and I felt the slap of a bullet against my left hand; the impact of that heavy slug spun me halfway around, the light tumbling to the floor and going out. I went down on both knees, forcing my gun hand back toward Tinkle, twisting my body and snapping a wild shot at him, then getting the gun barrel centered on his chest and firing twice so fast the shots blurred into one sound.

He started falling as I saw Artie's hand digging under his coat, coming out with a snub-nosed revolver, but Artie never got the gun an inch away from his chest because I shot him in the head. Dimly I saw his body go limp, but like a crazy man I fired at him again, and heard the hammer fall on an empty cartridge. It was suddenly dark, but I triggered the gun still again, not even

realizing the chambers were empty, not comprehending the darkness. I was like a man in a trance, sweat drenching my body and the taste of blood on my lips where I'd bitten them, the smell of cordite in my nostrils, and the drumming of blood in my brain.

I was still on my knees, body twisted, pain obvious in my left hand now, and the quiet, the stillness seemed slowly to become like a pressure against my eardrums, and the darkness, a solid black, was like a wall around me. I got my feet under me, stood up. Cannon wouldn't have a gun; Cannon —

My hand touched the light switch. I slid the glasses up off my eyes, looked toward the spot where the two men lay on the floor, flipped on the light. I was staring to my right as brilliant light blazed in the room and looking there was what damn near got me killed.

It was the grunt that saved me, the fact that Cannon always grunted before he swung that roundhouse cannonball of his, and when I heard the sound close by me on my left I didn't even stop to turn my head. I just let my knees go slack, dropping my body and turning as I fell, then tensed the muscles in my legs and let them start springing me up again as an arm that looked two yards long whistled over my skull.

And I guess Cannon must have been surprised, because always before when he'd swung at me it had been so very simple to hit my head,

and he was all splayed out in the air with his thick belly floating where I wanted it.

I just kept on going up, my right fist already balled and traveling in the right direction, and I let it go and felt it smash into his belly, heard the breath spurt from his mouth. I swung a little farther around, then pivoted, cocking my left fist and launching it at him. I knew I had him. He was bent over gasping, the whole side of his long bony face bare and unprotected.

My left clipped his chin, the pain almost killing me, and he spun half-way around, dropping to one knee. He was down a long way less than my size now, and I took half a step toward him, my right hand stretching for the ceiling, and when I slammed its edge down on the base of his skull it was easy for me to kick him in the face when he hit the floor and rolled over on his back. So I kicked him in the face. His jaw jerked far to the side, as if his face were made of rubber, then sagged and hung at an angle that was not normal at all.

I just stood there and looked at them all for a long minute. I noticed that Tinkle's oddly humped body was sprawled over the light he'd been holding, blotting out its beam, and I noticed that all of the men were dressed entirely in black; but it didn't mean anything to me. I could have noticed that they had purple horns growing out of their heads and it wouldn't have meant

anything to me. I wasn't in very good shape at the moment. That was all right. The rest of these guys were in terrible condition.

Finally it occurred to me that there must be a phone around here somewhere. I started looking.

It was four o'clock in the morning before I'd passed through Homicide, Burglary, and Scientific Investigation. I was standing on the Main Street steps of City Hall, blinking as a final flash bulb went off in my face. One of the reporters — Bruce Ladd of the *Examiner* — said, "Infra-red, huh? Make quite a story. That was Payne's contribution?"

"Yeah," I said wearily. "That part was The Professor's idea; Cannon was top man, the muscle; Tinkle cased the spots and unlocked and locked the doors."

"How about that Tinkle?" another asked. "He gonna croak?"

"Slugs in his chest and stomach, but they think he'll live. He might as well croak; Cannon broke that attorney's neck, but Drake hadn't kicked off when Tinkle's bullet killed him."

"The loot?"

"Got most of it. They were holding most of the rocks till they cooled, but that part got rumbled tonight along with the rest of it. You'll have to see Captain Master-son to find out what stuff his boys picked up."

There were a few more questions from the reporters. I answered them,

practically swaying on my feet. It seemed that I hadn't slept for a month. But I could sleep now; Cannon had been willing to tell the whole story, but if he moved his jaw a half inch there was a chance it would fall off, so he wrote it all down. That was nice, because it gave the boys upstairs a handwritten confession — including the fact that Cannon had rounded up Tinkle and Artie last night, after he'd left Lois and before they stole my Cad, then picked up little Joe and worked him over before their "hit-and-run" finished him.

The reporters finally had all they needed. I knew most of them, nice enough guys. The other stories about me had simply been part of their jobs, just as this tonight had been part of mine. And when one of them finally said, "Anything to add, Scott?" I nodded.

"Yeah, boys. One thing. Be sure you make it clear about Joseph Raspberry." Then they took off. They knew what I meant; they'd take care of it.

My hand was bandaged, and though I damn near lost a thumb, I'd keep the thumb, the hand, and a fat scar. All I needed was three days sleep. And I wanted everything cleared up before I hit the sack, because I was going to lock the door and jerk the phone out of the wall. So I found a phone and called Diane, to get the whole thing wrapped up and off my mind.

Her voice was sleepy. "'Lo?"

"Diane? Shell — Scotty, to you."

"O-oh, Scotty. What's the matter?"

"Nothing. You'll get your stuff back; just wanted to let you know. It all got settled tonight."

"You darling, I knew you'd get my pretties. Are you going to bring them to me?"

Her voice didn't sound sleepy any more. Funny thing, I didn't feel quite so sleepy myself. I said, "Well . . . I don't know. Cops'll have them for a while."

"You bring them to me. I want you to."

"I suppose."

"Scotty. Are you going to sneak in like they did, and put them on my dresser?"

For a moment I thought fiendishly that maybe I should do just that: clap on my glasses, click on my monstrous red flashlight and tiptoe into her bedroom crying "Where are you-ou? Diane, where are you?" eyeballing her frantically all the while. But I said, "We'll — we'll see. But the stuff will be tied up for a while."

"Well, when it gets untied, you just bring it right out here to me."

"O.K. Good night, Diane. Let Osborne know about it. He owes me some money."

"I will. 'Bye, Daddy."

I was clear back in the Cad and rolling down Sunset before I realized what she'd called me, but I kept the car under control. That made me think about Lois. I figured she'd be

in bed, too, but probably I should call her. She might be worried — and anyway, I knew now she'd never conned me, had gone along with me all the way. I pulled into a gas station and gave her a ring. She answered in five seconds.

"Hi," I said. After a little chatter I gave her a fast rundown on the night's developments then said, "I didn't know if you'd still be up."

"I've been awake all night. Waiting for you to call. You said you'd see me." I started to tell her that I was falling asleep in the booth, but she said, "You promised, you know. Can't you come up for one little drink?"

"I'm pretty beat —"

"I thought you'd want to come up for a nightcap, at least, so I bought us something lovely. Can't you come up for just one little drink?"

"You and your drinks," I said. "What color is it this time?"

She didn't answer.

I could feel my jaw slowly sagging as a pleasantly staggering thought struck me. I said, "Honey, Lois, uh, sweetie . . . uh . . ."

She said softly, "I went to so much trouble, bought us something and put it in the refrigerator —"

"In the refrigerator?"

"— and I've been sitting here so long in this chilly old room —"

"Chilly?"

"— and I'm so lonesome . . . and cold . . . and —"

I said, "Baby, loosen up. What the hell have you got in that refrigerator?"

"Champagne. A whole magnum of champagne."

Man, let me tell you. I was *wide* awake. "Baby," I said, "unlock the door and stand aside," then I hung up and trotted for the Cad. What the hell, I was thinking. One little drink never hurt anybody. Anyway not too much.



MUGGED AND PRINTED

RICHARD S. PRATHER (*Hot-Rock Rumble*) now lives and writes in his native California, where he created Shell Scott, who roams through *Bodies In Bedlam*, *Way Of A Wanton*, and other novels. He's been writing murder stories since 1949, before which he spent four years in the Merchant Marine on the bounding main, "which was usually not bounding, but quite flat and disgusting." He's been married five years, he says, to an incredibly lovely woman, Tina, whose measurements are "much more interesting."



IN THIS ISSUE:

TNT

Henry Kane is here with a Peter Chambers novelette that mixes a high-diving blonde and a \$50,000 policy with murder and mayhem. Richard S. Prather has thrown Shell Scott into a mess of stolen jewels and the people who stole them in a thrilling tale titled *Hot-Rock Rumble*.

TROUBLE

Harold Q. Masur is on tap with a Scott Jordan story about an empty safe deposit box — emptied on its owner's signature while the owner is in prison! And Evan Hunter starts his *Small Homicide* with a dead baby girl in a church, and takes us on the fascinating police hunt for the killer.

THREAT

Michael Fessier is back with *The Faceless Man*, the story of a sheriff, an ex-convict, and the angry mob that wanted his life. And Richard Deming has put a wounded man, his beautiful wife, and a hungry gunman together in a snowbound cabin in a story of flaring emotions and hate.

TERROR

Charles Beckman takes us to Ybor city, Tampa's Spanish district, for a murder committed in a dark alley, and the driving motivation of the man out to solve it. Emmanuel Winters is here with *The Caller*, the terrifying tale of a woman receiving phone calls from a stranger with one thing on his mind.

TIEUP

And wrapping up the issue with a solid knot is a story by Hunt Collins, plus *Crime Cavalcade*, plus Manhunt's *Movie of the Month*. A jam-packed June jamboree!