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All stories in this magazine are fiction. No actual persons are designated either by name or character. Any similarity is coincidental.

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# THE CREST OF THE WAVE

by JANE RICE

● He was riding the crest—  
'til a Delilah and a Judas  
tipped him into the river.  
After that—he rode them!

Illustrated by Edd Cartier

BIG MIKE settled back against the dove-gray velour upholstery with a well-fed grunt. His little eyes imbedded in rolls of fat gazed serenely out at the shifting scenery of Lindell Boulevard sliding past the car windows, three-

inch and bulletproof.

Women in furs, their tiny hats and sheer hose belying the scurrying wind that nipped at their silken ankles, and shook cascades of rusty leaves from the threadbare trees to send them whirling in the gutters; the stuccoed Coronado; tall, thin apartment buildings with blank inscrutable fronts; a house, incongruously out of place, draped with dried brown ivy; the Park Plaza with its circular drive of crushed stone and swank iron grillwork; an old crone huddled in her shapeless coat and exhibiting shoe-laces, and toothless gums, to passersby; the Chase, its clipped shrubbery curtsy-ing to the wind, its doorman spanking his white gloved hands for warmth. And beyond, Forest Park—the baseball diamonds deserted and forlorn, the trees trying desperately to make their tattered garments cover their twisted limbs; a trickle of people, bent against the wind, coming up the walk from the Monkey House; a small boy jumping up and down on the pedal of a drinking fountain, its bowl stained and discolored and choked with trash.

The car turned left. Neon signs began to make their slow appearance: Italian Spaghetti; Clark Gable in "Boom Town"; Beer To Take Out; Hamburgers 10c; "Gone with the Wind" at Popular Prices; Thrifty Dry Cleaning, Pants Pressed While You Wait; Closing Out, Everything Must Go, Prices Slashed; Edward G. Robinson in "Brother Orchid" All Seats 15c; Poske's Barbecue; a policeman on the corner teetering back and forth on his heels; Ladies' Entrance; We Buy Old Gold and Silver; a walnut-faced man in a dirty newspaper apron yelling, "Read all about it; big jewel robbery; read all ABOUT it, read ALL ABOU—" His voice was lost in the derisive toot

the chauffeur gave the horn as Big Mike swept by.

Big Mike picked up the speaking tube.

"Mebbe we shoulda bought a paper, hey, Joe?" and he laughed a thick, gurgling laugh of padded contentment.

The chauffeur only smiled. It was a mirthless smile, barely curved, and did not come anywhere near the outer corners of his lips. He didn't answer. Which was as it should be, for Big Mike had let the speaking tube slip from his pudgy fingers and had given himself up to meditation.

It had been a haul, all right. Fifty thousand bucks, easy. Of course, the boys had to get their cut but he could tone that down some. He knew how to soap the boys. And then that crook Zacchus wouldn't handle anything hot for less than a third. He ought to have his can spiked. He was *going* to handle it, though, and the way the D. A. was putting on the screws most of the mobs let out a squawk fit to bust your eardrums, if you brought in anything that didn't have six months' age on it. Oh well, say twenty thousand take after the payoff. Twenty G's complete. Not bad. Not bad at all.

Big Mike laughed again. Silently. His stomach shaking like pastry dough. Nobody could say he hadn't made good. Seven years ago slicing up codfish in the Market, resting his hands on the porcelain counter and saying, "What's yours?" to a lot of beefy-faced housewives who watched the scales like a brood of hawks. Well, that was seven years ago. A lotta water'd gone over the dam since then. Seven years. He'd done O. K. Plenty O. K. *Big Mike* instead a just Mike. The Kingpin some of them called him. That was him, all right. The Kingpin.

Big Mike heaved himself up by the

window strap and unanchored his watch from its hiding place among the folds of his blue-serge paunch. He picked up the tube.

"Slow down, Joe. Ain't no rush."

He settled back once more against the velvety cushions. Never wait for a doll. That was his policy. Keep *them* waiting. Made 'em feel like they was lucky he come at all. Of course, Flo wasn't no ordinary doll. She had class. Well, wait'll she laid her blinkers on what he'd save out for her. Them sparklers was class, too, all right.

The short, stubby fingers caressed a jewel box beside him on the seat.

Twenty thousand clear. He might even take Flo down to one of them resorts. One of them smart jobs with mineral springs and all the fixings. Nothing was too good for Flo. Funny, her calling him up and asking him to pick her up way out here. She'd never done that before. It'd been his place, or her place, or Garselli's downtown. But that was Flo for you. Just when you thought you had her tagged and figured, she'd do something and you was right back where you started. She was a pistol, all right. Yes, sir, mebbe one of them ritzy joints with a swimming pool right inside the building. That'd suit Flo to a T.

The car swerved over to the curb and purred to a smooth stop so the rear door was exactly even with the yawning cave of a faded green canopy flaunting on its canvassed sides the legend, "Floor Show Every Hour."

A GIRL in a squirrel-skin coat, with a jeweled butterfly caught in her platinum-blond hair, was standing just inside the gloomy shelter. She was nervous. You could tell by the way she kept touching a sausagelike ringlet that drooped be-

comingly low over one mascaraed eye. As the car drew up she seemed to grow tense, as if every nerve had gone taut as piano wire. But that was only for a moment—a split second. An instant later her powdered face was wreathed in smiles and, letting her coat hang loosely so that the decided V of her neckline showed like a demarcation on an alabaster column, she stepped swiftly to the door of the car.

Big Mike hoisted himself up and pressed down the safety catch. The door swung open.

"Keep yuh waiting?" he asked.

The girl flashed two rouged dimples at him. "Don't you always," she said archly and kissed him. Big Mike's face was momentarily buried in a full shirred collar of squirrel skin faintly redolent of perfume. And that was where Big Mike made his first and only mistake. And his final one.

Two men, slim-hipped, pinch-waisted, with dark slouch hats, swung from the shadowed twilight of the canopy and when Big Mike looked up he looked right down the barrels of two .38s. His hand darted underneath his coat but he was too late.

Flo, the rouge standing out in symmetrically round spots on her chalky cheeks, backed away—Big Mike's gun concealed in the voluminous squirrel-skin sleeves. Her blue eyes were locked with the blazing slits that were Big Mike's and a muscle at the corner of her mouth twitched, as if it held a hidden spring. She whirled suddenly and ran back under the canopy and up the steps. The blare of a band playing "My Gal Sal," sounded brassily as she opened the door and was cut off with its closing.

The silver and maroon custom-built Cadillac swept away from the curb and

out into the stream of traffic headed north.

All in all the entire performance had taken one and three-quarter minutes.

"WHAT'S the gag, boys?" Big Mike asked softly.

"It's no gag," the slimmest of the men answered. Straight-browed, clear, round eyes, a sensitive flaring nose, he just escaped being handsome. It was hard to say why. Was it the very clearness of those eyes, as if they had been chosen carefully from a vast selection in an optician's drawer? Or was it the immobility of those chiseled features, or the lines of the jaw—too soft, perhaps?

"You wouldn't kid me, would you, Toki?"

"No, I wouldn't kid you," Toki said.

There was a long silence broken only by the traffic noises and the distant melancholy "aug—aug—aug" of a paddle-wheeler loaded with crated poultry and machinery and bolts of bright calico, going down the Mississippi bound for Natchez and Shreveport and New Orleans.

Big Mike picked up the speaking tube.

"You in on this, Joe?"

Joe looked in the rear-view mirror and away again. Muffled and toneless his voice came through the tube.

"Whadda you think, Fatso?"

Fatso! He, Big Mike, being called Fatsó! His neck above his collar turned an angry mottled shade of red. These—these pipsqueaks with their patent-leather hair and their pasty pussés *daring* to—why he'd *made* them. What'd they been before he took over. Poolroom Johnnies, penny matchers, hanging out on corners and cadging drinks in saloons, and rolling drunks in areaways. And Flo. She'd been a hostess at Sac-

beck's guzzling ginger ale for Scotch and getting a cut on the bill. Flo! That she would do this to him, to Big Mike. Smiling that smile and taking him for what he was worth. And him not knowing it. That was what rankled. Him being played for a dumb gimp and not conning to it. And all the while Toki biding his time and waiting for a chance to step in. Waiting for a haul like this. Waiting until the stuff was planted with Zacchus and the all-clear signal had gone through. Flo and Toki. Toki and Flo.

"You won't get away with it, Toki."

"No?"

"No."

"Where you're going it'll be too hot to worry about it. If I were you, I'd concentrate on saying prayers—if you know any."

"It may be hot," Big Mike said slowly, "but it won't be too hot for me to make a return trip to see you. That goes for Flo, too. Tell her for me I'll be seeing her. Soon."

"Stow it."

"I'll square this if it's the last thing I do."

"The last thing you'll do will be to kiss the Buckley Bridge good-by."

"So that's it."

"That's it. Now cut the gab. You talk too much."

There was this to be said for Big Mike, he took it without belly-aching. He didn't bat an eyelash. They trussed him up with baling wire and weighted him. Weighted him good. So he'd stay down. When they carried him over to the railing he even derived a sort of grim pleasure out of the fact that it took the three of them to do it and that they breathed heavily, in great, gulping lungfuls.

Funny, he thought looking up, he'd never noticed before how many stars

there were. Kind of pretty. And the sky all pinky in one spot where the downtown lights hit it.

The three men gave a heave and he was clear. He would've screamed then but he couldn't, because there was adhesive tape over his mouth.

There was a splash and a white spray of water and finally only ever-widening ripples mirroring the wavy reflection of the green channel marker.

"Aug—aug—aug" went the paddle-wheeler bound for Natchez and Shreveport and New Orleans.

THE SILVER and maroon Cadillac nosed up to the green canopy. Toki got out and said, "Make it one o'clock, Joe." slammed the door and watched the red-taillight until it disappeared. He lighted a cigarette, flipped the match into the street, inhaled deeply, let the smoke dribble from his nostrils and, chuckling, he went inside. He spun his hat through the air to the check girl and walked down the red-carpeted hall to stand for a moment looking at the jammed dance floor, pocket size, and the perspiring Negro band, and the cavorting patrons, before he descended the steps on cushiony tiptoe and threaded his way through the maze of tables and jabbering humanity to Flo.

"Hi ya, gorgeous," he said laying a proprietary hand on her shoulder.

She jumped. "Cripes," she said, "you scared the gizzard out of me."

"What you so jittery about?" Toki sat down and signaled to a waiter in a limp Tuxedo. "A bottle of champagne," he said. "Best you got in the house."

The waiter grinned affably. "Sure thing, Toki."

Toki's hand shot out and stopped him as he prepared to move off. "From

now on it's Cruseppi, see. *Mister Cruseppi*. Got it!"

The grin vanished from the waiter's face as if it had been wiped with a damp sponge.

"Yes, sir," he said hurriedly and, giving a jerky little bow, he hastened away calling, "A bottle of Mums for Mr. Cruseppi." He knew his psychology.

Flo relaxed. "Then you did it. No hitch."

"Listen, baby, when I do something, I *do* it."

"You're sure he's dead?"

"Sure, I'm sure. Say what's eating you anyway?"

"Nothing. Only sitting here waiting like this gave me the wimmies. I kept thinking suppose . . . suppose he *didn't* die. Supposing he got away somehow. The way he looked at me. It was like . . . it was like . . . it was awful . . . like he'd have— Oh, Toki . . . it was awful."

"The guy's dead, I tell you. In three days those Mississippi river cat'll have picked him clean."

"What if he come up?"

"He won't."

"Did anybody see you?"

"Do I look like a goop?"

"Did he say anything? About me, I mean?"

"He said to tell you he'd be seeing you, soon."

Flo shivered. "The way he looked at me," she said.

"Oh, come off it. From now on, baby, you ain't got a thing on your mind but me. Look, I got something for you." He edged a jeweler's box under the table. "Open it under your napkin."

Flo lifted the hinged velvet cover and gave a delighted squeal.

"Ooooooooh, Toki!"

"Like it, eh? We'll get you a new

outfit to match and do one of them soup-and-fish joints. Whadda you say? How about the Windermere, Satiddy. They're opening up a new night club on the top floor. The Crazy House. I seen the announcement in the papers. We'll put on the dog. This place stinks. Ain't got no atmosphere. Hey! Waiter! Where's that there champagne. We ain't going to sit around here all our lives."

"Yes, Mr. Cruseppi. Right away, Mr. Cruseppi. I'm sorry to have kept you waiting, Mr. Cruseppi."

"Oh, Toki, you're wonderful."

Toki leaned back and permitted himself to expand.

"I'm riding the crest of the wave, baby. Yes siree, the crest of the wave."

IT WAS quiet down in the shanty boat. Axel Kohler puffed at his pipe and squinted at the oil lantern slung from the cross beam.

"River mighty fidgety," he said.

His wife wiped her hands on her apron and listened. "It's the wind. Been chopping at the river all day."

Axel Kohler puffed on in silence. After a while, he said:

"I can feel her swelling. Uneasylike. Like maybe she had got something in her craw that wasn't settling any too well."

His wife put her hands on her ample hips and surveyed him exasperatedly. "If you're thinking of getting out of mending those fishing nets, you've got another think coming." She waddled over and tapped the homemade barometer. "It's steady. This time of year there's always wind."

Her husband arose and, shielding his eyes with his cupped hands, peered out the dingy window.

"Crested waves," he said, "she's a-try-

ing mighty hard to spit it up." He turned back into the room. "Something's heavy on her stomach. She's riled, underneath."

"You talk about that river like it was human," the woman snapped. "Get started on those nets, Axel Kohler, afore I get my dander up."

IT WAS dusk. The hurried bustle of early Saturday night was accentuated by a cold drizzle of rain. The streets were capped with umbrellas. Men walked with their heads down, coat collars up, and here and there a woman scurried for shelter with a newspaper held over her hat. Clerks, salesgirls, bookkeepers, bundle-laden shoppers streamed out of the stores and office buildings, hung by straps in the crowded streetcars, jammed shoulder against shoulder in the busses, overflowed the corners and the yellow concrete safety islands. Lights were going out one by one in the high, soot-stained, rain-streaked towers of business, whose empty corridors were beginning to echo with the shuffling footsteps of bent-backed cleaning women and the slosh of sudsy mops and the scrape of buckets along the tiled floors. And lights were going on in kitchens, in homes, in apartments, in the murky back rooms of taverns, shining out all over the city in tiered squares, chasing endlessly around and around the glittering names on theater marquees, polishing the white raincoats of traffic cops and the drenched boulevards which danced with a thousand sneary, upside-down reflections.

A swell night for a job, Toki thought, going up the steps of the brownstone front; its iron balustrade glistening and wet. A helluva swell night. All of the coppers warming themselves in lunch wagons or parking their number

twelves in doorways outta the rain. Oh well, what the hell. He was in the bucks or would be soon as Zacchus coughed up. He didn't have to worry none for a while. Tonight was his and Flo's night. They were going to eat lobster tails and drink some of that there sparkling Burgundy and have some of them little glasses of stuff—cordial was it?—after they'd finished putting on the feed bag. None of this apple pie alamode. Roquefort cheese with crackers and a cordial, please. That was it. That was the way the highbrows did it. Offhandlike. Didn't even have to pop a gander at the menu.

He opened the door with his latchkey and went upstairs. Place smelled like cabbage. He'd have to look around for something more elite. Apartment hotel, maybe. A quiet one. Genteel. But classy. With a fire escape handy.

He unlocked the door of his room and switched on the light. A faded Brussels carpet, nodedescript wallpaper showing pale oblongs and ovals attesting to the pictorial habits of former tenants, a dirty sock hanging limply from the open drawer of a cheap, veneered dresser, a white iron monstrosity of a bed, its thin mattress veiled by a sleazy pink rayon counterpane with a cigarette burn in the center of it, a table boasting a soiled, crocheted doily and a vase of flyblown artificial roses, and a brown paper package.

Toki stopped. His eyes narrowed. His nostrils dilated like a hound dog casting for a scent. That package. He hadn't ordered no package. He approached it warily. There wasn't no name on it. No writing. What th— Maybe Flo'd sent him something. Maybe the boys had bought him a fountain-pen set with engraving on it like they'd done for Big Mike. There wasn't

no tick coming out of it, so it wasn't no pineapple, anyway.

He gave it an experimental push. It was heavy. Probably a gift from the boys. Bronze, maybe. He took out his knife, slit the package open and spread the flaps. In the bottom of the box, half covered with a layer of silt and mud, was a roll of baling wire, a jumble of sash weights and a water-soaked strip of adhesive plaster.

Involuntarily Toki took a step backward, his breath hissing out from between his clenched teeth. For a full moment he stood there, his eyes glued to the parcel, the color slowly draining out of his face. Then inch by inch he backed across the room, felt for the China knob with his hand, wrenched open the door and was out in the hall—his heart hammering against his ribs.

He went downstairs and knocked on Mrs. Weatherbee's door. Hard.

Mrs. Weatherbee, a worn, strawflower of a woman with her hair strained tightly back from a worried forehead, eased her door open a crack and peeped out nearsightedly, clutching with one scrawny hand a shoddy Japanese kimono.

"Yes?" Oh. Mr. Cruseppi! I was just laying down. I declare this weather gets in my bones something terrible, though I'm not one to complain if I do say so myself—"

"I got a package and I—"

"Oh dear, I hope I didn't break anything. It was so heavy. I could've died when I dropped it, and it made the most awful racket. Fit to wake the dead. I thought I—"

"Who brought it?"

"A man. I was out in the dining room setting the plates and the doorbell rang. And I answered it. Raining cats and dogs it was. And there was this



man holding the package and he—”

“What’d he look like?”

“He was big, and kind of solid fat, and he had little squinched-up eyes. I remember his eyes because they didn’t move. They stared right straight ahead all the time he was talking. Set, they was.” Mrs. Weatherbee drew her dressing gown closer around her neck. “And wet. He was wet as water. Looked like he was soaked through. I’ll bet you could’ve wrung out every last stitch he had on.” Mrs. Weatherbee paused in her recital. “He . . . he . . . he looked—drowned,” she said.

“What’d he say?”

“He said to put the package in your room and to tell you not to forget he’d be seeing you soon. Why? Is something the matter, Mr. Cruseppi? If I broke anything I’ll be glad to—”

“No,” Toki said in a staccato voice. “You didn’t break nothing. It was some . . . some tools I ordered—some wood-working tools.”

Mrs. Weatherbee sighed gratefully. “Oh. Well, I’m glad I didn’t break anything.” She peered at Toki. “Why you look like you’ve caught a chill, Mr. Cruseppi. I declare you’re real blue. Come in and I’ll fix you up a nice cup of hot tea. I declare this weather gets right into the marrow. Makes you feel the nearness of the grave, that’s what it does. Come in and—”

“No thanks,” Toki said, “I’ve got a date.” He forced his lips into a stiff semblance of a smile and left Mrs. Weatherbee shaking her head and “declaring” to herself.

TOKI WENT DOWN the hall, put a nickel in the coin box of the telephone and dialed a number. He stood with his back against the wall and his body rigid, only his eyes were alive, darting

up and down the hall and investigating the deeper shadows.

“Hello. That you, Joe? Toki speaking. Any of the boys been looking for me? Ain’t, eh. Well, look, don’t pick me up tonight. No. No, I got some things to do. If I want you, I’ll give you a buzz. That’s right. Yeah, I got a date with Flo. The Crazy House. Yeah. What’s that? Yeah, I’m kinda hoarse. Got a cold. O. K., Joe.”

He replaced the receiver, sent a probing glance along the hallway, and started back upstairs. He looked over his shoulder twice before he reached the top and he pushed open his door with his foot and stood outside flattened against the jamb, listening, before he went in.

When he opened his door again he was wearing a Tuxedo under his belted overcoat and was carrying a satchel. A heavy one. There was a nick on his chin as if he had shaved not only hastily but unsteadily. He stood for a moment on the threshold and then went back into his room and took an empty box off the table and stuffed it under the bed. He switched off the light, looked quickly up and down the hall, went down the stairs and let himself out into the night.

It had stopped raining but the sidewalks were still wet and puddles had collected where the paving had settled. An occasional car droned by, its tires making a *chzzzzing* sound on the slick streets.

Toki walked to the corner, turned, went half a block and entered an alley. He lifted the lid off a garbage can, snapped the catch on the satchel and upended it. There was a series of dull thuds. Swiftly he replaced the lid, closed the satchel and retraced his steps. At the corner he hailed a roving cab. “The Windermere,” he said as he climbed in.

The thing to do was to keep your eyes and ears peeled and your yap shut. Toki patted a bulge in his coat pocket. And your safety catch off. It *might* be the boys' idea of a joke. Rig some one of 'em out like Big Mike and send him over to see if he crawfished. What was it Mrs. Weatherbee had said? He looked—drowned. The old bat couldn't see worth a hoot without her specs. Like as not it was one of the boys. You'd think they'd have stuck around to watch though, wouldn't you? There wasn't no point in giving the box to Mrs. Weatherbee. Besides it was too damn risky. She mighta took it on herself to open it. Where'd they get them sash weights, anyhow? He'd 'a' swore the ones they used on Big Mike was the last of the lot. What was it she'd said he said—tell him not to forget I'll be seeing him soon.

Toki straightened his lips into a knife-edged line. When you was dead, you was dead. That's all there was to it. There wasn't no way of getting around it. He'd had a aunt when he was a kid who used to claim she saw spooks. Used to carry on regular conversations with 'em like they was setting right there in plain sight. And she'd been clapped in the nut hatch. Well, they wasn't going to clap *him* in no nut hatch. Big Mike was dead. He'd been dead for going on to three days and when you was dead for three days and rubbing elbows with river cat you was deader'n a doornail.

Mrs. Weatherbee had dished him up a lot of mush once about some guy in the Bible who'd been dead for three days and had gotten back. Resurrected was the word. Supposing there *was* something in this resurrection business. Aw nuts, this wasn't no Bible. This was St. Louis. It was probably one

of the boys. Probably Joe. Or Nickels. Well, let 'im try it again. He'd pin his nose up for him. They wasn't going to make no booby outta him.

The taxi crawled up in front of the cream-brick façade of the hotel and a doorman resplendent in plum livery and gold epaulets opened the door with a practiced twist of his wrist. Toki got out and put the satchel on the sidewalk. He paid the fare and waved away the nickel change with a lordly gesture.

The doorman picked up the satchel.

"I'll carry it," Toki said quickly.

"Be glad to help you, sir."

"I'll carry it. It ain't heavy."

"Yes, sir." The doorman gave him an odd look.

Toki took the bag and nearly dropped it. For one spinning minute he thought he was going to be sick and his knees felt as if they were filled with milk. He gaped foolishly at the satchel, his mouth tightened into a hideous cartoon of a smile and, moving as if his feet were leaden, he maneuvered the steps and disappeared through the revolving doors.

"WHAT they won't do to save a dime," the doorman observed to the cab driver. "It ain't heavy," he mimicked. "Not much, it ain't!" He spat on the pavement and rubbed it in with his foot. "Felt like it was loaded with brickbats."

"Takes all kinds to make a world," the cabby said philosophically. He yawned, pocketed his nickel, switched on the ceiling light and picked up a dog-eared copy of a magazine from the seat beside him.

"Like ghost stories?" he asked. "There's a dandy in this issue. About a bloke haunting another bloke because this here second bloke, which was his

partner, double-crossed him. Boy, he's got this here second bloke sweating buckets."

"Not me," the doorman said. "Ghosts is the bunk. Give me something real, something that actually happens, some-



**The light faded away above as he sank through murky water.**

thing I can get my teeth into. West-erns, now that's my ticket. *They're* stories."

TOKI didn't go through the lobby. He went downstairs to the lower level, paused at a door lettered neatly "Men," and stalked inside. He took the last stall in the row and waited until a florid-jowled man finished wiping his hands on a paper towel and left. Then he put the satchel on the floor and opened it.

In the bottom was a roll of baling wire, some sash weights, and a strip of water-soaked adhesive.

He mopped his clammy forehead with his handkerchief. The door whished open and someone came in whistling merrily, blundered into the last stall, said, "Oh, sorry," and retreated. Toki waited until he had gone. Then he locked the bag, went cautiously out into the gleaming expanse of white tile and mirrors and wedged the satchel behind a low-slung sofa. He went over to a wash-basin and rinsed his face.

A youth in his early twenties came in and surveyed him with tipsy glee.

"You looksh like yoush dwon-dwron-drowned," he hiccuped. "Dwroned in the bottom of the shea."

But Toki had gone. Hurriedly.

The youth's eyes blurred and with intense concentration he re-focused them and stared in bewildered puzzlement around the empty room.

"Sh'funny," he said musingly, "I would've sworn there wash a man in here." He held up two fingers and wiggled them before his nose. "Twoo. A grea' big man. An' a eenshy-weenshy midde-shized man. Dwroned man . . . men." A look of vague queasiness over-spread his countenance. He put his hand over his mouth and staggered into the last stall.

Toki hoped Flo had arrived. He needed company. Needed it bad. And he wanted a jolt. A good three fingers. Neat. Clear his head. It felt like it was full of flies. Or angleworms. Like his head was a jar and his brains was squirming around the sides trying to get out. Like they was alive and making snail tracks inside his skull. He'd better get hold of himself. As long as he didn't shoot off his yap he'd be hunky dory. Nobody'd know. No matter *what*, they wasn't going to clap him in no nut hatch. They wasn't going to lace him up the back in one of them sleeveless nightgowns and give him the bye bye. They wasn't going to do it! There was Flo. Now, easy does it. Sweet-talk her. Act natural. Give her the old sauce and sit tight. Don't keep gawping over your shoulder. And get a table against the wall. Yeah, smack against the wall.

"Hi ya, gorgeous. Keep yuh waiting?"

Flo coquettishly lowered one blue shadowed eyelid. "Don't you always," she said, dimpling.

They gravitated toward the elevator and were shot upward by a uniformed attendant who intoned with nasal boredom, "The Crazy House, floor show in twenty minutes, dinner from three-fifty, check room on your right, watch your steppleasethiscarmakesnostopsgoing down."

Toki checked their wraps, unobtrusively transferring the .38 from his overcoat to a cleverly designed inner pocket of his Tuxedo, while Flo with the aid of a vanity case applied another layer of powder on her pert nose. She linked arms with Toki and they went down the thickly carpeted steps into The Crazy House.

It was that literally. Except for a

lurid, surrealist mural over the bar, which was doing a tremendous business at the far end of the room, the walls were solid sheets of mirrors, the kind that are so popular with amusement park concession, and whose sole purpose is to distort one's image as grotesquely as possible. Add to this a red-velvet ceiling draped like a circus tent, a close-packed thicket of zebra-skinned chairs and tables, a maze of white shoulders and brocade and satin and taffeta and fire-struck jewelry, punctuated by the black coats of men, and hazed over with a flickering sheen of candle shine, and all this bounding and rebounding in caricatured deformity from the mirrored walls—and you can well imagine the effect was indeed all that the decorator had striven for. Yea, and full measure, and pressed down, and running over.

Flo squeezed Toki's arm delightedly. "It's the berries," she said.

The maitre d'hôtel advanced with remote hauteur. He bowed from the waist.

"You have a reservation?" The manager had sent him up from below to add tone to the proceedings and he was—as a result—in none too good a humor.

"No," Toki said. "But I want a table against the wall."

The maitre d'hôtel shrugged expressively. "I am sorry but I am afraid there is nothing available." He brushed an imaginary fleck from an impeccable coat sleeve and waited.

TOKI EXTRACTED a bill from his wallet and folded it carefully so that the denomination was uppermost. The maitre d'hôtel assumed a thoughtful expression.

"But, perhaps," he said, "someone has turned in a reservation."

The bill changed hands.

"Right this way, m'sieu," said the maitre d'hôtel. The only difference between this man and his lowly brethren at Saebeck's, and Kitsy Dikes, and Roy's Casino was that the maitre d'hôtel capitalized on his psychology.

Toki ordered a Martini for Flo and a double brandy for himself. "And don't die," he told the waiter. The waiter didn't. He knew a sure thing when he saw one. This gink was good for about three double ones and the lobster-tail dinner with an imported wine, and an excellent chance to pad the bill on the side.

As a matter of fact he was good for four. They warmed his stomach and relieved the constricted feeling across his chest. They acted as a sporofic and lulled his subconscious into a sense of security.

When he'd dumped out them sash weights there was probably some stuck in the bottom, or something. Musta been. After all he hadn't *seen* nothing had he? It was like circumstantial evidence, more or less. Hearsy mostly. And any goof knew you could beat the rap every time on circumstantial evidence. He was Toki Cruseppi, wasn't he? The boss. Sure he was. He didn't have to take shenanigans from anybody. Dead or alive.

He even danced with Flo. And enjoyed it. And he ordered the lobster-tail dinner with the imported wine. And ate it. And he was entertained by the floor show, although in his own opinion they wore too many clothes. And he actually remembered to order Roquefort cheese and crackers *and* a cordial without having to refer to the menu.

Flo was having the time of her life. When balloons had appeared she had popped the nearest ones with her cigarette. Her blond hair was spangled

with multi-colored confetti and the bracelets on her bare arms tinkled together and sparkled red and green and violet when she threw serpentine at the other tables. She wished the other tables would throw some back at her. And she had a hat of cone-shaped crepe paper with rosettes pasted on it. Toki had one, too.

She twisted her neck so she could see their irregular reflections in the mirrors. She giggled. They looked like dwarfs. Little bitty. The hats hardly showed. She punched Toki.

"Look at us," she said, "we're all scrooched up."

Toki obediently swiveled his head toward the wall. And the fatuous smirk vanished from his face. Not all at once, but gradually, as if it had melted by degrees, or had slipped, or been jarred, from its moorings.

Drifting toward him *through* the mirror was the figure of a man, his lips parted in a frightful, gloating grin. He moved slowly with a curious buoyant lift and his scant hair stood about his head and was wafted gently back and forth as if it were washed by invisible ripples of water. His features had the swollen stretched appearance of the drowned and the pallor of his skin was accentuated by a mottled bluish tinge. There was a fragment of muddy weed like a makeshift patch plastered over one of the small piglike eyes. The figure came on, deliberately, and, when it was separated from Toki by only a thin layer of glass, it began to raise its dripping hands, the pudgy fingers curved to fit smoothly around Toki's throat.

There was a crash, the brittle sound of splintering crystal, and Toki, pale as death, faced the amazed Flo across the overturned table. A bevy of waiters materialized, apparently from thin air.

"I'm sick," Toki said harshly. "I'll be back in a minute," and he fled, heedless of the sea of questioning upturned faces, of the dancers, of the tables, of anything at all except the wild desire to get away—as far away as he could—from where he was.

He jabbed the elevator button savagely. Again and again.

He had to get that bag outta the men's room, too. It had his initials on it and, if it was turned in, and the house dick saw them weights, and got to inquiring around, and if the bee was put on him— He felt like he was hollow inside and somebody had poured fizz water in the hole. Big Mike! It couldn't have been Big Mike. Big Mike was dead. Cold as a cucumber. But it *was* Big Mike. And he'd looked at him outta them marble eyes just like he'd looked at Coky Gallagher when Coky had held out on some of the numbers. And two days later Coky had been found doubled up in a trunk in the check room at Union Station.

It couldn't have been Big Mike. But it was. It *was*. Where was that elevator? He pressed his thumb on the buzzer and held it there.

The metal door clanged open to emit a stream of chattering people. Toki was the only one going down.

The elevator plummeted to the lower level and Toki lurched out and in the direction of the washroom. The attendant sniffed. Keep his finger on the buzzer would he. He knew how to take care of those babies. Let 'er ride, straight down the shaft, and bring 'er up short. Look at 'im wobble. *Phftt*, stick your finger on the buzzer again sometime, buddy.

The men's room was vacant. Toki let the door swing to behind him and leaned against it breathing deeply.

drops of perspiration beaded his brow, and his tongue was heavy and thick and glued to the roof of his mouth. Over and over the words chased through his mind in an endless circle of monotony—"Big Mike—he had to get outta here—get that bag—and get out. Big Mike—it *was* Big Mike—get the bag—and get out—"

The light glared from the white walls and ricocheted from the tiled floor. Wadded paper towels spewed from the wire baskets and one of the basins was filled with stagnant water. The room was odoriferous with tobacco, and disinfectant, and liquid soap, and of stale, exhausted air.

Toki swayed over to the sofa and dragged it out from the wall. He grasped the handle of the satchel and tugged it free.

There was a click and the lights went out.

TOKI froze. His eyes strove frantically to pierce the darkness which was illumined only by the dull, red glow of a bulb showing faintly through from the other side of the frosted transom. His ears sang with the desperate yammering of his heart.

"Who's there," he called softly.

There was no answer.

The satchel slid from his cold hands. He drew his revolver from his pocket and, pressing close to the wall, began to work his way toward the door. There was no sound except that of his own labored breathing. He was halfway around before he saw the form standing by the door waiting for him.

The gun fell with a *clang* from Toki's nerveless fingers and Toki, his arms outthrust before him as if to ward off the thing confronting him, began to back away, his throat working convulsively,

his voice a shrill, babbling squeal of horror.

The figure came on. Relentlessly. And Toki's very brain reeled with the damp river smell that seemed to permeate the atmosphere. His hip struck a washbasin, he stumbled, and would have fallen if he had not been gripped firmly by two icy hands that slowly, inexorably forced his head down, down, down into the soap-scummed water of the bowl.

He kicked out frantically and his arms flailed in a vain endeavor to grapple with his unseen adversary. But his struggles were impotent on the shadowy mist that surrounded him—a mist as intangible as river fog.

There was a succession of gurgles, the water spilled over the sides of the basin and splashed on the floor. Toki's limbs twitched once, twice, and went lax. And there was silence, except for the *dlop—dlop—dlop* of dripping water.

"HEY, where's the light!" The florid-jowled man was just a bit tight. "By Harry, it's an outrage." He felt for the switch and snicked it on. "Damned outrage that's wha—" His voice tore raggedly and his complexion changed quickly from apoplectic to tubercular. He blinked at the sprawled form with its head in the basin.

"Good heavens!" he said and wheeled on his heel. His voice could be heard diminishing down the corridor. "Help! Murder! Police!" He was not the type of clientele cherished by innkeepers who want to keep their hotels out of the newspapers.

FLO POWDERED her nose and rerouged her lips for the tenth time. Her rhinestone slippers beat an impatient tattoo under the table. She consulted the di-

minutive watch on her wrist and her eyes were angry blue slashes.

Well! This was the first time in her young life she'd been ditched. Ditched. Plain, common, ordinary ditched. And that waiter hanging around the table emptying ash trays, and putting water in the glasses, and rearranging the salt cellars. Thought he was going to get hauled for the bill, did he. She'd show him.

She summons him imperiously.

The only one who was going to get hauled was Toki Cruseppi. And sure as her name was Flo Davis he was going to get hauled, and what I mean *hauled*. She'd make him wish he'd never known anybody named Flo Davis, she'd fix him so he— She halted her thoughts to smile sweetly at the hovering waiter.

"I'm afraid my escort has been taken ill," she said demurely. "May I have the check?"

It came to forty-one fifty. Cripes, they really laid it on.

Flo put a fifty-dollar bill on the silver salver and said graciously, "You keep the change." That'd show him she wasn't no two-timer.

The waiter became suffused with cheer. Could he get modom's coat, could he call the starter and see that modom's car was waiting, could he—

"Thank you, no," Flo said. Modom's car in a pig's eye. Modom's jitney cab and it'd better not cost more'n three ninety or there was going to be a sore taxi driver. Just wait'll she got her hands on Toki Cruseppi. Ditched. And raked for fifty bucks to boot. Just wait.

She gathered up her long kid gloves and evening bag, arose and swept across the floor and up the steps, trying to act as if she were only on her way to the powder room.

She collected her coat from the check girl and went down in the elevator. Maybe Toki *was* sick like he'd said. So what? If he had any manners; he'd have sent a bellhop or somebody to tell her, and to see that she was put in a cab, *and* to pay the bill. As far as she was concerned he could go take a fast running jump in the reservoir.

Little clusters of people stood about in the lobby talking excitedly and the manager, looking very harassed, was trying his best to break up the groups and keep them moving.

There was an ambulance drawn up outside. The doorman whistled a cab for her.

"What's the matter," she asked him.

"Nothing," he said. "I guess it's some lame brain's idea of a lark." He'd had his instructions direct from the manager, himself.

Flo climbed in and gave her address. The driver folded down the corner of a page of a dog-eared copy of a magazine, shoved in the gears, and they moved out into the night.

THE METER read three dollars and ten cents when the cab drew up in front of the remodeled flat. Thirty cents tip. That left fifty cents. Just enough to buy a few lilies. And Toki'd be ripe for them when she got through with him.

She ran lightly up the steps and into the building.

A girl with her hair in tin curlers and a pink bath towel over her arm trailed her froufrou housecoat down the hall of the second floor.

"Hi," she said. "Have a good time?"

"Swell," Flo answered.

"My, you're sure all diked out." The girl sighed enviously. "I don't know what you've got I haven't got but



whatever it is, it's potent. Go out with one guy and have another guy send you flowers."

"It's my feminine appea— Flowers?"

"Gardenias. I nearly snuffed a hole in the box. You get gardenias and I'm lucky if my boy friend buys me a bunch of cloth daisies for my last year's coat."

"When did they come?"

"About half-hour after you left. I put them out on my window sill so they'd keep. Just a sec and I'll get them." The girl gave her a knowing look and she went off down the hall saying, "Anytime you want to give me lessons, dearie, holler."

Half an hour after she'd left. Toki hadn't sent them, then. Who had? Could it be that man in the Buick coupé who'd given her a ride home that day she'd gone to the matinee at the Bijoux, or the trombone player at Saebeck's. He'd had a crush on her for ages—scared of Big Mike, though. Big Mike. He used to say, "Phfah! Gardenias! Smell like funerals." Flo felt a little chain of goose pimples quiver along her spine. She wondered if she'd ever forget the way Big Mike had looked at her. It was enough to give you the bejums. She pulled herself together at the *slap, slap* of returning bedroom slippers. Well, whoever'd sent 'em would have put a card in the box.

She accepted the white pasteboard carton with careless nonchalance.

"Sure," she said, "anytime. Five bucks a lesson. Give me a knock when you're through with the tub, will you?"

"Oke doke, I'll leave the water running."

FLO LET herself into her suite. She called it a suite to distinguish it from the other apartments whose boudoirs pulled down from a closet in the living

room. She always made it a point to add, "Suite 2," when she gave her address to department stores for a delivery.

She turned on the lamps, threw her coat across the flowered-brocetelle arm of a chair and went into her bedroom. Flo really prided herself on her bedroom. It had been lifted bodily out of the Louis Quinze section at Stix, Baer & Fuller and was, as Flo said, a dilly. To be sure the brocade drapes were streaked from the radiator, and the vanity had a whitish irregular splotch on its inlaid top where she had spilled nail-polish remover, but it still looked like the kind of bedroom that might have belonged to Madame DuBarry. Flo was a bit hazy as to Madame DuBarry's identity—anyway a king had been ga-ga about her, and that was enough recommendation for Flo.

She usually walked languidly around her bedroom when she came in, dropping frilly heaps of clothing here and there. It gave her a sense of luxury, even if she would have to pick them up herself in the morning.

But tonight she didn't bother. Her resentment at Toki momentarily shelved, she snapped on the rose silk bed lamp and proceeded without further delay to open the florist's box. She lifted the gardenias out and hunted for the card. There was none. She shook the paper and ransacked the carton and even poked among the silver stems and creamy petals of the corsage. There simply wasn't a card. Anywhere.

That was damned queer. If you sent somebody flowers, you wanted to get the credit for it, didn't you? Unless it *was* the man in the Buick coupé. Maybe he was married or something. You'd think he'd have written a line on it though, wouldn't you? Like, "here's

to the Bijoux," or, "To an enjoyable ride," or something like that. You couldn't tell about married men, though. They were cagy. They might want to eat cake but, by gosh, most of them were darn careful they were going to keep what cake they had at home, too. Well, whoever it was would turn up. They always did.

She'd wear her black crêpe tomorrow. They'd look well on black, and the fox furs, and that off-the-face turban with the veil.

She slipped out of her gown and into a full-skirted *moire negligee*. And she'd wear the diamond bracelet Toki had given her, *over* her gloves like in the ads.

She took a jar of theatrical cold cream and a container of tissues off the shelf of the closet and walked across to her dressing table to light the tall, thin, lace-shaded lamps on either side of the scrolled mirror. And she'd wear her new doeskin pumps and her— She gave a stifled gasp and the jar of cream fell from her grasp, bounced off the grained wood and rolled bumpily around on the rug.

On the mirror was written in bold, blood-red letters, "It's your funeral." A lipstick, its scarlet tongue blunted, lay on the table top.

FLO LOOKED wildly around the room and back at the scrawled words. The cloying scent of gardenias arose chokingly in her nostrils. Her head swam and she gripped the edge of the table to retain her balance.

Who? Her door was locked. Nobody had a key, except Toki. Toki had one. Big Mike had one. But he was dead. Toki. Toki *must* have done it. Why? Why would he do a thing like that? Had he ditched her to come

down here and write that on her mirror? That wasn't like Toki. But he *must* have. Why? Why? *What* was her funeral? Was this his way of telling her she was washed up? That there was somebody else? It looked—it looked nasty hanging there in midair like that. Damn those gardenias. They *did* smell like funerals. They *did*! If Big Mike wasn't dead—but he was dead—his eyes that night she'd—she'd stood there under the canopy—but he was dead. He was. He *had* to be.

There was a rap on the hall door. With an immense effort Flo said, "What is it?" Her voice quavered and broke.

"Your bath's running."

"Thanks."

"What's the matter? You sound kind of shaky."

"Nothing. Nothing at all. See you in the morning."

"Oke doke. 'Night."

"G'night."

Flo took a handful of tissues and wiped the mirror frenziedly. The words smudged and ran together. Another handful, another and another and, finally, there was no trace except for faint pinkish film. She sat down on the French-blue bench and stilled the trembling of her lips with a cold forefinger.

There was no sense in getting excited. It was some of Toki's doings and that's all there was to it. He just had a perverted sense of humor. She'd make him wish it was *his* funeral. She'd knock his props for him! Lord, those gardenias. They made her sick to her stomach.

She put them outside on the window sill.

And nuts with a bath. She wasn't dirty. And, besides, the masseuse at the Adelpia Turkish Baths said that

too many of them weren't good for your skin. Dried it out. She'd turn the water off and nuts with it. What she needed was sleep. She wanted to be in fine fettle tomorrow when she saw Toki. She'd funeral him!

She wrapped her negligee around her and went out and down the hall into the bathroom.

The place was black as pitch. Gladys must have turned on the taps full tilt. Couldn't hear yourself think. Smelled like the pipes could stand some cleaning. A muddy, river smell. Dank. Where was the light chain?

She felt in one of her quilted pockets, found a paper packet of matches and struck one.

The door closed behind her. Softly, Easily.

She whirled. The match burned her fingers. She dropped it and tore off another. It broke in the middle.

"Gladys?"

There was no answer.

"Who is it?" she said hoarsely, tearing at the matches. But there was no reply—only the rush of water into the tub.

A third match flamed and this time Flo didn't know when it burned her fingers. She was conscious of nothing but the blotched, bloated features of the man moving toward her with dripping outstretched arms. She couldn't even shriek. She tried. But her voice was locked fast in her throat. The match burned down to the end, flared, and went out.

*Tink—tink—tink—*

Mrs. O'Donnell broke off in the middle of a snore, turned over in her mammoth bed and began on a different note.

*Tink—tink—tink—*

She wrinkled her nose sleepily and

hitched up her covers.

*—Tink—tink—tink—*

Mrs. O'Donnell sat up and listened.

*Tink—tink—tink—tinktink—tink—*

She switched on the light. A dark, wet stain was spreading over Mrs. O'Donnell's ceiling and a miniature pond was collecting, drop by drop, on Mrs. O'Donnell's pillow.

Her lips blew out in an exclamatory poof, and she got out of bed with an alacrity astonishing for one of her ponderous bulk, to shrug into a shabby bathrobe and stuff her archless feet into broken-down Daniel Greens.

These boarders! Forget to turn the lights out, forget to close the windows so that most of the time she was heating up all outdoors, and the bathtub! This would make the third time in six months. Did they care how much a plasterer charged. Did they care if the ceilings fell down? Did they care about anything but their own sweet selves? Not them! She'd bet dimes to dill pickles it was that Flo Davis again. The worst of the lot. Shiftless, no 'count. What did Flo Davis care if the ceiling fell down and killed innocent people, not to speak of the mess after the plasterer got through, and the *prices* he charged!

Mumbling and muttering, Mrs. O'Donnell climbed the stairs and padded down the hall to the bathroom. Water was seeping along the baseboards and the runner was a soggy mush.

Mrs. O'Donnell bunched her nightgown and bathrobe around her knees, opened the bathroom door, felt blindly for the light chain, and gave it a violent yank.

The bunched clothing unbunched and fell to her ankles where it sloshed loosely in the running water. Mrs. O'Donnell

put a hand on the wash bowl to steady herself, and without taking her gaze from the bathtub, she began to scream methodically, evenly, and with monotonous persistence.

THE MORNING sun tried its best to pierce the gray sky and did succeed in striking a brassy response from the portals of the Windermere before it retired for the day behind its conglomerate layer of sulphurous clouds, gasoline fumes and coal smoke.

The cabby looked up from his paper and frowned. One dumb day, if you asked him. Dead as ditch water. Quiet as an old maid's parlor. The funnies weren't even any good. Same brand of news, too.

Fire on Tenth Street. The regular run of accidents. The Windermere had managed to keep their little accident out of the papers, he'd noticed. Some pull, Shucks, he couldn't blame them, though. It wasn't their fault a bloke with a skizler full had to pass out face down in a washbasin.

And, let's see, a streetcar smash-up, and a beer truck, and the usual school bus and train, and a hit-and-run in a silver and maroon Cadillac. Two people killed outright. Joe Somebody, and Nickels Somebody-else. The guy driving had escaped. Well, he wouldn't stay escaped with that car and that description. Big and fat with small eyes, height five-ten, weight two-fifty, wear-

ing a blue-serge suit believed to be wet.

And a dame had jumped out of a window, or been pushed, during a party and another dame had slipped in a bathtub and knocked herself out long enough to get drowned. He'd had a fare last night at that second address. Or near it. Some looker. Acted like she knew her way around town. He'd bet *she* didn't fall in no bathtub. Not that babe. Not unless there was a bunch of pearls or a stack of dollar bills in the bottom of it. He wondered if it was true that there were more deaths caused in bathtubs than automobiles. He grinned. He'd have to tell *that* to the old lady next Saturday.

The jewel robbery had been solved. A fence named Zacchus—crimintently the *names* some of these birds sported—had been caught with the goods. Only one piece missing, a bracelet.

And the ads. Pages of 'em. Sears were having a sale. The old lady was griping for a new ice box. Maybe, he'd get her one. Christmas was coming.

And one of those shantyboat dodos—Krohler was it?—Kohler—had caught a stiff in his fishing net. Haw, bet *that* played hob with your breakfast, brother.

And the weather. Clear tomorrow, not much change in temperature. River 40.8, 40.8, 40.8, calm.

The cabby put the paper alongside him on the seat, pulled his hat down over his eyes, scounged on the back of his neck, sighed gustily, and slept.

THE END.

