

Mystery Book Magazine

THE BEST IN NEW CRIME FICTION—NO REPRINTS

Vol. 6, No. 2

WINTER, 1948

Price 25c

A Complete Novel

THE MASKED ANGEL LESLIE CHARTERIS 13

When Torpedo Smith goes down for the final count the timekeeper's bell tolls murder—and the Saint mixes with sudden death in the prize ring!

Three Complete Novelets

THE OTHER MAN'S SHOES KELLEY ROOS 86

Ray Murray hides out in a small town to write a play—and finds that he has adopted the identity of a man who is marked for grisly murder!

MY BEST FRIEND IS DEATH . WILBUR S. PEACOCK 132

The police were on one side, the real killer was on the other, and Bob Cummings was right in the middle in this tense and baffling crime case!

RACE FOR THE MORGUE . . WYATT BLASSINGAME 160

For Ray Stuart, the Bayou Teche Handicap was literally a contest with death—and it happened to be his own death which hung in the balance!

Short Stories

THE DARK HOUR EDWARD RONNS 75

A body lay on the stairs, and evil footsteps moved toward Linda's door

I'LL CUT YOUR THROAT AGAIN, KATHLEEN FREDRIC BROWN 121

Johnny Marlin returns after the long months he has spent in an asylum

MURDER IN MIND JOHN D. MacDONALD 180

Gunpowder grains and a man's mental attitude help solve a strange case

Features

HUNTERS AND HUNTED	THE EDITOR	6
THE CLUE ON THE SHADE	MARGARET PETHERBRIDGE	118
LITTLE MAN, WHAT THEN?	LEO MARR	152
A BARGAIN IN CRIME	SAM SLEUTH	179

THE DARK HOUR

BY
EDWARD RONNS

A body lay on the stairs and furtive footsteps moved down the dark hallway toward Linda's door—then the doorknob turned like a thing alive, and stark terror engulfed her!



She brought the poker down on the dark, thin head with all her strength

LINDA stood in the kitchen doorway, unable to advance or retreat. Outside, the windows were already dark, but the big globe in the ceiling shed brilliance all around her. She looked across the room at the young man leaning against the cabinets, near the glittering aluminum sink, and she took a deep breath. A milky blue marble

rolled across the waxed floor with a little whispering sound and touched the toe of her alligator shoe and stopped rolling.

"Put it down, Perry," she said.

"Why should I?" Perry asked.

"You're not supposed to have it. Put that knife away."

It was quiet in the kitchen. It was a

big kitchen, in a big house, and the only sound was that of her breathing and the clink of more marbles in Perry's left hand. He held the big kitchen knife in his right hand, the hardwood handle clenched in his fist. He was grinning at her.

"Nosy, aren't you?" he said.

"I'm just doing my job, Perry."

"You're always snooping around after me."

"I'm not, really," she said. "But you must do as you're told."

"And what if I don't?"

"I'll have to tell Mr. Blake," Linda said.

"Yeah," Perry said flatly.

"I don't like to tell him anything about you, Perry. But you were told distinctly to stop playing with these kitchen knives. You're apt to hurt yourself."

"Or somebody else," he said meaningfully, and suddenly he giggled and flicked a marble out of his left hand at her. The marble, red and white, spun through the air and hit the porcelain table that stood between them and bounced to the floor with a sharp, clicking sound.

Linda didn't flinch, nor did she move at all.

THIS was the very limit, she thought, the absolute end to her patience, her strength, her courage to continue. The job wasn't worth it. No position was worth it, no matter how welcome the extra income was.

As a grade-school teacher, trying to make ends meet on an inadequate salary, the summer employment with Mr. Harley Wentworth Blake had seemed utterly attractive, with no flaws, nothing to mar the ideal combination of spending her summer in a millionaire's summer home in Maine and earning enough as governess to see her happily through the rest of the year.

But Mr. Harley Wentworth Blake had failed to tell her about his seventeen-year-old son, Perry. Perry and his marbles. Perry and his penchant for knives and for killing things—birds, squirrels,

anything. Perry who had been kicked out of one expensive military academy after another as incorrigible.

The little twins, Babs and Bobby, were all right. They were little angels, aged eight, who took to Linda Moore like a couple of ducklings to water. Tutoring them was pleasant, and there was plenty of time during the day for her to take advantage of the beach, the float, and the sailboat in the cove below the big house.

But they hadn't told her about Perry. She looked at him across the kitchen and at the sharp knife that was in his hand.

"Unless you obey me, Perry," she said quietly, "I'll have to tell Hugo."

"You kind of like my handsome cousin, don't you?"

Linda ignored his question. "Put away the knife," she said.

"You stuck on him, baby?"

"Perry—"

"He ain't inheriting anything from my old man," Perry persisted. "I'm getting it all. There ain't any use your making a play for Hugo. He's out in the cold, the stuffed shirt! You can bet I'll kick him out fast enough, once I get my old man's dough. But I'd keep you around, babe. You bet I would."

"You're talking nonsense, Perry."

"Oh, I ain't so dumb," Perry said. "I ain't as dumb as they say I am."

She had to make an effort to stand there and face him with the knife in his hand. She tried to stare down the smirk on his dark, warped little face. She thought of the dark, warped little mind ruling that wiry, adolescent body and she shuddered inwardly. His eyes were too wise as they touched her body, smirking, amusing himself. Once he had told her that he liked trim blondes who were over twenty-one, even if they were school teachers. The same look was in his eyes then.

She didn't dare glance away from him. It was a question of establishing supremacy, but it was like trying to control quicksilver that slipped away from under your fingers, this attempt to control Perry.

"You're afraid of me, babe," Perry said.

"Don't be foolish," she said.

"You're scared. But I'd be nice to you."

He took a step toward her, rattling the marbles in his left hand, still holding the knife in his fist. She wondered why the house was so quiet. She could hear the muted thunder of the night surf on the beach beyond the windows, and the whirring of the electric clock on the kitchen wall. But there was no sound from anyone else in the house with her. Yet she knew the twins were upstairs, tucked in bed, and Mr. Blake was also upstairs, in his study.

She tried to remember if she had seen Hugo after dinner, but she couldn't remember anything. The light winked on the knife in Perry's hand and drove everything out of her mind except a quick, unreasoning, breathless fear.

IT WAS at this moment the pantry door opened and Eva and Carl came in together from the outer darkness. Eva was the cook, Carl the chauffeur for the Blake establishment. The woman was a big, flamboyant redhead in her late thirties, with a puffy complexion hidden under lacquered makeup. The man was big, with muscular, meaty shoulders and a long head, the dark hair of which was brushed sleekly against the flat sides of his skull.

They were both wearing outdoor clothes, and carrying paper bundles. Carl carried a cheap cardboard suitcase, in addition. Neither was in uniform.

Perry Blake turned and gave them his warped grin.

"Hail and farewell. I hear Miss Nosy fired you."

"Shut up, you little rat!" Eva said.

"You want your marbles knocked down your throat?" Carl said. He looked at the knife in the boy's hand. Perry's knuckles were white. "What are you going to slice up next, screwball?"

"The school teacher," Perry said, and giggled.

Carl grinned. Eva didn't say any-

thing. Her perfume was strong and sultry in the kitchen.

"Please take that knife away from him, Carl," Linda said.

"Why should I?"

"He'll hurt himself with it."

"He can cut his throat with it, for all I care," Carl said. "Eva and I don't work here any more, remember?"

"But—"

Take it away from him yourself," Carl said truculently. "You fired us, didn't you? Do your own dirty work with the brat."

"You were drinking," Linda said sharply. "You've both been stealing for the last two weeks, since you came here. It was Mr. Blake who told me to discharge you."

"After you snitched on us."

"I didn't," Linda said. "But in any case, you don't have to leave until the end of the week."

"We don't like it here any more," Eva sniffed. "Let's go, honey."

Carl leaned toward Linda. His little eyes were malignant. He weighed the suitcase lightly in his meaty hands.

"We ain't forgetting you, either," he said slowly. "I kinda liked it here. We lost the job on account of you, and I won't forget that, not for a long time."

"Are you threatening me?" Linda asked quietly.

"You can call it what you like," Carl said.

"Aw, let's go, Carl," Eva said impatiently.

The big man grunted and went out the kitchen door without a backward glance. The redheaded woman twisted her scarlet mouth as she glanced at Perry, and hurried out after Carl. Perry giggled.

"So they're gone," he said.

Linda faced him across the kitchen, alone again. Perry whistled, tossed the big knife high in the air. The blade sparkled with sharp splinters of light, and Perry caught it by the handle as it came down. He was three steps closer to Linda when he stopped moving. He hitched up his slacks under his scrawny chest and smirked. His thin face looked

sallow in the glare of light.

Linda took a step backward, away from the knife.

Someone came in behind her, from the main hall in the house. For a moment she thought it was Carl, returning for something he had forgotten. She turned quickly, then felt relief surge through her in a weakening wave.

"Hello, Hugo," she said.

He was a tall young man, not quite thirty, with the dark Blake hair and a squarely planed face and thick, pleasant ropes of eyebrows. His eyes bespoke competence. It was strange to see the family resemblance between the two cousins, Hugo and Perry—and to see the differences, too. His clothing smelled of the salt air and the sea outside.

HIS blue eyes swung from Linda to Perry, who stood across the kitchen from him, the knife held half behind him now.

"Is Perry bothering you again?" he asked her quietly.

"It was Carl and Eva," Perry said quickly. "Carl's coming back tonight and—he'll slit her throat." He giggled.

"Shut up," Hugo said.

Perry said, "You can't talk to me like that! You don't belong here, anyway. What do you hang around for? You ain't getting the old man's money!"

"Shut up!" Hugo said again, this time with more vehemence. His face was pale under the tan. He looked at Linda again. "Has he been annoying you?"

"No," she said. "Forget it."

Perry snorted. "Feeling pretty good now, ain't you, baby? Now that your boy friend is back."

"I'm going to knock your teeth down your dirty throat one of these days, Perry, my boy," Hugo said quietly.

"Well, it's true, ain't it? It's true about the old man's dough, too! What you thinking of doing, Hugo? Busting open the library safe? He's only got a couple thousand in cash there."

"How do you know?" Hugo asked sharply.

Perry smirked. "I know lots, I do. I know about you two, too. I seen you

necking on the beach yesterday."

Linda turned on her heel and left. She didn't want to tell Hugo to take the knife from Perry. The situation was too embarrassing. There was no telling what lies Perry might suddenly think up. She suddenly realized that her job and her reputation hung by a thread—a thread that might be snapped by a single quirk of Perry's twisted, malicious mind.

Hugo didn't follow her.

It was just nine o'clock. Turning, she walked down the wide corridor toward the broad center stairway. If it weren't for the twins and Hugo, I'd quit, she thought. It might be a good idea if she resigned, anyway. She mounted the stairs quietly, pausing on the little balcony to look back. No one was in sight. She could see the open double doors to the library, and a dim light in there.

A lamp shone down the second-floor hall ahead, softly illuminating the marine oils on the walls and the white bedroom doors. The first two doors were Hugo's and Perry's. Then came the twins' bedroom and her own, on the left side, opposite to which were Mr. Blake's rooms, including his study. There was no Mrs. Blake; she had died in an auto accident two years before. A light shone under the closed study door, and she caught the faint, rich scent of cigar smoke in the corridor.

Babs was awake when she quietly opened the door to the children's bedroom. Her big, wide eyes smiled up at Linda as the older girl bent over the dim bedside lamp.

"I want some milk," Babs said sleepily. "Some warm milk."

"You should be asleep by now," Linda whispered.

"I couldn't sleep. But Bobby sleeps any old way."

The curly blond head of the boy was just visible over the heaped-up blankets in the twin bed across the room. Linda listened to his quiet breathing, then nodded, touched her fingers to her lips for Babs, opened the window on the little iron balcony, and breathed deeply of the cool sea wind that swept in over

the lawn from the lip of the bluff. The dull boom and crash of breakers on the beach filled the dark night outside.

"I'll get your milk," she whispered to Barbara.

SHE closed the door quietly and hesitated in the hall, looking at Mr. Blake's room. The cigar smoke was as strong as before. It was regrettable, of course, but there was no choice—she would have to resign. She couldn't go on, with Perry acting up, with the cook and chauffeur quitting, and the whole burden of running the house on her shoulders. She hated to give up the twins and the summer in Maine. But not even Hugo could persuade her to stay.

She crossed the hall and tapped softly on the door.

"It's Miss Moore," she said quietly.

An impatient crackling of papers came through the door.

"I don't wish to be disturbed."

"It's quite important, Mr. Blake."

"Hang it all!" The man was plainly annoyed. "We'll discuss it in the morning!"

Papers crackled again, and there was silence. She lifted her hand to knock again, then let it drop limply to her side. Morning would be good enough. Perhaps she would feel differently about it herself, in the warm sunlight, playing with the twins, perhaps swimming with Hugo. After all, nothing serious had actually happened. And there were plenty of other cooks and chauffeurs to be had. She turned down the hall and went downstairs again.

The clink of glass came from the open library doors. Linda swung around the stairs and walked quietly into the big room. A Chinese lamp in a jade base cast a soft light on the oaken library table, the leather-bound books, the Van Gogh over the dark fireplace. A big wing chair was drawn up near the bay window, and an octagonal coffee table stood next to the chair, supporting a cut-glass decanter of rye. Someone's hand reached from behind the chair and picked up the decanter.

"Hugo?" she asked softly.

Perry poked his thin head around the back of the chair. His grin was sly and warped.

"Hello, beautiful. Been squealing to the old man?"

"What are you doing with that liquor?" she demanded.

"Drinking it," he said. "Have a snort?" He stood up, thin and gangling, his adolescent face dark and flushed. His yellow sport shirt was open at the collar. He had been drinking straight from the decanter. The thumb of his left hand made a flicking gesture, and a marble spun through the air toward her. She caught it before it struck her body.

He laughed. "Hugo ain't here, babe."

"Where has he gone?"

"To town. Maybe you don't appeal to him, honey. But you appeal to me. You sure do."

His little eyes were malignantly amused. Again she felt out of her depth, poorly equipped to handle the boy. She turned her back to him and left the room. Her spine tingled, expecting to feel the tap of a marble flicked at her. Nothing happened.

In the kitchen she warmed some milk in a pan and poured it into a tall glass, wrapping a paper napkin around the base of the glass. An odd impulse caused her to put aside the milk and cross toward the cupboards, where the large knives were hung in their racks. She counted them quickly, but there was no need to count them, as she saw at a glance that one of the wooden slots was empty. The same knife that Perry had been toying with before was missing again.

A queer, nervous thrill touched the nape of her neck. She returned to the library, carrying the warm milk. But the library was empty, with no sign of Perry. Nothing but three marbles, little blood-red spheres, winking like eyes on the soft, dark carpet.

Perry wasn't upstairs, either. She took the milk in to Babs, but didn't wait until the child drank it. Bobby was still sound asleep. She closed the door soft-

ly, looked toward Hugo's room, and shrugged. Mr. Blake's door was still shut fast. No sound came from it now. Quickly she went into her own room, locked the door, put the key on the bedside table, and went to bed.

From far below the open bedroom window came the angry snarl and crash of the Atlantic surf.

LINDA wasn't sure how long she slept, or just what awakened her. She sat up all at once in the darkness, shivering without reason. The bedroom window was open, and the sea wind poured into the dark room from the deeper darkness outside, laden with the scent of seaweed and ozone.

A thumping sound came from somewhere inside the house. Linda listened sharply, straining her senses. She drew the covers to her throat, then dropped them and slid her long legs over the edge of the bed, her toes seeking her slippers. At the same time, she reached for the bedlamp with fumbling fingers.

There was no sound from the adjacent twins' bedroom. There was no repetition of the thumping noise. An uneasy quiet returned to the house, except for the mutter of the wind and the surf.

Her fingers found the bedside lamp and twisted the button switch. It clicked futilely. Nothing happened. She turned it again, and once more. The clicks sounded loud in the darkness. The lamp wouldn't work.

For a moment she considered returning to bed, to the soft, warm security of the covers. Then a queer clicking came from beyond the door and she stiffened, listening. The clicks ended. She reached for her terry-cloth robe and slid into it, standing up in the darkness. It wouldn't do any harm to check on the twins.

She used her cigarette lighter, holding the tiny flame aloft. It flickered in the wind as she glanced at her clock on the table. It was two-thirty in the morning. Shielding the little flame, she crossed the bedroom and tried the wall switch. That, too, was useless. Evi-

dently the lights were out all over the house.

There could be no thought of returning to sleep now. Babs was accustomed to sleeping with the dim night lamp in the twins' bedroom, and if she awakened in the darkness she would be terrified. It was up to her to find the fuses and replace the faulty one.

The door key felt cold and slippery when she turned it and stepped into the hall. The draught caused by the open door snuffed out the lighter flame with an abrupt hand. She spun the wheel quickly, the tiny sparks dazzling in the darkness of the hall, and felt quick relief as the wick caught. The flame appeared like a tiny bomb. The little light was lost in the shadows that surrounded her. She moved quickly toward Hugo's room.

His door was closed. She rapped softly.

"Hugo?" she whispered.

There was no answer. She rapped again, a little harder this time. The wick on her lighter sputtered, then steadied again.

"Hugo!" she called again, louder now.

There was still no answer. She was suddenly conscious of appearances, of herself standing in nightgown and robe outside his room, at that hour. That it even occurred to her, she thought angrily, was again due to Perry. His thoughts had spread like slow, ugly poison throughout the entire house.

She turned to stare across the dark hallway toward Perry Blake's room. She could see nothing beyond the minute radius of the lighter. The little flame was utterly inadequate against the pressure of darkness around her. But she could see enough: the white of the stairs and the rail of the little balcony at the head of the stairway, and the white of Perry's door.

It was standing ajar.

She saw something else—a shadow, moving in the shadows crowding the opposite end of the hall. She sensed the movement of it rather than the form itself, and she turned sharply that way,

holding the lighter higher in her hand to dispel the gloom around her. The shadow didn't move. It seemed to be standing there, watching her soundlessly, with eyes that weren't eyes, but just darker patches of darkness in its shapeless form.

"Perry?" she whispered. The words seemed to scrape in her throat. "Is that you, Perry?"

THE shadows were just shadows. Nothing happened. Hugo's door remained tightly shut. It occurred to her that Hugo might not even be at home, that he might still be in town.

She backed away toward the stairs. She wondered if she should awaken Mr. Blake. But the shadows were thickest at his end of the hall, and the lighter flame seemed so inadequate.

She was imagining things. She was allowing herself to become overwrought for childish reasons, yielding to childish fears. It was the combination of things that evening which had filled her with apprehension—Perry, and the queer, threatening attitude of Carl and Eva, and the sounds she had heard, which could have been ordinary night sounds of the house and the wind. She was being foolish. There was no one at the end of the hall. No one lurking in the shadows.

The thing to do, she told herself with fierce resolve, was to go downstairs and find a candle in the kitchen and fix the fuses down there. She wouldn't have to go into the cellar. The fuse box was just beside the cupboards in the kitchen. In two minutes she would have things straightened out and be back in bed, safe and sound. The thing to do was to stop standing here while the fluid ran out of the lighter and the flame grew feebler. The thing to do was to go downstairs and fix the fuses.

She didn't move.

She became aware of perfume in the air, strong and cloying, as if a woman had recently walked in the hallway. It was Eva's perfume, and it didn't make sense. The cook had quit the house hours ago—hadn't she?

A little, sputtering sound came from the lighter. The flame was considerably smaller now. She drew a deep breath and went toward the steps. Her slipper kicked something on the floor and it skittered off the carpet to the balcony, hit the steps, and clattered down the stairway. One of Perry's eternal marbles. She listened to it bounce glassily down one step after another, then, after one particularly sharp click, it suddenly ended in silence.

Linda paused abruptly, hand on the balcony rail. There had only been half a dozen clicks. The marble had fallen less than halfway down the staircase. A queer breathlessness came up inside her. She kneeled, lowering the lighter flame to the floor. There were more of Perry's marbles at the head of the stairs, a handful of them, scattered about within the short radius of light. She picked one up with cold fingers and looked down the stair well.

The lower hall was a pool of darkness, surging up toward her like a tidal wave. She rolled the marble she had picked up toward the stairs. She heard it click once, click again, and again. Two more bounces—then a dull thump, and silence.

She followed the marble. Her heart was beating wildly inside her. One step at a time, slowly, with the little lighter sputtering lower, yielding finally to the surrounding darkness.

She saw the body before the flame went out.

It lay crumpled on the steps, blocking the way, twisted and motionless. She had time to recognize the heavy figure, the silk dressing gown, the shock of gray hair on the twisted head.

It was Mr. Harley Wentworth Blake. He was dead.

The lighter flame went out. The darkness rushed at her. It swooped in like a wave, engulfing her, and she backed up the stairs a step at a time, shivering. A rustling sound came from below, but she knew she couldn't go down there now. She couldn't go anywhere for the moment. She clung to the rail and listened to her own smoth-

ered breathing. She thought for a moment she was going to be sick. She listened to another sound, above the rasp of her breathing. A footfall behind her, in the hall.

SHE remembered the shadow she had seen before, and her heart seemed to leap into her throat. She whirled. There was nothing to see. Nothing to hear. The darkness was absolute. She backed to the wall and held her breath and listened. It came again, the sound of someone moving stealthily toward her. She wanted to scream. Terror clawed at her mind. She didn't scream. She moved her legs with a tremendous effort, sliding along the wall toward her own room.

She shivered. Someone was moving with her, not too near yet, but closer than before. *The murderer!* she thought. There was no use crying out. Who could hear her? Hugo wasn't in. Mr. Blake was dead on the stairs. The twins were only children, asleep. There was Perry—and she shuddered at the thought of him.

Her groping fingers found a doorknob and she twisted quickly, stepping backward. It was the twins' room. The door creaked ever so faintly. Instantly she swung it shut, pushing hard, turning the invisible key in the lock. Footsteps slithered with sudden purpose on the carpet, and a palpable weight was thrust against the door from outside. Something scratched faintly at the keyhole. She held her breath.

She could hear a muffled sound of exasperation, a sniffing giggle. The knob turned in her hand and she released it as if it were alive. She heard it turn all the way, and felt new pressure on the door. The simple ward lock held. She left the key in it and turned inside the room.

The open windows were faintly outlined against the night, showing her the twins' beds, one against each wall. The surf hissed and boomed far below the house. No sound came from the twins. The scratching sound stopped at the door. She shivered again, then sudden-

ly warned by the lack of activity in the hall, she whirled and ran soundlessly through the connecting bath into her own bedroom.

A sob of fright came in her throat as she lunged for the hall door. Her shoulder cracked sharply against it, just as it was opening. The door slammed shut with a cracking sound and her fingers flew to the key, twisting it in the lock. At the same time, someone shoved with angry impatience at the door. The lock held. The door was shut tight. Again there came an angry lunge against the panel. The door shivered. It held fast. She was safe—for the moment.

She thought of the telephone downstairs, and the extension in Mr. Blake's study across the hall. It might just as well be across the ocean. At least the twins were all right. There was no other way into their room. They would be safe, as long as she could escape the murderer in the hall. She listened to his angry, muffled sounds beyond the locked door.

If she only had something to fight him with!

She looked back into the darkness of her room. Faint starlight showed the dresser, the lamp beside the bed, the window and the balcony rail beyond. Then, suddenly, she remembered the gun Hugo kept in the desk in his room. Perry had stolen it three days ago, and Hugo had caught him shooting squirrels with it. Hugo had taken it back and locked it in the desk. If she could only get to it.

There was but one way to reach Hugo's room. She turned to the tall window, drawing her robe tighter against the push of wind that poured between the blowing curtains. The wind tangled strong, cold fingers in her blonde hair as she stepped over the low sill. The balcony was very narrow, with an ornamental rail that came no higher than her knees. It was nothing more than a concrete ledge jutting from the wall of the house, just a safeguard against the dizzy drop down the bluff to the sharply pointed rocks and the angry surf below.

THE wind pushed and hauled at her as she moved toward the next window. She prayed it wasn't locked. The din of the surf was loud out here, crashing in white blossoms of foam far below her feet. Once she looked out at the black, infinite ocean, merging with the dark sky. It seemed to rise up and lean over her, ready to topple and crush her with its black weight.

She reached Hugo's window and grasped at the sill with a sob of terror stifled in her throat.

It wasn't locked. She pushed it up with all her strength and almost fell inside. The wind pushed in with her, blowing the curtains in the warm darkness. There was a scent of pipe tobacco in the unfamiliar room. She looked toward the hall door, then closed the window to shut off the sound of the sea. Immediately she heard the shuffle of footsteps out in the corridor.

She went to the door and tested the key. It was locked. The steps outside veered from her own door to this one. An angry hand shook the knob. She shrank back a step.

"Get away!" she whispered. "Let me alone!"

A shoulder crashed against the panel. The shock seemed to go through her body.

She shrank back into the room.

"Who is it?" she called. "What do you want?"

A voice gibbered at her in a harsh, frantic whisper:

"Let me in!"

The door shuddered with another crashing blow. Linda groped across the room for Hugo's desk. It stood in a corner, she remembered, and then she also remembered that he had locked it after he put the gun away. She hoped it wasn't locked now, that she could reach that right-hand drawer and the weapon it contained.

The desk wasn't locked. Neither was the drawer. But it was empty. The gun wasn't there.

She searched frantically, but there was no gun. Not in that drawer, nor in any of the others. She turned toward

the smooth bed. There was no gun under the pillow.

"Linda!"

The whisper was harsh and urgent, coming from beyond the locked door. The knob rattled angrily.

"Linda, let me in!"

She recognized the voice. "Is that you, Perry?"

"Quick, let me in!" the voice implored wildly. "Something awful's happened!"

It's a trick, she thought. And with the recognition of Perry's voice, she felt a sudden, odd change inside her. Her crazily beating heart no longer threatened to burst against her ribs. The claws of panic were eased from her mind.

In its place came a slow, deep anger, a resentment at being driven helplessly through the darkness, in terror of her life.

"Linda, Linda! Let me in!"

She went to the door and stood facing it. She wasn't trembling any more. Anger made her voice queerly calm.

"In a minute," she said quietly.

"I can't—I'm afraid! Please!"

She turned to the dim fireplace in the corner of Hugo's room, moving with quick, firm footsteps. No more fear, she thought.

It's only Perry. No matter what he's done, it's only Perry.

The poker felt cold and heavy in her hand when she picked it silently from the rack by the fireplace. She returned to the door with silent steps, poker in hand. The knob was rattling desperately. She turned the key with a careful hand and flattened against the dark wall beside it, her head turned toward the door.

"Come in, Perry," she said.

The knob rattled again, then the door burst open and a dark figure hurtled headlong into the room out of the black corridor, rushing in toward her, arms outstretched. She didn't hesitate. She brought the poker down on the dark, thin head with all her strength. It made a dull, thudding sound as it struck home. Perry continued his forward plunge, his knees striking the floor, his

pale, white hands out-thrust, skittering over the carpet.

HIE FELL flat and didn't move. Linda lowered the poker. She began to shiver. An odd little sound murmured in her throat. She stood by the hall door and looked out there into the darkness.

Her anger was gone. Her courage was gone, too.

Too late, she realized what had happened.

Someone else was out there in the hall, moving toward her. Another shadow in the shadows. The one that had inspired terror in Perry's voice. She knew it for what it was, now—but it was too late. Perry had been pleading with her for sanctuary. He, too, had been fleeing from the murderer in the darkness.

She turned to face the brooding shadows in the hallway.

"I know you're there," she said.

"Yeah," said a voice. "I'm here."

She couldn't see him. She wanted to scream again. She clutched the poker in her hand.

"Where is Perry?" asked the voice. "You slug him?"

"Come and find out," she said.

"I'm coming, sister. And I ain't no easy mark like Perry."

Something sounded behind the voice, an incongruous, completely mundane sound that shattered the horror of the darkness. An auto horn. It blared loudly from the driveway in front of the house, and then was silent.

Linda seemed to hear echoes in her ears. She moved quickly into the hall, away from Hugo's open door, using the sound to cover the rustle of her gown. She flattened against the opposite wall and tried to see through the darkness to the stairs, where the prowler lurked. Her hand shook, holding the poker.

She could see nothing. The auto horn blared again, sounding impatiently out of the night. Footsteps padded toward her, then halted. Linda stopped breathing.

The footsteps came on again with

a swift, almost noiseless rush. Something hurtled into her shoulder, and she felt him whirl toward her.

She ducked, swinging the poker wildly, slicing through the darkness at him. She felt his hand reach for the poker, grip the robe on her shoulder, yank savagely. The cloth ripped. She tugged away, swung the poker again, heard a curse as her blow struck something solid and jarred her arm. He didn't let go.

His other hand caught at her hair and she kicked frantically, unable to cry out, twisting away from his fingers that groped for her throat.

She wasn't sure what happened, then. The dark hall was shot through with light and sound. Pinwheels of red and yellow sparks showered through her brain, and the thudding of her heart merged with that of someone's running footsteps.

Something slammed hard into her body, and she knew she was falling, going down to her knees.

She tried to stand up again, her hands groping for the wall, and the sound of scuffling shoes and struggling bodies made her stay where she was, with blackness all around her again, deeper and richer and more peaceful than before.

She knew she was fainting. . . .

The lights were on again. Hugo was bending over her, his dark hair in a loop over his forehead, a bruise on his jaw.

She heard the twins chattering excitedly from behind a closed door. There were other voices, too, that she didn't recognize.

She was in Hugo's room, on his bed, and for a moment she was grateful only for the lights, for the fact that they were working again.

"You're all right, darling," Hugo was saying. "I got back in time. There's nothing to be afraid of."

"She wasn't afraid," someone said, and it was Perry's voice. She felt quick relief that he hadn't been seriously hurt by her blow with the poker. "That baby ain't afraid of nothing," Perry reiterated.

ed. "She sure put an egg on my head, she did."

SHE looked at Hugo's anxious face. "And Mr. Blake?"

"He's not dead. He was hit from behind when he stepped out to investigate, before you did, and he slipped down the stairs and knocked himself out. He's all right."

"I thought it was Perry, at first," she said. "But it was Carl, wasn't it?"

Hugo nodded. "Carl and Eva. They kept their grudge when Uncle Harley fired them. Eva tried to warn him I was coming by blowing their auto horn outside. I guess you heard it. The two of them decided there was no sense being fired if they'd only made little pickings, so they came back tonight to clean out the library safe. He went after you because he thought you recognized him. We've got them both, anyway. The police are here already."

"What happened to your gun?" Linda asked. "I looked everywhere for it and it was gone."

"I had it with me," said Hugo. "I

was looking for them in town, because Perry said they'd been threatening you, and I wanted to impress on them that I wouldn't stand for anything like that with you. I missed them, but I got back here in time."

"She didn't need you," Perry jeered. His voice was respectful. "She's quite a babe. You should've seen her wallop me."

Linda sat up and looked at him. Perry's thin face was warped in a knowing smirk. There was no one besides the three of them in the room just then, although there was activity out in the hall. The police, she presumed.

"Perry," she said quietly.

"Yeah?"

"I want to be alone with Hugo for a minute."

"Oh, yeah?" he grinned. He flicked a marble at her. Linda caught it in midair and flicked it right back at him. It struck the boy's cheek with a light pat and rattled to the floor. Perry looked surprised.

"Get out of here, Perry," she said.

"Yes, ma'am," Perry said.