

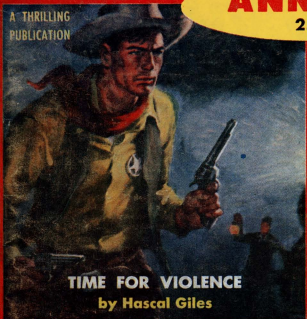
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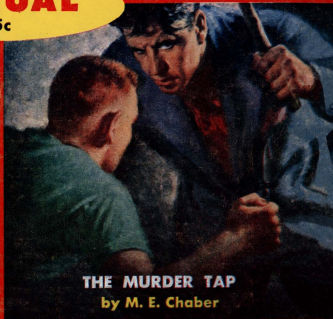
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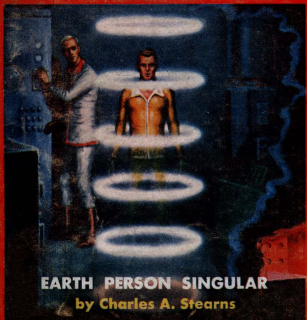
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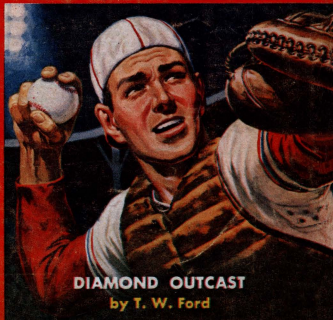
TIME FOR VIOLENCE
by Hascal Giles



THE MURDER TAP
by M. E. Chaber



EARTH PERSON SINGULAR
by Charles A. Stearns



DIAMOND OUTCAST
by T. W. Ford

STORIES

ANNUAL

Vol. 1, No. 1

1955 Edition

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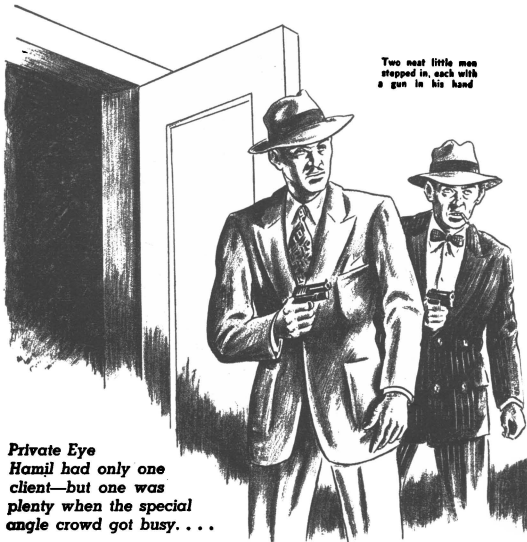
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ALEXANDER SAMALMAN, Editor

THE MURDER TAP

Two neat little men stepped in, each with a gun in his hand



*Private Eye
Hamil had only one
client—but one was
plenty when the special
angle crowd got busy. . . .*

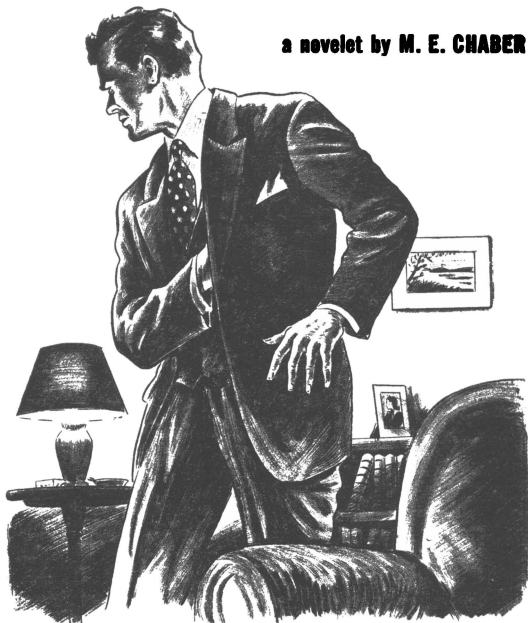
I

THE INAUGURATION was just a memory and all the bustle of the new administration moving into Washington was over. Most of the capital had settled down to political business as usual, so I knew it was about time for excitement to begin for me. I sat in my office and waited for it.

My office isn't what might be expected

from the address. It's just big enough for a chair, a desk, a hatrack, and a small bookcase. There's a phone on the desk, but it's an unlisted number. No secretary and no filing cabinets. And the bookcase is mostly filled with mystery novels. The frosted glass door has some lettering on it, but it's smaller than you find on most Washington doors.

a novelet by **M. E. CHABER**



The first line says, "Harry Hamal." That's me. The second line says, "Confidential, Inc." That's me, too.

I'm a private eye. Anyway, I've got a license that says I'm one. And I've got a piece of paper that says I can carry a gun in the District of Columbia. But I've got only one client, and I don't want any more. If any-

one comes in wanting to hire me, I say I'm too busy, and give the names of two or three good agencies.

The phone rang. I picked up the receiver and said hello.

"Harry," he said, "can you come over here right away?"

"Sure," I said. "What's up?"

"I'll tell you when you get here. It's personal this time." There was a click as he hung up.

That was my client. Senator Robert Webster. A nice guy even if he is a Senator. This is his third term in the Senate. He's an Independent. He's so popular in his home state that neither Democrats nor Republicans bothered to oppose him in the last election. So far as Senator Webster is concerned, it makes little difference which party is in power. He sides with whichever one he agrees with; if he thinks both are wrong, he strikes out on his own.

Senator Webster is chairman of a special investigating committee. It looks into any bit of Government business where there is suspicion of undue influence. It's a pretty busy committee.

THE SENATOR and I first got together about three years ago. I used to have a regular agency, but I didn't like it. I wouldn't have anything to do with lobbyists or special-angle boys, which means I barely got along. Then I inherited some money and decided to retire.

Before I closed up, I'd taken on a job for Senator Webster's committee. I liked the way he worked, and I guess it was mutual. We ended up making a deal. He didn't use any other investigators and I didn't take any other clients. It worked out fine. I just about made my overhead, but I was enjoying myself.

Maybe I ought to say one more thing about Washington. A lot of people thought that all the undue influence would end when the Cadillac set came into power. It didn't, and that wasn't anybody's fault. There are a lot of regulars in Washington who stay on, no matter who's in power. They don't hold any jobs, but they're in on most of the undue influence.

There's nothing melodramatic about it, like bribery or blackmail, as most people think. It's just friendship. The guys who do run the Government agencies have so much to do that a lot of the time they have to rely on what other people say. And it's natural to put more stock in what a friend says.

Then, too, Washington is a friendly town. Somebody's always giving cocktail parties. So there are a lot of guys who make a career of being friends of important people.

I got over to the Senate Office Building as fast as I could. Marge, the Senator's secretary, nodded when she saw me.

"Go on in," she said. "He's waiting for you."

When I went in he was going through some papers, but he shoved them to one side.

"What's the problem?" I asked.

"I'm not sure," he said, frowning. "We've been questioning a couple of witnesses on something that came to my attention. Haven't even got to the point of calling you to dig up more on it. But a week ago, I received a telephone call at home. It was about midnight. I was offered fifty thousand dollars to forget the investigation."

I whistled softly. Like I said, outright bribery is seldom tried—or even necessary—these days.

"Any idea who it was?" I asked.

"No. It was the voice of an obviously uneducated man. I'm afraid I didn't think of trying to find out who he was. I merely said I wasn't interested and hung up."

"You must have hold of something pretty big if they're offering that kind of money."

"That's just the point, Harry," he said. "It isn't. As you know, we've pretty well caught up on steel production since the strike, but just the same we need all the steel we can get in Korea. They still haven't the ninety-day reserve supply of steel-jacketed bullets the chiefs of staff consider necessary. As a result, civilian orders still come under a more severe scrutiny than normally. Yet in the confusion of changing administrations, someone gave a steel priority to a Sarmiento Racing Corporation—to be used in the construction of a new race track out in California."

"How big an order?" I asked.

"Only seventy-five thousand dollars." He saw my expression and nodded. "As a matter of fact, Harry, we weren't paying much attention to it. We had asked a few questions, but were inclined to consider it just a blunder."

I was getting interested. Nobody puts up fifty thousand dollars to cover up a seventy-five-thousand-dollar deal that probably wouldn't have amounted to anything in the first place.

"I might not have paid any attention even to that," the Senator went on, "if it hadn't been for what followed. My wife and children are back in our home state for a short visit. Three nights ago, a young lady showed up at my house. She insisted that I had sent for her and was rather crude in her attempts to enter when I refused to invite her in. She finally left when I threatened to call the police. The next day I happened to notice her picture in the paper. She's an entertainer in some night club. Her name is Carmencita. I don't know her last name, but Senator Greene happened to see the picture as I was looking at it, and he told me there are rumors she has been involved in—ah—a number of political deals."

THAT was putting it politely. I knew about Carmencita. She was a *flamenco* dancer in a small night club, the *El Companero*. She was a beautiful dame, with long black hair and the kind of figure that would make an invalid forsake his wheel-chair. And it was said, that if you knew the right people and were willing to do something she wanted done that she would be available for one-night stands. Favors for favors.

"You've got more willpower than I have, Senator," I said, with a grin. "Okay, I'll see what I can get."

"There's one more thing," he said. "I think my phone is tapped, and has been ever since I refused that bribe."

"You're sure?" I asked. Not that I was surprised. Phone tapping is illegal, but it's practically a national pastime in Washington.

"Reasonably certain," he said.

I picked up his phone, asked Marge to give me an outside line, and dialed my own office number, listening closely. There was a brief split-second when the volume diminished so slightly that it was hardly noticeable.

I put the receiver down. This wasn't a sure check, but it was enough to make me look further. That brief fall in volume could have been caused by faulty equipment—or it

could have been caused when the tap was cut in and before the tapper's condenser and resistor began compensating for the power drain.

"You may be right," I told the Senator. "I'll find out for sure. Anything else to tell me?"

He shook his head.

I picked up the phone and got an outside line again. I dialed the letters of the Senator's exchange, then the numbers, 9960. That would connect me with the telephone company's exchange repair clerk.

"This is Jones," I said when the clerk answered. They wouldn't know the names of all their repairmen. "I'm checking some trouble on a line and I need the pair and cable numbers."

I gave him the Senator's phone number. In a couple of minutes, he gave me the numbers I wanted. Then I dialed the cable records office of the phone company.

"This is Jones," I said again. "I need the multiples on two-twelve."

A minute later, I had an address. It was no more than half a block away.

"What was all that?" the Senator wanted to know.

"Locating the place where your phone may have been tapped," I said. "That's how easy it is."

He was still looking startled as I left.

The address turned out to be a small office building. This was the place where the phone wires from Senator Webster's office, along with the wires from other offices, would go through the basement and into an underground cable. If there was a tap, that was where it would be.

The janitor was willing to take me into the basement when he saw the card identifying me as an investigator for a Senate committee. People in Washington have a way of being more afraid of Senate committees than they are of the police.

There was a tap on the wires, all right. I ripped the connection loose and showed it to the janitor. He looked frightened.

"I didn't know anything about it," he said. "I wouldn't let anybody fool around with those wires. You've got to believe me."

"Relax, Pop," I said. "Nobody's accusing

you. When was the last time there was a telephone repairman down here?"

He thought a minute. "About a week ago."

"Had any new tenants in the last week or so?"

"One," he said. "Fellow up in three-fifteen. Said he was a writer and wanted a nice quiet place. You think—"

"I think," I said. "Don't worry about him. I'll take care of it."

II



I WENT up to Office 315. There was nothing on the door except the number. There was a light inside, so I knew somebody was there. I tried the door. It was locked, so I rapped on it and rattled the knob.

"Who's there?" somebody asked from inside.

"Fire inspector," I said. "Open up."

"Just a minute," he said.

I could hear some activity inside. Then the door swung open.

"Sorry, Inspector," he said. "I'm a writer, and I keep the door locked so I won't be disturbed."

There was a typewriter on the desk, but he didn't look much like a writer. I'd never heard of a writer who carried a gun, and the bulge under his left arm certainly wasn't muscle.

I walked across to look at the desk. There was a sheet of paper in the typewriter, but there wasn't anything written on it.

"I ain't done much today," he said. He sounded a little nervous.

I leaned over and yanked open one of the desk drawers.

"Hey, what're you doing?" he yelled.

There were head-phones in the drawer. I reached down and jerked them loose.

"This," I said, holding them up. "Anybody ever tell you it isn't nice to eaves-drop?"

His hand seemed to be trying to decide whether to go for the gun or not. "You a

cop?" he asked.

I shook my head. "I'm just a guy who doesn't like phone-tappers. Who are you working for, Buster?"

He cursed, and did go for the gun then. But I was ready for that. I whipped the head-phones down on his wrist. They made a good healthy crack and he temporarily lost the use of that hand. But he was a tough boy. He rushed me.

I had already figured he wouldn't talk easy, and I saw no reason to waste time. I took a swinging left on the shoulder, then stepped inside and hit him hard on the point of the chin. He flopped over the desk, taking the typewriter with him, and hit the floor on the other side. He tried to get up, and made it as far as one knee. Then he folded up like an old newspaper.

I found what I was looking for in his wallet. His name was Larry Blair and he was an operator for a private detective named George Stacy. I knew Stacy, and this was his kind of work. He didn't care what he did as long as the money was right. He had the reputation of working two ways from the middle—blackmailing as many people as he billed legitimately.

I put the wallet back, and went through the desk. It held an impulse recorder, which would give the numbers called, and a tape recorder. I took what tape there was and stuck it in my pocket.

The guy on the floor was just starting to groan when the phone rang. I hesitated a minute, then picked it up.

"Yeah?" I said, hoping I sounded something like Larry Blair.

"Augie," a voice on the phone announced.

"Yeah?" I said again.

There was a long pause and I knew it had been the wrong thing to say. Larry Blair probably would have known what Augie wanted without asking.

"You're not Larry," the voice said. "Who the hell are you?" It was one of those flat voices that never change no matter what's being said.

"Larry's not feeling well," I said. "I just took his place. He said you'd call."

It didn't work. The only answer I got was the click of the connection being broken. As

I put the phone down Larry was staring at me from the floor.

I came around the desk fast in case he still decided to go for the gun. I hadn't taken it away from him.

"Who's Augie?" I asked him.

"I don't know," he said sullenly.

I REACHED down, pulled him to his feet, and cuffed him across the jaw hard enough to make his head rock.

"Who's Augie?" I asked again.

He tried to stare it out, but his toughness didn't go deep enough. "Augie is all I know," he said. "I ain't never seen him or heard his last name. Stacy told me a guy named Augie would call sometimes, and when he did I should give him what I had."

"You mean you reported to him what you'd overheard on Senator Webster's phone?"

"When he called. The rest of the time I just gave it to Stacy."

"Is Augie the guy who hired Stacy to put this tap on the Senator's phone?" I asked.

"I don't know. You think Stacy tells anybody his business?"

I decided he was telling the truth. I reached out and pulled his gun from the shoulder holster. I dropped the shells in my pocket and tossed the empty gun on the desk. Then I went downstairs and got a cab.

George Stacy's office wasn't far from mine, but it was in a high-rent building. On the sixth floor, according to the name board in the lobby. It was already past the hour when most offices closed, but I figured that Stacy would probably still be there.

I got out of the elevator on his floor and walked past a couple of darkened law offices and an empty one. The next office was Stacy's. There was a light shining through the pebbled glass of the door, so I went in.

There was subdued lighting and expensive furniture in the reception room, but no receptionist. I wasn't surprised. I'd heard that Stacy wouldn't even hire a secretary because she might start finding out what went on in the office.

On the far side of the reception room was a solid oak door. George Stacy's name was on it. Also the word "Private." I'd just

started for it when there was a gunshot from the other side of the door.

I'm not fond of violence, but I needed some conversation with Stacy. So I pulled my own gun and threw open the door. I went in fast, stepping to one side and trying to cover the whole room.

George Stacy was slumped over, with his head on the desk. A thread of blood was spreading out over the light maple. I, thought he'd committed suicide. Then suddenly realized there wasn't any gun around. I wasted several minutes looking for a place someone could hide before I even saw the other door. I should have known Stacy was the kind of guy who'd have a back way out of his private office.

I ran across and opened the door. It opened into the corridor. But I was too late. There was no one in sight, although I could still hear footsteps going down the stairs.

There was no point to chasing someone who was carrying around that much lead. I turned and went back into the office.

Stacy was dead, all right. Someone had put a large-caliber bullet through the back of his head. The gun had been held close enough to scorch the hair. It must have been someone Stacy had known pretty well, to get that close to his back.

Late as it was, there wasn't much probability anyone else had heard the shot. I decided to take a chance and look around.

There was nothing in a couple of filing cabinets but some old reports on divorce cases. And divorces were a small part of George Stacy's business. To search the desk, I had to move one of his arms to get at the drawers. It was a waste of time. In one drawer was a bottle of bourbon and a carton of cigarettes. In another was a gun. The rest were empty.

There was something odd about it. Stacy wasn't the kind of guy not to have records. And the office didn't look as if it had been searched. Whoever killed him wouldn't have had time to do any searching before I barged in.

THEN I had a delayed memory. When I'd moved his arm, I had felt something inside his coat sleeve. I'd taken it for granted

that it was a cuff link. Now it seemed to me as if it had maybe been too large for that. More like a key.

I went over and explored the sleeve. It was a key. Fastened inside the sleeve with a safety pin—a gold safety pin.

I grinned when I saw that. George Stacy had been a fancy dresser, definitely not the type to be pinning keys inside his coat. So that key must have been pretty important to him. It looked like a door key. I didn't have any idea what it was for, but I tossed it in my pocket. If it had been important to him, maybe I could figure out how to use it.

As I left, I was thinking that probably hundreds of people in Washington had a reason for killing George Stacy. But I didn't believe it was coincidence that he had been murdered right after a character named Augie had discovered that someone was onto the phone tap. Killing Stacy was a pretty reliable way of keeping him from telling who had hired him.

I still had a couple of other leads. One was the Sarmiento Racing Corporation. It would have to wait until the next day. The other was Carmencita, and she wouldn't have to wait.

El Companero was a small, intimate club, with a five-piece Spanish orchestra. There were only a few empty tables when I got there. They always did good business, mostly because of Carmencita. Regardless of what she did when school was out, she was one hell of a dancer.

The waiter took me to a table and I ordered dinner. *Paella Valenciana*, which is one of my favorite dishes. It doesn't sound like much to describe—it's saffron rice, seafood, veal and chicken cooked in a casserole—but it's heaven to eat. With it, I had some imported *manzanilla*, a white sherry that tastes mild, but suddenly sneaks up on you.

By the time I'd finished off with coffee and a glass of *anis*, I realized that it was past the time the show usually went on. I motioned for the waiter.

"Carmencita?" I asked, when he came over.

He shrugged. "I do not know for certain," he said. He had only a slight Spanish accent. "But I think she will not dance to-

night. She is ill perhaps."

I made appropriate noises over the possibility of her illness, then the waiter and I entered into a slight negotiation. Some five minutes later, I had ten dollars less in my pocket and the waiter was scurrying away.

When he came back, he put a strip of paper in my hand. Carmencita's address was written on it. For the first time I learned her last name was Serrano.

III



CARMENCITA'S address was a good one. Not the most expensive, but not the cheapest either. I rang the bell and somebody buzzed the door open. There was a self-service elevator.

The apartment door was open when I reached it. A girl was standing in the doorway. It wasn't Carmencita, but she looked just as good. Maybe a little better. This one had red hair and green eyes. She wore a tailored suit, but the severity only accented her figure.

"Miss Serrano?" I asked.

"She's not here now," the girl said. She hesitated, then said, "She works in a night club. You'll probably find her there."

"Not tonight," I said. I looked past her into the apartment. It looked as if there were three rooms. Nicely furnished. "Any idea where else I might find her?"

She looked me over. There was something like approval in her eyes. That was all right with me.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"Harry Hamal," I said. "Miss Serrano doesn't know me, but I want to see her rather badly. On business." I emphasized that so the redhead wouldn't get the wrong idea. I didn't want her thinking I was one of Carmencita's playmates.

She smiled as if she knew what I was thinking. "I'm sorry," she said. "I haven't any idea where she is."

"You a friend of hers?" I asked.

"We share this apartment," the redhead said. Her tone seemed to indicate that the

relationship was no more than that.

I grinned. "Well, thanks, Miss—?"

"Carter," she said. "Fran Carter."

"Thanks, Miss Carter," I said. I looked her over again. "You a dancer, too?"

She laughed. "No, I work in the Defense Department."

"Oh," I said. The Sarmento racing deal had gone through the Defense Department. "That must be interesting."

She seemed to think it was just a polite comment. "It is, sometimes. I'll tell Carmencita you were here, Mr. Hamal. If you don't find her before then, why not drop around tomorrow evening? She's usually here until about eight o'clock."

"Maybe I'll do that," I said.

I meant it, too. Partly for pleasure, but partly for business. I never could resist redheads—or coincidences.

I decided to call it a day. There wasn't much I could do before morning, so I went home to my two-room apartment in the Jefferson Arms. A nice quiet place with a good class of neighbors. There was a retired opera singer next door. One of the more respectable lobbyists lived on the floor above, and one of our more prominent bachelor Senators, a guy who keeps making the headlines by seeing subversives under somebody else's bed, lived directly below me. I didn't know about the rest of the tenants, but I imagined they were more of the same.

On the way in, I picked up a paper and a couple of cans of beer. I'd just taken off my coat when I sensed something wrong in the place. It took me another minute to realize it was a sound. From the bathroom. Running water. I hurried in, thinking I must have forgotten to turn off the faucet that morning.

It was the stall shower. The hot water was running full blast. The glass door was all fogged up and steam was gushing out at the bottom.

Wondering how I could have been so stupid, I yanked open the door. Something slammed me back against the wall, then thumped to the floor.

Well, I'd found Carmencita. Her black hair was drenched with water and steam was rising from it. She was naked and her body was still as beautiful as I remembered

it. Death had only made it look more like marble. She had been strangled. I could see the bruise marks around her throat.

IT WOULD be hard to tell when she had been killed. That boiling hot shower would throw the whole business of body temperature and rigor mortis.

This pretty well settled it. Two leads—two murders. Somebody didn't want any investigation of why Senator Webster was being worked on.

Carmencita hadn't been dumped in my apartment just for fun. A murder charge against me might not stick, but it would certainly finish me off as the investigator for Senator Webster's committee. After something like that, I'd be fair game for any unfriendly Senator in a committee hearing.

I'd got that far with the reasons when somebody knocked on my door.

I never moved so fast in my life. I picked up Carmencita and got her back inside the stall shower. The water was scalding hot, but it was no time to be sensitive. I propped her against the wall and shut the door. I tore off my own clothes and splashed plenty of water on myself at the sink, as if I'd been taking a shower, and grabbed a robe. The knocking came for the third time as I left the bathroom.

"I'm coming!" I yelled.

I opened the door and managed to look surprised. I knew both of them. The big, rangy guy was Lieutenant Russell Peterson of Homicide. The other one was Sergeant Gray. Also of Homicide.

"What took you so long?" the lieutenant asked.

"Long?" I said. "You knocked more than once?"

"Long enough and loud enough to wake the dead," he said. He put a special emphasis on that last word.

"You ought to go down and try it in the morgue then," I said. It didn't get a laugh. "What is this—a social call?"

"Not exactly, Hamal. You haven't told us why it took you so long."

"I was taking a shower." I let myself sound a little annoyed. "What the hell does it look like I was doing—performing high

dives into the sink?"

"You couldn't've been drowning someone in the bathtub," Sergeant Gray said, laughing. He had a high-pitched chortle. I decided I didn't like him.

"Very funny," I told him. "What's this all about, Lieutenant?"

"We got a tip there might be a woman up here. A dead woman."

"You got the wrong apartment," I said. "I like them alive. I suppose this tip was anonymous?"

He sighed heavily. "It was anonymous. But you know how it is, Harry. We still have to check. Mind if we take a look around? We haven't got a search warrant—yet."

"Go ahead," I said, trying to sound willing. "Only try to make it snappy. This anonymous tipster—named me, huh?"

"Just the address and the apartment number." He was looking in the clothes closet. "You know a dame named Carmencita?"

"The dancer?"

"That's the one."

"I don't know her," I said. "I saw her dance once, but that's all. She had what it takes. Is that who you're looking for?"

He nodded. "She's missing. We checked on that before we came over here."

"Maybe she's shacked up," I said. "From what I hear, she's a girl with broad interests."

This time I drew a laugh from the sergeant. The high-pitched chortle. I decided I wouldn't make any more jokes for him.

"Maybe," was all the lieutenant said.

It doesn't take long to search a two-room apartment, so pretty quick we were in the bathroom. The lieutenant just stood there, looking around, but Sergeant Gray wandered over to the stall shower. He reached out to touch the handle.

"You left your shower on," he said. He made it sound like an accusation.

I SAID, "Sure, I had some vague idea of finishing my shower if you two ever get through bird-dogging me. Or were you planning on hanging around and taking it with me?"

"You ain't my type," he said. He opened his mouth, all ready to laugh at his own wit.

"That's a relief," I said quickly. "You can't always tell these days."

He closed his mouth and scowled at me. "What do you mean by that crack?"

"All right," Lieutenant Peterson said before I could answer. "I guess you're clean, Harry. Sorry to have bothered you. Come on, Gray."

The sergeant looked disappointed, but followed Peterson to the door.

"If you lose any live girls," I said, "come around and I'll help you look."

"We wouldn't know what to do with them," Peterson said wearily. "See you around, Harry."

"Sure," I said.

I closed the door as they went down the hall. Then I sat down on the edge of a chair and waited for some strength to come back into my knees.

After awhile, I went back into the bathroom. I wrapped a towel around my hand and arm and managed to turn off the shower without scalding myself.

The next problem was what to do about Carmencita. As I looked down at her, I thought it was probably the first time she had ever been a problem. But then it was the first time she'd ever been dead.

I had to get her out of my apartment. But this wasn't the kind of house where you could carry out a naked corpse without arousing some curiosity. If this sort of thing was going to keep on happening to me I'd have to move to a less conventional neighborhood.

Then suddenly I had a brilliant idea. I liked it so much I even started laughing to myself. I went over and rummaged around in my dresser. I finally found what I was looking for. A set of picks that would open any lock, if you knew how to use them. I did.

I went out and down the stairs to the next floor. The bachelor Senator was away on another of his investigating trips. I knew it because he and I had the same maid and she had told me. But just to make sure, I knocked. When there was no answer, I went to work with the picks. It took only a couple of minutes. I made sure I had the door unlocked, then I left it closed and went back upstairs.

I dried her off the best I could. Then I

wrapped her in a sheet and hoisted her body over my shoulder. When I opened the door and looked out, the hall was clear. I went down the stairs, hoping that everybody on the Senator's floor would be equally busy minding his own business.

Luck was with me. I slipped inside the Senator's apartment and deposited the corpse in the nearest chair. I didn't bother to make it fancy. I just pulled the sheet free and beat it, locking the door behind me.

IV



WHEN I got back upstairs the phone was ringing. I threw the sheet in the laundry basket and picked up the receiver. I was a little out of breath, but I managed to say hello naturally.

"Mr. Hamal?" a woman's voice asked. It was a nice voice.

"Yeah," I said.

"This is Fran Carter." It was the redhead. "Have you heard from Carmencita yet?"

"No," I said truthfully. "Why? Did you tell her I was looking for her?"

"No," she said. She sounded puzzled. "But she must have intended to get in touch with you. When I went to make a phone call awhile ago I discovered that she'd written your name and address on the cover of our phone book. I'm pretty certain it wasn't there yesterday, so she must have written it down just before she left. Are—are you sure you didn't call her earlier?"

"I wish I had," I said fervently.

"Well, I just thought I'd phone you about it." She sounded a little uncertain. "I'll tell her that you were here."

"Thanks, honey," I said. "I'll be around tomorrow evening."

I hung up and spent a little time wondering about the redhead. Then I got undressed for the second time that night. I decided against taking a shower. Instead, I took a fast bath and went to bed. When I went to sleep I dreamed the redhead and I were taking a shower together.

I was up early the next morning. While I

was having coffee, I tried to figure out where I could find myself two brand new, un-murdered leads. But nothing came until I was changing things from the pockets of the suit I had worn the day before and came across the key I'd found in Stacy's sleeve.

I sat down and gave it some thought. The problem was where would I be if I were a room to which George Stacy carried a key. And I had a bright idea—not original, but bright. It was one of the oldest dodges, but still good. In fiction it went back to *The Purloined Letter*, but in real life it probably started with a caveman who didn't want to split a tiger ham with his pals.

I went back down to the building where Stacy had his office—to the same floor, but not the same office. I stopped at the empty one next door. And the key worked. Inside there was nothing but cabinets of one kind or another. Some were regular filing cabinets; others obviously held tape recordings. I took off my coat and went to work.

It didn't take me long to find out that the place was a gold mine—if you didn't care what kind of gold you mined. He had enough stuff there to blackmail half of Washington, all of it neatly labeled. I quickly found the tapes on Senator Webster's phone conversations. I took them and started looking for something else.

The trouble was I didn't know exactly what I was looking for. There was some stuff on Carmencita, and I put that to one side with the Senator's tapes.

I had about given up and was putting tapes back when I noticed one in my hand labeled *Ferris Grenville*. He was one of those professional "friends" I mentioned before. He'd been around Washington a long time and had had a finger in a variety of things, ranging from the China lobby to cotton interests. I knew so much about him I hadn't paid much attention to the tape. Then I noticed there was something else written under his name. *Sar Race*. That could mean Sarmiento Racing Corporation. I added it to the others I had and left.

Back at the apartment, I used my own machine to erase the tapes that bore Senator Webster's name, then listened to the tapes on Carmencita. They would have been great as

a serial in *Sturling Confession Stories*, but there wasn't a thing for me.

FINALLY I put on the Ferris Grenville tape. It was the record of a telephone call, long distance to New York. I listened to the operators trading chitchat, then to the number ringing. Finally a man answered.

"Polly?" the Washington voice asked.

"Yeah."

"This is Ferris. I've just been talking to Harding."

"Yeah?"

"You're crazy, Polly," said Ferris. "Asking for a steel priority on that race track. We can't do it."

"What's the matter with you guys? All I want is seventy-five grand worth of steel. You guys are yelling as if I was asking you to put a snatch on the White House."

"It's just that it's foolish, Polly," Ferris said. "A race track is hardly an essential commodity. If anyone should start looking into it, we might suddenly find the Sar being investigated. If that happens, we'll be in trouble."

"I got boys there in Washington. They can take care of any trouble that comes up."

"Not the kind of trouble I'm talking about, Polly. You can't treat the Government like—like a gang of hoodlums. Better forget about building the new track. If you wait a few months, the restrictions will probably be lifted and you can build it then."

"I want it now," the New York voice said. "And what I want I get. What the hell's with you guys? You bellyache like old women."

"I'm just trying to give you some advice," Ferris said stiffly. "After all, that's what you—what Harding retained me for."

"Like hell it is. I pay you and Harding to do what I want done, not to keep yapping at me. Now, get on it. If you run into anything you can't handle yourselves, turn it over to Augie. That's what I've got him down there for."

There was a click as the New York end hung up. I heard a heavy sigh from Ferris Grenville, then a click as he hung up.

Stacy had really hit pay dirt with this tape. Ferris Grenville had kept his skirts clean in Washington for thirty years, but this tied

him in with one of the biggest criminals in America. It wasn't hard to figure out who "Polly" was. It had to be Polvo Cocido, a New York gangster who was believed to be one of the six men who ran the Crime Syndicate. There was already a Federal move under way to strip him of citizenship and deport him.

The "Harding" of the conversation was probably Peter Harding, one of Washington's most successful attorneys. Most of his work was representing individuals and corporations before the Government, but I seemed to remember that he had been Cocido's attorney when the hood had been up before the Senate Crime Committee. "Augie" probably was the man I'd talked to on the phone. And I was willing to bet Augie had dusted George Stacy.

The motive was apparently something called "the Sar" and I'd have to dig that out. But I was beginning to see why it was so fatal to be a lead in this case. Polly Cocido usually played for keeps.

I called Senator Webster on the phone. He put up an argument, but finally agreed to fix it so I could look over new contracts let by the Defense Department. In about thirty minutes, he called back and said I could do it the following morning.

That left me with the rest of the day free. There was no point in pushing Ferris Grenville until I knew what was holding him up.

At about six-thirty, I shaved and showered. Then I went over to the apartment house where Carmencita had lived. The redhead answered the door.

"Oh, Mr. Hamal," she said. "I've been pretty worried about Carmencita. She hasn't been home since I saw you yesterday."

"This the first time she stayed out all night?" I asked.

"N-no."

"Well, there you are," I said, with a grin. "I didn't really expect her to be here. I was thinking maybe we could have dinner."

SHE looked as if she wanted to, but wasn't sure she should.

"It's all right," I told her. "I work for Senator Webster and I won't try to pry any defense secrets out of you."

She laughed, and said she'd come. I waited in the living room while she got ready. Then I took her to a small restaurant where the steaks were good and so was the music of the small band. But it was also the kind of place where the tables were arranged to give you a little privacy.

"It's funny your saying that," she said, when we were seated at a table. "I mean about prying defense secrets out of me. One of the things I don't like about Carmencita is that she's always asking me about what goes on in the office."

"You must have an important job," I said. I was just making conversation.

She shook her head. "I'm a file clerk," she said. "Carmencita always wants to know why I don't look up contracts and things like that. She says I don't have any curiosity." Suddenly she thought she got the connection between me and Carmencita. "That's why you wanted to see her, isn't it? The Senate's investigating her."

"Not exactly," I said, laughing. "Most of the Senate never even heard of her, although I'll admit there may be a few Senators who knew her. Maybe too well."

"She always has dates with important people," the redhead said. "She keeps bragging about them, even though I've told her I don't want to hear about it."

"No curiosity?" I asked.

She laughed.

"You know if she ever did any kind of work except dancing?" I asked casually.

"I don't know. She owns a lot of nice things—like a mink coat—things she couldn't buy on what the club pays her, but I don't think she got them by working." She flushed slightly. "I know I'm being catty, but I don't like Carmencita much."

"Then why do you live with her?" I asked. She gave me a look. "Have you tried to find living quarters in Washington recently?"

She had something there.

Just then the waiter arrived and I ordered. When he left, I excused myself and went out to the phone booths. I had just about decided that Fran Carter either had nothing to do with the case or was the world's best actress. I was voting for the first.

I knew that by this time Lieutenant Peterson was on duty again. I put my handkerchief over the mouthpiece of the phone and dialed Police Headquarters, asked for Homicide. It was Gray who answered the phone.

"You cops are a bunch of dopes," I growled into the phone. "You went to the wrong apartment last night. I told you it was three-E, not four-E."

I hung up before the sergeant could even grunt. Then I went back to the table.

I didn't ask Fran any more questions and she didn't mention Carmencita again. As a matter of fact the conversation got more and more personal. I didn't mind at all.

After dinner, we had a few drinks and danced for a couple of hours, then I took her home. I maybe had other ideas, but she said good night to me at the door. So I went back to my own apartment.

I listened politely while the doorman told me of all the excitement. It seemed that the cops had discovered a dead woman up in the Senator's apartment. I clucked sympathetically and went upstairs and to bed.

V



NEXT morning I was at the Defense Department shortly after they were at work. Some handsome young career man took me in hand, with obvious distaste, and led me back into the offices. He stopped in front of a desk occupied by a red-headed girl.

"Miss Carter," he said, "this—er—gentleman is from Senator Webster's office. He wants to look at any new contracts that have gone through in the past two months. You may give him the assistance he requires. If there's any difficulty, call me." He started to march stiffly away.

I couldn't resist the temptation. "What do you think you could do for me that she can't," I called after him.

He gave me one of the glares Government workers reserve for us civilians and marched on his way. I turned back to Fran. She looked tired.

"That was mean," she said, but she

didn't mean it. "Do—do you know about Carmencita?"

I nodded.

"The police called me right after you took me home last night," she said. "I had to go down and identify her. It—was horrible. I didn't like her much, but it was terrible—her being killed like that. I—I felt even worse when I realized she was already dead when I was talking about her last night."

"You shouldn't," I told her. "The fact that someone dies, or is killed, isn't really a reason to change your opinion. Besides, traveling in the company Carmencita kept almost carries a guarantee of trouble."

"I suppose so." Fran hesitated a moment. "The police asked me all about her. I—I didn't tell them about your asking for her or about finding your name and address on the telephone book. Did I do right?"

"You did wonderful," I told her. "Now how about looking up those contracts."

She nodded and went over to a row of filing cabinets. I followed her over.

"If you just happen to notice any where the attorney representing the contractor is Peter Harding, I'll be especially interested."

She looked up and there was a light of realization in her eyes. For a minute, I wished I hadn't mentioned him. But then she spoke and it was all right.

"Peter Harding?" she said. "That's one of the men Carmencita bragged about going out with. She said he was a very important man. Did you know he was a friend of hers?"

"No, but I'm not surprised," I said truthfully. "Honey, I'm really not as smart as I seem. I just go along picking up one thing after another and sometimes it adds up."

She went back to digging out the contracts. I had no idea there could be so many contracts signed in only a couple of months. When she'd finished, I would have had to stand on tiptoe to look over the top.

There was an empty desk next to where she sat. I dragged all the documents over there and started to go through them. A lot of them were contracts between the Government and big, reputable firms. Those I tossed aside without even reading them. Slowly, I began to weed out the little ones. Finally I came to one that caught my eye.

The Sar Steel Products Corporation. That was the name on the contract. And Ferris Grenville, in his phone call to Cocido, had been worried about somebody finding out the relationship between the race track and the Sar.

The Sar Steel Products Corporation had agreed to manufacture steel shell jackets for the Army. It wasn't an especially large contract. Clipped to it was a notation stating that the corporation had been given a priority of three thousand tons of steel for the first year. There was also a sheet giving a few facts on the company.

There was nothing startling about it. The corporation was ten years old and had been manufacturing souvenirs and cigarette lighters. The president and chief stockholder was a Joseph Manassin. I'd never heard of him. The contract had been okayed by some underling in the department and initialed by a couple of dozen other guys.

EVERYTHING seemed to be in order. If I were going to find a miracle it wouldn't be in the contract. I had an idea.

"Fran," I said. She looked up. "Could I see a copy of the priority given this company?" I handed her the contract.

"That's in another department," she said. She looked at me. "Is it important, Harry?" I nodded.

"I know one of the girls there," she said. "I'll get it. You wait here. If anyone asks for me, tell them I've gone to the rest room."

She was back in about twenty minutes with a slim manilla envelope. There was a worried expression on her face.

"I've never done anything like this before," she said. "Maybe I shouldn't have."

"It's all right, honey," I said. "It only saves a little time. They'd have to show it to us if we demanded it."

I could see she still wasn't sure, but she turned it over. I took the papers from the envelope and glanced at them. I needed only one glance. This was a priority for thirty thousand tons of steel for the first year: I checked the contract again to be sure. *That* still said three thousand tons. Somebody was getting himself an extra twenty-seven thousand tons of steel.

I tucked the priority papers back in the envelope and handed them to Fran.

"Everything all right?" she asked.

"Just peachy," I said.

I turned back to look at the contract some more while she returned the envelope. I discovered one other thing in the description of the company that was curious. It had a branch office in Buenos Aires. I just couldn't imagine what a souvenir and cigarette lighter company needed with a branch office in South America. Especially a South American country that was so unfriendly to the United States.

I put the contract with the others and waited for Fran to come back.

"I'm on my way," I said. "See you tonight?"

She nodded.

"I'll be there about seven," I said.

"I'll be waiting," she answered.

I went out past the young career man. "Sorry I didn't need you, Buster," I said, "but I don't think we would have been happy together." He was still glaring as I went out to the elevator.

I took a cab over to my office. The first thing I did was put in a call to a private detective I knew in New York. I asked him to do a fast check on the Sar Steel Products Corporation and call me back. Then I sat back and did a little idle thinking. The business of the branch office in Buenos Aires still intrigued me.

I suddenly remembered that about a year before we'd had a guy in Buenos Aires do some checking on something for us. I opened a drawer in my desk and poked around among the scraps of papers that had been accumulating for too long. Finally, I found a little notebook and in it I found the guy's name, address and phone number. I picked up the receiver and put in the call.

After listening to various operators yacking at each other for a good fifteen minutes, I finally got my party. I told him who I was and after awhile he remembered me. I told him what I wanted and said I'd send him an international money order at once.

"Excellent, señor," he said. "I'll have it for you tomorrow."

"Not tomorrow," I said patiently. "Right

away. Get out there right now, then hurry back and call me. The quicker the better."

"But señor," he protested, "this is the siesta hour."

"I don't give a damn if it's the mating hour," I snapped. "Just get on it."

He argued some more, but finally gave in. His tone of voice indicated his opinion of crazy *Americanos*, but I didn't give a damn.

I MADE one more phone call. To the West Coast. I found out what I already knew from the tape recording. The Sarmiento Racing Corporation was owned by Polvo Cocido. But I got one surprise. Two minority stockholders were Peter Harding and Ferris Grenville.

After that I just sat back, chewed my fingernails and waited.

My New York friend called back at about one o'clock. I'd just finished a sandwich and coffee I'd had sent up.

"You're traveling in fast company, Harry," he said when I answered. "You know who owns the Sar Corporation?"

"I can guess," I grunted, "but I want to know."

"Up until about a year ago," he said, "it was owned by an ordinary business man. But then it was taken over by new management. The present president and chief stockholder is Joseph Manassin—sometimes better known as Little Joe Manassi, good right hand of one Polly Cocido."

So that was why the name had sounded familiar.

"Manassin is his right name," my friend continued. "But it seems when he came into the country, the immigration officer left the 'n' off and he's left it that way until now. The other stockholders are Bunny Cocido, Polly's wife, and two guys named Peter Harding and Ferris Grenville. They own two shares each."

Harding and Grenville must be slipping. I thought, actually to take stock in the companies. Unless Cocido had made them take it so they would be involved. That sounded like it, especially since they had only two shares each.

"Get anything else?" I asked him.

"Not much. The plant hasn't been oper-

ating in the last year, although they've put in a lot of new machinery. But they've got a Government contract now so I guess they'll be going soon. Funny thing about that though."

"What?"

"I talked to a guy at the plant. According to him the Government contract won't keep more than a third of the factory busv. Yet they didn't try to get a bigger contract. That's about it, Harry."

"Thanks," I said. "I'll put a check in the mail."

Thirty minutes later my other call came in. From Buenos Aires. Collect.

"There is very little to tell, Señor Hanaal," he said. "The Sar Steel Products Corporation has an office in the Eva Peron Building here. They've had the office for six months, but I do not believe they have as yet transacted any business. At present, there are no employees except the manager. He has his own business which shares the same office. Would you care to know about that?"

"Yes," I said. "Who is the manager?"

"A Señor Raymond Dizzler. He is a compatriot of yours, but it is understood that he has applied for citizenship in my country."

That was another familiar name and my pulse quickened. Raymond Dizzler was well-known all over the United States, but under the name of Dizzy Raymond. He'd been mixed up in about every illegal racket you could think of and was supposed to have been a partner with Polly Cocido in the narcotics trade. About a year before, he'd skipped the country rather than face a grand jury.

"What's his company?"

"It is called the Teodulo-Sarmiento Arms Syndicate."

There was the name Sarmiento again.

"Arms Syndicate?" I said. "Does that mean it's a company dealing in weapons?"

"Such would seem to be its intention," he said. "Señor Dizzler's company also has not contracted any business as yet, but his official papers mention arms and ammunition. Although Señor Dizzler has not yet made any contracts, I understand he is frequently visited by the representatives of a number of countries."

"What countries?"

He hesitated a moment, then said softly, "Those which you refer to as satellite or Iron Curtain countries."

I thanked him, promised to send him his money and hung up.

VI



POLLY COCIDO had worked out a pretty set-up for himself. He had a legitimate contract with the Government giving him a steel priority. But it was rigged so he had an extra twenty-seven thousand tons of steel a year.

And that was going into arms or ammunition which he was going to sell to the Russian satellites. And he might have got away with it if he hadn't gone jumpy and tried to bribe Webster. The connection between the Sar and the track was tenuous enough to have been overlooked.

This was a deal strictly for Senator Webster's committee. But the committee could do a better job if the case wasn't cluttered up with a couple of unsolved murders. I decided to do a little more pushing.

I went home and picked up the tape and a portable player. Then I went to see Ferris Grenville.

He operated from a suite in one of our better hotels. He was sitting behind a desk when I came in. Grenville was in his early fifties and looked like a slick version of a man of distinction.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Hanaal?" he asked politely.

"I want you to hear something," I said.

I set up the player and started the tape going.

"Very pretty," he said when it was finished. But something new had been added. He'd taken a gun from the desk and was pointing it at me. "I suppose you got it from George Stacy?"

"Yes," I admitted. It was going a little differently than I had expected.

"What had you intended doing with it?" he asked. The emphasis was obvious.

"I was curious about one thing," I said. "How did you jack up that steel priority?"

"You know about that, too? It was really quite simple. We merely saw to it that a slightly altered version of the contract was given over to the priority people."

"Why did you and Harding take stock in the companies?" I asked. "That was foolish of you."

"Cocido insisted," he said drily. He reached for the phone with his left hand. "I presume you haven't shared this with anyone else?"

"Not yet."

"Then I fear we must do something about disposing of you."

"Like Stacy and Carmencita?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Augie?" I asked.

He nodded and lifted the phone. "I don't like doing this, Mr. Hamal. I deeply regretted the deaths of Stacy and Carmencita. But unfortunately I'm so involved I have no choice."

"Sure," I said. "It creeps up on you. You start out with murder and the first thing you know you're chasing around with women, drinking pink ladies and generally going to hell— There's another tape. Don't you want to hear that?"

He stopped dialing and put the phone down. "Go ahead," he said, "but no tricks."

"No tricks," I said solemnly. I stepped over to the player and carefully removed the reel of tape. "Here," I said. "This is yours now." I tossed it to him.

He started to catch it before he remembered he was holding a gun. Then he tried to catch it with his left hand and bring the gun back to bear on me. He wasn't that good.

I dived head-first over the desk, came down on top of him and we went to the floor, the chair splintering beneath us. When we got up, I had the gun. Deliberately I slashed the barrel across his face. The gunsight ripped a little flesh and blood trickled down his cheek.

I TOLD him, "That's for trying to be a professional in something where you're an amateur. Now I'll tell you why I'm really here. I'm the only one who knows about this tape or the priority rigging, but I'm turning everything over to Senator Webster in the

morning. That gives you about eighteen hours. Maybe you and Harding can get away in that time, and maybe not. But you can make things a little easier for yourselves by tossing your friend Augie to the wolves."

"What do you mean?" he asked tightly. His face was white except for the moving streak of red.

"Turn Augie over to the cops for the murders," I said. "I'm giving you eighteen hours to do me and yourself a favor. Think it over."

I picked up my player and the tape and left. That afternoon in my apartment was one of the longest I ever lived. I had set myself up as bait. I was sure they'd take it, but I didn't know when. There was nothing to do but sit there and wait. It was a little like sitting on a keg of dynamite and not being able to see the fuse.

At a quarter to six, the telephone rang. I picked up the receiver.

"Hello," I said. It was a major triumph to discover that my voice was steady.

There was a click on the other end, then the almost soundless hum of a dead wire. I put the receiver down.

Knowing that something was finally going to happen made it easier to wait. I relaxed in my chair, running my hand in under the cushion to check on my one precaution.

The knock came at a few minutes past six. "Come in," I said. I had left the door unlocked.

The door opened and they came in fast. Two neat little men, both wearing clothes that were just a trifle exaggerated. Padded shoulders, wide lapels. They had tight, pinched faces with the kind of expressionless eyes that look at you as if you were a stick of furniture. Both had guns.

I stood up and made a vague gesture toward the gun in my shoulder holster.

"Hold it," one of them said. "Get it, Jack."

The other one stepped forward and lifted the gun from my holster.

"What do you know?" he said. "The guy's strictly an amateur. The gun's too small for the holster."

"Maybe he washed it and it shrunk," the other guy said.

"What the hell is this?" I demanded.

"Curious, ain't he, Jack? Just like we heard."

"You must be making a mistake," I said, trying to sound desperate. It didn't take much acting.

"No mistake, chum. You're Harry Hamal. We heard you were curious about us, so we thought we'd save you the trouble of looking us up. This is Jack Greco. I'm Augie Ciano."

"So you're Augie," I said. "You killed Stacy and Carmencita."

"Yeah," he said. He reached out and hit me with his left hand. It was an open-handed blow, but hard enough to knock me back in the chair. "You're pretty cute, Hamal. We astash the dame on you, but the cops didn't find her here. What happened?"

Rubbing my jaw, I told him.

"You see, Jack," Augie said. "Like I said, he's cute. He tried to frame a Senator. Maybe he's one of them communists. Maybe they'll even pin a medal on us."

"What are you going to do?" I asked. As if I didn't know.

"Our patriotic duty," Augie said with a grin. This was a boy who liked his work. "Turn the radio a little higher, Jack. We don't want to disturb the neighbors."

The second one crossed around behind me. The volume started to go up on the radio. This was it.

My right hand had been lying between my leg and the chair. I pulled my regular gun out from beneath the cushion. Augie wasn't expecting it, so I had time to make it good. I shot him through the right shoulder. The slug knocked him back against the wall.

THEN he surprised me. Instead of folding, he grabbed the gun with his left hand and tried to line it up. I had to waste another bullet in his left shoulder.

I knew the time was running out. I didn't try to turn around. I threw myself headlong out of the chair. I heard a shot and something helped me along. I hit rolling.

I came to a stop on my belly just as another slug dug into the carpet right beside me. This was no time to be fancy. I pulled the trigger and saw the shirt of the shooting man jump

a little just above the belt buckle. It slammed him back into the radio. He looked sort of surprised, then dropped to the floor.

My shoulder hurt like hell and I could feel something warm running down my arm. But I managed to get over to the phone and call the police. Then I sat down even though there wasn't a chair anywhere near me. The floor felt just as good. I must have passed out. . . .

I came to with somebody pounding on my door. At first I thought the sound was made by the throbbing in my shoulder. Then I realized it was the cops.

"Don't be so damned polite!" I yelled, "Walk in."

In a minute, cops were spilling all over the place. The Medical Examiner started messing with my shoulder while I started telling Lieutenant Peterson what it was all about. We both finished about the same time.

"Nothing serious," the M.E. said cheerfully. "You'll have a stiff arm for a couple of weeks, but that's all. It's a beautiful, clean furrow right across the top of your shoulder."

"You have the damndest ideas about beauty," I told him.

Then they started to clean up. The gunman named Greco was dead, but Augie Ciano would live to go to trial. I tried to get out of it, but Peterson made me go down town and tell the whole thing over again for the record. I also turned over to him the key to the office where Stacy had kept his files.

It was almost nine o'clock when I finished. Then suddenly I remembered I had a date with a redhead. Only it had been for seven. I took a cab across town, wondering if she'd waited.

She had. She stood in the doorway of the apartment, looking like a million dollars. I stepped inside and she came into my arms with a little rush. She pressed herself up against me. It jarred the hell out of my shoulder, but for once I didn't mind. Like the man said, it hurt so good.

She lifted her face and I kissed her. It started out to be a short one, but we both picked up our option.

I reached around behind me with my good arm and shut the door. We were already so late for dinner, I didn't think it would make any difference if we were a little later.