

Stag Party

Charles G. Booth

ONCE AN ENORMOUSLY successful novelist and writer of pulp stories, Charles G. Booth (1896–1949) is a name largely forgotten today, his fiction generally unread, while the films with which he was involved have taken on cult status and more.

He won an Academy Award for writing the best original story of the spy thriller, *The House on 92nd Street* (1945), an early work of documentary realism. His novel *Mr. Angel Comes Aboard* was filmed as *Johnny Angel* in 1945, a year after publication, and he wrote the novel *The General Died at Dawn*, which was filmed with Gary Cooper in 1936.

Born in Manchester, England, he emigrated to Canada before moving to Los Angeles in 1922, eventually becoming a contract writer for 20th Century Fox.

As with much of his fiction, “Stag Party” has a strong sense of place and evokes its time wonderfully. The hero, preparing for a showdown with gangsters in an underworld-run nightclub, dresses in his dinner jacket so that he’ll look his best for the confrontation.

Originally published in the November 1933, issue of *Black Mask*, “Stag Party” is the first and longest of three novellas featuring McFee of the Blue Shield Detective Agency to be collected in one of the rarest private eye volumes of the 1940s, *Murder Strikes Thrice* (1946), published by the short-lived paperback publisher Bond.

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STIRRING HIS COFFEE McFee—Blue Shield Detective Agency—thought he had seen the girl somewhere. She had dull red hair. She had a subtle red mouth and experienced eyes with green lights in them. That was plenty. But over her provocative beauty, lay a hard sophistication as brightly polished as new nickel.

McFee said, “You ought to be in pictures.”

“I’ve been in pictures.” Her voice was husky. “That’s where you’ve seen me.”

“No, it isn’t,” McFee said. “Sit down. Coffee?”

“Black.”

The girl let herself drop into the chair on the other side of the table. Her wrap fell back. She wore an evening gown of jade green velvet and a necklace of square-cut emeralds. Her eyes were guarded but urgent; desperate, perhaps.

Abruptly, she asked, “Do I look like a fool?”

“I dunno what a fool looks like.” McFee finished his apple pie, sugared his coffee. His movements, the flow of his words, the level staring of his V-thatched, somber eyes were as precisely balanced as the timing of a clock. The girl was restlessly tapping the table pedestal with a green satin pump when McFee asked: Some’dy tell you I was here?”

“Jules—at the door. He’s been with Cato’s ever since I can remember.”

A waiter came, drew the booth curtains, went

away. McFee gave the girl a cigarette. A flame came into each of her eyes and she began to pelt him with little hard bullets of words.

“I am Irene Mayo. Rance Damon and I were dining here one night and Rance pointed you out. He said, ‘That’s McFee, the Blue Shield operative.’ Jules told us you often dropped in for coffee around midnight—”

McFee muttered, “Coffee and Cato’s apple pie.”

“Yes. That’s what Jules told us. And Rance said, ‘Irene, if you ever run into a jam get McFee.’ So I knew if you were here—”

“What sort of jam you in?”

“I don’t know.” The girl stared at the ruddy vitality of McFee, shivered. “Rance and I left my apartment—the St. Regis—around eleven. We were going to the Cockatoo for supper and some dancing, but we didn’t get there.”

“Pretty close,” McFee said.

She nodded. “Rance had just turned into Carter, from Second, when he saw Sam Melrose—”

“That’s funny,” McFee said. He tapped a newspaper beside his coffee cup. “The Trib says Melrose is aboard Larry Knudson’s yacht. Has been all week.”

Irene Mayo flared out, “That’s what Rance said. That’s why he went after him. Melrose has been evading the Grand Jury ever since they opened up that Shelldon scandal. Rance said they couldn’t serve him.”

“I dunno that indicting him’ll do any good,”

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McFee muttered, frowning. "Sam took the town over when Gaylord rubbed out, and he's got his hooks in deep. Damon saw Melrose and went after him, you said—"

"Into the Gaiety Theatre. Rance parked on Second. The house was dark—after eleven—"

McFee cut in, "Melrose owns the Gaiety now."

"Rance told me. He said he'd be back in fifteen minutes—less, maybe. But he had to see Melrose." The girl's green eyes dilated a little. "I waited an hour and fifteen minutes. He didn't come back. I couldn't stand it any longer. I went to the lobby doors. They were locked. The box office was locked. I could see into the theatre. It was dark."

McFee said, "You tried the alley fire exits?"

"I didn't think of those. But why would Rance—"

The girl stared at McFee with terrified eyes. "Nothing can have happened—I mean, Melrose wouldn't dare—"

"I dunno, Sam Melrose—"

McFee saw the girl's red mouth lose its subtlety in the sharp twitching of the lip muscles. He stood up. "Put that coffee under your belt and stay here till I come back."

2

McFee crossed Third and went down Carter. A late street car rumbled somewhere along Brant, but the town was quiet. He walked fast for half a block.

Cato's had been at Third and Carter when the town was young and the Gaiety Theatre had billed Martin Thomas in *Othello* and William Gillette in *Sherlock Holmes*. That had been before business moved west and the corner had gone pawn shop and fire sale, and buttoned itself on to Chinatown. Second and Carter's had been McFee's nursery. Cato's hadn't moved because Signor Cato and Papa Dubois had known the value of tradition to the restaurant business, and because M. Papoulas, the present proprietor,

also knew it. But Cato's had kept its head up. The Gaiety had gone burleycue.

McFee tried the lobby doors. They were tight. The interior of the theatre was black. Light from the street seeped into the lobby. On the walls were life-sized tinted photographs of the girls. A legend under one of them said Mabel Leclair. She Knocked 'Em Cold on Broadway.

An alley separated the Gaiety Building from the Palace Hotel at Second. The Gaiety had two exit doors in the north side of the alley. On the south side the Palace had a service entrance. Instead of turning into the alley, McFee went to where Maggie O'Day had her ten-by-four hole-in-the-wall in the hotel building. She was putting her stock away. McFee bought a pack of cigarettes.

He said, "Seen Sam Melrose lately, Maggie?"

She was a little dark witch of a woman with rouged cheek bones and tragic purple-brown eyes. Like McFee and the Gaiety girls, she belonged to the picture. Always had. In the Gaiety's Olga Nethersole-melodrama days, she had played minor parts. That had been about the time the late Senator Gaylord was coming into power. Things had happened, and she had gone to singing in Sullivan's saloon on Second, until a street car accident had crippled her hip. Now she leaned on a crutch in her hole-in-the-wall and shook dice with the dicks and the Gaiety girls. Midnight or later she rolled herself home in a wheel chair she kept in the Gaiety alley.

"Sam's getting up in the world," the old woman answered.

"See him go into the Gaiety a while back?"

"Sam go into the Gaiety—" The old woman's voice thinned into silence. She stared at McFee. "It wasn't Sam I saw . . . It wasn't Sam—" And then, vehemently, "I can't be seeing everybody. . . ."

McFee said gently, "You better go home, Maggie."

He turned into the Gaiety alley, barked his shin against Maggie O'Day's wheel chair. He tried the nearer exit door. It was unbolted. The door creaked as McFee pulled on it. He slipped inside.

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The darkness fell all around McFee. It had a hot, smothering touch. It plucked at his eyeballs. He chewed a cigarette, listened. Vague murmurings were audible. The sort of noises that haunt old theatres. Dead voices. . . . Sara Kendleton, Martin Thomas, Mrs. Fiske, Edwin South. But that sort of thing didn't touch McFee. He knew the Gaiety for the rattletrap barn it was and waited, his hat on the back of his head and his ears wide open.

Suddenly he was on his toes.

The sound coming towards him was a human sound. It came down the side aisle from the stage end. It was a rustling sound, like dead leaves in a wind; then it identified itself as the slow slurring of a body dragging exhaustedly over a flat surface. Against a wall. Over a floor. It stopped. The taut quietness that followed throttled McFee. A groan flowed through the darkness, a low strangling cough. The slurring sound was resumed. It was closer now, but there was a bitter-end exhaustion in it.

McFee, chewing his cigarette, felt at the gun and the flashlight in his pocket. He took three steps forward, his arms spread wide.

The man pitched forward and fell against his chest.

McFee slid him down to the floor of the aisle. The man's chest was wet. He felt a warm stickiness on his hands. He made light, spread it over the man's face. It was Rance Damon. His eyes were wide open, fixed in horror; his lips were bloodless. McFee felt at the heart.

Damon was dead.

McFee muttered, "He's been a while dying."

The hole was in the chest. A good deal of blood had flowed.

Damon was around thirty, a dark, debonair lad with straight hair as black as Maggie O'Day's had once been. His bright eloquence, the bold ardor of his restless eyes, had stepped him along. The late Senator Gaylord (Senator by courtesy) had placed him in the District Attorney's office. Damon had become a key man. You had to figure on him. But his mouth was lax.

"The boys'll have to plant a new in-man," McFee said. He sniffed the odor of gin. "Party,

I guess." And then, "Well, well! Rubbed out doing his little stunt!"

McFee had lifted Damon's left arm. The fingers clutched a tangle of five-century notes. Ten of them.

A trail of blood spots on the aisle floor led backstage. The wall was smeared where Damon had fought his way agonizingly along it. McFee followed the sign, back of the boxes, up a short stair, through a door into the backstage. A dingy curtain shut him off from the house. He stood under the drops, among a bedroom set, and waved his light. Damon had crawled across the stage into the wing, where a final resurgence of life lifted him up.

Entering the dressing room from which Damon had come, McFee saw high, fly-blown walls that pictured the evolution of the burley-cue girl. He had appreciated it on previous occasions. A quart bottle of gin, two-thirds empty, stood on a rickety dressing table, two glasses beside it. He did not touch them. A table lamp lay on the floor, broken. Dancing costumes lay about. A rug was turned up.

Make-up material had been swept off the dressing table—powder, crimson grease paint, lipstick, eyebrow buffer. The tube of grease paint had been stepped on by someone, burst open. The stuff smeared the floor. It looked like coagulated blood.

Near the door lay a .32 automatic pistol. One shell had been ejected.

McFee went back to the aisle.

Irene Mayo was kneeling beside the body.

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McFee said, "I'm sorry, sister."

The cold beam of his torch made her eyes look enormous in her white, drawn face. Her mouth quivered. She pressed her hand against it, stifled a sob. But after a moment she said dully, "He would have been governor some day."

McFee answered moodily, "Damon had the makings." He stared down into the girl's uplifted eyes, at the purple shadows beneath

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them. The emeralds at her throat blazed coldly. He added, "If it's in a man's blood you can't stop him."

"Unless you kill him." The girl spoke passionately. "It's in me, too, but there's more than that in me. If it's the last thing I do—"

McFee cut in, "You saw Melrose?"

"No—" The girl hesitated, her eyes hardening. "But Rance saw him. Rance said—" Her eyes fell apprehensively. "I don't understand about that money—"

"Were you in love with Damon?"

"I don't know." She spoke slowly. "I liked him. He took me around a lot. He was a dear—yes, I did love him!" She rocked distractedly, said in a frenzy, "I'll spend every dollar I have to get Melrose."

"Good kid."

"Are you with me, McFee?"

Instead of replying, McFee put out his flash, said softly, "There's someone in the house."

The girl stood up, moved close to him, her wrap drawn tightly around her body. Her breath fanned McFee's cheeks. Neither of them moved. McFee pushed the girl flat against the wall.

"Stay here," he whispered.

"McFee—"

"Easy, sister."

McFee took off his shoes. He felt for his gun, went up the sloping aisle on the balls of his feet. A rustling sound became audible, quieted. He reached the top of the aisle, turned, felt his way towards the foyer. McFee sniffed. Perfume. Thick, too. He grinned, put away his gun. A door was on his right—the manager's office. He turned into the room.

McFee stopped. Someone was breathing heavily. He heard a sob—suppressed. A floor board creaked. McFee thought he located the woman. He took three steps forward, his arms wide apart, as when he had gone to meet Rance Damon. Caught the glitter of a necklace. As he flung one arm around the woman's neck, he slammed the other against her mouth and shut off her scream. She fought, but McFee held her.

He said softly, "One yip and I'll blow you in two."

The woman became quiet. McFee removed his hand.

"Lemme go, McFee," she said huskily.

"Leclair—swell! Anyb'dy else on the party?"

"Rance Damon—" The woman leaned on McFee's arm. "Oh, my God!" she wept. "Damon—that's all—"

Mabel Leclair's blond beauty was unconfined and too abundant. The petulant immaturity of her features ran at odds with the hardness in her round blue eyes. She presented a scanty negligee effect.

McFee asked, "That kind of a party?"

The woman's hands and negligee were bloody. She looked down at them and went sick. McFee directed the light into her eyes. "Sit down," he said. She fell moaning into a chair.

McFee snapped a desk lamp switch. The room contained a shabby desk, chairs, a safe, a water cooler and a couch. The dingy walls were a photograph album burleycue theme.

From the door Irene Mayo cried out, "She killed him—"

"I did not!" the Leclair woman screamed, and jumped up. "What you doing here? What'd I kill him for? We were having a party—oh—" The blood on her hands sickened her again. She wiped them on her negligee. She thrust her hands behind her back, shut her eyes, rocked her head. "Get me a drink," she whimpered, and fell into the chair.

"You had plenty, sister. What kind of party?"

"Just a party, McFee." She tried to smile wisely. "Rance dropped in to see me—"

Irene Mayo cut in, "That's a lie!"

"You think so?" The Leclair woman spoke wickedly. "Kid, I never seen the buttercup I couldn't pick. And I've picked 'em from Broadway west."

McFee said harshly, "Got anything to say before I call the cops?"

"Wait a minute, Handsome." The woman's eyes took fright again, but she seemed to be lis-

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tening, too. "Lemme tell you. Rance was drinking some. Not much. I hadn't touched it. Honest, McFee—well, mebbe I had a coupla quick ones, but I wasn't lit. I'm telling you, McFee. I was standing in front of the dressing table. Rance was standing beside me, next to the couch. He heard some'dy on the stage. The door was open—the backstage was dark. Rance turned around. And that's when he got it. Right in the chest. I saw the flash—that's all. McFee, I'm telling you! He spun round—kind of. I caught him—" The woman shuddered, shut her eyes.

"Yes?" said McFee.

"He was bleeding—" She wrung her hands. "He slid out of my arms—slow. I thought he'd never drop. The look in his eyes knocked me cuckoo. I fainted. When I came to—" She covered her face.

"When you came to—"

"It was dark. We'd busted the lamp, falling. McFee, he wasn't dead. He was groaning somewhere. I lit a match. He'd dragged himself out backstage. He wouldn't quit crawling. I was scared to switch on the lights—" McFee's cold eyes alarmed the woman. She reiterated desperately. "I'm giving you the straight of it. Rance and me—"

"What you here for?"

"To phone the cops."

"Did you phone 'em?"

"No. You came in. I was scared stiff. I thought it might be Rance's murderer coming back—"

"Phone anyb'dy?"

"No." The woman stared at McFee, the listening look in her eyes. "I didn't phone anybody."

McFee said, "You're a liar." He picked up the desk telephone. The receiver was moist. Leclair stared at McFee. "Who'd you call?"

"Go roll your hoop."

Irene Mayo leaned against the wall, a little to the left of the door. Her eyes were tragic and scornful. McFee was about to unhook the telephone when she gestured warningly.

In the foyer a man said, "Put that telephone down, McFee."

Mabel Leclair laughed.

4

The man moved into the lane of light that flowed out of the office. It was Joe Metz, who ran the Spanish Shawl Club, a Melrose enterprise. McFee threw a glance at the red-headed girl. She seemed to understand what was in his mind.

McFee flung the telephone at the desk lamp. Glass shattered. The room went dark. Leclair screamed. McFee dropped behind the desk.

Joe Metz called, "You birds cover those exits. Smoke him, if you have to . . . McFee!"

The latter, feeling around for the telephone, said, "Speaking."

"I've got three of the boys with me. Nice boys. Boys you've played ball with—" Metz was inside the room now. "They don't wanna hurt you—"

McFee answered, "You'll have me crying pretty soon." Prone on his stomach, he found the instrument, put the receiver to his ear, his lips to the mouthpiece. "Tell me some more, Joe."

Central did not respond.

Mabel Leclair ejaculated, "He's got the telephone, Joe!"

"That's all right," Metz drawled. "I've cut the wire. How about sitting in a little game, McFee?"

"Speak your piece," McFee said, and then: "I got a gun on the door."

"Handsome, it's this way," Metz said. "Sam Melrose has named the next district attorney—Claude Dietrich. Now the Gaiety's a Melrose house and Sam don't want a deputy district attorney dying in it two months before election. So we gotta get Damon away. But that's not the half of it." Metz spoke with a careful spacing of his words. "Damon was in a position to get Sam something he hadda have, election coming on. So Sam turned Blondy loose on the boy—Sam has more swell ideas than a tabloid editor.

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Damon was a nut for the frills. He fell for Leclair like a bucket of bricks. Blondy makes a deal with Damon. The boy's taken money before. Taking five grand from Blondy is duck soup—"

McFee said, "Five grand for what?"

"Oh, some photographs, an affidavit, a letter Melrose wrote, a coupla cancelled checks, some testimony from a lad that died—the usual junk."

"Grand Jury file on the Shelldon blow-off?" McFee asked.

"That's right—you're a good guy, McFee. The Grand Jury turned it over to the D.A. Melrose thought it ought to disappear."

"Lemme see," McFee said. "There's a murder tied up with the indictment, isn't there?"

"Sam'll beat that. But you know how it is, election coming on."

"Well, I haven't got it."

"Now, look here, McFee, you aren't in any shape to stand off me and the boys. Melrose wants that Grand Jury indictment."

McFee had begun to creep noiselessly towards Metz and the door. "Who give you the notion that I got it?"

Metz said coldly, "You gotta have it—or know where it is. Damon had the money and the Shelldon file in his hands when that .32 bumped him. He flopped into Blondy's arms. She threw a faint—" Metz interrupted himself to say, "There's places where women is swell, but a jam like that ain't one of 'em."

The Leclair woman cried, "You got your nerve! After what I been through—"

Metz laughed. "I've said there are places where women is swell." He proceeded swiftly. "When Blondy woke up Damon had the five grand in his fist, but the file was gone. She give me a bell at the Shawl. McFee, you got that Shelldon file, or you know where it is. Better play ball."

McFee said softly, "I'm covering you, Joe." And then, "You mean, I killed Damon?"

Metz answered carefully, "Damon don't count now. He isn't going to be found here. It don't matter who killed him. There's plenty

boys Melrose can plant when Dietrich is in. If you killed Damon, swell! You know your business. But you better not try bucking Melrose."

McFee moved some more.

He was in a spot. If Metz was bluffing, a Melrose heel had killed Damon, and the Melrose crowd had the Shelldon file. That would mean McFee knew too much and must become casualty No. 2. If Metz was not bluffing, he probably was convinced McFee had done the job and copped the file. Bad, too. And it left the question: Who shot Damon?

McFee asked, "Where's Melrose?"

"Aboard Larry Knudson's yacht," Metz answered smoothly.

McFee crept forward again.

The Leclair woman shrieked, "Joe! He's coming at you—"

5

Rising straight from his heels, a little to the right of Metz, McFee threw his left to where he thought the man's chin was, landed. Metz' head snapped back. The rest of him followed it. His gun spat flame. McFee steamed past. Metz cracked against the foyer wall.

Metz howled, "Watch those fire exits!"

"Lights!" another man yelled. "Where the hell—"

The Leclair woman screamed, "Backstage—" and then, "Look out for that red-headed tramp—"

McFee ran towards the north side aisle. McFee knew what he was doing. The switch was in the front of the house, off the backstage, north side. He was depending on the red-headed girl. They had a reasonable chance with the house dark—none if the lights came on.

Someone collided with an aisle seat. McFee jumped the man, struck bone with the nose of his gun. The man fell among the seats. He groaned, then shouted faintly, "Over here, you birds—"

Metz yelled, "The other aisle! Gun him, if he

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jumps an exit— Some'dy find that damned light room—”

McFee found it. Hadn't he been a Gaiety usher when he was a kid? There were steel switch boxes on a wall. The master switch box was largest. He plucked out a couple of fuses. They heard him. They drummed after him. Sets snapped back as someone crossed the house.

McFee cleared the switch room door, a flash beam jumped up the stage stair, pranced around in the wing.

A man howled, “Now we got the ——”

Leclair screamed. “That red-headed witch—”

McFee ducked across the backstage. The light lost him. A door hinge creaked, and he knew what was troubling Leclair. Very swell!

But the others didn't hear Leclair. They didn't hear the red-headed girl opening the exit door. Somebody monkeyed in the switch room, but the house stayed dark. A couple of men collided in the backstage. McFee wasn't one of them. The light jack-rabbed around the wall, shied at McFee. He chased towards the south wing. A shot came after him.

Metz yelled, “Jump him, Tony—”

The flash beam plucked Tony Starke out of the north wing. Starke had been a pretty fair heavy, and he owned a gymnasium. He looked tremendous. McFee twisted sidewise and leaned on the canvas drop that shut the backstage off from the house. The canvas was rotten old. It ripped with a thin scream, spraying dust, as McFee fell through it.

Art Kline was on the runway that fronted the orchestra. Pretty nearly as big as Starke, Kline bounced for Joe Metz, at the Spanish Shawl and was famous for his hands. He had broken a man's neck with them. Kline pulled a fast jump over the orchestra and landed on top of McFee. They milled for a moment. Then Metz, coming through the ripped curtain, collided with them, and all three pitched into the orchestra, McFee on top.

Kline conked his head, but it didn't do him any harm. He and Metz held McFee. Metz

yelled for the flashlight. They milled some more, bone thudding on bone; then a door opened and they rolled down a short stair under the stage and hit a wall. The place smelled of stale beer and fried onions.

Leclair shrilled, “That red-headed tramp's gone for the coppers. I'm telling you—”

McFee was getting plenty now. The flash beam came. Monty Welch brought it. Welch was five feet four. He dealt blackjack at the Spanish Shawl and knew when every cop in the city paid his next mortgage installment. Tony Starke rolled in with him, sat on McFee's head.

Metz went through McFee's clothes, then said, “What you done with that Shelldon file?”

McFee said nothing. He didn't like it under Tony Starke's two hundred and twenty, but he still was figuring on the red-headed girl. The coppers could make it in three minutes flat—if they wanted to.

Monty Welch said in his whispering voice, “Gimme a cigarette and a match, Art. I'll open his trap—”

The Leclair woman showed up then. Tony Starke put the light on her. She wore an ermine coat pulled tight around her body. Leclair had brought the coat from Broadway. Somebody said she had traded a couple of letters for it. She said very quietly, “McFee's red-headed friend went for the cops while you birds was playing tag—”

Metz blurted, “What's that?”

“I been telling you—the tramp that was with him—”

Metz said huskily, “We got to get outta this.” He sucked in his cheeks. His bulbous temples were wet and gleaming. “We take McFee. McFee'll talk later. Monty, you jam your gun in his kidneys. Hand it to him if he squawks. Tony, Art, carry Damon. I'll drive.”

Kline and Starke hoisted McFee to his feet. Welch's gun made him step fast. They drummed up the stair. They climbed out of the orchestra, paraded up the center aisle, cut across to the south aisle by the seventh row. It was like a scene from an old Gaiety play.

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As they clattered into the side aisle, a police siren wailed somewhere down Carter Street.

Metz said tersely, "We go through the Palace. Monty, fan that light—" And then, as Welch spread the beam on the aisle floor, "Cripes!"

They forgot McFee. His toe sent the flash whizzing out of Welch's hand. It shattered against the wall and darkness buried them. McFee sank back into the seat right behind him.

Metz howled, "Some'dy's been here—"

"I fell over him when I came in," Starke sobbed.

"Grab McFee—"

But the coppers were hammering on the foyer door, and they hadn't time to look for McFee, Metz said, "Scram!" They jumped through the fire exit, pushed through the Palace service door. Sam Melrose had taken over the Palace along with the Gaiety.

The coppers were coming down the alley.

McFee crawled out of a seat and spread his hands on the aisle floor, where he had left Damon's body. It wasn't there.

McFee leaned against the wall. He rolled a match in his ear. "That's funny," he said.

6

McFee felt a draft on his face. A man carefully let himself into the house. Two other men were behind him. The first man, Pete Hurley, of the homicide squad, spread a flash beam over the aisle floor. Hurley's hard hat sat on the back of his square head and he jiggled a cold cigarette between pouchy lips.

Hurley said bitterly, "Hello, Handsome."

"You got a pip this time." McFee sucked on a loose tooth, felt his jaw. "Tell one of your boys to fix a light. Here's a coupla fuses."

One of the men took the fuses, went away.

"Some'dy belled the desk and yelled 'Murder at the Gaiety,'" Hurley said querulously. He added cautiously, "Rance Damon. What's the dope?"

"Sweet," McFee answered, and stood up. "A box full of medals for Some'dy, and nob'dy

wanting to wear 'em." Wobbling, he put on his shoes. "Gimme a cigarette, Beautiful."

"I ain't looking for medals," Hurley said harshly. "Medals ain't safe in this town. Where's Damon?"

"Damon's dead. He went away. Ask Melrose's boys."

"Melrose's boys?"

"Joe Metz, Art Kline, Monty Welch, Tony Starke. It was good while it lasted." McFee lighted a cigarette, then spread out his hand. Lights began to go on. Hurley stared at McFee with his bitter, button eyes. McFee added presently, "Irene Mayo brought you boys."

"Who's this Mayo queen?"

"A nice little number. She's been in pictures. Likes to pull strings. She wanted Damon to be governor."

"You got that Shelldon file?"

"I didn't kill Damon, mister."

Hurley didn't look at McFee, as he said slowly, "The birds that shot Damon musta got away with him. You say Melrose's boys didn't take him away, so they didn't shoot him. That's reasonable ain't it?" He forced his uneasy, hostile eyes up to McFee's cold grin. "I said, that's reasonable, ain't it?"

"Anything's reasonable that's got to be," McFee answered.

Hurley's tone was sullen as he proceeded, "Melrose's boys is out then. How about that red-headed number. I mean—"

"You mean, did she carry Damon out in her stocking? No, Buttercup, she didn't. And if she didn't she couldn't have rubbed him out. That's reasonable, isn't it?"

Hurley's cigarette became still. "Mebbe there'll be a coupla medals in this after all—"

McFee said, "You can always sell 'em for hardware."

Hurley spread light upon the wet smear Damon's body had left. Sign indicated that the body had been dragged to the fire exit and out into the alley. There the sign ended.

Inside again, Hurley asked McFee, "Why don't that red-headed dame come back?"

"I guess she'd had plenty. You'll find her at

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the St. Regis." He added dryly, "Melrose'll tell you where to find Leclair."

"I'll find Leclair." And then, impressively, "Melrose is aboard Knudson's yacht."

Hurley followed the blood drop down the aisle. Here and there on the drab wall were imprints of Damon's wet, red hands. They leaped at the eye. They implied a frantic striving, a dreadful frustration. The two dicks tailed Hurley, McFee trailed the three of them, chewing the end of his cigarette. They crossed the backstage, shoved into the dressing room.

Hurley looked the automatic over, put it down. He looked at the glasses and gin bottle, at the upset table lamp, at the squashed tube of crimson grease paint.

"Some'dy better change his shoes," Hurley muttered.

McFee said casually, "Leclair's shoes looked clean."

Hurley stared sourly at the picture album around the walls. "Burleycue ain't what she was. You need a pair of field glasses to see the jittering toothpicks that prance on the boards nowadays." Turning to one of his men he said, "Harry, go give Littner a bell. Tell him he'd better slide over. Tell him—" Hurley slanted his eyes at McFee. "Tell him we are in a spot."

Littner was Captain of Detectives.

Hurley chalked crosses on the floor, near the dressing table and close to the couch, to indicate where he and McFee thought Damon and Leclair had stood, when the shot was fired.

Littner and the Chief came first; then Larrabee, the District Attorney, and Atwell, a deputy coroner. Larrabee said it was too bad about Damon. Pretty nearly everybody said it was too bad and something ought to be done. When Larrabee heard about the Grand Jury Shelldon file he went white around the gills, and shut up. Larrabee was half and half about most things. He had Bright's Disease. That was why he wasn't going to run again. The camera boys stood up their flashlight set. The fingerprint lads prowled around with their brushes and powders. A flock of dicks were detailed to do this and that. Littner turned the pistol over to Wal-

ter Griggs, the ballistic expert. The newshawks came.

The Chief said to Littner, "Melrose is gonna be damn good and sore."

"He ought to be damn good and glad some'dy else lifted Damon," Littner muttered.

"You figure he needs an out?"

Littner said cautiously, "Melrose is aboard Knudson's yacht, isn't he?"

Littner ought to have been Chief of Police.

After a while, McFee said to Hurley, "I guess I'll go finish my coffee."

7

McFee walked up Carter to Third, stood there a minute, rolling a match in his ear. The block between Second and Third was full of police and county cars, but the rest of the town looked empty. It was three-fifteen. McFee had been in the Gaiety about two and a half hours. He saw a coupe parked half a block down Third and walked towards it.

Irene Mayo sat behind the wheel, smoking a cigarette. Her eyes were feverish. Her white face was posed above the deep fur of her wrap like a flower in a vase. She said huskily, "I thought you'd come."

"It takes a while," McFee answered. He got in beside her. "Thanks for giving the cops a bell."

"Did they hurt you?" She looked intently at him.

"Some'dy sat on my head."

The red-headed girl let in the clutch. They made a couple of righthand turns then a left.

McFee said, "Damon sold out, didn't he, sister?"

"Yes—" The word tore itself from Irene Mayo's lips. Her knuckles tightened on the wheel. "That blonde woman—"

"Hadn't it in him, I guess," McFee muttered.

She said in a brittle voice, "He could have been governor. I had what he needed . . . I could have given him—" She shivered, pressed her hand to her throat. "I don't blame Rance. A man

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is just so much—no more. But Melrose—Sam Melrose—” She uttered the name as if it poisoned her mouth. “Melrose knew how to break Rance. And he had Rance shot because he wasn’t *sure*—” She stared straight ahead, her eyes as hard as bright new coins. “I’ll make Sam Melrose wish he hadn’t come to this town if it kills me to do it.”

They drove some more.

“Some’dy took Damon’s body away,” McFee said.

“What did you say?”

McFee told her about it. “Damon must have been taken after you got away. There was a five minute interval before the cops came.”

“What do the police think?”

“It isn’t what they think—this is Melrose’s town. They take the position that Melrose didn’t have Damon blinked because it wasn’t his boys carted Damon’s body away. They say that means some’dy else killed Damon.”

“Don’t you see?” Her tone was stinging, vicious. “Those Melrose men had Rance taken while you were talking to that Leclair woman. When the police came, and they couldn’t take you with them, they pretended Rance had vanished. They knew you’d tell the police. They knew the police—Melrose’s police!—would use it for an ‘out.’ McFee—” She gripped his arm, her face terribly white, “you must see that! You don’t believe what the police are only pretending to believe?”

They made a right-hand turn.

McFee put a cigarette in his mouth, said quietly, “Sister, you better lemme take the wheel. There’s a car tailing us. They’ll have more power than we have.”

“They can’t run us down.”

“They can do anything in this town. And they will, if they think I got what they want. Slide over.”

The girl said coolly, “Have you got what they want, McFee?”

A pair of white eyes grew large in the rear view mirror, McFee laid one hand on the wheel, slid the other around the girl’s hips. His toe

lifted her foot from the gas pedal. McFee said harshly, “Don’t be a fool—this is serious.” She yielded then and glided over his lap.

McFee jumped the car forward. It was a handy little bus, but it didn’t have the steam. McFee made a left hand turn and they hit a through boulevard. The tail car showed its lights again. The lights grew bigger. A milk truck rattled past.

McFee let the coupe out, but the white eyes swelled.

McFee said, “This is your coupe?”

“Rance’s.”

“Where’s your house?”

“Avalon. Eighteen hundred block. Avalon’s about a mile beyond the next boulevard stop.”

McFee looked at the girl out of slanted eyes. “I got a hunch they’re out to wreck us. I know those birds. If they ride us down, it’ll be as soon as we quit the boulevard.”

Irene Mayo said passionately, “I don’t know what they want, but nothing will make me believe Melrose didn’t have Rance killed.”

They approached the cross boulevard, doing fifty or so. The neon lights of an all-night filling station blazed on the opposite corner.

“I’d like to stand those lads on their heads,” McFee muttered. He grinned, but his somber eyes were calculating as they looked at the girl. “I got a hunch. How much you good for, sister?”

“As much as you are.”

He laughed a little. “Maybe we could get away, but I doubt it. If we waited somewhere, and phoned for a police bodyguard, they’d jump us before the cops could find us. I don’t know but what we hadn’t better try to stand ’em on their heads.”

The girl said nothing. McFee ran the car up to the filling station oil pumps. Behind them, the brakes of the pursuing car made a high wailing sound and the car—a rakish black sedan—rocked to a standstill. It had not crossed the intersection.

“What’s the street this side of Avalon?”

“Hawthorne.”

“Trees on it?”

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“Yes.”

To the white-uniformed, freckle-faced lad who came running up, McFee said, “Gimme a five-gallon can of crankcase oil—Eastern. Step on it.” McFee took out a jackknife, opened a blade. The lad reappeared, lugging the can of oil. McFee placed it on the seat, between himself and the red-headed girl. “Throw in five gallons of gas.” He added to the girl, “Just to fool those birds,” and drove his knife blade into the top of the can. Ripping around the edge, he muttered, “This is going to be dirty.”

The girl’s eyes became spheres of green light.

Oil slopped onto McFee’s clothing, over the girl’s wrap. The lad came back, McFee threw ten dollars at him.

“Keep the change, kid. And do this—” McFee impaled him with an oily forefinger. “Hop your telephone. Call police headquarters. Tell ’em, there’s an accident on Hawthorne, north of Grand. Tell ’em to send a riot squad. Tell ’em McFee told you.”

The boy blurted, “Anybody hurt?”

“There’s going to be,” McFee said as he jumped the car into the boulevard.

They hit fifty. The sedan behind them zoomed across the intersection, then settled down to tailing the coop from two blocks back.

Irene Mayo said tersely. “Avalon—three blocks.”

McFee dropped to thirty. The car behind picked up. McFee made the right hand turn at Hawthorne. The street was narrow, a black tunnel of peppers and eucalypti.

McFee drove half a block, dropping to fifteen. He shifted off the crown of the street. He placed the red-headed girl’s right hand on top of the wheel. She stared at him, her mouth a red gash in her white face. McFee bent back the top of the can. He caught the ragged edge nearest him with his left hand, thrust his right under the bottom of the can. The lights behind made a wide arc as the sedan swung crazily into Hawthorne.

Before the lights had quite straightened out, McFee heaved the can over the wheel and dumped the oil onto the crown of the road.

The oil ran in every direction. McFee flung the can into the trees. The sedan came roaring down Hawthorne, huge and devastating behind its tremendous lights. McFee shot the coupe ahead. He abruptly turned into a private driveway, shut off the lights.

The brakes of the big sedan screamed. The car staggered, ploughed towards the wet smear that oozed towards either curb of the narrow street. Someone in the car shouted thickly, hysterically.

The locked wheels of the sedan skidded into the oil.

McFee and Irene Mayo saw a big sedan slide sidewise on tortured rubber. Twice the car cut a complete circle at terrible speed, its lights slicing the darkness; then it leaped the opposite curb and snapped off a street light standard. Glass shattered. A wheel flew somewhere. The huge car lifted itself in a final spasm and fell on its side.

McFee said softly, “Very swell.”

8

Windows were going up as McFee backed into Hawthorne. He turned on his lights. Somebody yelled at him. At the corner, he made a left hand turn; then a right hand at Avalon. He drove two blocks, and saw the St. Regis, a green light over its entrance, at the next corner. It was a fairly exclusive, small, three-story house with garages. He drove into an open garage.

“Not bad.” He laughed and looked at the girl. She was leaning against his shoulder, very white. “Oh,” said McFee. “Well.”

He took out the ignition key. There were five keys on a ring. Sliding out of the coupe, he lifted the girl into his arms and carried her around to the front entrance. No one was about. The trees in the parking threw long shadows after him. A police siren wailed somewhere.

The letter-box directory indicated that Miss Mayo’s apartment was No. 305. He carried her upstairs, reminded of an Olga Nethersole play he

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had seen at the Gaiety years ago. Heavy, wine-colored carpet covered the stairs and halls. Some potted palms stood around and looked at him.

At No. 305, McFee tried three of the keys before he got the door open. A little light from the corridor came in with McFee—enough for him to see a divan in the middle of the living room into which the small entrance hall opened. He laid the girl on it, snapped a floor lamp switch. The room had dim lights, soft rugs, lots of pillows, some books and a couple of pictures. A swell little shack for a lad to hang up his hat in.

One of the girl's green snakeskin slippers had become unbuckled. It fell off. McFee saw a long manila envelope fastened to the lining of her wrap with a safety pin. He chewed his knuckle, then unpinned the envelope. "Shelldon File" was pencilled on its upper left-hand corner. The envelope was sealed. McFee stared hard at the girl. Her eyelashes rested on the shadows beneath her eyes. Slitting the top of the envelope, he looked into it. His expression became astonished. He smiled crookedly and put the envelope inside his waistcoat.

In the kitchen McFee got a glass of water. When he came back the girl was sitting up.

"How's it coming?" he asked.

"Nicely." Her eyes were amused but a little cold. "You must have done a gorgeous Sappho." She looked at her hands, at her wrap and gown. "That oil made a horrible mess. Do you suppose they are hurt?"

"You can give the hospital a bell in ten minutes."

She laughed uneasily. "Make yourself comfortable while I get into something else."

McFee was in a mess himself. He lit a cigarette. He began to walk up and down.

An ornamental mirror hung on the wall opposite the bedroom door. The girl had not closed the door and he saw her reflection in the mirror. She stood beside a table, a framed photograph clasped in her hands. Her expression and attitude were tragic and adoring. She pressed the photograph to her lips, held it there.

Her slender body drooped. She put the photograph down but continued to stare at it, her fingers pressed against her mouth. The photograph was of Rance Damon.

Irene Mayo slipped out of her green gown, when she reappeared some minutes later her eyes were subtle and untragic, and she wore lounging pajamas of green silk with a flowing red sash. She dropped onto the divan and laid her red head against a green pillow.

"You'd better use the bathroom, McFee," she told him.

The bathroom was finished in green and white tile and much nickel. He used a monogrammed hand towel on his oil splashed clothes. He washed his hands and face and combed his hair. Stared at his automatic meditatively, then stood it on its nose in his right hand coat pocket.

When McFee showed himself again, Irene Mayo had a bottle of gin and a couple of glasses on a small table.

"Straight is all I can do."

"You couldn't do better."

McFee sat down on the girl's left. The liquor made a gurgling sound. She poured until McFee said "yes," which wasn't immediately.

As he occupied himself with the glass, a blunt object jammed his ribs. He finished the liquor.

The girl said coldly, "Your own gun."

McFee asked, "What do you want?"

"That envelope." Her eyes were cold, too. "McFee, I went through Rance's pockets just before you came back and found me kneeling beside him. He had the Shelldon file. I took it. You have it. I want it back."

"What you want it for?"

"That's my business."

"Maybe I want it too."

"Don't be a fool." Her cheek bones began to burn. "I'll kill you if you don't give me that file."

"What'd the coppers say to that?"

"I'd tell them you wouldn't go home."

McFee smiled charmingly and unbuttoned his waistcoat. Still smiling, he handed her the envelope and said, "You better look at the catch."

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Suspicious, she jumped up, backed to the other side of the room, still covering him with the .38, and shook the envelope. Sheets of folded paper slid out, fluttered onto the floor. They were blank.

The girl said furiously, "McFee, I'll give you just three seconds—"

"Use your bean," McFee said harshly. "You saw me unpin that envelope. You know where I been since—the kitchen, the bathroom. I haven't got anything in my clothes. "If you like, I'll take 'em off. Some'dy's give you the run-around."

She stared at him, the cold fury in her eyes turning to mortification. "I didn't look—I took it for granted— What an idiot you must think me!" she wept. And then, stamping angrily, "How do you explain this?"

McFee said, "I can think of a couple answers." He helped himself appreciatively to the gin. "Number One: Leclair's putting the buzz on Melrose. She killed Damon, picked the meat out of the envelope, and left those blanks behind. Number Two: Damon had showed Leclair the file, but was trying to sell her the blanks." McFee set his glass down. "Here's another one: Mr. X, as the book writers call him, shot Damon and worked the switch. Don't ask me why. There's only one answer, sister."

"And Sam Melrose knows it!" Irene Mayo declared passionately.

She came towards McFee, her red sash swaying as she walked. Laughing a little, she sat down beside him, handed him the pistol. McFee took the cartridge clip out of his coat pocket, opened the magazine, shot the clip home. He set the safety.

Irene Mayo said, "Oh! You knew what I would do? You are clever—"

"Just an agency dick trying to get along," McFee answered softly.

She laid her head on the green pillow, her red mouth smiling.

"I didn't mean to," she murmured. And then, "Is your wife home, McFee?"

"Visiting her sister," he said.

After a while, McFee went away.

Down below McFee hopped the taxi he had called from Irene Mayo's apartment. He told the man to take him to the Manchester Arms, on Gerard Street. It was daylight.

At the Manchester, McFee paid the fare and went into the house, feeling for his keys. They were gone. "Metz!" he muttered, and explored his other pockets. Some letters and a note book he had had were gone. "I owe those lads a couple," he muttered.

McFee got a spare key off the building superintendent and walked up to his apartment on the fourth floor. He let himself into the entrance hall and pushed into the living room.

Joe Metz sat in a chair in front of the door. He had a .38 in his hand.

Metz said, "Hello, McFee."

McFee stood quite still. Metz's left cheek was strapped in adhesive tape from eye to mouth. His bulbous forehead was wet. Art Kline came out of the bathroom in his shirt sleeves. He was swart and squat, a barrel of a man. His nose and right forearm were plastered. The door behind McFee closed. Steel prodded his kidneys.

"Don't make any break, sap," said whispering Monty Welch.

McFee answered, "I thought I put you lads on ice."

"You bust Tony Starke's neck," Metz said.

Welch drove McFee forward. Metz stood up. The whites of his eyes showed. Art Kline shuffled across the room. He carried his hands as if they were paws. His eyes were fixed, reddish, minute.

Metz said, "Sit down."

McFee stared at the empty chair. It had wide wings. The three closed in upon him.

"Sit down, McFee."

The latter whirled quietly and crashed his right into Kline's swart jaw. The blow made a dull chopping sound. Kline hit a sofa against the wall. If he'd had anything less than a horse shoe in his jaw he'd have stayed there, but as the other two jumped McFee he bounced up, shook his head, dived in. McFee took a beating before they slammed him down into the chair. He rocked a

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moment, then threw himself forward and up. They slammed him back.

Art Kline smashed him terrifically in the mouth. McFee fell against the back of the chair. Metz began to go swiftly, thoroughly, through his clothes.

He said harshly, "McFee, what you done with that Shelldon file? What we just handed you is pie crust to what you'll get if you don't play ball."

"I haven't got it," McFee whispered.

Kline hit him again. McFee's mouth became bloody. He sat very still.

Metz said, "What you holding out for, goat? This is Melrose's town. You can't buck Sam. Come through, or I'll turn this coupla bear eaters loose."

Sick and raging, McFee blurted, "You bat-eyed kite, d'you think I'd be sitting here if I had it? I'd be down at the Trib spilling a story to Roy Cruikshank that'd put you gophers in your holes."

"Not if you were saving it until you thought you had enough to put the bell on Melrose." Metz unfolded a handkerchief, wiped his wet forehead, said slowly, "McFee, you must have that file. And if you have it, you're holding it with a notion of putting the bell on Sam. Nob'dy in this town'll live long enough to do that—I mean it both ways. But Sam wants that indictment killed, election coming on. Ten grand, McFee?"

"Go paddle your drum."

"Lemme work on him," Art Kline said. An impediment in his speech gummed up his voice. "I owe him a couple for Tony."

He went behind McFee's chair. He laid his tremendous hands on the top of it, flexed his powerful fingers. Whispering Monty Welch sat on the right arm of the chair. His patent leather-shod diminutive feet swung clear of the floor. Welch placed a cigarette between his lips, ignited it with a gem-studded lighter.

McFee waited.

Metz said, "They got no use for dicks in heaven."

McFee's mouth twitched. There was sweat in his eyes, on his cheekbones. He suddenly threw himself out of the chair and at Metz. The latter smacked him lightly across the head with his gun. McFee wobbled, fell back.

Metz said, "I'm waiting."

McFee did not answer. Welch dragged on his cigarette. The detached expression of his puckish face was unchanged as he held the red end a half inch from McFee's cheek. McFee slowly lifted his head. Art Kline laughed and slapped adhesive tape over McFee's mouth; then he caught McFee's wrists and began to bend his arms over the back of the chair.

Metz said, "Blow your whistle when it's plenty."

McFee threw himself around in the chair, but the steam had gone out of him. Metz and Welch held his legs. Kline leaned heavily, enthusiastically, on his arms. A seam in McFee's coat shoulder burst. His sinews cracked. His eyeballs came slowly out of their sockets.

Metz said, "Well?" anxiously.

McFee mumbled defiantly behind his taped lips.

"Funny about a guy's arm," Art Kline said.

To his downward pressure he added a sideways motion. Welch drew his cigarette across McFee's corded throat. McFee's face turned green. His eyes rolled in a hot, white hate.

"This oughta do it," Art Kline said.

Someone knocked at the door.

McFee fell sidewise in his chair, his arm limp. Welch squeezed out his cigarette. Metz held up a hand, his thin white face oddly disconcerted. The other two nodded slowly. The knocking set up a reverberation in the room.

A soprano voice said lazily, "This is Roy Cruikshank, McFee. Pete Hurley's with me. The superintendent said you came in ten minutes ago. We are coming in with a pass key, if you don't open up." Placatingly, "Now be reasonable, Handsome—we got to get out the paper." Pete Hurley added querulously, "I wanna talk to you about that wrecked sedan on Hawthorne. Open the door!"

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McFee lifted his head. He clawed at his taped lips, raised up in his chair. Art Kline smacked him down again.

“One peep outta you—”

Metz’s agile eyes had been racing around the room. They jumped at Kline. “Cut that!” he said tersely. And then, in a loud voice, “I’m coming. We been in a little game.”

Metz’ eyes lighted on a tier of bookshelves. On the top shelf were some decks of cards and a box of poker chips. Beside the bookshelves stood a card table. Moving fast, Metz grabbed the table with one hand, cards and box of chips with the other. Monty Welch took them away from him.

“Set ’em up,” Metz said.

In the kitchen on the sink were some glasses and a bottle of gin. Metz carried these into the living room. He placed them on the floor beside the card table, which Welch had set up in front of McFee’s chair. McFee stared at Metz ironically. Art Kline stood over him, bewildered. Metz carefully upset the card table, spilling chips and cards. He threw some money on the floor.

Outside, Hurley shouted, “McFee, I told you t’open the door!” and rattled the handle.

“Maybe he’s pulling his pants on,” Roy Cruikshank said patiently.

“Don’t get excited.” Metz spoke irritably. “I’m coming.” He ripped the tape off McFee’s lips. “Tell ’em anything you please—it won’t stick. Not in this town, it won’t. We got all the alibis we need.” To the other two he said, “McFee and Art tangled over a pair of jacks, see? Art laid him out.”

Metz poured gin into a glass. He drank half of it, spilled the remainder on the carpet. He wiped his lips on a handkerchief and opened the door.

“Hello, Pete!” Metz said.

“Oh, it’s you!” Hurley’s bitter button eyes went tight in their sockets. He shoved past Metz, saying, “Where’s McFee?”

Roy Cruikshank tailed him into the living room. Cruikshank was a slouching pink lad in his thirties. He had an egg-shaped stomach, evangelical hands and cynical, indolent eyes.

“Party,” Cruikshank said lazily. “Well, well.”

Hurley’s hostile eyes made their calculations. Art Kline sat on the couch, nursing his jaw. Welch, leaning back in a chair near the table, squeezed five cards in his left hand, lighted a cigarette with his right. McFee’s face was a mess.

“What happened, Handsome?” Hurley muttered.

McFee smiled with bruised lips. “Ask Metz.”

“Art and McFee mixed over a pair of Jacks,” Metz said with annoyed distinctness. “McFee smacked Art. Art laid him out.”

“How long you been playing?”

“Half an hour.”

Hurley flared out, “The superintendent told Roy and me—”

“It don’t matter what the superintendent told you. McFee’s been here half an hour. Coupla days ago, out to the Shawl, McFee said, ‘Joe, why don’t you and the boys drop in for a session some time? If the missus and me are out you’ll find the key under the mat.’ There’s a lad for you! So we dropped in tonight—around two. We played rummy until McFee came.”

Hurley looked at Welch and Kline. “That right?”

“Check.”

“Me, too.” Kline rubbed his jaw. “That guy packs a cannon in his kick.”

Glinting amusement surfaced the dark violence in McFee’s eyes. Hurley put a cigarette in his mouth, jiggled it angrily. Reddening, he said, “You heard these boys, McFee?”

“Sure!” McFee answered. “Gimme a drink, some’dy.”

As Cruikshank handed McFee the glass a faint irritability stirred his cynical indolence. “Sure that’s all, McFee?”

“That’s all right now,” McFee answered deliberately.

But Hurley had a couple of kicks left. To Metz he said vehemently, “I want the how of this Gaiety business.”

“Some’dy phoned the Shawl,” Metz replied cautiously. “Who was it, Art?”

“I dunno.”

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Metz waved his hand. "That's how it is, Pete. Tough, though. Damon was a nice kid. And Melrose is going to be damn good and sore."

Hurley suddenly became enraged. "You got your gall sitting there telling me—" He became inarticulate, his face a network of purple veins. "By God! This town—"

Metz asked quietly, "What you want to know, Pete?"

Hurley took out a handkerchief, wiped the palm of his hands, put it away. He said huskily, "I wanna know where you boys were between eleven and one."

"I'll tell you," Metz said confidingly. "We were having a little supper in Sam Melrose's rooms at the Shawl. Art, Monty, Tony, Max Beck, Fred Pope and me. Mabel Leclair put on a shimmy number. She left the Gaiety around eleven. One o'clock, Tony pulled out. He had a date. Art and Monty and me came here." Metz added lazily, "Anything else, Pete?"

Hurley's throat sounded dry as he said, "And that Leclair queen didn't hand Rance Damon five grand for the Shelldon file; and—"

"Why, Pete!"

"—You birds didn't walk Damon away with a hole in his chest—"

Metz asked Welch and Kline seriously. "Either you boys got Damon in your pockets?" And then, "Who's been giving you the run-around, Pete?"

Hurley glared at McFee. The latter said nothing. McFee's eyes were hot and violent, but he smiled with his lips and Hurley pulled his own eyes back into his head.

"And you ain't heard Tony Starke bust his neck in a smash on Hawthorne?"

"Gosh, no! How'd it happen?"

Hurley flared out disgustedly, "Mercy Hospital. He'll live."

Metz stood up. "We better go buy Tony a bouquet." He put on his hat. He buttoned his waistcoat. Art Kline got into his coat and shook down his trousers. Monty Welch carefully smoothed down his hair. Metz smiled. "Well, I'll be seeing you, McFee. We had a hot party."

As they reached the door Hurley said sourly, "The vice detail raids the Shawl tonight. Slatery and his boys. Midnight."

"Saturday's a swell date to knock over a road-house doing our business—"

"We got to make a play, ain't we? The Mayor's coming."

"Ohhh," said Metz. "Hizoner. Well!"

They went away.

9

Roy Cruikshank wrapped his evangelical hands around glassware and poured himself a drink. He set his hat on the back of his pink head. "Those lads were giving you the works, McFee?"

The latter jeered, "And why didn't I tell Hurley about it?" He flexed his shoulder muscles, began to walk the floor. "Why didn't I tell him those pansies tailed Mayo and me in that sedan to Hawthorne Street? Roy, I told Hurley plenty before I left the Gaiety."

Hurley blew up. "I mighta called the wagon, sure. And Morry Lasker'd have had 'em bailed out before I'd booked 'em at the desk. If it had come to court—which ain't likely—Metz and his lads'd have brought a sockful of alibis, and Lasker'd have given McFee the haw-haw for his tag-in-the-dark yarn. 'Y'honor-gen'lemen-the-jury, the witness admits the only light in the theater was that of an electric torch. How could he positively have identified my clients—" Hurley jiggled his cigarette. "The papers'd pan the cops and the D. A. for not making it stick. And me out airing my pants."

The Tribune man crooned, "Now he's getting sore."

"Whatdayou want for two hundred bucks a month? If I can crack the Melrose drag, fine. If I pull a dud I lose my badge. Lookit Frank Ward. Chased Melrose doing seventy and give him a ticket. Frank lost his job—and five kids." Hurley jerked his hat over his eyes, stood up. "The Chief said to me, 'Hurley, you're a good copper. But don't get too good.' I ain't going to."

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Hurley slammed the entrance door.

Putting a cigarette in the middle of his pink face, Roy Cruikshank said, "Hurley isn't a bad guy." He laughed from his belly up. "Tonight the vice detail raids Melrose's Spanish Shawl. The Mayor goes along. Metz has rolled up the bar and there's checkers in the gambling room. Hizoner drinks his lemonade and makes his little speech, entitled, Everything's Rosy in Our Town. Some'dy ought to give us a new deal."

McFee went into the bathroom. He swabbed his face with hot water, took a shower. He rubbed his shoulders with linament, got into clean pajamas, a bathrobe. He had a mouse under his left eye. His lips were bruised and broken. The hot violence still glinted on the surface of his eyes.

In the kitchen McFee prepared coffee, ham and eggs and flap-jacks; set the food on a tray with mess-gear. Cruikshank had righted the card table. He was dealing himself poker hands. "Boy!" said Cruikshank. They ate without talk, McFee believing in food first. Cruikshank was careless with his eggs. His neckties said so.

After they had cleaned up the tray, Cruikshank began to fool abstractedly with the cards. McFee suggested they cut for nickels. Cruikshank thought it a good idea until McFee had won around five dollars; then he muttered sourly, "I guess I've paid for my breakfast."

McFee said abruptly, "Who's the Trib backing for district attorney?"

"The Trib—" Cruikshank cut a ten-spade to McFee's heart-queen. "What you got on those girls, damn your hide—" He shoved across a chip. "The Trib—oh, yeah. Why, Jim Hughes, I guess. Jim's a good egg, and he'd give the county a break."

"Jim isn't bad," McFee admitted, "but Luke Addams is better; Luke knows the political set-up. Jim'd have to learn too much."

"Well, it don't matter who the Trib backs. Melrose has written the ticket—Dietrich. The Mayor endorses Dietrich and it's count 'em and weep."

McFee stacked chips. "Dietrich elected'll

throw the county Melrose." He looked at Cruikshank, eyes cold. "That'll give him the county, City Hall and police machines. Larrabee is soft, but he's got church backing and while he's D.A. he's never been more than half Melrose's man."

"What's on your mind?"

"I'll tell you." McFee spoke harshly. "If Melrose's heels had kept their hands off me this morning, I'd have kept mine in my pants pocket. But they didn't." His words made a bitter, drumming sound. "So I'm out to give Melrose a ride."

"On what?"

"The Damon murder."

"You think he or his heels killed Damon?"

McFee said softly, "Can I make it look that way, you mean?"

"You got the City Hall hook-up to beat."

McFee shuffled the cards. "Littner might buy a ticket," he muttered. "Littner ought to be chief." He added thoughtfully. "Littner's going to be Chief." And then, "Roy, could you swing the Trib to Luke Addams, if you wanted to?"

"Mebbe." Cruikshank rubbed his plump hands on his fat thighs. "But I don't guess I want to. Jim Hughes—"

"Swell!" said McFee. "Roy, you owe me five-ten. I'll cut you for it against Luke Addams for D.A. Five-ten isn't high for a district attorney."

Cruikshank grinned. "Cut 'em first."

McFee turned up a four-diamond.

"If I don't beat that—" Cruikshank exulted.

But his cut was a trey-heart.

"McFee, you lucky stiff, I got a hunch you're going to slam this across."

McFee said, "You owe me five-ten, Roy." He poured a couple of drinks. "To Luke Addams, the next D.A."

Cruikshank went away.

At his telephone McFee dialed Dresden 5216. He said, "Hello, Luke . . . McFee. Pin this in your hat: You are to be District Attorney . . ." Luke Addams laughed. So did McFee.

Then he hung up and went to bed.

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McFee got up around twelve and stood under the shower. His eye was bad, his lips were puffy, but he felt better. As he dressed, the telephone rang.

Irene Mayo was calling.

McFee said, "Oh, pretty good . . . a couple of the boys dropped in. Nothing much . . ." And then, "How about some lunch, sister? . . . Cato's. Half an hour . . . Right."

McFee stopped at his office, in the Strauss Building and looked over the mail his secretary had laid on his desk. Out of a white envelope—five-and-ten stock—fell a triangular shaped scrap of drug store paper. On it, in crude characters, was printed:

*Sam Melrose got the Shelldon file, you bet.
He's going to work on it.*

MR. INSIDE.

McFee stared at the note. "Well," he said finally, and went out.

At Cato's Irene Mayo waited in the booth McFee usually occupied. She wore a green felt beret, a string of pearls and a knitted green silk suit with white cuffs. Her eyes were smudgy, feverish in her taut face. She smiled, with a slow, subtle curving of her red lips.

McFee said, "Pretty nice."

"Not very nice," she answered. "Does your eye hurt?"

McFee grinned. "You ought to see the other lad . . . I suppose you had callers?"

She nodded. "Captain Littner and Mr. Hurley. They stayed about an hour, but I couldn't tell them anything they didn't know."

The red-headed girl ordered a roast. McFee said he was on a diet and took turtle soup, planked steak with mushrooms and apple pie. They talked a while. The girl presently fetched an envelope out of her vanity bag.

"That came this morning," she said.

The envelope was a replica of the one McFee had received. He took a swallow of coffee and shook a scrap of drug store paper out of the envelope. The crude printing on it was familiar.

You tell McFee Melrose got the Shelldon file at the Spanish Shawl.

MR. INSIDE.

The girl flared out, "Of course he's got it. And that means he had Rance shot. McFee—" She laid a cold hand on his, her eyes hot. "—I could kill Melrose—myself. It's in me to do it. Rance meant everything to me—I can't tell you—"

McFee said, "The Governor's lady."

She turned white. She whipped up her fork as if she was going to throw it at him. After a long moment she said coldly, "You mean I didn't love him—that I was just politically ambitious—"

"Oh, you loved him, sister."

"McFee, you are horrid." Tears started in her eyes. "But I don't care what you think. He'd have got there. I could have made him. He had appeal—the public—"

"What about the Leclair woman?" McFee asked.

Irene Mayo answered stonily, "She didn't count," and made patterns on the table cloth with her fork. "I loved him, but—I shouldn't have minded his blonde—much. A man is a man. Only the other thing *really* mattered—" The red-headed girl lifted her eyes to McFee's. "I am exposing myself, McFee. I did want to be—the Governor's lady. You'll think me mercenary. I don't care. I'd rather be that than dishonest. But Sam Melrose had to—" Her eyelids fell over the hate behind them, as she asked, "Who do you suppose 'Mr. Inside' is?"

"That doesn't make sense."

"Nothing makes sense."

"What does he mean by that sentence in your note, 'He's going to work on it?'"

"I been thinking about that," McFee said. "If Melrose has that Shelldon file he could do one of two things with it: Burn it, or work it over. By work it over, I mean change, substitute, lose in part, cut out, then send the file back with its kick gone. But we still got a good one to answer—" McFee stirred his coffee. "If Melrose has the file, what's he been chasing you and me all over

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the lot for?" He added after a moment. "The vice detail raids the Shawl tonight, by the way."

This appeared to interest Irene Mayo tremendously, but she stared at McFee silently while he wiped mushroom gravy off his lips and buttered a biscuit. "You said the Shelldon scandal wasn't big enough, in itself, to pull Melrose down, didn't you?"

McFee nodded. "You know what happened, don't you? Mike Shelldon was a big shot poker hound. Some'dy bumped him off in one of Melrose's joints—Melrose, maybe—but there isn't enough, if y'ask me."

"Wouldn't there be enough if it was definitely linked with the murder of Rance?"

"Yes."

"You just said the vice detail was going to raid the Shawl tonight. McFee—" She laid her hand on his. "—if Melrose has that file at the Shawl, and it should be found there—by the police—before witnesses—newspaper men—"

"Swell!" said McFee. "Some'dy'd have to do something then. But it isn't going to be, sister—"

"You don't know—" Her words came feverishly. "I'm not the sort of woman to sit down and wait. *I can't!* I've got to do something myself. McFee, take me out to the Shawl tonight. It's Saturday—there'll be a crowd—"

"If Sam has that file out there, you don't suppose it's lying around loose—"

"Of course I don't. But we might get a break. Things do break sometimes—unexpectedly. He knows what a gun is for, doesn't he?" she said, a little wildly. "He threatened us—we can threaten him—and if the police and some newspaper men are there—" She stared at McFee. She was very pale. She held her napkin in a ball between her clasped hands. "Not afraid, are you?"

McFee had finished his apple pie, sugared his second coffee.

"Got a hunch?"

"Yes."

"Well—" His eyes were amused. "Wrap

yourself around that food and I'll give you a bell tonight."

"McFee, you are a darling!"

"That's better than being Governor," he said.

After he had taken Irene Mayo to her car, McFee walked back along Third, turned down Carter. Some people were staring vacantly at the Gaiety Theater. A sign in the lobby said; HOUSE CLOSED TODAY. Across the exit alley hung a theater ladder. A cop on guard said, "Hello, McFee."

"Dirty job," McFee replied. He noticed that Maggie O'Day's hole-in-the-wall was shuttered. "That's funny," he muttered. "What happened to O'Day?"

"Search me," the cop said. "I been around Second and Carter twenty years and I never seen that old girl shut up before."

Rolling a match in his ear, McFee went down Second. He walked seven blocks and turned west on Finch, a street of ramshackle detached houses. Finch had been red light once; now it was colored. McFee stopped in front of a tall house with a crazy porch and a triangular wooden block at the curb. A pickaninny thumbed his nose at McFee.

McFee went along a broken cement walk to a drab side door. Two sloping boards with grooves in them led from the broken walk up to the door sill. McFee knocked. No one came. He was about to knock again when he sniffed the air. His eyes ran down the door. Folded newspaper showed between door bottom and sill. A keyhole was blocked. Moving fast, McFee pinched out his cigarette, picked up a piece of cement and shattered the window with it. He rammed the door with his shoulder. Lock and bolt gave and he fell into the room. A wave of combustible gas forced him back into the open, gagging.

A fat colored woman with a red handkerchief on her hair came up, running. She screamed.

McFee said, "Shut up. Go telephone the cops." The harsh fury in his tones spun her around, goggle-eyed.

McFee drew air deep down into his lungs and

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plunged into the gas-filled room. He shot up a window, hung his head outside, refilled his lungs. Facing inside he saw a gas heater, its cock wide open. Three cocks of a gas plate in one corner of the room were open. He shut off the gas flow and refreshed himself again.

Maggie O'Day lay in the middle of the floor. She lay on her side. Close against her was the wheel chair she had rolled herself home in for twenty years or more. But the last time she had come home she had come on her crutches.

Rance Damon's body was in the chair.

A rug tucked him into it. The five grand was still in his left hand. His right hung over the side of the chair, clutched in one of Maggie O'Day's weather-beaten bony ones.

McFee bent over the woman. He felt at her heart, lifted an eyelid. "Tough," he muttered. He went to the door and filled his lungs.

There were some rag rugs, a day bed, a couple of rocking chairs with antimacassars, a table, some framed pictures; near the gasplate was a wall cabinet. A door that led into the wall had been made tight with newspapers. Sheets of newspaper littered the floor.

A photograph of a large, fleshy, pallid man, still in his thirties, but already gross with high living, lay on the table. It was faded, had been taken perhaps thirty years before. The print had been torn in three, then carefully pieced together with adhesive tape.

McFee muttered, "The late Senator Gaylord." He chewed a knuckle, stared at the photograph, then looked at Damon and the woman. He said moodily, "Poor old girl!"

A bruise discolored Maggie O'Day's left temple. One of her crutches lay on the floor, behind the wheel chair. McFee saw something else then. He saw a red smear some two inches long on a sheet of newspaper on the floor in front of the wheel chair. He picked up the sheet, his eyes fixed and cold.

The smear was crimson grease paint.

McFee inspected Damon's shoes, the old woman's shoes. Neither pair was daubed with grease paint.

Very softly McFee said, "Pretty!"

A couple of coppers came. An assistant coroner, named Ridley, came.

Presently, Ridley said, "The old girl's been dead quite a while—ten or twelve hours. She cracked her head when she fell. It must have knocked her cold."

"Maybe some'dy cracked her first," McFee said.

"You mean, somebody else turned on the gas?"

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A couple of hours later, McFee talked with Captain Littner, Chief of the Homicide Squad, in Littner's office, in police headquarters on Greer Street. Littner was a lean hairless man with an oval head and bleak eyes as clear as cold water. He had a political, a cautious mind.

"O'Day had a son," Littner said. "Some thirty years ago. But nobody knew—I mean, nobody was *sure*—what became of him. There was a lot of talk. Gaylord—" Littner rubbed his chin, looked at McFee.

"Sure," said McFee. "Gaylord. And now we got Melrose. You talked with Leclair yet?"

"Yes."

"Did she mention alibis?"

"Nine of them."

"Where'd you see her?"

"Melrose brought her in. He said he left the Scudder yacht late this morning." Littner was amused. "He guessed we better close the Gaiety awhile. And anyhow, Leclair was opening a dance act at the Spanish Shawl tonight. He guessed he owed Leclair a statement to the police—oh, beans!" said Captain Littner gently. "What a town!"

"You ought to be Chief, Littner," McFee said.

"Yes," Littner answered carefully. "We traced that .32—the one killed Damon. It belonged to Joe Metz."

McFee exclaimed, "Now, you don't tell me!"

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“Joe said he hadn’t much use of a .32 and he sold it to Damon in the Press Club, couple of weeks ago. Rance wanted it for someone, Joe said. Joe’s got all the witnesses he needs—Carl Reder, Fred Pope, Wade Fiske. They say they saw Damon buy the gun, take it from Metz. Damon paid him fifteen dollars—” Littner smiled coldly. “Maybe he did.”

McFee said abstractedly, “Maybe he did, at that.” And then, “What do you think of this notion Damon’s murderer bumped off O’Day because the old girl saw him leave the Gaiety?”

“We have that smear of grease paint.”

“Grease paint isn’t easy to clean up,” McFee said, thoughtfully. “If it’s on cloth—any sort of fabric, I guess—it isn’t. Now if I’d killed some’dy and stepped in a mess of grease paint, I’d throw my shoes away.”

“Where’d you throw ’em, McFee?”

“Well, I might throw ’em in some’dy’s trash barrel. How’s that?”

“Not bad.” Littner made a note on a memorandum pad. “I’ll put a detail on trash collection.” He pulled his long jaw down. “McFee,” he asked, “what about that red-headed girl?”

“Nice little number.” McFee stood his hat on the back of his head. “A go-getter, and no better than she ought to be, maybe. Littner, if Leclair had dropped instead of Damon, I’d say Mayo could have done it. But she wanted Damon; she had a notion she could make him governor. Mayo wouldn’t have shot Damon.” Littner nodded, and McFee proceeded. “I got another idea. The vice detail’s going to knock over the Shawl tonight—twelve p.m. Melrose’ll be there—Metz, Leclair. The Mayor’s billed to tell a bedtime story. How about it, Mr. Littner?”

Captain Littner said, “Beans!” He opened a cupboard in his desk. “What’ll you have, McFee?”

“Rye,” said McFee. “The trouble with you, Littner, is you don’t wisecrack ’em enough. Lookit the Chief now—” He took the glass Littner handed him, pushed his forehead up, pulled it down. “Littner,” he asked again, “how’d you like to be Chief?”

“The pay’s good.”

“You’d need plenty drag.”

“Yes.” Littner stared at McFee with a flicker of warmth in his eyes. “Yes, I’d need plenty of drag.”

“Luke Addams is going to be District Attorney,” McFee said. “We got to elect Luke first.”

“Luke’d be a big help,” Littner admitted.

McFee leaned close again. “Here’s a question: If that Shelldon file should happen to be found in the Spanish Shawl tonight, what’d the Shelldon-Damon tie-up do to the Melrose organization?”

“Everything,” Littner answered drily. “But it won’t be.”

McFee handed Littner the “Mr. Inside” notes. He told him where he’d got them and watched Littner over the end of his cigarette.

Littner said carefully, “Maybe I’ll drop in at the Shawl around twelve.” And then, “Help yourself.”

“Thanks,” said McFee.

It was five o’clock. McFee’s car was in a garage on Fourth. He walked up to Carter, crossed Second. The cop was still on duty in the Gaiety alley. One of the lobby doors of the theater was open. A man with wide ears and a thick neck came out.

McFee said, “Hello, Harrigan.”

“A swell dish you canaries handed me last night,” the house manager said sourly.

“Lookit the publicity,” McFee told him.

“What the hell! You pull a murder on me and the coppers close the house. I could have sold out at two bucks a seat if they’d give me a break.”

“Why’n’t you talk to Melrose?”

Harrigan muttered uneasily and put a cigar in his mouth. “Guess it ain’t my picnic.” McFee followed him towards the door and Harrigan said, “The show’s closed, mister.”

“There’s a couple of points I want to check up.”

“Go read a book.”

McFee said, “There ought to be money in this for the house. If I give you a slant on what

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happened you ought to be able to hang an act on it when the coppers give you the go-sign. It'd sell big."

Harrigan looked at the end of his cigar. "A guy's gotta be careful," he mumbled; and then, "All right."

The backstage was dark. In Leclair's room, McFee turned on a wall bracket lamp. Light flowed out into the backstage. The couch stood against the wall. McFee stared at the crosses Hurley had chalked on the floor.

"Leclair was standing farthest from wall and couch," McFee muttered. "Damon was close against the couch—"

Harrigan cut in obliquely, "Leclair was out to the Shawl when Damon—if it was Damon—rubbed out."

"Oh, sure," McFee said solemnly. "Joe Metz and the boys said so. It was just a couple of ghosts I saw. Well, Mr. and Mrs. X, then. Mr. X flopped into Mrs. X's arms. They went down. Got a ball of string, Harrigan?"

The latter found string.

"Stand here," McFee said, and Harrigan set his No. 10's on the Mr. X cross. "Hold this against your chest."

McFee gave Harrigan the loose end of the string. Unrolling the ball as he went, he walked some twenty feet into the backstage, stopped and held the ball of string chest high. He stood on the south edge of the lane of light. The darkness of the backstage partly concealed him.

"The bullet must have traveled pretty well along the line of the string," McFee said. He added drily, "If there was any bullet—"

Slackening the line, McFee inspected a shallow horizontal groove, about an inch long, in the door jamb. The string had been level with the groove and about six inches to the right of it. McFee stared hard at the groove, twirled a match in his ear.

Backing up again, McFee said, "Put your dogs on the other cross."

Harrigan did so and the string grazed the groove. McFee said, "Swell!" and threw the ball at Harrigan. "Buy yourself a drink on me."

"Hey, wait a minute, fellah," Harrigan yelled. "You got me on by toes. What's the rest of it?"

McFee said, "Read it in the papers," and went out.

At Cato's, McFee ordered a Porterhouse steak smothered in onions. After his third coffee, he drove to his apartment. It was now eight o'clock. He looked up Irene Mayo's number and dialed Spring 2341. There was no response. McFee waited a little, then hung up.

He walked around the room, glaring at the Evening Tribune. The Trib said two killings in twenty-four hours was plenty and something ought to be done. McFee made a ball of the sheet. He carried the breakfast tray in to the kitchen. He put away the card table and poured himself a drink. He tried Irene Mayo's number again. No good.

McFee took a shower and got into his dinner clothes. He had wrecked four black ties when his telephone rang.

"Hello," McFee said. No one answered. "Hello, there—McFee talking."

He heard voices, vaguely familiar, but detached and distant and apparently not addressed to him. He embedded his ear in the receiver and waited, a fixed, hot look in his eyes.

The indistinct muttering continued until a voice suddenly cried, "You can't keep me here! I know where we are. We are in a house on Butte Street—I saw the name—Butte Street. Butte Street!"

It was Irene Mayo's voice that had ended on that desperate shrill note. Her voice had been thin and distant, but clear. McFee heard that muttering again.

And then, hysterically, "Don't touch me! I haven't got it—McFee—" A man laughed. A woman laughed.

McFee waited. His forehead was wet. He wiped it with a handkerchief. Gently replaced the receiver, and stood up. At his desk, McFee looked at a city map. He put a gun in his jacket pocket, and went down into the street.

As he got into his car, McFee said softly, "A house on Butte Street."

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McFee drove towards the foothills that threw a possessive arm around the town, on the north. Here the streets went up and down like stair carpets and lost themselves in tangles of oaks and eucalypti. This neighborhood had been built up years before, then forgotten while the town grew westward. Most of the residences were scattered, set in small acreage, and exclusively hedged about. Street lights were few.

Butte, a tag-end street, one block long, ended in a canyon. McFee drove up, then down the street. There were only three houses on it. Two were dark. The third, at the end of the street, was a secretive-looking, one-story, rambling, redwood place. A cypress hedge enclosed the grounds. A side window glowed.

McFee left his car at the corner, across the road from the street lamp, and walked back.

He went up a cinder driveway, saw a garage, half filled by a dark-colored sedan. The lighted side window shone dimly in the black expanse of house and mantling trees. Curtains screened the windows. McFee could not see into the room, but he heard voices.

He heard Joe Metz' voice. He heard Joe Metz say, "Sister, we just begun to work on you—"

McFee found the back door locked. The house was built on the slope of the canyon. He saw a basement window on his left, below the level on which he stood. The light was on the other side of the house; the wind made a melancholy rustling in the trees. He came to a decision. Holding his soft felt hat against one of the small square panes of the cellar window, he struck the felt sharply with the nose of his gun. The brittle glass broke with a tinkling sound.

His arm inside the window, McFee found the hook. The window swung upward on hinges. McFee threw the beam of his flash inside the cellar room, let himself down into it. He saw a stair, went quietly up it, came to a door. It opened when he turned the handle and pushed against it. He left his shoes on the top step.

McFee found himself in a dark, square hall, redwood timbered. He heard voices, saw an open door with light somewhere beyond it. Through the door he entered a living room with a huge stone fireplace. The light and the voices came from a partly opened door, opposite the one through which he had just come.

As McFee approached this door, Monty Welch whispered, "Lemme at her, Joe—"

This room was the library. McFee saw Mabel Leclair in a black velvet gown, curled up on a divan, eating chocolates. Metz and Welch were bent over an arm chair in which Irene Mayo strained away from them in an attitude of terror. Joe Metz held her by the arm. Her eyes were enormous, frantic. She whimpered faintly. Her lips were taped. Welch burned a cigarette.

McFee said, "Quit that, Joe."

Monty Welch must have heard McFee first. He spun on his heel, white violence bursting through his professional calm. As McFee said "Joe," Welch fired from the pocket of his dinner jacket. He fired again, lurching toward McFee. The latter aimed, let go. Welch's shoulder bunched up, he screamed and went down. He threshed about, buried his face in the carpet.

Metz stood erect, his hands at his sides. McFee went towards him. Metz did not move or speak. His bulbous forehead gleamed. His lip muscles twitched. McFee took a long stride, a short one, and struck Metz a terrible blow in the mouth. It made a crunching sound and Metz hit the carpet. McFee pulled the adhesive tape from Irene Mayo's lips.

"McFee—" the red-headed girl sobbed. She rocked in the chair, began to rub her wrists.

"Sure," McFee said. "Take it easy."

Welch dragged himself across the floor. McFee toed his gun under the divan. Metz lay groaning. His mouth and the plaster strap on his cheek were a crimson mess. He held a handkerchief against it. Suddenly, he jerked out an automatic. McFee's unshod toe caught his wrist before he could fire. The gun shattered the glass front of a bookcase. McFee raised Metz by his lapels and flung him onto the divan, alongside

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Mabel Leclair. The Leclair woman screamed and covered her face.

McFee searched all three of them for other weapons, found none.

“What give you the notion Miss Mayo had the Shelldon file, Joe?”

Metz blotted his wet lips, whispered, “She knows where it is—you, too—one of you—”

McFee cut in softly, “The gun killed Damon was yours, Joe.”

“I sold it to Damon.” Metz’ bruised lips distorted his speech. “The boys saw me hand it him. I told Littner—”

“How about Damon handing it to Leclair?”

The blonde woman opened her mouth, but as McFee looked at her she closed it again with a gasping sound. McFee proceeded. “You went to Miss Mayo’s apartment, I s’pose. That’s kidnapping. We’ll give Littner a bell.”

The telephone stood on the table. McFee backed towards it. Metz stared after him, his eyes haggard above the red-spotted handkerchief against his lips. The blonde woman wept. Holding his shoulder, Monty Welch struggled to a sitting position, his lips gray.

The telephone was a dial instrument. Several magazines had been inserted under the receiver, so that while the receiver was on the hook, the hook was up. McFee laughed a little and looked at the red-headed girl. She nodded, her eyes hot with hate. As McFee seized the telephone, she got control of herself and caught his arm.

“What’s on your mind, sister?”

“McFee, it’s our turn now.” She spoke feverishly. “These people aren’t important. Melrose—Sam Melrose *is*. He’s at the Shawl. The Leclair woman is opening a dance act there tonight. Well, she isn’t—”

“What’s that?”

Irene Mayo said deliberately, “Metz is going to phone Melrose that Leclair is too ill to appear. Shock—anything! And he’s going to tell Melrose her red-headed friend, Zella Vasquez, is on her way out to take Leclair’s place. Melrose—no one at the Spanish Shawl has seen me. If

Metz telephones Melrose I’m coming he’ll accept me as Leclair’s friend. Why shouldn’t he?” Irene Mayo hammered on the table. “McFee, you’ve got to make Metz telephone him—”

“Swell!” McFee said.

“I won’t!” Metz shouted thickly. “By God, if you lay a hand on me—”

McFee jerked him up and shook him into a shivering silence. He walked him backwards, slammed him down beside the table.

He said, “Metz, since half-past one this morning, you’ve been rocking the cradle. It’s my turn now. Do as I tell you, or I’ll spatter you over that wall. Grab that phone and tell Melrose Leclair is sick. Tell him Zella Vasquez, her red-headed side kick, is on her way out. And make it stick!”

Metz’ Adam’s apple ran up and down his throat. He rubbed his wet palms together, pulled the telephone towards him. He dialed Thorn 99238. He had to do it twice and then, huskily, “Mr. Melrose—tell him Metz calling.”

McFee stuck his gun into the back of Metz’ neck. He didn’t say anything. Melrose helloed, and Metz began a pretty good job of doing as he had been told. When he weakened, McFee leaned on his gun and Metz picked up again. Melrose put some question about Zella Vasquez.

Metz answered carefully, “I dunno, Sam. Leclair says she’s good—that oughta be plenty—” The blonde woman made blasphemous noises but subsided when McFee looked at her. Metz proceeded, “She’s on her way, Sam . . .” Metz hung up. “What Melrose won’t do to you for this, mister—”

McFee gave Irene Mayo his gun, said, “Watch him,” and cut out a length of the telephone cord. He bound Metz’ hands and corded them to the straight back of the chair in which he sat. Metz did not resist. His ankles McFee fastened to the legs of the chair with Metz’ belt and a couple of handkerchiefs. Metz dripped sweat but said nothing. At the back of the house McFee found some clothesline. He sat Monty Welch on another straight backed chair and

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roped him to it. Welch had fainted. McFee slammed a third chair down in front of Mabel Leclair.

She screamed, "You ain't going to tie me up—"

McFee cut in, "I'll forget you're a lady, if you don't sit in that chair."

"Forget it anyhow," Irene Mayo said hotly.

As McFee was tying up the Leclair woman, she flared out, "Sam Melrose thinks you red-headed Shebas are particular arsenic."

"He's going to change his mind."

"You couldn't hold Rance Damon."

Vivid spots of color on her cheek bones, Irene Mayo slapped the blonde woman hard across the mouth, rocking her head backwards. Mabel Leclair went pale under her make-up, became inarticulate. The red-headed girl was throwing up the gun when McFee said, "That's plenty, sister."

McFee found a roll of adhesive tape on the table. He taped the lips of his prisoners. Metz he dragged into the hall, on the heels of his chair, and tumbled into a clothes closet. The door locked, he threw the key into the cellar and put on his shoes, he locked Monty Welch in the pantry; left Mabel Leclair in the library.

Irene Mayo said, "You do a good job, McFee."

He nodded. "That telephone stunt was slick."

She shuddered. "I was afraid you were out. They were getting some drinks. I knew it was the only chance— They thought I was shouting at them."

McFee stared at her. He said slowly, "Think you can put over that Zella Vasquez number?"

She smiled. "I've known lots of men, McFee."

"What you think you're going to get out of it?"

"I told you at lunch. If Melrose has that Shell-don file—if I should find it—or the police—You said they were raiding the Shawl—" She clasped her hands, whispered huskily, "Perhaps I'm a fool, but I can't help it. I can't help feeling something's going to break—"

McFee muttered, "Let's get at it, then."

A clock in the hall showed nine-five as they went out.

They walked down Butte Street to McFee's car.

"I want to go home first," the girl said.

McFee smiled one-sidedly, answered, "Right."

At Irene Mayo's apartment, McFee poured himself a drink. He took the glass over to the telephone and called Roy Cruikshank, at the Tribune office, then Littner at headquarters. Ringing off, he pushed his face up and set his glass down. Near the telephone stood a portable typewriter. McFee took a chair and slid paper under the roller. He wrote for about ten minutes, then read what he had written, and put the paper inside his jacket pocket.

Irene Mayo came prancing out of the bedroom. She wore a green silk blouse, a blue velvet bolero, a frothy red skirt and a green sash. She looked like a red-headed Carmen. Snapping her fingers, she fell into McFee's arms. Her green eyes were veiled and humid.

McFee said, "Very nice," and kissed her. "If Melrose don't fall, I'll go peddling fleas to a dog circus."

It was nine-fifty. McFee drove fast. They took one of the beach boulevards, followed it a while, and turned north. Presently they made a west turn, then a northwest turn into a dirt road that ended in a grove of cypress trees. The trees were on a bluff high above a crashing beach, and garlands of red, green and blue lights hung against them. Crooked in the bright arm of the trees was a sprawling, dark-shingled building with gemlike windows. A horde of cars stood around. Music throbbed. People churned in a splatter of sound and color.

Irene Mayo said, "I'll go in alone. You come back later—" She added lightly, "If you care to."

McFee laughed and let her out. She ran under a canopy of colored lights and vanished through a door. An attendant ran towards McFee's car, but McFee reversed and roared down the road. At the intersection he parked long enough to

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smoke a couple of cigarettes before he put the car around.

He entered the Spanish Shawl at eleven-five.

12

At one end of the rowdy cafe floor a six-piece colored orchestra—Dutch Louie and his Pals—peddled hot music. The ebony lads looked livid and wet in the overhead yellow lights. A good crowd danced about. The closely regimented tables made a horseshoe about the patch of shining floor. Most of them were taken but Leo Ganns, the head waiter, found McFee one at the lower end of the room.

He ordered broiled lobster and coffee.

The music stopped and the floor emptied. McFee touched a match to a cigarette. The air was heavy with smoke and the odors of food. Some liquor was flowing. Two girls near McFee sat lopsided and very still. Dutch Louie began to shout through a megaphone in his mellow drawl. He ballyhooed one Zella Vasquez, red-headed Spanish dancer, who stood 'em on their ears in Havana, Cuba. "Yessir, ladies and gem'men, an' if you don't think she's got something you jest gotta have—"

Irene Mayo whirled onto the floor in her Spanish costume. Behind her came a dark, slick-looking number from the Argentine or Chicago, maybe. They did a fox trot, the ebony boys wailing "My Baby's a Red-head-too." After that, a tango. Then Irene Mayo went solo and turned in a sweet *la jota Aragonese*. As she frothed past McFee, her eyes bright with fever, rested on him without recognition. She threw herself into the dark number's arms, and the crowd stamped. They did another tango. McFee dug into his lobster. The crowd howled for more and got the hat dance.

Sam Melrose came smiling onto the floor. He was an olive-skinned man with an uneven mouth and grizzled hair parted in the middle. His face was old, his forehead was corded by deep lines that never smoothed out. He was thirty-eight.

The hat dance finished, Irene Mayo pin-wheeled towards Melrose. He caught her in his arms, kissed her, and whirled her off through a door. The house yelled its throat dry, but the red-headed girl did not return. The slick-looking number took the bows.

McFee said, "Not bad," and finished his coffee.

McFee strolled through a door which opened into a red-carpeted hall, pushed through a door in the wall opposite and joined half a dozen men drinking at a bar. The bar was a swivel arrangement that could be swung into the hall behind it on a couple of minutes' notice.

The barkeep said, "What'll you have, McFee?"

"Straight." As the barkeep set up his goods, McFee asked, "Comp'ny tonight, Ed?"

"I dunno," the man muttered.

McFee walked into the gaming room, which adjoined the bar. Roulette, black jack and craps were running. There were no windows in the room. The only entrance to it was from the bar. The games were at the lower end of the room, and it was possible to swing a false wall across the tables as quickly as the bar could be made to vanish. The device was superficial, but all the roadhouse ever had needed. Some twenty or thirty people were playing, their voices feverish and blurred. Now and then a word pattern emerged. "You pick 'em—we pay 'em . . . Get your money down . . . Six . . . point is six . . . twenty-one . . . throws a nine. Take your money . . ."

Art Kline stood near the crap dealer. He looked at McFee, flexed his shoulder muscles, looked away. It was twenty minutes of midnight.

Walking into the hall, McFee glanced down it to where Melrose had his rooms. A woman's voice lifted hysterically for an instant above the harsh overtones of the Shawl. Art Kline stuck his head into the hall. When he saw McFee, he pulled it back. McFee smiled coldly, waited a minute, then went past the bar to a side door.

It was light outside. He walked to the rear of the building. Here it was dark. Trees threw tall

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shadows. Light came from a curtained window behind some shrubbery. McFee glanced around, then pushed through the shrubbery. It plucked at his face and throat. The window curtains did not quite meet and he was able to see into the room. He saw a soft, intimate room and a floor with a yellow parchment shade. Irene Mayo reclined in a plush upholstered chair beneath the lamp. Sam Melrose sat on an arm of the chair.

The red-headed girl laughed provocatively. Melrose bent towards her. She pushed him away, her fingers on his lips. They talked a while, Melrose leaning attentively over the girl. McFee heard her slightly hysterical laugh and Melrose's bleak chuckle, but Dutch Louie and His Pals drowned out their conversation.

The room had three doors. One led into the hall, another opened into a small washroom, the third gave entrance from the business office. A red carpet covered the floor. An ornate flat-topped desk stood in one corner, a chair behind it, a cloak tree beside it. On the desk was a wire letter basket.

Melrose got up and went into the business office, closing the door behind him. Irene Mayo came sharply forward onto her feet. She stared at the closed door, an obsessed look on her face. She ran swiftly towards the ornate desk, bent over the wire basket. McFee saw a flat manila envelope in her hand, and muttered, "Swell!"

Someone behind him said, "We got you covered, McFee."

13

McFee turned slowly, his palms tight against his thighs. Three men in dinner jackets stood on the other side of the shrubbery, guns in their hands. One of them was Art Kline. An ascetic-looking man with disillusioned eyes and a plume of gray hair on his white forehead had addressed McFee. This was Fred Pope, who ran the Red Jacket, a Melrose enterprise.

Their faces gleamed a little. Their shirt fronts stood up like slabs of stone.

Fred Pope said, "Sam wants to talk to you, McFee."

"I had a notion he might."

"Come outta that."

McFee stepped into the triangular huddle the three men had made of their bodies. They took his gun away from him.

"Straight ahead," Pope said. "No monkey business."

A private door gave them access to the business office. There were comfortable chairs, a couple of mahogany desks, safe, telephone, and a filing cabinet. A desk lamp was lighted. The hall door opened and Sam Melrose entered, a cobwebby bottle in his hands.

When he saw McFee the lines that corded his forehead tightened until they looked like wires embedded in his skull. He set the bottle down, came towards McFee with quiet, quick steps. Fred Pope laughed, dropped into a chair. Kline and the other man laid their backs against the outer wall.

An electric clock on the filing cabinet indicated seven minutes of twelve.

Sam Melrose said, "McFee, I want that Grand Jury Shelldon file."

"Don't be a sap."

"What do you mean?"

"You got it already, Sam."

"McFee, you been handing my boys that line ever since they ran you down in the Gaiety this morning. I'm damn good and sick of it." Melrose's flat-surfaced eyes distended coldly. "But I'll give you a break. You shoved your nose into my business—got what I paid money for. All right—come through with that file and we quit even. You walk outta here. You go home. You forget everything you figured on remembering. And you let my business alone after this. When I get this town like I want it I'll throw some sugar your way. Where you put that file?"

McFee smiled, felt for a cigarette, put it in his mouth. He flipped a match at it. Anger puffed across Melrose's eyes, subsided. The two hard-faced men started forward, but fell back at Melrose's gesture.

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The clock showed four minutes of twelve.

McFee said, "Lemme see, there's a murder tied up with that Shelldon blow-off, isn't there, Sam?"

"I can beat it."

"What's the idea, then?"

"It looks bad, election coming on. I want it outta the way."

"Wait a minute, Sam. You got Leclair to make a deal with Damon. Damon is dead. His mother is dead. And the old lady didn't turn on the gas—" McFee paused, considered the other indulgently. "Can you beat all that, Sam?"

Melrose cut in harshly, "My boys didn't rub out Damon and his mother."

"Well, you oughta know. If that Shelldon file don't turn up at the wrong time, maybe the taxpayers'll believe you. It's funny what taxpayers'll believe. But the Damon-O'Day murders and the Shelldon racket'd make a bad combination." McFee laughed. "That Shelldon file's getting pretty important, Sam."

Melrose said, "Ten grand, McFee?"

"I haven't got it."

"Listen, mister—" The lines that corded Melrose's frontal bone deepened again. "I dunno what you playing for, but if it's to put the bell on me you got the wrong cat by the tail. I'm running this town. I'm gonna keep on running it. Nob'dy can get to first base unless I say so. McFee—" he prodded the latter in the chest, "—I want that Shelldon file. If you don't come across my boys'll walk you out and leave you some place."

The clock said one minute of twelve.

Dragging on his cigarette, McFee muttered, "Well, I dunno—"

The telephone rang.

Melrose picked it up. He did not remove his eyes from McFee, as he said, "Melrose talking." . . . And then, "Yes, Joe . . . Yes, what's that? . . . McFee—That red-head—His side-kick—But you phoned—What? . . . A frame-up— . . . You dunno . . ." Melrose's violent eyes impaled McFee. The latter stood stiffly, sweat on his temples. Melrose said coldly, "I got both of 'em here—Oh, McFee'll talk—"

Comprehendingly, Art Kline, Fred Pope and

the other man crowded McFee. As Melrose rang off, he said, "Watch McFee!" and jumped toward his private room, jerked the door open. His eyes were hot when he faced around. "She musta heard—Fred, that redhead's the Mayo woman. McFee brought her—a frame—Bring her back."

As Fred Pope went away, Melrose said quietly, "What's back of this Mayo woman coming here?"

"Some'dy's been kidding you, Sam."

"You gonna talk?"

"Nothing to talk about."

"Lemme work on him a while, Boss," Art Kline said.

It was two minutes after twelve.

McFee shook the sweat out of his eyes. Dutch Louie and His Pals were tearing a staccato jazz out of their horns. The music swelled, filled the house with crashing sound. But McFee could hear the ticking of his watch, the pounding of his heart.

"Listen to the music, Sam," he said.

Melrose shouted, "By God, McFee, if you won't talk my boys'll burn it out of your toes—"

McFee struck him in the mouth. As Melrose went backwards, Kline and the other men jumped in. They milled for a minute. McFee got home four or five good ones, but he was taking a beating when the music stopped. The house became completely quiet.

A police whistle shrilled out in the cafe room.

Melrose ejaculated, "The coppers! I forgot—" And then, "I'll fix those birds—" He checked himself, said less positively, "Art, you stay here—"

McFee cut in softly, "You can't do it." Melrose glared at him, dabbed a cut lip with a handkerchief. "Sam, you are in a spot. Littner and Cruikshank are out there. You didn't s'pose I'd walk in here without having my tail covered? I told Littner to look for me."

"Lotta good that'll do you," Melrose said harshly. To his men, "Take McFee down the beach—the shack. Keep him there till I come."

Art Kline stood behind McFee. "Get going,

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sap," he said, in his gummed-up voice, and shoved metal into McFee's back.

As McFee moved towards the side door, Littner entered.

Melrose's eyes turned white. Kline and the other man stared at him, slid their guns away. Littner looked around with his cold water eyes, rubbed his long jaw.

"Hello, McFee," he said. "Sam."

"Littner," McFee said.

"Argument?"

"No," McFee answered. "Sam bit his lip. He was just going to open a bottle of bubbly." McFee walked to the desk, picked up the bottle Melrose had placed there. It was moist and cold. "Seventy-six. Elegant." He turned to Melrose. "Got a glass for Littner, Sam?"

Melrose stared at McFee, his flat eyes inflamed. He did not speak. A flood of sound, shot through with panic, filled the house. Women screamed, glassware shattered. Melrose wiped his mouth, felt at his throat, pulled in a long breath. Then he sullenly crossed to the filing cabinet and took three glasses, a corkscrew and a napkin out of the bottom drawer. McFee ceremoniously handed him the bottle. Melrose wiped the top of the bottle, wrapped the napkin around it. The cork popped. Melrose poured unsteadily.

McFee said, "To the next District Attorney."

They drank.

Blood from Melrose's cut lip turned the "seventy-six" pink. He muttered blasphemously, held the napkin against his mouth. McFee hung his arm over Melrose's shoulders. A white heat played across the flat surfaces of Melrose's eyes.

McFee asked, "You got the Mayor out there, Littner?"

"Yes."

"Buy him a lemonade before you bring him in. Sam and I got business to do." McFee slapped Melrose's shoulder affectionately. "Five minutes, Littner."

McFee linked his arm in Melrose's. Melrose resisted him a moment, then let the other lead him towards the door of the inner room. Littner's eyes followed them, faintly ironical.

Art Kline and his companion glared angry bewilderment.

At the door, McFee said softly, "Tell your boys this is private, Sam."

Melrose muttered, "That stands."

McFee looked at Littner. "Maybe you better stick close. Some'dy might take a notion." Littner nodded.

McFee shut the door.

Melrose's face was yellow and wet. "What's your proposition?"

14

The room had a secretive intimacy that affronted the uncomplicated McFee, but he marched his somber eyes around it. The washroom door stood ajar. It had been shut when McFee had looked in through the window. His eyes dwelt on it a moment. Then he dug out the "Mr. Inside" notes and handed them to Melrose. "Take a look at these."

Melrose said thickly, "Would my boys have been tailing you all day, if I had that file here?"

"Sure you haven't got it here, Sam?"

"What you mean?"

McFee said slowly, "Littner and Roy are here to look for it. It'll make a swell story—if they find it in this room—A swell story, Sam—"

Comprehending, Melrose yelled, "You planted that file here! You and that readheaded tramp—What you done with it?" He dropped his hand into his jacket pocket. He pushed his face into McFee's, said in a low tone, "You find that file quick, or take it in the belly."

"Littner's out there, Sam."

Melrose breathed hard. He took his hand out of his pocket. He wiped sweat out of his eyes, rubbed his palms together. "I'll bust you for this, McFee." His eyes slid desperately around the room—chairs, desk, washroom, carpet.

McFee said, "Sit tight, Sam, or I'll call Littner."

Melrose began to walk the floor. He stopped abruptly, came to grips with himself. "Let 'em find it," he said huskily. "I can beat the rap."

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"Think so?" McFee chewed a finger nail. "Damon wasn't so much, but O'Day was his mother. Nob'dy knew it until today. The old girl had about a million friends in this town and all of 'em are beginning to feel sorry for her. You know what people are when they begin feeling sorry. Think you got enough drag to beat the Damon-O'Day-Shelldon combination?"

"My boys didn't rub out Damon and O'Day."

"This is politics, Sam." McFee thumbed a match at a cigarette. "It isn't what a lad does or don't do—it's what his public'll stand for."

"How d'I know that file's planted here?"

"Call Littner—you'll know then."

"You found out who killed Damon?"

McFee answered carefully, "Maybe."

Melrose pulled up in front of McFee. "What you want?"

The racket on the cafe floor had dropped to a backlash of irritation and protest. A door opened. Littner spoke to someone. Joe Cruikshank's soprano answered. The Mayor's platform boom cut in.

McFee said, "Sam, you been running this town long enough. I'm going to take it away from you."

"Yes?"

"The Mayor's out there telling everybody what a good guy he is." McFee spoke softly, pulled out the paper he had typewritten at Irene Mayo's. "The Mayor's your man. Your money elected him, keeps him in the City Hall. This is an unsigned indorsement of Luke Addams' candidacy for District Attorney—"

"A lotta help that'll give him."

McFee said gently, "With the City Hall machine and the newspapers pulling for Addams we got a pretty good chance beating Dietrich. Addams in, we work for a new deal in the police hookup—Littner chief. But that's future. Sam, you are going to tell Hizoner to put his John Henry to this declaration of independence, or I give Littner the go sign." He smiled. "How 'bout it?"

Melrose raged, "I will not!" But he was shaken. "I'll see you—"

McFee cut in, "You want Littner to use his

search warrant? This is politics. I'm telling you."

Jerking at his wilted collar, Melrose walked to the window. McFee slanted his eyes at the wash-room door. He kept them there until Melrose faced around.

"I can throw plenty sugar your way—"

McFee said, "You are going to need sugar, Sam."

Melrose opened his mouth, shut it without saying anything, pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes. When he dropped them, his eyes were crazy, and he came charging towards McFee with his hands clenched. Littner entered just then, a brown paper parcel under his arm. Roy Cruikshank was behind him. The Mayor boomed in the outer room. His handsome, silver head was visible for a moment before Cruikshank closed the door. Melrose shook his head, let his hands fall.

Littner sat down, laid the parcel on the floor beside him. He said nothing. His oval head, his cold water eyes said nothing. Cruikshank put a cigarette in his pink mouth, pulled his hat over his eyes and leaned against the wall.

"Do I get that file?" Melrose asked tonelessly.

McFee said, "Sorry. We got to have a guarantee the City Hall'll root hard enough." He added reluctantly, "But I'll give you a break, Sam. I'll show Littner who killed Damon and his mother."

Melrose wet his lips. "All right." McFee handed him the unsigned indorsement. He read it, turned it over, flared out, "None of my boys killed Damon. By God, McFee if this is another frame—"

McFee said, "I never framed anybody, Sam."

As Melrose went out and shut the door behind him, the Mayor's platform boom ceased. A low-toned, bitter argument began. Melrose's voice whiplashed, "I'm still running this town, Mr. Mayor."

McFee sat down. His eyes moved towards the washroom door, remained there a moment, came back. He wiped his face.

Littner said mildly, "Warm for the time of the year."

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"It's some of that unusual weather," Cruikshank muttered under his hat brim.

"Maybe Sam'll buy us a highball," McFee said. He laughed softly, looked at the cherubic Cruikshank, at the politically minded Littner. "Politics is funny. The lad who don't have to put over more than a couple of dirty ones to pull three good members out the bag has a medal coming to him."

"Some'dy ought to pin a medal on you, Handsome," Cruikshank said.

"I'm not through with this town yet."

Melrose came in then, a dull burn on either wet cheek bone. He handed McFee the indorsement, sat down and shelved his chin on his chest. He did not speak, did not look at McFee. The latter examined the signature. A clock ticked loudly somewhere. In the next room the Mayor was booming, "Luke Addams is a man in whom I have the greatest confidence. It will be a pleasure—" Dutch Louie and His Pals whipped into a jazz.

Parading his eyes around the room, McFee blinked at the washroom door, let them idle on the ornate desk. He went to the desk, bent over the wire basket and looked through the papers in it. He stood erect and stared at the end of his cigarette. A couple of overcoats hung on the cloak tree, near the desk. McFee put a hand inside one of them and brought forth a long manila envelope with "Shelldon" penciled in one corner. The envelope was open. He glanced into it.

Melrose lifted his head. Rage had contracted his eye pupils, ground them to points of bitter, fierce light. He did not speak.

McFee handed Cruikshank the Shelldon file and the Mayor's indorsement. "Stick 'em in the Tribune vault a while," he said.

"Right," Cruikshank muttered.

15

Littner gave McFee the brown paper parcel. "No. 3 trash collection wagon brought them in," he said.

"Very nice," McFee answered. He sat down, the parcel on his knees. He looked at his watch. "Twelve-thirty-five. It's just twenty-four hours since a lady came to see me, at Cato's. She said the lad she was with, Rance Damon, had gone into the Gaiety about an hour before. She said he'd followed Sam Melrose—"

Melrose ejaculated, "He did not. I was on Scudder's yacht. I got all the alibis—" He stopped there, wiped his mouth on the napkin. "You birds got nothing on me."

McFee proceeded softly, "The lady and I got into the Gaiety. Damon had been shot. He died. Some'dy had stepped on a tube of grease paint. Crimson. Smear'd it around. Damon's body walked out. I found it in Maggie O'Day's. Maggie was his mother. She had rolled him home in her wheel chair. Maggie was dead—gas. But there was a bruise on her head. Maybe she fell. Maybe she was slugged. I found a smear of crimson grease paint on a newspaper on the floor. There was no grease paint on Maggie's shoes or Damon's. Very well. I figured this way: The party killed Damon stepped on the tube of grease paint, in the dark, bust it open, got all smeared up. Grease paint is bad. Maggie saw that party beating it out the Gaiety. The party followed Maggie home, to see how come. Maggie accused the party of murdering her son and got slugged—with her own crutch, maybe. The gas was to make it look like suicide—grief. The party's shoe smeared the newspaper. The party didn't know it, went away. Now grease paint is hard to clean off fabric goods, and when the party saw what'd happened to a nice pair of shoes it looked like a good idea to get rid of 'em. Sounds easy. Only it isn't. Littner's men found 'em at the city trash collection dump."

McFee unrolled Littner's brown paper parcel. A pair of green satin pumps fell out. He held one of them up. The sole, instep, and right side of the pump were smeared with crimson grease paint.

Melrose blurted, "That lets my boys out."

McFee lighted a cigarette, looked at the match a while. "I said a lady came to see me at Cato's. She was wearing green satin pumps—"

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these pumps. When I took her home three hours later she was wearing green snakeskin slippers. She beat it out the Gaiety and phoned headquarters around 1:30. I picked her up on Third at 3:15—nearly two hours. That gave her plenty time to tail Maggie O'Day home, kill her, get back to the car, drive to her apartment—taking the Shelldon file with her—change her shoes, and get back to Third.”

McFee rolled a match in his ear. “But I couldn't figure out why Irene Mayo killed Damon. Wasn't she going to make him Governor, herself the Governor's lady? So I went back to the Gaiety and ran a string along what looked like the bullet trajectory. There was a horizontal groove in the door jamb level with the line the bullet followed—”

A muffled, sobbing sound interrupted McFee and terminated in a wail of despair. McFee wiped his face and throat with a handkerchief. A bitter, silent moment went by.

McFee said deliberately, “Irene Mayo wrote those ‘Mr. Inside’ notes. She planted that Shelldon file here because Melrose's blonde had taken Damon with five grand. She wasn't with Damon

last night. She tailed him down to the Gaiety. Melrose wasn't there. Slick little number. She tried to pull a fast one at her apartment this morning with a ‘Shelldon’ envelope full of blanks. Said she'd found it on Damon while I was in Leclair's room. Said it had fooled her. Well, she pretty near fooled me.” McFee stared gloomily at his cigarette. “Damon must have given her that gun—Metz' gun. She didn't intend to kill him—the lad she was going to make Governor. No. She fired at Leclair. Because Leclair was gumming up the works. You can't figure women. The bullet ricocheted from the door jamb, took Damon—”

That tortured cry came again, McFee got up, walked towards the washroom door.

A pistol shot reverberated in the room.

McFee took three strides forward. The door leaned open. He caught the redheaded girl in his arms. He carried her to a chair, laid her in it. Littner, Melrose, Cruikshank stood around. People came rushing in, the Mayor booming . . .

McFee said, “I had a notion she'd do it.” And then, huskily, “I never was much of a lad for hanging a woman.”