

A Sucker for Bullets

Cort Ramsey was just a Wall Street order clerk, but he sure knew his trigger tape. Yet when the customer's man bought himself a load of death, Cort found he'd been added to the deal — with a corpse as a dividend.



*Detective
Novelet*

By James A. Kirch

THE DJ tape was beginning to step it up, moving across the top of the board, and the prices were cracking, fast. I had a stick full of GTC orders on my desk, and I tried to keep my

eyes on them, making sure the boys on the floor didn't slip up on me. The lights on my board flashed like a neon sign.

Dickson wanted to dump 300 Mackson at the market, Harwarth was trying to get out from under on his steel position, and some two-bit customer was on my wire yelling about going short.

"I got an order in Sell 100 VX short since 18," he was shouting, "and the stock's down to 14 1/4 now. What the hell's wrong with you guys?"

I told him to keep his pants on and switched to the floor phone. Garson was crackling reports.

"Stow it," I told him. "Shoot 'em later. Get these. Sell—200 GDX, 100 RFP, 500 Q. Dump 'em. Buy—100 XLM, 50 TUT. 'S'all."

Garson said, "Hold it, keed," and I sat there waiting for him, watching the figures scoot across the tape. The break was a bad one.

The outside wire on my desk rang and a woman's voice half-lisped at me. "Is the market still all right?" That was a honey.

"It ain't even bounced yet, sister," I told her. "They're belting it." I hung up and swung back to the floor phone. Garson was on again.

"Am I glad I'm broke," he rattled. "Listen, keed, got your 2,000 SAC at 15-17. What's the name?"

I said, "Call ya back," and kneed White's phone off the hook. No dice. I said, aloud, "The lout's drunk again," and picked up the house wire, flashing the girl. "White, honey," I told her. "Double-quick."

"No answer," she snapped back. "I been ringing the guy for ten minutes for Mr. Rackman. And is Rackman sore."

I said, "Lemme know, honey," cradling the phone, and swung around to watch the tape. She steadied a minute, with maybe some short-covering coming in, and then they started sniping at the utilities. For the next hour I was busy, plus.

I HAD a string of bail-out orders from one of our boys who was up to his ears, and then some more short covering from the guys who decided it was kissing bottom. The reaction didn't come until one o'clock, and then it was more of a slow-up than anything else. It was slow enough, though, for me to let Pete warm my stool while I went out for coffee and.

Garson came on again from the floor just before I left, and this time his voice was edged. "Come on, keed," he said. "Slip me the name on that SAC. The stuff's hot."

I kneed White's phone off the hook again, with no luck.

"Christopher Columbus," I told Garson. "And lemme alone, buddy. I'm off duty." I tossed the phone to Pete and slid off the stool, beating it for the cafeteria across the street.

The way I figured it, it was White's headache, not mine. He was supposed to give me the account's name every time he shot an order through; the idea being to keep customers' men from changing their mind and slinging a bad position to some sucker. But he mostly didn't do it. He had two or three fat accounts, one of 'em big enough to pay my salary for five years without feeling it, and when a guy brings in commissions like that he writes his own ticket. At least, at G. L. Harwarth & Co. he does.

I took it easy at lunch, wondering where all the damn fools who expected to beat the market got their dough, and especially why a smart richbucks like Frank Rackman let drunken Bill White handle his account. I was willing to lay six-two-and-even that Rackman was the guy White had got into SAC.

SAC, in case you've forgotten the tape symbol, meant Service Aircraft Corp., a new plane manufacturing outfit that had sunk a million bucks of stockholders'

money experimenting with a new type dive bomber. It was a dynamite stock proposition—if the test flights went off okay, the stock would skyrocket; if they flopped, the stockholders had bought in a dead horse. Unless you had inside dope, it was a good thing to stay clean of, and from what I heard, nobody had inside dope. They had plenty of hopes, though—and hopes are what they run brokerage firms on.

On the way back I cut through the side entrance to take a look in White's office. He had a neat setup, that boy did. A door of his own to the main hall, with no name on it, and then an entrance from his office into the board room. His story was that his customers could duck in and put that way, without loss of time. My idea was White could duck out for a Scotch when he felt like it, without tripping over partners.

Which is what I figured he was doing now. The office was empty.

I was beginning to get worried. The SEC is pretty tough about putting orders through and then picking up the names later on, especially on a gamble issue. The way I figured, if an investigation came through on Service Aircraft before I got the customer's name from White, there'd be hell to pay.

That's how I figured. But I figured wrong.

There already was hell to pay. And nobody to foot the bill. Nobody, that is, but Cort Ramsey. And that happens to be me.

The tipoff came after I pushed Pete off the stool and slid in his place. The market was still backing and filling, trying to push its way up a little, without much luck, and for the first hour I forgot about White's order. I even forgot there was a chance of a jam-up.

That's until I looked down at the slip the boy from the news-ticker had slipped

on my file. It was all I needed.

"SAC—Service Aircraft Corp. plane explodes; crashes in test flight. Details later."

Like that, a million dollars' worth of company blown to hades. And me stuck with 2,000 shares of it without a buyer!

I said, "Holy cripes," and flagged the switchboard girl to try White for me again. I just sat there, holding the phone, waiting for it and hoping there wouldn't be a kickback on this thing. I was still holding the phone when the last SAC price appeared on the tape—5 $\frac{3}{4}$.

Ten points off, at two thousand bucks a point. Nice, that.

Garson came in on me again, saying, "Listen, Cort, you get that name—" and I said:

"Take it up with the big boss, Garson. Get Harwarth. It's supposed to be one of White's customers, but I dunno which. You better tell the boss."

"Me tell him?" Garson said. "What'll you be doing, kiddo?"

"Looking for White," I told him. "And looking hard."

I flagged Pete to come back from the front board and take over, and then I moved down the corridor to White's office, kicking open the door, hoping to hell the guy had come back.

He'd come back, all right. But not the way I'd been hoping.

HIS body was a thick blob of fat across the desk, his big head resting on the fat, soft arms. He was in one hell of a condition for a customer's man.

I said, aloud, "The drunken wizard," and cut in close to him, grabbing him by the hair to yank his head back and see if I could shake him out of the fog.

I didn't shake.

I just stood there, holding his hair in my right hand and staring at the dull strip

of metal jutting out of his side. I knew what that metal was, all right; I'd seen it before, on White's desk. It was a dagger-type paper cutter, razor sharp. But it was only two inches of it, and a useless two inches.

The other four inches was inside Bill White.

I said, "What—" and the voice behind me said:

"Forget something, son?"

I swung around, fast, staring at him. My fingers were still curled in White's hair and the movement jerked the body sideways, sliding it off the desk towards me. I stayed that way, hanging on to the dead guy's hair, staring at the man at the door.

He was slim and dark, with bright little eyes that seemed to dig holes in me, and an easy, sure way of carrying himself, like he knew what he was doing. He said, again, "Forget something, son?" and then I placed him.

"Cops," I said, aloud. "You're from the cops."

He didn't say anything. His little eyes kept drilling into me, like bright little lights, but he didn't say anything. He was taking his time about it. It was like he was frozen there, not moving, not saying a word, like he didn't give a damn what was happening.

"A knife," I told him. "A paper cutter, stuck into him like a knife. Right into him." I managed to pull my eyes away from those bright pinpoints, and get a glimpse behind him, into the open hall. There were two men out there, one of them in uniform. Neither one of them said a word.

"Murder." The sound of the word, me using it, jolted me. I said it over, explaining it to him. "Murder. Somebody killed him."

The little guy said, again, "Forget

something, son?" and I shook my head at him, not getting it.

The two men outside, the cop in uniform and the other one, pushed through the doorway and moved toward me, flanking the little guy. The plain clothes one was built thick, with a short, fat neck, and he lumbered forward in a half-crouch, like a turtle. He was a couple of steps in front of them when he reached me and shot his right hand out to grab my shoulder."

"Let him go, buddy," he said, slowly. "Just let him go. You already killed him."

I said, "Yeah. Let him go," and then I realized what he was talking about and let my eyes drop to the desk.

White's head was pulled back, the dead green eyes gaping up at me like dull pools of oil, and it was my fingers that were holding it back that way, like I was getting ready to shave his throat. I'd been standing there all that time, clinging to the dead hair, and not even knowing it.

I let go, fast, pushing away, and the body seemed to follow me across the room, slumping out of the chair, the big head butting against my chest.

The last thing I remember is the dick's words registering in my brain.

He hadn't repeated them—my brain had just suddenly picked them up and said them over for me.

"You already killed him."

For me that was the curtain speech.

THE cop was sitting at Harwarth's desk when I came out of it, smoking one of the boss's favorite cigars. He blew a cloud of smoke my way, squinted his eyes, and said, heavily: "You little punks always fold."

I swung my feet off the couch, starting to get up, and then I changed my mind. I half crouched that way, my head in my hands, until some of the blackness cleared

up, and then I managed to straighten, leaning back against the wall.

"I never passed out before," I said, slowly. The words seemed to hang back in my throat, like I was drunk. "It's the first time," I told him.

The cop scowled. "You maybe never killed a guy before," he suggested. "And you maybe didn't expect Grady to be waiting for you, like that." He took another drag on his cigar and spit the smoke towards me. "You ain't got your feet wet, buddy," he told me. "You better give before Grady gets tough."

Grady would be the small one, I figured. I remembered how he'd stood there in the doorway saying, "Forget something, son?" Not moving a muscle, not giving me a lead, just waiting for the break. Grady could be tough, all right. But there'd be no reason to hound me. No reason at all.

I told the cop that and he grinned at me through the smoke. "Grady don't see it that way," he said, evenly. "He thought maybe the hot-head who done the murder would come back, thinking maybe he slipped up somewhere. When your boss found the stiff and called him, he gave a hush order on it, just waiting for you."

I said that was a sweet idea. But the way I saw it, they didn't have a damn thing on me, and they knew it. I said: "You can't hold a guy for finding a body." The cop said: "That ain't all they're holding you for." And then he clammed up on me. I figured I had him, that they were just fishing around, trying to see what they could get on me.

I never figured that they already had it.

Even when Grady started painting the picture for me later, after they'd hauled me back to White's office, I didn't realize how black it was.

They'd moved the body, but they had a room full of people, this time. Harwarth

shook his white shock of hair at me as I came in and said: "Feeling better, Ramsey?" I didn't answer him. I was too busy sizing up the crowd.

They hauled all of White's big customers in, all those from whom he might take a thirty-grand order without wanting cash on the line.

Old man Rackman was seated in a corner of the room, tapping his cane against the arm of the chair. His smooth, high-priced secretary, George Dietrich, stood behind him, half-lounging against the wall. Mrs. Mabel Bedding, the ex-Follies queen who'd married a richbuck, kept running her diamond-crusted fingers along the window sill, following the bright reflections with her eyes.

That, with my boss, Harwarth, and the two cops, made up the crowd. A mixed enough group, all right; and even more mixed than they figured. One of them—excluding the dicks—was a murderer.

Except for Harwarth, not one of them spoke to me. They just stayed the way they were, the dame staring out the window, Rackman and Dietrich together in the corner, and the two detectives at the end of the room.

I said, to Harwarth, "Did you find out who bought the SAC?" and the boss shook his head, not answering.

Grady came into it, keeping his voice low, conversational. He wasn't fooling me a minute. I had him figured, all right. The quiet kind, who goes along waiting for a hole in your story and then plows right through it, spreading it out big enough to fit the death chair in.

"Here's how we stand," he told me, easily. "None of White's customers gave him that order for Service Aircraft. We can't find any indication that he put in a 2,000 share bid."

He had me too tense, that guy did. Just the way he was talking, I got my fur up.

That's why I missed the big point of what he'd said. And I shouldn't have missed it.

It was the opening gun. And I treated it like a dud.

I said, "He put the order in, all right. And I slapped it right through to Garson. It was around ten-thirty."

"Ten twenty-five," Grady told me. "We've checked with Garson on the time the order went to the floor. But that's all you gave him. Just an order."

"That's all I had," I explained, carefully. "I was busy, juggling a slew of orders around, when the private wire from White's office flashed on my desk. I picked up the phone and he says, 'Buy two thousand SAC,' and clicks off on me. So I shoot the order through."

"An account without a name," Grady said softly. "You take an order without a name, and don't even send a confirmation through on it. That's against regulations, they tell me."

"Look," I explained. "White's a big shot. Me, I'm an order clerk. He shoots through a buy order, and I buy. He's supposed to give me the account name, sure—but he doesn't do it. So I have to hold up the confirmation until I get the name. He pulled a lot of that stuff, White did."

HARWARTH said, "Highly irregular. Against all the rules," as if he didn't know White had been doing it right along, but I didn't call him on it. He was in a tough enough spot, the way I looked at it, with the SEC ready to hop on his tail about this. And jabbing at him wouldn't pull me out of the rut.

"How the hell was I supposed to know the guy'd get killed?" I asked. It was the wrong thing to ask.

Grady's voice was like steel. "That's what I've been wondering, kid," he said sharply. "That's what I've been

wondering. And here's how I add it up." He stopped a minute, weighing me in, as if wondering how much he should give out. He decided to give plenty.

"You got an order from White for Service Aircraft, all right. And you figured you'd coast along with him. You doubled the order, and when the stock broke, you were caught without money to cover. You stalled the man on the floor, ducked out for lunch, entered White's office, stabbed him, and then came back and tried to pass the whole order off on a dead man."

I said, "You're a damn fool."

Grady shook his head, his eyes dark. "You're the fool, kid," he told me. "I'll draw a map for you. Opportunity—you were seen coming out of White's office. Motive—to cover the extra thousand shares by throwing the whole business in White's lap. There's a lot of dough involved, Ramsey. Maybe not to some people, but to me and to a kid like you. And it'll, sound damned big to a jury."

The guy was talking in circles. "Listen, mister," I told him. "You can't make up a gag like that. Where the hell'd you get the idea I doubled the order?"

"Here." Grady picked a piece of paper off White's desk and held it out to me. "Here's where you slipped, kid. And if we hadn't been here when you came back, you might've found it."

I reached for the paper and Grady drew back, then shrugged his shoulders. "It's been photostated, kid," he told me.

It was a strip torn from the DJ machine, beginning with a series of prices. . . . "National Electric, off 2 ¼, General Westinghouse, off 3, Hydropower, off ½. . . ." But it wasn't the prices that interested me, or Grady. There was a note scribbled in pencil across the bottom of the strip—in White's handwriting.

Buy 1,000 SAC.

I just stood there, staring at it. I

couldn't say anything for a minute. I just stood there, staring at the "1" in from the three zeros. That was a mistake. It had to be a mistake.

"Two thousand," I told Grady. "Two thousand shares, he ordered."

"You ordered," Grady said, softly. "One thousand for White, and one thousand for you. And then the stock fell apart on you, kid. There's the murder motive, Ramsey. You didn't have ten grand, and you had to cover the loss, some way. You took the hard way—murder."

The way he said it, I could feel the sweat breaking out on me. He didn't say it like he was just telling me, or even accusing me. The way he said it, it was a verdict.

Murder. And then the judge would stare down at me from the bench and go on with it. *It is the judgment of this court that you, Cort Ramsey, shall be sentenced to death in the electric chair on. . . .*

That's what Grady was saying to me, saying it in one word. And the rest of them were standing there and drinking it in, their eyes suddenly bright with excitement.

"Your fingerprints are on the knife." Grady said it calmly, easily, and for a minute it seemed as if he was talking to someone else. "The papercutter has your thumb mark on it, and nothing else. We've got plenty on you, kid."

I said, weakly: "You can't frame me, like this."

"We don't have to frame you kid. We got all we need right now." Grady took a step toward me, motioning to Dolan, and the two of them closed in on me, walking slowly.

DOLAN'S arms were hanging loose, like ropes, ready to lash out if I made a move. And they were going to have to lash out, all right. Once the guy got his

hands on me I'd be in the clink. And it would be a one-way trip. I could see it in the cold, sure brightness of Grady's eyes, in the tight grain around Dolan's mouth. They were closing this case—and they were using me as the cover.

I said: "That came when the body fell against me. That's when my hand hit the knife."

Dolan's jaws clicked. "I was watching you, buddy, I'd've seen it."

The woman's voice was high-pitched, sharp. Sharp enough to freeze Dolan in his tracks and make Grady turn his head, staring at her. "I'll bet you did see it, mister."

Her diamonds were still flashing in the sunlight, like big chunks of glass, but she didn't look cheap, now. Not to me, she didn't. She was Lady Liberty, in person.

She said, again, "I'll bet you did see it, mister," and then: "The D. A. is a friend of mine."

Grady's eyes were black, dangerous. "So?" He lashed the word at her.

"No railroading, boys." She pushed herself to her feet and moved forward. And that girl could really move. She was carrying extra weight, maybe, but she knew how to carry it. And there was still plenty of fire left in her.

There was fire in Grady, too. It was in his eyes, in the sudden scowl that creased his face. "I don't railroad kids." He said it very slowly, very carefully, as if that settled it.

Mrs. Bedding let her lips smile at him. "Not you, maybe. But your pal does. You haven't got a thing on this boy. You haven't even got a motive."

"Fifteen grand," Dolan sneered. "Fifteen grand, and she says we ain't got a motive. Holy cow."

"It's real money," Grady said evenly. "Over ten thousand bucks is a lot to a kid like this."

“Too much,” the dame told him. “That’s the whole point!” She swung on me, smiling. “How much dough you got, kid? In the bank, stuck away, any place?”

“Ninety bucks,” I told her. “Not counting maybe ten bucks in bad debts. That’s all.” I didn’t follow her, didn’t see where she was getting. Grady had me in that much of a daze.

“And there’s your motive,” she said. “There’s your motive, shot to hell. You say the kid bought a thousand shares for White and then a thousand for himself, figuring to grab the profits. But you don’t know Wall Street.”

Dolan said, “Who does?” but the Bedding dame went right on, skipping him.

“There are no more free rides down here, mister. The SEC stopped that. You used to be able to buy something without putting up the cash, and if it went up, you sold out before anybody saw the color of your money. But no more.”

Grady was still scowling, but it wasn’t the same scowl. He was puzzled, not sore. He just stood there, waiting for her to finish, seeming to realize she had something on the ball.

“You’ve got to prove good faith, now,” she finished. “They hooked me on that one, once. No matter how big the profit is, you’ve got to lay the cash on the line to close a deal. This kid would know that—he’s an order clerk. And he had about as much chance of getting dough enough to close a deal like that as you have of railroading him to the chair.”

Like I said, Lady Liberty.

Mr. Harwarth said: “She’s right, Grady. The firm would’ve refused to turn over the money, and the boy knows that. He could never have expected to put a deal like that through.”

I could see Dolan wilt. And the Bedding dame followed through, belting

him hard. “I wouldn’t be too sure his hand didn’t touch the knife, copper,” she warned him.

Dolan pushed his lower lip at her, like a kid sulking, but he didn’t say anything. Grady was staring at her, nodding his head. “Smart,” he said, finally. “Smart. That’s something I didn’t know, lady.”

I said, “Mrs. Bedding, I—” and the woman let her lips smile at me.

“Forget it, kid,” she said, lightly. “Forget it. I’ve handled these coppers before. There was a couple of ‘em back in K. C. tried to toss me in the can for a strip tease because—” She stopped, grinning at old man Rackman’s expression. “Anyhow, forget it,” she finished. “They can work on the rest of us now.” She grinned maliciously at the others as she said it, getting a kick out of the idea.

Dietrich said nervously: “Mr. Rackman told you he didn’t see White today. He was trying to make an appointment to discuss his account, but neither of us managed Jo get in touch with him.”

RACKMAN’S voice was thin, waspy. “No loss,” he said, curtly. “White was no loss. Handled my accounts like a fool. Cost me money.” He shook his head at the rest of us, as if White’s mishandling his accounts solved everything.

“The little men who weren’t there,” Grady said, glumly. “And I’m right back where I started from. Rackman and his secretary spend all morning calling White, with no answer. Harwarth didn’t see him, but saw the kid coming out of his office. Mrs. Bedding didn’t see him at all. It listens crazy.”

“You could be wrong,” Harwarth told him. “The stock order may have had nothing to do with this. Anyone could have murdered White.”

“Sure,” Grady said, bitterly. “Sure.”

Over seven million people in New York, and you give me the field, wide open. I'll play it my way, mister. I never yet found a lot of dough and a murder without there was a tie-up." He turned to me, frowning slightly. "Okay, kid," he said. "You can scam. But stick around. This thing isn't over yet—and we'll be wanting you."

I said, "Yes sir," and got out fast, tossing a weak smile to Lady Liberty.

I was still weak, and a little dizzy. If I hadn't been so close to punch-drunk, I'd've thought of the out myself, without Mrs. Bedding's help. As it was, I wasn't feeling any too easy, even now. The way I looked at it, Grady was right. The murder and the stock order went together. And me and the stock order went together. Which meant—yeah.

The only thing that saved me was Mabel Bedding's point—the fact that I didn't have the dough. That was all that was standing between me and the hottest spot any body's ever been in—the lack of nine thousand bucks.

And the hell of it was, I had nine thousand bucks—and didn't even know it.

Frankie Stayle told me about it. Stayle was head cashier, and he came in the washroom just as I was leaving. I'd ducked my head under the water until I'd managed to forget Grady's eyes and the way he said "Murder," and I was feeling pretty good when I met Frankie. That's when I met him.

"Get-rich-quick-Ramsey, eh?" he ribbed, grinning. "What'd you do, kid, rob a bank?"

I was ready for him. I figured on a heavy razz around the office on account of being grilled by the cops, and this was just a start. "They wanted my advice," I told him, grinning. "It was nothing. Nothing at all."

"Nothing!" Stayle's voice was edged, sharp. "Listen, kid, I knew you when.

Don't tell me nine thousand lucks is nothing."

I didn't get it at first. I just stood there, staring at him, wondering what the hell he was talking about. I knew there was some nine-thousand dollar figure mixed up in this some place, but it didn't register.

I said: "Nine thousand whats?"

Stayle said: "Come off, boy. Come off. I mean the nine grand you sent around to the cashier's window. The envelope the telegraph boy brought in at two, with cash money and a note to credit your account. And don't tell me it's nothing, kiddo."

I wasn't telling him it was nothing. I wasn't telling him anything. I was just standing there, staring at him, wondering if the guy was nuts. I never saw nine grand cash in my life, and Stayle knew it, and I knew it, and the police knew it.

Only the police didn't know it. That was it. The police didn't know it, and Stayle didn't know it. I was the only one who knew it. Me and one other guy. The guy who sent it in.

Stayle said: "What are you buying, Cort? Treasury bonds? Or aren't you buying?" He was half parked in front of me, waiting for an answer, so I gave him one.

"I already bought it," I told him. "I already bought it, and the dough just covers the deal. I bought me a murder."

I put my hat on very carefully and pushed Stayle aside, closing the door in his face. I stood there with my back to the door for a full minute, getting a picture of that nine thousand bucks lying in the cash box in my name and wondering what the hell to do now.

I said, aloud: "Nobody'll swallow that one—nobody at all. You don't murder a guy for a twenty-grand stock loss and then pay nine grand to cover the murder. It doesn't make sense." And then I realized there was only one thing that would make

sense, to Grady. And that this time I wouldn't have an out.

I'M STILL not sure how I managed to walk out of that building. I know I walked slowly, carefully, so I wouldn't attract attention. And I know I passed three bar signs before I knew what I wanted.

I had one drink, a straight Scotch, and then I ordered a beer and stood at the bar, trying to figure what to do.

There was something in this, something I should be able to put my finger on, but couldn't. There was a line in it, somehow, that didn't fit, if I could only find it. And if I couldn't find it, I knew Grady wouldn't. Grady wouldn't be looking.

I ran it over in my mind, adding all the pieces together. One of them had given the order to White, and tried to cover it after the crash by killing him. Sending the nine grand to Stayle for my credit had been a nice touch—but an expensive one.

There was a chance, a fair one, that the murder wasn't hooked in with the stock order, that the whole thing was being used for a cover. There was a chance, for instance, that my pal Lady Liberty had knifed White for reasons of her own. I didn't like to think of that chance. If that's how it was, I was through.

I almost laughed at that, at the idea of me worrying about being through. Once Grady got his hands on me, I'd be finished, anyhow. And it was going to be awfully easy for Grady to get his hands on me.

I remember thinking how sure he'd been earlier about me being guilty, and then I realized that the killer had been pretty damned sure I'd been hooked, too. Nobody tosses nine grand away on a slim gamble.

I was thinking of that, realizing how

carefully this whole thing had been planned, how sure the killer had been that I'd be ripe for a fall guy, when the picture started unfolding for me.

Like that, it started unfolding. I got a quick flash of the note Grady had showed me, with the 1 where there should've been a 2, and then I remembered the other prices on that strip of paper. That was the first fold. And the killer had been damned sure I'd get hooked. That was the second fold. Before I was finished, I knew who the killer was. I was sure of it, one hundred per cent. If I'd used my head, I'd've seen it earlier.

The only thing was, I couldn't prove it. There was one thing you had to know, before you could follow it through. You had to know Cort Ramsey was innocent.

There were only two people who knew that—and Grady wasn't one of them. As long as Grady had me tabbed, the whole police force, the newspapers, and any jury they picked would have me tabbed. That was the hell of it—as long as I kept the murder brand, there was no reason to look for someone else.

They'd be looking for me, though. I realized that almost as soon as I realized I couldn't see Grady. They'd be laying for me at home, watching the ferries, the railroad stations. They'd maybe even keep an eye on the subway exits, watching for Cort Ramsey, murderer.

That's when I got my idea. Maybe I didn't expect it to work; it was one hell of a long shot. But even if it fizzled on me, it was better than the other answer. Anything is better than the chair.

I found a thrift shop on Sixth Avenue and bought a cheap imitation leather bag for a buck and a half, and a dark gray hat for another buck. I tossed my snappy green fedora in an ashcan on Forty-Sixth Street and kept going east until I hit a radio store. A small, compact little

recording phonograph cost me \$18.50, and left me with less than eight bucks.

I packed the gadget in my suitcase and took three taxis, doubling back across town, until I landed two blocks below the Pastor Hotel, on 45th. I registered as George Tackman, of Philadelphia, making sure I didn't fall for that stunt of using the same initials as mine, the way so many guys get caught. I got a single, no bath, on the eleventh floor. The way I figured it, I was safe enough.

They'd be watching my apartment, and maybe watching the exits from the city. They wouldn't start checking up on the hotels until morning. And by morning, I didn't give a damn whether they found me or not. By morning I was going to have this thing broken, or I was going to be jammed up so badly it would take more than cops to get me out.

That's how I figured it, anyhow.

I stayed in my room until close to ten, just sitting there, trying to keep my mind blank. Every once in a while I'd get a mental flash of blue-coated figures closing in on the hotel; not shouting or anything, just coming through the side-streets and lining up around the Pastor.

"A cordon," I remembered. "That's what they say. The police threw a cordon around the Hotel Pastor, trapping. . . ." I shook my head and pushed myself off the bed. It was time to move.

This was the weak point in my whole plan, the part that might jam up on me, even if my figuring had been okay. If I could've ducked it, I would have—but that's if. You don't collect on the if's.

THE funny thing was, it went without a hitch. The boys in the margin department were still working, so Harwarth & Co. was open. But there was no one in the order room—and there were no cops around.

I found a triplicate order blank in my desk, and some old copies of White's orders. I got the figures and the letters I wanted, and traced his handwriting, pressing down on the triplicate blank underneath. When I was finished, the top part was blank, of course, but I had two carbon copies of an order in White's handwriting. *Buy 2,000 SAC @ Mkt. A/C Rackman.*

I slipped the works under the time stamp and pressed down, the clock face coming right across the "2,000." I got an envelope out of my desk and addressed it to Mr. Rackman, at his home. I wrote across the back of the order: *I can send the original of this either to you or the D. A. Make up your mind, and make it up fast. I'll be at the Pastor Hotel, Room 1181.*

I didn't sign it, or anything. I didn't have to sign it. He'd know who it was from, all right. I just sealed it in the envelope and dropped it downstairs at Western Union, paying for delivery.

After that I went back to my room at the hotel and sat down on the edge of the bed, waiting.

Blackmail, sure. And there's a long jail term for blackmail. Almost the works. They save the real works for something else. They save the real thing for murder.

I tried the phonograph recorder to make sure it was hooked up all right, and then turned it off. I slipped the blank record on and pushed the contraption under the bed. After that, there wasn't anything for me to do but sit down and wait. And it was one helluva wait.

I kept wondering if anybody would come. If nobody came, or if the cops showed first, I was licked. If this didn't work, I'd signed my own death certificate with that note.

I said, aloud, "They have to come," and then there was a soft knock at the door.

I leaned down under the bed and snapped the recorder on and then moved across the room, to the right of the door. I got my left hand on the knob, jerked the door wide, and reached out with my right to grab the guy and pull him inside.

He came easy, too easy. He almost flew into the room and I just managed to get my left arm around him, to hold him back and run my hands over him for a gun.

It was Frank Rackman, himself. And it was all wrong.

"What the devil. . . ." he said. "What the devil. What's the meaning of this?"

I kept my voice low, quiet. "You'll find out what it means. I'm trying to clear myself of murder."

The old man had nerve, I'll say that for him. His voice cut like a whip. "You'll pay for this, boy," he told me. "I'm here with a warning. You can't involve me in this filthy case. And I refuse to be blackmailed."

I said, "Mr. Rackman, I can prove. . . ." and the voice from the doorway said:

"You can prove what, sonny?"

He was here. Dietrich came in slowly, his left hand in his pocket, his right hand holding the door knob. He'd come, all right, just the way I'd figured he'd come. But he was late. And that jammed the works.

He spoke to Rackman quietly, and Rackman nodded his head a few times, and then turned and left the room, not speaking to me. At the door, he stopped a minute.

"No money," he warned Dietrich. "I refuse to be blackmailed. Remember that." He closed the door quietly behind him.

Dietrich locked it behind him. He locked it very carefully, pulling a chair out from the wall and bracing it under the knob. He did it all very deliberately, like a guy who was planning something.

Like a guy, maybe, who was planning

murder.

MY HANDS were damp with sweat and the muscles of my back were tight, drawing me up. Just watching Dietrich, watching the way he moved, the way he kept his hand in his pocket, kept shuttling his eyes around the room, I knew what he was figuring on. And I knew it was too late to back out, now.

He turned suddenly, weighing me in with his eyes. When he spoke, his voice was flat. "Where'd you get it, kid?" I knew what he meant, all right.

"This morning," I told him. "You can see the time stamp on it. White sent it through this a.m., about 10:20, with Rackman's name on it. I been saving it."

"So you knew, eh?" His eyes were still cold on me, studying me, wondering what I really did know. "You figured on shaking Rackman down, making a little killing for yourself, eh?"

I grinned at him. I didn't want him to know I was worried, that I'd guessed he had a gun. I wanted him to think I was riding high, trying to run the show. I figured I'd get more out of him that way. And my recorder was still humming quietly under the bed.

"It looked hot," I told him, carefully. "It looked like a sweet chance to pick up some bucks. I figured there ought to be something in it for me."

"From Rackman, eh?" he said, carefully. "You figured on shaking my boss down for hush money. That's what you figured?" He knew better than that. Just from the way he said it, I could see he knew better. But he wanted me to say it. And I did.

"No," I said, quietly. "No, not from Rackman. From the murderer. From you."

The noise of that recorder was like a diesel engine in the silence, but Dietrich didn't seem to notice it. He was watching

me, waiting for the rest of it. I gave it to him, cold.

“You’ve been taking free rides on Rackman’s account for months, mister. When he gave you a five hundred share order to put through, you’d put through a hundred shares for yourself. And you put the orders through in hundred-share groups, without giving White the name. You’d pick the best buy for yourself, buying an extra hundred snares for Rackman at a higher price, if the stock went up. That’s what your boss wanted to see White about—because the way you’d been feeding his orders in, he thought the customer’s man was giving him a clipping. It wasn’t White who was giving him a clipping—it was you.”

He wasn’t saying anything. He was just standing there, watching me, letting me blow myself out. And I blew.

“That’s why you never took a loss on a stock, Dietrich. That’s why every time I wrote your name on an order the stock had moved up after the buy. I’ve seen that worked before, mister.”

“You’ve seen a lot, Ramsey,” he said, softly. “You’ve maybe seen too much for a kid your age.” He was sure of his gun, sure of his ability to take me when he wanted to. And he was almost ready to want to.

“Sure,” I told him. “Sure. I’ve seen plenty. I know that note on White’s desk was written two hours after he put the order through. It had busted utility prices, Dietrich, and it was supposed to’ve been written hours before the utilities cracked. That wasn’t smart.”

He’d made up his mind, now. Whatever else I said wasn’t going to make any difference. “No,” he said, slowly. “That wasn’t smart.”

“You found out White was going to see your boss, and you couldn’t allow that. The way you’d put the SAC order in, he’d

be sure to mention it to Rackman. The way you’d put the order in, Dietrich, he’d have to. You’d just told him to buy 2,000 SAC, the way you always did, without giving him the name. And he slapped it into your boss’s account. That was too bad, Dietrich.”

“Yes,” Dietrich agreed. “That was too bad.” The gun was still in his pocket, covered, but his eyes weren’t covered. There was murder in them. Double murder. “You were awfully sure it was me, kid,” he said, quietly. “It could’ve been Rackman, maybe. Rackman’s name was on the order.”

I GRINNED at him. Somehow I managed to grin, right back at the hate in his smoldering eyes. “It had to be you,” I told him. “Whoever framed me had to be damned sure he could get away with it. If Rackman had put in the order, or Mrs. Bedding, it would’ve been too big a chance. White might’ve sent the slip through in their name. You were the only one, mister, who could put in an order like that, and know your name wouldn’t be on it.”

“Smart,” Dietrich said. “Very smartly figured, sonny.” He was standing in front of me, bobbing his head up and down, like a vulture, not making a move.

“You gave me a motive, mister,” I said, slowly, “You gave me a motive, because you figured you’d be in the clear. But I’ve got a double motive for you. A double motive and the proof. I’ve got the original of the order blank—that was half the motive. And the other half was even bigger. You had a soft job to protect, Dietrich, a nice soft job. And if all your chiseling came out, you could kiss it good-bye. It’s that simple, Dietrich.”

“Simple,” Dietrich agreed. “It was all very simple. And it worked.”

“Almost,” I told him. “It almost

worked.”

He shook his head at me. His lips were smiling, a thin, tight little smile, but his eyes were points of ice. “No *almost*, sonny,” he told me, evenly. “It *worked*.”

His left hand came out of his pocket, fast, and the gun in it caught me across the side of the face, splitting the skin. He stood there a half second, staring at me, and then he leaned down toward the bed, pulling my machine out by the cord and smashing the record. When he looked up, his eyes were bright.

I couldn’t move. I couldn’t do anything but stand there, my eyes glued to the record. I knew I’d played it like a fool, that the guy had been leading me on, listening to the hum of that damned machine, when I thought I was pulling a fast one.

I’d pulled a fast one, all right. Too fast.

“A smart little kid,” Dietrich said, slowly. “A smart little kid who tried to spoil my game.” He came towards me, grinning, the gun still in his left hand, ready to use. “I’ll take that confirmation, sonny,” he told me. “I’ll take that confirmation, and any copies you’ve got. And then I’ll take care of you.”

The gun was like a club the way he held it, ready to slash out and cut the other side of my jaw.

“No,” I told him. “No.”

“One murder,” he said, softly. “One murder, or two, it doesn’t matter. I’ll take the order, sonny.”

I said, “No,” and threw myself at him. I wanted to get my hands on his throat. If I could just get my hands on him, once, I could handle him. If I could just reach him, get past that damned gun, I’d be all right.

I couldn’t.

The gun caught me across the side of the jaw, hard, and I went back into a corner of the room. I came up, swinging,

and the next slash caught me squarely across the face. This time, I didn’t get up.

I felt Dietrich’s arms around me, his hands running through my pockets, finding the slips. Everything that was happening seemed to be way off, in another world. All I wanted was for my head to stop aching. I heard his voice dimly, as if from a distance, and the words only half registered.

“Suicide. Eleven stories down. And that’s the end.”

I felt myself lifted and the bright glare of window glass was in front of my eyes.

I tried to come out of it. I caught Dietrich’s neck with my right and tried to pull myself in towards him, but my muscles wouldn’t pull. He was twisted around, his back to the window, holding me so that my feet just touched the floor, ready to heave me through the glass.

This was it. There wasn’t anything I could do about it; there wasn’t anything anyone could do about it. He had me, and he had it all figured. Like he’d said, his plan was going to work.

Almost.

The shot came from the doorway almost as soon as the chair flew across the room. If it had missed Dietrich, it would’ve taken my head off.

It didn’t miss.

His body jerked with the sound, his arms falling away, letting me slide to the floor. His gun came up unsteadily, pointed towards the doorway, and he triggered recklessly, the bullets ploughing into the wooden frame.

GRADY didn’t trigger recklessly. He fired once more, aiming low, and the bullet smashed Dietrich’s knee cap. He went back with the force of the slug, crashing against the window, his arms flung out to catch the frame.

He yelled once as he went through the

glass, and again, shrilly, before we heard the soft thud from below. That soft thud is the last thing I remember.

It was the second time that day I'd passed out cold.

When I came to, Grady was standing over me, frowning a little, the pink order slip in his right hand. He moved closer as my eyes opened.

"Suppressing evidence is a crime, kiddo," he told me. "A serious crime. If we'd had this order, with Rackman's name on it, and the time stamp, earlier in the day, we wouldn't've had all this mess. That's your fault kid."

I started to grin, but the quick pain changed my mind for me. "Not that one," I told him. "I made that one myself. Tonight."

Grady shook his head, his eyes dark. "10:20," he said, softly. "The clock on the time stamp says 10:20," and then his eyes lighted suddenly. He was one smart guy, Grady was.

"That's it," I told him, risking a grin. "We only use that stamp during the market. It doesn't say anything about a.m. or p.m. It just stamps out like a clock face. And 10:20 is 10:20 to most people. It was to Dietrich."

Grady nodded. "Neat, son," he said, smiling. "Neat but wacky. Where you got the idea you could frame a confession

from the guy with that singer sewing machine under the bed taking it down is more than I can see. But it worked, in the end."

"Yeah," I said, dully. "It worked. Like a duck. What I can't figure is how you guys showed up, on the button. Did Rackman tell you where I was?"

Grady was laughing, now, not just with his lips, but his eyes, too. He seemed to think it was funny as hell. "Kiddo," he told me, choking, "kiddo, when a nineteen-year-old kid can duck out on the New York police, that'll be the day. We've had a tail on you ever since you left the office. Right on your tail, sonny."

Nice, that. Very nice. I run around, risking my neck, playing the Lone Wolf, with a police guard parked downstairs in the hotel. I felt like the prize sucker. That is, until Grady's next crack, I did.

"By the way, son," he said, carefully. "If you get any good tips down in the Street, well. . . . what I mean is, if you hear of anything really hot, how about letting a guy in on it?"

He wasn't kidding me at all, he was dead serious. He figured I might be able to put him on to something that would clean up. And I'd thought I was the prize sucker.

Can you tie it? Like the guy said, there's always a new one coming in. Hell, you can't even kill them off, down there.