

Thrilling Detective, October, 1936

Maniac House



He shone his flashlight on the corpse

*Where There's Madness There's Method, Deputy Freese
Discovers as He Seeks the Hidden Meaning of
the Strange Laughter of Dying Men!*

By L. G. BLOCHMAN

“DON'T believe in ghosts either,”
said Dr. Coleman, “but the man's
dead. You can't argue that away.

He's dead.”

“Musta been a pretty hefty ghost that
killed him,” said Skinny Bill Freese, “Damn

near busted his head open. Look.”

Skinny Bill Freese, red-faced, a yard wide, and two hundred and eighty pounds thick, was the fattest deputy sheriff south of the Tehachepi, but he moved with surprising nimbleness as he shone his flashlight down at the corpse sprawled on the steep, carpeted stairway.

The dead man was a clean-cut, sandy haired fellow of about thirty. His forehead had been horribly crushed by something blunt and heavy. The blood which concussion had forced from his eyes and nose had dried on the grimacing face.

Besides Freese and Dr. Coleman, who had been summoned from his bungalow in the adjoining orange grove, three other men stood staring at the corpse on the stairs of the Maynard house. There was Deputy Sheriff Henry Corson, bowlegged, sure eyed, and quick shooting; there was pale, slick haired young Willis Maynard, who had inherited the Maynard house at the death of his father a year ago, but who wouldn't live in it; and there was Bisbee, the grizzled, white mustached, one-eyed old caretaker, who lived in a cottage fifty yards from the house.

BISBEE and young Maynard remained near the open front door. Skinny Freese knew of their silly objections to entering the house at night.

“Who is this guy, anyhow?” demanded Freese, as he bent over the corpse. “That ghost of yours seems to've frisked him. He ain't got a single thing in his pockets we can identify him by.”

“All I know,” piped old Bisbee, “is his name is Riggs—or maybe Jiggs—and he must be from outa town, 'cause nobody around here would want to rent this house, and he did. Least, he said he did. He come here with the key he got from Jewel, the real estate agent, and even after I told him about Old Man Maynard's ghost, he wanted to see the place.

He—”

“Who found the body?” Freese asked.

“I did,” said Willis Maynard, running his white, graceful fingers nervously through his hair. “I came up to the house while Bisbee went for the doctor.”

“What's the idea of goin' for the Doctor, before you even knew what happened?” Freese demanded sharply.

“I knew what happened,” Bisbee insisted shrilly. “It always happens that way—as soon as they stop laughin'—”

“Stop laughing?”

“Sure. This Jiggs—or Riggs—was laughin' like mad,” said Bisbee. “He hadn't been inside the house more'n ten minutes when he started laughin' and whoopin' and yellin' like a crazy man. We could hear him clear down here. And I said to Mr. Maynard here, 'He's seen it. Yore pore dad's come back again tonight and the stranger's done for.' Then he stopped laughin' and I went for the doctor.”

“The body was right here on the stairs when you found it, Mr. Maynard?” Freese asked.

“Yes,” was the reply. “I saw it when I opened the door. I didn't come in. I saw at once he was dead.”

Deputy Sheriff Freese pushed his stiff brimmed Stetson to the back of his head. If Maynard had been at the front door all this time, then the murderer must be still in the house.

“Unless he used a window, or the back door,” Freese said aloud. “Henry, you and me are goin' to have a look through the house.”

“Don't do it, gents!” Bisbee exclaimed. “The Old Man ain't easy in his grave tonight.”

The fat deputy turned his flashlight on the caretaker. The old man had a glass eye that was pale blue and didn't match the color of his good one. The glass eye wasn't in straight, and looked off at a startling angle as it

glittered under the flashlight.

“Bisbee,” said Freese, “you hop across the road to that real estate agent—what’s his name? Jewel—and tell him to come over. Maynard, you can go with us if you want.”

“I—I’d rather not,” faltered Maynard.

“Tell you what,” said Deputy Sheriff Freese, rubbing his three chins thoughtfully. “You say you ain’t scared of ghosts, Henry?”

“Not of no ghosts I’m liable to meet tonight,” grinned Corson, the bowlegged deputy, slapping his leather holster affectionately.

“Then you take a squint inside, upstairs and down,” said Freese, “while I check the doors and windows from the outside. I’ll meet you at the caretaker’s cottage afterward. I forgot to phone the coroner.”

Skinny Freese walked around the outside of the house, examining the flower beds for footprints. You had to say that for Bisbee: he did take care of the garden. The flower beds were in good shape for a deserted place like the Maynard house— “Maniac House,” as the neighbors called it after the strange events of the past year.

Maniac House was a two-story place in the midst of a little citrus grove twelve miles south of San Diego—between Chula Vista and the Mexican border, to be exact. Old Man Maynard, who built it, was a retired dentist who came to southern California from somewhere in the Middle West. When he died the year before, his son Willis came home from art school in Paris and started remodeling the house. He was going to convert part of it into a studio—but he never did.

The carpenters had been in the house only two days when Willis Maynard was found lying on the stairway one midnight, a deep gash across his forehead, laughing and babbling like a maniac. He was delirious for two days, then recovered completely. He

could never explain what had happened to him, although Bisbee, the old caretaker, claimed to know because he had seen the same phenomenon himself: the ghost of Old Man Maynard walking down the halls at night, clad in a white dentist’s smock, holding a candle in one hand and swinging a huge pair of forceps in the other.

Young Willis Maynard always laughed uneasily when Bisbee told this story, but he never slept in the big house after that. He went there in the day time to paint—he had set up his easels in the sitting room which had a north light—but he lived in a room in the caretaker’s cottage. And he had put up the house for sale.

Even at the low price Maynard was asking, there were no buyers. Prospects invariably shied off when they heard Bisbee’s story of Old Man Maynard’s murderous ghost. Then, just last month, Old Man Maynard’s nephew came down from San Francisco with an idea of buying the place—for sentimental reasons, because he liked the location, and because it was cheap.

The first night he was heard laughing insanely by himself—just before he was found lying on the stairs of Maniac House—dead, with the front of his skull bashed in.

AND now this stranger Riggs! Three dead, one wounded!

“Damned funny,” said Deputy Sheriff Freese to himself as he allowed his flashlight beam to crawl along the ledges of the back windows, where there might be marks in the dust.

“Any luck?” asked Dr. Coleman, who had been following the deputy’s examination with close interest.

“Nope,” said Freese. “By the way, Doc. You’re the one that signed Old Man Maynard’s death certificate, ain’t you?”

“That’s right.”

“Is it true he died the same way as

these others?"

"Hardly," said Dr. Coleman. "It's true that he was found lying on the stairs, and he did bruise his forehead in the fall. But his death—and the fall—were caused by cerebral hemorrhage. Apoplexy."

"Do you think Bisbee's crazy, Doc?" asked Freese.

"He's a little queer," the doctor replied. "Not crazy, exactly."

"You think he's sane enough to maybe figure he might lose his job if Maniac House changed hands—and that he's too old to get another job?"

"I have thought of that," said the doctor soberly.

"And maybe you thought how nice it would be to add this Maynard citrus grove onto your own grove next door—if you could get it cheap enough," said Deputy Sheriff Freese, suddenly shining his light in Dr. Coleman's face.

The doctor laughed—but his cold grey eyes didn't as much as blink into the glare.

"Are you trying to make out that I've been playing ghost?" he asked.

The fat deputy stared at him a moment without replying. Then he snapped out his light.

"Let's go down to the caretaker's cottage," he said. "There's no prints or anything here."

Deputy Sheriff Corson evidently hadn't finished his inspection of the inside of Maniac House, as he had not yet reached the cottage. Young Maynard was there when Freese and the doctor came in, and old Bisbee had come back with Jewel, the real estate agent from across the road.

Jewel was a tall, cadaverous looking man with buck teeth and dark, deep-set eyes. He was greatly agitated by Freese's entrance.

"Mr. Deputy Sheriff," he said in a deep, bass voice, "Bisbee tells me that prospect of mine just got himself killed. I

warned him about Maniac House, too, but he just laughed. Lucky he left me his card before he—"

"Let's see it!" Freese commanded.

Jewel held out an oblong of pasteboard. It read:

JAMES L. RIGGS

Federal Bureau of Investigation

Department of Justice

"Hell an' pink horse feathers!" Freese exclaimed. "A G-man! Now what the devil—"

"He said he wanted to rent a cheap place in this neighborhood," said Jewel. "Had to have it furnished, because—"

"Just a second while I make a phone call," said Freese.

He stepped into the next room, called the Federal Building in San Diego, talked for several minutes in a low voice. When he came back, the wide brim of his Stetson, tilted down over one eye, hid the puzzled frown on his ruddy brow.

"Guess you're right, Jewel," he said. "Seems like the F.B.I. loaned Riggs to the Immigration Service for a special job. Seems like there has been some smart racket goin' on down at the Border—phony visas, or somethin'—with a lot more foreigners comin' across the Line than the books show ought to be comin'. Riggs was goin' to look into the business, and I guess he wanted this place so he could be close to his work. Now if—"

He stopped. He felt his scalp crawl, his blood turn to ice water. From somewhere in the night, somewhere in the direction of Maniac House, came a wild, inhuman laugh. It was a long, mirthless peal of laughter that was somehow not like laughter at all. It was a little like a shriek, a little like the lugubrious baying of a coyote. It did not sound at all like Henry Corson, yet it must be Corson. Maniac House! Freese, for the first time, appreciated the

name. He had heard a sound like that only once before—when he had escorted an insane man to the state asylum at Patten!

THE mad laughter swelled again—then died in a long, drawn-out sob. After that, silence.

Freese's quick eyes swept the tense faces about him. Everyone bore a taut, fearful expression. The pale, esthetic brow of Willis Maynard was spangled with cold sweat. Old Bisbee's one good eye bulged with horror, a horror accentuated by the grotesque unconcern of the blue glass eye. Jewel's thin lips were drawn back from his buck teeth in a grimace of surprise and disbelief. Even Dr. Coleman's hand trembled as he tried to light a cigarette.

"It's happened again!" wailed Bisbee at last. "Your pal! I warned him! I warned you all that Old Man Maynard ain't easy in his grave tonight! I warned—"

"Come on!" Deputy Sheriff Freese whipped out his gun. "We're all goin' back to the house!" he declared. "We're goin' to clear this thing up once and for all. And if any thing's happened to Hank Corson—"

"I ain't goin'!" wailed Bisbee, his teeth chattering. "I—"

With his chubby left hand Freese grabbed the old caretaker by the scruff of the neck, lifted him clear of the floor, hurled him in the direction of the screen door.

"Don't talk back!" he said. "We are all goin'. Now git!"

Bisbee got. So did the others. They ran like scared rabbits before the gun of the aroused deputy. Skinny Freese ran after them. He didn't waddle, his great weight was no handicap to him; he ran, herding Bisbee, Maynard, Jewel and Dr. Coleman up the steps of dark, forbidding Maniac House.

At the front door Freese paused. His flashlight beam slashed the gloom of the interior, rippled up the carpeted stairway. The corpse of Riggs, the dead G-man, still lay

there—but that was all. Thank God for that! Despite his skepticism of Bisbee's ghost stories, Freese half expected to find Hank Corson's body lying there beside Riggs.

"Who's got lights?" Freese then snapped.

The electricity was not turned on in Maniac House. Only Maynard and Coleman had pocket lamps.

"I—I'll go with the doctor," said Jewel, the cadaverous realtor.

"I'll stay here," whined old Bisbee. "You need somebody to guard the door—"

"You'll come with me!" Freese ordered. "Maynard, you take the left wing. Doc, you and Jewel take the right."

Freese and Bisbee went upstairs. The mad laughter they had heard a moment ago was not repeated. A thick, ominous silence seemed to flow through the dark, musty house. Only the creak of flooring and the whisper of footsteps from the searchers on the lower story, disturbed the tense stillness.

Freese and Bisbee went into all the bedrooms. The furniture, shrouded in dustcovers, loomed like deformed specters under the restless, glaring eye of the deputy's lamp. But there was no trace of Henry Corson.

Freese rubbed his three chins as he emerged into the upstairs hall. There was something funny about that hall, but he couldn't tell what. He had noticed it before, but he was unable to analyze his impression that there was something wrong. He paced the length of the corridor, then went down the back stairs. What the hell and pink horse feathers had happened to Corson?

"There—there's the basement," suggested old Bisbee in an unsteady treble.

So Freese tried the basement. The basement stairs were thick with dust, but the deputy went down anyhow. Corson had to be somewhere. Freese's light revealed a big, hot air furnace, and a nearby pile of coal. The coal was grey with dust. Also grey with dust was

Old Man Maynard's abandoned dental office equipment which was stacked in a corner of the basement. Obviously the dental chair hadn't been touched in months, and spiders had spun a web from the tall drill standard to the instrument cabinet.

"Say, Bisbee," Freese began, when did—"

He stopped. The one-eyed caretaker was no longer beside him. He turned quickly, hurried up the basement stairs.

Just before he reached the top, he heard a loud, startled shout. Running footsteps followed, then confused exclamations.

FREESE made for the sound of excited voices. He found the four men in the dining room, in the left wing. Maynard, Jewel and Dr. Coleman were standing in front of an open window, staring in horror at something outside. Old Bisbee stood a little apart from the rest, his lips moving in silent prayer, his good eye shut tight, the ghastly, unseeing blue of his glass eye leering at Freese through half open lids.

Freese crossed the room in a bound, elbowed the others out of his way.

Just outside the open window, lying in a clump of shrubbery, was Deputy Sheriff Henry Corson. Corson's face was wet with blood. Just above his eyes was a wide streak of crimson pulp.

In an instant Freese had straddled the sill, sprang to the side of his fellow deputy. Tenderly he gathered his bowlegged little friend in his great arms, gently stretched him on the ground.

Corson still lived. Little bubbles of bright red froth that came and went between his lips showed that he still breathed. But Skinny Freese knew that it would not be for long. He knew by the horrid snoring sounds that came from Corson's throat and the blood trickling from his ears, that his skull was crushed beneath that ugly welt on his

forehead.

Dr. Coleman was crouching beside Freese now, examining the unconscious deputy with his flashlight.

"Can we move him, Doc?" Freese asked. "At the hospital—maybe—"

The doctor shook his head silently.

Freese looked down at Corson again. As he watched, the man's hands slowly turned to wax. Even before Dr. Coleman said so, he knew that Henry Corson was dead.

For a long moment Freese remained motionless by the body of his dead friend. Then he began to swear. And as he swore, his stunned grief flamed into burning, purposeful anger. It wasn't a ghost who had killed Hank Corson, but a fiend! And by all hell and pink horse feathers, Skinny Freese would get that fiend before the night was out!

EAGERLY Freese examined Corson's body for clues. He found broad, pinkish smudges on the insides of both dead hands—some pink, powdery substance that rubbed off easily. Freese smelled it. It had the faint odor of calcimine.

Then Freese looked for Corson's gun. It was still in its holster. Damn' funny, Freese thought. Corson had been attacked from the front—that's where the wound was—yet he hadn't pulled his gun. There wasn't a man in the Southwest quicker on the draw than Hank Corson. Why hadn't he even tried to use his pistol?

Freese stood up.

"Gents," he announced to the four men watching him in silence, "the coroner and a carload o' Federal men are on their way down here from San Diego. I figure they ought to be here in about twenty minutes. But before they get here, I'm gonna have the bracelets on the guy that killed Hank Corson, ghost or no ghost. I'm tellin' you that, gents, so that in case one of you wants to save trouble and maybe the risk of gettin' shot—"

He paused. No one spoke. He swept the four faces with his flashlight—then snapped it out.

He walked away a few steps and looked up at the dark looming mass of Maniac House. Protruding from the sloping roof, he made out two dormer windows. Quickly he walked around to the other side of the house, looked up again. There were two more dormer windows on this side. He frowned into the darkness. Then, suddenly, he thought he knew the answer.

Freese hurried to the spot near the entrance to the estate where he and Corson had parked their car. He unlocked the door, and began rummaging in the back seat, where they kept their emergency equipment: a short shotgun for close in work, a tommy gun with extra ammunition drums, a tank of tear gas, a little box of gas grenades, other gadgets for fighting bank robberies, quelling riots.

The deputy soon found what He was after, stuffed it under his coat—which made a big, queer shaped bulge when he buttoned it. Then he started back for Maniac House.

He went directly to the second story. He walked through all the bedrooms again. He paced the upstairs hall. This time he knew what was wrong with the hall. It was too short. There were three rooms opening off one side of it, and only two off the other. From the outside of the house there were four dormer windows. From the inside, only three rooms had dormer windows. There must be a room sealed off, somewhere!

Freese stepped into the bedroom at the short end of the hall. He examined the walls. They were papered with a gaudy flower pattern. Disappointing. He opened the closet door—and his heart leaped!

The closet walls were covered with pink calcimine. He ran his hand over the surface. A pinkish smudge stuck to his fingertips. The scent was hot! Hank Corson had been killed here—or near here!

Freese began working around the closet walls, pushing with his free hand. The far wall gave a little. He pushed again. The wall swung back—like a door. He stepped through the opening. The wall swung shut behind him.

His flashlight revealed that he was in a small cubicle, no larger than six feet by eight. The walls, floor, and ceiling were bare, except for a heavy coiled spring that had forced the wall door shut after his entrance. He ran his fingers along the corners, seeking some crack by which he could open the door again. There was none. He pushed against all four walls. They were unyielding. He was trapped!

Suddenly he was aware of a faint, steady hissing sound. He listened, tried to locate the source by ear. The sound seemed to come from all directions.

HE sniffed. There was no odor of gas—only a sweet taste at the back of his tongue. There were no fumes swirling in the beam of his flashlight. Yet he felt a sudden wave of giddiness surge over him.

Again his flashlight explored the walls of his prison. This time it revealed something he had not noticed before: a small, oblong steel grille in the baseboard, like a furnace register.

He started across the room toward the oblong grille. He felt his knees weaken under him. He reeled a little. He was strangely lightheaded. An uncontrollable feeling of exhilaration welled up in him, as though he were pleasantly drunk. He wanted to laugh, to shout.

Nitrous oxide! Laughing gas! He had guessed right, then—only he had forgotten that the favorite anesthetic of dentists had no color or odor. Was he too late? The hissing sound seemed very far away.

Quickly he unbuttoned his coat, look out the object that had made it bulge. In a few seconds, he had adjusted his gasmask over his

face. He sat down on the floor, breathed deeply. He was still conscious. Apparently he had not inhaled enough of the anesthetic to put him out. He breathed deeply through the mouthpiece of his gasmask. In a short time he felt his head clear.

The laughing gas was still hissing through the opening in the baseboard. The deputy bent over to see how it worked. He shone his light through the steel lattice of the register, and behind he saw a cylindrical metal tank with a tapering snout, the sort of container in which the liquefied gas is sold to dentists. He also saw a storage battery, an alarm clock, and a series of levers connected with the petcock on the tank. Evidently an electrical contact on the door turned on the gas automatically and the clock turned it off when the proper sleeping dose had been administered.

There was a click. The hissing stopped.

Freese snapped out his light. He wouldn't have long to wait now. He drew his legs under him, raised himself to a crouching position. Then he drew his gun, and, every nerve taut, every sense alert, he remained poised, peering into the darkness.

After a few moments he heard a faint rasping sound. A dim narrow strip of grey light split the darkness in front of him.

The rasping sound was repeated. The strip of grey widened. The opposite wall was sliding back. It was sliding more rapidly now. The grey strip expanded to an oblong. Then it was blotted out by the shadow of a man.

Freese's tense muscles uncoiled. He stripped off his gasmask, sprang toward the shadow.

His shoulder hurtled against a human body. There was a grunt. At the same moment something heavy crashed down across the deputy's back.

Freese winced with pain, but charged on, undeterred. He grappled with his

adversary, felt hard, powerful muscles move under his savage embrace. The man still had an arm free to swing his heavy bludgeon. The sledgehammer blows continued to thwack down on Freese's shoulders and back.

Freese rushed his enemy backward. The man gave way against the deputy's superior weight, retreated through the opening into a larger room. Freese lunged. His adversary stumbled, fell.

Freese landed on top of his unknown enemy, but the man was unbelievably agile. Almost instantly his quick, wiry body wriggled free.

The deputy raised himself to one knee, leveled the barrel of his pistol at the hoarse, panting sound in the darkness. He squeezed the trigger. Jagged flame spewed from the muzzle, roaring once, twice—

Missed!

The heavy bludgeon swished down toward the flash, smashed Freese's gun hand. The gun exploded harmlessly once more, then spun out of the deputy's stunned, aching fingers. He could hear it sliding across the floor.

Freese flung himself forward, grappled with a lithe, twisting torso, went down in a clinch. He rolled over, trying to avoid the battering, mauling storm from that loaded blackjack. His fingers closed on a cold, rough, metallic bar. He hung on. His other hand contracted into a fist, belabored the back of his adversary's neck with rabbit punches.

The killer's grasp weakened, Freese pulled the metal club free, swung it. A swift fist crashed against the deputy's jaw. The bludgeon slipped from his fingers, banged against the wall.

The two men clinched again, rolled over and over across the floor. The killer tried to grind his knuckles into the deputy's eyes. Freese fought him off. The killer writhed desperately, brought his knee sharply into Freese's groin.

And suddenly Freese found himself on his back, with the killer's clawlike fingers sinking into his throat.

Freese fought desperately to tear those suffocating hands from about his neck. No use. The killer's grip was as firm as the jaws of a steel trap. His thumbs gouged into Freese's windpipe.

Freese gasped. He heard strange sounds in his ears. Or was that the wailing of distant sirens? Frantically he tried again to wrench the strangling fingers from his throat. The pressure against his windpipe increased.

THE deputy's brain swam dizzily. Flashes of light were before his eyes. Or was that the beam of an auto's headlights shining through the dormer window, swinging across the ceiling? No matter. He could not hold out. He was suffocating. No he wasn't. He'd never been licked yet.

Suddenly Freese went limp. His hands thumped inertly to the floor. Then, with a last effort he raised his right thigh clear of the floor, and with his right hand dragged his pair of handcuffs from his hip pocket.

An instant later the steel bracelets closed with a click around the hands that were strangling him.

With a cry of rage the killer sprang up.

Freese gasped, filled his lungs with welcome air, wrapped his arms about the killer's ankles.

Swift ax blades slashed through the false wall at the end of the corridor. A portable floodlight sprayed a white glare through the broken partition. Federal men with tommy guns piled into the room, headed by Daniels, the district chief.

"Hello, Dan," said Freese weakly. "Glad you dropped in. But you won't need the tommies."

Daniels was looking about him in amazement. The sealed room was a shambles as a result of the recent fight. Printing presses

and a case of type had been upset. The floor was littered with engraved copper plates, steel dies, cans of printers' ink, stacks of little red covered booklets that resembled American passports—and a bloody sash weight.

Deputy Sheriff Skinny Bill Freese was looking at the three men who had come timidly into the room behind the Federals.

"Well, Bisbee," said Freese to the one-eyed caretaker, "I caught your ghost for you."

Bisbee's good eye stared incredulously at the manacled wrists of pale, disheveled Willis Maynard!

"Young Mr. Maynard?" Bisbee exclaimed shrilly. "Why, that ain't possible! It can't be him! Mr. Maynard was right with us when Corson was killed."

"No, he wasn't," Freese countered. "He was with us when Hank Corson walked into Maynard's trick gas chamber and got his lungs full o' nitrous oxide. Then Maynard joined us in the rush for the house, and he killed Corson while he was still unconscious from the laughing gas—killed him with that sash weight there—and dropped him out the dormer window into the shrubbery."

DANIELS, the Federal chief, went up to the handcuffed Maynard, sullenly silent, and scrutinized him closely.

"Maynard is the man Riggs was after all right," he said. "Riggs had located Maynard's San Diego agent, who was peddling forged American passports to immigrants waiting for visas in Tia Juana. His job was to find the man who made the passports."

"But surely," objected Dr. Coleman, "young Maynard wouldn't kill all these men over a matter of forged passports."

"No?" countered Daniels with a grim smile. "The phony passports were selling for a thousand dollars apiece. Just three a week meant an income of \$150,000 a year—and no income tax. I've known men who killed for a

lot less.”

“But Maynard himself was a victim—”

“That was a fake,” declared Freese. “Maynard wasn’t hurt bad, you remember. He just staged the part-time insanity act to build up the haunted house idea strong, after old Bisbee started it with his ghost stories. He didn’t want anybody to come near Maniac House to bother him while he was practisin’ the art he learned in Paris—copperplate and steel engravin’ was his art specialties, looks like.

“And in case anybody did get curious about this room he’d sealed off to work in, he fixed it so they had to make an entrance through a little anteroom where they’d get put out cold with laughing gas. Then Maynard bashed in their heads and dragged the bodies out to the stairway—to fit in with Bisbee’s ghost story. Course, he didn’t get a chance to drag Hank Corson out there, because we were all in the house at the time.”

“How’d you figure this out, Skinny?” asked Daniels.

“Well,” said Freese, mopping the perspiration that was trickling off his ruddy

face into the creases of his multiple chin, “when I see Hank Corson’d been killed—killed from the front—without drawin’ his gun, then I knew Hank couldn’t have been conscious at the time. Then I spotted Old Man Maynard’s dentist chair down cellar, and I remembered how Hank was laughin’ all by himself before he died. So I figured it might be laughin’ gas that made him unconscious. After that, all I did was get my gasmask and look for the room with the dormer window that didn’t show from the inside—Say, Dan, will you do me a favor?”

“What is it, Skinny?”

“Well, I know you got a call on this prisoner on Federal charges. But Maynard killed Hank Corson, and Hank was a friend o’ mine. So I’d kind o’ like to see him tried for murderin’ Hank. Then maybe I’d be the one to take him up to the death house in San Quentin.”

“He’s yours, Skinny,” said Daniels.

The quick grip of Deputy Sheriff Freese on Willis Maynard’s arm had the finality of the hangman’s noose.