

HOMICIDE'S THEIR HEADACHE

a novelette by CARL G. HODGES

Private Detective Bill Starch has both eyes wide open—but he is led into a blind alley when he takes the trail of a mystery involving a butler and a millionaire!



CHAPTER I

NO CLIENT—NO BUCKS

IT HAD been raining off and on since noon, and I was down in the dumps anyway. What Marge had told me when I hit Investigations, Inc. at two o'clock only riled me more.

"Sugar," I grunted at her, "what did old man Dilweg say?"

I put down the collar of my trench coat and tried to shape my sloppy felt into looking like something besides a tired snap-brim. I lit a smoke and parked my six-foot frame on her desk edge.

When I hit the States with my atabridged mug and a duffel full of dough, I tried to buy a dog tag and make it legal for her to fix my eggs and burn my toast every morning but she wouldn't say "Yes." She still calls me

"Mister" Starch. But it was worth twenty bucks a week just to have her around to look at. She's got about a million bucks worth of nice things hidden under about twenty-two ounces of clothes. And that little pug nose of hers is strictly out of this world.

Right now I wasn't thinking too much about wedding marches and her particular style of architecture.

"Mr. Starch," she told me, "Mr. Dilweg seemed rather perturbed. He said that your services as a private detective weren't worth two hundred dollars a week and he didn't intend to pay the bill you sent."

"He's crazy," I said. "He agreed to pay twenty-five bucks a day and expenses. Dilweg had me chasing all over the state trying to locate a guy by the name of Charles Bryce, Junior. I find Bryce doing a landscape job at Dilweg's own house under the name of Joe Briggs. What kind of a chump does Dilweg

think I am? I'll get my two hundred bucks off him or I'll twist his head right off the end of his backbone."

Marge looked at me like she was worrying how long her twenty bucks a week would last.

"Mr. Dilweg was a lawyer before he got to be an oil man and a millionaire," she reminded. "Maybe you'd better go slow."

"Millionaires don't scare me," I said. "I'm full of Starch. I'll go visit the old goat and I'll swipe two C's out of his wallet before the moths can bite me."

I slammed the door behind me as I boiled out of the office.

I crossed the street in the slackening rain and stood under the awning of the First National until the two-fifteen Noble Street bus showed up. I stepped off the curb and went ankle deep in water in the gutter before I hit the bus step. I was peeved to start with, and wet socks squishing around in soggy shoes didn't help my well-known Irish any.

If Elsberry Dilweg had been there then I'd have punched him silly. Just because he owned some oil wells and a couple million bucks he couldn't make a sap out of me. Not for two hundred bucks, he couldn't.

BY THE time the bus reached the outskirts of Springdale and the intersection of the outer drive with 66, the rain had stopped and the sun was trying to break through the clouds. The gutters were running full and the wide expanse of sloping lawn that led up the hill to Dilweg's twenty-room mansion looked fresh and green.

The old goat had his castle in a square block of ground, with the back of it facing north into raw, uncultivated timberland, separated from it by a high brick wall. I walked along the sidewalk on Noble, taking a gander over the low brick wall that hemmed the front of the estate.

I was heading for the iron gate that straddled a gravel drive that led up the hill to the huge stone house when a shiny black car,

with its chromium gleaming, and its spotless glass unmarked by the recent rain, pulled up at the curb ahead of me. A guy in a gray suit and a Homberg hat got out with a leather briefcase.

He was a good-looking guy with a crisp gray mustache over a good-natured mouth. He was about fifty years old and he could have posed for an ad as a successful banker. He was just about my height and weight, but he had good clothes and knew how to wear them.

He had an oval cigarette out and was flicking a pocket lighter. He was getting sparks but no flame. I handed him a paper pack of matches as I came up.

"You must have got that thing from your old maid sister for Christmas," I said. "They never work."

He smiled, and it was nice. "The sister or the lighter?" He lit his smoke and blew it out his aristocratic nostrils. "Thanks," he said. "Going my way?"

We turned in at the iron gate and walked up the gravel road, wet and white in the brightening sun.

"Yeah," I said, "I got a target for today. I'm going to lay down the law for old man Dilweg. He owes me two hundred bucks."

He laughed and his white teeth were nice, too. "I know just what you mean." He put out his hand, friendly. "Roberts is my name—Carson W. Roberts. Mr. Dilweg doesn't owe me anything. In fact, he has been most generous to one of my pet projects."

I had the guy labeled then. "I've heard of you. You're director of some welfare project down in East St. Louis. Handicap Haven, Incorporated, or something like that. My name is Starch—Bill Starch. Private detective."

His eyes turned on me with interest, like he'd never seen a detective before in his life.

"Why on earth would Mr. Dilweg hire a detective?"

He was fishing, but I didn't run with the bait. When I take on a client I keep my trap shut about that client's business. I had a

feeling that my profession was a shock to Roberts. I guess I just didn't fit in with his idea of a private dick.

We didn't say any more, and in a few moments we were standing in front of the big white door on Dilweg's sprawling veranda. Roberts lifted the brass knocker—made like an oil well derrick—and let it drop. I could hear the sound echo in the corridor.

We turned to look down over the hill to the west, where a little knot of men was gathered under a weeping willow tree with a lot of props around it.

"Mr. Dilweg likes weeping willows," Roberts volunteered. "He hired a landscape expert named Briggs to dig up that monster in his home town of East St. Louis and haul it forty miles to replant it here. He had to get a special permit from the State Highway Department so they could haul it here over Sixty-six. That shows he loves trees."

I grunted. "That shows," I said, "it's nice to have a couple million bucks." I was getting impatient. "Slug that knocker again, pal, or we'll grow beards before Richard opens the door."

He took hold of the knocker and the pressure swung the door open a little—the latch hadn't caught. Roberts pushed it open and went inside.

"Come on," he said. "It's all right."

I followed him inside and down a hall, about knee-deep in Oriental rugs.

Roberts called, "Elkins!" and then "Mrs. Franner!"

His yell wasn't loud, but his voice was the carrying kind.

Nobody answered the call. The house was quiet.

Roberts looked at me. "Funny both Elkins and Mrs. Franner are not downstairs." He added, in explanation, "Elkins is a kind of butler-handyman. Mrs. Franner is a sort of housekeeper."

He walked through an arched doorway into a paneled room that was undoubtedly a

study. Then he stopped. He turned back suddenly. His eyes stared wildly. His mouth gaped open. He made a lot of funny noises deep down in his throat.

I saw IT, too.

I bumped past Roberts in a hurry, and moved over the big Chinese rug, fast. I knelt in front of the desk. But there wasn't any need for haste.

ELSBERRY DILWEG was as dead as he would ever be. His featherweight five-foot frame, in rough gray tweeds, was lying face-up on the floor. His eyes were as prominent as white buttons on black shoes. His gray hair, what there was of it, made dead ear muffs on each side of his bald head.

Both his hands were gripped in agony around the handles of a pair of long, slender paper shears buried in his heart. There wasn't much blood; only a quiet seepage marked his vest.

I got up. "I saw my share of dead Nips on Guadal," I said. "They hadn't been dead long. Dilweg ain't, either. We better take a gander around the joint. You take the upstairs. I'll take the downstairs."

Roberts' mouth was still hanging open. He had nothing but fear on that classic mug. He was frightened silly.

"Snap out of it, bub," I said. "The killer might still be in the house."

He pointed woodenly at the wall behind the desk. I turned to look. An oil painting had been moved sideward in the paneled wall and the door of a small safe yawned open. I jumped across Dilweg's body and stuck my hand in the safe. It was empty.

"That don't prove anything," I said. "There's a lot of papers on Dilweg's desk. Maybe he took the stuff out himself."

I heard a door close softly somewhere. Not far away. I jumped for the hall. A man's shadowy figure darted across the opening at the north end of the hall.

"The killer!" I screamed at Roberts, who

had followed me. "Let's nab him!"

The unknown was faster than a shadow. He moved like a cat. I skittered across the Orientals like a kitten on a tin roof, trying to keep my balance on the polished floor. I dived. My hands grabbed the unknown guy's jacket. He squirmed and gave me a straight-arm that made my tonsils bounce in my throat. And my feet slipped from under me and I hit the floor with a crash that made my teeth rattle.

My quarry was out the side door and streaking down the east lawn like all the demons were after him. He took that low brick wall without breaking stride and vanished into the timber. He could have topped the record for the four-forty hurdles on any college cinders in the country.

I had a little brown-colored metal ring in my hand that I'd torn off the shadow's jacket. A metal ring about an inch in diameter. I looked at Roberts.

"Where was the guy hiding?"

Roberts pointed, his face still green with fright.

"There's a clothes closet under the stairway that leads to the second floor. Behind the closet is a door that leads down stairs to the garage."

I opened the closet door. A light clicked on automatically. The closet was empty, except for a cheap raincoat on a hanger and some hat boxes on a shelf. On the floor was a tiny blob of white stuff that felt like ground glass, and half of a light brown coat button. I gathered the stuff and put it in my handkerchief.

Roberts was nearly tongue-tied with fright. "Where's Elkins?" he chattered. "Where's Mrs. Fanner? Are they dead, too?"

I thought the guy was about ready to keel over, he was that green around the gills.

"Take it easy, chum," I said. "One corpse at a time is par for the course. There's nothing to suggest the killer was in the wholesale business."

"What are you going to do? You're a detective."

"Right now I'm gonna call the cops. Homicide's their headache, not mine. I'm only a private eye—with a client rubbed out—and me two hundred bucks poorer than I ought to be."

CHAPTER II

HOMICIDE TAKES OVER

I CALLED Homicide at City Hall and told Lone of Fleming Morf's stooges that there was a little matter of a dead millionaire demanding their attention. Roberts sat on the edge of a chair while I was calling. He puffed on a cigarette and gawked nervously at everything in the room except Dilweg's body. I felt sorry for the guy. Sudden death was too much for him.

"Let's take a look around the dump," I said.

He followed me like a lost dog. We went through everything upstairs and then repeated downstairs. Nobody was in any of the rooms, and it didn't look as if anybody had ransacked the joint for dough. Maybe the killer had got what he wanted in that safe in the study.

We went downstairs to the garage. Roberts turned on a light somewhere. The garage was a concrete-floored room thirty feet square, with heavy wood-paneled walls. There wasn't a thing in the room except a black four-door peerless, license 408-284. No bench, no oil drums, no tools, no cabinets, no nothing.

Raindrops still glistened on the black finish of the car, and the windshield was still smeary except where the twin windshield wipers had swept the rain away. I knew that sedan hadn't been there long. It had stopped raining only fifteen minutes ago, just before I'd gotten off the Noble bus.

I got in the car and sat behind the wheel. I glanced in the rear-view mirror. I could see Roberts standing behind the car, lighting

another cigarette. His hands were shaking. I hated to think how he would crack up when Detective-lieutenant Fleming Morf and his rubber hose boys started working on him.

I got out and walked toward the bare wall in front of the car. When I got three or four feet away, I heard something click. A wide wooden panel slid sideward in the wall and there was a yawning black opening, paved with concrete, sloping gently downward.

Roberts was at my shoulder. "That's a special driveway that goes under the house and comes out on the north side of the grounds," he told me. "It allowed Mr. Dilweg to drive out of the grounds without backing. The door operates with an electric eye. You opened the door when you broke the circuit with your body. The outside garage doors operate the same way."

"Are millionaires too proud to back a car?" I asked.

"I take it you've never met Mr. Dilweg in person," Roberts said.

"No. He hired me by telephone."

"He had a stiff neck. He couldn't turn his head without turning his whole body. It happened in an oil-well accident several years ago."

I heard footsteps on the hardwood upstairs and I felt sorry for Roberts.

"Let's go up and face the inquisition, chum. Morf and his stooges are on the scene."

We went up quietly and walked to the study. I expected to see Morf and his muscle men, but what I saw was a guy kneeling by Dilweg's body. His eyes were staring. He was skinny and tall and neat in a brown suit and a brown hat, but he had on a black bow tie on a white shirt. His face was as pale as paper and his Adam's apple jumped in his throat when he saw us.

He got up.

"I just came back from the bank," he stammered at Roberts. "I wasn't gone more than half an hour. Then—this. It was my fault—for leaving him alone."

I had an idea that this guy wasn't shedding any tears over Dilweg's demise.

"We found your employer just a few minutes ago, Elkins," Roberts said. "Mr. Starch and I." He introduced me to Dilweg's butler.

I grunted at Elkins. I didn't like the waver in his eye and the oil in his voice. "What bank did you go to?" I asked him.

"The First National."

I looked at my wrist-watch. "Come again. That bank closes at two-thirty."

"I just made it," he said, "and I just got back on the Noble bus."

"Was Dilweg here when you left?"

He hesitated for a long time, like a swimmer getting ready for cool-off. Then he made up his mind to answer.

"No, sir. Mr. Dilweg was just driving in the south gate as I got on the bus to go to the bank."

"How'd you know it was Dilweg you saw?"

His thin face got red. I couldn't tell whether he was angry or cagey.

"I know the license number. Four-o-eight, two-eight-four. Then he said, emphatically, 'It was Mr. Dilweg, all right.'"

"I'm only a private eye, Elkins," I said, "but I've got a two-hundred-dollar stake in this murder. Is Joe Briggs still working for Dilweg?"

"No, sir. Briggs has not been working here for several days."

"Fired?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Was Briggs a visitor here today?"

A GAIN that queer hesitation, like he was weighing his words on a scale of caution.

"Briggs was here early this morning," he said then, "but I really don't know whether he wanted to see Mr. Dilweg or Mrs. Franner. Briggs said he'd return later."

This guy was cagey. He didn't throw in much information for free.

“Did Briggs come back any time before you left for the bank?” I asked.

“No, sir.”

I had never seen Joe Briggs wearing eye-glasses, but a guy can never overlook anything in a murder case.

“Did Briggs ever wear eye-glasses, Elkins?”

Elkins said, “No, sir” emphatically, and one of my theories went out the window. Maybe the ground glass I’d found in the closet where the killer had been was an eye-glass lens, but if Briggs didn’t wear glasses then he wasn’t the guy that had scissored Dilweg to death. . . .

Two of Morf’s baggy-pants stooges came into the study first, like a vanguard. They acted like two-bit dicks act on hardwood floors and Oriental rugs.

Detective-lieutenant Fleming Morf brought his cock-sure, overbearing fat swagger into the room like a calliope following the elephants. His round head was like a pool ball with ash-tray hair clipped short so that it stuck up like a curbing on his wrinkled street of forehead. His eyes were cold, and they got colder when he saw me. He grinned without humor at the stooges, who watched him.

“The foul-ball is here,” he said.

I patted my hands together. “Clap hands—here’s the hero. Where’s your rubber hose and your brass knucks, tough guy?”

Morf ignored me. He looked at Dilweg’s body like it was a piece of cold fish on a platter. He made a face at his stooges and they started to go over the joint like a vacuum cleaner. Then he looked at me.

“Start talking,” he said.

I told Morf all about finding the body. I told him all I knew about Carson Roberts and John Elkins and Joe Briggs and Mrs. Lilli Franner. I told him about the wet four-door sedan downstairs and about the guy Roberts and I had flushed out of the closet. I even gave him my handkerchief with the broken button

and the ground glass I’d scooped off the closet floor. And I gave him the shiny metal ring I’d grabbed off the guy’s jacket.

He put the stuff in his pocket.

“Why can’t you cheap divorce dicks keep your paws off evidence in homicide cases?” he growled.

I got white around the lips. “Some of these days I’ll divorce you from your teeth, chum. Me pickin’ up the stuff didn’t change it any.”

“Keep your shirt on.” His eyes glinted. “The guy you traced for Dilweg? Is he around? Does he wear glasses?”

“You’re barking up the wrong tree,” I said. “The guy in the closet wasn’t Joe Briggs. Briggs don’t wear glasses. And Briggs misses on another count.”

I didn’t tell Morf, but the metal ring I grabbed was off an Army jacket, and so was the broken button. I know a little about them. I wore one.

Morf passed the dirty crack without comment. “If you looked for the guy in the closet what kind of a guy would you look for?”

“One about five-feet-eight. Medium build. Wears glasses. He’s a war veteran. And he probably wears leather heels on his shoes. Rubber ones wouldn’t crush an eye-glass lens to powder. And if you see him, you better move fast. He can run plenty fast.”

“That story fit in with yours?” Morf growled at Carson Roberts.

Roberts had quieted down a lot. He nodded. “Exactly.”

“Why’d you come here to see Dilweg?”

“I had an appointment with him,” Roberts said.

“What about?”

Roberts’ answer surprised Morf so much he nearly swallowed his tonsils.

“The purpose of my visit is none of your business, but I have nothing to conceal. It had to do with Handicap Haven, Incorporated. Mr. Dilweg has been very generous to the project.”

Morf's face was red as a spanked baby's behind. "What's Handicapped Haven, Incorporated?"

"A charitable rest home in East St. Louis for the needy blind, deaf, epileptic and crippled. We take them in and try to rehabilitate them and make it possible for them to learn to take care of themselves."

He said it with a gleam in his eyes and a flush on his face like it was something swell and he was proud of it. Morf s looked ashamed of himself, and for Morf, that was quite a job.

To save face, and keep his rep as a tough mug he whirled on John Elkins and punched the butler's thin chest with a stubby hand for emphasis.

"Where's the old man's housekeeper? This Mrs. Lilli Franner. Where is she?"

"I don't know," the skinny butler said. He backed away from Morf's threatening face and he was trying to gulp down his Adam's apple.

MORF dogged him and his heavy fist curled into a tight ball and he shoved Elkins roughly backward.

"Come on. Skinny, don't act cagey with me. With one woman alone in a twenty-room house with you and Dilweg, you don't lose track of her. Where is she?"

Elkins' face was green with fear, and his scrawny arms went up to shield his face. Morf's left hand jabbed hard at Elkins' chest and the skinny guy went backward on to the leather davenport. Morf glared at him.

"Do I have to let the boys work you over?"

Elkins cowered back, trying to squeeze his body into the cushions.

"She's gone," he got out.

"Talk, Skinny! And you better make it good!"

"Mrs. Franner. Mrs. Lilli Franner. She came here in answer to an ad I put in a matrimonial paper. I got her a job it with Mr. Dilweg as a sort of housekeeper. We were

going to be married, and then go into business together with our savings."

Morf grinned as if he enjoyed Elkins' misery. "So you fell for that moth-eaten one? Now your savings have gone blooey, I bet. Along with the dame. Give me the story. From the beginning."

Elkins sat up, trembling. "She had six thousand dollars in cash. If I would put up the same amount, we'd put it in a safe deposit box I had at the bank. Then we'd get married and go on our honeymoon. When we got back—"

Morf grinned some more. "Go on. This is gonna be rich."

"We went to the bank," Elkins stammered. "I put my money in a big envelope. I asked for hers. She blushed, and said it was pinned inside her dress. She took the envelope with my money in it and went into a private booth, and when she came back the envelope was sealed and she'd written across it, 'Property of Mrs. and Mr. John Elkins'."

Morf said, licking his lips, "Go on."

"I wanted to buy a little delicatessen I know about, but she kept putting it off. I started to worry about it. I even wondered about the money. But the box was in my name and I had the only key. This afternoon I went to her room to talk to her about it. I found a note on her dresser saying that she'd been called to Duluth by the sudden illness of her sister. All of her things were gone, like maybe she didn't intend to come back. Then I remembered that she had told me once before that she had no relatives except a brother."

"You're slow on the up-take, Skinny. Then what did you do?"

"I went to the safety deposit box at the bank. The envelope was there, just like I'd left it. But inside was only a thick pile of white paper cut to exactly the same size as paper money. There was a good bill on the top and the bottom of the pile—the rest was just paper."

Morf laughed, and I could have punched him in the nose.

“The gal’s plenty clever,” Morf said. “Switched the bills out and the dummy paper in while she had you buffaloeed with blushes. She put a good bill on each side of the pile in case you got suspicious and tore the envelope.”

He acted more like he’d found six grand than just learned that Elkins had been fleeced out of that much.

“You’re out six Gs, my skinny friend,” he said, “and I’ve got an idea that your blushing violet might have stuck Dilweg with them shears, too. Scissors come natural to women. And I ain’t positive but what you and her was in cahoots.”

“I want my six thousand dollars back!” Elkins said.

I butted in. “I lost a client when Dilweg got himself punctured, and I lost two hundred bucks. What’s it worth to you if I get back your six Gs, Elkins?”

“Five hundred dollars! Five hundred dollars!”

“Make it two Cs, chum,” I said. I got a stake in this now, showing up our muscle-brained Homicide here.”

Morf grunted. “I’ll get your six Gs, Skinny, at the same time I pick up the killer. And I got an idea that Duluth’d be a good place to start looking.”

CHAPTER III

THE LADY IN THE LITTLE HOUSE

A BUNCH of guys came in then—a couple of pencil boys from the *Journal* and a photographer. The flash bulbs popped with me and Roberts and Elkins and Morf looking down at Dilweg’s body. The reporters talked to Morf for about ten minutes, then lifted the phone and called their city desks.

While they were busy on the phone a couple guys came in with a big wicker basket and they dumped the millionaire in and carried him away. When you’re a croppie, it don’t

make much difference to the coroner whether you got ten million or ten cents.

Morf glared at the coroner. “A dame flew the coop. Think she could have eased that shiv into Dilweg?”

“Nix,” the coroner said. “No soap. Whoever pushed that scissors had a lot of push. The wound was bruised where the handles sank into the flesh. I’d say it was a man did the job.”

I had a different idea myself, but I grinned at the detective from Homicide.

“You’d better hurry your bloodhounds to Duluth, Rover Boy.”

I started for the door.

“Hold it, Divorce Dick!” Morf said. “Where you think you’re going? I haven’t given you a clean slate yet.”

“Are you goofy?” I said. “Dilweg owed me two hundred bucks. But that ain’t motive enough for me frying in the chair. You’ve done your dirty deed for the day. You’ve got a corpse and you think you’ve got a suspect. Do your stuff. I’ll be at my office any time you want to get me so you can four-flush some more.”

I left Dilweg’s mansion and hopped the Noble bus back to the loop. I went to the local library and spent an hour in the newspaper reference room. There wasn’t too much stuff on Dilweg, because he hadn’t gone much for publicity, but there was enough for me to piece together a few facts.

Dilweg had been raised and educated to the law in East St. Louis. In his early days he specialized in corporation law and managed to starve to death. Then he got into politics and did all right. He wound up as state’s attorney for St. Clair County. Then he got into the oil business, and horse-shoes and four-leaf clovers rained all over everything he touched, and he got to be a millionaire.

He had married young, he had no kids, and his wife had died about twelve years before. He had been about sixty-nine years old. He had traveled a lot and had seldom been at

home in the big mansion. He had spent almost a year in Canada before he had returned to his mansion less than a month before. He hadn't been back to East St. Louis in more than ten years, although his only charity was the Handicap Haven, Inc. that I'd heard about from Carson Roberts. There was one item showing a picture of him writing a check for a hundred and fifty thousand dollars in favor of Handicap Haven, Inc.

I didn't know exactly what I had expected to find. I'd been looking for something—anything—that might tie up Briggs, or Elkins, or Roberts, or Mrs. Franner with a motive that would make sense in the killing of the old millionaire. I didn't find anything. I didn't even uncover any scent of a nameless guy who might have it in for Dilweg enough to stick a scissor in his heart.

The only thing that intrigued me was the fact that everybody in the case seemed to be tied up in some way with East St. Louis. Carson Roberts had his Handicap Haven there, Dilweg had got his start there, Mrs. Franner lived there, and Joe Briggs ran a landscape engineering outfit there. Maybe it might pay off to check the East St. Louis angle.

By the time I got back to the office, the *Journal* extras were on the street and Marge's eyes were bugged out as she read the big black headlines:

MILLIONAIRE MURDERED!

She was wriggling that top-flight torso of hers in ecstasy and I wished I had been a better salesman for the idea of eggs and toast with her across a breakfast table.

"Mr. Starch!" she warbled at me. "Isn't it thrilling?"

"Your grandmother's antimacassar," I said. "Slip your gears into high and get me the police commissioner of East St. Louis, pronto. Mr. John Webster, otherwise known as Jawn."

In five minutes I was talking long distance to a guy that knew more crooks than you

could shake a stick at. And the tough ones tried their best to steer clear of his bailiwick. I knew a trigger that beat up his gal because she drove him through the burg once when he was drunk and not able to sit behind the wheel.

"Jawn," I told the commissioner over the phone, "do me a favor and keep your eyes peeled for the three-fifty I.C. There might be a jackpot on it. Forty years old, looks thirty-five; shape like Sheridan, gams like Grable, and a yen for men. The old matrimonial racket. Six Gs and a millionaire murder. Elsberry Dilweg. The name the dame used here was Mrs. Lilli Franner." I gave him a full description I'd got from John Elkins, then I said, "I'll be seeing you in a few hours, Jawn, and buy you a short beer."

I TALKED Marge into loaning me her jalopy. I pointed the radiator south on 66 and kept her perking until I pulled up in front of the city hall down in East St. Louis. Jawn Webster was glad to see me, but he sloshed cold water all over my hopes of finding Lilli Franner so I could collect two Cs from Elkins.

"My boys," he told me, "have covered every train and every bus into this burg. We've worked the hotels and the motor courts. We had men on bridges into Saint Looney, just in case she by-passed us. No soap. Where'd you get the brainstorm that she'd hightail it down here?"

"The butler she flimflammed says she came from here in answer to an ad in a matrimonial magazine. And she left a note for her amour saying she'd gone to Duluth. So, with six Gs in her poke, I figured she might go in the opposite direction."

A guy came in the office, chewing on a toothpick.

"Boss," he said to Webster, "the boys tell me that Lilli Mason is back in town. Just got back in a car, with a guy. You don't suppose Lilli could have taken a flyer in high finance? One name or another wouldn't make any difference to Lilli."

Webster grinned. "Lilli is put together pretty good. Could be. With a chassis like hers, she could even make Starch thaw out. We might make a call on her."

"You intrigue me, Jawn", I said. "You're the second guy that's described her wheelbase as out of this world. Maybe I better take a gander."

Jawn didn't like the idea. "Better let my boys bring her in. She runs a call joint and I think there's a few crap tables in some of the back rooms. There might be some blackjacks around."

"Tell me where, Jawn. I know this burg pretty well. No use of you flushing out quail if we haven't located the right bush."

He told me, and I got in Marge's jalopy and rode about eight blocks.

Lilli Mason's place was a two-story frame, clean and tidy and freshly painted. It had a little patch of lawn in front, where a stone Negro was aiming a stone hose in the direction of the front gate. The little porch was nearly hidden with climbing green vines.

The door opened to my push on the bell and a tall gal with chalk-white skin smiled at me.

"Come in", she said, and she made a casual effort to pull her skin-tight wrapper together.

I walked in and took a gander around. It was clean and nice but the air smelled like maybe the windows hadn't been open for twenty years.

I grinned. "Sister," I said, "you can go right on with your other work. I want to see Lilli Mason."

"You're a cop," she said, like she'd say "You're a worm." Her eyes got wide and her smile went down the drain.

"You catch on quick. Where's Lilli?"

"Upstairs. Second door on the right side of the hall."

The gal left me like I was a leper and went into a big room that was evidently a reception room for customers and left me to walk up the

carpeted stairs. I heard a buzzer pop off above me, and I wondered if my wrapper-clad friend had warned Lilli that trouble was on the way up.

I walked down the hall to the second door on the right. It was in a little jog and just beyond the door was a sharp angle in the hall. It was pretty dark and awful quiet. I looked around for any rubber-heeled guys with blackjacks, then I rapped my knuckles on the door panel.

A voice—a real nice voice said, "Who is it, please?"

I listened to a little devil in me and said, "Open up, baby, and feast your hungry eyes on Little Lord Fauntleroy."

The door opened and I caught my breath. A guy just don't expect to see stuff like that just by opening a door.

I took hold of the door jamb. Lilli Mason was quite a package. She was tall and willowy and her skin was white and firm. Maybe what she had was forty years old but she'd taken pretty good care of it. She had dark hair and dark eyes.

That wasn't all she had. It was the way she was put together. All she had on was a bra and a pair of panties, only partly concealed by a robe that was as effective as barbed wire. It protected the property but it didn't obstruct the view.

She smiled at me and her teeth were something, too.

"Put your eyes back in their sockets, mister, and come in. We're all friendly here."

I said, "I'd rather you'd put on some more clothes and come with me, Lilli. Lilli Franner. We got a little talking to do about six Gs and a pair of paper shears and a dead millionaire."

She was scared. Her right hand went to her throat and her robe fell open. Maybe that's what took my mind off my business. Maybe that's why I didn't hear anybody on the carpet behind me.

Something slammed against the base of my skull. Red and green lights and paper

shears and girls in loose robes danced a dizzy jig in my brain. I felt myself folding up at the knees. The floor came up and hit me, hard. A vision of September Morn shivering ankle deep in blood stamped my brain.

Then I passed out, cold.

CHAPTER IV

HANDICAP HAVEN

BEFORE I saw Lilli Franner again, a couple of hours had passed. It was five minutes of eight and the lights in the ceiling hurt my eyes. I was sitting in a leather chair in Jawn Webster's office in the city hall, rubbing my fingers over a bruise on the back of my skull, near my right ear.

Webster told me I had been sleeping in that chair, after they dragged me in from my encounter with the sap in Lilli Mason's boudoir. I was all right, he told me, according to the doctor.

Fleming Morf had come down to East St. Louis in a squad car at eighty miles an hour when Webster had notified him that they had picked up Lilli Franner and her boy friend. And one of Webster's plainclothesmen, a guy he called Dave, stood by the hall door now, his strong white teeth gnawing on a toothpick.

There was a rap on the door and Dave opened it. Lilli Franner walked in, escorted by a uniformed cop. I knew that shape and that face, even if it was the first time I'd seen her with so many clothes on.

She came in and Dave closed the door behind her, grinning.

Lilli saw me. Her eyes laughed. Her lids had a kind of reptilian look to them. Lilli could be plenty tough, even when she was laughing.

Tough enough to stick scissors in anybody.

"You can put your eyes back in your sockets, mister," she said to me.

I knew what she meant. I got red in the

face and I felt of that bruise on my dome.

"Lilli," Webster said, "you're facing some tough raps. Not only theft, or working a con game, but murder. Changed your mind? Want to come clean?"

"Copper," Lilli said, "you're missing the head pin. I don't know what you're talking about."

"You're too polite, John," Morf broke in. "Slap her teeth in!" Then he said to Lilli, "Listen! You lifted six grand off John Elkins. We expect to get it back. And we want a good alibi or we'll put you in the clink for killing Elsberry Dilweg. First off, where's Elkins' six grand?"

Lilli didn't scare easy. "I told Webster and I'm telling you. I ain't talkin' till I get a lawyer. Put me in the clink and see if I care. I'll get sprung so fast it'll curl your hair."

Webster spread his hands wide in resignation.

He looked at me.

"Got any ideas, Bill?"

I felt the bump on my head. "Let Morf take her back and put her in the hoosegow. Along with the guy that conked me. Whoever he is."

Webster grinned and explained to Morf, "Our impetuous friend here got himself conked on the noggin while he was enjoying an eyeful of Lilli. Lucky I'd put Dave on Starch's tail. Dave nabbed Lilli and her boy friend before Starch had hit the floor."

Webster made a signal to the uniformed cop.

"Bring in her boy friend. Maybe we can make *him* talk."

Dave went out, too, and Morf squirmed in his seat. He pounded his horny palm on the arm of his chair.

"Give me ten minutes alone with him," he growled, "and I'll slug him into talking."

The door opened and Dave and the cop came back, with a guy between them. I sat straight up in my chair. The guy was about five-eight. He was chunky, but catlike and

quick. His nose was like a button stitched in the middle of a brown face.

I gawked at Webster and Dave. "Is this the dame's boy friend? Is this the guy that slugged me?"

"Right," Webster said. "Ever see him before?"

"See him before!" I yelled. "He's the guy that Dilweg hired me to trace under the name of Charles Bryce, Junior. And all the while he was working for Dilweg under the name of Joe Briggs. Can you tie that?"

Morf wouldn't let me steal the show. He got up and stuck his mug up close to Briggs.

"You're on the spot, lover," he said. "My boys nosed around back home and they found out that a guy in a four-door Chevvy picked up a dame with a classy chassis just about the time Dilweg was bumped off. And Elkins, the butler, said you was at the place in the morning. I figure you waited around for Elkins to leave the mansion so the coast was clear, then you killed Dilweg, and brought the dame down here."

Briggs' face didn't change. He was calm enough, for a guy faced with a murder rap.

"Why would I want to kill the old man?" he said. "I was working for him."

"Elkins kind of intimidated that Dilweg fired you."

"He hired me to landscape the oil company's property here in East St. Louis. I left some of my crew at his place to finish the job on the weeping willow." He shrugged his shoulders. "I admit I waited across the street from Dilweg's for Lilli. I brought her down here in my car. But I didn't know the kind of business she was in, and I didn't know about her con game with Elkins. She told me Starch was a suitor who had been annoying her. That's why I slugged him."

I BROKE in to Webster.

"Did you give Lilli's joint the once over?" I asked.

I was getting anxious about Elkins' six

grand. If I got that back I stood to be two Cs to the good.

"We couldn't have done a better job with a vacuum cleaner," Webster said. "But we didn't find hide nor hair of Elkins' dough."

Morf wasn't done yet and he put the coal on the fire that made me hate him.

"So there ain't no reason why you'd kill Dilweg, eh?" he said to Briggs. "I ain't the sap that Starch is, Briggs. He trailed you all over the State of Illinois and never tumbled to the truth. I did. I checked the papers for a lot of years back. Your old man was sent to the pen by Dilweg when he was the prosecutor down here. That's why you changed your name from Charles Bryce, Junior, to Joe Briggs when you entered Aggie College. And that's why you scissored Dilweg. To get even with him for sending your old man to the pen. Revenge, pure and simple."

Briggs didn't scare easy. He was as calm as calm. "Why would I wait fifteen years to kill him and rob him. Revenge don't stay hot that long."

Morf chortled. "That's enough." He said to Webster, "We'll hold this cookie till a better suspect comes along. The newspapers held back on the robbery angle. The only way Briggs could know that Dilweg's safe was cleaned out was because he cleaned it out himself. I'll take him back and shove him in the clink. We'll make an open and shut case."

"Is there anything more logical than to think that a millionaire's murder might have money connected with it?" Briggs said.

"Morf," I said, "I don't think Briggs stuck Dilweg."

Morf glared. "You'd miss clues on your upper lip, right under your nose. You didn't even know Briggs' old man was a convict, railroaded by Dilweg."

"Something else I do know, Big Shot. I know that Carson Roberts and I flushed a guy out of Dilweg's closet right after we found his body. That guy wasn't Briggs. Until we find that guy, we won't come up with Dilweg's

killer.”

“Phooey!” Morf snorted. “I’ll pin it on Briggs and the dame.”

“Homicide’s your headache. I’m hunting for Elkins’ six grand. And I’ve got an idea I’m going to make a chump out of you. I’ll have a little talk with Carson Roberts over at the Handicap Haven and we’ll come up with a dozen reasons why Briggs couldn’t have killed Dilweg.”

I walked over to Handicap Haven, Inc. It was only three blocks from the city hall. It was a big rambling building of unfaced brick, three stories high. Almost all of the windows in the joint were lighted, but the light seemed dim, like somebody was saving electricity. I don’t suppose a blind guy, though, can tell the difference between a forty watt bulb and a thousand watter.

I pushed the buzzer and a guy with thick glasses opened the door a little way so I could see inside. It wasn’t too clean or too light. He looked funny when he saw me.

“I thought I told you—” he said. Then he grinned and said, “I’m sorry. I thought you were someone else. Somebody who has been asking for Mr. Roberts two or three times and I don’t think Mr. Roberts ought to see him. I think his life might be in danger.”

I had butterflies inside me. “Danger? Why?”

He opened the door wide. “Come in,” he said, “and I’ll take you to Mr. Roberts.”

I couldn’t see his eyes behind those thick-lensed metal-rimmed glasses of his but I followed him down the hall to a door marked “Office.” There was a familiar look about him, but I couldn’t peg him exactly. The rims on his glasses made him look like -an owl. He was as nervous as a cat on a tin roof.

“Who is the guy that’s been trying to see Roberts?” I asked.

He said it simply, but it hit me right between the eyes. “John Elkins, Mr. Dilweg’s butler.”

He seemed to enjoy my shock. Then he

said, “Follow me.”

“What gives?” I said. “This is the office right here, ain’t it?”

“Yes,” he said, “but Mr. Roberts isn’t there right now.”

I followed him down the hall about fifteen feet and he opened a door and held it for me. I walked into a dirty room with a table and a bed and a dresser. It was empty. Roberts wasn’t there. I whirled around.

“What is this?”

THICK Glasses had shut the door behind him and flicked the key in the lock. His hands were in the pockets of his brown jacket. The metal ring was missing from the left side at his waist. I knew well enough I’d grabbed that ring off the guy we’d flushed out of Dilweg’s closet.

I cursed myself for being such a sap. I grinned at him, but my stomach was brushing my backbone.

“Go ahead and shoot, killer!” I said. “You can fry only once for killing Dilweg. Killing me won’t raise the ante.”

He took his hands out of his pockets. He didn’t have a gun. I swallowed my heart and it started beating again.

He smiled, but it was a nervous grimace. “I didn’t kill Dilweg, Mr. Starch. I proved it to Mr. Roberts and I can prove it to you.”

“How’d you know my name?”

“I saw your picture in the paper with Mr. Roberts and Mr. Morf, and Elkins.”

I couldn’t get the proper pitch.

“We found Dilweg’s body and a couple minutes later we flush you out of a closet and you ran like the devil,” I said. “Were you waiting for your portal to portal pay? Or did you hide there when we came into the house and interrupted your getaway?”

“I’ll tell you the whole thing and you can use your own judgment,” Thick Glasses said. “I’m Blake Hobson. I was technician fifth class in the Army. I got burned around the eyes on Okinawa. I came back and found out

that fifteen acres and a shack I owned had been bought by Dilweg for back taxes while I was in the Army.”

“Wait a minute, bub. There was a moratorium on Service men’s debts.”

“I know. And I had eighteen months to reclaim and pay up before Dilweg got a clear title. But Dilweg took over while I was gone, sunk an oil well and brought it in. When I came back from Service I took a job with Mr. Roberts here. Then I went to see Dilweg about my land.”

“And grabbed the first thing that came to hand—a paper shears—and stuck him with it. Losing an oil well is a good motive for murder.”

Hobson quit grinning. “I didn’t kill him, I tell you. I went to see him. I saw some guys around a weeping willow tree. They were some of Joe Briggs’ crew and I recognized them. Then I went up to the house and in the side door. Dilweg was already dead on the floor. I got scared, and started to beat it, fast. In the back hall, somebody slugged me. When I woke up, I was on the floor of the closet, my glasses busted and a bump on my head.”

He showed me a bump on his skull, back of the right ear, the same place I had been slugged by Joe Briggs in Lilli Mason’s place.

“I opened the closet,” Thick Glasses continued, “and you guys were coming at me. I beat it. You know the rest. That’s the truth, so help me God.”

“Why’d you run? Your story was just as good then as it is now.”

“I knew Dilweg was dead. How was I to know you guys hadn’t killed him?”

“You work for Roberts. Why run from him?”

“You forget my glasses were broken. I didn’t recognize him. It wasn’t till I saw the pictures in the paper that I knew who it was in Dilweg’s house.” He touched his glasses. “This is an old pair I had around before I got mustered out.”

“I got to tell Morf, chum. I’m no sleuth for the city. I’m just a private eye.”

“I haven’t told you everything,” Hobson said.

“Let your imagination run, bub,” I told him. “Nothing can possibly jolt me now.”

“When I ran away from Dilweg’s house, I didn’t go far,” Thick Glasses said. “I hid in the timber till dark. Then a tall, skinny guy came out of the house and hid something behind a loose brick in the wall in front of where I was hiding.”

I grinned. “Bring in some false whiskers and a submarine and you got a new Perils of Pauline.”

CHAPTER V

SURPRISE SUSPECT

HOBSON went to the table and opened the drawer and came back with a thin, flat package, wrapped in brown paper.

“There’s the proof,” he said to me. “Read it.”

I did. “I’ll be a monkey’s uncle,” I said. “Even money says this stuff was taken from Dilweg’s safe.” I looked at him closely. “Is John Elkins the guy that cached this?”

“I’ve only seen Elkins’ picture in the paper. The guy who cached the package is the one who was here tonight asking for Mr. Roberts.”

“Why do you think Mr. Roberts’ life is in danger?”

“I think Elkins killed Dilweg, and I think Elkins believes that Mr. Roberts knows he did and is trying to prove it. So Elkins wants to put Mr. Roberts out of the way.”

“Have you told this story to anyone else?” I said.

“Yes. To Mr. Roberts. That’s why Mr. Roberts refused to see Elkins tonight.”

“Where’s your boss now?”

"I don't know. He left shortly after Elkins was here the first time. I don't know where he went."

"Did Mr. Roberts say anything when you showed him the package that had been taken from Dilweg's safe and then cached by Elkins?"

"He said it should be turned over to the police immediately."

"I think you've got something there," I said. "We're forty miles away from Morf. Would you trust me to deliver it as evidence?"

"I was hoping you'd offer."

He handed the package back to me without hesitation.

"Now," I said, "maybe you can let me out the side door or something. I don't want Elkins to be hanging around and slug me in the dark by mistake."

Hobson led me downstairs to a concrete-floored basement. It was full of work benches and machinery, and it smelled of leather. There were a half-dozen automobiles in the middle of the big room. The light was dim and I couldn't see things plainly, and he didn't offer to turn on more lights. Maybe it was a good idea, if somebody was hanging around outside with murder in his heart when he found the right victim.

I remembered the article I'd read in the library back home.

"How many handicapped guys actually live in Handicap Haven?" I asked Hobson.

"About twenty-five blind men," he said. "They live in dormitories on the second floor. But there's about a hundred and twenty-five who work here in the daytime. The blind ones make belts and billfolds and other leathercraft. The deaf and crippled and epileptic make brooms and stuff and polish automobiles."

"Got a list of the cars polished here in the last few days?" I asked.

"Yeah. But only by license numbers. Mr. Roberts always took care of billing the customers. Here's the book."

It was a little book. One of the last entries in it was a car with license number 408-284. Dilweg had had his car polished at his pet project.

"That was free," Hobson said. "For other jobs we usually get ten bucks."

He let me out the side door of the basement. It was as dark as the inside of the eight-ball and my skin was prickling on the back of my neck. But I acted as brave as I could and walked up the alley to the sidewalk. Then I walked back to the city hall to pick up my borrowed car.

I knew I had some pretty potent evidence in my pocket that somebody had taken out of Dilweg's safe, and I had no doubt that the same someone might get pleasure out of sticking a pair of paper shears in my gizzard to get it back.

But somehow I just couldn't add up all the angles to the case to make sense. If Elkins had killed his boss I couldn't figure where the con game on Elkins' six grand fitted into the picture. I don't believe in duplex mysteries. I believe that all murders are solved by finding the single thread of motive that is responsible for letting a human out of this world.

IT WAS nearly one o'clock in the morning before I hit the hay, and I slept like a hammered steer. When I got up, at about eleven bells, I phoned Morf, to tell him about the package Hobson had given me.

"Which one of your two suspects is gonna fry for killing Dilweg?" I said.

"A guy named John Elkins," he said. "Carson Roberts brought in a stooge of his by the name of Blake Hobson. Hobson seen Elkins cache a package that was taken from Dilweg's safe. And Hobson tells me you took the package. You better bring it down here pronto or I'll put you in the clink for holding back evidence."

"Last night, Genius, you swore you were going to hang the garland of guilt around the

necks of Lilli Franner and Joe Briggs. How come you changed your mind?"

"We never found no six grand no place, did we? And they come up with an alibi and they got witnesses to prove that they was at the Hog Hip eating lunch at the very minute Dilweg was stuck. They're in the clear. But I'm holding them here, along with Roberts and Hobson. When you bring that cache down here, I'm going out and put the heat on Elkins, and I'm taking the whole kit and kaboodle along with me. I'll get this thing down in black and white and Elkins will sign his John Henry."

Something close to inspiration clicked in my brain.

"I'll be down as soon as I shave," I said. "And I'll bet the one you put the bracelets on will surprise you."

I went down to the city hall and Morf grabbed the cache out of my hand like it was engraved with gold.

"Put the whole gang in squad cars and bring them along!" he roared at a couple of stooges. He frowned at me. "We don't need any more help from you."

"Give me a break," I said. "Elkins is a client of mine. I get two hundred bucks if I get his six grand back."

"All right. Come on."

We all drove out to Dilweg's mansion in three squad cars piloted by Morf's stooges. Morf pounded on the front door like he was storming the walls of Jericho. Nobody answered. The house was quiet as the tomb. Elkins didn't show up.

No wonder. When we finally got in the joint we found out why. Elkins was on his bedroom floor upstairs. He was flat on his back in some loud-striped pajamas. There was a bullet-hole in his right temple and a .45 automatic in his right hand. He was dead.

Morf did a lot of strutting around like the hero in the last act of a melodrama. He looked the body over. He handled the gun with a handkerchief and gave it to one of his stooges.

Then he looked around at his audience and spoke like an oracle, and he spat most of his words in my direction.

"He's been dead for eight or ten hours. I'd say he shot himself a little after midnight or thereabouts. He probably woke up to the fact that somebody had discovered his cache of the stuff he took out of his boss' safe and he knew the jig was up. Our whole murder mystery is all washed up. Elkins killed his boss and now he's bumped himself off."

"Why don't you come out of the kindergarten, Big Shot?" I said. "Elkins didn't kill himself. A schoolboy ought to know that."

Morf got red. "Huh?"

"That's a forty-five automatic, bub. If Elkins killed himself, where's the ejected shell?"

Morf got still redder and his stooges looked all over the joint for a cartridge case. They couldn't find it.

"Somebody bumped Elkins off," I said. "Somebody that Elkins knew pretty well or he wouldn't have been in his bedroom in his pajamas. Maybe the ejected shell got stuck some place on the killer. I read about a case once where a murderer got trapped because he stepped on an ejected shell and it stuck in his rubber heel. They hung him." Then I said, "Bring the herd downstairs, Big Shot, and I'll name the killer. I had a hunch about the solution this morning. Now I'm sure of it. Too bad I didn't figure it out last night. I could have saved Elkins' life and made myself two hundred bucks."

"Who are you, to order people around?" Joe Briggs said plenty ugly. "You're only a private gumshoe, and a punk one at that."

Lillie Franner was putting lipstick on her full lips. "That's telling him, honey," she drawled.

Briggs had lost his yen for Lilli. "Shut up!" he snapped.

"Mr. Starch is doing his best," Carson Roberts said, in that aristocratic voice of his. "The least we can do is cooperate."

"Thanks," I said. "Too bad we all don't see eye to eye."

"Downstairs, punks, and make it snappy!" Morf hollered.

WE ALL went downstairs to the study and Morf seated everybody. Then he glared at me.

"All right, get out your ouija board. Who's the killer?"

"You're getting this for free," I said. "How about letting me do it my way?"

"Okay, Dick Tracy."

"We'll start with the killer right here in the study," I said. "He had a fuss with Dilweg. He picked up the paper shears and killed him. Then he figured he couldn't just walk out of the house without providing some kind of a motive for murder. So he took the papers out of Dilweg's safe and planted them in Elkins' room."

"Then the killer came downstairs, and just managed to get out of sight before Blake Hobson came in the side door. Then he had to give himself time to provide an alibi so he slugged Hobson and put his body in the closet while he made his getaway."

Morf got up and paced the floor. "That's imagination. That ain't evidence. I'd look silly going into court with that."

"The things the killer did here ain't important," I said. "It's the things he did *before* and *after* that tripped him up."

"Your riddles annoy me. Speak up or shut up."

I grinned at Morf and then at Hobson. "Day before yesterday the deaf guys at Handicap Haven polished a four-door sedan. License number Four-o-eight, two-eight-four. They got a record in a book at Handicap Haven."

"So what?"

"That was Dilweg's car. Yesterday afternoon the killer drove Dilweg's car through the rain from East St. Louis and put it in the garage downstairs. The guy that Elkins

testified to seeing drive in the gate just before Dilweg was killed was *not* Dilweg but the killer in Dilweg's car."

"Are you crazy?"

"The car's still downstairs. Go down and sit behind the wheel. The rearview mirror is set for a guy six feet tall. Dilweg was only a little over five feet. He couldn't have used the rear-view mirror."

"How'd the killer get away?" Morf growled. "The boys working on the weeping willow tree didn't see nobody but Hobson."

"Simple," I said. "Very simple. The day before, he'd left his own car, exactly like Dilweg's, in the garage downstairs, and drove Dilweg's to Handicap Haven to have it polished. After he killed Dilweg, and slugged Hobson, he went down to the garage and drove his own car through the tunnel under the house. The boys at the weeping willow tree couldn't have seen him."

"You're still guessing," Morf said.

"Am I? He drove his car around the block and parked by the iron gate. His car was dry—in spite of the fact that it had stopped raining only when I got off the Noble bus and walked across the street. So his car had to be in a dry place less than a minute before I saw him park it. There isn't another place within a mile—except the garage downstairs."

Morf grinned at Carson Roberts, who was fidgeting with his Homburg on a corner of the davenport.

"He's put the finger on you, Roberts. What you got to say?"

"I'm confused," said Roberts. "I can't imagine why Mr. Starch would think I would kill Mr. Dilweg. He was a benefactor, not an enemy."

"I can fill in the motive, Roberts. Dilweg was a benefactor. Over a period of years he's given several hundred thousand dollars to you and your Handicap Haven. He thought you were providing living quarters for the handicapped, feeding them, and taking care of them generally. You had them making brooms

and leathercraft and working on cars on a commercial basis. You provided living quarters for only twenty-five blind men. The balance of Dilweg's money you appropriated to yourself. Dilweg found it out, threatened you with exposure—and you killed him.”

Roberts was still fiddling with his Homburg. “There’s a little matter of a dead man upstairs. Elkins. Why would I kill him?”

“Elkins lost six grand to Lilli Franner. He figured to get it back from you. Because he was the only man alive that knew it was *you* and not Dilweg who drove Dilweg’s car yesterday afternoon. He visited you in East St. Louis last night. He wanted to see you and blackmail you. You followed him home and killed him, and made it look like suicide.”

Robert’s lips for the first time had an ugly twist.

“You seem to know all the answers. I wonder if you know the answer to this?” His left hand dropped the Homburg and I saw the gun in his right hand. It was an ugly little pea-shooter and I had an idea he could hit what he shot at. It was a .32, but it looked like a cannon because it was aimed at my belt buckle!

CHAPTER VI

KILLER IN THE DARK

MORF didn’t have a rubber hose and his stooges couldn’t help him, so he just stood there with his round eyes popping out and his lower lip trembled so much his teeth rattled.

Roberts moved the gun from side to side to cover all of us.

“I’m walking out of here,” he said, in that aristocratic voice. “The first one who comes out that door after me, gets a bullet in his middle.”

He didn’t sound aristocratic any more. And I had a sneaking idea that it was only his

wish for haste that stopped him from putting a slug in my ticker.

He backed through the door into the hall. Then I could hear his feet pounding on the hardwood floor as he ran down the hall to the north.

I leaped for the doorway. And an Oriental rug saved my life. My feet went out from under me as a rug skittered on the floor. I went down. And the bullet Roberts had promised smashed into the door jamb and a white splinter of wood tore loose.

I scrambled up and grabbed a Louis XIV chair. Roberts was tugging at the door that led to the garage downstairs with his left hand, and he snapped a shot at me from the .32 in his right. That slug whistled by me so close I could smell hot lead.

I heaved the chair forward across the gleaming floor. It skittered crazily, but stayed on course, and slammed toward Roberts. And then the door came open under his frantic tugging and the zooming chair missed him and crashed through the door opening. I heard it bouncing down the stairway to the garage floor.

Roberts leaped through the door and his steps boomed as he ran down. I hit the door and jerked it open to utter darkness. I was outlined at the head of the steps. A bullet tore into the padding in the shoulder of my coat and I could feel the burn of its scratch on my hide.

I crouched low and pulled the door shut behind me. Utter blackness was all around. I heard Roberts’ muffled curses as he stumbled over the Louis XIV chair. My hands searched the wall in frenzy. They found a switch. I flicked it. Nothing happened.

Butterflies went berserk in my stomach. I was in a tight spot. A killer was below me in the dark. A guy who had killed twice and had nothing to lose if he killed again. The killer had a gun and knew how to use it. I was unarmed.

I couldn't see the killer and I couldn't even hear him move. He might be anywhere in a thirty-foot square room.

The killer couldn't see me, either. But he knew by now that I didn't have a gun. And he knew that I was on that stairway. He had three bullets left and my skin crawled with fear, expecting hot lead to blast me.

I couldn't retreat. The minute I opened the door behind me my body would be outlined against the light from the hall. So I bent forward until my groping hands found the step under me. I lay down like a snake, head first, and let my body slide down the steps. My ears were so finely tuned to danger that I could hear the scrape of my coat buttons on the edge of the steps.

A bullet roared through the darkness and I heard it smash into the door at the head of the stairs. The flash showed me Roberts' shadow, standing six feet from the foot of the stairs, his feet fumbling with the wreckage of the Louis XIV chair.

I squeezed my body tight to the steps. Roberts had two bullets left. Two bullets.

I squirmed downward. Another bullet crashed. And I heard a sudden low hiss of breath. I knew Roberts had located me by the flash of his gun.

At that moment the stairway door was jerked open and I heard Morf bellow his head off in fear as Roberts' last bullet smacked into the door and threw splinters of wood into the detective's face. Morf turned yellow and jumped back and closed the door.

I scrambled to my feet and dived off the stairway at Roberts' crouching body. Roberts sidestepped and I sprawled on the concrete. The skin peeled off my palms and I felt warm blood.

There was more light now, or else my eyes were getting used to the dark. Roberts grabbed the chair and hurled it across the room toward the paneled wall. I knew what he was trying to do—break the circuit on the electric eye and open the paneled wall as a means of escape.

I lunged at him in desperation. I heard the chair shatter against the wall. Something slugged out of the dark and slammed into my skull. Pinwheels flared in my brain. I folded up like an accordion and went down on the concrete floor.

In my dizzy brain I heard a crash like two locomotives meeting head on. And then I laughed like a crazy man—and everything went black. . . .

THREE hours later I sat in a chair in my office and acted like a hero while Marge “oh-ed and ah-ed” all over the place with her eyes bugged out like headlights in the rain. She shaved a little patch of hair off the welt of my skull where Roberts' gun butt had raked it. And then she stuck a strip of tape on my noggin.

“Isn't it thrilling?” she purred. “You solving two murders right under the noses of the police! Tell me all about it.”

“There wasn't nothing much to it, Sugar,” I said. “When I went down the stairs after Roberts I flicked a switch. When he slugged me and threw the chair to open the paneled wall, it didn't open because I had turned off the electric eye. In the dark he ran into the wall and knocked himself colder than a can of last year's mackerel. It was easy for Morf to put the cuffs on him.”

“Why did Roberts kill Dilweg?”

“I told you. Roberts was flimflamming the old man out of a hundred grand a year with his phony Handicap Haven. Dilweg found it out, gave him thunder and threatened to expose him. So Roberts killed him.”

“Why did Roberts kill Elkins?”

“Elkins knew Roberts was guilty of murder, and tried to blackmail him. Roberts had to kill him, too.”

“Mrs. Lilli Franner. Where does she fit in?”

“We found out more about her. She's been married four times. But her maiden name was Roberts. Yeah, she was Roberts' sister. In

addition to his Handicap Haven racket Carson Roberts was the unknown publisher of a matrimonial sucker paper on the Q.T. in East St. Louis. Roberts got Lilli into Dilweg's house thinking maybe she could charm the old man into marrying her. Dilweg didn't go for that. So Lilli and Roberts settled for the six grand they milked out of Elkins. We even got Elkins' six grand back from Roberts, excepting a thousand he gave to Lilli for her share in the swindle."

"How about Briggs?"

"He was a sap that fell for a dame. But the soldier, Hobson, will do all right. We found out Dilweg had had his lawyers looking all over the armed forces for Hobson. They were always a step behind him. In the old man's will, he set up a trust fund for the guy—all the

profit from the oil well he sunk on the kid's land."

Marge moved around and I saw things in her eyes that I'd never seen before.

"I think you're wonderful," she whispered down my neck. "Everybody's happy."

I held my head in my hands. "Everybody but me. I told homicide it was their headache. But I lost two hundred bucks when Dilweg was bumped off. I lost two hundred more when Elkins kicked the bucket. Morf got his name in the paper. Hobson got a barrel of money. All I got was crude haircut with a gun butt. Looks like homicide's *my headache*."

"Would this do for an aspirin?" Marge said, and she kissed me square on my big mouth.

Three days more and it'll be legal for her to boil my coffee and burn my toast.