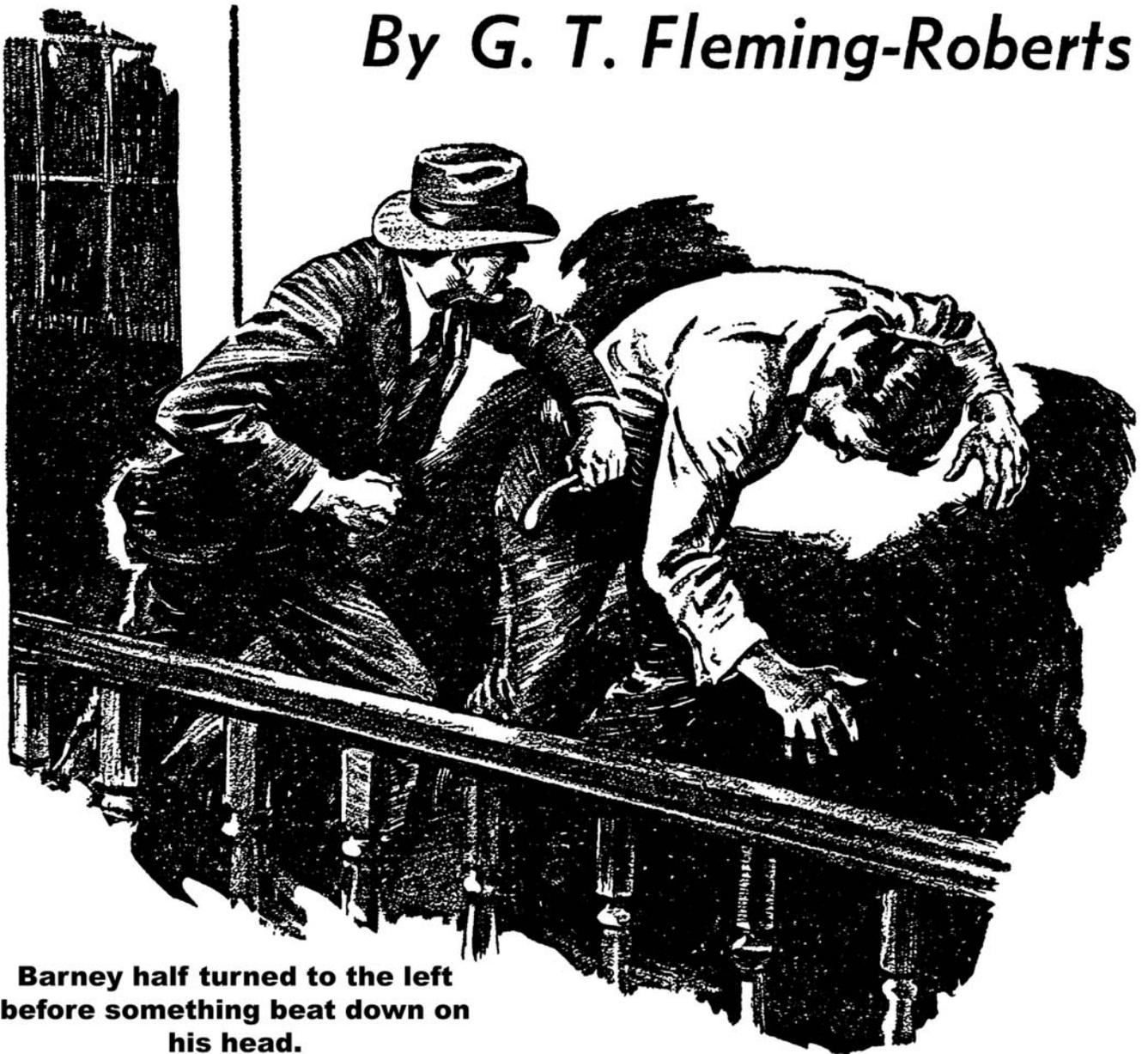


# One More Murder

By G. T. Fleming-Roberts



**Barney half turned to the left before something beat down on his head.**

Star reporter Barney Ghent plans the perfect killing — and the girl he loves is caught in a murder trap.

## CHAPTER ONE Not Quite Dead

FROM across Martindale Street, Barney Ghent noticed that the door of the old Pomeroy house had opened. Somebody came down the short approach to the sidewalk. A

woman. She turned north and ran, holding her purse up tight against her breast. She wasn't Mrs. Taylor, Harry Pomeroy's housekeeper. She was younger than Mrs. Taylor and her skirts were short. Barney hadn't seen anything of her face in the darkness. He didn't know who she was, didn't think it was important anyway.

Inside his tan balmacaan, Barney Ghent's shoulders shrugged. When there was nothing left of the fleeing woman except the skish-skish sound the toes of her shoes made on the concrete, he turned and moved without haste down the steps of Sam's Subway, the basement cafe in the Martindale Apartment Building. The smell of food sickened him, but he opened the door and went in anyway.

The place wasn't crowded. A woman sat a little apart from the table nearest the door, as though she waited for somebody. One of her knees was over the other and she dangled a blue kid pump from a silk-stockinged toe. She wore a black skirt and a blue-fox jacket that was open to reveal the frothy front of a white blouse. Pale gold hair rolled up from her brow and seemed to be important in securing a silly, brimless hat. A closeup might have discerned lines that were fortyish about her eyes and mouth and the shadowy prophecy of a double chin. But not even another woman could have made an uncomplimentary remark about her figure.

When Barney Ghent showed himself in the door, the woman uncrossed her legs, slid her foot into her pump. She gave the impression of standing erect without leaving her chair.

"Barney," she said, and raised gloved fingers toward a pretty mouth. "Barney Ghent!" It was as though she was seeing a ghost. And possibly she was.

Barney kept his right hand in the pocket of his coat, his fingers on the still warm revolver there. He raised his hat with his left hand. He thought ironically that he was still "Gentleman" Ghent, formerly police reporter on the Evening Star, and there was still time for him to notice an attractive woman like Marsha Hopson. He might have been surprised at finding her here except that surprise was one of the emotions he was forced to deny himself in order to live a little longer.

He asked Marsha Hopson if he might sit down, and when she didn't seem to hear him he sat down anyway. A dying man ought to have some privileges.

Marsha, he noticed, had not yet relaxed, as though she still doubted his substance.

"I—I thought you were—were—"

"Dead?" he concluded, smiling. "No, I'm not dead."

Only dying. He had perhaps six days before that thin-walled bubble in the arch of his aorta would let go.

As Dr. Fritz Wulfing had explained it to him, the gunman's bullet had nicked the big artery leading from the heart, causing a weakness in the wall. Under pressure of the blood surging from his ticker, a sort of blister had been formed at this point, growing larger all the time, like a tire's inner tube getting ready to blow. An aneurism, Wulfing had called it. Death might come any time, with the next breath. Or then again, if the Ghent luck held out, he might live for nearly a week if he completely avoided every sort of excitement.

He wasn't supposed to leave his apartment, or his bed for that matter. Yet this afternoon he had discharged his nurse, dressed himself, and here he was living on time borrowed from the undertaker.

"Care to pinch me?" he asked Marsha.

A smile trembled on her mouth. "I'm glad, Barney," she said and sounded as though she was. "When Mat came back from visiting you, he sounded awfully pessimistic about your chances."

Mat Hopson was attorney for the Evening Star, and Marsha's second husband. Her first was Harry Pomeroy, who lived just across the street.

This was Sunday night, and Mat had visited Barney Ghent on Friday. Barney remembered Friday particularly, because that was the day that Fritz Wulfing had brought him the revolver—the revolver that was at moment in Barney's right coat pocket, its barrel still warm. He'd asked Wulfing for the gun as a protective measure, he claimed; he didn't want some other hophead killer to steal the fragment of life that was still left to him.

Barney Ghent laughed with less restraint than at any time since Dr. Wulfing had told him the bad news about himself.

"That was because I told Mat I couldn't smoke," he said. "Mat ably figured that a Ghent without cigar is a Ghent without hope."

Marsha shuddered. "It must have been terrible." She referred to shooting, of course, "They got the guy, didn't they?"

Barney nodded. The gunman was in jail, maybe praying that Barney Ghent would live, so that he might escape the chair. The joker was that probably no one had told the killer that Barney Ghent was going to die.

"What was it all for, Barney?" Marsha asked.

He gestured without lifting his hands completely from the table. "One of those things. A newspaperman uncovers somebody's protected racket, blows the story into headlines, thus ruining somebody's chance for re-election. And the newsman's byline turns out to be a death warrant."

"Well, it's not something that happens twice," she said. "I mean, you'll take precautions."

He grinned, thinking, No, it won't happen again. And the dead don't have to take precautions. They don't even care.

"What are you doing here?" he asked aloud. "Haunting the old haunts?" He meant the Pomeroy house across the street, her home when she was married to Harry Pomeroy.

Marsha lowered her lids and he noticed that the blue of her eye shadow was startling against the sudden pallor of her face.

"I've been waiting here for over an hour for Mat," she said and studied the designs she drew on the tablecloth with a pointed fingernail. "This is our first wedding anniversary."

"Congratulations," Barney said.

"And Mat and I met here, you know," she went on anxiously. "That night Harry Pomeroy and I had gone round and round. I slammed out of the house and came over here to eat. Forgot my purse, of course. Mat was here and came to the rescue."

Marsha raised her blue eyes above Barney Ghent's face and to the door.

She smiled a little. "He's been my hero ever since," she concluded quietly.

Barney Ghent looked over his own thick shoulder and saw Mat Hopson coming in the door. He was a tall, trim man with a certain sort of dignity that was not overbearing. He could get by with a Chesterfield overcoat, a derby, and mustache wax. He could carry a cane in the Middle West without exciting suspicion. Women looked from him to Marsha and envied her. To the Evening Star, Mat Hopson was the sort of personality who could settle a libel suit out of court without losing the newspaper subscription of the plaintiff.

Barney Ghent stood up, put out his right hand to Mat Hopson's gloved fingers.

"You've made a remarkable recovery," Mat said, pumping Barney's arm. "Downright startling! Look, here, old man, aren't you pushing things a little too fast?"

Barney looked from Mat to Marsha. He forced a laugh. "Fifteen minutes with your charming wife and I'm a well man. The doctors ought to discover her!"

Then he turned so that Marsha could not see his face and put a finger on his lips. Mat Hopson understood and nodded almost imperceptibly. Hopson knew that Barney was going to die, but Barney didn't want Marsha to know it. He didn't

want sympathy. He didn't need it. He was having a hell of a good time tonight and sympathy mustn't spoil it.

Barney declined to join Mat and Marsha at dinner, lifted his battered hat to Marsha, and left the basement cafe. That was at thirty-eight minutes after eight. He took four full minutes to walk to the end of the block, where he stood on the corner and listened to the approaching wail of a police siren. His pulse quickened, and he knew that was danger to the thin-walled sack of his chest.

He turned abruptly from Martindale Street, walked west into the cool wind that drove scant, spitting rain out of the dark sky. He pushed his hat up from his forehead and lifted his face to the wind and rain. He was feeling all right. There was no pain except the stiff soreness of the bullet wound itself. Dr. Fritz Wulfing had told him there would be no pain at the end, but then Fritz Wulfing was a friend as well as a physician.

"And how the hell does he know?" Barney whispered into the darkness. Then his lips curled bitterly and he tried to consider himself objectively, like a corpse in a crime story.

He was pretty good at that. He might have written his own obituary, except that that hinted of dramatics. Lord, how he hated dramatics! When a story broke, Gentleman Ghent got the facts, put them down tersely in good newspaper style. He was a damned good reporter. Never be an interpretive writer. Never drift into fiction, because he wouldn't know a dramatic situation if he met one. And he'd met plenty. He was calloused to dramatic situations.

He guessed that was why he could think coldly about his own death, Maybe he was the nucleus of a dramatic situation and didn't know it.

He came around the block and into Martindale again. The siren was silent, but the red eye of the squad car was beaming down the street from a point directly in front of the Pomeroy house. This time Barney crossed Martindale to the east side, instead of walking by Sam's Subway again. And he went toward the narrow, red brick dwelling that belonged to Harry Pomeroy.

Behind the police car was a small, shiny new coupe with press plates bolted on about the licenses. That would belong to Benny Dean, who had ridden into the police-reporter job that had been Barney's. Barney grinned at the coupe and walked up the approach to the front door. A cop named Fitzgerald stood on the steps talking to some neighbors or passers-by who wanted to know

what this was all about. Barney shouldered up to the cop, said hello.

"I heard you were sick with lead poison, Barney," Fitzgerald said, and stared incredulously.

"Just released today." Barney jerked his thumb toward the door. "What goes on?"

"Harry Pomeroy got it," the cop said.

"Bad?"

"As bad as they come. Go on in, Barney. That cub from your paper will have to grow a crop of corns to fill your shoes!"

Barney went into a narrow hall that was all Turkey-red carpet, somber walls, worn plush settee, and walnut stairway. Benny Dean hung on a wall phone that had cost Harry Pomeroy fifty cents a month less than the other kind. He was asking for Caster at the city desk with one side of his mouth and trying to bite through a candy bar with the other side. He didn't see Barney.

Barney Ghent walked behind Benny and jerked the receiver away from Benny's ear.

"Hey, who the—" When Benny saw who it was his chubby face fell almost far enough to bounce on the floor.

"Barney!" he gasped.

Barney pointed with his forefinger at the phone. "When you address that big cluck call him Mister Caster, son, and you'll get to be famous and get shot at like me." He leaned over the transmitter and hugged the receiver to his ear.

Caster was yelling, "Barney. Is that you, Barney?"

"Me," Barney admitted. "I'm taking over for Dean."

"But you can't, damn it! You—you're supposed to be—be sick!"

Barney chuckled without mirth. "Just one more murder, Chief. Then I promise to stay out of your hair for life. I'm really going to enjoy this one, Chief."

He could hear Caster punishing his gum. In his mind's eye he could see the lean jaws chopping up and down. He grinned at the phone. This was tough for Caster, because Caster knew that Barney was going to die and knew, further, that Barney didn't want sympathy. It was almost pathetic the way Caster had dropped into Barney's flat every now and then, all the while Barney was in bed, to tell lies about all the big plans Henishaw and the other big shots at the paper were making for Barney's future. Caster had even worked himself up to such a pitch of enthusiasm over Barney's

non-existent future that he had promised to send him to Germany to cover the cold war.

"Okay, Barney," Caster said finally. "It's fine of you to sort of show Benny the ropes before the paper sends you to South America."

Barney Ghent hung up and turned to Dean.

"Benny, one of the things you want to learn is not to phone Caster until you've got something besides the fact a guy was shot. He likes you to have your story first, see?"

Then he turned his back on Dean and went up the carpeted steps to the den on the second story where Harry Pomeroy's body lay. Dean followed, his mouth slightly ajar and his camera bouncing on his belly.

## CHAPTER TWO Tap, Thump—Blotto

**D**OG-TIRED, Barney Ghent flopped on the plush settee in the hall of the Pomeroy house. He had just phoned his story to Caster. It was hardly a story, but rather a series of closely linked facts. Harry Pomeroy, dominant power behind the local political machine, had been found shot to death in the study of his home on Martindale Street. The body had been discovered by Mrs. Taylor, Pomeroy's housekeeper, at eight-thirty. Death had occurred somewhere between 7:45 and 8:15. There were two bullets in Pomeroy's chest, both .32 caliber. One bullet had penetrated Pomeroy's heart.

There was no chance of suicide, as the murder weapon had not been found. The housekeeper, Mrs. Taylor, was not a good witness, though she had been in the house at the time of the shooting. She could not remember hearing the shots, which might be explained by the fact that Pomeroy's den was in a remote quarter of the second story of the house, or perhaps because Mrs. Taylor was totally deaf in one ear.

To Mrs. Taylor's knowledge, no one had entered the house, though a man selling magazine subscriptions had knocked at the door at about eight o'clock. Mrs. Taylor had not admitted the magazine agent. Further, she could not describe him in any detail, because she was extremely near-sighted and had had the misfortune to break her glasses late Saturday afternoon.

Those were the facts as the police knew them. Barney Ghent sat with his heels together on the

floor and his knees far apart, the lean muscles of his abdomen relaxed, his head lowered. Interns from the City Hospital brought the body down the carpeted front stairway and along the hall, but Barney did not raise his head.

He could still see Harry Pomeroy slumping in his chair in the den upstairs, his shirt-front dark with blood, the stingy yellow light from the ceiling fixture falling on the waxlike dome of his high, bald head. Recalling that Pomeroy's position had been extremely similar to his own, Barney pulled himself upright.

Across the hall, behind the half-drawn portieres, Barney could hear Lieutenant Macallum of Homicide questioning Mrs. Taylor, the housekeeper. Barney got to his feet, crossed to the doorway of the portieres, and looked into the parlor.

Mrs. Taylor was a full-bosomed, thin-lipped woman. She sat stiffly in a chair, her plump fingers basket-clasped in her lap. Her hostile eyes followed Macallum's thick-waisted figure as he paced back and forth in front of her. Benny Dean and a couple of cops were standing near the doorway.

Barney Ghent hooked one hand over Dean's shoulder and clung to the portiere with his other.

"Who done it, pal?" he asked Dean, but his fat successor didn't answer. Macallum had the floor, was pounding it with his brogans, firing questions at Mrs. Taylor.

"Your quarters are in the first floor rear," Macallum was saying. "Now, Mrs. Taylor, you're perfectly certain that, in spite of your handicap, you could have heard anybody enter the back door? You could have heard anybody going up the back steps to Mr. Pomeroy's den?"

"Yes," she snapped. "I ain't as deaf as all that!"

"And you were in your quarters between a quarter to eight and eight-fifteen?"

"Except for when I came into the front hall to answer the telephone. That was some time just before eight o'clock."

"How long did you talk on the phone?" Macallum persisted.

"Maybe five, maybe ten minutes."

"Who to?"

"I don't know. It was some sort of household survey. Some woman was asking me a lot of questions about the kind of soap I used, where I bought groceries—that sort of thing."

Macallum nodded vigorously. "And you previously stated that both the back and front doors were night-latched. Now, at about eight-thirty you came into the front hall again to adjust the furnace thermostat and you found the front door standing open. How do you account for that, if the front door was also night-latched?"

"I told you," Mrs. Taylor said, "that I figured Mr. Pomeroy had stepped out. I called up the steps to him to see if he was in or out. He didn't answer. I went up the steps to the den to make sure, turned on the light, discovered him sitting there in the chair, dead. I don't attempt to account for the open door. That's your business."

Barney asked Dean in a whisper, "How's she so sure of the exact time she made every move, Benny?"

"She had her radio going in her room," Benny said. He was wide-eyed and excited. "She was laying for her favorite program, which was to come on at eight-thirty."

Barney yawned. "Well, I'm going home now, Benny. Feel weak in my pins."

"Sure," Dean said. "I know—when I had the flu, I was like that."

"Give me a ring if something turns up. The guy who killed Pomeroy ought to have a medal."

Barney patted Dean's shoulder and then went out into the hall and through the front door. He said good night to Patrolman Fitzgerald and shoved his hands into the pockets of his coat as he went down the approach walk. The short-barreled revolver in his right coat pocket was cold now.

He took a taxi back to his flat, was thankful that he had only one flight of stairs to climb. At the top of the steps he stopped and pressed his hand over his heart. It was beating fast, hard, and steady. He took a deeper breath than he had heretofore allowed himself and walked down the hall to the door of his apartment. He felt as though all the blood in his body had drained down into his legs. He was light-headed and leaden-footed. He unlocked his door, pushed it open, went into his living-room, and sat down in a chair without stopping either to close the door or remove his coat.

He sat there, staring across the room at a decanter of whisky that rested on the table. He'd never known a time when he wanted a drink more than he did now. But because whisky was one of those pleasant things which would hasten the rupture of that nasty little sack in his chest, he resisted.

He got to his feet, walked into the short hall where there were doors to bathroom and closet. He opened the closet, tossed his hat on the shelf, and hung up his coat. He was still thinking about the whisky.

Barney went back into the living-room and over to the table. He picked up the decanter and a short glass, poured himself a drink. What did it matter now, anyway? He lifted the glass. Here's to a short life and a merry one, he thought, and drank.

He put the glass down and gasped. The whisky hit his empty stomach hard and burned like lye. It stunned him a little, because there was something in the back of his mind which he had intended to do and couldn't quite remember. Oh, yes. The gun.

He walked a little unsteadily back into the hall, opened the closet, removed the revolver from the pocket of his coat. Then he carried it into the bedroom and turned on the light. The gun was a short-barreled Swiss Chylewski .32. He took it over to the dresser, opened the top drawer, tossed the revolver in on top of a pile of socks. He closed the drawer, went over to his bed, sat down, and began to take off his shoes. He got as far as untying the laces when he remembered that the light was still burning in his living-room and that he had not closed his front door. He got up and walked through the short hall, stopped.

He felt pretty certain he had not turned out the living-room light. It was out now. He was conscious of a cloying odor that nagged at his memory. Frowning, he stepped into the darkness, moving toward the door. If the door was closed and locked, then his mind was beating his body to the grave.

There was a sound—something that tapped once against the floor, followed by a soft, padded thump. Barney's pulse quickened. He turned half to the left before something beat down upon his head. All consciousness was eclipsed even before he hit the floor.

### CHAPTER THREE Old Stuff—With a New Angle

WHILE there had been no time at all for him to expect that this blow on the head would finish him, there was still some element of surprise in his return to consciousness. At first he thought that this was some sort of a dream that dipped into

his immediate past; he had so often in the days before come awake to find Dr. Fritz Wulfing bending over him, Wulfing's grave, gray face bracketed in the ear pieces of a stethoscope.

Wulfing murmured, "Thank God!" Barney rolled his head a little on the floor and closed his eyes.

"Barney," Wulfing said. "Barney!"

Barney opened his eyes again, stared up at Fritz Wulfing's face. The wrinkles in the doctor's lean cheeks were deep and black. Something close to desperation showed in the gray eyes. Wulfing drew his upper lip down, set his lower teeth on the fringe of his gray mustache.

"Barney, Harry Pomeroy has been murdered!"

There was unexplained anxiety in Wulfing's usually dull voice. Wulfing was no friend of Pomeroy's. In fact, Harry Pomeroy had been the cause of a recent estrangement between Fritz Wulfing and his daughter, Betty. Wulfing knew Pomeroy for what he was, had refused to let Betty have anything to do with him. Betty had promptly packed her clothes, taken them to her art studio. She had been living in the studio for a couple of months now.

"Barney, can't you hear me?" Whiting pleaded.

"Sure," Barney said weakly. "Pomeroy's been murdered. Old stuff. I covered the case for the paper, phoned the story hours ago."

He squinted across the room at the electric clock on the table. It was two in the morning. Whoever had socked him had done a pretty thorough job it. Or maybe his weakened condition had something to do with it. It was funny he'd come out of it at all. He raised his hand to his chest, patted himself.

"Am I all here?"

"Then you knew about Betty?"

He wasn't all there. Somebody slipped his wallet out of the inside pocket of his coat. He tried sitting up, couldn't have made it without the doctor's help. He turned, looking at Wulfing.

"What about Betty?"

"Then you don't know," Wulfing said. "Lieutenant Macallum has arrested Betty for the job."

Barney stared dully at the lined, worried gray face. "Get me a drink," he said. Wulfing shook his head, and Barney repeated: "Get me a drink! When Wulfing made no move toward the decanter,

Barney gripped the doctor's shoulder and hauled himself to his knees.

"Who the hell you trying to save, Fritz," he asked bitterly, "me, with three or four days left, or your own daughter?"

Wulfing let go, and Barney crawled on hands and knees to the table, got hold of the edge, pulled himself to his feet. He leaned against the table, got hold of the decanter and glass, poured himself a drink.

"Macallum's crazy," he said, and tossed off the drink. He began to feel better at once.

"Barney, you ought to be in bed," Wulfing said.

"I'm not," Barney chuckled. "Why did you come here, if you didn't expect me to get on my feet and help you?"

"I just wanted advice. You know the police better than I do. I wanted to know what would be best for Betty." The doctor sat down in his chair and tried to bite the fringe of his mustache again.

Barney said, "Stop worrying. Betty didn't do it, see?"

He just recalled the woman who had run from the Pomeroy house earlier that evening. Betty! If the poor kid had discovered the body, she wouldn't have known what she was doing. Maybe she dropped some incriminating piece of evidence.

"As soon as I get my hat and coat we'll go downtown and spring Betty," Barney said, and went into the hall where the closet was.

"But how?"

Barney reached for his tan balmacaan. "We'll tell Macallum that I killed Pomeroy." He stepped back into the living-room, smiling at Fritz Wulfing's incredulous expression. His smile quirked a little as he shouldered into his coat because when he moved his arms the wound in his chest hurt.

Wulfing gripped the chair arms. His jaw drooped. He kept shaking his head back and forth without saying anything. Barney stepped back to the closet for his hat.

"Sure." he said to Wulfing. "What's the difference? I won't even be tried. There won't be time."

All that was taut went out of Wulfing. He was suddenly as old as he looked. He rocked forward in the chair and buried his face in his hands, old, tired.

"I can't let you do this, Barney," he said slowly, his voice muffled by his fingers.

Barney grunted. He frowned slightly as he walked over to Wulfing's chair and looked down at the silver-streaked head. Fritz Wulfing thought Barney was playing the hero; thought that Gentleman Ghent, who was doomed to die anyway, intended to confess a crime he hadn't committed just to save Betty—

"Look, Fritz," he said. Wulfing raised his head a little. His eyes were haggard.

"I never went in for dramatics, Fritz, and I'm not playing the hero now. Not that I wouldn't in this case if things were a little different."

"What do you mean?" Wulfing whispered.

Barney laughed. "Why in hell do you think I asked you to lend me a gun—just to protect the paltry five or six days of existence left to me? That's what I told you, but I didn't think you'd believe it. Fritz, I'd never kill a man just to save what's left of my own life."

Wulfing still didn't understand. Barney rested a hand on the doctor's shoulder.

"I killed Harry Pomeroy, Fritz. Somebody should have killed him a long time ago. I did it because I thought it was the greatest service I could render this town before I have to shove off. You got that?"

"Yes," Wulfing said hoarsely.

Barney stared at him. The way Wulfing said that, the look he was giving from his gray eyes, you could tell he thought Barney was lying. Well, Barney wasn't lying.

He said, "Let's go downtown and spring Betty, Fritz,"

Barney Ghent had intended this to be a murder without solution. If he had more of a flare for dramatics he might have written a letter to be read after his death in which he confessed to the crime and explained why he had killed Harry Pomeroy. He had fully intended to dispose of the murder weapon the following day, lest the gun be traced back to Fritz Wulfing, the original owner. Now he was glad he had put that off.

On the way downtown in Dr. Wulfing's car, he explained why he had killed Pomeroy. This town didn't belong to the people. It was Pomeroy's town. Pomeroy ran the elections through a powerful machine of his own building. And because there was scarcely a public office from the courts to the council that had not felt the weight of Pomeroy's iron heel, the city had become honeycombed with vice and rackets. And every crime that flourished paid for its protection, so that when another election rolled around Pomeroy's

machine never lacked the funds to bring victory to its party. The rackets Pomeroy had fostered got away with larceny in the open. Graft in high office pilfered the public funds, heaped tax upon tax. And murder—nobody knew how many honest people had died because they had refused to play ball Pomeroy's way.

"Look at me," Barney said. "I'm a small cell of yeast, but I'm an example." He tapped his chest. "My ticker wouldn't be due to run down right now if it hadn't been for Pomeroy's machine. I expose a numbers game that has been running wide open in the Negro quarter. I can't put my finger directly on Pomeroy without running the paper into libel, but I do name a few names that have taken their share of protection money.

"And I'm small potatoes, Fritz. There have been cop killings nobody has explained to my satisfaction. Murder goes hand in hand with Pomeroy's business. And I thought if he died the teeth would be stripped from the central cog in the machine. But there was another reason."

Barney stopped speaking, stared straight ahead through the windshield at the deserted street.

"Well?" Wulfing prodded.

"I don't know why I should tell you this, Fritz. Maybe you'll understand. It wasn't jealousy. Neither revenge for what Pomeroy has done indirectly to me nor jealousy enter into the picture at all. But ever since I've known your kid Betty, I've loved her. She never looked my way. That was all right. I'm ten years older than she, and what's a newspaperman got to offer anyway? But you'll remember that she announced her engagement to Harry Pomeroy just before I got this slug in the chest. That hurt worse than the slug, because I knew Pomeroy would be poison to her."

Wulfing choked, a dry, hacking sound. "Barney," he said, "that's how I always wanted it—you and Betty. Maybe I talked you up too much. Maybe that's why she insisted on going around with Pomeroy. If I hadn't been so obvious—"

Barney laughed harshly. "Does there have to be an 'if' at this late hour, Fritz?"

He was glad that the blue lights of the police building were visible just ahead. There would be no long silence, no chance to think about what might have been.

## CHAPTER FOUR Not Enough Motive

THEY found Mat Hopson standing in the corridor of the building, talking to Lieutenant Macallum. He left the Homicide man and came forward to meet Barney and Dr. Wulfing, derby in his hand, his Chesterfield open. Macallum kept apart, a somewhat resentful look on his flat, blond face, as though he figured that the other three were hatching some plot against him.

Mat Hopson's dark eyes were grave, but his smile attempted to be reassuring. He pumped Wulfing's arm.

"Got your message, Doctor, and came right over," he said. "I want you to know I will do everything in my power to get Betty out of this difficulty. We can't, of course, offer bail on a murder charge."

"Just how bad is it, Mat?" Barney asked.

"Well, the big difficulty is that Betty refuses to answer questions," Mat said. "That's what I gathered from Macallum. You know and I know that Betty couldn't have done this thing. Down in his heart, I don't think Macallum thinks she did it. But you know how it is. Pomeroy was a friend of the Chief of Police. Macallum's being pressured, undoubtedly."

Barney snorted. "I'm going to talk to Macallum. I'll get him to let you see Betty, Fritz." He started across the corridor toward the lieutenant, stopped, looked over his shoulder to the doctor. "But, Fritz, not a word to anybody about what I told you, understand?"

There was a dazed expression in Wulfing's gray eyes, but he nodded.

Barney went over to Macallum, a big, shapeless man whose body might have been made out of a sack of grain with stovepipes attached for arms and legs.

"Mac," Barney said, "Wulfing can see his daughter, can't he?"

"Sure, Barney." Macallum crooked his finger to a plainclothes cop who was leaning up against the wall not far from the door of the Homicide office. When the detective came up, Macallum said, "Take Dr. Wulfing and Mr. Hopson to Miss Wulfing."

"And I want to talk to you alone, Mac," Barney said.

"Sure," Macallum agreed. He stepped to the door marked Homicide, opened it for Barney. They

crossed to Macallum's private office and Barney slumped down into a chair. Macallum sat down slowly and carefully behind his desk, as though his stuffed waistline didn't bend easily.

"What's on your mind, Barney?" he asked.

"Plenty." He smiled. "Look here, Macallum, Betty Wulfin'g didn't kill Harry Pomeroy. I saw her leave the Pomeroy house. She may have discovered the body, but that's all. All she really did that was open to question was fail to report the murder, and you can't blame her for that, considering the state of mind she must have been in. What ever led you to her in the first place?"

Macallum's flat, fishy eyes were fixed on Barney's face; they were expressionless with a certain hypnotic quality about them.

"Letters Pomeroy had. A tear-stained handkerchief with the girl's initials in the corner. The fact that a neighbor in the apartment next to the Pomeroy house saw a girl answering to Miss Wulfin'g's description enter the Pomeroy house during that interval of time in which the murder was committed."

"That's merely circumstantial," Barney said. "She didn't have any motive. She was going to marry Pomeroy."

"She had a motive," Macallum said. "That's it. She was going to marry Pomeroy. Her engagement had been announced. But Pomeroy wasn't legally divorced from his first wife. That's motive enough for a girl like Betty Wulfin'g."

Barney scowled. "Where'd you dig up that dirt about Pomeroy not being divorced?"

"We didn't. Dr. Wulfin'g did. Pomeroy had claimed a Reno divorce. Dr. Wulfin'g, who never wanted Betty to marry Pomeroy in the first place, checked with Reno. There's no record of the divorce proceedings. That's what's got Mat Hopson standing on his ear right now. It means he's not legally married to his present wife."

Barney plucked his lower lip thoughtfully. To a proud, high-minded girl like Betty this could be made to look like sufficient motive for murder. Barney dismissed all that with a flathanded gesture.

"Forget it, Macallum. You're making it hard for yourself. I killed Harry Pomeroy. I've always hated him and everything he stands for. I'd been told I had about six days to live, at the outside. Pomeroy was indirectly responsible for that little piece of bad news. So I killed him. He was dead before Betty Wulfin'g ever entered the house. The only reason she was able to get in without

knocking and arousing the housekeeper was that, when I went out after the job, I didn't close the door tight."

"Miss Wulfin'g had a latchkey to the back door," Macallum said flatly.

Barney came forward in his chair, bared his teeth. Then he forced himself to a calm. He couldn't risk kicking off here in Macallum's office, with the homicide man still unconvinced of the truth. Barney had to live—had to live long enough to see this thing through.

"I don't believe it," he said quietly. "Betty Wulfin'g wouldn't have the key to any man's house, whether she was engaged to him or not."

Macallum shrugged. He knew what he knew. "How did you get in, Barney?"

"Through the front door. Remember, Mrs. Taylor testified that a man selling magazine subscriptions called at the door? That was me. If her glasses hadn't been broken, Mrs. Taylor could identify me as that man. I've used that gag before to get in where I wasn't wanted. I guess a lot of newspapermen have. I stood in the open door, handing Mrs. Taylor a sales talk, my back to the side of the door frame that has the socket plate for the lock bolt. I had a rubber plug, cut from a hard eraser, in the hand behind my back. I wedged that into the socket where the bolt of the snap latch would ordinarily go. I was irritating to Mrs. Taylor. She slammed the door as soon as I stepped back, and the snap-lock bolt went home because of the plug."

"Newspapermen don't have any patent on that," Macallum said without enthusiasm. "All you've got to know is what kind of lock the door has."

"I knew that," Barney said. "I'd visited Pomeroy's house before on interviews, election forecasts, and the like."

He reached into his pocket and took out an oblong of rubber. A thin piece of brass, a little larger than the end of the plug, was cemented to the rubber to prevent the plug from going too deep into the snap-bolt socket. He tossed the plug onto Macallum's desk. Macallum had seen such things before. He didn't take his eyes off Barney.

"You had plenty of time to fix that up after you learned we had picked up Miss Wulfin'g."

Barney shook his head. "When I returned to my flat tonight from covering the murder I had committed, I carelessly left my door open. Some prowler caught me off guard, knocked me out, and robbed me. I spent the rest of the evening on my

living-room floor until Dr. Wulfing brought me around.”

Macallum shrugged stiffly. “Go on. After you had plugged the lock and after Mrs. Taylor had retired to her rooms at the rear of the house, I suppose you pushed open the door and walked in.”

Barney nodded. “I wonder if you noticed the makeshift electric wiring in Pomeroy’s den? That house was built before electric lights, and some things that the insurance underwriters wouldn’t approve of have been done. For instance, the wire from the lighting fixture in the den is stapled across the ceiling, through the door, and tapped off the fixture in the hall. The den light turns off and on with a pull cord, but it can be turned off from the bottom of the stairway by means of the switch controlling the hall fixture. I had noticed that on previous visits to the house, also.

“I turned off the switch at the bottom of the steps and went up to hunt Pomeroy in the dark. He was sitting in his chair, in a direct line between the door of the den and the window of the same room. I stepped just inside the door and shot him. I didn’t know whether Mrs. Taylor could hear the shots or not, what with her radio going. Apparently she didn’t.

“I wanted to be certain I’d killed Pomeroy before I lammed out of there. I came closer to his chair, but not so close I’d risk getting any blood on me. I lit a match and held it up. Blood was sopping the front of his shirt. He was dead, all right, and I don’t think he knew what hit him.”

“I’ll substantiate that,” Macallum said. “Medical testimony suggested that he was in a drunken stupor when he was killed. He hadn’t moved from the chair. You’re pretty convincing, but I don’t think you’ve got much motive. Not for murder!”

Barney got out of his chair. He planted big fists on the top of Macallum’s desk. He was trembling a little and he could feel the jarring beat of his heart throughout his body.

“No motive? Listen, Mac. Suppose you’re a Russian. You hate like hell the things the Soviet machine has done to your country, but you’ve played up to Stalin because you’ve had to stay alive. Some accident or something happens to you, and a doctor tells you that you’ve got six days to live. Would you hang onto what was left of your life, or would you risk throwing it away in an attempt to kill the man who had ruined your country?”

Macallum sighed. “Sure, I’d gun Stalin. But not Harry Pomeroy.”

“It’s the same thing on a small scale,” Barney said. “Pomeroy made this town what it is. You ought to know what it is. You’ve been as close to the vice rackets here as I have, and I’ve seen kids from high school on the skids and coasting to hell because of the protected vice in this town. You cops haven’t done anything about it because you haven’t been allowed.

“Pomeroy’s machine has taxed and spent—spent to buy the votes to perpetuate control. When the honest, thinking people got up on their hind legs to fight, what happened? You’ll find names from the cemeteries on the registration list. Pomeroy’s men vote early and often from dawn to dusk on election day, going from one precinct to the next, voting under different names. The machine has seen to it that aliens have registered. The machine has intimidated the ignorant.”

“Sure, sure,” Macallum admitted impatiently. “That’s a motive, Barney. But there’s a better, stronger motive for a guy they call Gentleman Ghent coming in here and trying to lie himself into the chair.”

“It’s the gospel truth, Mac,” Barney said through clenched teeth.

“A pretty girl like Betty Wulfing kills a guy who ought to be killed anyway. Betty’s the daughter of a friend of yours. You’re going to die before you could face trial anyway. You’re in love with the girl.”

“I am like hell!” Barney lied savagely.

“All right. So you don’t have to love her. But I think enough of you to believe you’d try a thing just like this. And I wouldn’t believe this confession of yours if you swore on a stack of Bibles a mile high.”

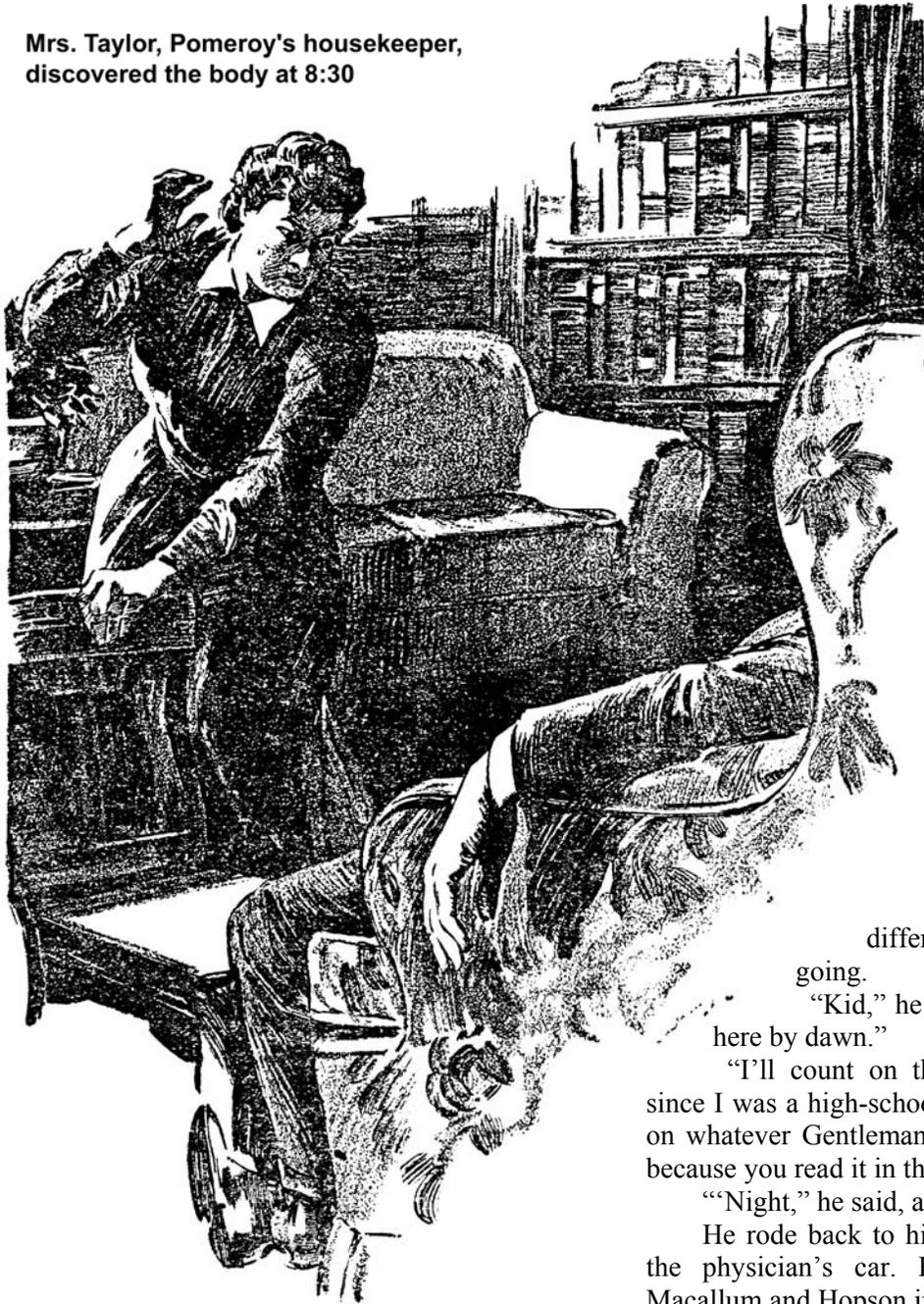
Barney took so deep a breath that the wound in his chest pained him.

“I’ve cracked a few cases for you, Mac, and I’ll crack this one. If you’ll come to my flat I’ll prove I killed Pomeroy.”

“Okay.” Macallum got out of his chair as though he was trying to keep his stuffed body from splitting somewhere.

“Why, Mac,” Barney said, “I’ll prove it if it takes me the rest of my life!”

Mrs. Taylor, Pomeroy's housekeeper,  
discovered the body at 8:30



## CHAPTER FIVE Four-O'Clock Caller

**I**N THE company of Macallum, Mat Hopson, and Dr. Wulfing, Barney saw Betty before she was handed over to the custody of a policewoman. There was no use telling Betty to keep her chin up; she did that without being told. She even managed a courageous smile as she said good night to her father. Barney went over to her, looked down into her sweet face, into her sober brown eyes. He patted her arm a couple of times.

"Hello, Barney," she said.

The only time Barney liked the sound of his name was when she spoke it. Maybe it wasn't so much the sound as it was the kick he got out of watching her soft lips say it.

Barney took off his hat. He swallowed. He wanted to tell her then that whatever he had done that night he had done for her. He wanted to say that killing Harry Pomeroy had been a double pleasure because it had kept Pomeroy away from her. But he didn't say anything like that. What good would it have done? When she did find out he had killed Pomeroy, she'd hate him. And even that wouldn't make any difference to him, where he was going.

"Kid," he said, "I'll have you out of here by dawn."

"I'll count on that," she told him, "Ever since I was a high-school punk I've been counting on whatever Gentleman Ghent says. It's the truth because you read it in the papers."

"Night," he said, and turned away.

He rode back to his flat with Dr. Wulfing in the physician's car. Right behind them were Macallum and Hopson in the lieutenant's roadster.

"You're feeling all right?" Wulfing asked.

"Fine, Fritz. I worked up quite a sweat in Mac's office. The air feels good." Barney thought it was funny that Wulfing closed the window after Barney had said that. "You afraid I'll catch pneumonia?" he laughed.

Wulfing coughed dryly. "I wouldn't want you to pull another fainting fit like the one you had in your flat. There's too much depending on you now."

"I didn't faint," Barney said. "Somebody bopped me on the head. You're a swell doctor!"

Wulfing looked at him sharply. "I thought you collapsed and hit your head on the floor. Who hit you?"

"I don't know. I'd left the door open. Somebody swiped my wallet."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"You didn't ask and there wasn't time. You told me the cops had pinched Betty for the Pomeroy killing. That seemed to be the only thing that mattered, right then."

Now, though, the attack on him by that prowler seemed to attain new importance. What if something else had been taken? He discarded the idea immediately. Why would anybody steal the murder weapon? No motive. It was crazy.

Crazy or not, the fear nagged him all the way to the flat. As soon as Wulfing stopped the car, Barney sprang out and hurried into the apartment building. He all but ran up the steps and lost all the time he had gained fumbling with the keys. Wulfing caught up with him and so did Mat Hopson and Macallum from the other car.

"Say! You better take it a little easier, Barney!" Mat said.

Barney got the door open, strode through the living-room and the hall and into the bedroom. He switched on the light and went immediately to the drawer in which he had put the gun. He opened it, dug into the pile of socks and handkerchiefs it contained. The gun wasn't there. He wheeled, went back into the living-room.

Macallum and Wulfing were standing on either side of the door. Mat Hopson was beside the table, reaching into Barney's cigar humidior. Barney lunged across the room and seized Hopson's wrist before he could withdraw his hand from the box. Hopson turned, his mouth open, a blank expression in his fine dark eyes. Barney looked down at the lawyer's fingers. They were clutching a cellophaned cigar.

"I've got to search you, Mat," Barney said.

"Search me? What for?" Hopson laughed. "You told me the other day you wouldn't be smoking any more cigars. I thought I'd help myself. I'm sorry if I shouldn't have."

Barney hauled the unresisting Hopson away from the table, slapped the lawyer's pockets, searching for a gun. Until tonight, after he had returned from the Pomeroy house, Barney had kept the gun Wulfing had given him in that cigar humidior. He didn't know but what he had returned it to the humidior instead of the drawer in his bedroom. That Mat Hopson had slipped the gun

from the humidior was a dumb idea, but then a lot of dumb ideas are born of desperation.

Mat said, "What's the matter with you, Barney?"

"The murder weapon. It's gone! Somebody stole the gun!"

"You mean the gun that killed Pomeroy?" Macallum asked.

"Of course. I put it in a drawer in my bedroom, I'm certain. It's not there now."

"So that's your proof?" Macallum asked. "You could have saved me the trip out here! We found the murder gun in Miss Wulfing's studio!"

Barney stumbled over to a chair and sat down. He shook his head in an effort to clear it. Everything was muddling up. He asked, "What kind of gun? A Swiss revolver?"

"A Chylewski .32," Macallum nodded. "And we're positive of the identification, since the slugs in Pomeroy checked with the barrel. I figured Miss Wulfing took the gun from her father's collection." Macallum turned his flat, strange eyes on Dr. Wulfing. "You had a Chylewski in your house, didn't you?"

"He had one," Barney said. "But he gave it to me Friday. Didn't you, Fritz?"

Dr. Wulfing twisted his mouth, and the long, dark wrinkles in his sunken cheeks twisted too.

"Yes," he said. "The Chylewski. I gave it to Barney." He ran his finger around inside his collar as though it was choking him. "That was Friday I gave you the Chylewski, Barney."

Macallum turned as though his neck was stiff and looked at Barney. The small muscles of Barney's brows ached from scowling, he was trying so hard to think this thing through.

"When did you pick up Betty at the studio, Mac?"

"Little after midnight"

"And it was about ten-thirty when I came home here and got knocked out." Barney's eyes met Macallum's. "Was Betty in her studio say between eleven o'clock and the time you picked her up?"

"Not according to her. She claimed she'd been out walking for several hours. But just where she walked she didn't know."

Barney thought that she wouldn't know. After finding Pomeroy's body she'd walk and walk, trying to pick up the pieces of her world and stick them back together.

"She was framed, Mac. You can see that, can't you?"

Macallum said, "I think you and Doc are trying to put something over."

Barney stood up, went over to the table, took a drink of whisky. He licked his lips, put down the empty glass.

"You gentlemen help yourselves," he said, indicating the decanter. "I've got to step out for a moment."

Mat Hopson said, "I could use a drink. How about you, Doctor?"

Dr. Wulfing didn't say anything. His eyes followed Barney across the room and out the door.

Barney went down the stairway, out the side door of the apartment building, down a walk that led to the garages at the rear. He was thinking of a half-finished portrait he had seen in Betty Wulfing's studio when he had visited her a few days before that hophead killer had sent a slug into his chest. It was a portrait of Mat Hopson. Betty had told Barney that Mat was having the portrait made as a surprise for Marsha.

Barney went to his garage, slid back the door, got into his coupe. He hadn't touched the car in weeks and had a little trouble starting it. He had discarded the danger of driving in his present physical condition because of the graver danger to Betty Wulfing. He was desperately determined that he was going to live to see this thing through. He just couldn't die until his job was done.

He backed the car out into the alley and headed for the street. Except for sharp stabs of pain in his chest brought on by the exertion required to steer the car, he felt fine.

His mind went back to that portrait of Mat Hopson. Mat had made a mistake, not telling Marsha why he was visiting Betty's studio. Marsha was an extremely jealous woman. If she had seen Mat going to Betty's studio, she would have come to some definite and wholly inaccurate conclusions. Who but a jealous woman would have framed Betty Wulfing for this crime? And it was a woman who had knocked Barney out in Barney's flat.

He wondered why it hadn't occurred to him before. It just hadn't seemed important because when he had come to Fritz Wulfing had told him the police had arrested Betty. That news had knocked everything else out of his head.

Now that his mind was definitely fixed on Marsha, he recognized that cloying perfume he had smelled in his apartment as hers. He recalled the sharp tap and the thump he had heard just before the knockout. That had been Marsha taking a step

toward him with one high-heeled pump on and the other in her hand, raised for a blow to Barney's head.

Barney got his car onto Thurman Boulevard and kicked down on the throttle. He drove madly, translating the exultation within him into speed. Betty was going to be all right. He had a witness now to prove he had killed Harry Pomeroy. How would Marsha have known where to find the murder weapon if she hadn't witnessed the killing, or at least seen him dash from the Pomeroy house after the killing? Marsha had been just across the street at the time, waiting for Mat.

He braked his car in front of the modernistic concrete bungalow that belonged to the Hopsons. A dim light burned in the living-room in anticipation of Mat's return. Barney went to the front door and thumbed the bell push. It was a little while before Marsha opened the door. She was wearing a quilted satin robe over her nightgown. Face cream had restored pallor and shine to her face. There were sleepless blue circles under her eyes, and just now she looked all of forty years.

"Barney!" she gasped.

He took off his hat. "Mind if I come in a moment?"

"But it's nearly four in the morning! Where's Mat?"

"At my flat," he said, and pushed his way into the living-room. She stepped back, left the door open. Barney closed the door, then walked over to a squarish red-leather chair and sat down. Marsha stood there, holding the front of her pink robe up tightly about her throat. She was shivering.

"Sit down," Barney said. "I've got to talk to you."

She went over to the davenport, sat down, brought her slippers under her.

He said, "Betty Wulfing has been arrested for the Pomeroy murder, but I guess you know that. She didn't kill Pomeroy. I killed him, and I guess you know that as well." He creased and re-creased the crown of his felt hat in his big hands. "The point is, Marsha, you've got to tell the police that you know I killed Pomeroy."

"But—but Barney, I don't know anything. Not anything at all! You killed Harry?"

"Sure. I had a couple of good reasons to do it. One of them was that I didn't want him marrying Betty. You, Pomeroy's ex-wife, can appreciate that. Maybe I shouldn't say ex-wife, Marsha, since there was something phony about that Reno divorce of yours."

Marsha picked at the satin of her robe, watched what her fingers were doing studiously. She didn't say anything, but her lips trembled.

"I'll get back to that divorce business later," Barney said. "That and your bigamy. Right now, let's talk about that visit you paid to my flat about ten-thirty tonight. Tell me about that."

She didn't say anything. Her face was like wax.

"Then I'll tell you," he said. "You had seen me leave the Pomeroy house after the killing. I had the murder gun in my pocket when I was sitting there in Sam's Subway talking to you. At ten-thirty when I went home to my flat, you followed me. I made the mistake of leaving my door open. If I hadn't, you'd have got in anyway by simply knocking at the door and paying me a call. You were after the murder gun. My leaving the door open gave you a swell chance. You came in, turned off the light when I went into the bedroom. When I came out again, you had one shoe off. And there isn't a better blunt instrument anywhere than a woman's high-heeled slipper. That's what you hit me with.

"You swiped the murder gun out of my bedroom. You took my wallet also, to make it look like simple robbery. You took the gun to Betty's studio, and again you played in luck. Betty was out, walking herself out of a threatening spell of hysteria. You planted the murder gun there. Why? Because Mat had been visiting Betty's studio regularly. You thought there was something between Mat and Betty, Mat being the dashing ladies' man that he is. You knew that Betty's being engaged to Harry Pomeroy wouldn't make any difference to Mat. But you didn't know that Betty wasn't that kind of girl. Maybe you judge all women by yourself."

Marsha's face flushed as though she had been slapped.

"With Pomeroy dead, you pictured Mat and Betty hooking up, with you out in the cold. You've always worried about losing Mat, haven't you?"

Marsha stood up, She was rather tall and looked it in the long robe she wore. When she was angry, there was a certain majestic arrogance about her. She pointed to the door.

"Get out! I'm not going to sit here and let a cheap newspaper reporter insult me!"

"Sit or stand," Barney said, without moving from his chair, "but you're going to listen, because I'm back to the phony divorce decree. You were the one who went to Reno to get that divorce from

Harry Pomeroy. But Dr. Wulfing checked up, desperately trying to find something that would put an obstacle between Pomeroy and Betty. There wasn't any divorce at all. You'd bought yourself a forged decree. It can be done—has been done before."

Marsha put both of her palms on her hips. "Why would any woman do that?"

"No decent woman would. But you like money, Marsha. You expected Harry Pomeroy to marry again. Then you'd blackmail him for his dough. A man of his political weight couldn't risk bigamy charges. You didn't know then that you were going to fall in love with Mat Hopson, and that, in spite of the fact that you yourself were committing bigamy, you were going to marry Mat."

"I met Mat before I ever left Harry," she said, trying to poke holes in his argument.

"But you didn't intend to marry him," Barney persisted. "You thought you were proof against Mat Hopson, but you weren't. After you'd fallen for him, you didn't dare tell him that you were still legally married to Harry Pomeroy. You loved Mat too much to risk losing him."

Barney settled back into the cushions of the chair. A grin curled the ends of his wide mouth—a sort of sly grin.

"But don't take it so hard, Marsha. Didn't good old Gentleman Ghent fix things for you by knocking off Harry Pomeroy? You're a widow now, and you and Mat can get married all over again, or just let things ride as they are. Who's going to be the wiser? Fritz Wulfing, a doctor, can certainly keep your secret. Betty won't care to tell. As for Macallum, he and Mat are good friends, and I imagine some sort of deal can be arranged. The only person who knows all and will tell all is that same Gentleman Ghent. Unless—"

Barney paused, then broke into a cheerful laugh. "You get my point? You tell the cops how you saw me leave the Pomeroy house, how you stole the murder gun from me, and how you framed Betty Wulfing. Do that and we'll manage to hush up the bigamy."

Marsha toyed with the idea a moment, her lips parted, her blue eyes fixed on Barney's face. Then with a swish of satin, she turned to the table that was back against the wall, opened a drawer, took out something. She returned to Barney and handed him his wallet.

"Well, thanks, Marsha!"

Eyebrows arched high on her beautiful forehead, she looked down at him.

"You've made yourself a bargain," she said. "Everything you've said is the truth. I'll testify against you, clear the Wulfing girl."

"Thanks, Marsha," he said again. "Better get dressed."

"Now?"

"Sure, now. I told Betty I'd have her out before dawn, That doesn't leave us much time. Go get some clothes on. I'll wait."

Ten minutes later, Marsha returned wearing the same outfit Barney had seen her in at Sam's Subway. Hastily applied makeup had dropped years from the age of her face, Barney stood up and mocked her by adjusting his tie.

She said, "You actually seem anxious to go to the electric chair, Barney."

"My dear lady," he said, "I won't live that long. They won't even get me to court."

## CHAPTER SIX No Time to Die

AS THEY left the house and walked out toward Barney's car, a man appeared suddenly on the sidewalk and walked in their direction. As Barney opened the car door, the man thrust out his hand in a motion like a traffic cop's signal to halt.

"Hey," the man said.

Barney turned. In the dim light he could see nothing of the man's face, but he was short and heavy.

"Your name Ghent?" he asked, coming up to Barney. He had an unpleasant nasal voice.

"Yes," Barney said.

"Well, I've got something for you."

The man drew his right hand from his pocket and Barney caught the blue-black gleam of an automatic.

Marsha Hopson had not yet got into the car. She was at Barney Ghent's side and a little behind him, now that the gun had appeared in the hand of the short man. She moved still farther toward the nose of the car as the man with the gun crowded Barney.

Barney slammed the car door, fell back against it. And then he kicked a hard fast one to the short man's middle. The man went back and down, but that stuff that padded his body wasn't beef. It was rubber, and he bounced. He came at Barney,

waving the automatic above his head. Barney guessed there wouldn't be any shooting and stepped out to meet the short man. He tried a left hook, and the short man ducked, came on with head lowered to butt Barney in the chest.

Barney was thrown back against the car, and maybe it was the car door handle that got him from behind just as the short man's head got him in the front. It was a sort of pincers movement. And it was howling agony for Barney. The breath went out of him, but that was the least of it. The most of it was the pain in his chest. He doubled over, started to slide down the side of the car. The short man caught him, straightened him, raked the barrel of his gun across Barney's face.

Something inside Barney told him he couldn't shove off now—not with Betty in the hooks of the law. He tried with his left again, savagely, and with double effect. The short man backed under the impact, but the rubber body of him seemed to have sponged up all the fight in Barney's body. He slid down on the sidewalk and the back of his head banged on the running-board of the car. His hat was gone from his head, and the short man stooped, got a handful of hair, used it as a handle to thump Barney's head against the running-board a couple of times.

Barney rolled over on his face. He would have crawled under the car if there had been room, he was that sick with pain. He gagged and gasped in air. He lay there with his chin on the curb, the top of his head touching the running-board.

The short man was pawing over him, rifling his pockets. But Barney didn't have anything that he cared about hanging on to except a few hours in which to live and to save Betty Wulfing from a murder rap.

The short man got Barney by the coat collar, lifted him back from the curb, and dropped him on the pavement. Barney lay still. Blood from the cut on his face trickled down to the corner of his mouth. He heard the whine of a car starter and the blurt of the exhaust. Then there was complete silence.

"Marsha, give a guy a hand! Get a doctor!"

He said that mostly with his mind. His lips scarcely moved. And then there was a long period of complete blackout, broken by a glaring flash of white light and dim white figures moving about a room. The smell of iodine, the saw-edged bite of it on the raw cut on his cheek cleared his vision somewhat. He knew that he was in the emergency hospital. He had probably been picked up by a cop.

"Doc," he grunted, as the iodine swab burned down his cheek again, "that hurts like hell!"

The pink, young face of the doctor bending over Barney broke into a friendly smile.

"If you play rough games, Mr. Ghent, you're bound to get hurt."

Barney struggled to sit up on the cot. The doctor had long, delicate fingers, but the pressure of those fingers on Barney's chest was enough to flatten him.

"Be good until I get this dressing on, Mr. Ghent."

"Listen." Barney gripped the doctor's hand. "Where's Marsha Hopson?"

"I don't even know the lady," the doctor said. "Are you going to let me dress that cut or do I have to use three men and a boy to hold you down?"

"Doc, they've got to find Marsha Hopson! It's important. Get the police!"

"All right, all right, Mr. Ghent, We'll find your lady friend. Now stop squirming, will you?"

"My chest," Barney said. He reached up weakly and put a hand over his heart "Never mind my face, Doc. Inside my chest. An aneurism in the aorta, I've got to shove off. Die. But not now. You've got to keep me going. There's a girl—"

He broke off suddenly because there wasn't breath or strength to go on. A nurse came over to the cot and began swabbing the inside of his arm with alcohol. She was a pretty blond girl with freckles and a tilted nose. Barney closed his eyes and saw her still. And then her features changed and her hair darkened. Her eyes became dark-brown, trusting and grave. Betty, as she had looked when he'd told her he'd have her free by dawn.

The sting of a hypo needle in his arm brought his eyes open.

"Now, Mr. Ghent—" the doctor cautioned.

"Listen, Doc, what time is it?"

"About five in the morning."

Barney groaned. He rolled his eyes at the hypodermic syringe. "Lay off that stuff, Doc! I've got to get out of here. I don't want to sleep! I tell you I've got only a few more hours to live and I've got a lot to do. No time to sleep. No time to die."

The doctor gripped Barney's arm and kept pressing on the plunger of the syringe.

"You're all right, Mr. Ghent. Just close your eyes." The doctor removed the needle, and Barney tried to get off the cot. He would have rolled off onto the floor if the doctor hadn't stopped him.

"Miss Williams," the doctor called to the nurse, "will you please help me hold this man? He's mildly off his trolley!"

"The hell I am!" Barney said weakly. And he kept saying that with his lips and then only with his mind as the effects of the sedative clouded his senses and brought sleep.

He slept for a long time, and when he awoke he found himself in a room in the City Hospital. There was a nurse at his bedside.

"How about some supper, Mr. Ghent?" the nurse asked.

"On the taxpayers?" He eyed the tray hungrily.

The nurse laughed. "On the taxpayers, Mr. Ghent." She put the food down on a table and cranked up the head end of the cot. His torso felt as stiff as he had imagined Lieutenant Macallum's was. He complained about that.

"The doctor strapped your chest to make you a little more comfortable, Mr. Ghent," the nurse explained. "Now eat your supper. I'll help you if you like."

Opening his mouth to eat hurt the side of his face where the cut was, but he managed and gradually the stiffness wore off.

"I want to see the doctor who's stationed at the Emergency Hospital," he said.

The nurse shook her head. "You can't. He isn't allowed to leave his post this time of day."

Barney wanted to know what the strapping around his chest was for. The nurse explained that he had some bruises—nothing serious, but uncomfortable. Then she told him that after he had finished eating Dr. Bhuel of the hospital staff was going to pay him a visit. Barney didn't want to see Dr. Bhuel.

"I've got to get out of here," he said. "I haven't much time!"

Dr. Bhuel, a middle-aged man with thick side whiskers and ribbon-dangled pince nez, came eventually into Barney's room. He introduced himself, showed false teeth in a smile.

"Mr. Ghent," Dr. Bhuel said, "Dr. Mason at Emergency informed me that you said you were suffering from an aorta aneurism."

"I'm not suffering from it," Barney said. "I've just got one. And unless I get out of here in a hurry you'll be suffering a lot more than I am!"

Dr. Bhuel chose to ignore that. "Who is your physician?"

"Dr. Fritz Wulfing," Barney snapped.

Dr. Bhuel pursed his lips. "A fine man. Very fine indeed. However, the best of us make mistakes, and I am delighted to inform you that Dr. Wulfing has made a mistake in diagnosis. This may be quite a shock to you, but a pleasant one, I'm sure. The bullet which penetrated your chest did crease the aorta, shall we say. Dr. Wulfing had every reason to believe that a serious aneurism would develop. But you are a man of unusual recuperative powers, a splendid constitution, and our most careful examination fails to reveal—"

"You mean I'm not going to die?"

"Die?" Dr. Bhuel's laughter was somehow like the mockery of the gods. "No, indeed, Mr. Ghent. At least not for a good many years, if you scrupulously avoid further contact with rapidly moving bullets!"

And that was water over the dam, a picture unalterable. Death was the card cheat, Barney Ghent the sucker, while the blind dame on the other side of the table dragged in the winnings and weighed them on her scales.

"Why," Dr. Bhuel said, as he wiped the tears of laughter from his eyes, "you'll be out of here in twenty-four hours, after you've had a good long sleep!"

"Don't tell any more jokes, Doc," Barney said. "I'll die laughing!"

## CHAPTER SEVEN One Slug Too Many

HE AWOKE in the morning with the taste of brass in his mouth and the dream indelibly etched on his mind. Bhuel came in to see him after breakfast and after a careful examination and some admonition regarding rest and relaxation, decided that he could leave.

Barney took a taxi to Police Headquarters, determined to get the agony over with as soon as possible. Lieutenant Macallum eased out of his swivel chair and came forward to shake Barney's hand.

"I hear you got batted around a little Monday morning and one of the boys had to pick you up and take you to the hospital," Macallum said,

"Have you got Marsha Hopson?"

Macallum's flat blue eyes stared at Barney. He didn't get it. Why should he have Mrs. Hopson?

"I told that doc who patched me up to have the cops hold Marsha Hopson! Do you mean to tell me you haven't got her?"

Macallum shook his head. "I saw Mat this morning. He came in to talk to Betty Wulfing. Mat said his wife had gone to Chicago."

"Like that, huh?" Barney grunted. "Listen! Marsha Hopson was with me when I got batted around on Monday, as you call it. I was bringing her down here as a star witness. She can prove I killed Pomeroy, and she'll confess she framed Betty Wulfing by planting the gun in Betty's studio. If she's gone to Chicago, it's to avoid testimony. She wants Betty to take this murder rap because she thinks Mat has been playing around with Betty."

"I ought to slap you in jail, Barney. You've perjured yourself so damned often, just to confuse the issue. Miss Wulfing confessed she killed Harry Pomeroy about thirty minutes ago."

"She what?"

"You heard me the first time."

"She—she can't do that!" Barney tapped on his chest with the tips of his fingers. "I killed him! I killed Pomeroy! Marsha Hopson can prove I killed him!"

Barney leaned forward, his hands on the edge of Macallum's desk. He swallowed. He looked into Macallum's immobile face. His voice dropped in quiet, earnest appeal.

"Listen, Macallum, they told me in the hospital that I'm not going to die, so the motive you gave me for lying is shot to hell. I'm telling you the truth. If Betty confessed, it's because she's trying to shield somebody."

Macallum sucked in his lower lip. He didn't say anything.

"Let me talk to Betty. Let me talk to her alone."

Macallum shook his head. "I can't do that. I can't have you two comparing notes."

"All right. Let me talk to her right here with you. You've still got her here, haven't you? You haven't sent her to the jail yet?"

"She's down here in the lock-up," Macallum said, "but I've had enough of this run-around you've been giving me. If Miss Wulfing is shielding somebody, I'll find it out. Now you get the hell out of here!"

Barney Ghent stood up. He said, "I'm going after Marsha Hopson."

"Go anywhere you like, Barney, Just so it's a long ways from my office!" Macallum said.

Barney slammed out the door, went through the Homicide office and into the corridor. Benny Dean, Barney's successor on the Evening Star, was sitting on the golden-oak reporters' bench outside.

"I got a bone to pick with you, Barney," he said, catching Barney's arm.

Barney turned savagely. "Let go, fat boy, I'm in a hurry!"

Dean didn't let go. He walked along, holding to Barney's arm.

"I'm in the doghouse for a boner you pulled, Barney. That story you phoned to Caster Sunday night on the Pomeroy murder was all wet. And I got hell for your slip-up."

Barney stopped. "What was the gripe?"

"Our sheet printed that there were two bullets in Pomeroy, and the Trib came out with three bullets."

"There were two bullets," Barney said. He was certain of that because he had fired only twice.

Dean shook his head. "I checked with the cops. Three slugs from a .32 revolver."

"All from the same gun?"

"Sure. The Swiss Chylewski they found in the Wulfing babe's studio."

Barney got Dean by the back of the neck, his lean fingers pinched hard into fat.

Barney shouted. "If you're kidding me, I'll kill you!"

"Leggo me!" Dean squealed. "You can ask Macallum!"

A cop sauntered toward them, wanted to know what the brawl was about. Barney let go of Dean's neck.

"So, Barney, I'd sure appreciate it if you'll square things—"

"Shut up!" Barney said.

"I get it," Dean said. "The Thinker, only with clothes on."

Three slugs in Pomeroy from the same gun—Barney was certain he had fired twice. But he had no reason to doubt Benny Dean's word, and he certainly couldn't go in and ask Macallum about it. Because Macallum might get the idea that Barney was beginning to doubt his own guilt. And if there were three bullets in Pomeroy, Barney just wasn't the murderer.

Who, then? Betty? Barney had seen the girl leave the Pomeroy house after Pomeroy was dead. But had she entered the house after Pomeroy was dead? He didn't know.

What about Marsha? She had the opportunity. She was in the neighborhood when the killing took

place. She had taken pains to tell Barney that she had waited there in Sam's Subway for over an hour.

But Betty had confessed. If she was shielding somebody—who? Not Marsha, certainly. Certainly not Mat Hopson. Barney, then?

Barney snorted. He got up and walked to the end of the corridor where the door into the traffic court was. Benny Dean followed him. Barney stepped into a pay-telephone booth in the corner and slammed the door in Dean's face. He slotted a nickel and called Dr. Fritz Wulfing.

"Fritz," Barney said, "stay where you are. I'm coming right over."

Barney left the building and went out for a taxi. He ordered the driver to take him to Sam's Subway in the Martindale apartment. It was nearly noon and Sam would be open for the luncheon trade. He got out in front of the basement cafe, told the driver to wait. Then he went in to see the cashier, whose cage was directly opposite the table at which Marsha Hopson had been sitting when Barney had run into her Sunday night. The cashier, who was Sam's eldest daughter, remembered Barney—she had noticed the blue-fox jacket Marsha was wearing.

"She came in about seven-thirty and sat at that table until her fella came in, Mr. Ghent," Sam's eldest said, chewing gum close to Barney's ear.

"That was her husband," Barney said. "And Mrs. Hopson was right at that table all the time? She didn't leave your sight?"

"Not once," the girl said. "I guess she was sore at her husband for standing her up that long. She musta telephoned him and burned his ear for him."

"Then she did go out to telephone?" he asked.

The girl shook her head. "I wouldn't kid you, Mr. Ghent. She telephoned from our booth right here."

"When was that?"

"Before you came in, quite a bit. It musta been about ten minutes to eight and she talked a good six minutes. I figured she was jawing her husband."

"Thanks." Barney said.

"And what got me, Mr. Ghent, it's the brass of some people coming in here and sitting at a table, soaking up heat, and not buying a meal. Shortly after her husband turned up—just after you'd gone, in fact—she up and decides she don't want to eat here anyway."

"Thanks." Barney said again.

Barney went out to his cab, gave the driver Dr. Wulfing's address.

In front of the big red-brick house in which Fritz Wulfing lived and worked alone, Barney got out of the cab, paid off the driver. He entered the house by the side door which led into the office waiting-room. The consultation room was closed, the clock card turned over to indicate that the doctor was in.

Barney knocked on the closed door with his knuckles. Wulfing jerked the door open, stood there staring, a thin, worn gray man with grave eyes deeply socketed.

"Barney," he said. "What did you do to your face?"

Barney grinned wryly.

"Don't worry, Fritz, I'm not going to die."

"So you found out?" he asked weakly.

"Yeah," Barney said. "I found out." He walked into the room and sat down. "Betty confessed to the murder of Pomeroy," he said.

On the other side of the glass-topped desk. Dr. Wulfing buried his face in his hands.

"How long have you known I wasn't going to die?" Barney asked quietly.

"Since two o'clock Monday morning," Wulfing said. "when I found you on the floor of your own living-room. I intended to tell you then, just as soon as I had told they had arrested Betty. I knew then that I had made a mistake in my diagnosis. But then you start in telling me how you had killed Pomeroy and I saw a way out for Betty if you told that story to the police."

Wulfing raised his head. "Can you forgive me, Barney? I was afraid if you knew you were going to live you wouldn't be willing to lie to save Betty."

"Lie?" Barney's eyes narrowed. "How do you know I didn't kill Pomeroy?"

"I knew you couldn't have killed him with that gun I gave you. When you asked for a gun, I knew it wasn't for self-protection. So I fixed up the bullets so they couldn't do any harm."

"How?" Barney asked. "I thought you might try panning off blanks on me. I looked to see. They looked all right to me."

"I removed the lead from the cartridges and substituted some ordinary lubricating graphite I had in the garage," Wulfing explained. "I mixed the graphite with some adhesive cement, molded it to fit the cartridge cases and look like bullets. I

knew as soon as the shells went off the graphite would disintegrate harmlessly."

Barney's eyes narrowed. "Then you had two Chylewski revolvers in your collection? Two identical guns. I might have known that if a gun collector like you gave away one of the guns, he'd have a duplicate on hand."

"That's it," Wulfing said. "The gun found in Betty's studio was the mate to the one you had. It was the murder gun. But I couldn't tell you all that, Barney. I just couldn't!"

"Forget it," Barney snorted. "If there's no other out for Betty, I'll still take the rap for her. I'm just trying to get some things straight in my mind. I shot at Harry Pomeroy in the dark though his figure was perfectly targeted against the night glow from the window. Then I lit a match to chock up. There was blood on Pomeroy's shirt front, and I naturally thought I'd done the job. I was so sure of myself that when I telephoned the story of the killing to the paper, I said there were two shots in Pomeroy, when actually there were three."

"Someone stole that second Chylewski, the murder weapon, from my collection some time Sunday afternoon," Dr. Wulfing said. "You know my reception room is always open. I was out on a call. Anybody could have unlocked that door between the reception room and my residential quarters with a ten-cent skeleton key."

"And you think Betty stole it?"

"I—I don't know."

"And didn't it strike you queer that, out of all the guns you have, this gun thief should happen to choose the mate to the gun you gave me?" Barney asked.

"Well, yes."

"When did you find out from the Nevada authorities that Harry Pomeroy was not legally divorced from Marsha?"

"I got a telegram Saturday night," Wulfing replied.

"Who did you tell besides Betty?" Barney asked. "Didn't you tell Mat Hopson, too?"

Wulfing nodded. "I told Mat about it the first thing Sunday morning. I told him before I told Betty, as a matter of fact, hoping for some legal advice."

Barney reached for the doctor's telephone and also the directory. He looked up the number of the only business-survey bureau in town and dialed. When the connection was established he asked:

"Were any of your operators conducting a survey by telephone last Sunday night to find out the various products used by housewives?"

"We have not conducted a telephone survey in this city for nearly six months," was the immediate response.

Barney put the phone down. He looked at Wulfing and grinned.

"Well, we've got the killer. And it isn't Betty. Betty undoubtedly found the murder gun in her apartment, recognized it as yours, and thought you'd killed Pomeroy. She's been shielding you."

"Good Lord, Barney! Betty surely didn't take my threats seriously!"

Barney laughed. "So you threatened to kill Pomeroy?"

"I told Betty that, rather than see him marry her, I'd kill him-yes."

"Well, then you can't blame the kid," Barney said. "Let's get in your car and go catch us a murderer. And you'd better pick up one of your guns on the way. And no phony bullets, either!"

## CHAPTER EIGHT Honeymoon's Off!

FIFTEEN minutes later, they stopped the doctor's car in front of the white concrete house of Mat Hopson, went up to the door, and knocked. To Barney's surprise, it was Marsha who opened the door.

"I thought you were in Chicago," he said.

Marsha was obviously dressed to go somewhere.

"Just going," she said. "In fact, we—I'm late as it is. You don't mind if I don't ask you in, do you, Barney?"

"Not at all," Barney said.

He took off his hat and suddenly shoved Marsha back with his arm. He went through the doorway and Wulfing followed. Mat came out of the back bedroom.

"Well, Barney!" he said. "Glad to see you. But say, you'll have to excuse us. We're off on a second honeymoon, as it were. That beastly divorce mixup—"

"Yeah," Barney said. "We know all about that. We can also figure that Harry Pomeroy died intestate, so that all the money he's milked out of this town and hoarded goes to his legal wife, friend Marsha here."

"That's perfectly true," Mat said, smiling. "A fortunate circumstance which somehow compensates for an unfortunate one."

"Awfully damned fortunate!" Barney said. "And as soon as you found out that Marsha was still legally married to Pomeroy, your legal mind figured out all the fortunate part of it. Marsha originally planned the phony divorce scheme so that she would still have a hold on Pomeroy and his money, but you didn't know about that until Sunday."

"Sunday afternoon, you went to Wulfing's place and swiped a gun. You deliberately took a duplicate of the Chylewski which I had. Wulfing brought me my gun on Friday and I put it in my cigar humidior. Later, on Friday, you visited me. I told you to help yourself to a cigar, inasmuch as I wouldn't be smoking them any more. You saw my revolver then."

"The idea was to shoot Pomeroy with the gun you stole, then trade guns with me. You didn't mind framing me, because you knew I was going to die anyway. And my hatred of Pomeroy has never been any secret."

"Sunday night, after she had learned from her father that Pomeroy was not legally divorced, Betty went to Pomeroy's house. That was after you had killed Pomeroy and I had tried to kill him. Betty wanted to break off with Pomeroy, have it out with him about this divorce business. Marsha, who was stationed across the street in Sam's Subway, saw Betty go into the Pomeroy house. Betty must have passed on Sam's side of the street before crossing over. All of which gave Marsha an idea."

"You had planned to frame me for the killing. You and Marsha were watching my flat, waiting for me to turn up. Evidently you'd found some difficulty in forcing your way into my rooms. Marsha argued that she ought to be the one to switch the guns in order to frame me. You let her go to it. Marsha knocked me out. She looked for my gun in the cigar humidior, which you had told her was the place I usually kept it. Not finding it there, she searched until she found it in a drawer in my bedroom. She took my gun, but did not replace it with the murder weapon. She left my flat, concealed the murder gun in her purse, gave you my gun, and told you she had carried out instructions."

"This is fantastic!" Hopson said.

"You didn't think it was fantastic in the wee small hours of Monday morning when you came to

my flat with Macallum, Wulfing, and me,” Barney said. “About the first thing you did was to check up on Marsha by taking a look into my humidior where Marsha said she had planted the murder weapon.”

“Marsha wanted to frame Betty because she thought you and Betty were cheating on her, so she planted the murder gun in Betty’s studio. And she also planted the latchkey to the rear door of the Pomeroy house. That was something you had overlooked. That latchkey belongs to Marsha. As Pomeroy’s wife, she still had the keys to Pomeroy’s house—a duplicate set which she had never given back. You had used that key to enter the house.”

Hopson smiled, but not quite so confidently. “You are ignoring the testimony of the Pomeroy housekeeper, Mrs. Taylor. She said she would have heard anyone entering the house.”

“Not if she happened to be telephoning at the time,” Barney said. “Mrs. Taylor, being deaf in one ear, holds the receiver to her good ear. She’d be deaf to anything except what was coming out of the receiver. That’s why she didn’t hear you come in, go up the back stairs.”

“Mrs. Taylor was on the phone when you killed Pomeroy because Marsha, planted across the street at Sam’s Subway, was on the job, talking to Mrs. Taylor and pretending she was some sort of survey artist. Marsha called when she saw you approach the Pomeroy house, and she kept Mrs. Taylor on the phone until you were in the clear.

“Later, when I left you and Doc and Macallum in my apartment you suspected I was on

the scent and had a short, heavy guy—some tough egg you’d played mouthpiece for in the past—tail me and beat me up out here in front of your house. I guess you must have figured that a good beating was about all it would take to put me away for good.”

Mat Hopson was pretty casual about putting his hand into his suit-coat pocket, but not so casual about taking it out. He had a revolver in his hand, and Barney all but laughed as he recognized it as the Swiss Chylewski Fritz Wulfing had given him.

Mat said, “Marsha, go get the car out. When I’ve finished, I’ll join you.”

Barney clenched his fists, legged across the room toward Mat. Mat pulled the trigger and the short-barreled gun barked, blew black powder from the gun muzzle. A puzzled expression came over Mat’s face. He fired two more times in rapid succession as Barney closed in. The shots didn’t stop Barney. Mat ran toward the bedroom door.

“Hold it, Mat!” Fritz Wulfing warned. He’d pulled an ivory-handled .45 from somewhere inside his coat and covered both Mat and Marsha with it.

“You’d better get the police, Barney,” the doctor said quietly. “I want Betty released as quickly as possible.”

“Yes,” Barney said. “We’ll do a little switching around ourselves, such as substituting the real murderer for the principal false suspect.”

He walked over to the phone, and with a life ahead of him to live, and half a chance with Betty—. Well, there wasn’t anything to keep him from trying, anyway.

THE END