

Dames, Diamonds and Daggers



When Baxter's sidekick was murdered, he was next on the rub-out register. And Baxter couldn't get to first base on this mysterious hunt until he'd got himself a brunette to join his morgue party.



Sensational "Baxter" Novelet

By Lawrence Treat

His gun whipped out, flaming.

CHAPTER I

THE MORGUE BRAND

BAXTER hit New York like a homing pigeon crashing through a spider web. If there was anything between him and his roost, he didn't see it. Five minutes after a Red Cap had taken his bag and a man with a guide service had tried to sell him the World's Fair, he was at home in his favorite bar. He leaned over the curved edge of the oak counter and poured forth to Mac.

"The chief," he said, "paid for fifteen hundred miles of railway just to look at my new mustache. He sent me South a couple of months ago and now I got a branch office in New Orleans. This mustache of mine swept the South, and the boss heard about it and

called me long distance.

"'Bax,' he says, 'come on up and have a conference.' So I came. I'm no dummy, Mac, and I know what a conference is. It's three beers in a row and the first two on the house!" He slapped his hand down and two flies died of heart failure. He was solidly built, dark and robust and flaming with energy. He descended on his friends like a crisp autumn day and made them feel good; to his enemies, he was a death-dealing tornado, with an ominous quiet in the center. Gangdom called him bad medicine and tried to keep out of his way.

"Mac," he bellowed, "it's good to be back where people rush around because they got no place to go. What's the news around town?"

He listened to Mac's gossip while his eye strayed casually across the headlines of the paper somebody'd left on the next stool.

Suddenly Baxter grabbed at the paper. His lower lip curled and he bit at the corner. He didn't speak. He shoved the paper at Mac's face and pointed to the item about Joe Ainslee.

Mac read it and exclaimed: "Holy hell! They got—"

He didn't finish the sentence. Baxter had left a half stein of beer and was trudging out of the place. The homing pigeon had turned into a jungle lion on the hunt.

The chief was a glum, gray man with a lined face. He was along in years, and though he lacked Baxter's flare and thunder, he had a hard, driving energy that seemed inexhaustible.

He went through the motions of being glad to see Baxter, which he was, but he was more worried than anything else. He got down to business almost immediately.

"They got Joe Ainslee," he said somberly. "Three thirty-eight slugs in the head, and you're next. Look at this."

Baxter picked up the letter. It was typewritten and brief. It read: "Time to get even. First Ainslee and Baxter, and then you, Cotton. Simple as ABC."

Baxter scowled. "This why you sent for me?"

"I sent for you before I got the letter and before Joe was shot. I wanted you here to reopen the Dawson case."

"Pinella," said Baxter thoughtfully. "Why bother with him when he's in jail?"

"He's only there for another year and his organization's intact. We heard he's figuring on going right back into the business as soon as he gets out."

THAT made it clear. "The business" was gypping insurance companies. Any kind. Fire, theft, life. Arson, larceny, murder. And splitting with the beneficiaries and agents. Pinella had never been a particular guy. And so the insurance companies had decided it was worth money to keep Pinella in jail in another state, if it could be done; and just when the

agency was getting down to work, somebody massacred Joe Ainslee right in front of his house. Baxter wondered vaguely whether there was a connection.

"I guess we can forget about the Dawson case for a while," he said. "It was only a murder, and the point now is that Joe and me—well, you know how we were. I gave up the best woman I ever met for his sake, and when I turned around, damned if he hadn't done the same thing for me. Some Apollo with a wad of dough got her instead, and Joe and me drowned more sorrow than they had beer on Third Avenue. Or almost.

"So Joe's a personal matter. I'm glad you sent for me, chief. There's no coin in this for the agency, so I'm on a leave of absence till things are cleared up."

"You're on a salary and expense account, like always," corrected the chief. "Think you were the only friend he had in the world? Just because you grew a mustache, don't figure you're head man around here."

Baxter picked up the letter and reread it. "Done anything on this yet?"

"No."

"It ought to be easy. He says he's coming after me, so I'll stick around and wait."

"Worst idea I ever heard of. Wait around and you're pure sucker."

"Got to find out who wrote this, don't I?"

"Ask the right guy and he'll tell you," observed the chief.

"Whom do I ask?"

"Me."

Baxter said: "You dried out wart of a heel! Start clowning and I'll throw your two cent agency in your face, Southern office included."

He spoke coldly. Joe's going hit him hard and his whole body ached. He wanted to get sore at somebody and the chief was the only guy available. They were friends, but any other time Baxter spoke like that he'd have gotten fired. On his ear.

But the chief took it. "This is our private

war,” he said. “The agency against Pinella and Company. I want to show Pinella and every damned crook in the country that when they tangle with us, they get wiped out. I want to see Pinella’s whole gang stretched out with their faces mashed up and their livers hanging out of their belts. I mean that. I want the cops to keep their noses out and I told them so. I held out on a little evidence.”

“Yeah?”

“Somebody dropped something when Joe got shot. They dropped this.” He took a glittering object out of a desk drawer.

Baxter said: “Jeez!” He fingered the miniature diamond dagger. “That was part of the Lidgate collection, wasn’t it?”

The chief nodded. “And never recovered. Pinella acted as intermediary and the rest of the stuff was turned back, but this little knife was always missing. So it’s a hundred to one the Pinella gang got Joe.”

“Which one of ‘em?”

“You guess,” said the chief.

Baxter stuck the diamond piece in his pocket. The chief said, “Give it here,” but Baxter didn’t pay any attention.

HE SAID: “Maybe there’s a tie-up and maybe they’re just two cases the Pinella gang happened to be behind. Joe and this Dawson guy. We got a lot of dope on the Dawson business, haven’t we?”

“A lot, but not near enough. Dawson carried big insurance. He had a house party that week-end and he drove off somewhere in the middle of the afternoon. Nobody knew where or why. They found him lying on the road, banged up with a lot of busted bones. And dead. A little beyond there was a dead dog and wheel marks showing a car had swerved at the dog and not away from it. That’s Pinella’s trade mark. Dead mutts. He kills every dog he sees.”

“Dog-Face,” murmured Baxter. That was what they called Pinella. Behind his back.

“A hick sheriff messed the case up and it never even got to the grand jury. There was no dame known in the Pinella gang, but Dawson went after dames and I still think he had a date that afternoon.”

“Hell with it,” said Baxter. “We can’t do anything about it now. That was a year and a half ago. What have we got on the Ainslee business?”

“Pinella’s in jail. He can’t shoot a man in New York when he’s in jail in another state. ‘You can’t even frame him. And that diamond knife makes it look like Freihoff.”

Baxter said: “Pinella. If he hadn’t violated the insurance laws by splitting commissions, we’d have had to get him for something big. And we’d have done it, too. Joe and me never missed. But instead, Pinella got two measly little years, and now the insurance companies are hollering. Hell! They’d have taken it different if they’d heard Pinella threaten ‘em the way he did us. Like a snake hissing. Something unhuman about him when he said he’d get us. I never bothered with it, but now that Joe’s gone—”

“Forget it. Handle it like it was just another case, Bax, or you’ll pull a boner.”

Baxter got up. The chief kept talking, but Baxter didn’t even listen. The chief’s voice was still buzzing as Baxter came out of the office and closed the door behind him.

Out in the corridor he saw a thin runty little fellow huddled in a big trenchcoat and standing near the elevator. It was a hot day, and why would anybody wear a trenchcoat if he had anything on underneath besides his underwear?

Baxter sniffed. He sniffed danger and he sniffed heroin and he marched at the runt wondering whether to grab him or gun him.

It showed how worked up Baxter was. Just a stranger whose looks he didn’t like and here he was being possessive, as if the runt had something against him and Baxter had the right to strike back.

But his instinct was sound. The runt suddenly tore into his pocket and brought out a big black automatic. Baxter's hand whisked to his shoulder holster. His draw was fast, unbelievably fast, and delicate. What a dancer or a skater does with his legs and a card sharp with his fingers, Baxter did with his hand.

His gun whipped out flaming. His shot thundered first, and the runt's bullet went wild as a slug slammed into the automatic.

It was punched clean out of his hand. He yelled, turned and sprinted for the stairs. Baxter pumped speed into his legs, rushed and tackled. The runt dropped like a ninepin, rose and knocked himself silly—with Baxter's help.

The chief came running down the corridor shouting, "Bax—what happened?"

Baxter turned from the limp form underneath him and sang out: "Caught a minnow, chief."

He stood up. Doors were opening on the corridor and scared clerks couldn't decide whether to be cautious or curious.

Baxter muttered: "Grab his rod, there by the elevator. I'll bring him in the office."

He stooped and picked up the frail little body. Baxter's nostrils twitched in disgust. Heroin, all right. The runt fairly reeked of it.

As Baxter strode back to the office, hands reached out and voices pleaded with him. They all asked the same question. "What happened—what happened?"

Baxter skipped the first couple and then found an answer. "He had a bad dream, and he just woke up."

He strode briskly through the office. He noticed the brunette with the small white teeth and the coal black eyes. She was new here. Funny he'd missed her on the way in before. Too worked up, he supposed. Her eyes were gleaming and her excitement went through Baxter like an electric current.

He shoved back his shoulders and preened as he carried the vaguely struggling little man into the chief's private office. There Baxter

stood him on his feet and watched him sway.

"Cheap little bully!" snarled Baxter. His fist curled and crashed. The runt left his feet and arched backwards, as if he were diving. Only there was no water.

Baxter rubbed his fist. He'd needed to get that sock out of his system. The tension was gone now, the shock of Ainslee's death was wearing down. Baxter began to feel like his old self.

He turned to the chief, pointed to the twitching form of the unconscious runt. "Your witness, counselor."

Then he went outside on important business. Work or no work, there were things he never passed up. When he came back, the runt was awake and Baxter had a dinner date with the brunette.

But the little man didn't have much to tell. A stranger had approached him on the street and called him by name. He couldn't describe the stranger, but the stranger had offered to keep him in heroin and give him a hundred bucks for bumping Baxter. The runt had been furnished all details, including a picture of Baxter with the mustache sketched in.

The runt repeated his story twice, without variation. Baxter stared contemptuously. "Next thing you know," he said, "they'll be sending out a torpedo in a kiddie-car."

CHAPTER II

PACKAGE OF DEATH

HER name was Anne, but Baxter rarely bothered with names. "Glory," he said, over a restaurant table, "how did an old rounder like the chief hire anybody as good as you?"

"I'm not good," she smiled. "I'm the slowest stenographer in the whole office, and Mr. Cotton threatened to fire me."

"I'll fix him," said Baxter. "He has a one-track mind and it just has to be opened in the right direction. Listen, you knew Joe, didn't

you?"

"Mr. Ainslee? I'd been in the office only a short time, but I liked him."

"Joe and me," mused Baxter, "would have torn a dame like you in two, and each taken half. And made you like it. I never had any luck in a case unless there was a gal in it that I fell for. You're all right, but somehow I haven't got the urge. They cut Joe down right in front of his own house."

"I hear they threatened you, too."

"If they only got the nerve to go through with it!" prayed Baxter. "You stick around and you'll have some fun yet."

"I applied for the job because I love excitement," she said. Her teeth glistened and her eyes were bright. "But all I do is take dictation and copy out reports. This afternoon was the first thing that really happened."

"The little runt? That was nothing. When I see a ham sandwich I don't let it eat me up, do I? Listen, Glory—I'm getting ideas. If you want to do something more than curve your shoulders over a desk, there's plenty to do. Only it ain't no fun, lady."

"I'd love it."

He stared at her. Just a kid out for a thrill. A kid that reminded him of sunrise in the country, of spring and running water. He had a twinge of conscience and didn't want to let her in for this sort of stuff. Poor kid, she thought it was all roses and glamour.

"Yeah," he said. "You'd love it. You'd love it if some gorilla smacked you into the hospital so you came out lopsided or in a wheel chair the rest of your life or with your face hashed up so people looked in the other direction when you breezed by. You got an expression that says you just got into this world and you still like it. A week from now you may be okay, but nobody's going to grab you by the hand and say, 'Hello, Glory.'"

"I don't understand."

"I mean you been going to the movies too much or reading too many stories, and you figure you want a thrill. But there's no thrill in

this. You'll be so scared you'll want to hide your face in your stomach, and when it's all over you'll just be ashamed you lost your nerve, and if you hear a shot in the movies you'll get up and scream."

"I'm not like other girls," she said. "I really mean what I said."

"Then you're stupid." Baxter had warned her, and now he felt no further responsibility. Joe Ainslee had been worth the six best women ever invented, and this was all for Joe's sake. "You're stupid," he repeated, "but it's your funeral."

"What do I do?" she demanded breathlessly.

"You save me a lot of time and worry. You go into some joints where I couldn't go without a battle, and I don't like too many battles in one night."

He wrote some names on a slip of paper. "I want to find out where a guy by the name of Freihoff is. He used to be in the circus and on a vaudeville circuit. Knife artist. He's tall and has lips like soft rubber and he ought to be at one of these joints I wrote down. Make the rounds and keep your eyes open, and if you locate him call at Mac's bar. If I don't hear from you by morning I'll go down to the morgue and look you up.

"You look like a sea breeze in the middle of July and you'll be able to get through any door you want. The trick'll be to get out again. And you won't get a raise and you won't even get thanked, because Joe's dead and this is his business. Now beat it."

Baxter did an errand and then went back to Mac's bar and moped. After a couple of hours the phone rang and Mac answered. He said: "Hello," and then: "Hey, Bax—for you. Take it in back?"

IT WAS the brunette. She said: "I'm good and I found him. With a giant. I'm drinking rum with them now but it's too sweet for me and I'm a little sick. They're in a back room of the Tenth Avenue place. Shall I wait for you?"

“Beat it,” said Baxter. “I’m on my way.”

The street sign merely said *Chop House*. You could buy chops too, but that wasn’t the main business.

Baxter had a big package under his arm when he walked through and knocked at the back door. The bartender looked at him and didn’t recognize him. He called out: “Want anybody?”

“Yeah. I want to go in back. I want the whole damn bunch. Push that bell for me, will you?”

“I don’t know you.”

“I’m Baxter and you know me now. Pinella sent me.”

Then the little window in the door opened and a pug studied him. Baxter said: “I want to see Freihoff and I don’t want to wait around any more. I got a bomb under my arm and I’m tired of holding it. That’s a gag, sure. Tell Freihoff.”

The pug grunted and the window closed. Baxter sighed. He felt the door experimentally. It was solid, but so was he.

He pushed it when he heard the buzzing sound. He walked through a narrow corridor. There was a crap game in the room beyond. He went past the crap game and opened a second door. He called, “Freihoff?” and followed the sound of a grunted answer.

The room he entered had a table and a couch and some chairs. Two people were sitting at the table, but there were three glasses. The edge of the third one was smeared with lipstick.

Freihoff was tall, gangling, loose-lipped. His joints were loose and rubbery and he moved with a heavy slouch. His companion, Harry Bondini, was a giant. He had the girth of an ox, the neck of an elephant, the face of a granite statue. The jaw was strong, determined, the eyes were on fire. He’d come via the circus, too. Strong man and no faking about it, either.

Baxter placed his package on the floor and sat down. “I got a message from Pinella,” he

said.

Freihoff snapped: “Don’t be funny. You know where Pinella is.”

“I don’t. I know where he was and I know where he’s going, but I don’t know where he is. He busted out of jail, which was the same as admitting he bumped off Ainslee. Pinella lost his head.”

Bondini rumbled, “You can’t prove—” and Freihoff barked:

“Shut up, you dumb ape! This guy’s here to shoot questions and tangle you up in some phony statement. Then he’ll call in the cops and you’ll have a couple of days in jail to sweat it out. They won’t learn nothing because there’s nothing to learn, but who in hell wants to dirty himself up with cops?”

Baxter leaned back and tilted his chair. “I’d take beer, if anybody asked.”

“You’ll take a run out powder and nothing else,” said Freihoff angrily. His loose lips juttled and he squirmed in his chair.

Baxter said: “Giving up the old trade, Freihoff? I haven’t heard that anybody got knifed in a hell of a time. You want to keep in practice. Remember, when you had your act you used to throw knives twice a day, regular, and you were good. Let just one week go by and you get rusty. Suppose you heaved one at me and missed, Freihoff. Then where’d you be?”

“When I throw one at you I won’t miss,” said Freihoff. He licked his big loose lips. “You just give me the chance.”

“Don’t have to. When you fool around with hop-heads, you stick your neck out so far that all I do is pull the rope and I got you. I can tell the first cop to take you, or I can pick you up under my arm and walk out with you, and the hophead that gunned me will say: ‘That’s the guy! He promised me a few decks of heroin and a hundred bucks to get Baxter.’ That’s a crime in this state, Freihoff. You ought to read up on law.”

Bondini’s muscles tightened and he gripped the chair next to him. He was like a

big dog waiting for his master to loosen the chain.

FREIHOFF glared. "If you could do all that, Baxter," he remarked finally, "you'd do it. You wouldn't come in here and just talk."

"You forget about Pinella. He's the guy I'm after. You're just the spare tire that goes along with the car I want. And a retreat, at that."

Freihoff glared. "I don't like you. You going to leave, or do I ask Harry and the bouncer to help you out?"

"What I really wanted was to go up to your place and look around, friendly-like."

"Get a warrant," said Freihoff. "Going?"

Baxter picked up his package and untied the string. Then he threw it on the table. The package hit with a dull, flat thud. The paper spread and the dead dog lay in clear view.

"Dog-Face," murmured Baxter.

The effect was electric. For an instant Freihoff and Bondini stared in fascination. Then Bondini let an ugly growling note rumble from his throat. His eyes stared and his muscles tightened up. The growl rose into a sharp howling oath. He grabbed the chair, whirled it like a hammer and flung.

Meanwhile Freihoff leapt to his feet and punched at the light switch. His other hand reached for the top of his vest and seemed to flow out with a knife blade in the palm. His hand flipped it in the same motion with which he'd drawn the knife. His loose lips dropped to bare his teeth and he uttered a high squeaking sound.

Baxter was scared. It was like opening the wolf cage in the zoo and seeing the pack fly out, howling and growling and heading for the first baby carriage.

Except that Baxter was no baby carriage. Not the slightest resemblance. He worked faster and more intelligently.

At the first move on Bondini's part, Baxter's whole body snapped into action. He

slid down in his chair, got his knees under the table and grabbed the edge with his fingers. It rose up like a great ungainly beast, and behind its armored bulk Baxter scuttled out. The chair hit it with a crash and the knife point thudded into it, quivered and grew still. Freihoff plucked it out and felt the edge.

"You want to watch out for this Baxter guy," he said. "He's tricky as they come."

Bondini's voice was hoarse. "What'd he bring that dead mutt around for? That's what I want to know. Dog-Face don't ever let a mutt go by without killing it, if he can, but he only sends 'em around for one reason."

"Death," muttered Freihoff.

The room was warm, but a cold chill sent him into a fit of shivering. He was glad it was dark so that Harry couldn't see.

CHAPTER III

GUN FOR A WARRANT

BAXTER had a beer in a nice quiet place. The party with Freihoff and Bondini had been a success and a failure at the same time. He'd thrown a bomb all right, but what of it? You throw enough of them around, and by and by one of them explodes in your face. Baxter stroked his mustache. He didn't want to ruin it with a bomb. Not to speak of the face on which the mustache was built.

He thought about the brunette. She was clever and a cute little trick and he could spend time with her and wait for Pinella to make the next move. The kid liked him, too, which was unusual. Baxter normally went for the ones that didn't give him a tumble.

But he had a feeling that if he sat around and waited for Pinella, Pinella would win the round by a bump-off. Pinella's mind had to get mussed up a little, and then he'd get sore and lead with his chin. But Pinella wasn't around, except by proxy, and so Baxter had to work on him through Freihoff. Baxter paid for his beer and went out. This was a hell of a

way to spend his first evening in New York, playing hide-and-seek with a knife artist.

He felt his gun in the soft worn leather of the shoulder holster. He wondered whether he could pull a gun faster than Freihoff could pull a knife. He didn't feel experimental.

He went back to the place marked *Chop House*, hailed a cab and told the driver to park across the street.

"There's a guy coming out of there by and by," he said, pointing to the chop house. "If he has a car, follow him. If he starts walking, let him get about a block away and then creep up on him. Like a mouse, see?"

"Who's the mouse?" asked the driver. "Him or me?"

Baxter grinned. "You charge extra for the humor, or is that instead of the tip?"

"If I get paid for sitting here and listening to the meter tick, I ought to be able to talk. It's a free country, ain't it?"

Baxter said: "Sure, but you haven't been paid yet. Think that one over, pal. It'll use up half the brains you got."

Baxter waited about an hour before Freihoff and Bondini came out. Baxter pointed to them. "The India-rubber man's the one I'm after. The other guy's little and don't count. You'll get double the meter if you stick to him, and nothing but an argument if you lose him."

"Make it triple or nothing," said the driver. "I can't take chances unless you make it worth while."

"Triple," said Baxter.

But it was easy money. Freihoff got into a two-year-old car with the paint peeling and drove crosstown and up. The cab kept a respectable distance behind and forgot about red lights. So there was nothing to it. Freihoff stopped at a drug store and dropped Bondini, drove on a couple of blocks and parked. When he locked the car, Baxter knew Freihoff was home.

Baxter glanced at the meter and multiplied it by three. Then he remembered it was an

expense account and he added a two-dollar tip. The hack driver took it with a kind of awe.

"Say," he remarked. "If I'd asked four times the meter instead of three, I bet you'd have forked up on that, too."

"You're wasting good talent on a cab," was Baxter's answer. "You ought to drive a hearse."

There was no comeback to that one, and Baxter marched off.

He stepped into the elevator and said: "Freihoff." The elevator man took him up to the fifth floor and pointed to the door at the end of the corridor. Baxter marched down it and rang the bell.

He heard footsteps and then the door opened. Freihoff pulled it wide, scowled and tried to slam it shut. But he was too late. Baxter had his foot across the sill and a gun in his hand.

HE SLID in and slammed the door behind him. "I told you I wanted to look around your place," he remarked. "And I told you if you chucked a knife and missed, it would be just too bad." Baxter grinned amiably. "Trouble with you is you don't half listen. Any knives to sharpen, lady?"

He frisked Freihoff and pulled a knife and a leather sheath from a contraption rigged to the inside of the vest. Baxter pocketed the knife and holstered his gun. "As I said, I just want to look around."

"Got that warrant with you?" Freihoff's loose lips curled in contempt.

Baxter said: "Sure. Right here." He patted his gun.

Freihoff snarled: "I'll get even for this!"

Baxter merely yawned. "Maybe you're wondering why I'm kidding around. Maybe you're wondering why I don't knock the hell out of you, when I know you had a hand in bumping Ainslee. Well, you can keep on wondering."

He strolled across the room, pulled open a table drawer and dumped the contents on the

floor. "Nothing much there," he remarked. He returned to Freihoff and studied him carefully. "On the other hand," concluded Baxter, "maybe I will knock the hell out of you."

His hand whipped out and the palm struck Freihoff's lip. The knife man jerked back, stiffened and glared. But he did nothing. Baxter smiled back, genial, unhurried, dangerous.

When the phone rang Freihoff started to cross the room. Baxter grabbed his shoulder and spun him back. Then Baxter walked over to the telephone and picked it up.

"Hello?" he said.

He heard a click as somebody cradled the receiver at the other end. "Same to you," said Baxter.

Freihoff was standing next to him, close enough to have heard the buzz of conversation, had there been any. Baxter was sorry he hadn't thrown him across the room, out of earshot, and then put on an act. Pretended he was getting information, even though the wire was dead. He could have bluffed a nice heart to heart talk and watched Freihoff's expression.

Baxter might have learned something that way, but it was too late. And besides, he had something to think about. Who would phone Freihoff's apartment at eleven P. M. and know Baxter's voice well enough to hang up at his mere hello?

"The girl friend hung up on me," remarked Baxter easily, and Freihoff's eyes narrowed. Baxter grabbed his arm. "Come on. Let's have a look in the bedroom."

Freihoff went along without objecting too much. Baxter started with the closet. There were a lot of suits here and several of them were oversize. That meant Bondini, and was bad. The big man might show up soon and so it was time to get down to business.

Baxter marched over to the bureau and took out the drawers one by one. He spilled the contents on the floor and heaved the drawers at one of the beds. The pile of

clothing and papers and keys and boxes stood knee high. Baxter bent down. He palmed the little diamond knife that he'd taken from the chief. He began sorting the junk on the floor.

He looked up suddenly and showed the piece of jewelry. "So!" he snapped. "Where'd you get this thing?"

Freihoff didn't answer. Baxter said: "Part of the Lidgate haul year before last! Possession of stolen property, Freihoff. I didn't think you'd be dumb enough to keep an item like this around!"

Baxter heard the front door open. At the same instant Freihoff yelled and threw himself at Baxter. The knife man's assault was sudden, vicious. He pounded at Baxter with his knees, while his arms clung and pinioned Baxter with desperate strength.

Baxter couldn't get a hold. He thrust with his elbow, wrenched and broke free suddenly. At the same time he saw Bondini's immense hulk loom in the doorway and smash at him.

Baxter rolled with the two hundred and fifty pound onslaught. He went over on his back and snapped at the arm that was encircling him. The arm was firm and massive as the trunk of a tree. It gave slightly but it didn't twist or relax. Too much power and too much weight.

FREIHOFF had something metal in his hand and was slashing at Baxter. He buried his head against the giant's shoulder and Bondini took part of the blow. He grunted and kept squeezing.

Baxter felt as if his ribs were caving in. His lungs were collapsing and he couldn't get air. He sucked through his windpipe, but a ton weight still seemed to be crushing his chest. He gritted his teeth, grabbed at one of Bondini's fingers and pulled. He couldn't twist it back.

He began gasping. He knew his struggles were growing feeble. He relaxed, let Bondini do what he wanted.

The giant changed his hold, grabbed

Baxter's head and tried to smash it down against the floor. Baxter drew up his legs. Using them as leverage he squirmed. His shoulder hit the floor and the giant hauled him up again to heave, the way a woodsman hauls up an axe imbedded in a log he's trying to split.

Baxter put all his strength into his thrust. He pushed from his knees and catapulted himself. He felt as if his back were being broken in two. He shot outwards. At the same instant something crashed on his head and Bondini made a final leap and straddled him.

Baxter lay quietly on the floor. The giant picked him up and tossed him across the room, as a drunken man might toss a chair that got in his way. But Baxter didn't even know it.

When he came to he was lying in an alleyway, resting on a pile of newspapers. He breathed with difficulty; every part of his body ached, and for a long time he didn't move. He stared up at the fire escape that ended one story above him. He must have been thrown down from there. If he hadn't been lucky enough to land on the papers, he might have been dead by now. Badly hurt, anyhow.

He groaned and changed position. Cautiously he felt himself. His clothes were torn and his flesh was bruised, but when he stood shakily on his feet he was at least sure that no bones were broken.

He stared up at Freihoff's apartment. No light showed. He felt certain Freihoff had gone, but Bondini could stay on in perfect safety. After all, Baxter's entry had been illegal and Freihoff and Bondini had a right to throw him out. He couldn't get them on that score.

Slowly he limped towards the street. He was a pretty lucky guy. Here a letter said they were going to kill, and Freihoff and Bondini had had him as defenseless as an infant and all they'd done was to drop him down the fire escape. Why? When they had a chance like that, why hadn't they done away with him?

They'd never have another opportunity like it, and they were bound to realize it.

Baxter felt in his pocket. The little diamond knife was gone. He'd pulled a boner, on that one. Apparently Freihoff didn't know he'd dropped it on the street; he'd accepted Baxter's accusation without a word of denial.

Baxter headed for the first phone and called the brunette. "Hello, Glory," he said. "You still alive?"

"Of course I am. I loved it. I had some trouble getting away, but that made it fun. And you?"

"I had a big night. Saw the guy that killed Joe Ainslee and knocked off his hat."

"Where?"

"In my dreams, Glory. I turned yogi and I got dreams. If I look banged up tomorrow, don't laugh. Or worry. It's just my latest disguise. Fool anybody with it. Even fool myself."

He hung up, He'd lost the only piece of evidence he had, he'd learned nothing and he'd served warning on the Pinella gang. He'd never messed up a case like this before in his life.

"Joe," he murmured, "I'm a dumb, half-tailed nit-wit. But when they got you, they pulled one murder too many. And by golly, I'll get them!"

He trudged heavily out to the street and headed for his hotel.

CHAPTER IV

RETURN VISIT

BAXTER stayed away from the office the next day. He spoke to the chief on the telephone and mentioned vaguely that he had some nice leads, which was partly true. He had a couple, but they were about as good as a politician's election promise.

On the following day he marched into the office. The march was a little ragged, but as far as the brunette was concerned it was a

success. She had an expression that practically got up and talked, and it said: "My great big hero!" Baxter made sheep's-eyes and entered the inner office.

The chief was showing the strain. He crackled out: "You're alive, anyhow, but I'm damned if I know whether that's good or bad."

"Bad for me and good for you. As long as I'm alive you're one up on the world. Remember? 'First Ainslee and Baxter, and then—'"

The old man slapped a hand on his desk and snapped: "Cut it! You'd crack wise at a slug that tore your head off, if you were still conscious."

"If he was still conscious, who wouldn't?"

The chief's jaw hardened. "What'd you dig up?"

"Nothing." Baxter stood up.

"Listen, Bax. You got your own peculiar way of doing things and mostly I give you a free hand, but this time I want to know where you think you're getting."

"I'm just messing around. If I mess hard enough, somebody'll lose his nerve and crack."

"Or crack you. With a thirty-eight slug."

"Wouldn't surprise me. But what I need right now is diversion. That brunette outside—you couldn't give her a day off, could you?"

"She takes time off and she's fired. She's slow, anyhow."

Baxter got up and went outside. "Glory," he said, "you're fired. You're taking a day or two on a trip with me, and then you're through. The boss thinks you're slow."

She looked as if she were about to cry. Baxter picked up the chair with the brunette on it and kissed her. The rest of the office snickered.

He parked her at a hotel in the town where the penitentiary was, and he went to the prison alone. He asked to see Ivy Bronner, up for a ten-year stretch for a holdup and assault with intent to kill. Bronner, a thin man with a long nose, pushed his beak at the wire grating that

separated what Baxter called the in-patients from the out-patients.

Bronner's greeting lacked cordiality. "Who in hell are you?" he demanded.

"Baxter. Some of your pals got together and put up a little coin. They want you to have all the comforts of home, and since I was making a trip up here anyhow, I said I'd fix it."

"Well, go ahead and fix."

"Sure. Get fresh and I'll walk off with the coin. What the hell do I care how you make out? I got nothing to win." Baxter shrugged and moved away, but Bronner's voice called him back.

"Hey!" His mouth worked and the contortions waved the beak up and down. "How do I know you're on the level?"

"You don't. And I just finished telling you that for all I care, you can rot here. It's just a little liquor and a few privileges that your pals are trying to fix. If you want it, tell me the ropes. Otherwise the hell with you."

Bronner's lips twisted. "See Jaeger," he said. "He's got an itch in his palm and he can fix anything."

"Who's Jaeger?"

"Chief screw. And if you hold out on any of that dough—"

Baxter slapped at the wire grating. Ivy Bronner let out a yelp and one of the guards, marched over, but Baxter was on his way out, strolling leisurely, hobbling a little because he still favored his bruises.

He found Jaeger on a street corner and said: "I'm Baxter. How about sitting down over a beer and talking?"

"About what?"

"I got a friend in the big house, and I got money for a few things he needs. Maybe you'd like a slice of it."

"Me?" said Jaeger. "You got the wrong guy, but I'll take a drink with you."

IT WASN'T easy. Jaeger was suspicious, and Baxter had to admit it took a pretty

dumb guy to open up in front of a stranger and admit he was taking bribes for smuggling stuff into the jail he was supposed to guard. So Baxter changed his tactics.

He took a fifty-dollar bill out of his pocket and shoved it on the table. "Take it or leave it," he said. "It's nothing to me. I come up here on other business, and some pals of Bronner's asked me to do this little favor. It's nothing to me whether Bronner gets it or not. But I got something else on my mind and I got a hunch it can mean plenty to you. You know a guy by the name of Pinella? He's taking a two-year rap for some insurance stuff, but he's a big shot."

Jaeger's sharp brown eyes blinked. "Pinella," he said. "Yeah. I know who he is."

"Well, there's some trouble come up and I'm trying to smooth it out. I'm not spilling names, but some guys on the outside got the bright idea that Pinella broke out last week and bumped somebody."

"You ought to know better than that," remarked Jaeger.

"Lay off the act. I'm just telling you, and you can take it or leave it. These guys figure Pinella did it, and unless I come along and tell 'em different, and prove it, Pinella's going to get a knife in his back. Maybe you want that. Maybe you want an investigation around here."

"Who's going to knife him?"

Baxter laughed. "I spill that, and one of these days you read in the paper about Baxter. How they found his body on a dark street. What do you think this is, huh?"

"If you want me to stop it, you got to tell me who to stop."

"I don't want to stop it. I just want to be sure the guy's right before he goes ahead with it. Either Pinella got out of this place last week or he didn't. That's what I want to know."

Jaeger said: "Don't be a screwball. Nobody gets out of this place."

"Okay," said Baxter. "Here's what's going to happen. You'll find Pinella dead in his cell,

knifed. The papers will play up that story and ask first how somebody got hold of a knife, and second how somebody got into Pinella's locked cell and then got out again. There's going to be one hell of a fuss and a demand for a thorough investigation.

"And the guy at the head of the people wanting the investigation, the guy writing to the papers and the governor and demanding that the warden or the head guard or whoever's responsible should be removed—that's me. Baxter. So I'm giving you your chance now. Either you answer my question and back it up, or you take the consequences. Did Pinella break out?"

"No!" Jaeger said firmly.

Baxter sat back and lit a cigarette. He'd been bluffing, of course, but he'd put up a convincing bluff. And now he was stumped. Everything he'd done the last few days had been building up to this, that somehow Pinella had gotten out for a night without the jail records showing it. And Jaeger, with his back to the wall, came out with a straight denial.

Baxter finished lighting the cigarette, then leaned forward and asked softly: "If Pinella wasn't out last Saturday, then who was?"

Jaeger licked his lips and hesitated. His eyes shifted, and he rubbed his finger slowly along the edge of the table. When he finally looked up, he said: "Larkin."

"Prove it," snapped Baxter.

Jaeger shrugged. "Go up there and ask him. Just say you're from his sister and you won't have any trouble seeing him. Ask him and then check his alibi. You know your way around and you know you got me on the spot. That's why I'm coming clean. So go ahead and check."

Baxter did just that. Larkin, a confidence man from upstate, admitted he'd signed out the Saturday night Joe Ainslee had been killed.

"Sure I was out," said Larkin. "Think I'm one of these saps that wear themselves down wishing they was outside? Not me. I like it

here. I got dough on the outside, and with dough the screws'll do anything you want them to. So my job's chauffeuring the warden's car, except that I don't usually drive when he's in it. I just go up to the right screw and I tell him I want to get out, and a little later I get a slip made out to pass me through the gates in the warden's car. He's usually out of town and don't know nothing about it. Sometimes I drive along for a few hours and then come back, just to get the feel of it, see? Then there's other times when I get tanked up and have a good time."

"What'd you do Saturday?"

"I went around," said Larkin. "Eight in the evening till one in the morning. I stepped."

"You didn't go to New York, did you?"

"Hell, no! I had a few drinks and got in a poker game, and then I came on back."

Baxter took a slip of paper out of his pocket. "You wouldn't mind telling me who you saw, would you?"

"Why would I mind?" And Larkin reeled off a string of names that Baxter jotted down on the piece of paper.

FOR the next couple of days Baxter checked and the alibi stood up, and so Baxter was right back where he'd been almost a week ago, when he'd seen the news item at Mac's bar and the world had stood still. Right back where he'd been, except for one thing. He was stubborn.

But he liked vacations, too, and he hung around an extra day and enjoyed himself. He toted the brunette along with him and showed her off. She was a good number and he'd have loafed there more or less indefinitely if he hadn't gotten a wire.

BE AT OFFICE SIX FRIDAY MRS. DAWSON ARRIVING FOR CONFERENCE WHY DON'T YOU REPORT (SIGNED) COTTON.

So Baxter went back to town and started in all over again, from the same point and with

the same theory. To find Freihoff. To reopen the Dawson case.

He stopped in at Mac's bar, ordered a beer and let his feelings out. "Mac," he said, "if you added up four and four and they didn't make eight, what would you do?"

"Sure, I'd march into the booby hatch and ask 'em if they could use a steady boarder."

"I don't like booby hatches."

"Or," continued Mac, "I'd give up arithmetic and hire somebody that could do it for me. But myself, I'd stick to beer." Mac poured one and wiped off the foam. "At the same I time," he said, "it would be worth my while adding them up again, for maybe it would turn out that the first time I was drunk and so the second time they'd make eight, just like always."

"But they don't," said Baxter.

"Or maybe it would happen one of the four was twisted and I'd read it wrong."

"That," said Baxter, "is a bright idea. Damn bright."

It was shortly before six when he reached the office building. He went up in the elevator and swung down the corridor. He was still wondering where the Dawson case would hook in and what Mrs. Dawson could tell. All the way from Ohio.

It was a hell of a trip to make a lady take, just on the hunch that her mind would work differently from the way it had a year ago. Or that she'd turn truthful. Still, the chief was no dummy and he'd say something better than: "Sorry, lady. Go on back to Ohio."

Baxter was thinking of Mrs. Dawson when he marched into the office. Maybe that was why he went to sleep on his feet. Or maybe he'd had a little too much beer. Anyhow, he pushed open the door and took a couple of steps toward the chief's office, and his first warning was when the gun poked into his back.

Freihoff said: "Freeze. And stick up your mitts."

Baxter grumbled: "Why in hell should I?" But they were just words. He put up his hands and bit his lips, while Freihoff's hand reached forward and slid the gun out of the worn leather holster.

Caught like a fly against the window pane. Baxter thought of the letter the chief had showed him a few days ago. "First Ainslee and Baxter—"

This was the end, then. He should have burnt those words into his brain and gone around expecting an ambush behind every door. Well, it was his own damn fault and he'd have to take it. Only he hoped the chief would get wise to himself and call in the cops on the biggest manhunt in history. Unless the chief got his, too.

Baxter turned around grinning. "It's a nice gun, Freihoff," he remarked. "Want to buy it?"

Freihoff snapped: "Walk inside. And don't be so damned cocky, either."

Baxter walked. He pushed open the door to the inner office and saw Bondini towering in the center of the room, and the chief sitting down on the couch. The old man was mussed up, too. His face had a couple of bruises and his nose was smeared out of its track, and his shirt was ripped and stained with blood. But his voice crackled and he had enough spirit left to bawl out Baxter.

"You poor fish!" he barked. "I been telling 'em they better beat it before you come along, and here you play it as dumb as I did!"

Baxter shrugged. "Got to let them have their fun. What's up, chief?"

"Plenty. These bright guys came in a half hour ago and tipped their hand. I was waiting for Mrs. Dawson, and instead of her, these mugs show up, and what in hell happened to her? They knew she was due and they were scared of what she'd tell, so they moved in on me. But how the devil did they know about her?"

"I told 'em," said Baxter.

THE old man said: "Oh." That was a little beyond him. He was breathing heavily and his eyes wanted to close and his brain was tired out from the beating, and now Baxter came along and threw conundrums, and the chief couldn't follow. He said, in that sing-song voice: "Beat the hell out of these mugs, Bax!"

And Bondini and Freihoff just stared. They fingered their guns and glanced at the clock and didn't know what to do, and suddenly Baxter realized he wasn't going to get killed. Not tonight, anyhow.

The chief stood up slowly. He was groggy and he swayed on his feet and he muttered "You and me, Bax—clean up the world!" He clenched his fists and staggered forward, and then Baxter saw the old man was really trying to do it. Out on his feet and with his brain dead, he wanted to tackle the two gunmen with his bare hands.

Baxter grabbed the chief and spun him back to the couch. "Stay there," clipped Baxter, "and don't move till I tell you to. Understand?"

The chief said, "Yeah," and leaned forward. He didn't know what it was all about, but Baxter was here and he trusted him.

Bondini said, "We could start looking through them files awhile, couldn't we?" and Freihoff snapped: "Shut up!" His loose lips hung down and quivered. He was controlling himself but it was an effort.

Baxter said: "Help yourself. Always glad to work along with a couple of friends. Any confidential stuff you want—just step up and ask. I saw Dog-Face yesterday and he said the sky was the limit as far as you birds were concerned."

Baxter spoke steadily, and his voice rose slowly so that now it was loud enough to be heard through the wall. He knew the people in the office next door. They worked late and if they heard his voice and heard a rumpus, they might catch on and phone the police. It was a

slender hope, but he was working up to it when Freihoff guessed.

“Shut up!” he screamed suddenly. “You want to talk yourself into this?” His gun gestured. Baxter saw the fingers tremble and he sat down abruptly.

The chief stirred and rolled his eyes. His voice rumbled incoherently. Baxter leaned down but he couldn’t distinguish the words.

The taps on the outer door sounded sharp and clear. Three short ones, then a long one. A pause, and the signal was repeated. Baxter tried to hear the sounds of footsteps, but the corridor was too far away. He thought he knew what it meant. Mrs. Dawson had come, and had been intercepted.

Well, how long could Freihoff get away with that? Baxter had a feeling that the next couple of days, were going to be important.

Freihoff said: “Okay, Harry. Get the stuff.”

Bondini stepped outside. Baxter heard a drawer of the filing cabinet slide open. The old man sat up. Baxter slapped him on the shoulder and got to his feet. Casually, he crossed the room.

HE KNEW he ought to sit down next to the chief. Sit down and take it, while Bondini went through the Pinella and Dawson files and selected what he wanted. Then the two mobsters would go and the chief could swear out a warrant for robbery and assault. Nice and legal and respectable. But a lot of guys would laugh at the story of two mugs walking into the Greely Square office and getting away with the files. So what? It was common sense to let them.

Nevertheless, something in Baxter couldn’t see it that way. Once he knuckled down, he was through. Lose his reputation, lose his own confidence, maybe. And let down the chief and the agency. And so his brain kept working and looking for an out.

He moved toward the little table with the two glasses and the water thermos. The Greely

Square employees had given it to the chief for his fiftieth birthday. It had been Joe Ainslee’s idea, and Joe and Baxter had chosen the thing. It was nicely weighted.

Baxter signaled the chief with his eyes, but the chief didn’t understand. Instead of staying on his side of the room, getting set and keeping as close to Freihoff as he could, the chief walked over to Baxter.

A drawer crashed outside. Bondini called: “Ready in a minute. Just finishing up. That damn thing slipped out of my hands.”

Baxter slid a glass toward the edge of the table. He picked up the thermos. It was heavy. He could heave it at Freihoff’s gun and then charge in before Freihoff realized what was happening. Freihoff was a knife man and he’d be slow with a gun. All Baxter had to do was grab it and wrench it loose before Bondini came in. Then he could mow down Bondini and go to a night club with the brunette. He’d be a real hero. She had a way of looking, with those black eyes of hers—

Baxter was holding the thermos. Muscles tense, body balanced, he had his eye on Freihoff’s gun. Freihoff had the gun lowered. His lips were curled and he started to say something. Now, while he was talking!

The chief’s hard lean fist streaked out, crashed and caught Baxter on the chin. He reeled back, banged over the table and tried to stay on his feet. But the action was automatic and instinctive. Awareness left his brain and his paralyzed body went crashing to the couch.

His face and chest were soaking wet and the old man was bending over Baxter when he came to. Baxter said: “You poor slob, letting ‘em get away with that!”

The chief said: “He’d have killed you, Bax. You didn’t have a chance.”

Baxter sat up. “Yeah?” he said. “And what have I got now?”

“You got a job, you got two hands and a brain. Such as it is.”

Baxter grunted. The chief didn’t want to

lose those papers any more than Baxter did, and the chief had saved his life maybe. And what the hell could Baxter do about it now?

“Sneaking up behind me,” he said. “That the way you usually sock a guy?”

“Bax,” said the chief, and he was grinning for the first time since Baxter came North, “you been working for me six years, and many’s the time I got sore at you and wanted to sock. So when a chance came along like that—could I pass it up?”

CHAPTER V

PLAYED FOR A CORPSE

THEY had no sleep, but by morning they’d called all the hotels and there was no Mrs. Dawson registered. They’d tried to trace her from Grand Central and from taxis and from restaurants, with no luck. But she was a client and she was missing, and it was up to the agency to locate her.

Baxter thumped his fist on the desk to emphasize his points. “It’s as clear as custard,” he argued. “Somehow or other they found out she was due here. You sent for her on the chance that she could or would give you some dope on the Dawson case. You guessed right; Freihoff practically told you that. He shot the works to keep her from getting here. He swiped the files on the Dawson case and so it’s hot.”

The chief shook his head. “A couple of heels like Freihoff and Bondini wouldn’t have the nerve to buck the agency just for a reason like that. They walked in to bump us, and then they got a signal to call it off. You heard it yourself—that rap on the door. Nothing to do with Mrs. Dawson.”

“Yeah? And where is she now? Listen—she was hooked up with the Pinella gang. Her husband was killed and she collected a wad of insurance, didn’t she? That’s Pinella’s racket. He kills the guy and gets half the proceeds. Been doing it for years.”

“No,” insisted the chief. “Not this time. If Pinella got half, all we’d have to do is ask her to account for all she got, and she wouldn’t be able to.”

“That’s why they grabbed her before she got here. Afraid she’d talk.”

“And the files?”

“The hell with the files! Call in the cops and send out an alarm for Mrs. Dawson. Find her, and you’ll hang a murder rap on Pinella. She’s an accomplice and she’s ready to squeal.”

“No,” said the chief. “It doesn’t make sense. There’s something more that we haven’t caught onto yet.”

“Sense or no sense, where is she? I’m asking!”

Just then the phone rang. The chief picked it up. He barked a gruff “Hello.” Then his voice went polite. He said: “Oh, yes . . . Don’t let it bother you. Just come straight up here. . . . Right.”

He hung up and turned grinning. “That was Mrs. Dawson,” he said. “She missed her train and took a later one instead. She’s at the station now but she’ll be here in fifteen minutes. I told you they wouldn’t have the nerve to grab her.”

Baxter crossed the room and stared moodily out of the window. He had a new gun in his holster. He’d be using it pretty soon, maybe. It seemed his head was no good, but maybe his hands would get him out of this maze that took a new twist every time he thought he was getting anywhere.

He decided to leave the Dawson case to the chief and to go along on his own line as if nothing had happened to make it look wrong. He said aloud: “What I need is a little diversion.”

He dialed a number. “Hello, Glory? How about stepping out tonight? We’ll make it a big one. . . . Okay, I’ll stop by for you.” He glared at the chief.

The chief laughed softly. “I hired her back,” he said. “Nice ornament to have around

the office. She'll be in again Monday."

IF MRS. DAWSON had spent a nickel carfare to get from Cleveland to New York, the nickel would have been wasted. She said the same things she'd said two years ago. There had been a house party. They were all friends. Her husband had said he had an appointment that afternoon and would be back for dinner. She'd gotten the news of his death right after the cocktails. She'd passed out from the shock and the next few days were hazy. Very.

Baxter went to his hotel to catch up on sleep. By evening, he was rarin' to go.

The brunette was dressed up like something you brought over from Paris and had photographed when the ship reporters came aboard. Baxter packed her in a cab and brought her to a place where he could show her off.

He said: "You're the Queen of the May. They'll turn the lights on pretty soon and everybody'll get up and applaud."

"I'm just a girl who almost lost her job. Isn't there something I can do to help with the case, so the boss will think I'm useful and be glad he took me back?"

"The boss doesn't think. You can do a lot of things, Glory, and I'm wondering whether you'll do one of them tonight."

"If you'll only give me the chance."

"Sure. We got a client named Mrs. Dawson who holds out on us like a manufacturer being investigated by a senate committee. I want to ask her to join the party and then we can work on her and get her drunk. Maybe she'll talk when she's blotto."

"I thought this evening was just for the two of us."

"I thought you wanted to help."

"I do. But I won't sit here and watch you flirt with some stupid woman."

"She's forty-two and got warts. Her feet are flat and she laughs like a nanny-goat."

The brunette put her hand on the table and her eyes had that expression in them. "I'm silly," she said, "but I'd be too jealous."

"If you don't want to, you don't," said Baxter. "I never forced a woman yet."

It was around midnight when he took her home. They'd had a few drinks and Baxter had his arm around her, circling her waist and holding her by the wrist on the far side. He hailed a cab, and as soon as he had her stowed inside he kissed her. He told the driver to ride around because it was all on the expense account, but the brunette said she wanted to go home.

She lived in an apartment out in Brooklyn. Baxter ordered the cab to wait. Wait a few minutes, wait a few hours—it didn't make any difference. He walked her inside, with his arm still around her waist and his hand on her wrist. Up the elevator and down the long corridor, Baxter and the brunette, walking slowly.

Behind them a door pushed open carefully, soundlessly. The long steel snout of an automatic rifle poked through and rose slowly. Behind it a revolver leveled upward. The two barrels, the long shiny one and the short snub one, weaved cautiously, waiting for the girl to move over so that they could get a clear shot at Baxter. In the back.

"First Ainslee and Baxter—"

EARLIER that evening the black car left the penitentiary. It twisted through town and rolled along on the open highway, eating miles and thrusting straight for New York. Pinella, at the wheel, had a dark pointed face, sallow, saturnine, intent. His mouth was parted in a grimace.

You wouldn't have called it a smile because there was no expression to it. Nothing pleasant. Nothing amused or even cynical about it. Just a grimace, as if somebody had sewed up his mouth that way and the rest of him was revolted.

He drove well to the right and kept his eye on the speedometer. Not for an instant did he let the needle hover beyond the speed limit. The evening air was cool, and whipped through the window. As dusk gathered, he switched on his parking lights. Everything safe, every thing legal. Ainslee last week, Baxter this week, Cotton next week. As long as he didn't get pinched for speeding, he had no worries. He'd checked out of the place as Larkin.

Like last week, Larkin had signed the prison slip to take out the warden's car, and like last week Larkin had told his friends to run a poker game and swear that he was with them. Larkin might get in a little trouble, but he was being paid plenty and would keep his mouth shut, or else. Pinella had dough and he knew how to use it. And that was what counted. Dough.

Ahead, a small dark form trotted to the edge of the road, hesitated and ambled diagonally across. Pinella saw the dog and his foot snapped down on the accelerator. Something tightened in his throat and he felt the wetness slide down his lips. It just hit him that way. He was gurgling to himself.

The car shot forward and swung towards the center of the highway. The dog kept trotting, crossing diagonally. It heard the thunder of the car, glanced over its shoulder and shifted to get out of the way. It trotted confidently on.

The car leapt like a projectile, veered and aimed itself at the dog. The front wheels hit with a thud, then a rear wheel bumped over an obstacle. The entire machine seemed to shudder, as if it were alive and resented this deliberate destruction.

Pinella slowed until he was just under the speed limit. His grimace widened into a leer of pleasure. He took one hand off the wheel and rubbed sweat from his forehead. Behind, on the road, the dead dog lay quietly, no longer breathing.

The street sign merely said *Chop House*.

Pinella slowed as he passed it. At the corner beyond he saw the tall thin figure of Freihoff leaning against a wall. Freihoff pushed himself forward, glanced up and down the street and then strolled towards the car. Pinella pushed open the door.

"Okay?" he asked.

"Okay," said Freihoff. He slammed the door and the car slid forward.

Presently Freihoff said: "How's things up there?"

Pinella turned in a cold fury and his words snapped out with a biting contempt. "Shut up!" he snarled.

Freihoff didn't answer.

Pinella didn't speak again until after they'd picked up the automatic rifle. Then he let it out.

"This Baxter guy!" he snapped. "Who in hell does he think he is? He comes up to the big house and tries to find out from Jaeger whether I got out last Saturday. And you know who he's got with him? Anne!"

"He's nuts about her," said Freihoff. "She called up this afternoon and said there was nothing to it."

"That Baxter guy!" repeated Pinella.

Freihoff said: "Yeah. Almost upset the works. I wanted to bump that guy like I never wanted to bump no one before."

"He's mine," said the dog-faced man. He thumped his chest. "That whole lousy Greely Square bunch is mine, for putting me away. Me! Pinella!"

Freihoff didn't answer. They drove to the Brooklyn apartment and got out. Freihoff said: "It's a front apartment. We can see out the window when they get back. She said she'd make it between twelve and twelve-thirty. They walk down the hall right past, and we let him have it from the door. That's all there is to it."

THEY entered the building in silence and walked up to the third floor. Freihoff led the way down the hall and unlocked a door

with a key he took from his pocket. The rooms inside were empty. Pinella removed the rifle from the case, examined it and then put it down near the door. He went over to the window, flattened himself against the frame and watched.

After a while he said: "How's things?"

Freihoff picked his words carefully. "Lousy," he said. "They sent for Mrs. Dawson, and we had to go down to the office and take it over."

"What did they want her for?"

Freihoff shrugged. Pinella said: "Well?"

"How do I know why? She missed her train and sent a wire. Anne got it and ditched it, but she couldn't get word to us in time. So there they was waiting, and there we was with rods on 'em. Then Anne give us the signal and we beat it. Took some of the files and burnt 'em up, to fool 'em."

Pinella said: "They still think Dawson got bumped for the insurance. They don't know yet that any guy that takes Anne out gets his. This Baxter—he'll know, after tonight."

Pinella stared out of the window. Dawson fooling around with Anne, and so Pinella had bumped him. And now Baxter fooling around with her. . . .

Pinella tried to think of other things, but it was hard. He kept seeing Anne and Baxter together. After a while he really saw them. A big energetic guy, and the moll. Yeah. She had what it took.

Baxter didn't dismiss the cab. Pinella wondered what he'd do if Baxter didn't come upstairs to the trap. It made his heart stop beating. He'd have to duck the hackman, too, on the way out.

He said: "Now." He walked across the room and picked up the rifle. He released the catch and opened the door a crack. Freihoff, gun in hand, towered over him. Pinella crouched.

He saw them move past, Baxter with his arm around her. Pinella raised his gun, tried to get a shot at Baxter without endangering the

girl. But it couldn't be done. Maybe he'd have to wait until Baxter came out. In that case, Baxter would face him and that wouldn't be so good.

Pinella's breath began to hiss with excitement. Somehow, he couldn't get a clear shot. His narrow beady eyes squinted. Maybe when she opened the door—

Baxter whirled suddenly and flame shot from his hand. Pinella felt the slug rip into his chest. For a fraction of a second he couldn't see. The hell with everything! The hell with the girl! He tugged wildly on the trigger.

The gun began jumping in his hands but he couldn't control it. He saw Baxter crouched at the end of the hall, still firing. Opposite, the wall was pockmarked with machine-gun bullets. The damn thing—so heavy.

Pinella pitched forward. He bumped his head hard but he scarcely felt it. He was weak. He began coughing, and the coughing did him good until he tasted all the blood in his mouth. Then he got scared. He reached forward with his hand, clutched at the floor. From somewhere, he heard a police whistle shrill. It was the last sound he ever heard.

BAXTER and the chief had a late conference at the office. The brunette and Bondini were in jail, Freihoff in a hospital and Pinella in the morgue. Baxter's batting average was perfect.

He answered the chief's questions thoughtfully.

"Larkin," he said, "was on the records as having checked out and Larkin had his alibi mapped out, same as last week."

"How'd you guess it?"

"The dead mutt, for one thing. If Pinella'd stayed in prison, Freihoff and Bondini would have known it was a gag when I dropped that dead dog on the table, like I told you. But they didn't know, and so it followed that Pinella had been out and they thought I'd traced him by the carcass. Not his—the mutt's.

"Then the way they let me go when they

had a chance to kill me. I was due next, but they threw me down the fire escape and left me. That meant I was being saved. For what? For Pinella, of course. He'd busted out once and he was going to bust again."

"Same angle on the time they had us at the office and didn't go through with the killing," observed the chief. "But you didn't build your case when you were up at the penitentiary. Why not?"

"Pinella was too smart, and if I'd had any other ideas I'd have given that one up. The Larkin alibi had me stopped, only I had nothing else. So I went right on the same as if I'd proved it instead of disproved it."

"And the girl? How'd you know she was working with 'em?"

"Well, she found Freihoff awful fast that first night, but my mustache was what really gave her away. The mustache was sketched in on the photo the little runt had. Remember? I thought it was funny right off, but I didn't tumble till later.

"Nobody up North had seen that mustache, and the only picture with it showing was the snapshot I sent you. So there had to be somebody in the office that got hold of it, and the brunette was the only possibility. You're losing your touch, chief, hiring a moll like that and putting her right in the middle of your office."

"From the expense accounts," observed the chief, "it looks like you think she deserved the best."

"Just business," grinned Baxter. "She began to hook in more and more each time. The night I was up at Freihoff's, for instance, and the phone rang and nobody answered when I said hello. Somebody had to know my voice, and know Freihoff well enough to call him at one A. M. And he looked scared when I talked girl friend. So who would it be, if not the dame that had been drinking rum with him a couple of hours before?"

The chief rumbled an assent. "And so we were all off on the Dawson case. He'd dated Pinella's dame and so Pinella shot him. I showed the brunette's picture to Mrs. Dawson and she identified her as Dawson's ex-secretary. That's important. Shows why Freihoff and Bondini came here to prevent me from speaking to Mrs. Dawson, and shows why Pinella wanted to wipe us out as soon as we reopened the Dawson case. A chance recognition, and Pinella and his sweetheart were due for the chair. Killer and accomplice.

"But the chief reason for gunning was that he knew he couldn't operate again as long as we were in business. We were bound to get him. And he sure had a clever alibi, being in jail."

"Better off where he is now. That's what I call the perfect alibi. Dead."

The chief grunted. "As for the girl, she was with Ainslee taking dictation the night he was killed, and she must have led him right into the trap, same as she tried to lead you. What made you turn, Bax?"

"Her pulse. I was counting it all evening, ever since we left the night club. She knew when and where I was going to get bumped, and she was excitable. When her pulse raced, that was my signal. It's an old trick, chief. Joe Ainslee taught it to me."

The chief was solemn. "About Joe," he said. "I been thinking he'd kind of like the pair of us to have a drink to him. A kind of wake, see?"

Baxter got up. "Yeah," he said slowly. "Yeah."

But he wasn't happy. First Joe got bumped, and then a brunette fell for him and it turned out she was just playing him. For a corpse.

A good-looker all right. Couldn't deny that. But hell—no sincerity!

And so Baxter turned to drink.