

Five-Star Frameup

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Marty Quade, mastermind of detective tactics, tripped over a twenty-grand corpse—and landed in a colossal shakedown shambles.



CHAPTER I

DEATH'S-HEAD CLIENT

FOUR miles from Hampton City, Marty Quade slowed down his hired Drive-Yourself sedan and began watching for the Russian Tavern. He rounded a bend in the road, and the lights of Hampton City became suddenly visible, down in the valley below. The city sprawled across the Hampton River and thinned out on the far slope beyond, where the residential section of the manufacturing metropolis would be located.

Marty kept one eye on the road and one on the view. He passed a big billboard which said:

500 feet to the
RUSSIAN TAVERN!
DINE and SLEEP
In Luxurious Comfort
Superlative Service
Delicious Russian & American Food
Restful Beds—Continental Breakfast
Personal Proprietorship of
COUNT BORIS METCHNIKOV

Marty grinned sourly as he passed the poster. Then he swung in a sharp right turn

into the U driveway that led into the grounds of the Russian Tavern. It was a low, wide-fronted structure with a central building and two wings. There was a wooden cupola over the middle part, with a great bronze bell, illuminated by a floodlight on the roof. It looked like the cupola of some old Russian Orthodox cathedral of Czarist days.

Sounds of music came from inside, and Marty recognized the strains of that old standby, the Volga Boat Song. He swung the car into the parking space.

A man in a swallow-tail coat and a stiff shirt-front came out to greet him. The man was big and red-faced, with a bulletlike head and a generous moustache. A red sash ran diagonally across his shirt-front, underneath the coat. Upon his left breast there were pinned half a dozen medals and colored ribbons. He looked like nothing less than a visiting ambassador or a grand duke.

He approached Marty with an air of suave affability, showing two rows of beautiful teeth in what was meant to be a dazzling smile.

"Ah-h! Goot evening, sir. Permeet me zat I introduce myself. I am zee Count Boris Metchnikov—zee manager of zis humble taver-rrn. Welcome. Welcome!"

He grabbed hold of Marty's hand and pumped it up and down. Then he looked slyly toward the car. "Zee lady? She ees wat you call—bashful? Tell 'er she may come out. We here are zee soul of discretion. Eet ees safe—"

"There's no lady," Marty told him sourly.

Count Boris Metchnikov looked startled and unbelieving.

"W'at? No .lady? You 'ave come wizout a lady?"

He left Marty standing there, and went and peered into the car. Then he came back, shrugging his shoulders.

"Zen per'aps eet ees fat you would like to be intorduce' to wan of zee—er—'ostesses 'ere?"

"Layoff," Marty told him. "I'm not a sucker. I'm not here for pleasure. I'm here for

business. Quade is the name. I want to see Lenore Eastman."

"Oh! Ah! Yes, yes." Count Boris Metchnikov's tone immediately became formal and cold. "Quade. She 'ave give' me zee name. She 'ave phone' you from our telephone, to New York, an' 'ave ask t'at you come at once. T'at is right. Follow me, please."

He turned and led the way inside.

THEY passed a hat-check girl clad in a very scanty costume. Then they entered the dining room. A four-piece string orchestra was playing another Russian song, slow and voluptuous. Two couples were dancing—that is, they were moving around the dance floor, hanging on to each other as if they were glued.

There were two couples seated at tables, in the next to the last stages of inebriation, and slobbering over each other. Soft-footed waiters moved noiselessly, serving them. The lights were low.

Marty raised his eyebrows. There were at least a dozen cars outside, but only four couples in evidence.

Metchnikov saw Marty's quizzical look, and spread his hands. "Our private dining rooms upstairs—you comprehend, no?"

"Yes," said Marty. "I comprehend. Is Mrs. Eastman in one of the upstairs rooms?"

"But yais. She always take a private room."

"She comes here regularly?"

"Two, t'ree time' a week. Ever since she 'ave meet thees yong interne from zee Hampton Ceety 'ospital."

"Interne?" Marty asked. "Is he up there with her now?"

"But yais. Thees I do not comprehend. Always, zey come separately, an' zey go separately. Nevair do zey bozzer us. But tonight, she 'ave come downstairs, an' ask for ze phone. Zen, w'en she 'ave finish, she say to me, 'I am expect a man by ze name of Quade. E come from New York. Sen' 'im right up!' "

Metchnikov looked perplexed and vexed. "W'y should she ask for another man?"

Marty grinned. "How should I know?"

They were at the head of the stairs now, and the count led the way down a carpeted corridor, past several doors, and stopped at the last one on the right, numbered 10. He gestured with both hands.

"'Ere. She 'ave said t'at I mus' bring you to ze door an' leave you. Goot luck, Meestaire Quade!"

Marty watched him go back down the hall and start to descend the stairs. Only then did he turn and knock at the door.

There was a slight pause, then a woman's voice asked: "Yes? Who?"

"Quade," Marty said shortly.

"Oh!" Then: "Are you alone?"

"No," Marty growled. "I have three G-men with me and two redheads from the Winter Garden chorus!"

Once more there was an "Oh!" It was followed by a sniff. "Wise guy, huh!" the woman's voice said through the door.

The lock clicked, and the door was opened. A white oval of a face peered out, a pair of heavily mascaraed eyes glared at Marty, then looked up and down the corridor. Satisfied, she pulled the door all the way open and said:

"Come in, quick. Heavens, I'm glad you came, Mr. Quade!"

Marty grunted, and went in. She closed the door at once, locked it. Then she turned and faced him. She was tall and slender, with dark hair and great dark eyes that looked as guileless as the Mona Lisa's. She was wearing a dark green evening gown, but there were wrinkles in it here and there where it rested snugly against her body, as if she had pulled it on in a hurry. Her hair had a beautiful permanent wave, but wisps of it were loose behind her ears, and one curl was hanging down over her left temple.

But she was beautiful, nonetheless. At a rough estimate, Marty would have said that

she was in her early thirties. Right now she looked older than she really was, because her makeup wasn't on evenly, and some of the mascara was streaked down the corners of her eyes.

"Mr. Quade," she said theatrically, one hand at her breast, "I'm in terrible trouble!"

MARTY said nothing. He sized her up, then turned and looked the room over. There was a table in the center, with the remains of dinner. A casserole with some unfinished lobster a la King lay uncovered. A pot of coffee stood at one side of the table with two cups next to it. The cups were clean. There were two places set, and two dishes, both with unfinished lobster on them.

The rest of the room was pleasantly furnished, with two upholstered chairs, a settee, a radio console, and a small desk. There were pictures of Russian nobility on the walls, in hunting dress and in court costume.

In the far wall there was a door, partly open, and Marty could see that it led into a bedroom. All he could glimpse from where he stood was the foot of the four-poster bed and an edge of the dresser.

Lenore Eastman came up close to him and put one hand, almost caressingly, on his sleeve. He got the faint scent of some expensive perfume and he could hear her breath coming fast.

"You've got to help me," she said urgently. "I phoned you in New York because I can't trust anyone in Hampton City, and I need a man like you who isn't afraid of—of doing things."

Marty gave her a queer look. "Doing what kind of things?"

She turned her eyes away. "Things—that may be necessary to—help a client out of trouble."

"You're not my client yet."

"But—but you've come, haven't you? You wouldn't have come if you weren't taking the case—"

"I came because you offered me a fee of a thousand dollars," he told her gruffly. "You haven't hired me till you've paid my fee—in advance."

"Oh! That!" She went across to the desk and picked up a dark green purse, which matched her dress.

She opened the purse and took out a roll of bills which was so thick that she had difficulty holding it in her small hand. She opened up the roll, and Marty saw that it was all fifties and hundreds. She counted out a thousand dollars, handed it over.

"Well?" she asked. "Have I hired you?"

Marty examined the bills, made sure they weren't counterfeit or hot, and stuffed them in his pocket. "All right," he said. "What's the score?"

Her eyes opened wide. "You—you're taking the case—not caring what may be involved? Suppose—suppose I've committed—murder?"

Marty grinned. "Lady," he said, "if you've committed murder, you're out a thousand bucks. You don't need me. You need a lawyer. When I take a case, I always assume my client is innocent. If you expect me to break the law to cover up a crime, you've come to the wrong store."

"I know. I—I've heard of you. Everybody in New York swears by you. They say—"

"Never mind what they say," Marty growled. "Let's get down to cases. What goes on here?"

Her eyes darkened for a moment, and she looked at him peculiarly. "You don't like me, do you, Mr. Quade? I can see by the way you act that you don't like me."

"You're damned right!" Marty told her.

"But why? We've just met. You don't know anything about me—"

"I know a lot about you," Marty corrected. "I know that you're the wife of Oliver Eastman, the publisher of the Hampton City *News-Journal*."

She nodded. "I told you that, myself, over

the phone. But that's all—"

"Not quite all," Marty said. "I know that you're here in this damned roadside tavern, because you're two-timing your husband. You've been coming here regularly, with a young interne from the City Hospital." Marty paused, scowling. "And if there's anything I dislike, it's a two-timing dame!"

"And yet," she sneered, "you take my money!"

"Sure I take your money. But not for nothing, girlie. When a woman like you sends for me, I know damned well that I'm going to earn my fee." He waved his hand impatiently. "Now that our cards are on the table, let's get down to business." He motioned toward the door to the other room. "You can tell your boy friend to come out now!"

Lenore Eastman stood very silent for the space of a dozen heartbeats. Her eyes were fixed on Marty with a sort of vindictive satisfaction. Then she began to laugh, abruptly, in a high, shrill voice.

Marty frowned, and took a step toward her. But she stopped that near-hysterical laughter as suddenly as she had begun. Then she swept across the room and kicked open the bedroom door. The rest of the bed was revealed.

Across it a man lay sprawled on his face. He was wearing trousers and a shirt open at the throat. He had dark hair, and the back of his head was nicely shaped. But it wasn't going to do him much good from now on, because a long steel knife was buried in his back, squarely between the shoulder blades. The knife had an onyx handle, decorated with an inlaid golden crest. The man's feet trailed on the floor, and both his arms were outflung across the bed.

Marty took the whole thing in with a quick glance, then looked at the woman. She flung out an arm, gesturing toward the bed.

"There's my boy friend," she said. "He can't come out." She dropped her arm and bowed to him, sardonically. "And now, Mr.

Quade, you can start earning that thousand-dollar fee. Get me out of this, damn you!”

CHAPTER II

\$20,000 CORPSE

MARTY gave her a dirty look, and brushed past her, stepping into the bedroom. He bent and touched the edge of his hand to the back of the dead man’s neck. It was stiff and cold.

Marty turned and inspected the room. Nothing was out of place. There was a vanity at one wall and a dresser at the other. A couple of drops of blood were spattered on the rug. The dead man had been wearing bedroom slippers on his bare feet. One slipper was still on the right foot, but the left had fallen off and was lying on the floor two or three feet from the bed.

The single window in the room was open, and a crisp breeze was pushing the curtains inward. Marty stepped over to the window and peered out into the night. It faced west, and he could see the sprawling lights of Hampton City, out across the valley.

Directly below the window, there was a low roof, probably of the kitchen. It would be no problem at all for a tall man to reach up from the roof to this window, and boost himself in.

Marty turned around and saw Lenore Eastman, still standing in the doorway, watching him.

“Well?” she asked. “Are you sorry you took the thousand dollars?”

Marty shrugged. “How long has he been dead?”

She glanced at her wrist watch. “He was killed ten minutes before I phoned you. You took exactly two hours and twenty-seven minutes to get here. That makes him dead two hours and thirty-seven minutes.”

“Why did you kill him?” Marty asked.

“I didn’t kill him, damn you. We were in

there at the table, having a snack. He thought he heard a noise in the bedroom, so he got up to look. I was sitting over there, with my back to the bedroom, and I didn’t see what happened. But I heard him gasp, and then I heard him drop on the bed and thrash around for a second.

“I was scared stiff, but I jumped up and ran to the door. I stopped right here, where I’m standing now. I was frightened. It was dark in the bedroom, and I couldn’t see a thing, except those lights out there in the valley.

“Then a dark shape climbed out of the window and ran along the roof. He was silhouetted perfectly for a second. It was a big man, but that’s all I could tell. He dropped off at the far end of the roof, and disappeared. Then I wanted to scream, but I realized what would happen to my reputation if the police came. I remembered hearing about you and I immediately went down and phoned for you.”

“H’m,” Marty said thoughtfully. “You were just worried about your reputation. What about *him*?” He jerked his head toward the dead man.

“I loved him,” she said. “His name was Tony Nash. We were going to run away next week. But now he’s dead—and I’m left alive, and I’ve got to get out of this mess. And you’re the one who’s going to get me out of it. You took my money, you know.”

“Yes,” said Marty. “I took your money. But if you killed this guy, I’ll not lift a finger to save you from the electric chair. Better tell me now. It might be cheaper for you to get some one else—”

“I’ll play it this way,” she told him. “I didn’t kill Tony.”

Marty nodded. “Okay. Get your coat and all your stuff. Snap it up.”

“What are you going to do?”

He grinned. “Whoever killed him—assuming that you’re telling the truth—did it to get you in a jam. If he’d just wanted to knock Nash off, he’d have picked some other

time.”

“Yes,” she said, thoughtfully. “That’s right. My husband is the publisher of the *News-Journal*. A lot of people hate him. They could get at him through me. I’ve managed to—to keep him in the dark about—all this.”

“Skip that,” Marty said harshly. “Get your things.”

She collected her hat, her coat and her bag.

Marty went around, wiping fingerprints off the silverware, the doorknobs, the bathroom fixtures.

She watched him for a while, and then she said swiftly: “My prints are on the knife, too!”

Marty stopped very still, holding the towel in his hand. He stared at her for a long minute. Then he put the towel slowly down on the table.

“All right,” he said. “I’m not playing sucker for you. I’m through.”

He took out the roll of bills, which he had carelessly stuffed in his pocket, and dropped it on the table, next to the towel. “Here’s your money. Goodbye, my sweet.”

HE STARTED for the door. As his hand touched the knob, he turned around and looked at her. She was leaning against the wall, her shoulders slumped, her eyes closed. She had let her bag and her coat drop to the floor. She was the picture of utter, hopeless despair.

Marty swore under his breath. He clamped his jaw shut and turned back to the door.

“Go ahead,” she said. “I don’t blame you. I deserve everything that could happen to me. Even this. I don’t blame you, Marty Quade.”

“To hell with that,” Marty growled. “I’m not falling for any act like that.” He started to turn the knob, and just then some one started to rap harshly against the door.

“Open up in there!” a harsh voice ordered. “This is Captain Cooligan of Homicide. Open in the name of the law!”

“Ah!” breathed Marty. He left the door and sped across the room. He stooped and

picked up her bag and hat, forcing them into her hands.

“Get going!” he whispered. “Out the back window. Think you can jump from the lean-to roof?”

She looked at him, uncomprehending “—You—you’re going to help me—anyway?”

He nodded. “I didn’t believe your story—until just now. Nobody knows Tony Nash is dead—except the guy who killed him. So how come Homicide is on the job? It looks as if some one was trying to frame you. I’m giving you the benefit of the doubt—till I find out different. Scram now!”

Captain Cooligan was smashing against the door with his revolver butt. “Are you gonna open up, or do we break in?”

Marty didn’t answer. He pushed Lenore Eastman into the bedroom and over to the window. Awkwardly she climbed over the sill. “What—what about you?”

“I’ll follow in a second. Got to clean up some odds and ends.”

He pushed her over on to the adjoining roof, then hurried back into the dining room. The thousand dollars lying on the table he stuffed into his pocket. Then he threw a last glance around to make sure he hadn’t overlooked anything, and raced back to the bedroom, paying no attention to the pounding on the door.

With the towel he wiped the handle of the knife stuck in the back of the dead man, and threw the towel into the bathroom. He saw Nash’s clothes, strewn on a chair, and went through them with racing fingers.

He found a wallet stuffed with papers, and a black memo book, which he appropriated. Then he climbed through the window and raced across the roof after Lenore Eastman. Behind him he could hear the door splintering under the assault from the hall.

In the dark, he saw her drop over the side, saw her white hands clinging for an instant to the low roof-top, then let go. He reached the edge of the roof just a moment after she had

disappeared, and looked over. His mouth tightened, his hands bunched into fists.

Lenore Eastman was standing there at bay, her back to the wall, and facing a stocky man with a gun in one hand and a pair of bracelets in the other. A shiny silver badge shone on the man's coat lapel, but his face was shrouded in darkness, as was Lenore Eastman's.

"Just stand still, lady," the detective chuckled. "We knew you was up there, and we figured you might try to make a break out this way. Stick your hands out for these bracelets, and come closer so I can see your face."

That was all he said, for Marty Quade came down off that roof, feet first, and struck him flush on the head. The man went down under the avalanche of Marty's hundred and ninety pounds, and lay still.

Marty picked himself up, brushed off his trousers. Then he picked up Lenore Eastman's hat and bag, which she had dropped once again.

"Come on," he said, and led her around the side of the tavern, on the run.

THERE was a police squad car pulled up under the portico in front of the entrance. Another detective was on the steps, talking to Count Boris Metchnikov, who was gesticulating with both hands, and having difficulty in getting his pronunciation understandable.

Marty could hear him and the detective arguing, all the way out here, in the parking space.

"I knowing nodding. Nodding, I tell you."

"You're lying, Russky," the detective growled. "What's the name of that dame up in Room Ten?"

"I know nodding. There ees no woman—"

"Aw, shut up. Wait'll Captain Cooligan brings her down. You'll talk, all right."

Marty grinned in the dark as he led Lenore Eastman among the parked cars till he came to his own. "Metchnikov was brought up in the

old school, all right," he chuckled. "That Russky doesn't believe in talking to cops!"

He carefully opened the door of his car, helped her in. "How did you get here?" he demanded.

"I left my own car about a mile away, and waited for Tony to pick me up in his."

"Okay. You couldn't have done better if you'd planned to murder the guy. Get in."

"But—but we can't get away. They'll follow us in the police car."

"I'll take care of that. Get in!"

She obeyed doubtfully.

Marty left her there, and made his way along the driveway, bending low. He reached the police squad car, squatted down on the far side of it, hidden by its bulk from the detective on the entrance steps. He took out a pencil and bent close to the tire, feeling for the valve.

He found it and pushed the cap in with the point of his pencil. A low stream of air began to ooze out of the tire. He kept the pencil there until the tire was completely flat. While he did this, Metchnikov and the detective kept on arguing, and the sound of the door upstairs being smashed in filled the night air with its racket.

Just as Marty finished his job, there was a tearing, crashing sound as the door finally gave before the onslaught. There was a couple of moments of silence, and then Captain Cooligan's voice, roaring like a bull to the detective on the front steps:

"Daly! Get around to the back, quick! Smith is knocked out!"

Detective Daly cursed loudly, and left Metchnikov standing there. He raced around the house toward the rear, yanking out his service revolver.

As soon as he disappeared, Marty Quade stepped out from behind the car and motioned to Metchnikov. "*Ps-st!*"

The Russian did not seem at all surprised. "I have hear' thee air go from zee tire. But I 'ave say nodding."

"Attaboy," said Marty. "Keep clammed

up, and it'll be worth your while."

Metchnikov looked at him cunningly.

"Ow much?"

Marty grunted, pulled a bunch of bills out of his pocket. "There's a thousand. A couple more if things work out okay. How's that?"

"Eez no' bad. I 'ave lose much business 'ere by thees keeling. You mus' ask thee lady no' to keel any more mans 'ere in my taver-n."

"No more," Marty said solemnly. He patted Metchnikov on the shoulder, and left him. There was a lot of racket at the rear of the house, but Marty paid no attention. He returned to his car and climbed in under the wheel, beside Lenore Eastman.

"All set?" he asked.

Without waiting for a reply, he stepped on the starter. It *whirred* over, and caught, and he had the car in reverse and backing out of the driveway in seconds. He didn't put on his headlights till he was out in the road.

Daly came running from the rear of the house, yelling for them to stop. He fired a single shot which missed the car by ten feet. Then the detective started running for the police squad car.

Marty chuckled and stepped on the gas. They sped down the road and left the Russian Tavern far behind. Lenore Eastman, looking back, said: "They're not following us. What did you do?"

"Deflated them," Marty told her. "There's nothing for cops like deflation. And by the way, Lenore, you owe me another grand. I just gave my thousand to Metchnikov to keep his mouth shut."

SHE didn't say a word, but dug into the purse and counted out the money and handed it to him. "If you'd asked for ten thousand more," she said, "you'd have got it, too. You don't know what this is worth to me. If it'll take money to square this, don't hesitate to spend it. I have plenty. There's twenty thousand in this purse. Tony got it tonight. He

was going to get thirty thousand more tomorrow, and that's what we were going to run away with."

Marty's hands tightened on the wheel. "Where did Tony Nash get that money? He was only an interne!"

"I don't know where Tony got it. He wouldn't tell me. All I knew was that he'd been doing some special work for a man in town, and making extra money. This was to be a lump sum payment for some special services."

Marty laughed harshly. "What sort of special services could a young interne do to be worth fifty grand? What sort of racket was he in? Come on, open up!"

"I tell you," she flared, "I don't know! You've believed me about the other things—why not in this?"

"I'm not believing you in anything," Marty growled. "I'm just giving you the benefit of the doubt for the time being."

She looked at him sideways, from under lowered lashes.

"You're certainly taking awful chances—for a man who doesn't trust anyone. Suppose I really did—kill Tony. You're being an accessory, aren't you? They'll throw the book at you for helping me to escape—and for knocking that detective out."

"Sure," Marty said bitterly. "But I took your money. I get high fees—because I'm willing to take chances." He slowed up as they passed a car parked without lights at the side of the road.

"That yours?"

"No. But—" She was suddenly excited, tense. "I know that car. I know whose it is!" She put a hand on his arm quickly, as he began to push further down on the brake. "*Keep going!*"

Marty let the car roll for another hundred feet till they rounded a curve in the road. Then he pulled up and turned to look at her.

"Well?"

She was pale, but there was a strange

glitter in her eyes. “Now I know who killed Tony Nash! That car we just passed—it’s my—husband’s!”

Marty whistled. “You think he got wise to what was going on, and took the law into his own hands? A man of his standing would be hardly likely to do that.”

“A man of his standing!” she exploded. “Do you know what Oliver Eastman is? He’s nothing but a high-class blackmailer. He has Toby Flood working for him as managing editor. Flood does all the dirty work. Why do you think the *News-Journal* gets all those full-page ads from companies that don’t even do business in Hampton City?”

“I’ll bite,” Marty said. “Why?”

“Blackmail!” she spat out. “Instead of holding their victims up for money, they make them take a full-page ad in the paper every month. In that way, the victim can take the funds out of his company treasury. He finds it easier to pay. Toby Flood works on a salary basis, but he also gets fifty percent of the net profits.”

Marty shook his head. “Baby, you’re sure this isn’t chapter two of a serial story you’re telling me?”

“I swear it’s true. That’s one reason I hate my husband. It’s one reason why I’ve been—two-timing him, as you put it. To talk to Oliver, you’d think butter wouldn’t melt in his mouth. But Flood told me what was going on. And then I got it indirectly from other people in Hampton City. I found out why we’re not received in the social circles in town—”

“Did you accuse your husband of being a blackmailer?”

“No. I never dared to mention it to him. I—I was afraid of what he might do. There have been other murders in the past. I didn’t want to end up with a knife in the back.”

Marty shrugged. He put the car in gear again, started it toward town. “It looks like you’re ending up behind the eight ball, anyway. You know, I’m beginning to feel a little sorry for you.”

“Thanks,” she said bitterly. “I hope I don’t have as tough a time convincing a jury that I didn’t kill Tony—as I had making you believe me.”

“You haven’t succeeded yet. You’re still on probation. I’d like to take your word for everything and work on that basis. But I’m too old a hand to fall for this dame-in-distress stuff. I’m watching for the first false note in your story, baby.”

“Wait!” she suddenly exclaimed. “It’s about here that I parked my car. Slow up.”

Marty braked down to ten miles an hour. They coasted along the side of the road, while she peered into the darkness. “I left it on a little side road”—she gasped, and pointed—”There! That’s where I left it. But it’s—gone!”

Marty looked where she was pointing. A bit of narrow road turned off at a sharp angle from the highway. There was a little clearing alongside it, but it was empty of cars.

“Right in that clearing!” she exclaimed. “I left it there. And some one’s taken it!”

CHAPTER III

SCOOP FOR SCANDAL

MARTY looked as if he had a sour taste in his mouth. “Whoever planted that murder in your lap is making damned sure that you can’t dump it. If he’s smart, and if he thinks the way I figure he thinks, he’s taking your car right over to the Russian Tavern and leaving it there!”

“Then they’ll have me cold!” she gasped. “If my car’s at the Russian Tavern, it’ll prove I was there!” She slumped in her seat. “They’re too clever for me—my husband and Toby Flood. . . . I’m beaten.”

“Not yet,” Marty said grimly. “That’s easy.”

“What’s easy?”

“The answer to that one. I’ve been up against that gag before. Hang on, Lenore!”

He really stepped on the gas for the next two miles, and hit the suburbs of Hampton City in two minutes flat. He slowed down then, asking directions of Lenore, until they reached the very center of town.

“What time is it?” he asked.

“A quarter of twelve.”

He drove slowly now, peering at the various theatres and restaurants they passed.

“Look out!” she warned. “The *News-Journal* Building is the next a corner—South Broadway and West Street.”

Marty nodded. He swung off before they reached the next block. He pulled up opposite a motion picture theatre. The lights were out, but the show wasn’t over yet. A few people were straggling out of the lobby. The unlit electric light letters on the side of the marquee said:

JOEL McCREA in FOREIGN
CORRESPONDENT ALSO BLONDIE
HAS SERVANT TROUBLE BINGO TOO

“Have you seen those pictures?” he asked her.

She looked at him as if he’d gone crazy. “No.”

“Wait here.”

He got out of the car, went across the street and, looked around on the sidewalk in front of the theatre. Suddenly he stopped and picked something up, and came hurrying back to the car. He held out to her the thing he had picked up. It was the stub of an admission ticket.

“You’ve been in there all evening, watching *Foreign Correspondent*, and *Blondie Has Servant Trouble*. If anyone should ask you, *Foreign Correspondent* is all about spies in Europe, and a guy being assassinated. *Blondie* is about haunted houses. Tomorrow, you can go to the library and look up back issues of the newspapers, and read the reviews.”

“But—but what about my car? How could I have been in there, if my car is at the

Russian Tavern?”

Marty took her arm and drew her out of the car. “See that drug store over there at the corner? Go across and telephone police headquarters. Tell ‘em you’ve just come out of the movies, and you left your car parked here, but it’s gone now. You want to report it stolen.”

“Oh!” For the first time that night, there was a sparkle of hope in her dark eyes. “I’m beginning to believe,” she breathed, “that you’re going to be able to get me out of this!”

“Don’t be too optimistic,” Marty growled. “You’ve got plenty of headache coming before you can say you’re in the clear. Now hurry up and put that call through!”

She left him and went swiftly across the street.

HE WAITED till she had disappeared into the drug store, then he turned and ducked back down the street to a little cigar store he had noticed as they passed. He went straight to the phone booth and looked up the number of the *News-Journal*. Then he dialed it.

“Let me talk to Mr. Eastman,” he said.

“I’m sorry, but Mr. Eastman is never here at night. You’ll have to call in the morning.”

“All right, I’ll talk to Toby Flood.”

“He’s out, too—wait a minute, I think he just came in. Hold on.”

Marty held on. In a moment a crisp voice said: “Flood talking. What is it?”

“How much will you pay for a hot tip?” Marty asked.

“What kind of tip?”

“About a murder at the Russian Tavern.”

“Hell, we have that already. It came in on the police wire.”

“You haven’t got what I have, mister.”

“What do you mean?”

“The name of the murderer, for instance. How would you like to get that—exclusive?”

There was a long pause. Then: “Just who are you?”

“Smith is the name. Just Joe Smith.”

“Smith, eh? And you know who killed Nash?”

“Yes.”

“Is it male or female?”

“I’m not talking, Mister Flood—till I see the color of your money.”

“How do *you* know who killed him?”

“Oh, I get around. I’m a newspaper man myself.”

“All right, come up here right away.”

“Make it twenty minutes. And if you have the cops there, you have no story.”

“Don’t worry. We don’t do business that way.”

Marty hung up and went out. He reached the car at the same time that Lenore Eastman got there from the drug store. Her face was flushed, and she had lost a lot of that beaten look.

“How’d you make out?” he asked.

“All right. They told me to go to the nearest police station and sign a report of the loss, but I told them I had a terrible headache, and would tomorrow morning be all right, so the sergeant said yes, and they would put the stolen car on the teletype right away. Then I called home, and talked to—Oliver.”

Marty raised his eyebrows. “I thought you said Oliver was out there on the road, in his car?”

She shrugged her shoulders. “He could have got home just now, too, couldn’t he? I told him about the car being stolen, and he seemed genuinely worried. The butler who answered the phone at first said he was asleep. I wonder if it *was* Oliver. . . .”

“Nuts,” said Marty. “You go home and sit tight. If they should come to question you, don’t talk. Have a headache. Have hysterics. Have anything. But don’t talk till you hear from me.”

“What will you be doing?”

“Me?” Marty grinned. “I’m going up and make a deal with Toby Flood, the managing editor of the *News-Journal*. I’m going to tell him who killed Tony Nash!”

Her eyes opened wide. “You—know?”

“Hell, no.”

“Then what are you going to tell him?”

Marty grinned. “*He’s* going to tell *me* things. I have to start getting angles on this town, and the best place to get inside angles is a dirty newspaper. Better give me that dough of Tony Nash’s. You don’t want it found on you.”

“Here. Take it all. I don’t want any of it—now.”

She opened her bag, took out the roll and handed it to him. “Be careful,” she warned. “You don’t know Toby Flood. He’s tough—”

“So am I,” Marty said softly.

“—And smart. He’s liable to get more out of you than you’ll get out of him.”

“Are you afraid, Lenore?”

SHE shivered. “Yes. I won’t be able to sleep tonight. I can’t get rid of the horrible picture of Tony, lying there with the knife in his back. I keep seeing it all the time—and that dark shape, climbing out of the window and scurrying across the roof.”

She closed her eyes, then opened them swiftly, and tried to smile. “And I’ll be worrying about you. If anything happens to you, I’ll have to face the police alone tomorrow. They’ll grill me—”

“Take it easy. Have you got a phone in your bedroom?”

“Yes, but it’s an extension.”

“Can you cut it off so it won’t ring in any other room?”

“Yes.”

“Do that, then. And wait for my call. If the phone rings, pick it up carefully and listen. If you hear my voice, answer. If it’s someone else, hang up very carefully—so they won’t hear the click—and swing the switch so it’ll ring elsewhere.”

“Oliver’s room is right next to mine. He might hear it.”

“All right then. Don’t cut the phone off from the rest of the house. If it rings, pick it

up, but don't talk into it. Let Oliver answer first. If I call, I'll ask for Cecil, then say it's the wrong number. Let him hang up in his room, wait a couple of seconds, then say hello. I'll talk to you then."

She nodded. "All right."

Marty watched her go down to the corner and get into a cruising cab. Then he climbed back into his car. He took the money she had given him, including his own thousand dollars, and stuffed it into the glove compartment. He locked the compartment, then drove the car up South Broadway till he found a parking lot. He left it there and walked back to the *News-Journal* Building.

It was a big place, and it was lit from top to bottom. Down in the basement the great presses were going full speed, while on the upper floors there was a feverish scurrying of activity. The morning edition was going through the mill. In the side street there was a long loading platform, with a number of trucks backed up to it, waiting to receive their first batches of the morning paper.

Marty went in the front way and looked at the bulletin board. Toby Flood's office was on the third floor. He took the elevator up.

The third floor was devoted to executive and editorial departments. The great stretch of space was brilliantly lit and alive with clattering typewriters and hurrying copy boys. Nobody looked at Marty. He went over to the switchboard. A male operator was in charge.

"Mr. Smith to see Mr. Flood," Marty said.

The operator nodded. "He's expecting you. Go right through. His office is the second from the end."

Marty crossed the busy floor toward the row of offices at the far end. He stopped in front of the one that was marked. *Mr. Flood*, and went in without knocking.

Flood was seated at his desk, facing the door. He was just putting down the inter-office phone. The operator at the switchboard must have called him to announce the visitor.

Flood was a heavy, compactly built man,

with thinning hair, carefully combed and brushed. His eyes were deep-set and piercing, his mouth thin. He gave Marty a keen, appraising glance and nodded toward the chair in front of the desk.

"Sit down," he said harshly.

Marty didn't take the chair. He came and sat on a corner of the desk, looking down at Flood.

Flood looked irritated. "Well," he barked. "Say your piece. Let's hear what you know. And say it quick. I'm busy. We go to press in an hour."

"Excuse me," said Marty.

He got off the desk, dropped to his knees and looked underneath, pushing Flood a little to one side. There was a switch under the desk, close to Flood's hand. It was pushed over to the word, "On."

Marty put his hand on the wire, followed it along the inside of the knee-hole to where it disappeared into the bottom drawer. Another wire led upward, into a hole which was drilled into the desk top.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Flood demanded indignantly.

Marty didn't answer him. He got to his feet again and saw that a large and ornate inkwell covered the spot on the desk where the wire would come out. It had a wide, perforated cover.

Marty looked at Flood and winked. "Naughty, naughty," he said, and pulled the cover off the inkwell. There was no ink in it at all. Instead, there was a little microphone inside.

He bent down and pulled open the bottom drawer. It contained a complete dictograph set, with a cylinder which was turning slowly, ready to record everything that was said.

Marty yanked the wires out of the dictograph machine. The cylinder stopped turning.

"All right, Mr. Flood," he said. "Now we can talk."

Instead of being angry, Toby Flood looked

at Marty with new respect. “You’re no dumbbell, Mr.—er—Smith. You know all the answers, don’t you?”

Marty grinned. “I’ve been through the mill. I’ve worked on dirtier sheets than this.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Let’s skip it for the time being,” Marty said. “Let’s do business. How much for the lowdown on the Nash kill?”

“It depends on what you have. And what you can prove.”

“Suppose I saw Nash knocked off.”

FLOOD didn’t answer at once. He fiddled with a paper cutter on the desk. He kept his eyes fixed on Marty’s, as if he would pry the secret from him. Then he said slowly:

“I told you—it depends. It might be worth a century—or it might be worth a grand. I’d have to hear your story first.”

“Well,” said Marty, “what kind of story would you like to hear? I’m open to editorial revision.”

“Oh!” said Flood. “I see. So that’s the kind of guy you are.”

“That’s the kind of guy I am. And money talks.”

Flood nodded. He opened the top drawer of his desk, took out a long, narrow leather wallet. He unzipped it and began to extract hundred dollar bills from it. He counted out ten of them and laid them on the desk, watching Marty carefully. Then he closed the zipper of the wallet and started to put it in the drawer.

“Don’t put it away,” Marty said.

Flood raised his eyebrows. “You’ll have to make your story good to earn more than a grand!”

Marty didn’t move. He spoke in a flat, emotionless voice. “She was wearing a dark green evening dress and a black Hudson seal coat.”

“Ah!” said Flood.

He opened the zipper of the wallet and began counting out more money.

He didn’t stop at two thousand or at three thousand. He didn’t stop till the pile of bills on the table amounted to five thousand dollars. He looked at Marty. “That’s the limit.”

Marty’s eyes were on the wallet. The five thousand dollars didn’t seem to have made much of a dent in the bulging contents.

“You’ve got plenty more in there,” he remarked. “Looks like about thirty thousand dollars. I’d say at a guess.”

Flood smiled crookedly. “You have a good eye for money. But this is all you get. Take it or leave it.”

“All right,” said Marty. He stretched out his hand for the money.

“Nix!” Flood smiled crookedly. He separated a thousand from the pile and pushed it over. “That’s on account. You get the rest after your story clicks.”

Marty shrugged, picked up the ten bills and pushed them in his pocket.

Flood put the remainder in an envelope, sealed the envelope and slipped it into the top drawer. Then he pressed a button on his desk.

Almost at once, a side door opened. A big man came in. He was wearing a derby hat, and he had a bull neck set on a pair of powerful shoulders.

Flood nodded to him. “Captain Cooligan, this is Mr.—er—Smith. He saw Nash killed. He can identify the murderess. He has already described her.”

“I heard him,” Cooligan barked.

“Then you know what to do?”

The police captain nodded. “Come on you,” he ordered Marty.

Marty merely regarded him stonily.

Cooligan glowered. “What are you waiting for?”

“For you to be civil,” Marty told him.

“You punk!” exclaimed Cooligan, and took a threatening step forward.

Marty moved off the desk, and swung to face him.

COOLIGAN grabbed for his coat, and Marty flicked a fist up to the police captain's jaw. It didn't look like much of a blow, but it rocked the big man's head back.

Cooligan let out a roar of rage and thrust a hand under his coat.

Flood jumped up and shouted, "Wait, Cooligan, wait, you fool!"

The police captain let his hand fall away empty from his holster. He felt tenderly of his jaw.

"Before we're through," he said softly to Marty, "you and I will have a little heart-to-heart talk."

"Suits me," Marty told him.

Flood waved his hand impatiently. "Go with Captain Cooligan. He'll take you to see a suspect. If you identify her, the rest of the money is yours."

Marty started for the front door.

"This way," Cooligan said sourly, leading the way out the side door. They went down the back way and got into Cooligan's squad car, which was waiting in the side street. Daly was driving.

"Over to Eastman's house," Cooligan ordered.

In five minutes they pulled up in front of a sprawling house upon the Hill, in Hampton City's exclusive residential section.

Marty scowled at sight of the police car which was already parked in front of the house. A uniformed patrolman was on duty in the foyer, and he opened the front door for them.

"Did the D. A. get here yet?" Cooligan demanded.

"Yes, sir. Assistant District Attorney Wilson is in there with Lieutenant Turk, questioning the woman. Her husband, Mr. Eastman, is in there with them."

Cooligan nodded, and led the way into the sitting room at the left.

Lenore Eastman was sitting straight and taut in a high-backed chair, her face pale and her eyes hunted. She was still wearing her

dark green evening dress. Apparently the police had got here directly on her heels.

The district attorney was standing over her on one side, and the police lieutenant on the other, while Oliver Eastman, bald-headed and a little corpulent, was standing at the window, nervously smoking a cigar.

As Cooligan and Marty entered, the district attorney was saying: "Now why do you think anyone would deliberately take your car from in front of the Apollo Theatre and drive it to the Russian Tavern and leave it there, Mrs. Eastman? Isn't that a rather thin story?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Wilson," she answered. "But someone else drove my car there. I never did."

She was about to say something else when she saw Marty Quade. She seemed to congeal all over, and a terrified, beaten look came into her eyes. She was thinking that he had turned on her, too.

Cooligan stepped to the middle of the room, grinning crookedly.

"All right, Wilson," he said. "We'll break this case right here and now!" He motioned to Marty, "Okay. Do your stuff."

Marty stepped deliberately over to Lenore Eastman's chair. He studied her carefully for a full minute, then walked around to get a side view, as if he were looking at a model.

Cooligan was explaining triumphantly to District Attorney Wilson, "This guy saw Nash killed. He saw the woman do it. We've got her cold!"

He turned to Marty. "All right, you've had long enough. Identify her, and let's get it over with!"

"Why, no," Marty Quade said deliberately. "This lady is not the person who killed Nash!"

CHAPTER IV

TURNABOUT TACTICS

IF SOMEONE had come up and exploded a giant firecracker behind Captain Cooligan, the effect would not have been more startling. For a moment he stood there, rigid, as if turned to stone.

As for Lenore Eastman, a glad light came into her eyes, and her head rose. From over at the window, Oliver Eastman exclaimed: "By Jove, this settles it! Your own witness fails to identify Lenore. Get out of my house, Cooligan. And you, Wilson, too! If she says she was at the movies, that's where she was. Someone is trying to frame her—and very awkwardly, too!"

By this time, Cooligan had recovered from his shock. His face looked as if a thunderstorm were sweeping across it. He stepped forward and gripped Marty's arm.

"You punk—"

"Take your hand off me," Marty said quietly.

"Down to headquarters!" Cooligan roared. "We'll make you sing down there."

Marty lifted up his left foot and kicked Cooligan hard in the shin. The police captain jumped with the sudden pain, and let go of Marty's arm.

Marty stepped back, and his hand flicked up and down from his shoulder holster. It appeared with an automatic. He swung it to cover Cooligan, Lieutenant Turk, and District Attorney Wilson.

"Good-bye gentlemen," he said softly, and backed toward a French window. It was unlocked, and he pushed it open, then stepped through on to the verandah.

Cooligan let out a roar like a bull, and dashed after him.

Marty fired one shot into the floor at the captain's feet, stopping him short. Then Marty ducked along the verandah toward the rear of the house. There was another window here, opening into the room next to the sitting room. He stepped swiftly through it, into darkness. He closed and locked the window, then flattened himself against the wall.

He heard Cooligan and the others racing out across the verandah, and spreading out, around, the grounds.

"Run the car around in front," Cooligan shouted, "and turn the headlights on. He can't get far."

Peering out, Marty saw the flashlights of the searchers quartering the lawn. He smiled thinly in the darkness and put his automatic away. Then he felt his way across the room to the door which connected with the sitting room. This was a library, and he felt rows and rows of books along the entire wall. When he reached the door, he turned the knob carefully and inched it open.

Oliver Eastman and his wife were alone in the next room. Over and above the sounds of the searchers out on the lawn their voices rose in heated altercation.

"You know damned well, Lenore," Eastman was saying, "that you never go to the movies. Maybe you can make the police think you were at the Apollo Theatre tonight. But not me. I know where you were. You were at that Russian Tavern all night!"

"What makes you so sure?" She taunted. "Is it because you were there, too?"

"You went there to meet that young interne, Nash. You've been meeting him regularly!"

"Suppose I was!"

"Then you admit it?"

"Yes!" she exclaimed defiantly. "Yes, I admit it. But what about you? When I married you, I told you I didn't love you. I was starring in a burlesque show. They called me the strip-tease queen. But I was making a living.

"You kept after me, till I said I'd marry you. You told me you had a prosperous newspaper and that you had a high position here in the community. You said you'd make me love you, if I only gave you a chance and, married you."

"That's, true. And Lord knows, I've tried hard enough."

“Tried!” she exclaimed scornfully. “You never told me that you were the town’s leading blackmailer. You never told me that your newspaper’s prosperity was based on ads that were secured through blackmailing!”

“Lenore!” Oliver Eastman’s voice was hoarse. “What are you saying? What do you mean? What’s this about blackmailing?”

“Don’t make me laugh, Oliver Eastman. Everybody in Hampton City knows how you get your ads. They hate you for the things you’ve done. You have political power, too—gained through blackmail. Captain Cooligan is in your power. So is District Attorney Wilson. Do you think you fooled me by the way you acted just now when they were questioning me? You pretended to defend me. But I know they wouldn’t even be here if you hadn’t ordered them to do it!”

MARTY pushed the door open another fraction of an inch and peered through the crack. He saw Oliver Eastman’s face. It was lined and drawn, and his eyes were pools of misery.

“Lenore!” he exclaimed. He came across the room and seized both her arms, and looked into her face.

“What’s this you’re saying? What’s this about blackmail?”

“As if you didn’t know! I never mentioned it to you, because I was afraid—of what you might do. But after what’s happened tonight, I’m not afraid any more—Yes, I was at the Russian Tavern with Tony Nash. But you killed him. You were waiting in your car, down the road for the chance to come in and crow over me. But we fooled you. I got away. So you came home.

“But it was *you* who killed him. You stabbed him and then drove away, and phoned Cooligan to come and arrest me. But you waited too long. You wanted me to suffer for a couple of hours. But you gave me enough time to get a detective from New York. That man who was just here was Marty Quade.

He’s put a spoke in your wheels already, hasn’t he?”

She paused, flushed and out of breath. “Now you can call your police back—before they kill Marty Quade. Tell them to arrest me. Tell them I admit being at the Russian Tavern. Go on, give me the works!”

Oliver Eastman had listened to her with a stupid and uncomprehending look on his face. When she was finished, he seemed more dazed than ever.

“Lenore! There’s been some terrible misunderstanding. I swear to you I never blackmailed anyone in my life. And I wasn’t even near the Russian Tavern tonight. I didn’t have my car today at all. I left it at the office, and walked home.

“Lenore, you *must* believe me. I don’t care what you’ve done. I love you. I’ve seen you grow cold toward me, and I thought I had failed to make you happy. But I never suspected that you’d been listening to lies.”

“I wish I could believe you,” she said, looking up at him desperately. “I wish I could believe you!”

Marty Quade pushed the door wide open and stepped into the room. He smiled at the startled faces they both turned toward him.

“I think you can believe him, Mrs. Eastman,” he said. “I think your husband is an honest man. So damned honest that he didn’t even guess what was going on around him!”

“You mean—someone else has been doing the blackmailing?”

Marty nodded. He took out the small black notebook he had taken from the pocket of the murdered Tony Nash. He flipped through the pages.

“Nash was working for the blackmail ring. He got a lot of calls on the hospital ambulance—calls that were supposed to be confidential. Professional ethics. But Nash didn’t care about ethics.

“He reported all his information to Toby Flood and Flood proceeded to put screws to the victims. Here—” he put his finger on an

item on one of the pages— “Nash kept a record in here of the money he made. Here’s an entry under December 22. \$200—*G. F. matter.*”

Marty looked at Eastman. “Did you get any ads around the end of December, from anyone whose initials were G. F.?”

The newspaper publisher snapped his fingers. “Of course! The Godfrey Farnam Machine Tool corporation. They have a big factory just outside of town. They’re busy with government orders. I wondered why they wanted to run a full page ad every month. But Toby Flood said it was an educational campaign.”

Marty grunted. “Educational, hell! It was blackmail!”

Eastman looked thoughtful. “Come to think of it, there was some rumor about Farnam’s daughter, back in December. She was going to be married, and she’d been out all night at a roadhouse with a young doctor—”

“Tony Nash!” Lenore Eastman exclaimed. “That was how Tony made his extra money! By compromising women.”

Marty Quade nodded. “And he got that twenty thousand dollars from Toby Flood by threatening to expose him. Toby promised him another thirty thousand, so he could leave the country. But Flood paid off with a knife in the back instead of cash!”

“If we could only prove that!” Lenore exclaimed.

OLIVER EASTMAN dropped into a chair, and put his head in his hands. “I’ve been made a fool of!” he groaned. “Toby Flood has made me a fool and a criminal. No wonder people stopped saying hello to me in the street. No wonder I was left alone at the club. Damn him, I’ll—I’ll kill him—”

“Take it easy,” said Marty. “There’s a better way—prove he did it all without your knowledge.”

“But how? No one will believe I didn’t know what was going on.”

“Leave it to me,” said Marty.

The searchers out on the lawn were shouting to each other, and their voices grew louder as they approached the house.

“He got away!” Cooligan was yelling. “Let’s get to a phone and put an alarm on the short wave. We’ll pick him up.”

Marty grinned. “Here come the wolfhounds. Where’s your phone?”

“In there,” Eastman said. “In the library. Where can you hide?”

“In the library,” Marty said. “But—but Cooligan will want to use the phone.” “Exactly. That’s what I want him to do.”

“He’ll catch you—”

“He could do worse than catch me,” Marty said. “He could catch the measles. Send him in. I want to talk to him—in private.”

He left them perplexed and frightened, and stepped into the dark library. He closed the door and switched on the light. Then taking out his automatic, he stationed himself behind the door. He heard Cooligan, Wilson and Turk come storming into the next room.

“Where’s your phone?” Cooligan demanded.

“In—in the library,” Marty heard Lenore say weakly.

A moment later the door was pushed open, and Cooligan strode in, looking for the phone.

Marty kicked the door shut, and turned the catch. Then he leaned with his back to it, his automatic pointing at the police captain.

Cooligan whirled at the sound of the closing door. He saw Marty, and his face flushed a deep brick red. He took a step forward, and stopped with the muzzle of Marty’s automatic a foot from his chest.

“Back up and sit down in that chair,” Marty said, very low.

Cooligan glared at him. “You’re piling up plenty of grief for yourself, mister,” he growled. “For two cents I’d jump that gun—”

“Don’t do it—yet,” Marty said. “Let’s talk first. Sit down.”

Cooligan backed up and felt for the chair.

He lowered himself into it, holding himself taut, ready for the slightest chance.

"Listen," he said. "Whoever you are, you can't get away with what you're trying to do. You took money from Flood, and then crossed him. You made a monkey out of me in front of Wilson, the D. A. What do you think is going to happen to you when we get you downstairs in headquarters?"

Marty sighed. "Are you interested in nabbing the murderer of Nash—or just in pinning it on Lenore Eastman?"

Cooligan dropped his eyes. "She killed him. It's open and shut. All we need is your identification. Boy, if you didn't have the drop on me, I'd really go to work on you. You'd identify her, all right. There are ways of—"

Captain Cooligan's eyes became wide and round. His mouth remained open in utter amazement—because he couldn't believe what he was seeing.

For Marty Quade had snapped off the catch of his automatic, and reversed it. Then he threw it in a gentle arc into Cooligan's lap.

"Catch!" he said.

AUTOMATICALLY, Cooligan's hand went up and caught the automatic. But his mouth remained open a moment longer. He looked incredulously at the gun, and then up at Marty, who remained leaning against the door. The police captain wet his lips.

"You must be crazy," he said.

"No, not crazy, Cooligan. I just have faith in my judgment. I've sized you up, and I'm gambling on being right. You have my gun. You can go to work on me any time you like, now. Only I want you to listen to me first. I could have made you listen at the point of the gun. I prefer it this way."

"I don't get it," Cooligan muttered. "But go ahead."

"My name isn't Smith, of course. I'm Marty Quade."

"Quade! Of course! I thought you looked familiar. I've seen your picture in the

papers—"

"Never mind that. We've got to talk fast. I've sized you up as an honest cop, Cooligan, in spite of the fact that you work for Toby Flood."

"Thanks," Cooligan said bitterly. "It's a long time since anyone has called me an honest cop."

"That's what I thought. Flood has something on you, hasn't he? Something that gives him the power to make a crook out of you."

The police captain grunted. "Skip that. Let's hear what else you have to say."

"No," Marty insisted. "Let's not skip it. This is your chance to become an honest cop again. Let's you and I work together. You know damned well that Lenore Eastman didn't kill Nash. Help me on that, and I'll help you on the other thing—whatever it is. I'll help you break Flood's hold over you."

Cooligan laughed harshly. "It can't be done, Quade. My son—my only boy—is going to law school. It's his last year. Soon he'll come up for his bar exams. But two years ago he forged a check. Flood cashed it for him. Flood has the check. He can put my boy in jail, can ruin his career. Do you understand?"

Marty nodded. "I understand. Suppose you go in and explain to Lenore Eastman that you're framing her for murder—sending her to the electric chair—in order to save your son's career. How about your own son? Would he accept the sacrifice of a woman's life—so he could become a lawyer? Does he know what you're doing for him?"

Cooligan buried his head in his hands. "Heaven help me, I don't know what to do!" he groaned.

"I can tell you what to do," Marty said. "Act the way you'd act if it was your own career that was at stake. Would you dirty your hands with blackmail, and with framing innocent women—just to save your own hide?"

Cooligan raised his head. "Damn it, no!"

"Maybe your son made a mistake. He was young. But if he's anything like his old man, he wouldn't want you doing things for him that you wouldn't do for yourself. Why not try it the other way? Let's see if we can't pull Flood's teeth. If we succeed, you can hold your head up again, like a man. If we fail—" Marty spread his hands—"it's the kind of gamble every man must make at least once in his life!"

For a long time, Cooligan sat there, looking up at Marty Quade. He sat there so long that one might have thought he was a stone image—except for the globules of sweat that beaded his forehead. His knuckles shone white as he gripped the automatic. Then he slowly rose from the chair. Deliberately, he came close to Marty. The two men were almost the same height. Their eyes met on a level.

Cooligan reversed the automatic and handed it to Marty.

"Here's your gun, Quade," he said huskily. "I'm with you—all the way."

Marty smiled. Their eyes still meeting, the two men clasped hands in a hard, firm handshake.

CHAPTER V

SHAKEDOWN SHAMBLES

AT TWO o'clock in the morning, the rush had let up a little at the *News-Journal* building. The paper was put to bed, the copy desk was deserted except for one man, and the staff had largely gone home.

Toby Flood was smoking furiously at a cigar as he leaned over his desk, playing with a key ring on which there were three safety deposit keys. He picked up the phone and barked: "Get me Captain Cooligan!"

In a moment he had his connection with police headquarters, which was only a block away.

"Cooligan! What are you doing about the Eastman woman? Have you got an alarm out for that fellow, Smith?"

"I'm doing everything I can," Cooligan's voice came over the phone. "And I think I can put my hands on Smith in a few minutes. In fact, I'm sure of it."

"All right. When you get him, don't book him. Bring him here to my office."

"Okay."

"And you better not fail, Cooligan. This is one thing where it wouldn't be nice for you to fail."

"You can depend on it," Cooligan said. "Smith will be in your office within the hour."

Flood grunted, and hung up. Almost at once, the inter-office phone rang.

"It's Mr. Eastman, sir," said the switchboard operator. "He wants to see you at once."

"Eastman? He wants me to go to his house?"

"No, sir. He's here. In his office. He wants to see you in there immediately."

"All right." Flood hung up, a twisted smile on his face. He got up from behind the desk, took a small pistol from the top drawer and put it in his pocket. Then he went out. He walked down the row of offices till he came to the last one. It was marked: *Mr. Eastman, Private.*

He knocked perfunctorily, and walked right in.

Oliver Eastman was pacing up and down, with a worried frown.

"Look here, Flood," he said. "My wife is in trouble. They say she killed Tony Nash. Cooligan and Wilson were at my house, questioning her. They brought a fellow named Smith, but he failed to identify her. But they may arrest her before morning. We've got to do something."

Flood shrugged. "I'm afraid there's nothing we can do."

"How about Cooligan? I understand you have influence with him. Can't you call him

off?"

"Call him off? I'm afraid not, Mr. Eastman. It looks bad for your wife, from what I can learn."

"Isn't there anything we can do?" Eastman demanded. "Isn't there some way out?"

Flood assumed a very judicious expression. "There's only one way out that I can see."

"Yes?" Eastman said, with an appearance of eagerness.

"If you were to sell out your interest in the *News-Journal*, and move to some other city, I think the case against your wife could be quashed. I could guarantee it."

"Sell out?" Eastman repeated, frowning. "Where would I find a buyer? The paper is worth almost a quarter of a million."

"Well, that's a lot of money. If the price were low enough, I might buy it. Say, fifty thousand dollars."

"Fifty thousand! Good Lord, Flood, no one knows better than you how much it's worth."

"It's worth every bit of a quarter of a million. But I can only pay fifty thousand."

"I could sell it in the open market for a hundred thousand."

"But that wouldn't help you get your wife out of the jam she's in."

"I see," Eastman said, quietly. "It's a holdup."

Flood shrugged. "Call it anything you like. That's my offer. Fifty thousand, and your wife goes free."

"I'll let you know in the morning," Eastman said.

FLOOD turned on his heel and went out. He made his way back to his own office, a smug look on his face. But when he opened the door, the smug look vanished.

Marty Quade was sitting at the desk, an automatic trained on Flood's stomach.

"Come in," Marty invited pleasantly.

Slowly, Flood entered the room. Marty got

up from the chair, went over and locked the door.

"What are you going to do?" Flood asked.

"Kill you," Marty said seriously.

Flood laughed. "You'd go to the electric chair. You must have been seen coming in. They'll hear the shot outside—"

"Sure they'll hear the shot," Marty admitted. "Sure I was seen coming in. But I won't go to the electric chair. No jury in this town would convict me. Not when I prove to them what a blackmailing skunk you were."

"How are you going to prove it?" Flood asked, sitting down behind his desk.

"Keep your hands in sight," Marty warned. "I don't want you buzzing for help." He clicked off the safety catch. In the silence of the room, that little *click* was an ominous and deadly sound.

"Now wait a minute," Flood said hastily. "What the hell do you want to kill me for? You can make a lot of dough with me. I gave you a thousand already. You could have got four thousand more by identifying the Eastman woman as the one who murdered Nash."

"You know damned well she didn't murder Nash. And you know damned well that what I know is worth fifty grand. You pulled a fast one on me before, when you buzzed for Cooligan to come in. You only gave me a grand, and you thought you had me in a spot where I'd be forced to identify the Eastman woman. But I put it over on you.

"Now, suppose I go to the D. A. and tell him who really killed Nash? Suppose I tell them how you borrowed Oliver Eastman's car and drove out to the Russian Tavern? Suppose I tell them how you climbed up on the lean-to roof, and reached the bedroom? Suppose I tell them how you knifed Tony Nash, and then climbed out again, drove a mile or two away, and phoned the cops?"

"You had a little delay there, because Cooligan had been called away from headquarters on another case, and you didn't

want anyone else handling it. So you waited till Cooligan got back, then tipped him off to go out there and find the dead body. You also tipped him that Lenore Eastman would be in the room. You knew she was still there, because you'd been watching the Tavern."

Toby Flood's face was tight and set. "How do you know all this? Were you watching me?"

"Can you think of any other way I'd know it?"

"You couldn't have guessed—about me borrowing Eastman's car. Or about my parking on the road till I made sure Cooligan had come."

Suddenly, Flood stood up. "Look here, Smith—or whatever your name is—tonight is your lucky night. You saw something by accident that you should never have seen. But it won't do you much good.

"Try and tell your story to Cooligan, or to the D. A. Do you know what will happen to you? You'll be arrested, and then you'll be shot—'while attempting to escape.' I've got plenty of power in this town. Nash isn't the first man who tried to chisel on me, and got his.

"Take it from me, it's better to work *with* me. I'll give you twenty-five grand. You identify the Eastman woman as the killer of Nash. And I'll give you a job here, at two thousand a month. I'm buying this paper tomorrow. You and I can make a lot of money together."

"H'm!" said Marty. "It would be a damned good proposition—if you hadn't murdered Tony Nash. I don't like murder."

"You fool!" Flood barked. "Do you think I'd be offering you such a proposition if I hadn't killed Nash? Not that you could prove it, mind you. But I've got big things planned, and I don't want trouble right now."

"Yes, sir," said Marty Quade. "Trouble is just what you're going to get!"

He went to the door, unlocked it, and pulled it open.

"Come right in, captain," he called.

Captain Cooligan walked into the office. Marty closed the door and locked it again.

"Captain Cooligan," he said, "I ask you to arrest this man, Toby Flood, for the murder of Nash. He has just admitted it to me, with all the details, and his motive."

TOBY FLOOD was leaning over the desk, snarling with anger. "He's crazy, Cooligan. I never told him a thing. He's mad. Better put the handcuffs on him. Take that gun away from him."

"Now take it easy," Cooligan advised. He turned to Marty. "What's this you tell me? Mr. Toby Flood confessed to murdering Nash?"

"That's right. And he offered me fifty thousand dollars and a job at two grand a month—to keep my mouth shut."

"Ridiculous!" spat Flood. "Prove it!"

"That's easy," said Marty. He stepped over to the desk, and pulled open the bottom drawer. The dictograph in there was working merrily along, recording everything that had been said in the office.

"I spliced the wires while Eastman kept you talking, in his office," Marty explained. "It's your own dictograph, Flood. You ought to know how well it works. Think there'll be any trouble proving your confession to a jury?"

Flood reached frantically to snatch at the wax cylinder in the machine. Marty seized his wrist, yanked him away from the desk, shoving him into Cooligan's arms. Cooligan deftly snapped a pair of bracelets on him.

"Damn you, Cooligan," Flood snarled, "this will finish your son. I still have that check."

"And a lot of other papers," Marty said softly. "We want them."

"To hell with you! If I go to jail, this whole town will be on its ear. I have enough stuff on the people of Hampton City to blast the town wide open. Plenty of others will ride with me!"

Marty sighed. He looked at Cooligan meaningly.

The big captain seized hold of Flood's arms, raised them in the air, holding him helpless, while Marty went through Flood's pockets. He found the key ring with the safe-deposit keys.

"Ah!" said Marty.

"It won't do you any good," Flood sneered. "You can't open those boxes without me."

He stopped as he saw Marty fingering through the small black note-book which he had taken from the dead body of Nash. Marty started reading initials—the initials of people whom Nash had delivered to Flood for blackmailing.

"Stop me if you recognize any of them, Cooligan," he said.

At the tenth set of initials, Cooligan said: "Hey. J. S. Did you say, J. S.?"

"That's what I said."

Cooligan grinned. "That would be Judge Jasper Shipley, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court."

"Ah!" said Marty.

He found the phone book, looked up a number. Then he lifted the receiver and gave the number to the operator. "Keep ringing," he said. "It's Judge Shipley's home. He's probably asleep."

It took several minutes before he got his connection. He put his mouth close to the

mouthpiece and talked earnestly for five minutes.

"The judge is coming right over. He's going to sign an order permitting the police to open the safe-deposit boxes. All the papers will be brought to him. And you, Cooligan, and the judge and I, will destroy every damned one of them."

Cooligan breathed a sigh of relief. He turned to Toby Flood, who had the desperate look of a cornered rat.

"Come on, mister," he growled. "Some of the boys down at headquarters will want to have a little talk with you!"

"Go easy on him," Marty warned. "Keep him in one piece, so he can stand trial."

"We'll treat him *damned* gentle!" Cooligan said. "How about you, Quade? Want to come down and sit in?"

"No, thanks," Marty grinned. "I have to go tell Oliver that he owns his paper again, and Lenore to be a good girl from now on. Then I have to go over to the parking lot and pick up twenty grand that nobody in the world is going to claim. Not a bad fee for a night's work!"

"I never begrudged a private dick his fee less than I do this one!" Cooligan said fervently.

"Damn you both!" Flood said, in a broken voice.