

# Six Tricks Make a Corpse



By V. E. Thiessen

**M**orning light streamed in the window, touched the firm edge of Michael Munsen's jaw, and ran down his arm to the desk, where his fingers were absently palming the ace of spades.

Across the table Harry Service watched the card with fascinated eyes. It disappeared, appeared fleetingly, its center fiercely black in the sunlight, then disappeared again.

"You're good, damned good!" Service

said gustily. He shifted one elegantly creased trouser leg over another, and raised eyes that were like bits of broken green glass to look at Michael.

"You're prepared to pay the price?" Michael asked.

"Certainly, boy. Any amount within reason."

Michael Munsen lifted eyes as large and brown and sad as a spaniel's, and said, "I don't mean money, Harry."

"What do you mean?" Harry Service's face showed bewilderment.

"Let me get it straight," Michael said. "You suspect one of your crowd has been cheating at cards?"

"That's right."

"I take it you're accustomed to playing for high stakes?"

"Too high," Service confessed.

"What game do you play?" Michael asked.

"Bridge. Sometimes we play a bit of poker, but mostly we play bridge."

Michael flipped the ace onto the center of the desk, and stared at the trademark. He said, "It's an unpleasant business, looking for cheaters. Once I found the cheat, I'd have to expose him. A lot of times the truth isn't what people think, and a lot of times it isn't pleasant. That's what I meant when I asked if you were willing to pay the price."

"I want the truth," Harry Service said viciously. "I'm prepared to pay to find the truth."

"Whom do you suspect?"

"I'd rather not say. But he'll be there this afternoon, at our clubhouse on the lake. You can come as my guest, and keep your eyes open. Is it agreed?"

Michael Munsen sighed. He began to shuffle the cards expertly, dealt thirteen cards in front of the other man.

"This is your hand," he said. "The opponents' bidding goes through four no-

trump to six hearts. What do you bid?"

SERVICE laughed, like a father laughs at a child's foolish question. "I'd double, of course. I have two aces. They can afford to lose only one trick."

Michael gathered the cards together. His eyes, dwelling on Service's face, seemed sadder than before. "You're not going to like the truth, Mr. Service."

"Why not? What are you getting at with this mummery with the cards, and why the sudden formality? Confound it, Michael, if I know my own daughter you're almost one of the family right now."

A tightness grew in Michael's chest. "Maybe you don't know your own daughter."

Service's green eyes narrowed. He leaned forward, peering across the desk. "What's the matter? You and Patricia have a little disagreement?"

"Yes." The ace of spades began to dart in and out of Michael's fingers again, like a bird flashing between boughs.

"Well, you can patch it up. I'll bring Pat to the clubhouse this afternoon."

"Don't be a fool," Michael said tautly. "She knows her own mind."

Service grinned, and got up from his chair. "See you at four this afternoon," he said. He moved toward the door, then paused and looked back. "Oh yes," he said, "I forgot to tell you Roy Tate will be there." He smiled at Michael and went out.

Michael stared after Service a moment, then he cupped his hand about a match and drew smoke from a fresh cigarette.

Why in the name of the seven gods of luck did Harry have to meddle in his daughter's affairs? Michael's investigation would be unpleasant enough without Patricia being present. Tate would be there too. "Messy," he thought, "messy." He drew a breath of cigarette smoke, let it out

again in a slow swirl. Then he turned back to his office.

**M**ICHAEL was surprised at his first glimpse of the clubhouse on the lake. He had driven down in a pleasant frenzy of speed. Now the clubhouse came suddenly into view, and he was surprised to find that it was, literally, on the lake.

It perched on high pilings, a hundred feet out into the lake, like some huge brown wading crane. It was roughly square, and except for the large area of casement windows, was stained brown. From its entrance a narrow ramp arched shoreward. A sign at the shore end of the ramp said simply:

HAMMERHEAD CLUB—PRIVATE

Michael pulled his car to the side of the road, parked it under an elm tree, and began to walk up the narrow ramp toward the clubhouse. He was halfway there when the door opened and Harry Service's voice shouted, "Come on in, Mike. Glad you could make it."

Service's face, Michael noted, was flushed, either from drink or gambling. When he came into the room, Michael suspected it was the latter.

Four men were grouped around a poker table, playing bridge. Behind the group, on the divan in the corner, sat Patricia Service. She was a long-legged, smooth-appearing girl, with hair the color of maple syrup.

Harry Service said, "Here, Mike, meet the boys." Michael shook hands with them in turn. Roy Tate said, "I know Munsen," and did not offer his hand.

"You and Pat can cut in next rubber," Harry said. "Come on, boys, it's Sam's deal."

Sam Humble began to deal. Humble was a middle-aged, smooth-faced man.

Michael watched him for an instant as he sat on the divan. The other man, Steve Brogan, was florid-complexioned, a few years younger than Humble. Michael said, without looking at Patricia, "Mighty cool out on the lake like this. They have a nice little place."

"Very nice indeed. Did Dad tell you how they got it?"

Her voice was so soft that it fooled Michael. He looked at her, wondering about this truce between them. "No, Harry didn't mention any of the place's history," he said.

"They built it. Get that, Michael Munsen, these men are all big business men. Yet they weren't too proud to build this—with their own hands!"

Michael said, "I wouldn't be ashamed to work with my hands—wouldn't be ashamed to work in your Dad's factory. But it's not my line, Pat."

"And what is your line?" Her voice was a fierce whisper. "This playing at detective?"

"It's not exactly play," Michael said.

"It's not exactly a steady job either. It's not a job a person could depend on." Her eyes were pleading.

Michael said flatly. "A man has to choose his own job. You should know that, Pat."

**S**HE gave a tiny snort. Its main ingredients, Michael noted, were hurt and disbelief. It seemed a fitting finale to the conversation. Michael began to watch the card game without seeming to do so. After a time it became obvious that Sam Humble was winning; it was also obvious that he would always win.

"Six hearts," Humble said softly.

"Double," Service shot out.

There were two passes, and Humble said even more softly, "Redouble."

Michael walked over to the table to

watch the hand come down. As his partner's hand was spread, Humble said, "Nice hand, Roy. I think we'll make it. How about fixing a round of drinks."

"Sure." Roy Tate watched the first tricks fall, then went into a small room to the rear of the card table. Michael heard the sound of a refrigerator door, and glasses clinking.

Humble drew in the last trick, making the bid. "Game and rubber," he said. "How about another?"

"Not for me." Service hoisted himself from the table.

Michael murmured, following, "Humble is the man you suspect. He wins often, doesn't he?"

"Too often. What does he do?"

"Brace yourself. He wins because the rest of you play stinking bridge. He doesn't need to cheat."

Service's face began to look as though it were shot full of beet juice.

"Confound you, Mike—" he began hotly.

What he would have said remained a mystery to Michael. There was a splintering crash from the kitchen, the sound of glasses breaking, and then a heavier thud, as something heavy hit the floor.

"What the—!" Service's anger became amazement. There was a general rush for the kitchen door.

Inside the kitchen Roy Tate lay huddled against the refrigerator. Broken glass lay at his feet, and a thin trickle of liquor oozed from one of the fragments. There was no sign of injury on Tate's body, no sign at all except the color of his face. It had an odd blue tinge.

First to reach him, Service raised amazed eyes to the group. "Dead," he said. "His heart must have stopped like that." He snapped his fingers, and the sound was oddly loud and indecent in the silence.

"He didn't have a weak heart," Humble said.

The fourth man of the bridge foursome, Steve Brogan, stood staring at the dead man's face. He said suddenly, inconsequentially, "I saw a man with a face like that, once. He had just been struck by lightning."

The silence of a moment before would have seemed noisy now. Michael stepped to the window and looked out at the ramp, then up at the sky.

The ramp rose, bare and deserted. There was no sign of any other presence near the lake. High in the West, the Sun was a ball of brass in a cloudless sky.

Behind him, Michael heard Patricia gasp, turn, and stumble away, fighting the shock. He had the almost uncontrollable desire to put an arm around her clear brown shoulders and murmur words of comfort. For an instant the veins in his temples stood out as he steeled himself.

Then he moved quietly to the telephone and began to dial.

**F**IRST to arrive after Michael's calls was a nearby doctor. He had hardly more than glanced at the body when the siren-topped homicide car shrieked alongside the lake and two men came up the ramp.

Sergeant Key, in charge, herded the group into seats around the divan. The other man, a medical examiner, joined the civilian doctor in a check of the body.

Moments later the examiner came out of the kitchen, stared at Sergeant Key. "Funny thing," he said. "There seem to be no loose connections, no electrical equipment, yet this man has been electrocuted."

"Get the car to radio for an electrical expert," Key directed. "Then come back and help me."

The routine, Michael noted, was

normal. They were not permitted to talk about the incident, and Sergeant Key took them one by one to the car outside for questioning.

Michael himself was last to be questioned. Sergeant Key sat beside him in the police car, queried, "Your name, address and occupation."

"Name, Michael Munsen; address Thirty Sunset Drive, occupation, confidential investigator."

Key scribbled in his notebook. Then he looked up. "I've heard of you," he said softly. "Specialize in crooked gambling exposes."

"Yeah," Michael said.

"If you're clear, we'd appreciate your help; Look at this." Key passed the notebook on to Michael. "Can you add to that?"

The dead man, according to Key's thin, crabbed handwriting, was Roy Rogers Tate, technician at Station XVP, an experimental television station now under construction.

Sam Humble was a salesman, dealing in electrical specialty sales to big concerns. Steve Brogan was the owner of a radio retail and repair shop in the downtown district. Harry Service was listed as a radio manufacturer. His daughter Patricia had just graduated from college, lived with her father. All the group lived in one of the better residential districts on the west side of town.

"I can't add much," Michael said. "I knew Tate, and I came here as guest of Mr. Service."

Sergeant Key grunted, peered at Michael. "I understand they play for pretty high stakes. Your visit. Was it business?"

"It was business," Michael said.

"Anything I ought to know?"

"Yes," Michael said. "Sam Humble plays fine, correct bridge. Steve Brogan plays what we call poker bridge, bids

psychics, likes to bid a little too high. Harry Service plays by the book, but bucks the odds a lot of times because he doesn't know any better. The dead man, Tate, played spotty bridge, sometimes fair, sometimes terrible. He was lazy, thoughtless."

"I didn't mean that," Key grunted. "Any cheating?"

"No!"

"About yourself," Key murmured. "I understand there had been bad blood between you and Tate. How about it?"

MICHAEL frowned. "In my business you make a lot of enemies," Michael said. "Last fall old man Tate thought Roy was playing too much poker, suspected he might be a sucker for somebody. He had me check up. There was some funny business, all right. Roy was running in marked cards."

Key lifted an eyebrow. "You exposed him?"

"I warn my clients. I hate a chiseler." Michael's eyes were suddenly no longer liquid, they were frozen stone.

Key asked abruptly, "Are you in love with Patricia Service?"

Michael held his face wooden while amazement tingled through him. "What business is that of yours?"

"I guess that's answer enough. It doesn't leave you too clean."

"What in blazes do you mean?"

"I mean Roy Tate was annoying Patricia Service. He was after her to get her to go week-ending with him."

Michael felt his fists knotting, straightened them with an effort.

Key said, "I guess that's all, Munsen. We'll have to search you, of course."

Michael submitted. Bored, he watched familiar objects come into view. Cigarettes, silver cigarette lighter, pen-style flashlight.

Surprise stiffened his muscles. Key looked at him and then at the small flash. "Didn't want me to find this, eh?" he said.

"It isn't mine. I don't know how it got there."

Michael's mind was racing wildly. He had been careless, the surprise of Tate's death had stopped his watchfulness. Someone had slipped the pen light into his pocket.

"Hey, Key!" the shout from the cabin reverberated over the water. "Come here."

Key finished listing the contents of Michael's pocket, dropped the pen light carefully into an envelope and put them in his pocket. Herding Michael before him, he started up the ramp.

**I**NSIDE an amazed group of people were looking at the kitchen. One of the cabinet doors was open and a tangle of radio parts showed inside.

A man in coveralls, the electrician caned by the police, looked up as Sergeant Key entered. He pointed with a screwdriver when he had Sergeant Key's attention. He exclaimed:

"You are looking at the most diabolical little booby trap I have ever seen. The photo-electric cell here actuates a relay, closing a connection with the electrical power of the house. That makes the stainless steel edging of the sink as dangerous as a bare power line. If a man were leaning over the sink and touching the water faucet as a ground, he wouldn't even know what hit him."

"If it hadn't been for the color of his face," the medical examiner said, "we might have passed it off as heart failure."

"Is the device safe now?" Key asked.

"Yes, until somebody actuates the relay."

Key picked the pen light out of his pocket, clicked the switch. Now light became visible. He grunted, knelt on his

knees and pointed the light at the mechanism. He pushed the button, and the relay clicked. He shut off the light, and the mechanism became harmless again.

Key looked at the group. "It's funny. Usually a thing like this is easy to solve. Not many men could rig a trap like that. But everyone of you uses tools, and everyone of you are mixed up in technical electrical work except Munsen. The only man in the crowd with the motive and the weapon couldn't have rigged the trap."

Harry Service opened his mouth. His face looked grey. He closed his mouth again.

"I was a radio operator overseas," Michael said. "I might as well tell you before Harry does."

Harry Service's face looked as though he had been slapped.

Key said, "That does it. The rest of you can go. We'll hold Munsen for a few days."

"Wait a minute. I was in the living room when he fell. How in blazes could I have flashed the light on the electric eye?" Michael asked.

Key looked at the electrician. "Did you check the wall? Are there any lights or mirrors in the wall?"

"The wall's clean. I went over it as soon as I saw this little trap," the electrician said.

Key's voice took on a tone of wonder. "Something went wrong with the mechanism, I think. At any rate, it killed, there's no doubt of that."

Patricia Service said clearly, "I don't believe it." She walked firmly through the group, looking at Michael. "What must I do? How can I help you, Michael?"

Michael said softly, "I don't know." His mind seethed and fear kept clotting his thinking. He had been sitting by Patricia. Did she slip the light into his pocket?

Another scene flashed into his mind.

Harry Service had walked beside him, arm over his shoulder, murmuring about Sam Humble's bridge.

And Michael had stood beside the table. While he was watching the cards, Humble or Brogan could have slipped the light into his pocket. His mind began a kaleidoscopic jumping. Humble was a good bridge player, Brogan played poker bridge, Service bucked the odds—the scenes from which he had drawn these conclusions were a montage in his mind.

"Come on, Munsen." Key set fingers into his arm.

And with the touch, the jumble of thoughts fell into a pattern.

"If I confess, will you let me show you something?" Michael said abruptly.

"Sure."

HE LED the way to the kitchen. "I'll need a bit of help," he said. He leaned across the sink, touched the tap. "See here. The thing is dead, not dangerous. I want one of the fellows to draw a glass of water, then drop it and fall as Tate did." He pointed at Brogan. "You'll do, Steve."

"Damned if I do," Brogan said.

"Go ahead, Brogan, give him rope," Key said.

"Come, Humble, stand right here. When I give the word, Brogan will draw the water. Now—" The tightness was filling Michael's chest. He had to be right.

Water began to cascade into the glass.

"Now," Michael said, "Humble, open the refrigerator and get some ice cubes."

Humble put his hand on the refrigerator door.

"No!" Brogan leaped away from the sink, his eyes like a wild animal's. "Don't open that!"

"Stand away from the sink, and listen," Michael ordered. He opened the refrigerator. The click of the refrigerator

latch was loud in the silence. Michael opened the door wide.

The second sound was fainter, but unmistakable. The relay clicked. With the refrigerator door open, the steel edge of the sink was electrified—a thin steel band of death. Michael closed the refrigerator and the relay clicked off.

His voice dripped a slow chill. "Nobody but our poker bridge player, our psychologist would have dreamed that one up. Brogan knew this crowd well. With that door open, the death trap is set. He knew there was only one man lazy and careless enough to leave the refrigerator door open while he mixed the drinks. The habits of Roy Tate's life made him the one sure victim. He died while Brogan sat playing at the card table."

The electrician snapped a wire on the relay, rendering it harmless, then opened the refrigerator and dug inside. After a moment he grunted. "Yeah—mechanism in the vegetable bin. The black light goes on and off with the switch that operates the regular light."

Key was behind Brogan. Suddenly, as Brogan tensed, Key caught his arm, twisted it. "Been watching you, take it easy," he said. He looked at Michael.

"Any more ideas?"

"Only guesswork," Michael said. "Brogan is prompter for the new television station. Tate worked there—maybe Tate found a rake-off of some kind—maybe embezzlement."

"We'll check on it," Key said, "And radio parts can be traced. Once you know where to look, you can always find enough." He urged Brogan out the door, and after a moment the siren began to shriek away.

Patricia Service said, "I don't think I shall ever forget this horrible day. Take me somewhere and hold me, Michael."

Michael did.