

Thrilling Detective, May, 1943

The PIN that Killed HITLER

By G. T. FLEMING-ROBERTS

*A penthouse voodoo party produces a corpse that changes
the sham horror of the evening to gruesome reality!*



McClosky pushed the business end of his gun
into Fime's middle

CHAPTER I

HEX PARTY



HE pin was a gleaming, delicately tempered sliver of steel, as long as a dagger and needle sharp. It had an ornate head of jetlike glass. It was intended for the express purpose of holding a straw sailor hat on the up-swept hair of a strawberry blonde.

The strawberry blonde was Lola Rowen. She came off the rococo stage of the Gay Nineties Club, followed by a comedy horse that was part of the act. The horse was composed of papier-mâché, glazed cambric, and a team of has-been hoofers named Wilksberry and Mike. Wilksberry, at the head end, plastered a portion of perspiring face against the peep hole in the neck of the horse.

"Take another bow, huh, Lola?" he asked huskily.

Lola Rowen paused. Out there in the dance hall, that had once been the ramped floor of a theater, the patter of applause dwindled. Then one pair of large masculine hands was clapping loudly and alone.

Lola shivered. The veil she wore with the straw sailor had lent her pretty face a misty, dreamlike quality, robbed it of its hint of disillusioned harshness. Now fear drove color from her cheeks, making her like the ghost of some grand lady from the decade of her costume.

"No," she said breathlessly to Wilksberry. "No more tonight." She hurried toward the door of the dressing room, passing the can-can girls and Georgie Dee, owner of the Gay Nineties.

"They go for you," Georgie Dee called after her. "Like the Strawberry Blonde from the movie of the same name. Yes, I think I could safely say almost like Rita Hayworth."

"That's nice of you, Georgie," she murmured, and started to take off her hat as she opened the dressing room door. At least she took out the hat pin.

The ten inch sliver of delicately tempered steel quivered like a moonbeam on water and blurred through quickly started, frightened tears. For the first time it appeared to her as something more than a pin. It was—it could be—a weapon, a deadly weapon.

She caught her lower lip in her teeth, and stood thoughtful a moment while her pulse beat high. She thrust the pin vigorously back through the hat, through her up-swept, pinkish-gold hair. Her lace-gloved hand went to the dressing room door.

MAUDE, the wardrobe mistress, came from across the room. She smiled at Lola.

"Well, dearie—"

"Maude, I'm not going to take time to change," Lola broke in hurriedly.

"Not change?" Maude looked Lola from the crown of the absurd hat and down the long tight-bodiced gown of mauve satin. "You're going out like that?"

"It won't matter," Lola answered. "I'm just going with Dick Borden to a party at Romany Scherf's."

"Richard Borden the Third!" Maude sniffed contemptuously. "One third tighter than the bark on a tree! My boy Jerry has been hacking Richard Borden oftener than any taxi driver deserves, yet never a tip does he get. If I was you, dearie, I'd see more of that nice Jonathan Pime, even if he is only a cop."

“Jonny Pime’s a dear!” The fear in Lola’s eyes was replaced by the warm light of tenderness that did not escape Maude’s shrewd glance.

“You’re in love with Jonny. Admit it, dearie.”

“I’m not sure.” Lola went over to the dressing table and stood there picking at the fingers of her gloves. “Get me my wrap, please, Maude.”

“Well, I’m sure you’re in love with him,” Maude decided. “And the more fool Jonny Pime if he can’t read it in your eyes!”

Maybe Jonny didn’t want to read it, Lola thought. She sighed, turned around, her eyes following Maude to the closet. That was how she happened to see the huge orchid bloom reposing in a crystal box balanced precariously on the hat shelf. She drew a shallow breath, crossed to the closet, reached over Maude’s head for the orchid.

Maude turned slowly, the white wrap over her arm. Her faded eyes were nested in worried wrinkles as she watched the girl lift the top of the crystal cube and take out the tiny envelope nestled next to the blossom.

“Dearie,” Maude whispered, “that’s from the wrong man. That’s why I hid it. It’s that no-good ex-husband of yours. He’s followed you here from New York.”

Lola had opened the note and her frantic eyes followed the words penned on the paper. Box and orchid slipped unheeded from her left hand and her fingers closed over the note to crumple it into her palm.

“Yes,” she whispered. “Matt’s here. He’s out in front now, Maude. He clapped after the others had stopped—his way of letting me know he’s not through hounding me.”

Maude’s colorless lips compressed.

“So that’s why you’re in such a rush.”

“Yes. I didn’t see him, but I knew he was there, out in the shadows.” Lola’s shoulders shivered as Maude helped her on with her wrap.

“You just run along, dearie,” Maud said and vigorously nodded her assurance. “If Mr. Matt Engles comes back here looking for you, I’ll fix his wagon for him!”

“You mustn’t!” Lola’s objection was quick and fearful. “Don’t antagonize him. You don’t—you can’t know what he’s like.”

“Huh! I’m too old to be scared of any man, and he’s less than that. You run on now, even if it’s got to be with Richard Borden.” Maude made a shooing motion with her gnarled, needle-pricked fingers.

DICK BORDEN was waiting at the back door of the club, a tall, lean man, square-shouldered, in his tuxedo. He had dark hair and eyes, but his skin had a fair transparency that let the blue of Borden blood show through. He stared incredulously at Lola, dressed as she was, and smiled faintly as though this was a joke he didn’t quite catch. He smiled almost entirely with his upper lip.

“You’re not going to Romany Scherf’s like that, are you?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said with just a trace of defiance. “Like this. I don’t care where we go as long as we get away from here in a hurry.”

And as she walked beside Dick Borden toward the taxi stand the June night had no warmth for her. She was shivering. . . .

Jonathan Pime knocked at the door of Romany Scherf’s penthouse apartment, then stepped a pace backward, thrusting his hands into the pockets of his tweed trousers and began whistling “A Bicycle Built for Two.” He had strong competition from the Conga music which filtered through the sound insulation. Pime

stopped whistling to knock again; again got no response and tried the knob.

The door was unlocked and Pime walked into a small reception hall. The atmosphere within was thoroughly impregnated with the fumes of rum. That and the music and the gaudy charm strings hung on either side of the living room opening made the place seem like a bad dream degeneration of the Good Neighbor policy.

A man in evening dress sat on a loveseat in the hall, tying his shoelace. He had graying black hair, a long lean nose surmounted by a pair of horn-rimmed glasses. His name was Will Gephart, but because he ran a small loans company there were people who pronounced it "Gyp-hard".

Gephart's dark eyes went over Jonathan Pime as though he was measuring him for credit. He took in the short, hard-muscled body, Pime's stolid features and the freckles that somehow contrived to make him look boyish. If the Shylock recognized Pime there was no indication.

"I knocked," Pime said, "but there were no takers."

Gephart took his hat off the loveseat. He took himself off too and stood unsteadily.

"Romany doesn't lock her door," he said. "Like the spider's parlor, you know."

Pime glanced through the opening and into the room beyond. Through the faint, unsteady yellow light he saw the bobbing shadows of hunched figures. The music was torrid, seductive and loud, and when it stopped, abruptly in mid-bar, squeals, giggles, and lusty shouts prevented anything like monotonous silence.

"Jab him one!" somebody shouted. "Heil, heel! Stick him where it hurts!"

Pime whistled as he turned to Gephart.



"I didn't kill him," Lola murmured, as Josny took her in his arms

“Sounds like refined slaughter, but what is it?”

The phonograph music was started again. Gephart shook his head and his lips tasted the bitterness of tomorrow’s hangover.

“They get louder and funnier. Romany’s putting the hex on Hitler. Why don’t you go in? I think there’s a spare blonde around somewhere. Me—I’ve had all I can take.”

He had, at that. Gephart was watching the pattern in the carpet pretty closely as he walked to the door.

Pime stepped through the opening, and in the guttering light of candles saw Romany Scherf’s guests in a Conga line that snaked around the room. He had heard that you could find anything from a literary lion to an acquitted axe murderess at Romany’s parties. She collected sinister characters as a hobby.

In the Conga line, Pime picked out her latest acquisition, Luther “Doll” McClosky, parolee from an armed robbery rap. Then there was Dr. Hall Neely, a charlatan medic who had recently been attacked by the Better Business Bureau. Pime also recognized a disbarred attorney by the name of Vance.

NOT the least sinister person in the room was Romany Scherf herself. Her tall, shapely figure poured into jade green satin, was in the background. She was like the queen of witches presiding over the Black Sabbath. Her jade-green eyes were half-closed, a Mona Lisa smile twisted her red lips. Long pointed fingernails, lacquered jade, flashed against the white flesh of folded arms. Her head was turned half to the right, concealing the jagged scar that marred an otherwise beautiful face.

Pime saw Dick Borden, the transparent skin of his face showing the flush of too

many drinks, full lips set in a sullen pout. But Pime didn’t see Lola Rowen, and just then she was the only person in the world he wanted to see.

At the end of the Conga line was a buxom blonde wearing a frothy formal. She saw Pime, gave him the eye.

“Grab on, little man, and get in on the fun,” she invited.

Pime grabbed, and watched the blonde’s feet for a moment and then went into the step that closely resembled an Indian war dance. The blonde reached back, patted Pime’s hand.

“Get yourself a pin when we pass the table,” she shrilled. “But be careful where you stick it!”

“‘Pin’,” Pime asked. “What for?”

She giggled.

“Kill Hitler, honey. *Heil*, honey. You stick Hitler. It’s voodoo, see?”

He didn’t see. They filed past a table on which stood a cocky little wooden bird which normally would have been bristling with cocktail picks. Instead, the bird was filled with ordinary glass-headed pins, an inch or so long. The blonde lunged for a pin, tripped over her skirt. Pime innocently took the bait and put both arms around her to keep her from falling on her face. She straightened, twisted around to press a moist kiss on his lips. She giggled as Pime broke away from her.

“Don’t be bashful, honey. I’m Dor’thy.”

“I’m disgusted,” Pime returned. He wiped at his smeared mouth with the back of his hand.

That was when Romany stopped the phonograph. There was a pell-mell rush toward the center of the room and a dark mahogany table that stood there. Pime went with the crowd, saw between shoulders the thing in the center of the table. It was a ten-inch image of Adolf Hitler, grotesquely modeled in wax. The

object of the crazy game seemed to consist of sticking a pin in Hitler before the music started again. Considering that all the contestants were more or less drunk, the scoring average was not particularly high.

“Witchcraft, huh?” Pime snorted, though nobody paid any attention to him in the wild scramble to hex Hitler into an early grave.

He turned away from the table at the sound of a closing door and saw Lola Rowen across the room. She looked just as he had seen her earlier at the Gay Nineties Club, wearing the same old-fashion lilac gown with her pink-gold hair piled high on her lovely head.

Pime crossed quickly to the girl, thinking that she was as out of place at Romany’s brawl as the gown she wore. Dick Borden ought to have his nose punched for bringing her here.

“Jonny!” she gasped. “Jonny Pime!”

He took her hands. They were like ice.

“The old lady in the dressing room told me you’d come here,” he said as quietly as he could and still be heard above the clamor around the table. “I suppose you know Matt Engles is in town.”

She closed her eyes briefly. Her lids were blue.

“I know,” she said faintly. “And, Jonny—”

A hand dropped heavily on Pime’s right arm, jerking him around to face Richard Borden the Third. Borden wore a sullen glower and his lower lip looked like something that belonged on a cream pitcher.

“Where you goin’ with my girl, Copper? Firs’ it’s McClosky hornin’ in, and now you.”

Pime knocked the tall man’s hand down. Richard Borden glared at Lola.

“Lola, I mushay you don’t show much discrimination who you’re palsy with.”

Pime’s left jabbed Borden’s shoulder,

sent him spinning back into the crowd around the table. Vance, the disbarred attorney, caught Borden, asked how about bringing suit for assault.

“Or maybe it’ll be for bodily damages,” Vance corrected as he saw Pime moving relentlessly toward Borden.

Pime’s face was still impassive. His eyes were as vacant as the sky and just as blue, but he didn’t look much like a boy now.

The baby-faced parolee, Luther “Doll” McClosky, laid hands on Pime. Romany Scherf’s smile gleamed a danger signal from the shadows at the side of the room.

“Watch it, Luther,” she said. “That’s the law.”

McClosky acted like Pime was a hot stove. Vance took another look over Dick Borden’s shoulder, blinked back a rum haze.

“Hey, it’s Pime from Homicide!” he announced.

“Hey, it’s disgusted from pulchritude—that’s what he told me,” cried the blond “Dor’thy”.

“I ought to take this party apart,” Pime said to Dick Borden, “with you as the tool.”

Borden’s handsome face was still flushed, but that was the liquor. Although he kept telling Vance to let him go he kept backing up until finally he had pushed the disbarred attorney into the mahogany table that supported the waxen Hitler.

“Lookut!” somebody said. “Lookut the pin! Musta killed him!”

Dr. Hall Neely, who had made enough money from his quack medicine to afford three chins and a waistline annex, was bending unsteadily over the table, his small gray eyes pointing brightly at the image.

Pime saw it, too, and for a moment forgot what he was going to do to Richard Borden the Third. Among the ordinary

pins that had found their mark was a ten-inch hat pin with a jet-glass head. The hat pin completely transfixed the image of the *Fuehrer*.

“Lookut,” Doc Neely said excitedly. “Is that blood or is that blood?”

He meant the blood that stained the shaft of the pin that was thrust through the pigeon breast of the mighty paper hanger.

The guests ganged around the table, elbowing each other, all trying to see at once. Romany Scherf moved around until she presented the beautiful side of her face to Pime. There was a curious, expectant light in her witchlike eyes. Her tapered fingers rested lightly on Pime’s arm, the inch-long, jade-painted nails gleaming wickedly against the rough tweed.

“How perfectly crazy!” she whispered. “But isn’t that pin that killed Hitler the one Lola Rowen was wearing in her silly straw hat?”

CHAPTER II

IN THE EYE

LOLA was not in the room. The rest of Romany’s guests were standing about the table where *Der Fuehrer* bled, arguing about who had struck the mortal blow. Everybody seemed drunk enough to sidestep the logical question—how could blood come from a wax image? Pime stepped away from the table and searched the room with worried eyes. There was no sign of Lola.

He crossed to the door from which he had seen her emerge only a few minutes before. It opened on a short connecting hall with doors leading to a closet and two bedrooms. The first bedroom contained furniture of carved ebony and the bed was covered with a black satin spread. Pime’s lips made a like whistling noise. This was

obviously Romany’s room. It fitted the crazy quirks in her personality.

The second bedroom was more conventional. Here the women guests had left their wraps. Pime saw Lola’s brown straw sailor and her filmy veil among the things on the bed.

He stepped inside and closed the door. A June bug came at him like a dive bomber and he batted at it. He looked up at the central lighting fixture and the ceiling was swarming with insects. He looked over to the window. It was closed.

Pime walked over to the end of the low Hollywood bed, stopped. A man lay flat on the floor, face toward the ceiling, staring with one eye as though fascinated by the crawling, buzzing nightlife that circled the light. The other eye was filmed with blood.

The man had wavy, red hair. If his lips had been closed his mouth would have been cruel, thin, but lifelessly open, it was just a hole in his face. The man wore a tuxedo that fitted his square-shouldered figure perfectly. His hands were huge fists.

His name was Matthew Engles and once upon a time, until she had found out what kind of a beast he was, he had been married to Lola Rowen. He had served a stretch in prison for robbery. Only recently he had been under suspicion for a bank hold-up that had occurred in up-state New York, but there had been nothing to make the charges stick and he had moved west, laughing at the lawhounds who sniffed at his heels.

Engles had never been able to leave Lola Rowen alone. Even after she had discovered he was a crook, even after she had obtained a divorce on grounds of cruelty, Matt Engles hadn’t kept away from her. He had hounded her from one town to another, always hunting, always finding her.

Fear had driven sleep from Lola's eyes, had gouged the song out of her soul. Fear of Engles had ruined her stage career, had forced her to take work in second-rate night spots.

Matt Engles deserved to die, but Lola Rowen didn't deserve to have him die like this. Because dead as he was, Matt could still hurt her.

Pime squatted beside the body, hands on thick knees. He stared at the face of the corpse and the wound that had penetrated one eye. A hat pin would do the trick, thrust into the eyeball and through the brain. Blood on the hat pin hadn't come from the wax image of Hitler. It had come from the agile brain of Matt Engles.

Pime whistled thoughtfully. He pushed Engles' tuxedo jacket back from the shirt front, noticed as he did so that a button and a small scrap of black cloth had been torn from the tuxedo front. Pime looked at the inner pocket. There was no manufacturer's label sewn to the pocket top. Inside the pocket was a brown calf billfold with a single, open-lipped compartment which contained a ten-dollar bill and four ones. The identification card proclaimed the wallet the property of Engles.

Pime searched the other pockets of the jacket, found only a Canadian twenty-five-cent piece in the change pocket. Searching the trousers, he made the discovery that the dead man wore neither belt nor suspenders, yet his trousers fitted comfortably loose at the tops.

PIME touched Engles' right hand. The flesh was cold. A black thread stuck out between knuckles, and when Pime pried back the fingers, he found a black scrap of cloth to which a button was sewn. The scrap and button belonged to the tear in Engles' own jacket.

Pime shuffled back from the corpse in

his crouched position. His eyes wandered over the floor, stopped on a tiny sliver of paper about a yard away. On hands and knees, he picked up the paper and looked at it. It was a thin slice off the edge and corner of a bill—too small a piece to show the denomination. The line along which the piece had been torn was ragged, almost as though it had been chewed by tiny teeth.

He put the torn bit into his own wallet and stood up. He stared vacantly at the insects that drew dizzy circles around the light, then went over to the window and raised the lower sash.

The screen fitted tightly and in place of the usual patent catches were four screws that bored into the window frame, holding the screen securely. He closed the lower sash and opened the upper. A June bug bored out of the darkness, caromed off Pime's head and took a drunkard's path toward the light. The screen didn't cover the top half of the window at all.

Pime leaned out, looked up past overhanging eaves of the penthouse and into the starlit sky. Looking down put butterflies in his stomach. He was closing the window when the door of the room opened and Romany Scherf came in.

There was a long black-papered cigarette in Romany's blood-red lips and its scented smoke wreathed her face without hiding that ugly, white-powdered scar. Seeing Pime, she hastily turned to him her unmarred profile. Her hair, Pime thought, looked like the carved ebony in her bedroom.

She noticed the corpse of Matt Engles, took out her cigarette and blew thin, inhaled smoke toward the dead man. Her jade eyes shifted slowly back to Pime.

“ ‘Best laid plans of mice and men,’ ” she quoted.

Pime came away from the window.

“Just like that,” he said. “You come in

here, discover a corpse and then quote Shakespeare.”

“Robert Burns, the poor people’s poet,” she corrected.

“Well, anyway, what were Engles’ plans?”

“To get back with his ex-wife,” she said quietly. “Lola didn’t know about it, but it was all arranged. Engles paid me to see that Lola came here tonight.”

Pime stared incredulously at her and she laughed scornfully.

“Go ahead. Call me a name, little man.”

“Consider yourself called,” he said coldly. “How much was Engles paying you to pull this, and since when do you need money?”

“I wouldn’t answer the first part of that. As to the second, I’m never too busy to take money. Besides,” she added, “it was self-defense to bring Lola and Engles together.”

“You mean you’ve got your sights on Dick Borden and wanted Engles to take Lola out of the way?”

“Borden?” Romany laughed. “That anemic tight-wad? I don’t like the type, little man. No, Luther McClosky was showing a yen for Lola, and that auto crack-up I was in when I was a kid makes any pretty face stiff competition.”

“Where’s Lola now?” Pime asked.

Romany shrugged.

“I wouldn’t know. She left the apartment while you and Borden were brawling. I saw her go out about the time Doc Neely discovered that Hitler was dead. What about the blood on the hat pin? Did the pin kill Engles, Copper?”

“Don’t call me Copper,” Pime said. “The draft board yanked me yesterday, and I’ve got ten days to straighten out personal matters. Tell me, did Engles cash in without paying you for helping him corner Lola in this rotten snare?”

Romany nodded, a slow smile curving the corners of her mouth.

“Then you came here on a personal matter, not as the law?”

“Seems that way.” Pime’s mild blue eyes sharpened. “What became of Engles’ belt?”

“Belt?” She noticed the corpse again. “I wouldn’t know, little man. In a horizontal position, he doesn’t need one.”

“And Lola didn’t know he was here. I presume you brought Lola’s wraps in here, but how about the other guests—did they know Engles was here?”

“They might have,” she admitted. “At least, the women would have known because I sent them in here with their own wraps. Lola wasn’t to know about Engles until later. The rest of us were to get her so drunk she’d talk to him.”

THE rottenness of the scheme brought a wave of red rage to Jonny Pime. He slapped Romany soundly across the mouth.

Romany backed to the door. The scar on her face flamed through the heavy coating of liquid powder. She told him exactly what she thought of him for twenty consecutive seconds while Pime let himself cool down. He’d played it all wrong—antagonizing Romany. When the cops came she’d probably dump the entire murder mess into Lola’s lap.

The opening of the door broke in on her tirade. A plump, middle-aged brunette whom Pime had tagged as the wife of Dr. Hall Neely looked into the room.

“Romany, dear, Doctor and I simply must be leaving.” Mrs. Neely hiccuped delicately behind three fingers. “Everything’s been so very nice. Just everything. And I do hope our little voodoo charm puts the hex on Hitler. It’s been such fun.”

Romany wheeled on the woman, put a

hand in Mrs. Neely's face, and shoved. The doctor's wife rode the push out of the room and Romany heeled the door shut with a bang.

"A gushing female," she sneered. "If there's anything that makes me sick it's a gushing female!" She turned to Pime. "All right, what do you intend to do, little man?"

"Get the cops," Pime said. He laughed. "You ought to like that. It'll be nice publicity." He reached past her for the knob of the door.

He never quite knew where the knife came from, but there was a flash of white thigh against jade green satin, and there was the knife in Romany's hand.

Pime caught her wrist before she could drive the shimmering blade into any part of him, but it took everything he had to hang onto her. Her left hand raked at his face and the jade green nails got him across the left cheek as he dodged. He had both of her wrists in another moment. Romany screamed and tried kicking, which was a little awkward because of the long tight skirt she wore.

The door burst open and Romany's guests piled into the room—Dr. and Mrs. Hall Neely, two couples unknown to Pime, Vance, "Dor'thy", and Luther McClosky.

"Kill him, Luther!" Romany screamed.

THE baby-faced parolee started to his lady's rescue. As he caught sight of the corpse of Matt Engles he stopped in his tracks and glanced at Pime. Pime shoved Romany as far away as he could and lunged at McClosky. McClosky pulled an underarm gun and got the business end of it into Pime's middle.

"This'll put you back in stir, Doll," Pime warned, and regretted that his own gun had gone across Chief Hurvey's desk along with his badge that morning.

McClosky's sandy brows came down

tight above his eyes.

"Nobody's going to tie me to a murder rap," he said. He backed away. Vance and the blonde made room for him. Romany stepped to McClosky's side, smiled defiantly at Pime.

"Keep away, Romany," McClosky said.

"I'm going with you," she said. "We'll face it together."

"She's crazy," Pime thought.

"Oh, no." McClosky shoved Romany off and backed right on into the living room. Pime followed while Romany and the others stayed where they were, expecting fireworks.

McClosky took a key out of his trousers pocket, backed toward the door. Pime took up some of the space that separated him from the parolee, and McClosky stiffened his gun wrist.

"I'll let you have it, Pime. Don't try to stop me."

Out of the corner of his eye, Pime detected movement from the direction of Romany's dining room. Richard Borden the Third appeared, holding a cocktail at arm's length and following it with his nose. Borden sighted Pime and McClosky, came at them leaning like a sailboat before a blast.

"My girl," Borden murmured. He slammed the glass to the floor. "Where'ssh my girl, Pime? Cut me out with Lola, huh? I got a good mind, I got an awfully good mind to knock your head off!"

He tried and was short a foot. He came close for another blow, and Pime beat him to the punch, knocked him cold with a short driving left to the jaw. Pime turned back to McClosky, only McClosky wasn't there. He'd gone out the front door of the apartment and by the time Pime had crossed the hall the outer door had been locked on the outside.

Pime came back through the reception

hall, stepped over the sprawled Richard Borden the Third. He headed for the telephone.

CHAPTER III

LADY ON THE LAM

JONATHAN PIME'S old boss, Lieutenant George Starin, came up from Headquarters with his print and picture men and reporters from three newspapers. He saw what there was to see, heard what there was to hear, then called Pime into the bedroom that was the scene of the crime.

George Starin, a heavy man of fifty, tired-faced, worn down by his own relentlessness, sat on the edge of the bed and loosened the laces of his shoes. His feet were swelling, he said.

"Jonny, this party is so alcoholic nobody seems to know anything specific, like times and places. The only one who seems to remember any thing is Romany Scherf, and she's either crazy or crazy like a fox. You can take your choice."

"She's a dame who had everything—money, background, good looks," Pime said. "She was in an auto crash that took away her looks and left her some kind of a complex."

Starin nodded.

"She can't be a clinging vine so she'll be poison ivy. You know, Jonny, she's the one who stuck the hat pin in Hitler. Her prints are on the glass ornament of it."

"Did she admit it?"

"Sure. She found Engles' body here, pulled the pin out of his eye, stuck it in the wax image later on. She says she thought that would make the murderer show his hand—'psychological reaction' she called it. But do you know why she cared who killed Engles?"

Pime shook his head.

"She have to have a reason?"

"Yeah. She says she wanted to marry the killer. She had the crust to say she's always wanted to marry a real murderer."

Pime laughed.

"She's trying to get your goat."

"And darned near has. And right after that, she changes her record and decides the killer was a woman."

"Lola Rowen?" Pime asked.

"That's right. And it makes sense, Jonny. Two persons walked out on the party, Will Gephart and Lola Rowen. Who's got the best motive? Lola was scared silly of Matt Engles, wasn't she? Don't you see, it fits Lola like her own glove."

"You're wrong," Pime said flatly. His blue eyes stared at the bugs circling the ceiling light. "Somebody opened that window over there from the top. Whoever did that didn't do it either to get out of here or to let somebody else in. And when one half of a window is screened you don't open the unscreened portion for ventilation. That window was opened to toss something out. And what's obviously missing?"

"Matt Engles' belt, for one thing," Starin said. "But for all we know it could have been anything that was tossed out." He grinned at Jonny. "I didn't miss the bugs nor the half-screened window. I even sent somebody downstairs to see if there was anything down there that might have been tossed from this window. It was no good."

Pime shrugged.

"Gephart could have picked it up on his way home."

"Nope, Jonny, we can't deal in abstractions like that. Just why did you come here tonight, anyway?"

PIME stared thoughtfully at the lieutenant.

"I don't know exactly," he answered, "except that I followed Lola here. When my number came up in the draft, I had ten days to settle personal business. I couldn't think of any personal affairs except Lola. When I go into the Army, she's the girl I want to say good-bye to. As for Matt Engles—I'll admit I knew he was in town, and I was worried about him bothering Lola. If I had found him pestering her tonight, I think I might have killed him."

"Lola beat you to it." Starin said quietly.

"No," Pime denied.

"Where is she now?"

"I don't know."

"I was a dope to ask." Starin sighed wearily. "In your shoes, I'd lie for her, too."

"I'm not lying."

"Sure, Jonny, sure."

"Look here, Starin, you're overlooking Luther McClosky entirely."

"Don't worry. I grab McClosky, and if he's carrying a gun he's violating parole regulations. But remember this, he didn't lam until after the body was discovered. If he'd pulled the killing, he'd have run out on the party before. Why would he hang around?"

Pime didn't know the answer, but maybe McClosky had one. Then he brought up the matter of the button and the torn scrap of cloth found in Engles' hand. He showed Starin the torn corner of the bill he had found. But Starin didn't put much faith in clues.

"You see, Jonny, a nut like Romany Scherf wouldn't be above garnishing a corpse with red herrings. Either Romany or somebody else." He looked shrewdly at Pime as he said this last.

"Sure," Pime scoffed. "Knowing you like I do, knowing you wouldn't pay any attention to a clue if it was hung on the end of your nose, I'd be bound to drag in

something fishy! I'm dumb like that!"

"Don't get sore, Jonny."

"I'm not sore. Only if you try to hang this on Lola Rowen you'll make an ass of yourself."

"We've got to find her before we can pinch her," Starin said dryly as Pime left the room.

Out in the living room, Starin's men were taking down the names and addresses of the guests, warning them not to leave town until further notice. Richard Borden the Third saw Pime coming and straddled the doorway between living room and hall. He put up both fists.

"I'm gonna knock your teeth down your throat, you little shrimp!" he threatened.

Lex Voorhes, a cop, dropped a big hand on Borden's arm.

"All right, One-round Richard, I think you're overtraining." He pulled Borden aside, winked at Pime as the latter went through the door.

Starin hadn't been fooling when he said he wanted Lola Rowen. Pime found that out when, at four in the morning, he drove down to the Illinois Street Hotel where Lola stayed. First Class Detective Mike Holden was in the lobby. As Pime approached Holden started shaking his head.

"She hasn't been here since eight o'clock last night, Jonny," Holden said. "That is—if you're looking for the Rowen girl."

PIME didn't say anything. Probably his concern for Lola was as plainly visible on his face as his freckles.

"I tossed her room," Holden said, rocking up and down on the balls of his feet. "According to the dope Starin gave me, she was wearing a lavender dress with a bustle. I couldn't find no dress like that in her closet. It's a holy cinch she couldn't

skip town dressed like your Aunt Minny in the old family album.”

Pime admitted that she couldn't. He left the hotel, drove to the Gay Nineties Club. The place was dark and locked with not even a clean-up man on the premises. He went back to his car, his brow furrowed and not a whistle in him.

If Starin was right, if Lola had been driven to kill Engles, there was no telling what she would do afterwards. Even suicide. That was the ugly possibility that kept recurring in his mind as he continued his hunt.

He made the rounds of the cheap hotels where a girl without baggage could get a room and no questions asked. Starin had not overlooked that bet either. Pime ran into Detective Yale at a place called “The Cozy Home” and Detective Horowitz was asking questions at a nameless three-story lodging designated only by the small sign “Rooms.”

At seven o'clock in the morning, Pime went to his own flat, lay down on the bed without removing his clothes and slept until noon.

He combined breakfast, lunch, and the reading of the morning edition of the *Times*. The Engles killing had made the front page right along with the war news, because of the Hitler angle. There was a cheesecake publicity shot of Lola Rowen, “pretty strawberry blonde sought by police,” as well as a profile shot of Romany Scherf holding the wax statue of the *Fuehrer* pierced by many pins.

Pime chucked the paper into the sidewalk trash container, walked over to Virginia Avenue and down a block to a door beneath a sign that read:

CONFIDENTIAL LOANS

Will Gephart's loan office on the second floor didn't occupy much space.

The front office contained nothing more than a desk, chair, file cabinet, and check-writing machine. It was lunch time and there was no one at the receptionist's desk.

Pime walked to the door marked PRIVATE and shoved it open. He bumped into somebody and was about to apologize when an arm dressed in blue serge reached him and jerked him into the room. A man's voice said:

“I thought I told you to lock the door, Artie?”

Pime looked from one to the other of two men he had never seen before. The man in blue serge was lean and jumpy. The man in the chocolate brown gabardine was rounded and smooth. They had nothing in common except guns, stubby blue automatics held in experienced hands.

Will Gephart was sitting behind his desk with a gag in his mouth. His horn-rimmed glasses were pushed up on his high forehead and there were tears in his eyes. In the palm of his right hand there was a little blood and three wire staples from a stapling machine were driven into his flesh.

“Don't let me stop you, boys,” Pime said. “I guess the Shylock has put the squeeze on a few thousand people himself. Don't mind me. I'll just be an innocent bystander.”

CHAPTER IV

THE MAUVE GOWN

WILL GEPHART motioned with his bleeding hand, indicating Pime. He nodded vigorously so that his glasses slid down onto the bridge of his nose.

“He'll make talk now, Bill,” Blue-serge Artie said.

Brown-gabardine Bill put down the staple machine, but not his gun. He reached behind Gephart, pulled off the

handkerchief that kept the gag in Gephart's mouth.

"I still don't know anything about the belt," Gephart babbled. He said no more because Gabardine Bill punched him in the side of the head. The blow nearly knocked Gephart out of the chair. He set up a howl and had to be mildly strangled.

"Fun is fun, boys, but—" Pime said.

"You horn out of this," Blue-serge Artie said, as he rammed Pime in the ribs with his gun.

Bill eased up a little on Gephart's windpipe. The Shylock coughed, choked, found his tongue again. He pointed at Pime.

"Ask him," he wheezed. "He was there. He came in as I was leaving."

Bill wheeled on Pime. Bill's eyelids screwed down on hard black eyes.

"That a fact?" he asked.

"You boys are interested in Mr. Engles' missing belt?" Pime asked.

"That's what we mean, brother," Artie said.

"I wouldn't know anything about that," Pime said slowly. "You friends of the late Mr. Engles or pals of Doll McClosky?"

Brown-gabardine Bill slammed a fist at Pime's face. Pime backed up, and a chair hit him below the knee. He sat down in the chair, and Bill hunched over him with one fist raised like a hammer. The gun was the thing, not Bill's fist. Pime grabbed at Bill's gun with both hands and at the same time doubled his right leg and kicked Bill. This effectively separated Bill from the automatic and simultaneously gave Bill a ride back into Blue-serge Artie. Artie was nearly crushed by the bulk of Bill backing him to the wall. When the enemy had time to reform its lines, Pime had the gun around so that Bill got a look at it from the business end.

"Will this thing work?" Pime asked, and thumbed off the safety catch.

Evidently they all seemed to think the gun would work, for Artie dropped his own rod as automatically as a vending machine drops a ball of gum.

Will Gephart got out of his chair and dived for the wall at the back of his cubicle. He pressed an electric buzzer push button frantically with his palm. Brown-gabardine Bill lunged for the door, made it, with Artie on his coat tails.

"Shoot them down!" Gephart yelled.

Pime saw the two men making for the stairs and shook his head.

"I'm saving my talents for the Nazis. And I want to talk to you, Gephart."

Gephart dropped into his chair. He picked up a handkerchief that had been a part of the gag and wiped at the blood on his hand. He started pulling staples out of his flesh.

Evidently there was a back stairway to the place, because at the same time that Bill and Artie were making their descent, somebody was coming up by another flight. The somebody appeared in the door of the private office a moment later—two hundred pounds of beef in a crew-necked sweater.

"You want me, Boss?" the beef asked, his words by-passing through a badly mashed nose.

Gephart smiled mechanically and explained for Pime's benefit that this was one of his bad-claim collectors.

"Yes, Cecil," the Shylock said to the man. "Two crooks just left by the front stairs—one small and lean and the other medium height and plump."

Cecil looked dully at Pime.

"He's small and sorta skinny," he said.

"He's not the one," Gephart said. "Go after them, will you?"

WHEN Cecil had gone Gephart pushed his glasses up on his forehead and wiped his eyes.

"I don't know a thing," he said to Pime, "except what's in the papers. I left the party last night—well, you know when I left."

"What's this about Engles' belt?"

"I don't know. I didn't even know he had one until that goon squad lit into me."

"Wasn't your hat in the room where the body was found?"

The Shylock shook his head.

"The men's clothes were in Romany's closet in the hall, just as I told the detectives this morning."

Pime regarded Gephart thoughtfully for a moment, his lips puckered. If torture with a staple machine couldn't draw Gephart out, nothing as humane as a beating would do any good. Pime started for the door.

"I suppose I'll see you at Romany's tonight?" Gephart asked.

"Why at Romany's?" Pime asked.

"Didn't she phone you? Tonight she's got some screwy notion that we ought to re-enact the crime, like in the movies. She says she'll beat the police to the solution. It's crazy, but so is Romany."

Pime said maybe he'd be there. Romany would need somebody to play corpse, wouldn't she?

About four o'clock, the Gay Nineties Club began to show signs of life. The club served dinner at eight and the first show was at nine. At five o'clock, Pime saw the old woman who was wardrobe mistress approaching the building with a shopping bag in her hand. She went in by the side door, and shortly after that Pime left his car and followed.

The trail was so obvious that he couldn't quite believe that Lieutenant George Starin had missed it. Since Lola couldn't hope to escape the eyes of the law

dressed in that mauve garb of a dead decade, and since she had not returned to her hotel, there was only one other place where she could pick up any clothes of her own—the dressing room at the club.

Pime found old Maude removing her hat in the dressing room. She whirled around, rather more startled than seemed normal, when Pime appeared in the doorway.

"What do *you* want?" she demanded.

Pime smiled pleasantly and raised his hat.

"There's one thing this club has that the other night spots don't—an experienced wardrobe mistress. Now you take these burlesque joints—"

"I'm not an experienced wardrobe mistress, Mr. Pime," Maude snapped. "I got my learnin' mendin' clothes for a laundry. What do you want? I'm a busy woman."

"Have you seen Lola Rowen recently?"

Maude frowned at him.

"Saw her last night."

"I mean after last night—say in the wee hours of the morning about the time you were closing here."

Maude shook her head.

"Go on with you. I'm a busy woman." She passed the closet door and closed it casually—too casually. "If you'd had any gumption about you, you'd have married her and protected her from Engles."

"That's right. It's just another case of too little and too late." He went directly to the closet door and opened it wide.

"Here, you can't do that!" Maude kicked the door shut again but not before Pime had got a glimpse of Lola's mauve costume on one of the hangers.

"I guess I can't," he said. "Not being on the Police Force any more, I guess I can't snoop around where I please."

HE WENT to the door, turned to face Hold Maude. Her ample bosom was rising and falling rapidly. Pime's smile was reassuring.

"You ought to know I wouldn't turn you in for doing something for Lola," he said. "And I wouldn't turn Lola in, even if I knew she killed Engles."

He left the dressing room, found Georgie Dee's office at the front of the building, got Maude's New York street address from the owner of the club. Exactly twenty minutes later, he climbed the steps of an old frame lodging house, used a skeleton key on a simple lock.

When the door was open, Lola Rowen was standing in the center of Maude's combination living room and bedroom, too terrified to move or speak. She was wearing a simple black and white checkered skirt and a white blouse. Her pink-gold hair hung loosely down to her shoulders, and there was a bow of black velvet ribbon knotted at the crown.

For a moment, she couldn't do anything but worry a handkerchief with nervous fingers. Tears welled into sleepless, blue-lidded eyes and she all but collapsed in Pime's arms. He thought, regretfully, that this was the first time he had kissed her.

"I didn't do it, Jonny! I didn't, I didn't! You've got to believe me."

"Sure, you didn't. You couldn't."

"But I *could*," she said, her tear-moist cheek against his. "That's the awful part. Last night, when he clapped as he did and I knew he was in the audience, I thought that if he came to me again, if he so much as touched my hand, I would kill him. I thought that if I didn't have a better weapon, I could stab him with my hat pin. When I read his note there in the dressing room—"

"What note?" Pime interrupted.

"He sent an orchid and there was a short note in the box. Maude tried to hide the flower from me, but I found it. I thought, Jonny, it might have been from you."

"That cheap crook sent you an orchid? But what about the note?"

"He was trying to buy me back, I think. The note said something about his buying orchids for me every night and anything else I wanted. I was furious. I could have killed him then."

"Where's the note now?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"I don't know. I think I dropped it somewhere, maybe at Romany's or on the way. I was so furious and so frightened I didn't know what I was doing. But I didn't stab him, Jonny."

"Did you know last night that it was your hat pin that killed him?"

"Yes, I knew. I was going to leave Romany's alone because Dick Borden had been drinking so much I couldn't stand him. I went into the bedroom to get my hat and wrap, and Matt was there—dead. I looked at my hat on the bed and saw the pin was gone, and I knew then it had killed him."

"You didn't see the pin?"

"No."

"Romany says she took the pin out of the wound," Pime said. "She planned to put it into the wax Hitler with the fool idea that the murderer would reveal himself. There's something else, Lola. Did you notice if Engles wore a belt?"

She shuddered, shook her head.

"I was only in the room a minute. If I had known Matt was at Romany's I'd never have gone. You know that, don't you, Jonny?"

For a long time there was silence while Jonny Pime held Lola, ran his fingers through her hair, and knew that this was

what he had wanted to do for a long, long time.

“Jonny,” she said finally. “You want me to go down to Police Headquarters now, don’t you? That’s why you came looking for me, isn’t it?”

“I came here to do just what I’m doing now,” he said. “That’s all. I’m not connected with the police any more. I’m practically in the Army. You’re the girl I want to say good-bye to and I’ve got nine days to say it in. That’s why it was so desperately urgent that I find you.”

“Jonny,” she murmured, “you’re sweet.”

“When I learned last night that Matt Engles was in town—well, I couldn’t have gone away from you, knowing that he’d be after you again. I think I would have killed him if somebody hadn’t beat me to it.”

“Jonny, you darling.” She lifted her lips to his.

Afterwards, Pime told her, getting down to practical matters, that she ought to sit tight where she was. He had a hunch that things were going to break right that night. He’d see her again, later.

When he was gone, Lola listened to the dim echo of his footsteps. Tears came into her eyes again, but they were different tears, tears to be cherished always.

She had just recalled a final warning which Jonny had given her, to lock the door, when it was pushed open by a man—a big man, paunchy, with a tired face that slid downhill.

“I figured Jonny would find you, Miss Rowen,” he said. “Jonny always was a good cop. I’m George Starin, from the Homicide Office. You want to put on a hat or something before we go downtown?”

CHAPTER V

THE BELT

PIME had the .32 automatic he had taken from Brown-gabardine Bill in Gephart’s office. It was a lot different from the Police Positive he was used to, but he thought he could handle it all right. He shoved it into his suit coat pocket that evening after he had dressed to go to Romany Scherf’s place. He was just leaving his flat when the phone rang and a nasal voice came out of the receiver.

“Mr. Pime, this is Jerry Munising.”

“Jerry who?” Pime asked, puzzled.

“Munising. I’m a hackie, night stand at the Gay Nineties. My old lady dresses the dolls at the club and she wants to see you.”

“Later on tonight,” Pime said.

“But now,” the nasal voice went on. “Tell you what. I’m on my way to the club. I’ll drop by and give you a toot. This is plenty important, Mr. Pime. Plenty important!”

Pime hung up. To stand in front of a building and wait for a cab was a mighty good way to get shot if somebody was on the hunt for you. He didn’t know but what the two fine lads who had hammered staples into Will Gephart’s hands mightn’t try and pull a trick like that.

He went down the steps and stood just inside the door of the apartment building. It wasn’t long before a shiny green taxi pulled up to the curb and tooted. Pime went out, hurried to the curb, and got into the rear compartment of the hack.

The driver jerked his head, indicating the meter. “I’m leaving the flag up, Mr. Pime. This one is on me.”

“What does Maude want?” Pime asked.

“Mom? She didn’t say. She just said to get you in a hurry, and seemed warm under the collar. She can’t get it through her head I’m over thirty-five, married and with kids. She still thinks I should run errands for her. But she’s a great old girl.”

"She's that, all right," Pime said soberly and relaxed on the cushions. This looked like it was on the level.

At the rear door of the Gay Nineties Club, Maude was waiting for him. The old woman grabbed Pime's coat lapels.

"I couldn't phone you," she said breathlessly. "The cops are looking for me like I was an accessory or somethin' for hiding that poor girl. You'll have to do something. They've got Lola."

"You mean they arrested her?"

"Sure. And I'm tellin' you you'll have to get her out, or find the real murderer, or somethin'. You don't think Richard Borden the Third could raise bail for her, do you?"

"Not on a murder charge, he couldn't," Pime said. "But I'll get her out, Maude. You count on that." He pressed a five-dollar bill into the old woman's hand. "That's little enough for your kindness to Lola."

HE RAN back to the taxi stand where Jerry had pulled up.

"You know the Shelton Apartment Building?" he asked the hackie.

"Sure," Jerry said. "I hacked Richard Borden the Third there a couple of times with some gorgeous girl. Last night, for one. But listen, Mr. Pime, I can't make this trip on the house."

Pime said that was okay and Jerry put down his meter flag.

"Richard Borden the Third!" Jerry took out his peeve on the gearshift lever. "On an average of three nights a week I hack that guy somewhere. Always he's got some gorgeous girl in tow, and always he waits for his change. In the rain even, he waits for his change."

Jerry shook his head dismally.

"Tell you, Mr. Pime, the dame that'll go with him is dealing in futures, because it's a cinch he don't spend anything on

presents!"

Pime chuckled.

"Ten hours of hacking," Jerry went on, "and what do I get? Maybe four, five dollars. I got a wife and three kids and payments on the cab. And I like to pass my old lady a buck now and then."

"It's tough," Pime agreed.

"With the tire situation what it is, it's thumbs down on hustling for fares. You got to stick at the stand and when opportunity knocks suppose it happens to be in the person of Richard Borden the Third. I'm unlucky that way. You just tell me how I'm goin' to make out with my family and my cab payments."

Pime couldn't tell him. A corner street lamp made a mirror of the cab windshield and reflected Jerry's thin, worried face.

"Maybe," Pime suggested, "you could hand Richard Borden and his sort telephone slugs for change some dark night."

Jerry chuckled. "Oh, I get square in a small way. Like last night— But here we are, Mr. Pime, at the Shelton."

Pime got out and asked the fare. Jerry consulted his meter.

"Seventy-five cents."

Pime handed the hackie five dollars.

"Keep the change."

"Hey, wait! I wasn't hinting."

"You're going to earn it," Pime said. "I want you to go inside here with me. Up in the penthouse where a lady named Romany Scherf lives. Okay?"

"Sure, okay. If it takes all night, I'm still making money."

"Tell me what happened the other night."

Pime and the cab driver were still talking when they reached the elevator.

They rode up to the penthouse with the Dr. Hall Neelys, and when they reached Romany's apartment found that Richard Borden and the blonde who called herself

“Dor’thy” were already there.

Romany wasn’t pleased to see Pime. She was wearing a dress of orange flame with nail polish to match, and when she saw Pime her face flushed to approximately the same shade.

“As a party-crasher, you’re superb, little man,” she said to Pime. “And who’s this person?” indicating Jerry.

“If you’re going to re-enact the crime, you’ll need an extra to play corpse,” Pime said. “That’s Jerry, here.”

Jerry took off his cap. “Jerry Munising, ma’am. Green Cab Thirty-eight.”

Romany let them in. The well-fed Dr. Hall Neelys had begun drinking cocktails offered by Richard Borden who obviously had had several already. Borden sighted Pime and clenched his fists.

“Where’s my girl, Copper?”

“She’s in jail right now,” Pime said coldly.

“I bet you put her there,” Borden said belligerently.

“Shall I sock him, Mr. Pime?” Jerry asked. Pime shook his head.

ROMANY reminded Borden that he had to mix more cocktails. It wasn’t long after that the disbarred attorney, Vance, put in his appearance, followed by the couple Pime didn’t know and Will Gephart. The Shylock had his hands bandaged.

Vance grinned maliciously at Romany.

“Where’s McClosky?”

Romany’s lips thinned. She didn’t answer.

“He’ll be here,” Romany assured them. “You’ll see.”

She passed the tray of cocktails all around. Jerry the hackie, sitting next to Pime, smacked his lips in appreciation.

“Imagine drinking this nectar every day, Mr. Pime. You can do it if you hold

out on tips to hackies, huh?”

Pime didn’t have a chance to reply because of the sudden appearance of Luther McClosky in the living room door. McClosky was not alone. Flanking him were Brown-gabardine Bill and Blue-serge Artie—with guns and the paper stapling machine. Probably only Gephart and Pime grasped the full significance of the stapling machine.

Pime looked across at Romany.

“The boys seem to want Engles’ belt pretty bad. This ought to be good.”

Romany said nothing. There was a cold smile on her lips and an insane gleam in her jade green eyes.

McClosky locked the door. Everybody started talking at once, asking questions. McClosky put a stop to that, and when there was silence, nodded at Gephart.

“You tell ’em, Shylock. Tell ’em what Bill can do with a paper stapler.”

Gephart, very pale, hid his hands behind him.

“I haven’t got the belt. I swear I haven’t.”

“What’s this about a belt?” somebody asked.

“It’s not so much the belt,” Pime said, “as what was in it. Looks like this reaches back into the not too distant past when a bank in up-state New York was stuck up for a hundred thousand dollars. The cops had their eyes on Engles, but he was alibied from here to Christmas.”

“Never mind the deductions, wise guy,” Blue-serge Artie said. “That hundred grand Engles was lugging in his girdle was part ours—mine and Bill’s and the Doll’s. Matt held out on us.”

“Quiet!” McClosky roared. His eyes covered the room. “Get this, everybody. We’ve got ways of making you talk if we have to. Ask Gephart. We’re going to find out what some dirty rat did with our dough.”

“And,” Romany put in, “we’re going to find out who killed Engles if we have to torture you all.”

The blonde “Dor’thy” began to blubber and got cuffed on the ear by Blueserge Artie.

“Wait a minute, folks,” Pime said loudly to be heard above the general racket. “Before the sadistic fun starts, which Romany seems to be looking forward to, let me clear up a couple of points. It might save some paper staples for the war effort.”

“Make it brief,” McClosky ordered.

“I think you can narrow down the field a little bit,” Pime said. “For instance, who knew Engles had the money? McClosky did, sure, but maybe there was somebody else. Did anybody pick up a note that Engles had written to his ex-wife to enclose with an orchid, a note to Lola promising orchids every night and anything else she wanted if she’d come back to him?”

PIME eyed the circle of frightened faces, stopped at “Dor’thy”. The blonde looked as though she wanted to say something.

“I saw a sort of note like that kicking around the floor here last night,” she said to Pime. “Maybe somebody else saw it, too.”

“Maybe they did. Maybe somebody got the idea that Engles was rolling in money from that note,” Pime said. “But there’s something else. Romany, you said Engles hadn’t paid you for steering Lola Rowen here last night.”

“That’s right,” Romany admitted.

“Well,” Pime went on, “I think Engles was going to do right by you just before he was killed. He didn’t have your price in his wallet, but he must have had that much and a lot more in his money-belt. My guess is that he had taken off the money-

belt to get out the dough he was going to pay you when the killer bungled into that room.

“The killer saw the money, grabbed the hat pin out of Lola’s hat on the bed, stabbed Engles with it. In his hurry to shove the money back into the belt, the corner of one of the bills got caught in the zipper teeth and was torn off. I found the corner of that bill on the floor in there.”

“Where’s the belt?” McClosky said. “The apartment and everybody in it were searched. It’s got to be Lola or Gephart who swiped it.”

“No, it doesn’t have to be Lola or Gephart,” Pime said. “The window of that murder room had been opened from the top by the time I discovered the body. It’s doubtful if anybody would have taken the chance of tossing that money-belt containing a hundred grand out the window with the idea of picking it up later.

“It must be that somebody stood on top of that lowered upper sash, reached out to the eaves of the penthouse roof, and stashed the belt there. That would take a tall person, but Vance is tall, and Borden is tall, and so is Romany Scherf.”

McClosky snapped his fingers. Then he strode toward the bedroom, called back to Bill and Artie to watch things. Gephart said he hoped McClosky would fall out of the window and break his neck. But McClosky didn’t. He came storming back into the living room a moment later, carrying a wide belt of supple black leather with a long zipper sewn in the lining. The zipper compartment was wide open.

“You’re the one, Copper!” McClosky shouted. He lashed Pime across the face with the belt. “What did you do with the dough that was in here?”

EXCEPT for the red welt across his cheek, Pime's face was pale.

"The killer's got it," he said quietly. "The killer wouldn't want the belt. The money's the thing. Keep your shirt on and I'll tell you about it."

"Make it snappy!"

"When the killer went into that room last night and caught Engles with his belt off, he grabbed the hat pin off the bed. Maybe Engles was drunk, so it was a sort of pushover fight, but in the struggle Engles got hold of the front of the killer's tux and pulled off a button and a scrap of cloth. After the murder job was done, the killer realized the torn tuxedo was going to put him right behind the eight-ball.

"So the killer simply traded tux jackets with his victim, first ripping off the manufacturer's label to avoid a police trace-back, and switched wallets. Both Engles and the killer had the same general build of torso and the switched jackets fitted very nicely. The killer knew that if he made off with the belt and the money it contained, he'd lay himself open to suspicion. Look what leaving early did for Gephart.

"Instead of leaving, the killer stashed the belt in the eaves. On returning here tonight he revisited the bedroom, got down the belt, took the money out and put the belt back.

"It was just about perfect for the killer. The police were chasing Lola for the murder. That was the killer's first line of defense, since Lola was the perfect fall guy. But even if she were proved innocent, there was still McClosky as a possibility. That's why the killer was so anxious that I didn't prevent you from escaping last night, McClosky."

"Never mind the details," McClosky said. "Talk fast."

"It was perfect, except for one thing," Pime said. "When the killer made the

switch of Tuxedo jackets, he overlooked something in his own jacket pocket.

Pime looked around at the tense faces of his listeners, at the watching guns of Bill and Artie. This was going to be the payoff. He nodded at Jerry, the hack driver.

"Maybe you ought to confess, Jerry."

"Huh? Me?" Jerry stared at Pime. "I didn't have nothing to do with this, Mr. Pime. Honest!"

"You brought Dick Borden and Lola Rowen in your cab last night, didn't you?"

"Sure, but—"

"And the fare was seventy-five cents from the Gay Nineties to the Shelton?"

"So what?"

"You knew Dick Borden always waited for his change, didn't you? What kind of money did he hand you, Jerry?"

"A buck," Jerry said, a light breaking on him. "And I gave him his change."

"A quarter, huh? But could he have spent it, Jerry?"

"Well, you see—" Jerry paused, swallowed. His thin face was knotted with worry. "Well, that Richard Borden the Third never did tip me. And earlier in the evening, one of my fares panned a Canadian quarter off on me. So I just passed the Canadian two bits off on the tightwad, Richard Borden the Third."

"And," Pime concluded, "the Canadian quarter was in the change pocket of the jacket Borden switched with the dead Matt Engles."

BORDEN came out of his pretended drunk in a hurry. He started for the door. Bill and Artie swung their guns on him, giving Pime the break he needed. Pime unlimbered the .32 automatic, shot Bill through the wrist. That put the scare into Artie who immediately dropped his gun. Borden still thought he could make the door, but Pime put two slugs in

Borden's legs while Hackie Jerry Munising cheered and grabbed McClosky.

Covering McClosky and his two pals, Pime went to the phone, called Police Headquarters, asked for George Starin. While waiting for Starin, he ordered Dr. Hall Neely to search Borden.

The inner pocket of Borden's jacket yielded two flat packs of thousand-dollar bills.

"Our dough!" chorused McClosky, Bill, and Artie.

"What about me?" Will Gephart chimed in. "Borden owes me fifty grand. Who really owns that dough?"

"A bank," Pime said, still waiting to talk to Starin. "Engles, McClosky, Artie and Bill composed the stick-up mob that lifted the dough from that New York bank. Engles pulled a fast one, Borden killed to

get it from Engles, and you're out of luck, Shylock."

"I guess I am," Gephart moaned. "And I suppose my pressuring Borden for the fifty grand he owed me is what really made a killer out of the guy—that and a conveniently placed hat pin."

Starin's tired voice came out of the transmitter, and Pime told the lieutenant that he had Engles' slayer and what was left of the bank stick-up mob.

"And," he added, his blue eyes brightening, "bring my girl along with you, Starin. We're starting from here."

"Starting for where?" Starin wanted to know.

"An eight day honeymoon—Lola and I," Pime concluded.

Eight days. He anticipated it like a second lifetime.