

Doom Boom

By Glenn Low

Homicide sent Detective Tony Childers to check on a dead man found in a store. But when it turned out that the corpse had escaped to advertise his deal in death, Tony found himself banging the cash register for a bargain-sale in butchery.



CHAPTER I

THE boat whistles from the river gave a hollow, resounding tone, prophesying a change of weather. A neon-pinked fog swaddled the Hill District lights, throwing a shimmering orange gauze across the jitter-bugging letters of the mammoth electric chewing-gum sign on the city cliffs. Over the fog, and the world, the sky was minus a moon and starless. A moisty vapor slapped gently at Detective Tony Childers' good-humored face as he hurried from his car to Gentz's candy store.

He was thinking of the two-gallon pot of coffee steaming away on the hotplate in

his room at detective headquarters, also of the dozen doughnuts stored in his locker. He was hungry, and anticipation of the feed he'd promised himself practically had him drooling.

When old man Gentz had phoned in a while ago and reported that a dead man was sitting at a booth in his confectionery, Lieutenant Jock Anderson had singled Childers out to go take a look.

"The old guy's probably boozy," Anderson had said, "but go give it a look, Tony. Maybe some lug died of indigestion from eating some of Gentz's gumdrops. I'll keep the coffee warm 'til you get back."

"It's a job for the uniforms," Childers

had complained. "They're the lads who pull kids' kitties off the trees and stir the snooze bums in the penny-clip joints. This is Homicide, but who'd ever guess?"

He drove the four blocks over to Gentz's in his own car, fast, afraid some of the dicks would find and consume his hidden doughnuts.

Mr. Gentz met Childers in front of his store, a nervous grin splitting his fat wrinkled face. "It was only a customer we missed when we closed up," he explained. "He was asleep in a booth. Somebody saw him through a window and phoned my house. I dressed and came right down. When I saw him sleeping there, I—I guess I flew off the handle a little. I thought he was dead. I'm sorry to have bothered you fellows, but I didn't have the nerve at first to take a closer look."

"Where's the guy now?" asked Childers, no longer interested in the business.

"I woke him and he went home." Gentz locked the store, then went to his car, parked at the curb. He offered Childers a cigar.

"Don't use 'em," the detective told him.

Gentz thanked him, said good-night, then drove away.

"Rattle-brained old bunny," Childers mused, then remembering the hot coffee and doughnuts made a beeline for his coupe. The cry for help came just as he slipped the key into the ignition. He scooted out, glanced up and down the block.

A moment later Simon Tork appeared in front of his shoe store eight doors away. The cry had come from that direction. Childers started toward the little shoe merchant. Two men left a car in front of Tork, walked over to him. They were strangers to Childers. When he reached

Tork the men had returned to their car and driven away.

Childers had known Simon Tork for several years. "You hear somebody yap for help just now?" he asked after he'd greeted him.

"It—it was me, Tony," said Tork, his flat, loose face twitching with what looked like fear.

"Those birds trying to lift your wallet?"

Tork wagged his head. "No. It was before they drove up, I was working late and—"

"Late?" Childers cut in. "You know it's after two A.M.?"

Tork nodded loosely. "I've been having trouble with my old partner, Aussie Mellon. Two weeks ago I bought out his interest in the store. There were some receipts I couldn't find. Aussie says he's got more money coming—that I didn't pay some bills like I said. We had a big fuss. So tonight I was looking for those receipts, to prove I paid those bills. A while ago I went into a little room behind my office where we keep some old files, and there--"

Tork stopped speaking, sucked in a long breath. He glanced up and down the block, his face pale, thin lips twitching. "Let's go inside," he said. "He's still there. You'll see why I cried for help."

He pulled a ring of keys from his coat, stooped to unlock the door. A car turned from an alley, its headbeams stroking the business fronts across the street. Childers watched it a moment, then turned to follow Tork inside.

The storekeeper had unlocked the door when the car stopped behind them. There was a whizzing sound, a thud, a crunch. Childers caught Tork's body as it slumped forward. The car roared away.

A HOT wetness touched the detective's hands. He caught the

weakening shudder as life deserted the little merchant. Easing the body onto the pavement, he felt for the murder instrument.

He found it at the nape of Tork's neck. Grasping a thin handful of feathers, he pulled it out. It was a huge dart with a striking point ten or twelve inches long. The point was set in a slim haft of leaded cork. The haft was tufted with waxed turkey feathers.

"Medieval," Childers muttered, staring at the bloody dart. "Likely they had guns to back them up if it missed. Wonder why they didn't use guns?" He looked back, saw wispy fog-goblins silently dancing along the thoroughfare. "Bullets can be traced, a thing like this, never," he mused.

The sensation that hostile eyes probed him through the fog tingled his spine. On the river a boat whistle hooted dismally. A cat appeared, as if from nowhere. He kicked it away from the corpse, produced a flashlight from his coat, and entered the dark shoe store.

There was a phone on a wrapping counter. He dialed detective headquarters, told Lieutenant Anderson what had happened. "Yes," he said, when ready to hang up, "it is a dart. A big one with turkey feathers."

Anderson said he'd be right over, snapped back the phone. Childers entered the office in back. A door opposite him was closed. He opened it, flicked on the light.

A man lay in the middle of the floor. Childers recognized him, noted what looked like a bullet hole between his wide-stretched eyes. "Too bad, Joey," he murmured, ovaling the deadish face in the light. "You sure came down in the world, working the bleed on small fry like Tork."

The sprawled figure was Joe Estramer, alias a dozen other guys. Artist in blackmail, inventor of many new con-

game tricks. Smooth, smart, deadly, cruel—Estramer had been the synthesis of them all. It would have been no surprise had Childers found his corpse in a ritzy suite at some swanky hotel; but here—here in a dusty back room of an ordinary shoe store?

Estramer wore a black and grey pencil-stripe suit, white shirt, maroon tie. A light grey felt hat stood, crown up, on the floor beside him. Facts in the killing seemed clear enough to Childers. The blackmailer had been there to squeeze money from Tork. Tork had killed him. Estramer's pals had got even—

His deduction hit a snag. Estramer had never traveled with a pack. Estramer had always worked strictly solo. Childers wondered what blackmail engendering deed lived in Tork's past. He couldn't imagine Tork ever committing a crime. Before going to Estramer he moved a spot of light around the room. There was a blank wall, a filing cabinet, a corner, a window—

The light hit her and the girl screamed like she was stabbed. He saw trim heels, curvaceous legs, a slim ivory-colored hand as she scrambled through an open window. He heard her heels clicking on the alley brick as he went through after her. He was maybe fifty feet behind when she turned onto the through stem.

He almost bumped into three musicians as he turned the corner. A quick glance told him the trio was returning home from an all night shindig. One of them was a Goliath, a veritable man-mountain. It was he who grabbed Childers' shoulder, jerked him up and back. "Hold, guy. What yer chasin' the lady fer?"

Childers flashed his badge. The big man set him down like he was on fire. "She went that away," he said, pointing to the black jaws of an alleyway. "Atween

them buildin's."

THE alleyway was so narrow Childers' shoulders rubbed. He made to thumb on his flash. It was slapped from his fingers. Something hard smacked his head, but he didn't fade. He struck out blindly. Somebody grunted. A man's voice said, "Take it easy, bo."

Fingers clawed his gun from his shoulder-rig. Hands took him from behind. Then it really got dark—too dark for this world.

He heard a *click*, felt his feet leave the ground, only he still stood on something firm. His body shot upward, swung over, swayed slowly through space. Such a crazy angle? Why didn't he fall, land somewhere? Something like hair was in his eyes.

A car's motor roared. He was moving. Not an inch from his ear a feminine voice whispered, "Are you alive?"

He whispered back, "I'm alive. Who are you?"

"Miss Flower Blue," said the whisper. "Who are you?"

"Tony Childers, a ham from Homicide."

"A detective?"

"Suit yourself," he said, disgustedly. "Could a detective get in such a jam?"

"Where are we?" asked the girl.

"I don't know. Are you the girl I chased?"

"Must be," she said. "But I didn't kill Joey. I didn't know you were a detective."

"Who killed him then?"

"I don't know. He's been hanging around Annie Mayes."

"Cockleburr Annie Mayes?"

"Yes. A while ago I thought he was on his way to meet her. I followed him in my car. You know, Joey's been on his good behavior since that fur swindle at Fornash's. You know about that?"

"Yes. Joey came clear on that play by less than the skin of his teeth. But it would take more than that to scare him out."

"He's been seeing Annie Mayes a lot lately. And last night I thought he was going to meet her. But he wasn't. It was Julius Carp. He met Julius Carp."

"Julius Carp? Hmmm," purred Childers. "Wonder where we are? We're moving. Suppose we're inside a coffin?"

The girl was cool. He marveled at her composure, thought it strange he'd never heard of her. "Could be," she said.

Julius Carp's dishy face with its pigeon-foot wrinkles, agate eyes, and pasty skin jumped in the dark before Childers' eyes. The little trail away from hot coffee and doughnuts was sure leading into a morass-macabre.

The girl said, "Carp and two men, one of them a big fellow, got into Joey's car. I drove around after them a while, then lost them. Later I saw Joey's car parked near Tork's shoe store." She paused, her whisper seeming to dry out.

"Go on," said Childers. While she talked there wasn't so much danger their plight would send her into hysterics. So far she'd displayed admirable courage.

"I parked and waited in my car," she said. "In a few minutes Carp came from an alley beside Tork's store, glanced up and down the block, then went back. I got out, entered the alleyway, stood just inside it. After a while Carp and three men came from Tork's store. Joey wasn't with them. I knew Carp had gone through the alleyway and entered the store from the alley.

"I went back to the alley. At the rear of the store I found a window open. It was dark inside. I must have been crazy, worried over Joey like I was. Anyway, I climbed through the window, was feeling my way along a wall when a fellow came in with a flashlight—you."

She was probably lying, Childers decided. He knew headquarters would never swallow such a story. "When I put the light on Joey was the first you knew he was dead, eh?"

"Yes," she said. "I thought you were with Carp. That's why I ran."

"You knew Joe Estramer well, huh?"

"Very." Her whisper was softer when she spoke of Estramer, sketchy with little bumps.

"You think Joey was in on some scheme with Carp?"

"No. Joey hated Carp."

"Got any ideas?" He was guessing that she'd probably been in the shoe store with Estramer when he was killed, and was making her getaway when he discovered her.

"Only that Carp must be mixed in with Joey's murder somehow. Carp is soft on Cocklebur Annie, and Joey's been playing up to her. Naturally Carp wouldn't love him for that."

Childers knew Cocklebur Annie Mayes. She was the boldest item in females in town. She was beautiful with her boldness, though, a soft blonde with sad eyes. A hole-in-the-wall night club, the Cameo, over on Cameo Street, featured her as a singer. The night club belonged to Julius Carp.

Carp also owned another spot across town, the Medieval Sports Club, a joint where games of the Middle Ages were resurrected and indulged in by a bunch of crackpots. Carp was a master at discus throwing. Childers guessed that Cocklebur Annie had been beating Flower Blue's time with handsome Joey Estramer.

SUDDENLY the girl moved a hand, pressed something against his chest. "It's a gun," she said. "I found it in Tork's back room, near the wall. Maybe it's the

gun that was used on—on Joey."

He took it, knew by touch that it was a .32 revolver. Sniffing it he knew that it hadn't been fired recently. "I'll keep it," he said. "Tell me, where do you live, where do you work?"

"I live at Bixler Court. I'm a model at Fornash's."

"Live alone?"

"Now I do." A moment's pause, then fine said, "I didn't kill Joey."

"How'd you get in here—wherever we are?"

"I ran into a blanket, or something like one," she told him. "I turned into an alley to get away from you. Somebody caught me in the dark, wrapped me, unwrapped me. I couldn't see where they were putting me. A minute later they put you in—there's a door of some kind."

Suddenly all motion quit. Outside somebody said, "Okay. Fetch them out."

Whatever encased them moved, swung upward. "We're being carried," whispered the girl. "Do you really think we're in a coffin?"

"Might be, but don't get the jitters now. Keep your head."

"They want to get rid of us because they think we know too much," she said, her voice shaky for the first time. "They might bury us or drop us in the river."

"We'd hear the boat whistles if we were near the river. It's a foggy night," he reminded her.

All at once it was as if they were inside a can and dropped onto the pavement. Maybe ten seconds skipped by, then there came a *click*. Fresh air flowed over them. Outside it was dark. A voice said, "Get out, flatfoot."

Childers obeyed. The *click* came again. Feet sounded, moving away. The gun that jammed Childers' ribs held steadily. They were taking the girl away. He marveled that she didn't cry out.

A jab from the gun punctuated a voiced order. "Move up, straight ahead." Childers walked, counting his steps. Forty and he ran into a wall. No! A wall didn't move. A sliding door, He was shoved into space.

He lit on his feet with a jar that burst a batch of stars in front of his eyes. The drop had been maybe fifteen feet. The darkness was airy ebony. Dropping to one knee, he felt of the floor. It was sticky. He sniffed it. Oil.

A sliding, groaning sound came from above. Fear touched him a cold flash, passed on, leaving him angry, eager, ready to fight. Fight? The sound drew nearer, then something struck his face. He grabbed it. An oily cable. He knew where he was then—in a pit at the bottom of an elevator shaft. The elevator was coming down.

Childers moved fast, inspecting the walls with the flat of his hands. The walls were concrete, very smooth. He went onto his knees, felt over the floor. It was laid with unmortared brick. He stood up and bumped his head on the underside of the descending elevator. It was coming down slowly, filling the shaft like a cork fills a bottle mouth. Death would come like that, slowly, horribly.

Fear wedged a dry knot in his throat, raced his heart madly. The pattern of his coming murder was not intricate, but of a design that would baffle by its very simplicity. He would be found squashed, but who could ever say how he'd got into the pit?

He dropped to his knees. In a few seconds the elevator platform caressed his shoulders. He dropped onto his stomach, rolled over onto his back. If it came all the way he'd take it in the face, damn them!

Strangely then, Childers wondered if any of the boys had looted his locker in the squad room and eaten his doughnuts. His

next thought was of something he'd once read—something about a dying queen who'd used her last breath to inquire concerning the fate of a fly that had buzzed into a spider's web.

"How damned inappropriate!" he muttered. With a bumping crunch the elevator settled down solidly.

CHAPTER II

FOR perhaps a minute the elevator remained at the bottom of the shaft, then lifted slowly, stopping when its platform touched even with the basement ceiling. The basement was flooded with light now. A tall young man, nattily dressed, flashlight in hand, leaned under the cage and peered into the pit. All he saw was three stacks of oily bricks, two feet high and neatly placed. Above his head, noiselessly, Tony Childers swung out, let go the cable guides, and fell onto his back.

The man whirled, dislodging Childers. The detective recognized him as he jammed the unloaded .32 against his chest. It was a bluff he thought would work.

"You ought to make sure when you try for a kill," Childers said, eyes gleaming behind big smudges of oil and grease. "Those loose floor bricks sure will cause you plenty of hell!"

The young man was Lloyd Fornash, son of the wealthy department store owner. Childers knew this was the Fornash Store basement. Lloyd Fornash was an assistant manager in his father's store. He had a reputation for level-headedness, honesty, and ambition.

"I thought—" he stammered, staring into Childers' grimy face, "that—you see—it's like this. Our night watchman phoned the house a few minutes ago. I was the only one out of bed, so I took the call. He said someone had broken into the

basement here. I came right over, and—”

“And didn’t call the cops?” interrupted the detective.

“I wanted to make certain before bothering them,” replied Fornash, his voice becoming more calm. “If it interests you, our night watchman has been murdered. Maybe you killed him?”

Childers gave a cheerless grin, stepped back. For the first time Fornash actually saw the gun. He deliberately lunged forward, sent a hard right at Childers’ head. It connected. Childers went down. While his head buzzed, Fornash tore the gun from Childers’ hand, then aimed a kick at his face.

Childers dodged it, grabbed Fornash’s foot with both hands and jerked. Fornash’s back smacked the floor. Childers had the department store executive’s throat in his hands when he said, “You don’t know me, squirt, but I know you. I’m Detective Tony Childers, City Homicide Detail.”

“We-l-l,” gurgled Fornash, wincing painfully, “why didn’t you say so? I’ll be glad to return your gun.” He did, graciously, not asking to see Childers’ badge, and said, “Come along, I’ll show you the night watchman, He was stabbed in the throat.”

ONE glance told Childers that a dart like the one in his coat pocket had punched the bloody hole in the night watchman’s throat. The man was sprawled at the foot of a basement stairway. He’d been dead only a matter of minutes.

“What time did he phone your house?” Childers asked.

“I can’t say exactly,” Fornash replied thoughtfully. “Twenty-five minutes ago would be a close guess.”

“That phone on an outside line?” Childers pointed at a telephone on a billing-clerk’s desk behind the stairway.

“Yes, sir,” said Fornash, clearing his

throat uneasily. “If you don’t mind, Mr. Childers, just how did you get in here?”

“I was brought here. By whom I don’t know. After they came in here they didn’t turn on the lights. One of them pushed me into the elevator pit, then pushed the *down* button on the wall. The elevator is automatic, I know. At what floor is it usually parked at quitting time?”

“The first floor,” Fornash told him. “But the watchman often used it.”

Childers took the dart that had killed Tork from his coat. “Ever see a hellish thing like that?” he asked Fornash, holding it out. “Does anybody use such wicked things in games—target throwing?”

Fornash’s face paled slightly as he wagged his head. “We sell dart-and-target sets in the store, but nothing like that. I never saw one a third that large.”

“There’s a model works in your store. A Miss Flower Blue. Know her?”

“Yes, I—I—” Fornash’s voice jerked into silence, he sent a confused glance at the floor.

“Friendly with her?”

The executive lifted his head, eyes flashing angrily. “That’s none of your business,” he snapped.

“Right,” said Childers, smiling. “I take it you know Miss Blue is sweet on the crook, Joe Estramer?”

“That’s a lie!” Fornash’s face reddened, bulged at the jowls.

Childers laughed, “You’d know,” he said.

“I knew—know Joe Estramer,” retorted Fornash. “He swindled our firm out of a number of rare silver fox furs. He cleaned up something like twenty-five thousand dollars, then managed to come clear with the law.”

“It didn’t come under Homicide,” said Childers. “So I wouldn’t know. But I’m told you doubted your own furrier’s appraisal on those fox pelts and turned

them over to an outside furrier for a check appraisal. It was too bad the outside appraiser turned out to be a crook. Handsome Joey is a slick number. One time he's a fake prize fight promoter, next he's a bogus real estate agent, and next he's a big gee for a junky furrier—a little hophead who claimed you sold him some furs, and you couldn't prove you didn't."

"Look," said Fornash, his manner suddenly peevish, "I didn't release those furs for appraisal. Permission was given by telephone, presumably by my secretary. But that was all wrong, and—"

"Skip it," said the detective. "It didn't come under Homicide. Now if there'd be been a murder . . ." Childers picked a long bright blonde hair off his coat, glanced at it, decided Flower Blue was a blonde.

Fornash gaped at him, a puzzled frown creasing his face.

"One more thing," the detective said, "anybody try to blackmail you lately?"

"No," said Fornash.

"No?" Childers returned, flatly. He slipped the dart into his pocket, glanced studiously down at the night watchman's purpling face.

"Why don't you report this killing to headquarters?" Fornash asked.

Childers wrapped the golden hair around his finger, slipped off the curl, put it in a vest pocket. "My plans are different," he said. "Let's take a walk."

"Am I under arrest?" Fornash asked as Childers took his arm.

"Not yet. We'll find a cop out front."

There was a cop on the corner. Childers whistled to him. When he came up, Childers said, "A fresh stiff inside, officer. The store night watchman. Mr. Fornash here will explain—it was murder."

"Where you pick up the oil, Tony?" asked the patrolman, squinting at Childers' face.

"In an elevator shaft—I almost went to press. You'll hear about it later. Phone Lieutenant Anderson, report the murder. Fornash will show you the corpse; also make certain Fornash is around when Homicide arrives. Get me?"

"I get you," said the cop tightly, glancing at Fornash with cold eyes. "I thought you might be around, Tony. I saw your coupe parked up the block, and—"

"My coupe? Up which block?" interrupted Childers.

"This block. Up there." The cop pointed the direction. "And I heard about you playing tricks over at Tork's shoe store. Anderson's sore as hell, the way you ran Homicide down to Tork's to see a corpse that wasn't there. All they found was a couple of puddles of blood, one out front and one in back. Anderson is shouting that Medical ought to send you to the behavior clinic."

"It'll all come out in the wash," Childers said thoughtfully.

"Anderson'll skin you for leaving here—if you do," said the cop.

"I'll risk it," Childers said, shoving his hands deep into his hip pockets and gnawing his upper lip studiously. "You say my coupe's up the block?"

"Don't you even know where you parked your own car?" said the patrolman.

"Tell Anderson I'll need that suspension for disobeying departmental rules. It'll give me a chance to take the rest I'm going to need."

CHILDERS found his coupe parked up the block, like the cop had said, key in ignition where he'd left it. "Accommodating of them," he mused, slipping under the wheel. He wondered why his coupe had been driven from in front of Gentz's candy store—thought that perhaps riding space required by him and Flower Blue, with whatever had encased

them, had forced part of the mob to find other means of transportation. The car that had stopped for Tork's killing had been a sedan. If they'd needed his car, that meant there were several of them.

He switched on the ignition. Light from the instrument panel lit up the fresh blood soaking the seat beside him. His heels raked something on the floor. He reached down, picked up a pair of woman's shoes. He recognized them instantly. They were the only things about her he could have recognized. His flash's beam had limned them clearly as they'd disappeared through Tork's back window.

In a twinkling he'd sent power to the coupe's engine, angled it away from the curb. His lean jaws went squarish, his curved chin, blunt. He didn't even think to abuse the swirling fog when it impeded his driving. He thought he knew where he was going now. He only hoped it wasn't just a way station on a red road to hell.

At Julius Carp's Medieval Sports Club the custodian was a scrawny man with a weedy mustache and shriveled face. When Childers knocked on the side door he opened it, but on seeing the begrimed condition of the detective's face tried to close it again. Childers grinned, pushed in past him.

"It's Homicide, old chum, so don't mind the oil," he said. He flashed his badge. "I'm interested in medieval sports, especially dart-throwing. Suppose you lead me to the range room?"

"Can't refuse a copper," wheezed the old man. "Nothin' in the range room, though. Nothin' anywheres. Mr. Carp keeps things on the up an' up, I tell you."

He unlocked the fourth door down the hall, stood aside for Childers to enter. "Here it is, the range room, like you wanted," he said. "Look all you like. What's the matter, somebody murder somebody?"

Childers didn't reply. The range room was just that—a long narrow room with archery racks and dartboards at one end, a long row of targets at the other. Beyond the dartboards, filled with brightly feathered missiles much smaller than the vicious instrument that had killed Simon Tork, Childers saw an array of photographs tacked on the wall.

"Pictures?" he said, stepping over to stand in front of them, hands shoved deep in his hip pockets.

The old man shuffled to a stop behind him. "Yeah, some pictures of contest winners. Everyone of 'em is a ace-high dart-thrower, too. Every one of 'em is a prize-winner."

Childers pointed to a picture of a pretty, wide-eyed brunette. "She's a prize-winner, sure enough," he said. "Who is she?"

The custodian's reply wasn't much of a surprise. "Miss Flower Blue. She's one of the top-notchers. Won more prizes on the darts than anybody, 'ceptin' Guy Boomer."

Childers' gaze lingered approvingly on Flower Blue's face for a moment, then he pointed to another picture, that of a big man with a head shaped like a keg. "Maybe that's Boomer?"

"Right," said the custodian. "He used to be a wrestler, an' a good one. Now he kind of works around for Mr. Carp."

A picture at the end of the row gave Childers a shock. "Lloyd Fornash comes here too, eh?" he said.

"Used to," replied the custodian, "but not since last week. Last week him and Mr. Carp got to bettin' money on a dart match, an' Mr. Carp lost a great lot—a great lot! I reckon Mr. Fornash won ten, 'leven thousand from Mr. Carp. Then he quit and wouldn't give Mr. Carp a chance to win his money back. Mr. Carp got sore and ordered the young whippersnapper out

of here. Told him never to come back, too.”

”Carp right handy with the darts?” Childers inquired.

”He’s good with ‘em,” said the custodian. ”Throws a bit too hard, but he’s good.”

Childers turned to leave. ”If you’d like to look in some of the other rooms, you’re welcome,” said the old man.

”No, thanks,” Childers said. In the hall he stopped at a phone booth long enough to make sure of Aussie Mellon’s address.

SIMON TORK’S former partner in the shoe retailing business lived on Ridenour Street, in a little house that showed no light as Childers drove up and parked. After the detective had rung the door bell four times a hall light winked on. A minute later a wispy middle-aged man entered the hall. He didn’t open the door, but spoke through the glass.

”Who is it?”

”Detective Tony Childers. You know me, Mr. Mellon.”

”Yes—yes, so I do. What do you want?”

”There’s been some trouble at the shoe store. I want to talk with you.”

”I got nothing to do with the shoe store now,” said Mellon. ”I sold my interest to Simon. I got nothing to do with any trouble of his.”

”Open the door,” said Childers, leveling his voice. ”Tork’s been murdered.”

Mellon quickly unlocked the door, stepped back, holding a faded bathrobe tightly about his little figure. ”I don’t know anything about it. Simon owed me money, but I don’t—”

”You two quarreled,” interrupted Childers, moving close to the frail man, ”Simon refused to pay you some money you thought you had coming. This

morning, around two o’clock, you killed him. I’m arresting you, Mr. Mellon.”

”No! No!” whined Mellon, ”I was asleep at two o’clock. Honest. I didn’t kill Simon. He was my friend. A little squabble, we had. Yes. But nothing like makes for murder. I didn’t do it.” His voice softened, purring with defeat. ”If my wife was only home she’d tell you the truth. She’d tell you I was asleep since early last night. And—”

Childers grabbed at Mellon’s bathrobe, caught the lapel, jerked it from the little man’s hands. Mellon was fully dressed, wearing a dark business suit. ”You sleep like that—in worsteds?” asked the detective.

Mellon’s lips loosened, wobbled. ”No. You see . . .” He gulped, sent out a colorless tongue to swab blistery lips. ”I should have called the police,” he moaned. ”But I was scared. I’ll tell you all about it. Only give me time. I’ll tell you, truly.”

He swabbed his lips again, stared at the detective with frightened eyes, then stared beyond him at the blackness beyond the door glass. A hard shudder traced his small frame.

”A while ago the doorbell woke me. I got up and came to the door. I was afraid of nothing then—I opened the door. Just like that—I opened it. And Simon fell—fell inside. He—Oh, heaven help me, Mr. Detective! It was horrible—horrible. Blood—blood . . .” Mellon moaned, wrung his pale hands. His chin jerked, tears broke from his fear-stretched eyes.

”How can I tell you?” he chattered. ”They asked for five thousand—it was here. The money. I had it in the house. So I—”

The door swung open. No one was there. Out of the darkness came a soft fluttering sound, then a thud. After Aussie Mellon fell onto the floor on his back a thin wisp of feathers at his throat quivered.

Blood, as if drawn forth by that quiver, sprouted under the cork haft of the giant dart.

Childers threw a hand, mashed the light button, bringing darkness. He slammed the door, flipped home the night latch. "I wonder," he murmured, "was that one meant for me or—him?"

He felt his way to a hall stand where he'd spotted a phone. He'd dialed the number so often that the darkness was no hindrance. A sergeant answered.

"You, Tony?" he barked. "We thought you'd been croaked."

"Where's Lieutenant Anderson?" Childers inquired.

"Out with the boys chasing old man Fornash's only son," said the sergeant. "The rich boy got away." The sergeant drew his breath so hard it rattled in the receiver. "The beat cop found something you missed. It was in Fornash's car—a dame's purse. Identification cards in it too; belonged to a Miss Flower Blue. After the patrolman found it he was biffed on the noggin. Some of Fornash's pals helped him get away.

"Anderson's raising hell because you left a killer like him in one man's care. He got the chief out of bed. The whole department's on its ear. This time, Tony, your high-handed ways are going to cost you your job. The chief's already said he's going to kick you out of the department, and personally."

Calmly, Childers said, "There's a corpse at 2232 Ridenour Street. A poor little shoe salesman named Aussie Mellon. You'd better see to it somebody comes right over. And I won't be here. Thirty minutes from now, if I'm able, I'll call or come in. If I don't, you can tell Lieutenant Anderson the dozen doughnuts in my locker are his. They can go as a peace offering from a dead dick." He cradled the phone and began feeling his way down the

hall, toward the back of the house.

He was sorry he'd ever bluffed Aussie Mellon, trying to scare out of him the full story of what had happened when the killers brought Simon Tork's corpse to his door. He knew now how the blood had got in his car. They'd used it to transport Tork's body.

The man clutching a gun, crouched and waiting beside Childers' coupe, didn't move until he heard a car's motor come to life in the alley back of Mellon's house, then he stood up, mumbling an oath. When he looked in the detective's coupe, he cursed some more. This time Childers had taken the ignition keys with him.

CHAPTER III

OLD man Gentz, the candy man, awoke from a troubled sleep with a hand gently pressing his shoulder. The bedlamp was burning when he opened his eyes. He came up with a jolt, stared wildly at the oil-streaked face of Detective Tony Childers.

"Nice and easy," said the detective soothingly. "Your wife let me in, told me where to find you. It's four A.M., and you're not being arrested for killing a crook named Joe Estramer. That is, you're not unless you refuse to tell me exactly what happened at your candy store this morning."

Gentz gulped, twisted into a sitting position, then said, "He wasn't dead—I told you the truth. He was alive, like I said. But he was not a customer. I didn't know him."

"But you really thought he was dead at first?"

"Yes," Gentz nodded loosely. "I got the call and went to the store, like I told you. When I went in he was in a booth, his head back, his arms down. There was blood over his face, from a hole between

his eyes. I didn't go to him. While I'm standing there, scared, not knowing which way to turn, two men came in. I'd locked the door, but they had a key that fit.

"One of them, a big fellow, took a gun from his pocket. 'It's your pistol,' he said. It was true; it was mine. The gun I leave under the counter, near the register.

" 'You killed that man,' the smaller fellow said. 'So we're here to help you out. You pay us, and we'll remove the body. If you won't pay us, we'll call the law. They'll fry you for murder.' "

A helpless look clothed Gentz's face. "So what could I do?"

"How much did you give them?" Childers asked.

"All I had in the store safe. Two thousand, three hundred dollars."

"And what happened?"

"They went out. I thought they'd double-crossed me. I didn't know what to do; then I did what I should have done at first. I called the police department."

"And then?"

"When I came out of the phone booth the man I thought was dead was gone. He'd walked out. See? He wasn't dead at all. It was a skin game, a swindle."

"Let me guess how the man you thought was dead was dressed. See if I'm right. He had on a black and grey pencil-stripe suit, a maroon tie, a white shirt, a light grey hat."

"Yes. Yes," chattered Gentz. "That's correct. Have you got him in jail?"

"No," said Childers. "You made a bad mistake. You should have told me all about it at first."

"I know, I know," said Gentz, twisting his fingers together. "Has something else happened? Have they worked the same trick on somebody else?"

Childers nodded, taking the unloaded .32 from his pocket. "This your gun?" he asked.

"Yes." Gentz nodded, staring at the weapon. "They didn't give it back."

"Maybe they did take the man from the booth. Maybe while you were at the phone—"

"No. They didn't come back."

"But you aren't sure?"

"No, not sure, but almost. I don't think they came back."

"I think," said the detective, moving to the door, "that you, Simon Tork and Aussie Mellon were guinea pigs in a test. Used to perfect an experiment before it was tried on bigger specimens."

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Gentz, his face confused.

Childers grinned cheerlessly. "Guinea pigs carry no tales—but don't worry about it."

His grin quit. "Be ready to go down to headquarters. The police may need your help soon." He went out, saying, "S' long, Mr. Gentz."

CHILDERS thought he recognized the sedan parked in front of Julius Carp's house on North Avenue. He drove on past, parked around the next corner. After talking with Gentz he'd searched the car he'd driven away from the alley in back of Mellon's house. Besides other interesting things, he had found a loaded .45 automatic and a ring of keys. He had gun and keys as he walked back to Carp's house.

Carp's house was dark. The fog had lifted on a soft breeze. All objects near the street-lamps were clearly visible. Childers entered the vestibule. Carefully then, as noiselessly as possible, he began trying the keys in the door. One fit and he let himself inside. With the door closed, he stood in the dark, listening. Soon he knew others were awake in the house.

Voices, muffled and almost unintelligible, came from upstairs. One,

vaguely familiar, said, "You'd better make the call, and fast."

"First you'll have to prove the girl is safe," came the reply. "If you've harmed her I won't go through with it."

"You'll go through with it, okay," was the reply. "They're your darts. The cops will find more like them in your room. They've already pinned one killing on you. Now besides looking for you, they want to know what you did with little Miss Blue. Since they found her purse you don't have a ghost of a chance."

"Kill me then," retorted the familiar voice.

Another voice, soft and silky, broke in. Childers heard it, showed the darkness a satisfied smile. "We can turn the play," it said. "It works either way. Stick a knife in your gullet and your hot-headed chum here will pay up. How about it, chummy? Fifty grand, cash on the barrelhead, and we'll puncture his pipes and leave Cockleburr Annie's knife in the hole. It makes for a motive. The dicks will believe she bumped him for killing her sweety."

The silky voice laughed. "Her sweety, get it? Little Joey Estramer, the bright-minded boy."

"I'll pay it," came a muffled voice.

The familiar voice sounded, its tone desperate. "I'll make the call. Give me the phone."

"Seventy-five grand if you kill him and not me," said the muffled voice.

Silky said, "Maybe you'll make a higher offer, kid."

There was a gasp. "Yes, yes. One hundred thousand!"

"One hundred and twenty-five," bid the muffled tone.

"You want to go higher, darling, to save your life?" The sulky voice was gloating.

"One-fifty," came the choked reply.

The silky voice was confident now,

viciously happy. "Whoever has the most dough lives to ride out a murder frame. Speak up, suckers."

"I'll pay two hundred grand. It's all I got," chokingly said the muffled voice. "Untie me. I'll get it for you."

"I'll go higher!" sobbed the other bidder. "Give me the phone. I'll make the call."

"My friend and I will go outside and talk it over," come the smooth-toned reply.

Childers saw a dim oblong of light on the upstairs ceiling blur as the men walked into the hall. From near the top of the stairs, Silky Voice said, "We'll take the two hundred grand, then turn the play. After he hands over the money, we'll kill him. The sap will still pay up. He'll have to, or stew in his own broth."

"Play both ends against the middle, eh?" came the guttural response. "In the end the sap will fry anyway. What sticks me is what we're going to do with Cockleburr Annie."

"Bury her somewhere in her leg o' beef coffin," replied Silky Voice. "Just leave Annie to me."

"So far in this play, so good," was the throaty reply. "We got guys in frames for the other killings, but we ain't got anybody in a frame for Annie's murder, if it happens. We'd be better off if you hadn't led her on, got her all browsy over you. Her butting in on the Tork play wasn't too good. It was the first hitch. That dick, Childers, was the next one."

"That flatfoot's got more lives than a bobtailed cat. You got to give him credit, swiping Ray's car while Ray was waiting by his jalopy, waiting to give him lead poisoning. He might get smart enough to find us. Ray's car had a key to this place in it, also a gun."

"He won't come here," said Silky Voice. "Gentz didn't talk. Tork and Aussie Mellon didn't get a chance. He hasn't got

a thing on us.”

“We got to bump old man Gentz,” was the reply. “We got to tighten things up. This game is going to earn some real dough. One more worry, though, the flatfoot has the darts to work on. He might go to the Medieval Sports Club and check on guys that can throw them.”

“And where will that get him? The guys we got in frames are all expert dart-throwers, except Aussie Mellon, and he’s croaked. The more the flatfoot noses in, the more he’s going to think wrong is right. I tell you I’ve planned this one solid. We’re manufacturing the reasons for blackmail, then collecting on them. It’s a sweet new angle. As the old saying goes, we’re having our cake and eating it, too.

“The old way a guy had to have something dirty in his past before the squeeze could be put on. Our way, we give them what looks like a dirty present. Frame them for murder, then let them see the frame—they’ll always fork over before you call the coppers. You saw how Gentz paid up, and Tork—and Aussie Mellon, too, when he saw Tork’s corpse. This racket is a natural.”

The guttural reply was tinged with some doubt. “The only hitch is Annie. We can leave the department store model where she is, let her rot if nobody finds her. What does she know? Nothing. But, Annie . . .”

“I’ll figure out a way to dispose of Annie, don’t worry,” said Silky Voice.

“The flatfoot knows we got her, don’t forget.”

“Sure, he does; but he doesn’t know who we are, neither does Annie. She hasn’t seen any of us. The only voice she’d recognize is mine, and she hasn’t heard it.”

“Let’s go in and collect, get this over with,” was the reply. The guttural tone was edged with impatience.

The sound of their voices dropped, became almost indistinguishable, as they reentered the room.

CHILDERS moved forward, groping his way. Four steps and he kicked something that gave with a hollow sound. He went to one knee, felt along the wall. A leather object came under his hands. He finger-traced it. “A fiddle case,” he whispered. “The musicians . . .”

He recalled the human monstrosity that had stopped him in his chase after the girl. He hadn’t got a good look at the big ape’s face, but “Could be,” he mused.

He opened the fiddle case. A short-snouted automatic rifle was inside. He recalled there had been three musicians. He moved his hands, found another case—a monster. “For the cello,” he told himself. He found the huge metal clasp that locked it. He had to use both hands to pry the clasp open.

A scream from above brought him to his feet, automatic in hand. “I’ve paid you—don’t kill me! Don’t!”

Childers mounted the stairs four at a leap, thanking the heavy carpet that muffled his steps. It was rotten odds, four to one, but with the gun and a surprise entrance, maybe he’d have a chance. He couldn’t let murder happen under his nose and do nothing to stop it.

They heard him coming. The hall lights flashed on behind him. A huge form shadowed the stair well. Something wafted past his ears, thudded in the wall. The automatic pounded his palm, hard, as he drove lead and fire upward.

Fire and lead answered fire and lead. Something, like a mighty hand, grabbed his left wrist, jerked it. The big shadow up there was falling. He flattened to the wall, sidestepping the plunging body.

Two figures suddenly popped up where the big one had been. Guns roared.

Twin fingers of fiery death sought him out. His left arm went dead to the shoulder as a slug tore through it. He climbed on, leaping into the stifling smoke, upward, pumping lead! A hoarse scream. Another body hurtled down. The top of the stairs went vacant.

Down the hall a door slammed. Childers raced at the sound, tore at the door knob.

A warning voice came from beyond the door. "They're not here. They slammed the door, went down the hall."

The warning came too late. Childers whirled. Joe Estramer stood at the end of the hall, an automatic in his fist. "Drop the gat, Tony," he said.

Childers let the gun fall. "Hello, Joey," he said, a cold smile flicking his lips.

"Not surprised, eh?" the blackmailer said.

"No. After talking with Gentz, I knew you were alive. You played dead in his candy store, so it was easy to guess you also played dead in Tork's back room—played dead there to fool Cocklebur Annie. If she hadn't been there to lure me away, I'd have found you out then."

"And died for your trouble," said Estramer. "One more step my way, and I meant to kill you."

"Then I have little Annie to thank for saving my life," said Childers. "I'll not forget."

"Dead men can't remember, Tony."

"But I'm not a dead man, Joey. Not yet."

"You're busy borrowing minutes, though. After you're dead and rotten we'll still be skimming along on the golden wave, playing our little game. Does that gripe you, shamus? Those two guys you gunned just now aren't important. Are they, Ray?"

A voice behind Childers said, "No. Boomer was good with the darts, and

Skinny was a good locksmith; but there are others."

"Locking Annie and me in that fake cello case was a smooth stunt, Joey," said Childers, talking to gain time, and not knowing what he'd do with it when he'd gained it. "Dressing your hoodlums up like musicians was another slick trick. Where you made your mistake was letting old man Gentz live."

"Still time to fix that little slip after we croak you," Estramer said.

Childers went on, "Gentz told me about you practicing your play on him. I figured if you'd played dead once, you'd do it again. I'd been to the Medieval Sports Club and found out Lloyd Fornash and Julius Carp had quarreled. That quarrel gave a motive, and put Fornash or Carp in a frame in case either of them was murdered. It was easy then to guess where and on whom you meant to pull your first big stunt. Especially after I learned Fornash had been grabbed away from the cop. It was logical you'd stage the play here, in Carp's house."

"Gab on, Sherlock," said Estramer, grinning. "We'll listen. I'm trying to think now who'll pay up when he finds your corpse in his bedroom. Maybe it'll be old man Fornash—could be he'd believe his son had killed you."

Childers smiled. "Nice headwork, Joey. Only before I left Gentz's house I phoned headquarters, told them where I was going. They ought to be outside just about this minute." He knew the lie was weak.

Estramer's wicked smile failed to fade. "And didn't come in when the guns popped awhile ago? Don't make me laugh. You know what, Tony, I think I'll have Fornash kill you. It'll be better to have a legit' case when we go to bleed his papa. Open the door, Tony, and take a look at what we got in there."

THE detective opened the door. Lloyd Fornash and Julius Carp were tied in chairs. The strain the past few minutes had brought upon them was painfully evident in their haggard faces.

“Two valuable babies,” commented the man called Ray, coming in close at Childers’ back.

Estramer strode over to a clothes closet, opened the door, and helped out a pretty barefooted brunette. She was bound and gagged.

At sight of her Lloyd Fornash gasped. Estramer led her to a chair, then untied Fornash’s hands. “I got a little piece of work for you, kid.” he said. He took a giant dart from his coat. “I want you to throw this—right into the middle of the flatfoot’s neck. If you’ll oblige, and quick. I won’t push pins under your beautiful girl friend’s fingernails.”

Childers knew, then, why Estramer had grabbed up Flower Blue. She was the goad that made Fornash skip rope. Fornash shuddered, gasped, as Estramer put the dart in his hand.

Julius Carp spoke. “Fiends! Murderous fiends!” His voice was a rattling croak.

“He feels bad,” Estramer told Childers. “We got two hundred grand from him, now we’re going to bump him off.” He pulled a pin from his coat lapel, reached and got the brunette’s hand. “Pins under her pretty nails first,” he said. “Then a knife across her white throat, if you won’t play ball, Fornash.”

Fornash clutched the dart with trembling fingers, fought to force his eyes up to his target. The room grew quiet. After a few seconds the man called Ray said, “Make it fast. We’re taking too much time here.”

Fornash raised his hand for the throw. Childers glanced at Flower Blue, noting the beautiful, pure hazel of her eyes. He forced a stiff grin of defiance. They’d

never understand, he knew, but he said it anyway. “This gives Lieutenant Jock the doughnuts.” He set his soul to meet death.

“You can keep the doughnuts, Tony,” spoke a steady voice from the door.

They all looked that way and saw Jock Anderson’s big square face, saw the Police Positive in his strong right hand, saw the hall filled with hard, official faces behind him.

Estramer and Ray did as told and shelled out their guns. “How—?” began Tony Childers, then, “Hello, Jock.”

Lloyd Fornash dropped the dart as Cocklebur Annie wriggled into the room past Anderson.

“You were in the fake cello case,” Childers said to her. “When I unlocked it, you got out and phoned headquarters?”

Annie nodded. “That cello case is the satchel they used to transport us to Fornash’s store. After they took you out and closed it again they turned on the lights. The night watchman saw them, and one of them killed him. From what they said I thought they’d smashed you with an elevator.”

Childers said, “Why did you lie, tell me you were Flower Blue?”

“I was scared. If you got away I was afraid you’d arrest me for Joey’s murder. Last night he forced Flower Blue into his car. I believed she’d killed him. I knew you didn’t get a good look at me.”

“How’d you know he’d picked her up?”

“After I found her purse and shoes in his car he told me. He said he was holding her to force a payment from Lloyd Fornash. I threw her things into a couple of parked cars while you were chasing me.”

The police had snapped handcuffs on Estramer and Ray; had untied Carp, Fornash, and Flower Blue. Flower was crying gladly in Fornash’s arms. Carp was

folding a stack of money Anderson had taken from Estramer.

Childers took a curled, golden hair from a vest pocket, held it out for Annie to see. "Something you lost in that oversized cello case," he told her. "It told me you weren't Flower Blue after I saw Miss Blue's picture at the Medieval Sports Club."

He slipped it back in his pocket, said, "Too bad you had to fall for a lug like Joey, with so many right guys in the world. But maybe there's one guy who knows enough about life that he could forgive a hell of a lot for the sake of a fresh start for a square little kid like yourself."

Anderson came over. "Those two at the bottom of the stairs are dead, if you'd

like to know," he said. "And, Tony, there's something I want to tell you. I—"

"Skip it, Jock," said Childers, tiredly. "I know it all—I've heard it so many, many times. Insubordination. Willful neglect of duty. Disrespect for a superior officer . . ."

Unfazed, Anderson said, "I want to tell you that I think you rate a sergeantcy. You've got the guts and brains and—"

"Brains?" said Childers, arching oil-smearing brows in surprise. "Look, Lieutenant, I cracked up this bloody mess—okay. But I did it by following one wrong hunch after another. Can I help it if the little Cockleburr here made them all turn out right?"