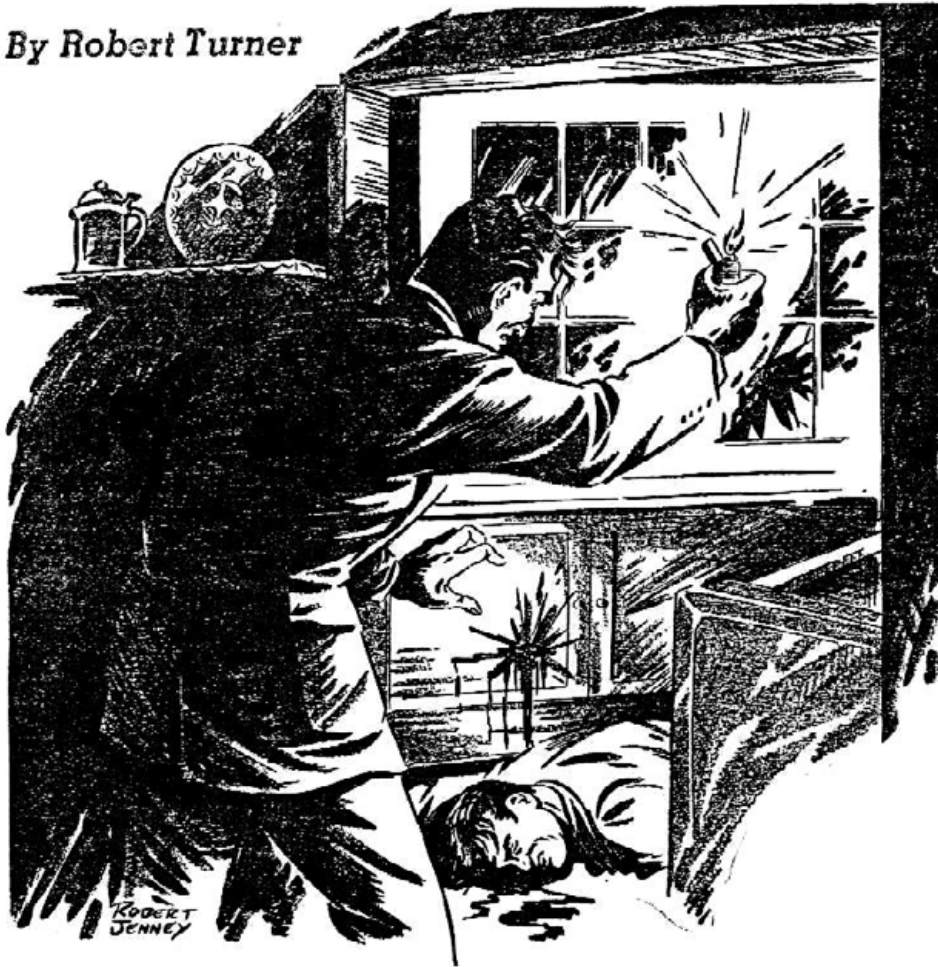


# Wake Up and Die!

By Robert Turner



*Frightful dreams had been troubling Dan Munson's fitful slumber. But these dreams were as nothing compared to the wild nightmare of bloodshed and horror that confronted his hour of awakening.*

THE little men were having a wonderful time with his head. There were two of them, zany little guys, about the size of your hand, with cherubic cheeks and bushy beards and they were dressed like wood nymphs in a Disney picture. They were tossing his head back and forth between them, like some huge, air-filled beach ball. Once in a while, for luck, they would give it a kick, or bounce it between them. They were having great fun.

It wasn't much fun for Dan Munson,

though. It hurt his head to be kicked and bounced like that and it made it dizzy and sick to be tossed through the air. He didn't like it. He wished the funny little men would stop.

It was almost as though they'd read his mind. They did stop and, with gales of squealing laughter, they disappeared into thin air. This happened as his head was floating midway between them and it suddenly dropped and landed on something with a terrible, painful jolt. . . .

Dan Munson awakened right after his skull had smacked against the headboard of the bed. He sat up abruptly in the darkness and the pains and sickening dizziness came back to his head. And he realized now, conscious, that the sensations didn't come from any little dream men kicking his noggin around, but were merely the brutal reality of a colossal hangover.

He groaned and rocked there in the darkness and muttered those famous words over and over: "Never again, Munson. Never again."

He tried to think, to remember what had brought this on, but the gears seemed jammed in his brain. Nothing happened. No thoughts, no memories. Nothing but pain. He opened his mouth and smacked his lips, hoping some of the dark purple taste would escape, but it didn't. So he just sat there for awhile.

**S**OMEWHERE, off in the darkness, Munson became aware of running water. It seemed that there was a lot of it, like a waterfall, almost. He tried to make some sense out of that, but all he got was a terrific, burning thirst, and a torturing picture of himself, sitting under a mountain waterfall, with his mouth open and thousands of gallons of icy cold, wonderful water cascading down his throat.

Slowly, the gears of his mind began to mesh and he reached out and touched the bedclothes, figured that he'd been asleep on a bed. Very good, so far. His hands ran down his body and found out that he was fully clothed. Then they explored the bed next to him, but it was empty.

Assuming that he was home, in his own bed, where was Laura, his wife? "Oh, Lord!" he groaned into the darkness. "She'll kill me, getting crocked like that!"

He got up off the bed and stumbled through the blackness of the room, fell over a chair. He picked himself up, rubbing

bruised shins, and cursed Laura for moving the furniture again. There shouldn't have been a chair in that particular place. He staggered toward the doorway and the light switch next to it. His fingers traveled up and down the wall but couldn't find the switch.

"Now, wait a minute," he said thickly. "Laura couldn't have moved the light switch. Impossible."

He went to walk out through the doorway into the hall and slammed his face against the wall, bouncing back with a little moan of surprise and frustration. The doorway was gone, too. No doorway. What was going on, anyhow?

And that sound of rushing, falling water, which he located as somewhere beneath him, now? It was beginning to annoy him. He wondered vaguely if this whole thing was some nightmare, one of those realistic ones. He shook his head vigorously and learned he wasn't still asleep, not the way it hurt his head and put bells ringing in his ears and made his temples go in and out like a bellows.

Off to his right, there was the sound of a clock ticking. That was wrong, too. They had an electric clock that hummed a little, didn't tick at all. He moved cautiously through the blackness toward the sound. His hands, outstretched before him, encountered what seemed to be a dresser, fumbled over it until they came to the base of a lamp. They climbed up the lamp and located a button switch, pressed it. Nothing happened. The lamp didn't light.

His other hand explored the top of the dresser and found a package of cigarettes and what felt like a lighter. With great concentration, he made the lighter break into flame. He stared at himself across the little yellow light in the dresser mirror and winced.

It was the poor light, he figured. He couldn't really look like that, even very

much hung-over. He was thin all right, but the reflection leering back at him was ghastly, with burning, hollowed eyes and drawn mouth. The dark hair that should have been slicked down from a neat part, was a tousled mess. His shirt collar was open and his tie pulled awry.

"You dirty old drunk!" Dan Munson said to the reflection. "You should be ashamed."

And then he almost dropped the lighter. He was looking at the clock and it said three A. M. and it was an old-fashioned alarm clock that he'd never seen before. The rest of the paraphernalia on the dresser was strange, too. He backed away from it, horrified. He wasn't home, at all. He was in a strange house, a strange bedroom.

He turned slowly around, holding the flickering flame of the lighter aloft. What he could see of the rest of the bedroom verified the fact of its strangeness.

**T**HE heavy, continuous sound of rushing, pouring water continued and he tried to identify that. Someone was taking a bath, maybe? At three o'clock in the morning, in a darkened house? Besides, it sounded like too much water to be just a faucet running.

He saw the doorway, and there was a light switch next to it. Weaving toward it, he flicked the wall switch up and down with his finger. Still no lights went on. The current must be turned off. What kind of a place was this, anyhow? He went out into the hall and saw the old grandfather's clock out there and the umbrella stand and a clothes tree, with an old trench-coat on it. Memory came with a rush then, and he knew where he was.

It came clicking back into his mind like a motion picture running backward. When he'd left the office, he'd stopped in at a bar for a quick one with Lew Eshmont, their new insurance salesman. Eshmont was a

nice guy in a slick, garrulous, flashy-dressed sort of way.

They'd had a few more on top of that quick one, and it had seemed like a good idea when Eshmont insisted he come home with him for dinner. Especially since he'd been faced with the prospect of eating out that night. Laura had told him that morning that she was going downtown to shop and intended to stay down for a hen-party dinner with girl friends from her old office.

His memory balked then. The rest was vague, hazy. There was blurred remembrance of coming here with Eshmont, to the salesman's home, a cozy little cottage in the suburbs. There was a not too clear picture of Betty Eshmont, Lew's wife, a luscious blonde in a slinky black dinner dress. They'd had dinner and it seemed to him there was another man there, Eshmont's brother, or cousin or somebody. There'd been more drinks after dinner, but that was all he could recall right now.

What had happened after that, Munson wondered. What was he doing still here, so late at night? Why were the lights out and where were the others?

Out in the hall, Munson called out weakly, "Hello, there! Anybody home?" His own voice sounded funny against the silence, hollow, unreal. When nobody answered, he tried again, louder this time, but the result was the same.

Panicky, Munson staggered into the living room, tried the wall light switch there, but without success. The power seemed to be off all over the house. The pale, flickering glow from the lighter he held in his hand spread over most of the small living room. He saw that it was unoccupied so he went out back into the hall and along to the kitchen.

He stood in the kitchen doorway and looked around the small room, illuminated by the wan flame of the cigarette lighter.

The room was a wreck. The kitchen table and a couple of chairs were overturned. On the floor was a litter of broken dishes, spilled ash trays, and shattered highball glasses. In the center of the mess was an empty whisky bottle, one side of it stained with ketchup or something.

“Lord!” Munson gasped. “What a wingding we must have thrown! I don’t—”

He broke off. He had suddenly moved the lighter and sent the long shadows leaping to another part of the room. Part of the light fell on the other side of the turned-over table and Munson felt his eyes straining almost out of his head. He shut them fast, leaning against the door jamb, his stomach tossing and reaching up toward his throat. He shook his head violently and hardly even noticed the pain of it this time. Then he opened his eyes and looked again.

**I**T WASN’T any trick of the D.T.’s nor any optical illusion brought about by the shadows and dull light. It was there, sure enough, a man sprawled out on the floor, behind the table. The man’s face was turned toward the wall, but Munson didn’t have to see that. He saw the pink silk shirt and the loud, checkered slacks and pointed yellow shoes and the shiny black hair and knew that it was Lew Eshmont lying there.

Only now, part of the back of Eshmont’s head wasn’t shiny black, it was smeared and matted with a sticky, reddish substance. There was a pool of it under his head, too. Munson knew now that the red smear he’d seen on the whisky bottle hadn’t been ketchup, either.

Somebody had conked Lew Eshmont over the head with that bottle. They’d done a real job of it. From the way Eshmont lay, with one leg doubled under him, the stillness of him, Munson knew he was dead.

Some more of the blur cleared from Munson’s mind and he remembered other

things that had happened this evening. He remembered the eyes of Lew Eshmont’s wife, Betty, green and long and slightly slanting-provocative, flirting eyes. He remembered the deep, ripe red of her mouth and the way it had smiled at him. He’d tried to pay no attention to the open way she had flirted with him all through dinner. He’d tried to tell himself that she was just being friendly, nice, to one of her husband’s friends. But it hadn’t turned out that way.

Several times, he remembered, after dinner, she’d insisted on dancing with him. At least she had called it that. He’d been plenty embarrassed, too, with Eshmont sitting right there watching them. Eshmont had pretended not to mind, had made joking remarks about it. But there had been an undercurrent in his tone and something in his eyes that made Munson know that Eshmont was not taking it all so lightly.

Several times Munson had told them he was leaving. He wanted to get away before there was any trouble. But each time somebody had insisted on one more drink. The last time he recalled, Betty Eshmont had insisted on going out into the kitchen and making the drink herself and she had pulled Munson out there with her. But as soon as she got into the kitchen, Betty hadn’t bothered making any drink. She had flung herself into his arms.

He could remember now, with little guilty thrusts of conscience, the clinging softness of her, the warmth of her round arms around his neck and the heat of her mouth, pressed against his.

He’d been too dumbfounded, taken by surprise, to do anything for a moment. Then when he started to break away, it was too late. He heard a great roar of rage and looking over Betty’s shoulder he saw Lew Eshmont standing there, his face purple with anger, his fists clenched.

The other man—Magraw, his name

was, Munson remembered, Eshmont's cousin, who lived with them—was with Lew. He'd tried to grab Lew, hold him back. But Lew Eshmont had broken free from Magraw's grasp and thrown himself at Dan Munson. They had crashed over backward across a chair to the floor. That was all Dan Munson remembered.

As that terrible scene flooded back into his memory, Munson wondered why he didn't recall any of the rest of it? Had he hit his head against the floor, been knocked out? Or was it just that his mind had blacked out over that part of it? Maybe in the drunken fight that had followed, he'd killed Eshmont. In self-defense, maybe, but even so—

His thoughts cut off that track as his stomach turned even at the idea.

"But what about the rest of it?" he asked himself. "Where are Betty and Magraw? What's happened to the lights? How—"

And then he listened to the roaring sound of pouring water, much louder, here in the kitchen, and his eyes darted toward the door that led down to the cellar. The noise was coming from down there. Completely sobered now, he knew what that sound was, too.

**S**HOWING him over the house, when he'd first got there, Eshmont had taken him down into the cellar. The cellar had been full of half-dried puddles and there was a watermark around the walls, a couple of inches from the floor. Eshmont had pointed out the main water pipe that had burst a few days ago. That section had been replaced with new pipe, but Eshmont had told him the whole thing was rotten and he had to get it all replaced soon. The plumber had told him some other part might spring a leak or burst at any time.

Munson knew now that was what had happened. The water pipe had burst again

and the basement was being flooded. The power wires had become inundated and blown all the lights.

Suddenly, through the noise of the pouring, rushing water down below him, there was another, faintly discernible sound. Munson stood frozen, listening, and caught the sound again. This time there was no mistaking it. It was a woman's voice, crying out for help. He ran across the kitchen to the basement door, flung it open. Cautiously, holding the flickering flame of the lighter out before him, he started down the steps.

Halfway down his foot sank into water up over the ankle. He felt it filling his shoe, icy cold and uncomfortable. Quickly, he withdrew the foot, shaking it furiously, cursing. Down here close at hand, the sound of the escaping water was a great roar. Munson squatted, holding the tiny cigarette lighter flame far out before him. The reddish glow of it fell palely over slickly undulating dirty water, as far across the cellar as he could see. The place was flooded almost to the ceiling.

Then it came again, the cry he'd heard up in the kitchen, more audible this time. "Help! Get me out of here. I—don't want to drown. I don't want to die!"

Looking toward the sound of the voice, Munson saw a dimly shadowed object on the other side of the flooded cellar, near where the furnace should have been. It was clinging to some kind of pipe and thrashing the water wildly.

"Betty?" he yelled. "Hold on. Stay with it. I'll run and get help!"

"No!" she screamed back. "There isn't—time. I—I can't hold on much longer. I—"

The voice faded into a sickening gurgling sound and the shadowed object over there in the water disappeared. The splashing ceased.

Swiftly, Munson yanked off his shoes.

Holding the lighter high over his head, he bent forward and let himself down into the icy grip of the water. He held the tiny flame above his head and worked with a one-arm sidestroke toward the spot where Betty Eshmont had gone down. He was a few feet away from the spot, shivering and gasping for breath, when her head broke through the surface again, close to him.

No longer was Betty the slinky, blond siren type. Her yellow hair was plastered tight to her head, strands of it clinging in snaky wet tendrils to her cheeks and forehead. The mascara of her eyes had smeared and run, mixed with her other makeup. Her lips were shriveled and blue with cold. Her eyes were walled back in her head.

**J**UST then a draft whisked across the flood waters in the cellar and the cigarette lighter flame puffed out. The darkness seemed to smother Munson like a great shroud. Frantically, he fumbled to set the lighter aflame again and it escaped from his wet, slippery fingers, fell into the water. There would be no more light to guide him.

The next few moments were nightmarish, horrible. He reached out with one hand, swinging it beneath the surface of the water, and his fingers finally tangled into the loose floating strands of Betty's hair. He got a tight grip and pulled her head above the surface. Next he got his arm around her, under the shoulders. He treaded water for an instant, reached as high as possible with his free hand. It found a steampipe and his fingers clamped onto it.

Inch by inch he worked along the length of the pipe pulling Betty, limp and unconscious, with him, toward a gray splotch on the far wall, which he figured to be one of the high cellar windows. Halfway there, the girl regained consciousness, stiffened in his embrace, began to thrash

about in wild desperation, sobbing hysterically. Munson almost lost his grip on the pipe. But then he got one hand up on her throat and cut off her wind.

"Stop it!" he yelled. "Calm down or you'll drown us both. We'll be all right, if you'll stop thrashing' around."

In a few moments she subsided and Munson took his hand from her throat. She gasped, "I'll be okay, now. Who—who are you?"

He told her, then asked, "What happened, anyhow? How did you get caught down here like this?"

He felt her shudder. In a dull monotone, she said, "I—I guess I fell down the stairs. I was knocked out. When I came to, I was lying in several inches of water and the cellar was filling fast. I tried to make it back up the stairs, but there was something the matter with one of my legs and I was too weak and dizzy. I couldn't make it, kept falling back.

"The water got deeper and deeper. I—I finally crawled to a table, then pulled myself up and lay across it. When the water rose, the table floated. It held me up and I got to the top of the furnace. I—"

She broke off, her body jerking convulsively against his arm. "It—it was horrible," she said. "Get us out of here! Please!"

He was almost to the window now and in a few more moments he turned loose from the overhead pipe and splashed a few strokes to the gray patch of light. Somehow he reached up and undid the latch, got the window open. It was narrow, with barely room to squeeze through, but he made it finally. He got them both out of the cellar.

For several minutes they sprawled there, wet and shivering, on the soft earth in a clump of lilac bushes planted against the side of the house. He reached over and touched Betty Eshmont's shoulder.

"Let's go," he said. "Let's get over to

the house next door and get warmed up and call the police. I—”

He stopped. Betty wasn't listening. She'd passed out again. He lifted her limp figure in his arms, walked across a lawn and a driveway, through a privet hedge gap and into the next yard. The neighboring house was a little larger than the Eshmonts'. There were no lights on, but Munson clumped up onto the front porch and kicked at the door with his foot.

MUNSON almost had to boot in a lower panel of the door before a light flashed on in the hall and footsteps shuffled toward the door. It was an old man who opened up. He wore a bathrobe over a long-tailed nightshirt. He was pink and shining bald except for cottontail tufts of white hair over each ear. His round blue eyes practically hung on his cheeks when he saw Munson standing there, sopping wet and shivering, with a woman in the same condition in his arms.

“Don't get alarmed,” Munson said quickly. The old fellow looked as if he were ready to keel any moment. “This is Mrs. Eshmont from next door. She got trapped in their flooded cellar and almost drowned. I think she's all right, though. Just fainted from shock or exposure or something.” He didn't say anything about the fact that Mr. Eshmont had been murdered. The old boy didn't look as though he could have stood that.

“Come in then, come in,” the neighbor mumbled finally. He tugged nervously at his pinkish jowls. “My name's Jeremy. My wife'll be right down. Glad to do anything we can to help.”

Mrs. Jeremy, an apple-cheeked little old lady in horn-rimmed glasses, put in her appearance then and bustled around, wringing her hands and exclaiming what a terrible, terrible thing it was, that the Eshmonts seemed like such a nice young

couple, too. She supervised the job of putting Betty Eshmont to bed in a guest room, shooping out her husband and Munson, ordering them to call a doctor immediately.

Mr. Jeremy gave Munson the doctor's number, showed him the phone in the dining room, and told him to make the call while he tried to dig up some dry clothes for Munson to put on. After he'd called the doc, Munson phoned the police about Eshmont's death. They said they'd send somebody right out.

As he hung up, Munson heard the Jeremys' doorbell ring. When the old man answered it, Munson heard an excited familiar voice. He was just starting out into the living room where Jeremy was talking to the new arrival when he heard his own name mentioned. He stopped in the doorway and listened, recognizing the voice. It was the man named Magraw, Eshmont's cousin. He was saying:

“It must have been that guy, Munson, who did it. Lew brought him home from the office for dinner and he and Betty were playing up to each other all night. Lew was terribly jealous of his wife. They were having a big fight out in the kitchen when I got scared and left. I—”

Munson stepped out into the living room. He said, “What is all this, Magraw? Where did you disappear to?”

Magraw was a slightly built, dapperly dressed young man with thick, wavy yellow hair and a high-cheek-boned handsome face. His eyes popped and his long thin jaw fell when he saw Dan Munson.

Magraw stabbed a finger toward Munson. “That's him, Mr. Jeremy. That's the man who killed my cousin and his wife Betty! What's he doing here? Listen, Munson, you aren't going to get away with this!”

“Killed Betty?” Munson said. “What

are you talking about?"

"You know damned well what I'm talking about, Munson," Magraw snarled. "Go phone the police, Mr. Jeremy. We'll take care of this guy. I come home and find my cousin Lew dead in the kitchen and Betty floatin' around in the flooded cellar. What happened, Munson, after you killed Lew? Did you get afraid that Betty would tell on you? You had to get rid of her, too, didn't you?"

Dan Munson stood there, water still trickling from his wet hair down into his shirt collar. He stood there with his legs aspraddle, a tall, rangy-shouldered man, and slowly his fists closed against his thighs. This was beginning to get him. He'd had enough of this business tonight. It was too much now, with Magraw standing there accusing him of murder.

**I**T WAS then that the puzzling things Magraw had said began to penetrate and Munson saw what was wrong with the other man's excited statements.

"Wait a minute," Munson said. "You say Betty is over there in that flooded cellar? What makes you think that? Was she there before you left the house tonight?"

"Of course not," Magraw said. "But when I came back a few minutes ago, I found Lew Eshmont in the kitchen, dead. Then I heard water flooding the cellar and looked down there. I—I saw Betty down there and—"

"You did?" Dan Munson's lean, haggard-looking face tightened and a tiny muscle began to jump along his jaw line. "That's peculiar, Magraw, because Betty isn't over there in the cellar any more. She's right here, in the Jeremys' bedroom. She's alive and the police are coming here, too, Magraw. I imagine she'll have a lot of things to tell them about what went on over there tonight."

Color washed out of Magraw's face. His hands worked nervously at his sides. "Betty—she's here?" he gasped. "She's alive? But—but that's impossible. She *couldn't* be. She—"

"You should have made sure she was dead, there in the cellar, before you left," Munson cut in. "You've just given yourself away, Mister. You took too much for granted. You figured Betty wouldn't have a chance, lying there unconscious after you busted the rotten water pipe open. If you hadn't been so cocksure that your whole plan had succeeded, you might still have gotten away with it and pinned it on me. Even after what you did to her, Betty still tried to cover up for you. She told me she fell down the cellar steps."

Magraw opened his mouth several times, but no words came out. A corner of his mouth twitched and his green eyes took on a glassy hardness so that the light reflected from them as it does from a cat's.

"Betty covered for me?" he finally managed.

"Yeah. She had to, you damned fool, because she's as guilty as you are. The way I see it, you and Betty had just been waiting for a chance like my visit tonight afforded. You've been seeing each other secretly and tonight gave you a chance to knock off two birds with one stone. You would get rid of Eshmont, leaving you free for each other, and Betty would grab off a big hunk of insurance. Lew was an insurance salesman and they always carry heavy policies on themselves."

Slowly, Dan Munson started toward Magraw. He said, "I'm going to fix you right now before the cops come. I don't like being made the patsy, the fall guy in any murder rap like you cooked up tonight. I resent it."

Magraw fell back before him. Suddenly his hand darted into his pocket and he yanked out a small-calibered automatic,

lined the black hole of its muzzle onto Munson's stomach.

"Stay away from me," he snarled and started edging toward the door. "You haven't got a damned thing on me, really. You won't be able to prove anything."

"I don't know about that," Munson answered. "I have an idea Betty will cook your goose for you, soon as she comes to and finds the whole thing's come out. She'll be ready to sing plenty loud. I imagine she's plenty sore about you deciding at the last minute to double-cross her, kill her, too. What happened, Magraw? Did you suddenly get it figured that as Eshmont's next of kin, if Betty was dead, too, *you'd* get that big hunk of insurance money?"

Just as Magraw was reaching a hand out toward the knob of the front door, footsteps pounded up onto the porch outside and the doorbell clanged loudly. Magraw spun about in panic at the sound. Dan Munson dived at him. He hit him around the knees in a perfect flying tackle and they crashed against the wall and went

down. It took two cops and old man Jeremy to pull him off Magraw's still figure. . . .

It was broad, staring daylight when Dan Munson was released from headquarters, on bail, as a material witness. The little men were back again, kicking his head around, only he couldn't actually see them this time. He could only feel them. Reaction from all the excitement and the hangover, in full glow now, made him feel like a walking version of a Dali horror painting. It didn't help any, either, to think of facing Laura the way he looked, the way he felt.

Before he headed home, he stopped in a drugstore and bought a five-pound box of candy. At a florist's, he got a dozen roses. But even thus armed, Dan Munson knew a man wasn't too safe, going home to his wife after being out all night. Even with the whopping story he had to tell. She probably wouldn't believe it, even when she read about it in the papers. Wives were like that. He got into a cab and settled back into the seat and hoped for the best. And let no man invite him home for dinner for a long, long time to come.