

MOONLIGHT SAVING

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Stroud tried to whip a nasty left hook to Gorse's jaw

Ed Farrell, Insurance Detective, Stalks a Murdering Saboteur Through a Sinister Maze of Political Corruption!

OVER in town, a clock tolled seven as I parked on the bridge approach. The construction shack squatted there was like all others I'd seen on Reliance Bridge Company jobs—unpainted, boxlike. Only one detail differed here. A dark piece of crepe fluttered from the door.

The door opened as I jumped from my coupe. A stocky, booted man stepped out.

"You're Farrell, the insurance company detective?" he asked me. "I'm Dade, job superintendent." He nodded somberly toward the crepe. "Fellow named Wicker, poor chap. He was our night-watchman."

"Natural death?" I asked.

"No, somebody slugged him," he said. "About four this morning. We didn't get word to Chicago till you'd left. He'd

flopped right where you're standing— See the blood?"

The Reliance Bridge Company carries construction insurance with Federated American, the company I sleuth for. On each new bridge-building contract, they take out one policy covering intentional damage. *Human* damage. There's always the chance some fired workman will sabotage a bridge for spite. More likely, it's some crook posing as a workman.

My employer at the Chicago home office had called me in early that morning.

"This Clay Hill bridge," he explained, "will connect that town of twenty thousand with a rich farming section, the Bottoms, across the river. A Reliance executive just phoned me, from their office here. He's panicky about a message they just received.

"They got a threatening letter once before. It was last summer, when they bid this job in. They were warned that they'd never finish their bridge. They put that down as a crackpot's work, didn't even report it to us. Now they received this new threat."

"Another letter?"

He nodded worriedly.

"It says: 'You had your warning about Clay Hill bridge, suckers!' "

The boss explained Reliance's jitters further. This was a steel-arch bridge, a hundred-yard span. They'd been building several months from both river banks. The day after tomorrow they'd join the two reaching arms in the center. But till then the arms, resting on frail props or "bents," wouldn't stand much jolting.

"Reliance is worried about dynamite," my boss finished. "So am I—plenty! Reliance would lose twenty percent if the bridge was wrecked. But Federated American Insurance m would lose the rest—nearly two hundred grand! Ed, it's

up to you to see that nothing happens to that bridge!"

A BLEAK December wind fluttered the dead watchman's crepe. I glanced up at the incomplete bridge. Lights, following the arch, faintly illuminated the girders. A half moon careened through fuzzy clouds, silhouetting the framework like the stark ribs of a prehistoric monster.

Shivering, I stepped inside the office crammed with blueprints, tools, and welcome heat. I asked Dade about the killing.

"I'd stationed two watchmen," he said. "One at each approach. I'd heard about that first threat and, the arch-closing being a crucial moment, I remembered it."

"You didn't know about the new letter yet?" I asked.

"No, not till I phoned Chicago this morning after the murder. Wicker had lights burning here—you noticed the bulbs on the arch and approaches? Besides, a searchlight's spotted on the water where each bent rises from the river bottom. A 'bent' is the support propping each arm. I figured that if I could keep a wrecker off the approaches and bents, he couldn't touch the bridge."

"Who found the body?"

"A girl. She lives under the abutment here and heard the shot. A brave kid. She grabbed her gun, ran up here and chased the killer off single-handed. The lights had gone out—damn that power company! So she couldn't see much of this running man by moonlight. Then she discovered poor Wicker, this Miss McElroy did, and phoned me."

"McElroy?" I said, startled. "Betty? Is she here?"

He nodded approvingly.

"Guess you've handled our cases before."

Betty McElroy! Every time Reliance finished a job, Betty and her mother would load their cookstove and kitchen utensils into their trailer, light out to another Reliance location. Then they'd rent a building nearby or have one hammered together. And presto! She had another restaurant and was feeding all the construction hands. Why? Her fare was good, the company recommended her, and—she was a swell kid.

"The local mayor came here today," Dade continued, "and offered me police protection. I told him we'd leave all arrangements to you." His hands trembled when he lit a match. "That's all I know."

"Look," I said. "You've been around this town three months. You must know some people, hear things. What about suspects?"

Dade tugged at a hairy ear.

"There's three you might investigate," he said. "The first is Mayor Gorse, a smooth-talking, ambitious politician. He's against the new bridge. When the bids were opened on this job, he had them drawn illegally. But an alderman caught on. It was some kind of trick to delay the contract award until next city election, then take a new bridge vote. Besides, Gorse is linked with the local power company."

"Crooked?" I asked.

"So I gather. Then there's Blodgett. He owns the river ferry just below here."

"He opposes the bridge because it'll hurt his ferry business?" I guessed.

DADE shook his head. "It'll ruin it! The city's already gone to court, canceled his franchise. He can't even operate after the bridge is finished! Also, there's Parelli, a banker at Oakville, twenty miles across the river. Oakville depends entirely on farm trade with The Bottoms. The free bridge will bring that

here, because Clay Hill is much nearer that section. Farmers go to Oakville now to save ferry fare. The bridge will wreck Oakville, and Parelli practically owns the little town. So he'd rather see it in the river than over it!"

Outside, the wind whistled a vibrant, urging tune. I jumped to my feet, turned my coat collar up.

"Driving down," I said, "I hoped this threat was a practical joke. Now I know better. That murderer won't hesitate to make mincemeat of this bridge! His only problem's how, and when. I'm out to stop him. Not just while the arch is being joined but till the job's done! What's more, the Clay Hill people never *can* feel their bridge is safe until this killer's put away. And Wicker—we're not forgetting him. I mean to get that rat!"

After introducing Hull, the new night-watchman, Dade left. Then I had another look at the bridge. The road continued only to the abutment end. The bridge floor wouldn't be swung from the suspenders until the arch was closed.

The moon played ghostly tag with breaking clouds. The near arch-arm curved over a crutchlike bent, projected free beyond for forty feet. The other arm, stretching from the far side, had steadier support. Its bent stood much nearer the free end.

If anybody desired to commit big damage, the arm on our side was the one to blast. The arms were twelve feet apart now, Hull said. Two more days of work would link them together. And it was sixty feet down to water from up there.

Hull was nervous. He kept wetting his lips, rubbing horny hands. A riveter, he'd been given the guard job after Wicker left a vacancy. Thick muscles lumped out his sleeves.

He showed me a telephone that was connected with the far bank. I phoned the

other watchman, Charley. All quiet over there, his voice told me. Then I asked Hull where I could locate Clay Hill's mayor.

"City Hall." Hull squinted his watch. "Evening paper announces a regular city council meeting there at seven. It's seven-fifteen now."

It was eight blocks downtown, he said. With the night becoming clearer, I decided to walk it.

Two hundred yards from the bridge the road right-angled into a town street. A little old man stood under the intersection light, scanning the sky.

"She's gonna stay out, hey?" he croaked at me.

"The moon? Yeah, it isn't going to rain after all."

He hopped birdlike inside a coop-size booth off the sidewalk. His arm levered and the intersection light went out. I stared downtown. All the streetlights were blacked out.

"Did you do that?" I asked, scowling.

"I'm Jelk, city moon-watcher," he cackled proudly. "When the moon's bright, we save light! Forty smackers a night, my nephew the mayor says!"

| SNORTED.

"So your nephew Mayor Gorse pays you city money to watch the moon and yank a switch. Hard work." I glanced back where I'd walked from and my jaw dropped. "Hey, the bridge lights are out, too!"

"Yep, same powerline." He giggled. "This is the second time I've jerked that switch. My job only started last week."

I grabbed his arm, shook him.

"So you had those lights off when Wicker was shot! Now you'll scare the new watchman. Switch those lights on!"

The old man jumped into his doghouse, slammed the door. A bolt grated.

"Hull knows I might turn 'em off," he yelled at me. "I told him today. You see the mayor, mister! This here's my job!"

You bet I'd see the mayor. I started downtown.

There was only a house or two to the block out here. The rest were vacant lots, bare trees, bushes. Frosty shadows loomed everywhere. Then I heard something *thump!* It sounded just ahead, in a dark clump of bushes. The bushes shook. I stopped, braced myself. Then I understood. Somebody had tossed a rock in that bush to distract me.

I whirled, ducked from an onrushing masked shape. A club crashed off my skull. Skyrockets exploded in my seething brain. I staggered, but kept my feet. Then he ran away and scooted behind a board fence as I whipped my gun out and shot three times. Bending low, I ran to the fence, peered over.

I saw lots of trees—a park probably. My assailant was hidden there by now. All I knew was that he'd worn a dark cloth over his lower face. I didn't even know if he was big or little.

Wagging a groggy head, I staggered toward town. Then I broke into a trot. When I reached City Hall, my head was clear and I was running hard.

"Where's that council meeting?" I asked the uniformed cop at the desk downstairs.

"Postponed." He blinked. "The mayor had to leave. Got a phone call a few minutes back, so he left with Mr. Stroud."

"Stroud? The power company owner?"

"Yep." The cop started running around the desk. "Hold on, young fella! You been fightin'?"

I ran outside. I'd forgotten my face was all bloody. I found a cab, handed the hackie a buck to wheel me to the bridge fast. When I jumped out there, he left looking scared. I yelled for Hull. A

flashlight beam drilled me.

"You, Mr. Farrell?" It was Hull, a gun in his fist. "Wanted to make sure. I chased a guy off ten minutes ago. Right after the lights went out. Caught him sneaking onto the bridge."

"Recognize him?"

"No, sir. He ran like a deer, after I shot. But he dropped this. Heard it pop the planking and found it with my flash."

He laid a gold watch in my palm. I flipped it over. On the back was engraved the letter "P."

AFTER keeping Hull company for half the night, I drifted into Betty McElroy's lunchroom for a late breakfast. I perched on a stool at the clean white counter.

"Ed!" Betty waltzed out of the kitchen, shook hands warmly. "I heard about last night. I've been expecting you. How's your head?"

It still throbbed from a knot under my snap-brim, but seeing Betty again made me feel fine all over. She looked swell. She had dark shining hair, a million-dollar figure and blue Irish eyes a mile deep.

She fried ham and eggs on the spick and span griddle. She told me her mother was out back in their trailer. She was in bed, half sick from the excitement. Betty was keeping her .32 under the counter, in case the killer showed again.

She'd heard local news around the lunchroom. For instance, that Blodgett, the ferryman, had been defeated for mayor by Gorse in the last three elections. He would run again next February. Some townfolks predicted he would win.

The campaign issue was utilities—lights, water, gas. This bird Stroud owned the local plant that supplied all three. Blodgett wanted to boot him out, let the city operate its own plant. Blodgett claimed he'd made a study of power rates.

He branded Stroud's rates exorbitant.

Blodgett charged that Mayor Gorse had persuaded the council to keep Stroud's plant. For this work Stroud was furnishing free gas to run a mill Gorse owned. Blodgett couldn't prove this story, but it threatened Gorse's chances for re-election.

"I'll interview the mayor," I told curvesome Betty. "And, pet, if there's more shooting necessary, leave it to me!"

"I haven't seen you for months," she said, "so don't get yourself plugged!"

She'd tried to joke, but suddenly shuddered and went white as a flour sack.

At City Hall the mayor sent word I could come upstairs. Lanky, about thirty-five, this dapper fashion plate shook hands damply. He ran a palm over slick black hair.

"Heard about you," he said silkily. "Meet my friend Stroud."

This other man in the little office was shorter than Gorse, but huge! Three hundred and fifty pounds anyway! Age about forty-five. He didn't even try to rise for manners. Nobody could blame him.

"A pleasure," he said, slipping me a limp ham hand. "The mayor was just telling me you got slugged last night, son."

Gorse's sanctum was small but ornate and expensive. There were new deep-cushioned chairs, a gigantic shiny desk for His Honor. A framed motto on it read: "*Strike While the Iron Is Hot.*"

Gorse blew a bulging smoke ring. "Heard about it this morning, Farrell," he said. "Next time, cut us in. My city force would have the hoodlum in the clink by now."

"Thanks," I said, scowling darkly. "Also for offering your cops to guard the bridge, which I understand you did."

Gorse assumed a platform pose, waved a slim cigar airily.

"And Dade, the superintendent, crudely refused our aid! No gentleman,

that fellow. You'd think *I* was after the bridge! If Dade was the only one concerned, I'd say let his arch go splash!"

HE and Stroud swapped quick, apprehensive glances.

"Of course, I'd hate to see you insurance people hurt," Gorse added, waxy eyelids fluttering. "And this city—why, this bridge'll be wonderful for Clay Hill! I love my town, Farrell! Living in Chicago, maybe you've never felt the warm fire in your heart for a small town like. . . ."

When Gorse's flowery oration ended, I told him about the bridge lights' blackout last night.

"Why can't the power company give us a private line? Instead of that street light hookup? If you love Clay Hill's bridge so, how about letting those lights burn uninterruptedly till we can close that arch?"

A cold, contemptuous grin twisted the corners of Gorse's handsome lips.

"You don't know politics here," he said. "And you don't know Blodgett!"

"What's the connection?"

The mayor and Stroud exchanged more furtive glances. The ponderous powerman sat quietly, like a placid Oriental idol—except his slitted, venomous eyes. I understood now where Gorse looked for directions. But though Stroud might be engineering all this deviltry, he'd had help. With his giant bulk, he couldn't run as speedily as my attacker had.

"Here's the set-up, Farrell," Gorse said smoothly. "Recently I read how various mayors had saved their cities money with this moonlight saving plan. But the minute I started it, what did that crank Blodgett do? He began yapping that I was raising an economy smoke screen, a publicity stunt just to capture votes next February! While I'm really helping Mr. Stroud bleed

the citizens with high power rates, he said!"

"Blodgett's wrong there?" I asked, twisting my wide lips wryly.

Gorse shot me a venomous scowl. His brow furrowed. His expression molded into one of martyred pain.

"It's no joke, Farrell," the mayor said coldly. "I must march on with my moonlight economy project! If I retreated even one night to help your watchmen, Blodgett would jeer how he'd exposed me as a scheming politician! It might win him the election. A calamity!"

I wheeled on enormous Stroud, owner of power plants in half a dozen towns.

"Can't *you* give Dade a private line?" I asked. "Short on wire, or what?"

"I intend to, son," he said expansively. "We didn't know about the mayor's moon business when we hooked up the bridge. I'll give you a private line as soon as I can pull some linemen off last night's windstorm damage to my Oakville wiring. Just a couple of days."

"Swell!" I exploded angrily. "Lights for river catfish! In two days maybe there won't be any bridge." I wheeled on the mayor. "You and Stroud are very chummy, eh? Damn funny you're anxious to cut his power profits by this moon scheme!"

MAYOR GORSE drew up. Anger shook him like a seething, pent-up volcano.

"Personal friendship," he said in a harsh voice, "has no bearing on my public duty. I don't like your tone!"

"Listen, glamor boy," I snapped. "Maybe you haven't heard the gossip—about your mill getting free gas."

"Blodgett!" Gorse shouted, his face working spasmodically with hate. "He's lied about me for years. Where's his proof? I've never received free gas. I

simply oppose municipal ownership because it wouldn't pay here. Damn Blodgett!"

Stroud clamped a ham hand on Gorse's arm. He'd actually struggled to his feet. He shoved Gorse into a chair, whispered sibilantly in his ear. Then he patted my shoulder jarringly.

"Sure, you've got to investigate rumors, son," he said purringly. "But weigh everything you hear. Remember, the mayor's beaten Blodgett for office three times. So the fellow's mighty bitter."

"As for lying little Parelli—" Gorse sputtered, then stopped with a yell of pain. Stroud's gigantic foot had quietly mashed Gorse's small one to shut off his words.

"What about Parelli, the Oakville banker?" I snapped.

"Blodgett's a lying miser!" Gorse yelled. His wild, bloodshot eyes avoided me. He limped to the door, threw it open. "Go see him personally. Then you'll realize why I can't give such a man any advantage! Now get out!"

It was my intention to locate Blodgett anyhow. That afternoon I walked a hundred yards below the bridge to his ferry. Moored in its slip, it listed badly. It needed new red paint. Blodgett squatted on its rickety apron, waiting for a fare.

Nearing fifty, he was burly, red-faced. He wore patched overalls. For twenty years this boat had been a gold mine, but old Blodgett was still too stingy to install a motor. He propelled it along a cable by means of a grip-bar. That long exercise had given him bull shoulders.

I wanted to interview him, I said, because maybe he had heard something on the murder night. His house was nearby. Besides, perhaps he had an inside tip on my case.

"Nope," he said, spitting downstream toward a dam. "I mind my own business and favor others doing likewise." His eyes

suddenly flecked with hatred. "They're robbing me, that's what they're doing! . . . Still, I wouldn't want anyone killed."

His sudden outburst startled me.

"Robbing you? Who?" I asked quickly.

He sprang up suddenly, stuck his maniacal face into mine. His bulging eyes were seared with passion.

"I had the exclusive franchise to operate this ferry," he yelled. "Got it fair and legal. I've worked hard, lugging people across this river. Then this gang started talking this bridge! They had the state's control over my franchise transferred to the city, provided they'd build a city bridge. Then they revoked my franchise. I can't operate .after that bridge opens! Is that justice?"

"But you got damages, didn't you?" I asked.

"Five thousand dollars!" he said, snarling. "You call that compensation after a man's put twenty years in a business? His best years, his life's blood?"

"Why don't you appeal the condemnation award then?"

HIS jaw bunched. Something popped inside.

"I did. But they wouldn't change it. That same gang of politicians fixed my appeal, too. Mayor Gorse and his hellish crew!"

"I don't quite get your point of view," I told the raging ferryman. "You're supposed to champion a city-owned power plant, basing your mayor race on that platform. Then why can't the city also own the transportation facilities across the river? Does a bridge happen to hit your pocketbook?"

His big fist knotted. I half ducked, expecting a blow. But the fist shook at the bridge, where workmen climbed preparatory to joining the two reaching

arms on the morrow.

“Because this damn bridge won’t help the city!” he yelled savagely. “When Clay Hill gets cheap utility rates, that’ll help every resident, won’t it? But who will this bridge help? A few merchants, yes. The banker, oh, yes! But what about laborers, railroad men, me? Nobody’ll travel that side road across the river but Bottoms farmers. Yet we’ve all got to pay for the bridge. It ain’t fair!”

“But Mayor Gorse doesn’t agree with you, eh?” I said.

He peered at his shack with smoldering, suspicious eyes. Then he looked up the road into town, back at me. He licked thick lips.

“Listen,” he said. “I was keeping this secret till my campaign got hot. Mayor Gorse favors a bridge—but not this one! Oh, no! If those Bottoms farmers come here toll-free, how will the trading switch affect Oakville? It’ll wreck it! Well, Stroud owns the power plant there, too. Maybe his power business here would improve some, not much. But his Oakville plant—blooey! Altogether, Stroud’d get burnt plenty. So he’s against a bridge.”

“And Gorse? What did you start to say about him?”

Blodgett tugged on my lapel, pointed a blunt finger downstream.

“See the gap in the hill where that power dam reaches back?” he said in a low voice. “Gorse wanted the bridge there. Stroud, too, if one had to come. Figured maybe he could recoup his Oakville plant loss that way.”

“But how?” I asked.

“Stroud would have gotten plenty for a right-of-way across his plant grounds by the dam. But Gorse, he’d really have feathered his nest with options!”

“Options?” I echoed.

“Gorse dabbles in real estate,” Blodgett said. “If the bridge had been built

down there, its road couldn’t have entered town on Cedar Street, like it does now. The hill’s in the way! Its traffic would have emptied into Locust Street—there’s no other way. That’s how the options come in.”

“You mean—?”

His beefy head nodded vigorously.

“Gorse bought options all along Locust, a quiet back street. They gave him the right, when the traffic increased property values there, to buy cheap. And sell sky-high!”

I nodded. Something icy was forming along my spine.

“And if this present bridge was wrecked? Maybe after the next election Gorse could get the bridge site changed?”

Blodgett bent, plucked up some dirty twine, pocketed it frugally. His eyes returned to me with baleful, crafty malevolence.

“What do you think? The options are still good. They’re on record at the courthouse.”

Another guy was bothering me. Maybe testy Blodgett could help me on him, too. I took a wild stab.

“Didn’t I hear Gorse and Parelli were partners or something?”

“Been hearing about Parelli, have you?” he said. “Well, Parelli can’t afford a bridge at *any* point. He practically owns Oakville. Then the way this crooked ring will handle tolls, Bottoms farmers can’t use the bridge free unless they make their spring crop loans with Canby, the Clay Hill banker who is in cahoots with the ring. But Bottoms crop loans are what made that vulture Parelli. Losing that business along with real estate depreciation, will break him.”

“Parelli in Oakville now?” I asked.

“I dunno. Maybe he’s still in Clay Hill. I ferried him across the day before yesterday. Nervous as a cat! He can’t

swim a lick and nearly drowned last summer. He kept hollering at me not to sink the boat, and kept looking at his watch.”

“Watch, huh?” I took out a watch, showed him the letter on the back.

“Ever see this before?”

Blodgett’s bushy eyebrows meshed.

“Why, it’s his! I noticed it particular yesterday. . . .”

Around four that afternoon I located Parelli in his Clay Hill hotel room.

“But why do you want to see me?” he asked suspiciously when I told him my business. Short, hatchet-faced, he had bristly graying hair, a complexion brown and pitted like a Graham cracker.

“A man’s dead,” I said quietly. “Somebody’s trying to wreck a bridge. I want the culprit. And, frankly, you’re a suspect.”

Panic whirled in sharp, slate-colored eyes. He rubbed his palms on his tailored coat, regained some control.

“I’ve opposed the bridge. Naturally you’d wonder about me.” He swallowed jerkily. “Unfortunately I haven’t an alibi—is that the word? This morning early I drove to the country. Alone.”

“Why are you in Clay Hill today?” I asked. “And yesterday?”

He spread thin, shaking hands.

“I came in the day before yesterday to confer with Canby of the Farmers Bank. Hoped to make a deal with him to divide all future crop loans we both should make. Bottoms farmers arrange their loans in February. I’m afraid they’ll all see Canby now instead of me.”

“So!” I snapped. “Canby turned your proposal down! So you tried to wreck the bridge then and the watchman got in your way. Or did you hire somebody to kill Wicker?”

“No!” the banker shrieked. “I didn’t! No!”

“Then why did you stay over after Canby refused to split? To slug me last night?” I jumped, grabbed his frail shoulders as he reached for an open suitcase. He’d managed to snap it shut. I yanked at the bag. It was locked. “Trying to gun me, huh?” I snarled.

He threw a hand over his eyes.

“I don’t own a gun! There’s private papers in there. Nothing to do with your case.” He wrung his hands despairingly.

“Why’d you remain in Clay Hill?” I demanded.

HE sank limp in a chair. “I’d hoped to see Canby again,” he said. “Besides, I’d lost a luck piece here. I’ve owned it ever since I became successful.”

I held out the gold watch. He snatched at it feverishly. His mouth worked crazily when I pocketed it again.

“Luck piece, is it?” I snapped. “We’ll see.”

A little later I drove to the bridge. It was a cold, cloudy night. Tomorrow the crew would join the arch. Unless—

Yes, the wrecker would strike tonight, if ever. How? Where? Parelli, Gorse, Blodgett—all three hated this bridge! Who would it be?

I insisted that Dade go to his hotel. He looked dog-tired, and I had two good watchmen without him. Besides, Dade’s job was building this bridge. Protecting it was mine!

At nine P. M. I left Hull, slid down the graveled abutment to Petty’s place for coffee. She’d just come from the trailer, she said. Her mother, abed with a splitting headache, had imagined the trailer wheels weren’t level. Betty had moved it a bit to humor her.

Betty’s jet-black hair was brushed in that up-do. Long-lashed blue eyes twinkled in a beautiful, oval face. In her perky blue restaurant uniform she was a

picture to take your breath away.

"Someday," I said, "I'll catch you on one of these construction jobs and marry you."

"I'm still waiting!" she said, and swingily carried some cups into the kitchen.

There was a light tap at the front window. I looked around. A staring face bleared against it, wearing a handkerchief mask! Then it disappeared. I lunged to the door, stared outside. Nobody was there. I thought I heard gravel sliding. Betty ran out. She knew from my face something was wrong.

"Keep your gun in hand!" I whispered what I'd seen. "I don't know why he rapped. Maybe he wanted only to see him while you were in the kitchen. I'm heading after him."

"I'll go too!"

"No. Stay with your mother!"

I raced to the abutment and called Hull as I scuttled upward through loose gravel. No answer came. The moon peeped fitfully through scudding clouds. The bridge lights were off again.

In front of the construction office I stumbled over something soft. It was Hull. He was alive, with a big knot on his head behind. He'd live. I wondered if he'd been left there for me to find. Then I heard another tapping.

Metal carries sound. This was like a tapping carried by a railroad rail. I slipped across the roadway, set my ear against the arch frame that rose from there.

Click-click-click.

I loosed the gun under my arm. Somebody waited on that curving arm. For me! And I accepted the invitation.

I began the crawling climb. The steel girders were icy. At each upright I crouched, hooked a leg around while I rubbed my numbing hands and peered upward. The tapper was making a mistake.

With the garish moon sailing out from behind a cloud, he'd be easier to spot up there than I would.

THEN I saw him silhouetted, at the very end of the arm thirty yards away. I was certain because he'd moved. Then he was gone.

He quit tapping a moment. Then began hammering! Loudly!

Clang-clang-clang!

"Mr. Farrell!" somebody yelled from across the river. "What's that noise over there?" It was Charley, the other watchman.

I crawled faster. Up here the arch was leveling out. I looked down, shuddered. High places always did get my goat. I was over the river now.

"Hull!" yelled Charley. "Answer me!" The bent loomed just ahead of me.

Dade's crew had left the sliding platform which holds the erecting derrick. It stood directly above the supporting bent, to lighten the load on the projecting arm.

I clutched the platform with dead fingers. Pulled myself shakily onto it. Three names swam through my giddy head. Blodgett, Gorse, Parelli. I stared far down at the river. Something clicked in my seething brain. The bridge lights flashed on.

I knew the killer now!

Crouching in the derrick's shadow, I looked along the arm. The bulbs spotted along it didn't give too much light. I'd wait. Before long his head would stick from that framework. Then I'd—

"Drop your gun!" a voice snapped behind me.

My fingers spread. I heard my gun splash sixty feet below.

"You've got me, Blodgett," I said turning slowly. "What next, Blodgett?"

I called his name pretty loud, hoping Charley could hear.

In the semi-darkness I made out Blodgett's leering face, bull shoulders. He wore no coat, just flapping overalls and—no shoes. A handkerchief dangled under his chin. A gun glinted in his fist.

"Mr. Farrell!" the watchman shouted. "I'm phoning the cops!"

Odd that Blodgett didn't warn me against answering.

"I don't care how loud *you* talk," he chuckled softly, reading my thoughts. "So long as *my* voice isn't overheard."

"You—?"

"Catching on? Folks'll say you climbed here to dynamite the bridge yourself. Know what else they'll say? They'll say, 'Farrell was bought! He staged things to look like he'd chased somebody up that arch. He tapped on that girl's window, told her a lie about a face he saw. He knocked Hull down from behind. Even talked to *himself* on the arch so the other watchman would think there were two men aloft.

"Then he lit the dynamite fuse, tried to escape by jumping in the river. But his foot tangled in a rope. When the divers went down to the sunk span, he was snagged there. His pockets were stuffed with articles he meant to leave behind, to throw blame on Parelli and Blodgett! Folks, it looks like Gorse engineered it.' That's what they'll say!"

My forehead poured sweat. Stark horror welled inside me.

"So your blast is ready to light, Blodgett?" I said. "You'll escape by swimming." I summoned a crazy bravado. "I won't let you tie me to the arch. You'll have to slug me first. That'll leave a give-away wound."

"Leave the details to me," he said, jeeringly. Then, "Damn that moon!"

THE moon played tag with clouds again, flitting shadows across the tiny platform. A light shone from the townside

bank. The trailer's doorway! Betty stood framed in its yellow rectangle.

My breath whistled in. She'd moved the trailer directly under the arch! When this giant arm collapsed, it couldn't miss the trailer. Betty and her mother—thousands of tons of crushing steel!

I tried to turn. A gun-snout jabbed my back, a viselike elbow clamped my head and something damp slapped over mouth and nose. A sickening vapor seared into my lungs. Ether! My legs, arms tingled. Reeling, I scratched futilely at the rag. Strength oozed from me. The moon, dancing through the sky, careened wildly. The moon, the mayor's moon. My last chance—

"The Gorse in the moon!" I yelled wildly. "Look out! He's flying through the air at us!"

It was just goofy enough.

"What?" Blodgett's grip relaxed. He glanced backward. And I kicked that gat from his fist.

The kick nearly yanked me off the platform. I teetered precariously on the edge, flung myself on all fours. Blodgett stomped me with a heel. Then his fists flailed my face. Each time he struck, I shook my head, came higher on my knees. He took one last kick. And when I tottered to my feet, he was gone.

Hearing a splash, I looked overside, saw his head bob in the golden, far-off water. My stomach writhed. A thousand devils of giddiness made my head whirl. The killer was swimming away! Charley couldn't stop him. Nobody could but me. No time to climb down and get a boat. Only one chance, to jump and—

I stepped off into space. My eyelids ballooned like parachutes. Water hot-footed me, blistered my face. Icy water closed overhead. Somehow I floundered to the surface. Then I saw Blodgett ahead. He swam with long, silent strokes.

My clothes dragged like window-weights. I went under, got one shoe off, then the other and the heavy coat. I struck out after him.

He'd been swimming for his ferry. Now he veered midstream, heading straight for the power dam. Maybe he'd shot it before, knew a getaway trick. My arms churned faster.

I caught him at the dam and clutched his shirt. Together we catapulted over, all arms and legs. We rose in bubbling water. He kicked my face. I cocked my fist, smashed him on the temple. He sobbed, strangled. I grabbed him just in time to keep Old Man River from beating the hot squat to him. . . .

"Queer customer, Blodgett," I said at the construction shack later. Dade and the mayor were present. Also Parelli, Stroud, Betty and the two watchmen. "He was really public-spirited and sincerely believed a city-owned power plant would be better for Clay Hill than a private one. He was ready to fight for it! But the bridge—that hit his own pocketbook hard. So he meant to wreck it."

Gorse snorted contemptuously.

"Why did he threaten Reliance?" Dade asked me.

"At first he hoped to scare bidders off this job. Later, when that hadn't worked, he referred to the first threatening letter in a second. Meant in the end to throw all the blame on Mayor Gorse and to link the first letter with the crime.

"He stole Parelli's watch on the ferry. Not to cast final suspicion on him, but to leave the watch in Gorse's pocket after he'd killed Gorse. At first he intended to dynamite the mayor with the bridge! But Wicker surprised him with his preparations. So he put off dynamiting till tonight and picked on me."

"Why did he knock on my window?" Betty asked.

"He thought I was nearer to catching him than I was. That's why he tried to kill me last night. He didn't realize that, until just before he nabbed me, I suspected Gorse and Parelli as much as him."

"Just before?" she said. "Did you know that Blodgett was the killer *before* he captured you on the platform?"

"Yes, when the bridge lights flashed on. If the mayor was guilty, he'd have prevented that. Because with him lying in wait for me, those lights would have given an advantage to me, not him. The only avenue of escape left to the murderer, after killing me, was the water. There was no boat below so I knew he meant to dive. But Blodgett himself told me that you can't dive, Parelli. And that left only Blodgett."

Mayor Gorse waved his cigar, airily.

"Next time, wise guy," he said, "don't suspect the mayor. I ought to lock you up with Blodgett. Anyhow, he's through running for mayor. That's something, eh, Stroud?"

"Whoever does run," I predicted, "will beat you very easily."

Stroud stared at Gorse, then Parelli.

"You told!" he screamed, and tried to whip a nasty left hook to Gorse's jaw. But the Mayor quickly sidestepped the blow. Then I jumped in and quieted the raging banker.

I faced the Mayor calmly.

"You've been getting bribe money from Stroud," I snapped at the cowed Gorse, "to pay for your help in keeping his power plant in Clay City. But that's been hard to prove. Next time don't take checks on Parelli's bank for it. If a transcript of the account became public, you'd have difficulty explaining those big items!

"Parelli brought such a transcript along to use as an axe over Canby, one of your crowd, to make Canby play ball with him on splitting some crop loans. It had you

plenty worried and made you and Stroud leave council meeting, go into a huddle with Canby. I forced Parelli's bag for the transcript today when he left his room. So stop that moonlight saving comedy to capture votes, Gorse. You're finished politically!"

After the others left, Betty's hand squeezed mine.

"Ed, Mother says thanks for everything," she said, smiling. "If there's anything she can do . . . ever—"

"There is one little thing," I said. "The bridge won't need guarding tomorrow night. So if she'd persuade her daughter to give me a date. . . ."

Betty's hand clamped tighter.

"I was hoping," she said, "you'd think of that!"