



I'd switched the dice before I threw again.

Complete Crime Novelet
By W. Lee Herrington

THERE wasn't any doubt about the way it happened—I had my binoculars on him. His boat was clean and white. The afternoon was one of those days, clear and sunny when the Bay sparkles like a bowl of cold silver. I brought the borrowed boat close enough for him to recognize me. When he waved, I put the 7x50 glasses on him.

Harry Buell's face was thin and wore a set, tortured look. In the glasses, I could see now he was waving me off.

Buell's slender hand pointed jerkily to something on the boat seat. His shirt was open at the neck. Buell's necktie had been used to make a loop around twelve sticks of dynamite. I could make out thin, spidery wires that led from the explosive to the long fingers of his left hand.

Buell's right hand waved again, frantically.

The binocs hit my chest, thumping, as I used both hands to roll the wheel over, hard right. Over my shoulder, the white boat was tiny again.

My boat heeled into a tight circle. Halfway around, I could feel the concussion against my back. My boat came on around. The explosion geysered white water upward.

When the water thinned, the clean white boat was gone.



It was almost sundown and the wind was freshening. The little man wearing the greasy cap grabbed the bow line and made it fast to a bitt. His scrawny hand helped me onto the dock. "Tough, Mike," he said softly. "Are the police bringing the body in?"

"No," I said. "There wasn't enough left to dirty a coffin." I went back to the boat and got a white piece of planking about seven inches long and handed it to Fred Varney.

Varney squinted a rheumy eye at the bit of wood hammered from the boat by the

dynamite. He clucked when he turned it over and saw the long splinter of bone driven into the wood. "Tough," he said eloquently.

"That's all I found," I explained. "There was some little stuff, a small oil slick formed for a few minutes. Then this piece came up; it was the biggest I found."

Varney's eyes didn't change. "You want me to drop the Joe Marish thing?"

"Why should you?" I demanded. "This just ends things for Harry Buell, not for me. Joe Marish is my meat now."

Varney sucked on a tooth and spat loosely over the edge of the dock. "Marish left town two hours ago, while you were out in the bay. Joe turned his gambling joint over to one of his boys. His girl friend sub-leased her apartment—to one of the boys. I checked with the bank and she had cleaned out her safety deposit box about thirty minutes before I got there."

"Any trace of where they were heading?"

Varney said: "Just a trace. Marish had reservations for two on *The Chief*, out of L. A. That don't have to mean anything. They could just drop off and hole up anywhere."

I walked across the dock to where my old coupe was parked. Varney, the little dried up private dick, followed and got into the car.

I reached for my billfold and said: "How much do I owe you up to now?"

Varney smacked his puckered lips. "Seeing as how I ain't done you much good, grabbing Marish, call it twenty bucks. Yeah, twenty bucks is enough."

There was two hundred in the billfold. I made two piles of it and handed Varney a hundred. "You'll never get rich," I said, "making special rates to your friends."

VARNEY took the hundred and put it in his shirt pocket. "A good way to die broke," he said casually, "paying more for something than it's worth. You figuring on going after Marish?" When I slowly nodded,

the wiry old private dick said: "How do you figure on handling him when you catch him? He's probably out of the jurisdiction of California."

"The Grand Jury indicted Joe this morning," I said. "He can be extradited on a fraud indictment."

Varney pulled at his chin with his thumb and forefinger. "You know how to make rabbit stew—first catch the rabbit."

I got the old car moving. "You know my kid sister?"

"Met her," Varney grunted.

"The kid and Harry Buell were going to be married," I explained; "she and Harry were saving to buy a little place over in Oakland."

"I know," Varney said softly. "Harry tried to wind his dough up to a big pile. He dropped the savings to Marish. Joe used crooked dice and cleaned him out."

"With crooked dice," I said. "That's what makes it indictable. You didn't know the rest—Buell dipped into his boss' till to the tune of another ten thousand—a few thousand at a time. He covered his shortages by some clever bookkeeping."

"I knew about that," Varney nodded wisely. "He also dropped that to Marish. I can see why he would get in his boat and drive out in the bay and blow himself up after leaving you a note, saying what he was going to do."

We rode two blocks in silence. Varney leaned against the door, weighing me with his eyes. "You know how to tail a man? How to trace him—a guy like Marish?"

I hadn't thought it out that far. All I wanted was to get Joe in front of my gun; that was as far as my brain had worked it out.

Varney said: "All you got is a hot head and an ideal. You want to find Marish and kick his head off for what he did to Harry. I ain't no saint or a reformer and it wasn't any skin off my back if Buell wanted to gamble.

But I know a guy will do most anything when it gets into his blood."

We were silent until we came to the block where Varney lived in a furnished room.

He held the car door half open. "I'd be a good man to have along," he said quietly. "When I was your age, I worked for the Pinkertons awhile, then I got into gambling. Used to be known as a pretty handy man with the bones, but you can make more money being a Pink unless you want to shoot crooked dice or milk the suckers. I didn't."

"Thanks," I said. "This may turn into a long trip."

"I ain't got a thing on the fire."

"This is personal," I discouraged him.

Varney's eyes blinked. "Keep the engine running," he said feelingly. "Take me maybe three minutes to grab my keister. Be right with you."

"I have a hunch Marish headed east," I said. "It will be cold and snowy when we get out of California."

Varney said: "What the hell? You're the only client I got; I wouldn't want to lose you."



THE MINUTE the green dice left my hand I knew they were wrong ones. Not just the six-ace-flats that give the house more than their unearned percentage. These were the real things, the kind they use to clean the slickers with.

Before the cubes had hit the buckboard I slapped my hand down over the two fifties in front of me and said in a hard voice: "*No dice!*"

A nerve in the stickman's eyelid twitched once. A thread of a smile wound round his thin lips. The smile went away when I laid four c-notes alongside the fifties and said: "And the four hundred."

Right and wrong bettors looked up at me,

casually. Across the table a heavy set man shifted his cigar and snapped: "Roll 'em."

The dice came back to me and I ran my fingers over them, let them ride. They lay back spinning, now coming to rest. I had been hunting a four.

"Nine," the stickman sang in a monotone, "the point is four. The gentleman in the blue suit is looking for Little Joe from Kokomo."

The dice were in my hand again and I wished for a drink; anything to kill off or drown the feeling that rats were gnawing at my insides. But there couldn't be any drinks tonight—until afterwards. Tonight was for Harry Buell; sweat dampened my fingers and I cursed under my breath.

It was the age-old spot for the bustouts. The stick man was either rusty or clumsy, or having an off-night. A blind man could have spotted the switch from across the street on a dark night.

I raised my shooting hand, the left, to my shoulder and stopped the follow through. The stickman droned: "The point is four."

The short, flat bellied little man crowded close to my left shoulder. I fastened my eyes on the bridge of his nose, just two inches below the visor of his greasy cap. "That's the second time you've crowded me," I snarled. "The other time, I said gimme room."

The little guy grunted and grudgingly gave me six inches more room. He sucked idly on a tooth and his mild eyes met mine. The eyes were smiling; the mouth wasn't. I hunched my shoulder and slammed against him, hard. He grunted and walked away from the table. I watched his cat-like walk; his feet encased in a run over pair of discarded bowling shoes. His cotton pants whipped against his thin legs as he passed the warm air coming from the air-conditioning vent.

I shook and rolled. The silence was a cold, evil thing. The air at the stickman's end of the table seemed to be brooding with a

dead flatness, like stale perfume on a hot day.

Two and two make four in any language.

I raked the thousand bucks my way and put my back to the table. I had already caught the signal; two men by the blackjack table dropped away from the game and came my way. I angled toward the john. They met me about the center of the room. They didn't play rough. Just a hand cupped under my elbow and a hard voice saying in my ear: "Thataway."

A finger pointed to a stairway. My left hand slid a cigar from my breast pocket and put it in my mouth. My left hand fumbled with the cigar as we walked up the wide, carpeted stairs. It's an old trick, but it keeps a fist higher, or a hand closer to a gun in a shoulder clip.

It worked now. When we got to the second floor landing and turned right, my hand dived for the .45 Colt under my arm. It came out and raked across the mouth of the man on my left; I let it swing back and punch into the side of the other bouncer on my right. He grunted.

Behind me, the first hood made bubbling sounds from his mashed mouth as he sat down and leaned against the wall. I nudged his pal. "All right," I said harshly. "You were going to take me up to see Joe Marish and then escort me home—like hell. Open the door; that's the only thing stopping us."

CHAPTER 2

IT WASN'T one of those Hollywood production offices. There was a gross of square feet floor space that smelled of paper, office supplies and dust.

The man sitting across the desk was talking on the phone. He said: "Yeah, okay Clyde," and hung up the phone. He looked at us through rimless eyeglasses; they made him look like a worried businessman about forty years old.

The man in front of my gun coughed nervously. "Look, Joe," he began.

I stepped from behind him and let my .45 show. "Tell the punk to blow," I ordered.

His voice was almost woman-soft. "You heard what the man said, Lou."

I waited until the door sighed shut behind Lou before I said: "You're Joe Marish."

He nodded.

"Clyde would be your crap table croupier."

"Yeah, Clyde," he said easily.

I put my gun away and snaked a pair of green dice out of the little hideout pocket just inside my cuff. Marish took his glasses off and slowly polished them, watching the dice as I rolled them across his desk.

"Go on, take 'em," I said; "they're yours. Don't blame Clyde. He did the best he could, but if you're smart, you'll get rid of him. He's clumsy. First, he switched in a pair without fours; then when I upped the bet he switched in the bust-outs."

Joe Marish frowned.

"I switched in my own marbles," I said. "I was after a four, in case Clyde forgot to tell you."

Marish put on his glasses and picked up the green cubes. He rolled them out, squinted at the four-three seven for a few seconds. "Okay," he said. "So you're good; you looking for a job as a dealer?"

"No."

"Maybe you're figuring on opening a spot of your own."

I threw a quick look around the little office, holding Marish in the corner of my eye, watching his hands.

On the corner of the desk, a thin gold frame outlined an eight-by-ten portrait of a woman. The writing was large enough to be read from across the room: *To Joe, with Love, Leslie.*

The writing was just under the left breast of a better-than-average-looking black-haired girl about twenty-five years old. I

looked at the picture long enough to remember it.

"Well?" Marish reminded me.

"I've found my spot." I sat down in a chair and kept my left hand high. "You're all through, Marish—in this town, in any town."

FOR TEN months I had been wondering what it was going to be like—how I'd feel when the last second came and went. I felt fine. All the way down to my heels. The knots in my belly had gone away and the rats had let up.

Joe Marish licked his lips. Sweat was on his flat forehead. In slow motion his hand moved an inch at a time toward the desk drawer close to his stomach. He lowered his eyes. All my nerves tightened then; I had never shot a man dead before.

A blob of sweat poised on the gambler's eyelid, imprisoned by his eyelashes. He blinked his eyes. The drop of sweat made a darker spot as it hit the blue blotter. He raised his eyes and put his hands flat on the desk. I let my gun slide out into sight.

"You should have gone for your gun the minute I walked into the room, Marish," I said bluntly. "You knew who I was."

"Yes," he said and cleared his throat. "Mike Trahan. Five foot eleven, one seventy? Blue eyes, ears set flat against your bullet shaped head. Sandy hair. That's all the description I had; someone forgot to tell me about the two-inch scar on your left cheek bone."

"Memphis," I said. "I got that in Memphis. You got out of there two hours ahead of me, but your boys remembered orders to kick me around when I showed up." I fingered the still tender scar on my cheek. "That's just another item on the debit side. It's been a tough ten months, finding you, because I've always been behind. Joplin, Fort Smith . . . Kansas City. Only missed you by about seven minutes in Kansas City."

A nerve twitched erratically at Joe Marish's lip. "Kansas City?"

"The Missouri side," I explained. "A little joint over by the State Line. I lost two months more, finding you here in Middleburg." I tapped the desk with my gun. "This time it's different, Joe; it's the end of the world." I thumbed the hammer back on the automatic.

Marish pressed his lips together. "You could shoot a man to death in cold blood."

"Sure. Couldn't you?"

"I didn't kill Harry Buell," he said quickly; "Buell committed suicide."

"Sure," I admitted. "I watched him die."

Marish spread his manicured hands. "You're a gambler, Trahan; you ought to know how the game is played. Somebody always loses."

"I'm not a gambler," I snapped. "I wouldn't know."

Marish frowned. He touched the green dice with his thumb nail. "You're not a gambler? A guy who can make a dice switch like you pulled on Clyde? Clyde says. . ."

"To hell with Clyde. I'm just like a cheap politician; I've got one trick. I mastered the switch to keep from getting cleaned in strange games. After all," I added. "It took dough to find you."

Marish stood up. "Buell died ten months ago," he said and the confidence worked back into his voice. "Tell me that you mastered the switch in ten months and I'll say you're a liar."

"I had a hard teacher . . . Maybe I'm a liar, put you'll never know." I lined the gun on the gambler's stomach. "You're getting the breaks," I insisted. "We didn't recover enough of Buell's body to hold a funeral. He didn't get to ride to the graveyard. It won't be that way with you; your corpse will have a hearse to ride in."

MARISH licked his thin lips. "Before you burn me out you better listen a

minute, Trahan. The way it sets out there in San Francisco at the minute, Harry Buell was just a guy who couldn't take the disgrace of losing his savings; he lost more than that."

"Sure," I agreed. "Ten thousand bucks he embezzled."

"You want to tie your sister in with that in the newspapers when the story breaks?"

I switched the gun to my right hand and wiped sweat from my hand to my pants leg. Marish kept on prodding the sore spot in my armor.

"From what I learn," he said. "Buell's boss didn't give it out to the papers. Buell was just a guy who dropped his honeymoon nest egg, gambling. Buell was getting set to tell his story to the grand jury; he had a private dick getting evidence against me. I had couple of the boys prowl his office, make it look like an ordinary burglary. What I wanted was his books. I've got every entry he made and every item he covered up. Blast me and the envelope goes to the San Francisco newspapers."

I lunged across the few feet between us and rammed the .45 into his stomach. My thumb jerked toward the small safe in one corner of the office. "Open it," I ordered. "You've got ten seconds, Marish."

I almost shot him then in reflex action as the phone rang. He darted a look at the instrument. "Open the safe," I ordered hoarsely.

Marish smiled. "The envelope," he said evenly, "is in my safe deposit box."

The phone rippled again. His eyes questioned mine. "I'm expecting this call."

I lowered the gun. It was bitter, knowing I couldn't let him have it all in one lump, without a gun in his hand. And not ever, now—not as long as the ledger sheets from Harry Buell's books rested in an envelope in the gambler's deposit box.

Marish read the bitterness in my face as I nodded my head and said: "Answer it."

Marish stilled the phone bell. He listened, said: "Yeah, Clyde, yeah. Thanks," and hung up.

The gambler made a fist of his manicured fingers. "I've got Middleburg like that, Trahan. The lad on his way up is Sam Cudahy, a vice-squad dick. I've been in Middleburg two months and I'm doing all right; the suckers will last forever." He came around the desk.

"Looks like I've been running from a phony. From now on, the tide runs out. I'm going to be crowding you. Don't come into the Primrose Club again; you'll live a lot longer in San Francisco."

I backed to the door and put my gun away. "You could be right," I admitted.

Marish scooped the green dice from the desk. He tossed them toward me. "Take them along," he said, "as a memory of the *Primrose Club*."

The green dice made no sound as I let them bounce against my foot and onto the carpet. They slid across to the desk leg and stopped, four-three.

Marish said: "So long, sucker."

I DIDN'T look back as I went downstairs. The heavy-bellied man that passed me on the stairs looked me over casually, and went on up. He could have been Cudahy, the vice-squad dick.

He would have looked like a typical small town cop if there was such an animal. There isn't. Whatever makes a man a cop in one town would make him into a cop in another; crooked cops don't come in a pattern.

My feet were silent on the carpeted stairs. With two steps to go, I slowed, moving over to the right.

She moved to her left. She was about twenty-five, had black hair and more than a trace of eyebrows. Her long skirt snuggled against her hips. There wasn't much above the waist in the way of a dress and it wasn't

just a four dollar bare midriff outfit. I moved over to my left.

She moved to the right and we both stopped. She closed her eyes and let me measure her long eyelashes with my eyes. She wasn't demure, not shy, not innocent. Just a hell of a good looking dame about to become impatient.

Her eyes opened and she smiled. "Aren't we a little old to be playing games, like this?"

"I didn't have much of a childhood," I said and put my back to the railing. "Don't let me crowd you; don't keep Joe waiting. Sam just went up."

She didn't call me a liar. She just moved to the right and started up the stairs. I watched her, realizing the human body had muscles I hadn't learned about. She paused and turned. "Don't I know you from somewhere?" she asked slowly.

"Sure," I said. "We went to Vassar together."

Clyde wasn't at the crap table when I went out. It had begun to snow a little, a fine, damp misty snow.

CHAPTER 3

FRED VARNEY used his thumb-nail to split the seal on a bottle of bourbon. He poured liquor into two stained waterglasses, tossed the empty half-pint bottle into the wastebasket by the rickety dresser.

He killed half his drink and went to the grimy window and looked out at the snow on the window sill. Without turning his head he asked: "You want to tell me about it?"

"Tell you what?"

Varney said: "We pulled the diversionary tactics as usual. I crowd you; you get sore, slam into me to cover up the switch." Varney half-turned. "You did switch out the house dice and run in your own?"

"Yeah."

"You did make the four?"

"Sure," I said. "I made the four." I took the thousand bucks out of my pocket and laid it on the dresser.

"The boys did escort you up to have a talk with Marish?"

"All right," I snapped at the little dick. "So I didn't blast Joe Marish to death." I took a cut at the warm whiskey.

Varney turned to face me. He killed his drink and gagged. "Why?" he asked flatly. "That's all I've heard from you for ten months. Tonight, we even got you into the *Primrose Club* with a gun on you. You faced Marish."

Varney went over to the rickety bed and toed his battered valise from under the springs. "We can get a train out of Middleburg in about thirty minutes," he said quietly.

"Train?"

"Things that whistle," Varney said peevishly and swept the greasy old cap and worn bowling shoes from a chair. He rolled them up in a faded pair of cotton pants. The bundle made a soggy sound as it dropped into the cardboard suitcase.

Varney said: "Some people got it, some ain't. They can either kill a man or they can't; you can't." He snapped the valise shut and worked at the broken fastener.

"There were reasons, Varney," I began.

"Never been much to ask a man his reasons," the little man said and his lips were pale.

I counted out five hundred dollars and pushed it toward him. The bourbon was warming my stomach and the snow didn't look so cold now.

Varney looked at the money. "What the hell is that for?"

"I'm staying," I said shortly and went to the window and looked at the snow again. The tracks my car had made in the street were filling.

Behind me, the silence kept on growing. Hell, I promised myself—I'll tell him in a

few minutes; tell him about the safety deposit box and the ledger sheets and why we've got to play it different and cagey from here on in.

The old coot! We've disagreed before on policy but we always got together afterward. I'll tell him in a minute that I'm not sore about anything . . .

Varney's hand was on my shoulder suddenly, pulling me around. "Look, son," he said evenly. "I've taught you everything I know about tailing a man. Gambling, percentages and averages and stuff like that. You caught on quick. You could have come back to this little stinking hole of a room and told me Joe Marish foxed you; I'd understand. You want me to shut up?"

I said: "I've always listened to you."

"You could have said that you learned there is more to justice than just being the judge and jury and executioner all by yourself, and I'd have believed you. I'm pulling out because you don't need me any more."

I WENT OVER to the dresser and killed my drink. "I know what I'm doing," I said doggedly. "Just changed our plans, that's all."

"Your plan," Varney corrected me. "I ain't blaming you, boy. I've been there myself."

"Been where?"

"To hell and back. You've found out why Harry Buell and maybe a billion others gamble. It gets into your blood. I've seen it the way you moved your hands; the look in your eyes. It's a fatal disease, boy. It puts spots before your eyes and you can't see straight. You'll die poor; you'll have a lot of fun, but ain't you forgetting something?"

"A little white boat and a dozen sticks of dynamite and a guy who was going to buy a little house over in Oakland? No, I'm remembering."

Varney hefted the suitcase and went to

the door. "I won't be around any more, boy. Just remember, the old tricks are the best." The door hinges squeaked. "Anything you want me to tell your kid sister?"

I said: "Sure, Tell her I'll be home for Christmas," I went over and held the door open. There wasn't any use, putting it off. My hand stopped on his thin shoulder. "Stick around, Varney," I said. "I'm going to need you more than ever."

"You'll never need anyone but yourself," he said truculently. "I've been a lone wolf all my life and I'd better start traveling that way again. I'm getting old for this sort of thing. Sixty-four, last month."

"I forgot," I said. "Meant to give you something for your birthday."

"So did I," he lied. "Always promised myself a nice white bed to die in and I got a feeling I'd better be making me a bed, somewhere." Varney cleared his throat. "Then, too, I kind of miss the fog back home."

I shoved the five hundred into his shirt pocket. He looked more like a retiring railroad conductor than a detective. "I'll drive you to the station," I said and punched his shoulder. "You'd probably get lost."

We both laughed and stopped laughing and this was the end of ten months together. Lousy hotels and greasy meals. Laying off the liquor to sharpen the timing with the cards and the dice. Always keyed high, watching for a fast shuffle or the quick switch that can clean you out.

Ten months of practice, hour after hour; bottom deals and second card. . . the whole soggy mess of dog eat dog and to hell with the guy on the tail end.

Maybe Varney was right; maybe it was getting inside me. In my blood. The snow had whitened the ground when we got down to the old coupe.

Three blocks short of the station, Varney stopped me with his hand. "No use driving around the long way," he said quietly. "I'll

cut down through the alley here. Hell, I ain't much on saying goodbye, anyway."

He got out of the car as I curbed it and turned, leaning partly in the window. "I ain't been exactly asleep, you know," he complained. "I been digging up stuff. This dame Marish lammed out of San Francisco with . . . Leslie Costello. Dark, good-looking and shapey. She's dug in over at the Mercedes Hotel in room 617. Usually gets in around ten thirty. There's a guy you'll want to watch."

"Clyde?" I asked.

"Character named Cudahy. Vice-squad dick. Offhand, I'd say Marish lets him get his bribes right at the table. The Costello girl has a safe-deposit box over at the Merchant's Trust." Varney fished a dog-eared notebook from his pocket. "It's all in there." He pushed the notes to me.

His hand came awkwardly to mine and I felt the broken nail of his index finger against my palm as we shook hands. No words. Just his body turning, walking rapidly, the suitcase against his knees. I drove on slowly, smiling to myself, anticipating the sour look on his battered old face as I would pull up at the station and head him off.

I'd tell him then, in a few minutes. Why I had to stay; why I had to wait until we could find a way to get the ledger sheets out of . . .

I WAS HALFWAY up the block when I heard closely-spaced shots, thin, flat and crackling, like an automatic rifle.

I wheeled the old car around in a tight u-turn and skidded it to the mouth of the alley. On my feet I danced toward the dark mouth of the alley. I shoved my gun into the dark and followed it.

Three hundred feet across the darkness of the bricked alley a dark sedan was backing into the street, now pulling on up the street out of sight. It was too long a range for an Army .45 automatic.

Bent against the brick wall halfway down the alley, Fred Varney clutched his thin hands at the bricks. Above the dead blanket of snow I could hear the scratching of his fingernails as he tried to claw his way upright.

He pushed away then, turning to face me. I plunged forward. Varney took a few steps, standing upright. We were about nine feet apart when he caved. He went down slowly like a flower on a short, wilted stem.

There wasn't any blood on the snow. Maybe it was because he was so old and dried up and hard or hadn't been hit just right. I had to rip his shirt to find the holes.

They were small. Whatever bleeding Fred Varney had done was done inside his gray-haired chest. It happens that way sometimes with 22's. He had been hit five times. Varney hadn't died broke, but the money hadn't stopped the little slugs, either.

The second-gear snarl of a car brought my head around. I slid in the snow, my gun up as I swung around. The blast of a heavy gun pounded in the alley as the dark sedan slid to a stop and voice snapped: "Drop the gun, sweetheart."

It was the sight of two gun-barrels showing in the back window of the Packard that decided me. I let the .45 fall to the snow. A man behind a flashlight got out, slushed across to me and held the light on my face.

"This the guy, Dumpy?"

"Yeah, yeah," another voice answered. "Let's get going."

A SHORT man opened the door of the Packard and came over and hit me in the mouth with his fist. I backed against the brick wall, my eyes hunting the dark for my gun. A gloved hand grasped my wrist. My first impression when the cold, frosty metal hit my hands was of cops and steel handcuffs.

A hard hand slammed into my belly and I went to my knees, sucking in icy air I sat

down on the snow and gagged. A hand chopped across my neck in a rabbit punch.

I rolled over on my face as a heavy foot shoved against my shoulder, and I lay there, sick and gagging, knowing exactly what was taking place. My fingerprints were being pressed or smeared against something metallic. Not a gun. The thing seemed to be in parts; a flat something and round, pencil thin object.

The cold wind freshened on its way up the alley. A train whistled and squalled coldly and the sound died. The Packard's exhaust swirled snow as the driver whipped the car past Varney's body and purred on across the alley.

It didn't make sense all at once. Joe Marish had promised to crowd me; maybe I was to be found in the alley with Varney's body to explain. The odds were good on it succeeding, but it didn't explain the hugger-mugger with my fingerprints. I watched the Packard slide out of the alley and turn into a street. I rolled over on my side and in the semi-dark I could make out Varney's body.

It was a hell of a bed, but it was white.

When I heard the sirens, I sucked in air in gulps and scooped Varney's body into my arms. He would have weighed a hundred twenty in a wet overcoat.

I got him into the coupe and was a block away when the siren squalled behind me and the cop car swung into the alley.

The odds were getting short. I might just barely have time to get back to the little smelly room on Quincy Street and grab my own stuff.

CHAPTER 4

THE SWEAT was warm on my hands as I gripped the lobby phone.

A voice no harder than rain water said in my ear: "Yes, this is Miss Costello. Who is calling, please?"

"Games," I said and waited. Her laugh

was a husky thing. "I just remembered," I said, "where we met before. Top of the Mark, San Francisco."

There was a long pause this time. "That's a long way off and it long time ago," she said.

"You were drinking some sort of pink drink," I said. "Tell me what it was and I'll have one waiting at the bar downstairs."

"Bacardi," she said promptly. "With just a touch of grenadine. Ten minutes?"

I said ten minutes would be fine and hung up. In the bar I ordered a double bourbon. Varney's liquor had evaporated in me, there in the alley. When the clock had used up eight minutes, I ordered a Bacardi cocktail with just a touch of grenadine and laid my hat on the bar chair next to mine.

The bar wasn't crowded. The bartender put the pink drink on the bar top and a hand pushed past my shoulder. Painted fingernails glinted on long fingers, wrapping daintily, lifting the thin stemmed glass. Her other hand pushed my hat at me.

Leslie Costello sat down and sipped her drink. She blinked her long eyelashes at me. "No cyanide in it," she said cheerfully. "Who are you?"

"Call me a friend and let it go at that, Miss Costello."

"Leslie," she prompted me. "All my friends call me Leslie and I have no enemies."

"That's what you think," I said and watched her eyebrows jack up across the wrinkles in her forehead; "you're about to get the well known cross."

She put the glass down slowly and her coppery eyes tried to drill into mine. She said: "I don't think I'm going to like you."

"You don't have to," I promised and stood up and leaned against her chair. "I can't put love and kisses in the bank. After all, I don't care who pays me."

"What are you selling?" The hard look shaded off into the same worried look

Marish had worn when I first saw him.

"Give me ten minutes," I said. "I've got my samples in my car." I patted her shoulder and laid one of Varney's c-notes on the bar, covered the bullet hole with my bourbon glass. "Order something for me," I said; "'I've got a phone call to make.'"

I made the phone call from the booth. The cops were nosy. When I asked them to look into the little matter of a body in 617, Mercedes Hotel, they asked my name. I hung up and went out the back way.

I MADE it in a little more than ten minutes. The girl with the coppery eyes was frowning, her eyes on the bank of phone booths as I came in.

She said: "All right, buster, you've had your fun. You were talking like a mugg before. I've been picked up before but not this easy; now if you don't mind, thanks for the drinks and I'll see you around."

I said: "The San Francisco grand jury wants to know about your association with a coast gambler named Joe Marish."

Her lips thinned and one corner raised cynically. "Cop."

"I'm just a guy."

"Skip the plot gimmick and just give me the punchline."

"I'll cut it any way you like, but you'd better buy the whole thing. Joe was set to give you the heave when this Harry Buell affair caught up with him."

"You're a liar." She signaled the bartender.

"So you're not a lady," I said. "You were banker for Joe Marish; he kept his dough in your safety deposit box. There was at least ten grand of it that was embezzled by Harry Buell. Marish took it away from Buell with crooked dice."

"You want to hear me cry?"

"Don't start on my account," I said easily. "You were indicted along with Marish. A little private dick, who developed

the evidence, has been tailing Marish for months. Marish has been afraid you would make a deal with this fellow Varney, so he called me in. You're all through, baby."

"I . . . how can Joe hurt me?" She blinked her eyelids. "Anytime Joe wants his dough all he has to do is ask for it or use his key."

"You rented the safety deposit box? Marish is your deputy?"

"Of course. It's always been that way." Leslie pushed away from the bar. "¥ au had me going for a minute there, buster." She held out her hand and showed her index and second fingers. They trembled a little. "Joe and me are like that."

"You're the short one," I said, and watched the cop car through the window. It pulled to the curb and a seedy looking man about fifty got out and went into the Mercedes. Sam Cudahy, the vice-squad dick tagged along behind. Leslie watched them too.

"Ten will get you thirty," I said, "that you know the string bean cop with Cudahy."

"Max Nance. Homicide."

"Room 617. You're all ready but being dressed in and your picture mugged; Fred Varney is under your bed."

"Why?" she moaned softly. "Why, buster? I've played fair with Joe Marish." Her eyes narrowed. "I don't believe you."

I put a nickel in her hand and jerked a thumb toward the bank of phone booths. "You'll just have time to make one phone call. Ask Joe about the little blonde in St. Louis. Then I'd suggest you beat it over to the Merchant's Trust and have a look in your safety deposit box."

She swallowed. I watched her adam's apple move up and down. "You mean I . . ."

I nodded. "You've been framed, baby. Oh," I said indifferently, "they will have a time of it, making a first degree charge stick, because there isn't any real evidence Varney was killed in your room. But the little

slugs—the 22's make it look like something a babe could do." I smiled. "I'll come see you on visiting days, if you say so. Well, I got to report back to Joe that everything went off all right."

A scared look hurried across her face as Sam Cudahy came to the door of the bar room, looked around and crossed to us. I nudged the girl and we walked across to meet Cudahy.

His piggy eyes were frosty as he lowered his voice and said: "Now don't blow your lines, kid; we can straighten this out."

I went back to the bar and picked up my change and had another drink. It got lonesome after awhile so I went into the lobby and waited by one of the imitation palms in the broad buckets by the doors. I had to wait five minutes.



CUDAHY came out of the elevator and crossed over. "You boys from the coast work fast," he said grudgingly.

"We're not slow," I admitted.

"The little one wasn't so fast," Cudahy said shortly; "Nance wants to see you upstairs."

"Worry about vice," I snapped. "You're not homicide."

"Nance is. Come on, let's get going." He put his larded hand on my biceps. I slapped his hand down.

"I had you pegged for a smart cop, Cudahy. Now I'm not sure." We started toward the elevators. "I was going to cut you in for a real piece of the *Primrose Club*, not just the kind of rent money you're getting now."

The big cop's feet slowed. "You were going to cut what?"

"You ought to get around oftener," I said. "Joe Marish is all washed up. I'm taking over. I like this town. You saw my first step; framing the girl to pry her loose

from Joe.”

“Wait a minute,” Cudahy’s little eyes loosened a bit. “This little guy upstairs is a private dick from the coast. We know you and him have been holing up on Quincy Street.”

“Sure,” I said quickly. “Varney was a friend of mine. He’s one of the best stickmen in the business. He was on his way back to San Francisco tonight to bring in a new crew. Marish had him knocked over.”

We stopped, five feet from the elevator. Cudahy said: “I don’t think you can do it; Joe Marish is a hard baby.”

“Have it your way,” I snapped. “Either come in with me or go out with Marish. I don’t give a damn, either way.”

“I’m not a gambler,” he said. “I’m just a cinch bettor. Show me you can deal Marish out and I’m your boy.”

“First,” I said, “I’ll get the girl loose from Nance. Is he an honest cop?”

Cudahy looked as if the question pained him. “Weil,” he said hesitantly, “you can’t get to him.”

“I’ll have her out in ten minutes,” I promised.

We got into the elevator and went up to six.

CHAPTER 5

MAX NANCE was either an honest cop or spent his dough for something besides clothes. He needed a new suit, shoes and a hair-cut. Maybe he was buying a home.

He shoved the girl out into the hall with Cudahy and swung around to me. His eyes weren’t any softer than agate. “You were in the bar with the girl.”

“Yeah,” I said and went over and looked behind the bed. Varney’s death mask was peaceful. I looked at Max Nance and decided to blow the roll. “You can rule out the girl,” I said. “She was in the bar while I was

putting Varney’s body under her bed.”

Nance said: “Don’t suppose I have to remind you about not talking unless you want to.”

“No, I know the formula. You’re an honest cop in the middle of a nasty mess, Nance. Varney was killed over in Hoagland’s Alley half an hour or so ago. I had just left him.”

Nance said in a hard voice: “I don’t get it. Why lug him over here and dump him under Miss Costello’s bed?”

“You know Sam Cudahy is taking his pay from Joe Marish?” A tired look crossed Nance’s face as he nodded.

“Varney was a cop of sorts,” I said. “I want his killer worse than you do, Nance. You’re a cop; you’ll be a cop another ten, fifteen years. You can spare a couple of hours.”

“For what?”

“For me. Give me an hour—two hours. I’ve driven a wedge between the girl and Marish with a lot of lies. I’ve boasted to Cudahy I can jar her loose from anything you might be able to do to her on this Varney business. If I go out that door with Cudahy believing that, I’m in. I’ve got the girl, Cudahy and that leaves Marish. That’s the way I want him because. . .” I stopped, testing Nance’s eyes. All I could see was an honest cop, hard as a horseshoe nail.

“It started back in San Francisco,” I said slowly. “about ten or eleven months ago—”



Nance opened the door and we shook hands. I got out a cigarette. Nance scratched a kitchen match and lighted my cigarette. He turned to Cudahy. “Okay, Sam, the girl is clean. He was with her for two hours; send up Murphy, will you, Sam?”

The three of us went down in the elevator together; Leslie, Cudahy and me. The girl had a dull, unsure look in her dark

eyes. I patted her shoulder.

"Nothing to it," I said. "I wouldn't let it worry me." I winked at Cudahy. Downstairs, he walked to the door and held it open. We went out and Cudahy went over to the police car and jerked his thumb at a red faced man. He came close to me on the way back in.

"Okay," he said in a husky voice. "I'm your boy."

I grabbed Leslie's arm and we went to the parking lot behind the hotel. We rode out into the country and stopped at a beer joint with a neon sign.

•

SHE DANCED with her head on my shoulder. The juke-box music ground to a halt. She pulled her head back, focused on my face and said: "How did you do it? Max Nance wasn't born yesterday; you must draw a lot of water with the police."

"I'm just about to drag bottom," I laughed. "Getting you out wasn't easy. I had to make a lot of promises."

"I'm still confused. First, you frame me with the police, then you alibi me. I can't make you out."

"Don't ever try." I took her back to the booth and the waiter jerked his head toward the clock on the wall. It was twelve minutes to the one o'clock closing time. I ordered a pink drink for Leslie and bourbon for me. "Maybe I liked your looks. I took one look at you and to hell with Joe Marish."

She frowned. "You can get away with crossing Marish?"

"I can try." I reached for her as the music began again. She came into my arms readily. Her hand pressed tight on my shoulder. In the darker corners she pressed against me firmly.

"You got a name, buster?"

"Mike," I said. "Just Mike."

"Mike. . ." She whispered. Her eyes were closed.

I pulled her face around to mine with one hand and kissed her hard on the mouth. Her eyelids fluttered.

"Mike . . . ?"

"Yes?"

"I wish I was back in San Francisco? Can we go back sometime?"

"In your safe deposit box," I said quickly, "there's an envelope."

"Yes . . . addressed to the *San Francisco Chronicle*."

"You could go back any time. If that envelope got into the right hands, you'd be free of Marish . . . me. . ."

"Mike. . ." Her eyelids opened and she was pulling me back to the booth. We had our drink and the bartender slid a cloth curtain in front of the liquor stock.

Leslie Costello said: "Okay, buster. You win. To hell with Marish."

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When we got to the door she squeezed my hand and added: "Any time after nine o'clock in the morning. I'll get it for you then."

We were in the coupe, starting out the drive when the green Packard pulled across in front of me and stopped.

I hit the brake and clutch. A chill that wasn't from the night air crawled up my neck. My hand was on my .45 as the left hand door opened on my car.

Lou, Marish's bouncer said softly: "Don't do it." Lou's helper, Dumpy, opened the right hand door.

Joe Marish got out of the Packard and unbuttoned his topcoat and laid it on the car seat. He walked our way and motioned with his head. Dumpy jerked Leslie from my car and shoved her roughly toward Marish.

Marish struck her once with his fist. She stumbled, went to one knee. Marish pulled her to her feet, hit her in the mouth with a fist and shoved her toward the Packard.

She climbed into the green Packard.

Marish came over and leaned into my car. Soft light reflected from his eyeglasses as he moved his head. His fist slashed into my face. My head rammed back against the door. Lou's gun punched me forward. Marish hit me again, twisting his fist a little. The laugh in his throat was deep, an animal growl.

"You can have him, Lou. Better rough him up it bit first." Marish walked to his green Packard.

Lou punched me to the middle of the seat and climbed in under the wheel. Dumpy got in and held his .38 against my side. Lou took my .45 and jerked the old coupe into life.

THE PACKARD pulled out first, heading back toward town. Lou drove a mile or so and curved off the highway onto a dark, rutty road. A hundred yards down the road, we stopped. Another car was pulling into the lane.

Lou said: "Get out and take it."

I got out, fast, on Lou's side. We fell heavily to the ground. Lou's gun caromed off the running board into the darkness. I aimed a kick at the bouncer's head and felt it connect. Lou covered fast with his arms. Dumpy cursed in the darkness, coming around the front of the old coupe.

The second car squealed to a halt. Dumpy snapped a shot at me, then swung his gun around as a flashlight bit into his round face. He slowly lowered the gun, as the door of the car opened.

Sam Cudahy came forward slowly, holding the sawed-off twelve gauge shotgun waist high.

"Drop it, Dumpy," he said sharply.

"You nuts, Sam? This is the guy the boss said to . . ."

Cudahy clicked the gun-hammer up and down. He laughed stridently.

"Trahan is the boss." He held the gun in one hand and helped me to my feet. He

nudged Lou with his foot.

Lou got up cursing and stood close to Dumpy. Cudahy moved them with his gun to where the car's headlight shone on them. He turned to me. "Well," he said, "what do you want done with them?"

"Varney's killing will have Max Nance on the prod," I reminded him. "No use lousing things up with any more shootings. Take them back to town, give them an hour's head-start to get to hell out of town."

Cudahy shook his head and laughed. "Okay, boys," he barked. "Get moving. Walk. Keep walking and don't look back."

Dumpy and Lou exchanged curses as they started back up the dirty road. We watched them reach the highway and cross over and then we couldn't see them anymore.

Cudahy turned to me. "Now what was that you were saying about a cut of the *Primrose Club*?"

"I need a drink," I told him. "You're a cop, you'd know a joint still open."

We got in my car and backed around and headed back to the highway that led back to Middleburg.

I said: "That was right nice of you, Sam, getting the boys off my back."

"Punks," Cudahy said shortly.

"I'll remember it. Anything I get out of the *Primrose Club*," I promised, "I split with you."

We had our drink and Sam carried my stuff from the car to the desk and I checked into the Mercedes Hotel. We went past the imitation palms and stopped at the curb.

We shook hands and Sam Cudahy said: "Good night," and walked up the street. When he got to the corner, a parked cab pulled away slowly. I didn't give it a second glance. There were still a lot of cars cruising along at that time of the morning.

CHAPTER 6

A HOT BATH and a few more drinks made me sleepy. It took all of ten seconds to go to sleep. It didn't seem there was any lapse of time until the phone woke me.

It was five thirty. The night still had a dirty gray look outside. The guy on the phone was Max Nance.

He said: "Get on your pants and get down to the lobby."

When I met him in the lobby Nance didn't say anything. He pointed wearily toward the cop car at the curb. When we got outside, Nance said: "We'll take a little ride."

I was smart enough not to crowd him for answers. We crossed town and went into a building across from the police station. Any way you looked at it, it was a morgue.

When they pulled the drawer out and pulled back the sheet, Nance pressed close to my shoulder.

"Pretty, ain't she?" Nance said heavily.

There wasn't any way the undertakers were going to make her pretty again. Leslie Costello's face was almost flat. She hadn't lived long enough for the flesh to become swollen.

"Hell," I said hoarsely. "What did they use on her, rocks?"

"We figure maybe a tire tool or a jack handle," Nance said in a hard voice. "You'd say it was the Costello girl?"

"Sure," I insisted.

They closed the drawer and we went back to the car. "That's what I get for letting an amateur talk me into delaying things," Nance said in irritation. "I should have jailed the whole damn *Primrose Club* crowd the minute Varney's body was found. Your time has run out, Trahan; starting now, it's just straight police business."

"Why not?" I asked wearily. "I'll string along any way you want. After an, it's a job for the cops. Has been, all the way."

"Glad you realize that," Nance retorted.

"Pick up a couple of punks named Dumpy and Lou," I said. "Then bring in Cudahy. I'll give you a quitclaim on Marish."

Nance nodded. "It's been a hell of a night," he complained. "First, the Highway Patrol finding the girl's body out along Highway 40. Then the other three."

I waited. He'd get around to it in a few minutes.

"Marish," he said finally, "seems to have skipped. The other three we got all in one piece. Cudahy and the two punks, Dumpy Emery and Lou Rice. The way we figure it the three of them got together in this rooming house over on the West Side and shot it out. It will be a ballistics job to say just who got who. You want to go back to the hotel?"

I got in the police car and leaned against the cushions. Daylight wasn't far off and it had started to snow again. When I got out of the car at the hotel, Nance said: "We'll want you a little later in the morning for an official statement."

"Any time after nine o'clock," I promised.

If Sam Cudahy had been telling the truth about Marish's hideout, on our ride back to town, there was only one stop left. A little apartment down by the railroad tracks. I even had it figured out by now where my fingerprints were. I got my coupe and drove down to where I could smell the railroad smells, and waited.



THERE WERE skid-chains on the Black & White cab. The driver got out, looked at his watch and lighted a smoke. He stamped snow from his shoes and looked up the face of the old building.

I left the front window and walked to the door marked: 4-A, and knocked. A voice growled: "Who is it?"

"You ordered a Black and White."

The chain came off the door promptly. I got my .45 in my fist and rammed it in his belly when he opened the door.

I said: "Easy, Clyde, easy . . ." He backed across the room. Joe Marish came out of the bathroom, in his shirt sleeves. He was working the buttons on his cuffs.

"Both of you," I snarled. "Face to the wall."

The gambler's mouth hung open a little and his perfect teeth showed bare for an instant. Then Marish wiped his gambler look back onto his face and faced the wall.

There wasn't a gun between them when I fanned them. My gun pushed Clyde, the stick man around, facing me. "The Primrose Club is closing, Clyde," I said. "There's a cab downstairs and the driver has cold feet. Don't keep him waiting. The last I heard, they still need a crap dealer over in Wichita, Kansas."

Clyde went to the bed and got his overcoat and hat. He was silent as he went out. I heard his steps go down the stairs and I had a look out the window.

When the cab pulled away, I nudged Marish around. "This is the end of the string, Marish," I said hoarsely. "It's all gone . . . The Primrose Club, Cudahy, your protection man and your boys, Dumpy and Lou."

Marish smiled crookedly. "That leaves just you, Trahan; you'll play along with me, because you have to."

I shook my head.

Marish said: "Like hell you won't. You had me under your gun once before and you wilted because I had the aces. The ledger sheets are still in my safe deposit box."

"Leslie Costello's box," I corrected him.

"What's the difference; I've got a key. You'll string along with me and walk me right on past the cops because you want those ledger sheets. Without them, your west coast indictment is not worth a damn; let me walk into court and show Harry Buell was an

embezzler and his deposition against me is worthless. It nullifies his credibility."

"That was why you killed Varney," I said. "Buell is dead and Varney is dead and that leaves no complaining witness."

"Varney got it," Marish said tightly, "because Clyde decided Varney was helping you work the switch on him."

"You were even set to jam me with the cops on Varney's murder," I snapped.

"Yeah, I was. You carry a .45 automatic. We bought a .22 caliber conversion set that adapts to your .45 to be used for target purposes. We knocked your pal over and pressed your prints onto the magazine and the barrel. It was a joker to throw to the police if things got tight. Cudahy ruined the chances on that, when he and the boys went off half-cocked and shot it out last night. That made too many killings."

"The girl," I said. "When you killed the girl it made one too many."

"All right," Marish bared his teeth again. "So to hell with her; she would have crossed you for the next guy." I shook my head.

"You don't get it yet?" I asked. "You haven't got any table stakes to jockey me with, Marish. You're through. Finished. Broke."

HE SHOOK his head. "I know the girl didn't get the dough," he insisted. "She admitted she was crossing me with you, but she didn't get the money. It's almost nine o'clock. You and I walk uptown, and I take the seventy grand in the box. You get the ledger sheets. Then we're quits."

"The girl is dead." I laughed bitterly. "You can't get into the box."

"I'm her deputy; I have a key." Marish smiled.

"Not now. You should have studied law at night. Under the laws of this state, a safe deposit must be sealed the minute a renter dies; only the Probate Court can open it now."

I went over and snicked the lock on the door, and peeled off my coat. I wrapped the gun in the coat and threw it behind the bed.

Fred Varney was right. The old tricks are best. Man's oldest weapons are hard fists. Joe Marish brushed his glasses from his eyes. They broke and tinkled on the floor. He lunged forward; his fists were no harder than a lump of hard coal.

His blows stung my face like wasps. I covered and worked backward, then drove a left into his belly. He grunted and kept working on my face. I drove him back with body blows. He aimed a kick that lowered me to my knees. He dived across the bed, his hands grubbing in the dim light for the .45 behind the bed. I stumbled to him, pulled his legs around and blasted a fist into his mouth.

Marish forgot the gun wrapped in the coat. He covered up and backed toward the bathroom. A hard hand pounded on the apartment door. Marish licked blood from his lip. "Anything you say, Trahan," he begged. "I'm not in shape for this." He sucked in gulps of air. "I'll go along with you."

I lowered my fists. Marish kept backing to the bathroom. At the apartment door a hard voice said: "Goddammit, open up in there."

Joe Marish dived at the bathroom door. His fist came up with a .45 like mine. He

must have had it hanging on the inside door knob. Behind me wood splintered.

Marish fired three times. The first shot singed hair from my head, the blast was so close. Marish moved his gun a little higher and to the right. I could see the bullets slam into him as I fell away, jerking my head toward the door.

Max Nance held the hammer back on his police revolver. Marish fell silently. His gun bounced as he fell. Nance came forward cautiously. When he was sure Joe was finished, Nance faced me. His mouth was tight, his lips blue with the cold. He stamped his feet.

"What the hell were you waiting for?" he complained. "I've been waiting, with this place staked out, since daylight. We picked up Clyde and he's in the can."



IT WAS a clear, clean day outside. The cold had a hard, solid feel to it. I came out of headquarters and walked toward the Mercedes Hotel to get my things and get out of town. A clock in a window said it was almost noon. I slowed, staring at the window display of a novelty store. My eyes read the crudely lettered show-card: *Mystify friends and relatives. Card tricks, trick dice, 98 cents, up. Do Your Christmas Shopping Early.*