



# Let Me Live

by D. L. Champion

## Off the Wagon

**I**T WAS a little after midnight when the headwaiter opened the door and thrust his head into my office. He was grinning widely.

"You're out of the red for the evening," he said. "And I've picked up a twenty-dollar tip."

I looked up from the depressing figures in the ledger. "Who came in?" I asked. "The Aga Khan or Santa Claus?"

"Both," said Louis. "It's George Deane."

I whistled and stood up. George Deane did not possess the wealth of the Aga Khan; he was not as open-minded as Santa Claus. But he ran a close second to each of them. He was worth several million dollars, and when embarked upon one of his periodical sprees he handed out money like a congressman voting appropriation bills.

"Played right," I said, "he's good

for a couple of grand. What's he ordering?"

"Veuve Cliquot, 1911."

"After the third quart, give him the Gold Seal. Charge him the Cliquot prices. He'll never know the difference."

"Don't worry," said Louis. "I was brought up in a Prohibition speak-easy. He'll get the works."

His bald head disappeared through the door. I closed the ledger and stretched. Dean's check should wipe out the month's deficit. To celebrate, I went down to the bar and ordered a Scotch and soda.

Considering it was Thursday—an off night—things didn't look so bad. There were a dozen couples on the floor, and half the tables were occupied. There was only one deadhead columnist in the house, and inasmuch as he'd recently acquired a stomach ulcer, I figured we could hold him down to a bottle of brandy.

Deane was sitting in a corner right under the orchestra. He was alone. He was tossing down highballs con-



sisting of one third cognac, two thirds champagne. He drank seriously and without apparent enjoyment. He drank with the grim purpose of the periodical drunkard who falls off the wagon with a resounding splash, three or four times a year.

I was halfway through my second Scotch when I noticed Manny Slade, his girl, and Strong-Arm Sligo seated in the middle distance. Manny was a tough guy. He'd been a beer runner until '33. Obviously he could no longer be engaged in that profession, yet his income hadn't seemed to suffer. At the moment no one knew exactly what his business was. Further, no one asked.

Sligo was precisely what his nickname implied. He was the guy who beat up the boys that Manny didn't care to murder. They were inseparable companions. They shared and shared alike—everything except the girl. Ruth Gagen was Slade's alone. The last man who had doubted that rested quietly at Woodlawn.

However, no matter what the detective bureau thought of Slade, he

"I'm a tough guy, see?" said Riker, and swung his right. But then the Law stepped in and taught him some in-fighting.—A novelette

was a right guy as far as I was concerned. He'd done me a few favors and was always good for a fast touch if the interest was right.

I sent them over a bottle on the house, finished my drink and returned to the office.

I sat at the desk for a long time, planning contentedly what I would do with the cash when Deane paid his check.

I decided I'd take home an armful of roses, hand five hundred to Dinah and tell her to take a vacation. It had been a long time since our family had been able to afford the simple luxuries of life.

A discreet knock on the door brought me out of my reverie. Slade and Sligo came in. I stood up, reached for the cigar box and said, "Hi, boys. Have a smoke."

Manny Slade took a cigar. Sligo shook his head and opened his cigarette case.

"Thanks for that bottle, Riker," said Manny. "Good stuff."

"Don't mention it," I said and sat down again. I knew quite well they hadn't climbed the stairs to observe

the social amenities. "What's on your mind, Manny?"

"Deane," he said. "Do you know George Deane's downstairs?"

"Know it?" I echoed. "Who do you think's paying for that bottle I sent you?"

Manny nodded. "I figured that," he said. "He'll probably pay your rent for a few months as well."

"Sure," I said. "He probably will."

There was a long silence then. The conversation was getting precisely nowhere. I was still wondering what the boys had up their well-tailored sleeves when Strong-Arm spoke for the first time.

"With all the dough Dean's got," he said softly, "he can afford to pay a damned sight more than your rent."

"Sure," said Slade. "That's right, Strong-Arm."

**T**HERE was more silence. Somehow my feeling of purring content was no longer with me. I came to the point without subtlety. "Manny," I said, "what's on your money-making mind?"

"Listen," he said. "You probably know that Deane's handling the reorganization of the Cardex Lumber Company?"

Since I had read the evening papers I did know it. Deane's specialty was taking over moribund businesses, reorganizing them, turning them into thriving concerns. He was a genius at this sort of thing. So much so, that news of his connection with the Cardex Company had sent the stock up eight points that afternoon.

"Well," I said, "and what's that got to do with us?"

Sligo examined his huge gnarled knuckles and whistled softly. Manny leaned toward me with the air of a man about to utter a confidence.

"Listen," he said again. "Suppose Deane never got down to Wall Street in the morning? Suppose he didn't get down there for a couple of days?"

Something tightened up inside me. But I kept an expressionless face.

"All right," I said. "Suppose he didn't?"

Sligo raised his eyes and addressed the wall.

"It'd certainly knock hell out of the stock," he observed.

I nodded slowly. "It probably would. However, that wouldn't put any money in my pocket."

"It might," said Slade. "It might mean a cold five grand or even more to you, Riker—if Deane didn't show up in the Street for three or four days."

I stood up. I'd heard all I wanted to hear. As a matter of fact, I'd heard even more than that. This was just about deadline for making my position clear.

"Manny," I said, "I've got a pretty low opinion of the law. I'm no Rover boy; I'm no solid citizen. I'm not above ordering a dozen cases of champagne that I have no intention of paying for. I'm not above handing out a rubber check when I'm broke. Further, I have few scruples about investing a few dollars in a fairly safe enterprise that mightn't meet with Tom Dewey's approval. But I don't stick my neck out for a felony rap. Least of all one that's called kidnaping. Once Deane gets out of my place I don't care what you do with him. I'm deaf, dumb and blind. I've already forgotten what you just said. But, to quote a Hollywood genius, include me out."

"Kidnaping?" said Strong-Arm in a soft voice of amazement. "Now, Manny, wherever did he get *that* idea?"

"I guess we didn't phrase it very well," said Slade in a voice that matched his henchman's.

My mouth was dry now. When a pair of tough guys begin to talk with the gentle tongue, it indicates trouble. I began to feel worried. But I kept my mouth shut and waited for more details.

"Look here," said Slade. "Deane's downstairs sopping up champagne and brandy. Ruthie's at his table helping him do it. He'll be on his face very soon now. This is no snatch, Riker. It's all perfectly legal and above-board. All we're asking you is permission to take him into a private

room. He'll go willingly enough. Hell, that's no snatch."

"Sure," said Strong-Arm. "He goes of his own free will, see? Ruthie, Manny and I go with him. All pals, see? Every time his glass is empty, we fill it up. The way he drinks we can keep him there for a week. No one'll know where he is. Cardex stocks'll drop twenty points."

It was clearing up a little now.

"And," I said, "in the meantime, you guys'll be selling Cardex short for every nickle you can raise?"

"We shall be doing exactly that," said Manny. "Five grand's your cut."

I thought it over. I certainly could use the money. It seemed safe enough. If Deane walked into a private room of his own volition, if he stayed there for a week, stupefied with liquor, there wasn't any rap that could be pinned on me. Furthermore, it was dangerous to say no to Slade.

"Well," said Manny, "are you in or out?"

There was faint menace in his tone. I bit off the end of a cigar, lit it, and dealt myself in.

"There's a door to the left of the kitchen," I said. "It leads into a little corridor. At its end there's a private dining room. One window in it, which gives out to the alley in the rear. Take him in there."

Manny Slade stood up.

"Riker," he said, "you're a smart guy. I knew all the time we could depend on you."

"Manny," I said, "you've got to promise one thing. If by some miracle he should become sober, insist on going home. You've got to let him go. A snatch rap is too tough for any of us to take."

"Don't worry," said Slade. "We'll take no chances. All you got to do is send down a dozen bottles of cognac and a case of champagne."

Strong-Arm opened the door. "Put it all on one check," he said. "Deane's."

When they left the room, I mentally cancelled Dinah's five-hundred-dollar vacation. Now I was figuring on Europe—and going with her.

## Old Score

**A**T FIVE minutes past four, I escorted the last drunk to the door and closed up the club. There were sounds of drunken revelry emanating from the back room. However, I did not look in. I went back upstairs and phoned Dinah that I wouldn't be home. Then I got undressed and lay down on the office couch, feeling quite pleased with the night's work.

As I saw it, I was in five grand and there wasn't a paragraph in the penal code that could touch me. Manny, the girl and Sligo did all the work while I collected. Besides it was all as legal as a chain store. I rolled over on my side and slept the sleep of a man with a white virgin conscience.

It was the big Finn who cleaned up the place in the mornings that woke me up. He was shaking my shoulder when I opened my drowsy eyes.

"Hey," he said. "A guy with a badge is downstairs."

"So," I said. "Give him a drink and send him away."

"He don't want a drink. He wants to see you. Says his name is Weldon."

I cursed and sat up. "All right," I said. "Tell him I'll be right down."

I washed my face in cold water and wondered what in hell Dick Weldon wanted from me at this hour in the morning. Although I'd known him for twenty years, we didn't pay each other social calls. In fact, we didn't even speak if we could avoid it.

When I was ten and Weldon two years younger we had begun a feud that was still running its course. He'd been a serious bookish sort of a kid while I was running wild. There was a day when he had taken it upon himself to give me hell for swiping two bananas from a pushcart. Even in those juvenile years Weldon was strong for law and order.

The result of that lecture had been a tooth, nail and fist fight which had lasted for the better part of an hour. I emerged from the lists with a pair

of black eyes, three missing teeth, and a bleeding nose. I also emerged victorious. Weldon was out cold. He remained in bed for three days afterward.

It had started then and it had never abated. My ideas about the world were hardboiled and practical. I learned at an early age that if I didn't look out for myself, no one else would. Weldon, on the other hand, had a wide streak of idealism. He got on the cops at twenty-one while I was making fifteen bucks a day as a bookmaker's runner.

He held me in an obvious contempt which I heartily reciprocated. He considered me a petty crook, and I considered him a fifty-dollar-a-week sucker. Maybe he'd forgotten that twenty-year-old licking, but he'd certainly never forget the decision I'd scored over him two years ago. Twice we'd clashed hard. Twice I'd won. And if there was one guy in all the world I felt definitely superior to, it was Dick Weldon.

I PUT on my clothes and went down the back stairs. I met Manny Slade in the little corridor outside the private room. "The law's outside," I told him.

He frowned. "Hell, it can't be Deane," he said. "He's out like a light. No one could know he's here."

I shrugged. "It probably isn't," I said. "It's Weldon. Probably nailed me for some violation. I'm going out to talk to him. Put an ear to the door and listen in if you want to."

He followed me down the corridor and stayed behind the door as I went out across the dance floor to the bar. Weldon was sitting on one of my seventy-dollar chromium stools.

"What's the matter?" I said. "Is the Police Department suffering from insomnia? It's not quite half past ten."

He stood up and looked at me as if I were a distasteful emetic.

"Riker," he said, "where's Deane?"

That not only startled me, it put a definite empty sensation in the pit of my stomach. I stalled for time.

"Dean?" I said. "Why, he's in Chi-

cago. And from what Joe Williams said in yesterday's paper he's going to have a good season. I like the Cubs this—"

"Stop clowning," said Weldon. "I mean George Deane. Not Dizzy."

I went behind the bar and poured myself a stiff eye-opener. I put the glass down and met his eye squarely.

"And what makes you think I know anything about George Deane?"

"He was here last night," said Weldon. "He hadn't left when you closed up. I've checked on that. His associates can't find him this morning."

"Drunks wander off to odd places."

"He's in none of them. The whole Department's been looking for him. I just heard he was here last night. I decided to see if he was still here."

"Of course you have a warrant?" I said.

From his expression, I knew he hadn't. I thought of my five grand cut and decided to play it to the hilt.

"Look here, Weldon," I said, "maybe I'm just an idealistic dreamer, but it seems to me that even a copper should have a sense of fairness, of decency. Just because I gave you a licking twenty years ago, is no reason for you to continually hound me. Can't you ever forget that fight?"

Weldon put a cigarette in his mouth and lit it.

"You're the guy who does the remembering," he said. "I've forgotten it years ago. I'm here to find George Deane. That's all. There's no prejudice or bias behind it."

"Of course not," I said ironically. "You're not even sore about Dinah, are you? I'm still waiting for that congratulatory telegram you never sent to the wedding."

That got him, as I had known it would. His face was suddenly pale. His jaw muscles were tense and there was pain in his eyes.

"Riker," he said in an odd strained voice, "only a triple-plated louse would make a remark like that. Let's leave Dinah out of it. Let's forget, too, the rollicking childhood days. I'm here to search this place for

George Deane. That, and nothing more."

"That's simple enough," I told him. "All you have to do is step outside and get in a taxi. Then you drive to the office of the District Attorney. He'll tell you where to find a sitting magistrate. You will then state under oath that you have good reason to believe that George Deane is being held illegally in the 77 Club. He will give you a nice crisp piece of paper. Technically, it's called a search warrant. Then you bring it back and hand it to me. After that you start searching. See how simple it is?"

He glared at me. Then suddenly he smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

"Riker," he said, "you're a damned fool. Why don't you grow up?"

There was something patronizing about his tone that I didn't like.

"Why don't you?" I asked, annoyed. "It seems to me that you're the infant. I've made and spent plenty in my time. You're getting thirty-five hundred now as a detective sergeant. And that's the most you ever made."

His smile grew broader. "You haven't changed since you were ten," he said. "Emotionally, you're the same age. Always the tough guy; always the shrewd operator, too smart to work like ordinary folks. Actually, you're nothing but a complete sucker about everything. Consider the way you botched this Deane thing."

I pricked up my ears at that.

"Go on," I said. "Keep talking."

"WELL," he went on, "as I figure it, you didn't really snatch Deane. You haven't the guts for that. You've probably got him upstairs drinking his head off. Your sole purpose is to keep him away from the Cardex people until the stock takes a dive and you can deliver what you've already sold short."

I stared at him. It was the first indication I had ever had that Dick Weldon possessed a brain cell which functioned. He had hit this one dead on. I was still speechless when he hurled another bombshell at me.

"But as I was saying, Riker, you're

still a child; not a particularly precocious one either. I suppose it never occurred to you that the Cardex people would have the stock temporarily withdrawn from the Exchange. They did that at nine-thirty this morning, when they couldn't locate Deane."

"You're lying," I said without conviction. Inwardly, I was cursing Manny Slade for being such a fool. This was his play. He should have thought of this angle.

"I'm not lying," said Weldon. "Call your broker if you doubt it. Right now you can't buy or sell a share of Cardex for all the money in the world. Now do you mind if I look for Deane, or do you still insist on a warrant?"

I shrugged my shoulders. It wasn't pleasant to lose to Weldon, but it appeared that he had me this time. My five grand had flown out the window. However, nothing was actually lost. True, Deane was still in my back room. But as far as any act of mine was concerned the statutes of the State were intact.

"All right, Weldon," I said. "Go and get him. He's cockeyed drunk in the back room. But he's free, white and twenty-one. He went in there under his own power. I'm clean."

Weldon nodded. "All I want is Deane," he said. "Lead me to him."

I walked across the room toward the door near the kitchen. I was burning up. For the first time in my life Weldon had made a sucker out of me and I didn't like it. I was sore at him; I was sore at Slade. A great mastermind Manny had turned out to be! He might have figured the Cardex people would pull something like this.

I flung open the door and stood aside for Weldon to pass.

"The last door on your left," I said. "You'll find Deane in there drinking with some friends."

"Sure," said Weldon sarcastically. "Friends! A bunch of the old Groton alumni, I bet."

He was pretty cocky. However, there was nothing I could do. It was Manny Slade's rap. He could take up the argument from now on. I remained standing at the end of the

corridor as Weldon marched down to the door of the private dining room. He flung it open without knocking.

He stood upon the threshold staring into the room. There was an odd expression on his face. Then he turned to me and said, "What are you pulling, Riker? Are you still clowning, or are you in this deeper than I thought?"

I was aware of an apprehensive tightening of my stomach muscles. I walked down the hall and stared over his shoulder. The room was empty.

### III

#### Wise Guy

**T**HERE was a half-full bottle on the table. There were a dozen empties on the floor. Four glasses and a still smoldering cigarette butt stood on a silver tray. An overturned chair lay near the open window; and the paint on the sill was scuffed.

"Well," said Weldon, and I could feel his burning eyes watching for any treacherous facial expression of mine, "well, what about it?"

I didn't answer right away. As a matter of fact I couldn't. Inside me were two choking emotions. One was stark, insane rage at Manny Slade; the other was paralyzing fear.

It didn't take any great, alert brain to see the way Manny was playing it. Undoubtedly, he had overheard Weldon's conversation with me outside. He had realized, as had I, that our dream of a quick clean-up in the market was shattered. But while I had quit and thrown in the hand at that point, Manny had decided to keep in the game.

It had started out safely enough with all the laws in the statute books intact; but now, Manny had thrown both the Lindbergh Act and the State kidnaping laws right out the window. What last night had merely been a surefire con racket this morning had developed into an ugly snatch.

"Well," Weldon was saying again, "are you talking here or down at Headquarters?"

I swallowed hard and forced a grin to my face. I laughed a laugh that I trusted held a rollicking note.

"The joke's on you, flatfoot," I said. "Deane left here at half past four this morning. I was just kidding you along. You really thought you had me that time, didn't you?"

He looked at me long and steadily. "I'm by no means sure I still haven't got you," he said. "You've been living on the ragged edge of the underworld too long, Riker. I think you've overplayed the hand this time."

"Now listen," I said, trying to hit a note of anger, and hoping that my tone held more assurance than I felt. "Aren't you bright enough to know when you've been kidded? Deane hasn't been here since early this morning. Deane's never been in this room in his life."

"No?" said Weldon. "Someone's been here within the last few minutes. That cigarette butt's still burning."

"So what?" I said. "Probably belongs to the Finn who cleans up."

"Maybe," said Weldon. "I'll check on it. If Deane has been in this room, you'll go downtown."

"How can you check on that?"

"The glasses. There'll be fingerprints on these glasses. I'll have them checked."

I felt a cold chill then. I clutched at a final desperate straw.

"Don't tell me you've got Deane's prints on file at Headquarters. He's a solid enough citizen."

"I can get them, can't I? I can get them from his home. From his office. I can check that easily enough. The chances are that the fingerprints of those drinking companions of his are on file downtown."

I stood there like a fool. For one of the few times in my life, I didn't know the answers. At last I said, "Well, what am I supposed to do? Is this a pinch?"

He shook his head slowly. "No," he said. "I'll check these prints first. I don't want to hold you, Riker, until I have to."

"Considering you've got nothing, it's very nice of you," I said.

He met my eye. "I'm not considering you," he said pointedly.

**T**HAT remark left me feeling like some minor species of groundhog. It's not a pleasant sensation to be granted favors for the sake of your wife. Weldon looked at me for a long time. I was uncomfortable and nervous. I was in a beautiful spot and well aware of it. At the moment I didn't see how I was going to get out.

Weldon sighed. He seemed to be lost in thought. Then, when he spoke there was a conciliatory note in his voice.

"Riker," he said, "Heaven knows I bear no deep fraternal love for you in my bosom. Nevertheless, I honestly don't believe you're a vicious criminal. As I said before I think you're just an overgrown kid. No matter what you think about it, I've no desire to see you rot in jail for twenty years."

"That's a beautiful thought," I told him. "Let's have the rest of it."

"I think I've got this thing pretty well figured," he said. "Knowing you as I do, I don't really believe you had any plan to kidnap Deane. I think the original idea was that which I outlined to you a while ago. You intended to keep him here for a day or so, while you got those short sales out of your system. As you, yourself, so carefully pointed out to me, before we found Deane missing, it was all legal and clean."

"Why," I said, "this is marvelous, Weldon. And do you really think Lizzie Borden did those murders?"

He ignored that, continuing as if I hadn't spoken.

"You've been sold out, Riker. That seems obvious enough. Your little playmates who were in here drinking with Deane overheard me tell you that Cardex was off the exchange. They didn't like to see all their profits go, so they snatched him instead. It leaves you in a nasty spot."

Well, I didn't need him to tell me that. I was grasping a big empty bag with both hands.

"I'll make a deal with you," went

on Weldon. "I'll do my best to keep you out of it. I'll stay on your side if you'll give me what you've got."

"For instance?" I said.

"Come clean on the whole deal. Tell me if my theory about you keeping Deane here last night was correct. If so, tell me the names of the boy friends who've crossed you up. Give me all the details and I'll play along with you."

"What's the angle? Why have you suddenly developed this big Santa Claus streak toward me?"

He regarded me soberly. "It's not for you," he said. "You know that."

Sure, I knew it and I didn't like it. Weldon disliked me as much as he liked Dinah. He'd been pretty broken up when she'd married me. Any magnificent gesture on his part was calculated to save her feelings, not mine. Furthermore, I had a damned sight more faith in my own ability to clean this thing up than I did in the Police Department.

"I'm not having any," I said shortly. "I'm not hiding behind Dinah's skirts. I'll play this hand myself. I've got a personal score to even up as well. If you've assigned yourself to this case, break your own trail. I'll do the same. Now do you want to take me downtown?"

He considered that for a long, long time. Then he shook his head.

"I'll have the boys look these glasses over first. But for your own sake you'd better stay around where we can find you."

"I'll be either here or at home," I told him. "I told you I'm clean on this. I've nothing to run away from."

I left him there carefully picking up the glasses. I went upstairs to my office.

I closed the door and sat down at the desk. Then I mentally cursed Manny Slade and Strong-Arm from here to Calcutta. My last remark to Weldon had been pretty hollow. True enough, I was clean on this particular deal, but that was going to do me one hell of a lot of good with a Federal Grand Jury. I was an accessory before and during the fact, and the



book said that the rap on that was a cold twenty years.

As I could see it there was only one answer. That was to find Slade, to find Deane before the fingerprint man handed Weldon the lowdown.

That wasn't going to be easy. Undoubtedly, Manny, Strong-Arm and the girl had dragged Deane out the window while Weldon and I were talking. Undoubtedly, Manny's big green car had been parked outside. By now they were miles away, speeding to some hideout from which to conduct ransom negotiations.

And in the meantime Weldon was collecting evidence that would end the career of Ronnie Riker. Frankly, I was scared. What Weldon had said was true enough. I had lived on the edge of the underworld for years. But I'd never left myself open for a rap like this. Another doubt assailed me. Perhaps Weldon was right when he called me a sucker. Right now I'd rather be getting a mere fifty a week and be clean than sit on the hot spot where I was at the moment.

I smoked innumerable cigarettes and paced the office floor for three hours. And even then I was no nearer an out than I had been when I'd started. I was beginning to weaken. Perhaps, after all, the sound thing would have been to have accepted Dick Weldon's offer. Go along with him after Slade. But it was tough to crawl to Weldon now.

I smoked and paced for another half hour and decided it was even tougher to go to jail for the rest of my life. Weldon, for all his dislike of me, was a square shooter. He would keep his word. Besides there was Dinah to think of. Moreover I was in a blind alley and had no choice.

I sat down at the phone and was dialing headquarters when Pen Sanders walked in without knocking.

#### IV

#### Worse to Worst

**A**NNOYED, I put down the phone, looked up and snapped, "What do you want?"

"You," he said. "Come on."

I was in no mood for cryptic dialogue. But I kept my temper.

"Listen," I said. "Don't clown. I'm busy as hell. Now what do you want?"

Pen Sanders sighed. He thrust a hand into his coat pocket. When he withdrew it I found myself gazing into the unfriendly muzzle of an automatic. I blinked and my brain refused to function any further.

"I thought you worked with a Waterman," I said. "What does that rod mean?"

"It means," he said softly, "that you're coming with me whether you like it or not. Now let's get going."

"Now listen, Pen—"

"Will you shut up," he said. "We're leaving now."

I looked at the automatic once more and decided that he was right. We were leaving now. But I was eternally damned if I knew why. I put on my hat and coat. I tried to fathom what lay behind Pen Sanders and his gun. My mind stood still, stagnant and bewildered.

I had known Pen Sanders for ten years, two of which he had spent in jail. He was probably the most expert forger that ever got his name on a Headquarters *dossier*. He was called Pen because a pen was the token of his profession. But I had never seen him with a gun before. He had a reputation as a quiet peaceful guy who never ventured beyond the field of forgery.

As we walked down the stairs, he put the automatic back in his pocket. He kept his hand in there, too. I could feel the steel muzzle pressing against my back as we went out into the street. There was a black coupé at the curb. A dark Italian I had never seen before was behind the wheel. Pen opened the door.

"Inside," he said.

I got in. He sat beside me. His gun formed a menacing bulk against the fabric of his coat. He nodded to the chauffeur and the car shot ahead through traffic.

I sat huddled in the seat and began to wonder if everybody was going

crazy. First, I had become involved in a kidnaping racket as a suspected snatcher; now, I was playing the role of snatchee. And with that happy thought came another one; the first ray of light that had hit me since Pen Sanders' entrance.

"Pen," I said, "did Manny send you?"

He raised his eyebrows, smiled faintly and nodded. A surging hope welled up inside me.

"Then you can relax," I told him. "You don't need a gun to take me to Manny Slade. Hell, man, when you came in I was trying to figure how to get in touch with him. He's the one man in America I want to see right now."

Pen shrugged, and kept his hand on his gun. "I can't take any chances," he said. "This racket's a little out of my line."

That was true, and it had been bothering me. Why had Slade and Strong-Arm cut Sanders in? If they had merely wanted some thug to pick me up, the town was full of hard boys better qualified for the job than Sanders.

The car moved crosstown toward Hell's Kitchen. I stared blankly through the window and thought hard. Then it hit me—hard and cold like a dash of icy water in my brain. There was but one single reason in all the world why they should cut Pen Sanders in. It was a freezing and terrible reason.

I felt physically sick at that moment. There was a stronger and deeper fear within me than I had ever known. I utilized every ounce of my will to pull myself together. I was going to need all the nerve, all the conversation I had when I confronted Manny Slade.

**T**HE coupé came to an abrupt halt over near the waterfront. Sanders flung the door open and looked at me. I got out on the sidewalk before a three-story red brick tenement. Sanders spoke to the driver without taking his eyes off me.

"Joey, you know what to do now."

Joey nodded and drove off. Sanders took my arm and led me up the four steps to the dirty foyer of the tenement. We walked up two flights of stairs and stopped before a scarred unpainted door. Sanders hit the panel four times with his knuckles. A key rasped in the lock. The door opened.

"Welcome to our little nest," said Strong-Arm Sligo.

We entered a drab railroad apartment. In the front room sat Manny Slade. On a table before him was a bottle of my cognac. He got up when I came in and grinned at me.

"Well, Riker," he said, "I saved our investment after all."

A sudden blind rage swept over me, temporarily deadening my fear.

"Manny," I said, "you're crazy. Stark staring crazy. You'll never get away with this in a thousand years."

Manny raised his eyebrows. There was an odd smile on his lips that I didn't like as he looked at Sligo.

"Strong-Arm," he said, "we save him his five grand cut and he says we're crazy."

"Ingratitude," said Sligo. "The world's lousy with it."

"Manny," I said, "never mind the clowning. We're all in a spot because of this. What are you going to do about it?"

"Do?" said Manny. "Why, we're going to collect the dough that the Cardex people swindled us out of by suspending their damned stock."

"You're still crazy," I told him. "Don't you know you can't get away with a snatch any more?"

"Sure we can," he said, preening himself. "If I arrange the details."

I sighed. We weren't getting anywhere. "All right," I said. "And what are the details?"

"We get fifty grand for the return of George Deane," said Manny. "That part's simple enough, isn't it?"

"No," I said. "It's not."

"Why isn't it?"

"Because," I said slowly and deliberately, "you can't return George Deane. You haven't got him."

Manny's little eyes narrowed. Strong-Arm crossed the room swiftly

and stood at my side, peering into my face. Pen Sanders sighed and took a drink from the bottle.

"What do you mean by that crack?" said Sligo. "Where do you think Deane is?"

"He's dead," I said, never taking my eyes off Manny. "Murdered."

There were layers of silence in the room. It was not merely an absence of noise, rather the tense electric silence that presages the explosion of a bomb.

I stood with my legs slightly apart, ready to swing from the floor if Manny made a move to touch his gun. I was taut as a steel spring; my nerves were quicksilver. I felt a little better when Manny took his eyes from me and fixed them menacingly on Sanders.

"Pen," he said, and his voice was jagged ice, "I told you to keep your mouth shut. I told you—"

"I told him nothing," said Pen quietly.

"He didn't have to tell me," I said. "Do you think I'm a complete sucker? You cut Pen in, didn't you? Well, why should you do that? You've never been any too eager to hand out dough for the sake of sweet charity. Pen's a forger. He's never been mixed up in any other racket. Once I remembered those things, I knew Deane was a corpse."

"A smart boy," said Manny softly. "Nice figuring, eh, Strong-Arm? Keep talking, Riker—let's hear the rest of it."

"All right," I said. "It's simple enough. There's only one reason you'd want a guy with Sanders' ability with a pen. And that'd be to forge the ransom notes. You undoubtedly found samples of Deane's writing in his pockets. Now that he's dead, Pen'll turn out the letters in Deane's handwriting."

Manny nodded his head like a schoolmaster beaming approbation at his star pupil.

"He's got a nice head on his shoulders, Strong-Arm," he said. "I'm glad we got him in with us. We certainly need a guy like him."

I was aware of that cold tense feeling inside me. "What do you mean by that, Manny?" I said. "And why did you kill Deane?"

Manny shrugged. "It was his own fault. He came to in the car after we dragged him out the window of your joint. He started to squawk bloody murder. He wouldn't shut up. I had to give it to him."

"Besides," said Sligo, "with him out of the way there's no one to identify us."

"Us?" I said.

"Why sure," said Manny, with an affability that frightened me. "Us. We're making you contact man, Riker."

SO THAT was it. He was cutting me in all the way with a vengeance. That was why he had sent Pen out to bring me in. I inhaled deeply. I looked right into Slade's little eyes and said, "No, Manny. I'm out."

Manny blinked at me. "You'd better stay in, Riker," he said. "It's all arranged."

"What's arranged?"

"We've already been in touch with Deane's attorneys. His brother-in-law runs the firm. They have agreed to have fifty thousand in cash ready for us at four this afternoon. We have already specified you as contact man. You will go to the lawyer's offices with a note written by Sanders. You'll collect and come back here."

I didn't answer him for a long time. Even without thinking it out I sensed that he hadn't told me everything. Then, as I considered it further, I saw where the hole was.

"Manny," I said, "there's more to it than that. You know damned well, I want no part of this. What's to prevent me from going to the coppers when I get out of here? Or what's to prevent me from picking up the fifty grand and spending the rest of my life in Mexico?"

Manny looked at Sligo. There was a smile on his thin lips that held something of triumph in it.

"You see, Strong-Arm," he said, "I

told you Riker had brains. I told you he was our man. In fact, his services will be so valuable that I'm glad we took those precautions to insure his seeing things our way."

"Precautions?" I said. "What precautions?"

Manny looked significantly at Sligo. He ran his fingers through his hair and screwed up his face.

"Riker," he said slowly, "I'm afraid this is going to get you sore. But if you'll just keep cool for a minute and think it over, you'll see it was the only thing to do."

I had a black premonition then. My lips were dry, and somehow I knew that Manny's next words would climax the entire situation.

"All right, Manny," I said and my voice sounded strange in my own ears. "Let's have it. What have you done?"

"Well," he drawled softly, "Ruthie and that guy who drove you here are over at your house, Riker. They're waiting there to hear from me."

Had I been in a scientific mood then, I would have become cognizant of the peculiar psychological fact that the antidote of fear is rage—black unreasoning rage. All the apprehensive fear that had been clinging to me fell away. A single burning thought persisted in my brain to the exclusion of all else.

*Dinah was in danger!* A force, more powerful than any which had ever actuated me, drove me on.

I disregarded the fact that Manny Slade had killed a dozen men; I disregarded the fact that Strong-Arm Sligo was the most brutal and proficient rough-and-tumble brawler that had ever committed mayhem upon some Shylock's delinquent customer. I took a step toward Manny and swung viciously from the hip.

My knuckles cracked against his jaw. He reeled back to the wall. I sprang in again and hooked a right to his cheekbone. Then I felt a pair of gorilla arms encircle me, lift me bodily off my feet. I was flung violently to the floor. My skull cracked on the dirty boards. Dazed, I rolled

over, ready to rise again, to fling myself on Manny.

Strong-Arm stood over me, his huge hands dangling at his sides like the paws of an orang-utan. A shadowy sadistic light was in his eyes. Behind him stood Manny. His hand held an automatic. His facial muscles were tense and a thin streak of blood ran crazily down his cheek.

His little eyes were half closed. His lips were angrily distorted. The muzzle of the automatic was pointed directly at my head.

My rage evanesced as rapidly as it had come. In its place returned an aching hollow fear. I was closer to death than I had ever been before. I lay motionless on the floor, and a fragment of prayer, learned in youth, flickered through my mind.

Strong-Arm Sligo lifted a huge shoe and held it suspended six inches above my face. Without taking his eyes off me, he spoke to Manny.

"Well," he said, "does he get it?"

From the expression on Manny's face, I thought I did. Then, suddenly, his face relaxed.

"Let him up, Strong-Arm."

## V

### Contact Man

**S**TRONG-ARM stood back as I got painfully to my feet.

"Manny," I said, "what have you done to her? What have you dragged her in this for? If she's hurt, I'll get you for it. If it takes the rest of my life."

Manny sighed again. "Why do you have to lose your temper?" he asked in an aggrieved tone. "We ain't hurt her. We don't intend to hurt her." He paused for a long long time, then added, "Unless."

I licked dry lips. "Unless what?"

"Let's sit down and talk it over," said Manny. "If you'll listen to reason you'll see we just had to do it, Riker."

He sat down and poured himself a drink. I remained standing, waiting for him to go on.

"You see," he continued, "we had to protect ourselves. You can see that. Why even you asked how we could be certain you wouldn't turn us in, that you wouldn't take a powder with the money. Well, Ruth and that driver went to your house. They're sitting there with your wife now. In case you don't play with us, she'll get hurt. But as long as you cut yourself in, she'll be all right."

"What do you want me to do?"

"It's simple enough. Take the note Pen has written to Deane's brother-in-law. Pick up the dough and bring it back. You get your cut. I call off Ruthie and Joey and it's all over."

"What if this brother-in-law has already called copper? What if they make a pinch when I arrive?"

"They won't dare do that," said Manny. "As long as they haven't got Deane, they'll hold off until he's returned to them."

"Which," I said bitterly, "he's not going to be."

"They don't know that," said Manny. "Why, in every snatch that's ever been the family has kept away from the cops until after they've paid the ransom. They won't take no chances."

"So," I said, "I'm to go and get the money for you. I bring it back here and you promise not to hurt Dinah. Is that it?"

Manny nodded approvingly. "That's it," he said. "I knew you'd be smart about it. The whole thing's a cinch. Besides, you got nothing to worry about. In our phone message we said we were going to contact you. They'll never know you were actually in on the snatch."

"I wasn't," I reminded him.

"Anyway," said Manny. "you're with us, aren't you? You're in?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "What the hell else can I do?" I said bitterly.

"Good," said Manny. "I knew you'd see it our way."

He gave me the note Pen had written. He scribbled the lawyer's address on the envelope, and he escorted me to the door. On the threshold his air

of phony affability vanished. His little eyes met mine, and his voice was hard as he spoke.

"Riker," he said, "you're a smart guy. But don't be too smart. Don't mastermind any way to cross me. If you do I'll kill you deadlier than George Deane. And I'll kill your wife first. Do you understand that?"

I understood that. I understood it very well. Had I not, I would have had Headquarters on the wire in three minutes flat. And that was the first time in all my life that I had ever considered blowing the whistle for a copper.

I walked out into the dirty crowded street and took a taxi downtown.

**I**T WAS a few minutes after four when I reached the offices of Chadmouth and Naylor. I had stopped off for a couple of drinks on the way down, but they had failed to stem the nervousness I felt.

I decided now that I was in this far, the only thing to do was to get the dirty work done as quickly as possible, to get Dinah out of the hands of Manny's friends. If, after that, there was a rap for me to take, well and good. I was prepared to take it.

A girl showed me into Naylor's office without delay. Naylor sat behind a huge mahogany desk, fat and reeking of money. He did not speak until the girl had gone. Then he said, "You have the letter, Mr. Riker?"

I told him I had the letter, and handed it to him. I suffered an acute attack of jitters while he read it. If he spotted the fact that it was an arrant forgery, he would call the coppers then and there. I knew what sort of treatment to expect at the precinct house in a situation like this.

I breathed with relief when he nodded his head slowly and looked up.

"I have the money here, Mr. Riker," he said. "Of course I am principally interested in making certain that my brother-in-law is safely returned. The money is unimportant compared to that."

downstairs and give them the office. You'll stay here with us until we all leave."

Strong-Arm smiled unpleasantly. "Maybe longer than that," he said.

"Shut up," said Manny. "How can I count when you're chattering?"

I walked over to the table. There was still a stiff drink left in the cognac bottle. I drained it.

I sat down and watched Manny count the money. Strong-Arm stood over by the door. He was watching me with mockery in his eyes. Pen still sprawled lazily in his chair. Manny scooped up bills like a bank teller and his lips moved as he counted.

But since that crack of Sligo's I knew that the same thought was in the back of every mind. The four of us knew that I would never leave that room alive. I felt dead and numb inside. There is a point at which fear ceases, a point when the nerves refuse to register sensation. Oddly enough my brain was alert. It functioned in an impersonal abstract way, as if detached from my physical being.

I saw it all clearly enough now; and the only surprising fact was that I had failed to see it before. I had been a reluctant partner in this deal. Moreover, I was the only guy connected with it who was known to Naylor and the police. From Manny's point of view it was dangerous to have me at large.

It was absolutely certain that I would be picked up if I got out of here. All the heat in the entire Department would be turned on me. And inasmuch as I actually was clean, Manny figured I'd crack. I'd tell them everything I knew about the affair.

Manny packed the bills up again and returned them to the briefcase.

## VI

### Let Me Live

"ALL here," he announced. "We'll split it up across the river." He glanced at his watch. "We can get going in a few minutes now."

He ignored me completely. He made

no mention of the five grand I was supposed to get. All his affability, his pretense had gone. They were all treating me as if I were already a corpse.

"Manny," I said. "Say, listen, Manny."

He turned around slowly and faced me. Strong-Arm kept his back against the door. Sanders puffed languidly on a cigarette.

"Listen, Manny," I said. "About Dinah. What are you going to do about Dinah?"

"I'll call your house on the way out, Riker," he said. Then he added with peculiar gentleness, "I got no reason to hurt her now, Riker. You don't have to worry about that."

I believed him. There could be no point in harming her now. I felt some relief in that.

Manny tossed the briefcase to Strong-Arm. Pen stood up and walked ostentatiously to the window. He stared through the dirty pane into the street beyond. I knew it was because he did not want to look at the thing which was going to happen.

Then something inside me snapped. My nerves came to life again with a terrible intensity. I felt like a man who has been buried alive. This room was my tomb. Death was here at my side. Out there in the street was life, animate and vivid; there was Dinah; there was laughter, there was love. I didn't want to die. I wanted life, life. I *had* to live!

I stood up and I could feel the tremble in my knees.

"Manny," I said, and my voice was dry and fearful, "let me out of here. I'll keep my mouth shut. You don't have to worry about me. I don't want to die, Manny. Hell, Manny you know me. I'll—"

"Now listen, Riker," he said, in the tone of a man chiding an unreasonable child, "you see how it is. You been around. I can't afford to have you get pinched. The three of us are liable to burn if you talk. You see how it is, Riker."

"But I tell you, I won't talk. They'll never get a word out of me if they use every hose they've got.

I tell you, Manny, I'll keep quiet. I'll—"

"No," said Manny Slade. "When a guy's going to go, he'll promise anything. You know that, Riker. I can't take a chance on you. All right—are you ready, Strong-Arm?"

Strong-Arm said that he was ready. He put on his hat and tucked the briefcase underneath his arm. Manny reached into his shoulder holster and withdrew his automatic. Pen Sanders kept staring out the window as if his life depended on it.

It's not a pleasant thing to admit, but I was crying then. I could feel the warm tears crawling down my face. There was something in my throat choking me. Blood pounded in my head.

Dimly, I heard Manny speak again in that gentle concerned tone.

"In the head, Riker. In the head. You'll never know what hit you. It'll be easy, Riker. Just like getting slugged with a blackjack."

Blurrily, I saw the blue barrel of the automatic lift. Strong-Arm's sardonic face leered at me from a great distance. Then, deep down within me, the instinct for survival surged up like a tidal wave. Even when the odds are a million to one, a man will fight, at the last moment, for his life.

I sprang like a football tackler at Manny. The sheer suddenness of my move took him by surprise. I heard the automatic roar over my head. My arms encircled his waist, bringing him to the floor. I heard him shout. I heard Strong-Arm's oath as he charged across the room.

Strong-Arm grabbed me by the throat and picked me up as if I were a rabbit. Manny got to his feet. "You yellow rat," he snarled. "I'll give it to you in the belly now. I'll give it—"

There was a crashing sound against the outside panels of the door. The lock rattled metallically. Manny swung around.

"Who's that?" he yelled.

**T**HE answer was another crash. The panel splintered. The lock cracked in two. The ancient door

swung open. Figures danced crazily before my wet eyes. I didn't recognize them but I knew Weldon's voice.

"Stick 'em up, Manny," he said. "And drop that gun."

"It's the law!" said Strong-Arm, who still held my throat.

Manny Slade uttered three obscene syllables, then turned to me.

"You tipped 'em, you dirty double-crosser! You'll get yours."

Sligo still held me as Manny whirled with the gun in his hand. I heard the sound of a booming shot. The smell of powder filled my nostrils. Then, as I wondered hysterically if this were death, I saw Manny Slade fall slowly to the floor. Strong-Arm released my throat. He lifted his arms over his head.

Weldon walked across the room and thrust the muzzle of the Police .38 in Strong-Arm's ribs.

"Try something," he invited. "Try something and get what Manny got." He turned to me. "Sit down, Riker. If there's anything left in that bottle, drink it. You look as if you could stand it."

I fell into a chair and managed to coax three swallows from the bottle. A few minutes later, two of Weldon's men came from the rear of an apartment carrying a bloody mess that once had been George Deane.

Weldon snapped a pair of handcuffs on Sanders and handed him and Strong-Arm over to a uniformed sergeant.

"You boys take 'em down," he said. "I want a few words with Riker here."

The grim cavalcade filed from the room. Weldon shut the shattered door as best he could and came over to me. He stood there looking at me for a full minute. I moved uncomfortably in my chair.

But by now I had somewhat recovered my nerve.

"I guess you saved my life," I said. "There are a few million people I would have preferred to you, but under the circumstances, thanks."

Weldon shook his head and sighed. "Always the adolescent," he said. "If you hadn't been such a fool, your

life would never have been in danger."

"What do you know about it?" I flared. "Do you know they had a mug sitting over Dinah? Do you know they would have killed her, if I hadn't done what I was told?"

"I know all about it," he said. "If you hadn't slugged me with that ash-tray, you would have known that Dinah was in no danger."

I looked at him in utter amazement. "You don't mean Manny was bluffing?"

"Of course, he wasn't. He's not the type."

"Then suppose you tell me what you're talking about?"

"All right," said Weldon. "Try to listen for once. Forget you're a Broadway professional wise-guy. When I found Deane's fingerprints on those glasses, I came back to the club to see what information I could get out of you. You weren't there. So I went to your home. I was there when Ruth Gagen and that Sicilian came in to put the finger on Dinah."

"So, what happened?"

"I pulled a gun on them and took them over to the station house."

I sat there, feeling a complete sucker.

"DO YOU mean to tell me," I said, "that Dinah was safe while I was running all over town slugging you, dodging coppers, and finishing, lined up in front of Manny's gun?"

"I mean to tell you exactly that. I tried to tell it to you in Naylor's office, and got belted over the skull by way of thanks."

"But how did you get to Naylor's office? How did you know I'd be there?"

"First, I tried to get that Italian to talk. He wouldn't and I didn't have the time to put pressure on him. However, it was obvious that any ransom demand would be made to either Deane's relatives or business associates. I called them all. Naylor told me about the phone message, that you were coming. I told him to hold you until I got there. I figured you could lead us to the hideout."

I breathed deeply.

"All right," I said. "But how the hell did you get here now? How did you find this joint?"

"After you got away," said Weldon, "my only hope was to put the heat on Ruth Gagen and the guy I'd pinched at your place. It took an hour or so to get them to talk, but they finally came through. So, here I am."

And here was I, to my astonishment. Ten minutes ago I was an odds-on corpse. Even now I wasn't filled with any sense of triumph. As a matter of fact, I felt an utter fool. Weldon had showed me up all the way.

"Listen, Riker," he said. Then he stopped and shifted uneasily on his feet. "This isn't easy to say. Besides, I've said it in effect, once today. Why don't you quit? Why don't you grow up? You're a fool to throw your life away rubbing shoulders with that smart mob. It's not fair to yourself, or to Dinah. You nearly got it today. If you don't watch your step there'll be other days like this."

I stood up. I knew that he was right, but I didn't relish being lectured.

"Weldon," I said, "you just saved my life, so instead of telling you to go to hell, I'll be honest. You just happen to be right. It's probably sheer coincidence but for once in your life you are right. From now on, I'm keeping my nose clean. I'm watching my step. Of course, I don't mean I'm sucker enough to be a lousy copper for a few bucks a year. But there are other honest businesses."

Weldon sighed. "Riker," he said, "you've learned some respect for the law because you've just had a bad scare. You sneered at the Penal Code for a long time because trouble never caught up with you. Well, it almost did today. It's the same thing with your attitude toward me."

I raised my eyebrows at that. "Meaning?" I said.

"Meaning that because once upon a time when you were two years older than me, when you were fifteen pounds heavier, you gave me a licking. You've never forgotten it. You've



held me in contempt ever since. Today's events have taught you some respect for the law. By the same psychology, I figure that I ought to give you a thorough thrashing myself. Then you'd have a better opinion of me."

I laughed aloud at that. It was the first honest laughter from me in eighteen hours.

"Weldon," I said, "you kill me. I'll admit I've been wrong today. I've been wrong several times. And you've been right. Yet there's one thing I'm absolutely certain of. That is, that I can lick you on the best day you ever had. I'll bet you a century I'm right on that."

He took off his coat. "I can't afford

that kind of money," he said quietly. "I'll bet you four bits."

I flexed my muscles. Now I felt a little better. After I had given him a beating, I wouldn't mind so much that he had made me look like a terrible sucker all day. I flung off my own coat.

"Come on," I said. "This time I know I'm right."

He came in fighting.

**IT WAS** utterly incredible that I should be wrong once again on the same day. But I was. And maybe I was wrong about Weldon. He seems like a right guy, after all. He insisted on buying us four beers apiece with the half dollar I lost to him.

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