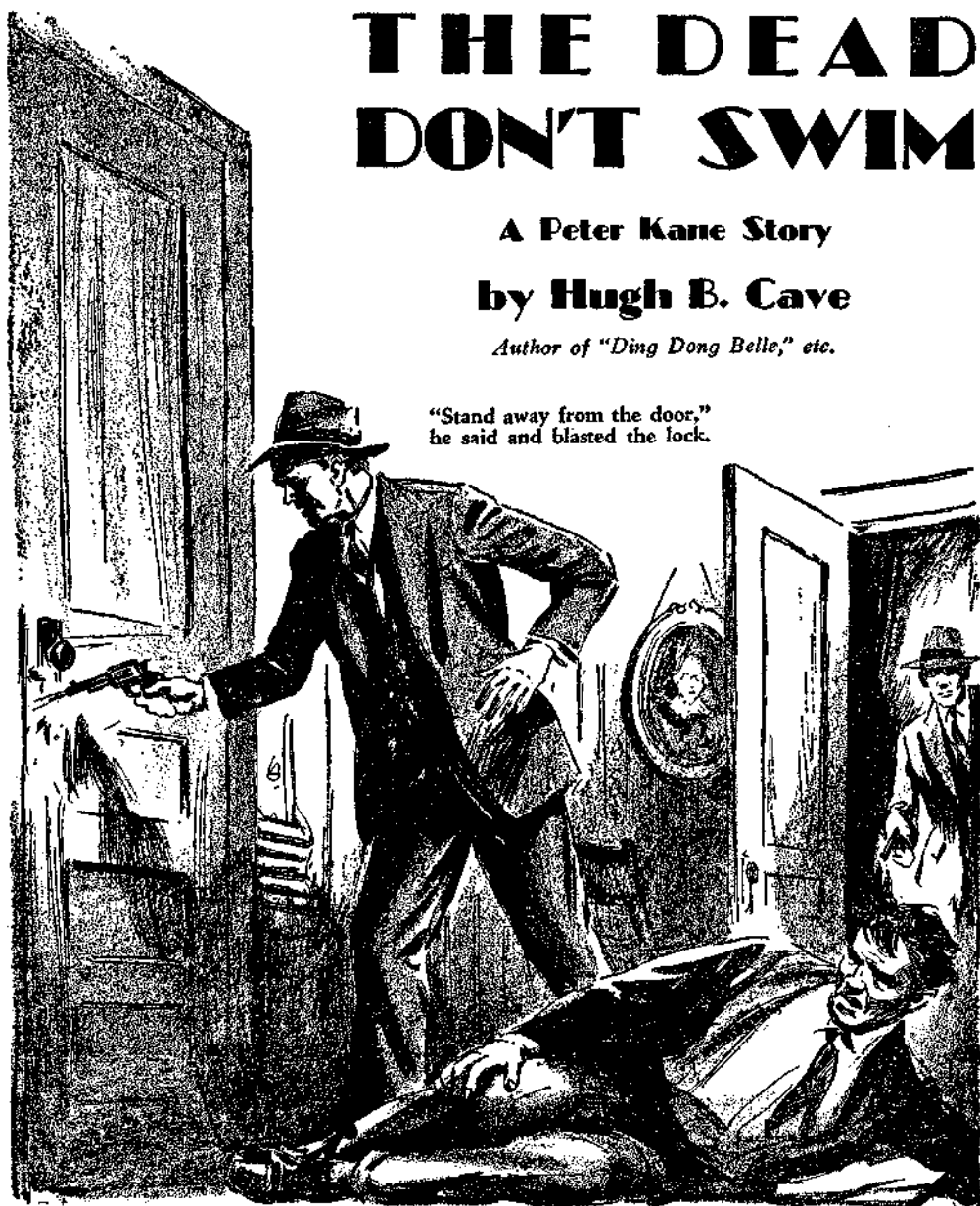


THE DEAD DON'T SWIM

A Peter Kane Story

by Hugh B. Cave

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"Stand away from the door,"
he said and blasted the lock.

Shamus Peter Kane is only slightly squiffed as he sails into the case of the missing radio operator who went for a swim—but he's three sheets in the wind by the time he fishes him out—to the glory of the FBI and the chagrin of Lieut. Moroni the magnificent.

THE sign read *POSITIVELY NO ADMITTANCE!* and that was a laugh, because anyone with tenacity enough to find this place would never be scared into retreat by a placard. Kane read the sign from his car, got out and went up to the building.

The place had been hacked out of the woods, and a road gouged into it. It consisted of one flatroofed building and two tall radio towers that poked their points to

heaven. It had been built here, Kane supposed, because land was cheap. Or for complicated reasons having to do with atmospheric conditions. Or something.

He knocked, and got no answer. He turned the knob and walked in.

Nine tenths of the building was taken up by hulks of machinery set on a concrete floor. The other tenth was a glassed-in office where a man wearing earphones sat at a desk. The man had a round, pink face that looked freshly scrubbed. He looked up. He was bald. Dits and dahs crackled through the phones, and with his gaze on Kane he swerved around to the typewriter beside his chair, rolled in an oblong of yellow paper and began tapping the keys. Every few seconds he leaned across the desk to make a few dots and dashes of his own. It was quite a game, Kane decided, watching from the office doorway.

This ended, and the fellow pushed the phones back on his gleaming head. His widened eyes said: "What is it?" His scowl said: "It better be good, with you barging in here like this!" His lips said nothing at all. They were pretty pink lips that belonged on a girl.

"You're George Bricklin," Kane said. "I'm Kane, private investigator, working on the Maitland affair."

"Investigator? You mean private detective?"

"That's right."

Bricklin lit a cigarette. "Well?" he said. Visitors, Kane gathered, really weren't welcome.

"Do you always talk with those things glued to your head?" Kane asked pleasantly. "Or could you remove them for a while?"

"I wear them. It happens to be my job."

"Oh," Kane said. "I understand. Messages from ships at sea and all that." He sat down. A teletype machine crowded him on one side, a bulletin board covered with charts and maps on the other. "Well, my job is to find Paul Maitland. You being his boss I hoped you might be of some help."

Bricklin hooked his heels on a rung of his chair. He really was a little guy, five feet short. He had a scowl, though, that belonged on a six-footer with sinus trou-

ble. "I'm fed up with this Maitland business!" he growled.

"So?"

"First the police, then the insurance people, now you! What the hell am I running here—a radio marine station or an autopsy?"

Nasty, Kane decided. Very nasty. "All I want, friend, is a word or two. It seems Maitland was working on some sort of gadget—"

"I don't know what he was doing, and I don't care!"

"It also seems he was having wife trouble," Kane went on, ignoring the outburst. "According to the papers, you said he'd been morose and moody for some time, that he hardly spoke to you when you showed up to relieve him that night. Trouble is, most of that stuff in the papers was supplied by Mr. Moroni, the city's ace sleuth, and Mr. Moroni is apt to be a little loose-lipped at times, for the sake of publicity."

"The papers," Bricklin declared tersely, "had it right."

"M'm. I'm surprised. Did you know Maitland was going for a ride that night?"

"No."

"He just went, hey? You three fellows live in a farmhouse up the road, don't you?"

"Yes."

"I suppose it gets kinds of boring at times."

"Maitland," said the little bald man, "was bored all the time. That was none of my business. My job is to see that schedules are kept and the work done. If a man wants to go riding at midnight, that's his own affair." His phones crackled. He slewed about in his chair to work the bug. Kane debated the wisdom of further probing.

THIS particular ship, if ship it was, had a lot of traffic. After ten minutes of watching Bricklin's amazingly agile movements and listening to the static-blurred rattle of code, Kane sighed and reached for the pint in his pocket. He took a generous bite out of it and felt better. He decided suddenly that, what the hell, Bricklin was too cagy to let slip any information anyway. He stood up.

A car stopped outside and Kane heard

its door slam. He stood still. He took one look at the big man who strode into the station—one long, unhappy look at the red neck bulging above the pink-and-white striped shirt, at the bulldog features and hostile mouth. "Oh-oh," Kane said softly, and sat down again.

Moroni loomed over him. Moroni the Magnificent. Moroni the Great Brain, the publicity bound, the poison in Kane's ivy.

"So, Kane! I rush out here to warn Bricklin about you, and you're here already!"

Kane stared at the red face and voiced a sigh. "Jed Clay's been talking to you, I see." That, Kane realized, was understandable and cast no reflections on Jed Clay, city editor of the *Post*, who was a smart man looking after his own interests.

With Moe Finch on the way out and Moroni on the way up, it was to Clay's advantage to play both ends against the middle.

But Moroni was genuinely sore this time. No horsing. The big dick's eyes held a dangerous glitter as he swung on Bricklin. "Has Kane been annoying you?" he snapped.

"Everybody annoys me," Bricklin grumbled.

"He tell you he was the police, or anything like that?"

"No, he didn't say that."

"I'm surprised," Moroni snarled. "And disappointed." He glared at Kane again. "You make one little slip this time, Kane, and all the Moe Finches in the world won't grease you out of it! You hear?"

"My ears are ringing."

"I'll wring your neck!"

"But, my dear man," Kane murmured, "I'm only doing my duty as a citizen. You yourself planted the seeds of thought in my troubled mind. Didn't you tell the papers this was an espionage case?"

"I'm telling you to keep out of it!"

"Surely my memory is not at fault, Mr. Moroni," Kane said. "Didn't you tell the papers that the men out here—Payne and Maitland and Bricklin—were natural prey for foreign agents, with their intimate knowledge of the position of ships at sea, and all that? It seems to me I read—"

"I refuted all that, Kane, and you damn well know it! This case is closed!"

"But poor Mr. Maitland is still miss-

ing," Kane murmured. He stood up. "Ah, well, Mr. Moroni, perhaps I'm wrong. Time alone will tell." His smile was annoyingly unctuous. "Farewell, gentlemen." He walked out to his car and got in, and with a languid wave of his hand, drove away. As usual, Peter Kane was not quite sober.

He drove along the rutted road a quarter mile and stopped at the farmhouse in which Bricklin and the other radio men maintained quarters. The radio station was something new; accommodations for the men were still primitive. Kane hauled a newspaper clipping out and studied a diagram of it—a diagram of Paul Maitland's last ride. He drove half a mile more, turned left at an intersection.

This road snaked through the woods and emerged suddenly in a waste of sand dunes. The waters of the Atlantic rolled sullenly against a mile-long strip of empty beach, under a leaden sky.

It was here, according to the papers, that Paul Maitland's car had been found, with an unopened bottle of hydrate of chloral crystals in the glove compartment. The glove compartment was locked, the key in Maitland's clothes. Therefore he must have put the poison there himself.

His clothes had been found down there in the dunes. According to the eminent Mr. Moroni, only one conclusion was tenable: Paul Maitland had removed his clothes and deliberately swum out to his death. The presence of the poison in the glove compartment indicated a contemplation of suicide by other means, then a sudden decision to simplify the method. The motive, Moroni said, was marital trouble.

To be sure, the Great Brain had first talked of foreign agents, kidnaping, espionage and so forth, but after thus building up copy for the papers, he had backtracked gracefully to the more simple solution.

Kane gazed at all that ocean and shuddered. He disliked water. He felt the need of a drink and had one, but it helped matters only slightly. This, he decided ruefully, was a sad and screwy case.

IN THE first place, it was Moroni's case from start to finish. Moroni had built it up out of nothing. In the words of Moe Finch's lovely and worried wife, Anne, it

was just another Moroni attempt to publicize himself into Moe's job.

Kane had been over that angle with her. After reading the headlines until they sickened him, he called at the Finch apartment and demanded belligerently to know why he hadn't been sent for. "Damn it, pal! You know what's happening! Why wasn't I asked to stop it?"

Lovely in a red satin housecoat, Anne bit her lip. "I wanted to, Peter, but Moe—well, you know how he feels." For no good reason, the wall above the radio became a loadstone for her gaze. "You've helped him out so often. It can't go on, he says."

"Why doesn't Moe take some first-grade lessons in showmanship, and play Moroni's own game?"

"You know Moe."

Kane knew Moe. In the world of Moe Finch, just two things existed: his wife and his job. He had no time to buy drinks for the newsboys.

"Besides," Anne said wearily, "there's nothing to this case, Peter. Nothing you could do, even if Moe would have it."

"They guy is still missing."

"If that means anything."

"It could," Kane had insisted, helping himself to a drink from Moe Finch's little bar. "It could, couldn't it?" He had loved this girl once. He supposed he still did. Liquor and his hell-with-it outlook had licked him, and she had married big-hearted, dependable Moe Finch on the rebound. Kane couldn't see Moe Finch ruined without at least trying to stop it.

And then, of course, there was the Alma Payne angle. With Moroni riding his hand-made headlines, Alma Payne had paid Kane a visit in his Beacon Agency office. She was a nice girl. She was the wife of Dave Payne, an operator at the station. She didn't believe Paul Maitland had committed suicide.

"The papers, the police, and especially that man Moroni are all wrong!" she'd insisted.

She showed Kane a letter. It was typed on cheap yellow paper and read: "DEAR ALMA: I'M TOLD MY BETTER HALF IS PLAYING AROUND AGAIN—THIS TIME WITH SOME FELLOW IN THE APARTMENT UNDER YOU. WILL YOU LET ME

KNOW THE SORDID DETAILS? THEY MAY COME IN HANDY WHEN I DECIDE, AS EVENTUALLY I MUST, THAT ENUF'S ENUF. REGARDS, PAUL."

He'd written it while on watch at the radio marine station, where the machines had only capital letters. And on the back of it were pencil scratches that looked to Kane like the doodlings of an inebriate. And a notation: "A.R. Co. 222 E. Layland." Kane had not as yet looked into this.

"He was probably working on some new invention," Alma Payne declared, "and just happened to write me on a piece of scratch paper. Paul is forever inventing something. He's smart. Both Bricklin and my husband, Dave, are secretly jealous of his ability."

"And this wife of his who plays around—you and she share an apartment in town here, because there are no accommodations out there for women?"

"That's right. Yes."

"Does she play around?"

"Yes, she does."

"Who with?"

"Well, her latest is a man named Lett. Leo Lett."

That was what did it. The name Leo Lett. After shutting the door on her, Kane had lifted a fifth of Scotch out of his desk drawer, got middling drunk and thought about it. And decided, with typical Kane hot-headedness, to go all out, go overboard.

HE SWAYED over the telephone and dialed the number one used when desirous of speaking personally, and privately, with the grizzled city editor of the *Post*, Jed Clay.

"My friend," said Kane, swaying, "this is Peter the Kane, of the Beacon. I have news." He paused, listened to the reply, and murmured, "Dear, dear!" Then he plunged.

"About the Maitland case, friend," Kane said, "and the blatant publicity being dished out in behalf of the magnificent Mr. Moroni. Pull in your horns. The case is far from solved, friend, and Mr. Moroni far from knowing the all of what happened. The headlines will come later."

Jed Clay said suspiciously: "What the

hell are you up to, Kane? You feuding with Moroni again?"

"I just want you to be geared," Kane said solemnly, "for the explosion. There *will* be an explosion. Take my word for it. Mr. Moroni may be blown up in it."

He hung up in the midst of Jed Clay's reply. He stared at the phone and was suddenly sober. He took a quick drink and wiped sweat from his face. "God help the Beacon Agency," Kane muttered, "if this is a dud!"

Now he stared at all that ocean, that mean, gray, ominous ocean into which Paul Maitland was supposed to have swum to a watery grave. And presently Kane became aware of a lank shape walking slowly along the beach.

About the same time, the lank shape became aware of Kane.

The fellow halted, peered at Kane's car. He came on again. He trudged through the sand and put a hand on the car door. "Nasty way to commit suicide, wasn't it?" he observed pleasantly. "You've read the papers, I suppose."

"Of course," Kane said. He wondered if the lank one were as guileless as his smile, and didn't think so. The gray eyes in that thin face were shrewd. The nonchalant attitude was a mite too obvious.

"Know this fellow Maitland, did you?" the man asked.

"He was a good friend of mine," Kane said. You opened the window and in flew info. Perhaps. It was worth a try.

"Well, say! That is something! Do you honestly believe he committed suicide, as the papers maintain?"

"Do you?" Kane asked.

"Why, I don't know. I suppose the police wouldn't make such a statement unless . . . but *you* should have an opinion on the matter, if you knew him well."

"I'll tell you," Kane said. "I think there's something screwy about this whole business. I'd look into it, too, if it weren't that I'd surely be questioned by the police and put to a lot of inconvenience. In my opinion, friend, Paul Maitland is no more dead than you are. No, sir. I think—" He pulled up short and stared at the top of the man's head. "There I go, shooting my mouth off again. Never know when to keep it buttoned."

The thin man underwent a slow but

definite metamorphosis, shedding his nonchalance. He frowned. "My name's Bradley," he declared. "I'm an investigator for the company in which Maitland was insured. If you really know anything about this affair—"

Kane beat a hasty retreat, adopting a scared look that would have passed a screen test. "Me? Know anything? Oh, no!"

"My company is prepared to pay well for any information, Mr.—er—"

"Not me," Kane said. "Oh, no, not me! I'm not poking my nose into this mess, friend." He jabbed a foot at the starter.

Mr. Bradley, the insurance man, let go the door with great reluctance and was nearly bowled over. The car slewed through soft sand in reverse. Kane turned it, glanced into the mirror as he drove away. Mr. Bradley was angrily staring after him, and suddenly got out pencil and notebook and began writing.

THE telephone book listed an Arless Radio Company at 222 East Layland. Kane slapped the book shut with a grunt of satisfaction. He was in a bar two blocks from Layland, and the barkeep, calling him by name, had placed Scotch and tap-water on the mahogany without waiting for an order.

Kane poured a double dose from the bottle and downed it. He had done a lot of running around and was dry. He supposed it would help if he had a bite to eat, but food invariably lost its appeal when the bloodhound in him was runing rampant.

He had another, a quick one, drank the tap-water to settle it and went over to Layland Street. The Arless Radio Company was a manufacturing plant in a block-long building. Kane climbed sooty stairs to a sooty office.

A plump gray man peered through spectacles at the hen-tracks on that yellow sheet of paper. He said finally: "It appears to be some sort of frequency monitor, Mr. Kane, but obviously this is no more than a preliminary sketch. If you could show me a more finished diagram—"

Kane said: "There may be something more in your files, under the name of

Paul Maitland. It's possible he wrote to you."

Paul Maitland had written. Clipped to the letter were detailed drawings and diagrams. The letter wondered if the Arless Company could make up this piece of equipment from the drawings.

The Arless man consulted an appended carbon copy of the firm's reply. "We—ah—offered to do the job for fifty-five dollars," he declared, "but I don't see anything further here from Mr. Maitland. Wait, and I'll check."

He checked. In ten minutes he was back shaking his head. "No. That's the last we heard of it. Perhaps our price was too steep for him. I'm sorry, Mr. Kane."

Kane was sorry, too. "What other manufacturers could make up this gadget? Close to home, I mean."

"Well, now, there's the Driscoll Company on Atwells Avenue, the Trenchard-Biddle Company . . ." The gray man named two others.

Kane begged a loan of the drawings and made the rounds. It was slow work. It was throat-parching. Fortunately the manufacturing district was generously sprinkled with oases. Kane was very drunk when at last he got results.

Eben Snead & Company was the place. Eben Snead himself recognized the frequency monitor. "M'm," he said. He was a large, slow-moving man with a nose like a kingfisher's beak. "M'm, yes. We've made this monitor within the past two weeks, on special order, sir. Indeed we have. But not for a Mr. Maitland, I'm sure. I'll check."

He checked. "Made it for a man named Philip Smith," he reported after research. "Sorry I can't give you his address, but he called for the work personally. We have had another order from him since. Have some drawings and specifications of his in the files."

"You mean he's coming back?"

"Friday," Mr. Snead said.

"What does this man Smith look like?"

Mr. Snead was sorry, but he didn't remember. Perhaps someone else would know. He checked. He returned to Kane, shaking his head. No one, it seemed, had paid any particular attention to Mr. Smith's physical appearance.

"Did he know radio?"

"Why—ah—yes, he seemed to. On the other hand, I do recall that he seemed unwilling to go into any deep discussion of the article he wished us to make."

"Suppose we look at his drawings," Kane suggested, "and compare them with these." He tapped a restless forefinger on the papers mailed to the Arless Company by Paul Maitland. "You're an old hand at this game, no doubt. If the two sets of drawings were prepared by the same man, you'd be able to tell, wouldn't you?"

"Possibly," said Mr. Snead. He placed the two sets side by side and studied them. "Odd," he murmured.

"What's odd?"

"On the surface these were not prepared by the same man. Yet there are certain similarities that puzzle me."

"That's all I want to know," Kane said. "What time Friday is Smith expected?"

"We promised the work for two o'clock."

"I'll be here. I'll be seeing you."

"Will you?" said a voice at Kane's elbow. "Now isn't that nice!"

Kane turned. He blinked into the beaming face of Moroni, who had oozed quietly through the doorway to take up a position behind him. Moroni was aglow with triumph.

"You've been a big help, Kane," Moroni gloated. "A great big help. Very nice of you, Stupid, I'm sure."

KANE was in an ugly mood as he drove across town to the apartment address given him by Alma Payne. It was a middle class neighborhood, the house too big to have any personality. Apartment thirty-four, Alma had said. Kane peered at the names besides the bell-buttons.

Thirty-four was right, and the card bore both their names: Alma Payne and Mildred Maitland. It was Mildred Maitland that Kane wanted. He rang the bell.

She wasn't much to look at. Too small and skinny for Kane's liking, she had mouse-colored hair and a small, discontented mouth. Her nose was a button, her cheekbones high, her neck so thin that her collarbone stood out like ropes.

She looked at Peter Kane with a good deal of interest, her frank scrutiny reminding him that he was supposed to be a

handsome guy with a build the ladies liked. She said: "About Paul? Of course I don't mind! Come right in."

Kane parked on a studio coach that served as a divan. He accepted a cigarette. He bet himself a dollar she would offer him a drink, and won the bet handily. It was cheap rye. The bottle in his pocket contained better stuff, but he left it there.

In answer to his question, Mildred Maitland said with a shrug of her tooth-thin shoulders: "Frankly, yes. I do think he committed suicide."

"Why?" Kane asked.

"Well, Paul was a very moody man. Oh, very moody! And at times he was almost impossible to get along with. We quarreled a lot, and I simply had to seek the companionship of other men occasionally, in order not to go mad. He didn't like that. He threatened many a time to do something drastic."

"Meaning suicide?"

"Yes. Suicide. And then he was always working on some crazy invention, and never had any time for me."

"Do you know what he was working on at the time he disappeared?"

"Heavens, no, Mr. Kane! I never meddled in Paul's affairs!"

Kane wondered. "Did you know he'd bought those poison pills?"

"Did I know? Of course not!" She threw her hands about in dramatic helplessness. "If I'd known, I would have done something about it before it was too late!"

Kane wondered if she would have. A gal in love with her husband might have, but the way this scrawny wench was rolling her eyes and her voice at Peter Kane, it was obvious she could love no one but herself. It was also apparent that she considered herself utterly devastating to anything that wore pants.

Kane asked an important question. "Why do you suppose Paul suddenly decided to drown himself, Mrs. Maitland, after he'd gone to all the trouble of obtaining poison?"

She hesitated. She looked bewildered for a moment, then shrugged her shoulders, sighed, and somehow was all at once sitting beside Kane on the couch, with bottle and glass in her hand. "Dear me," she

said, "I don't pretend to know all the answers. Here. Have another drink."

Kane had another drink. If she hadn't been drinking, too, he would have suspected her of trying to poison him, the stuff was that awful. It filled his stomach with smoke. "Pal," he thought, "get out of this dump!" Scowling, he said aloud: "Is Mrs. Payne around?"

The scrawny one's eyes flashed. "Mrs. Payne does not live here!" she snapped.

"No? She told me—"

"She moved," said Mrs. Maitland.

"Oh," Kane said. He thought he understood. He didn't think it was worth talking about. Rising, he placed his empty glass on a table. "Well, Mrs. Maitland, thanks. I'll run."

Her mouth fell open, petulantly. "You aren't leaving?"

Kane left.

HE DIDN'T go far. He didn't get out of the building. In the downstairs hall two men were waiting when he stepped from the elevator. Since Kane had never seen them before, he paid no attention. They took care of that. They moved in, one on each side of him. The one on his left, the young one, said gently: "Take it easy, pal, and nobody will get bruised." His fingers slithered over Kane's pockets.

Kane stopped. When he did this, a gun in the pocket of the other man quickly nudged his ribs, and he guessed it was wiser to keep moving. They marched him out of the building, across the sidewalk to a car that was parked behind his own.

Kane thought of the foreign agent angle expounded by Moroni, and strove for a look at his captors. They didn't fit his notion of what foreign agents ought to look like. They were very ordinary. They wore ordinary clothes. They were sure of themselves, and their nonchalance gave Kane the creeps.

The older one drove. The younger one sat beside Kane on the sedan's rear seat, with a gun against Kane's body. Experimentally Kane said: "This bewilders me no end."

The answer was to the point. "Go right on being bewildered, pal, in a nice quiet way."

The car zigzagged across town, avoiding most of the crowded arteries. There

were times when Kane might have yelled for assistance, but he thought it might be too costly. The city slipped behind, and the man at the wheel stepped up the pace to a smooth forty.

Kane stared out the window and watched daylight turn to darkness. He hadn't realized it was that late. He wondered, metaphorically, how late it really was for Peter the Kane. The woods and fields became a shroud. Far out of town the car turned into a rutted road, bumped through blackened wilderness and stopped.

The place was a farmhouse of doubtful ancestry, and the man who opened the front door and came out on the porch was almost as scrawny as Mrs. Mildred Maitland. Face to face with him, Kane towered over him and stared, and said gently, with understanding: "Oh-oh. You."

The fellow smiled. He put out a hand. "How are you, Kane?" His name was Leo Lett. He had used a lot of other names while shifting from racket to racket, but Leo Lett, Kane knew, was the one on his birth certificate.

He didn't look born—he looked carved out of a briar root. The face of Leo Lett was knotty and dark, and huckleberry eyes and bat-wing ears, and the face sat upon a short, tough torso.

"Come in, Kane," Leo invited. "Where did the boys pick you up?"

"He was in and out of so many damn barrooms, we almost lost him," grumbled the man on Kane's left. "We finally caught up with him in Mildred Maitland's apartment house."

"You see, Kane? You get around too much. Where angels fear to tread, Peter Kane is the bull in the china shop." Leo's laugh was throaty. "I get those damned proverbs all mixed up, don't I, pal?"

"Don't you," Kane said.

In the old-fashioned parlor, Leo deftly ran his hands over Kane's clothing. "The boys take your gun, Kane?"

"I didn't have one, Leo."

"No? You getting careless?"

Kane sat down. "How was I to know this was a job for artillery?"

"That's right. How would you?" Leo gazed owlishly at his two lieutenants. "Leave us alone, boys. Mr. Kane and I wish to talk." He leaned forward as the

door closed. "I got to apologize, chum, for the way you were brought here. It was unavoidable. No hard feelings, hey?"

KANE almost laughed.

"What," Leo asked, "is this job getting you, pal, besides a crack at that dumb dick, Moroni? Is there any dough in it for you?"

"Not a sou."

"And what are you out to prove, pal?"

"It's like this," Kane said. His gaze wandered around the room and he wondered if he'd be leaving it. He thought probably he would, after a fashion. Leo Lett was not at the moment in bad with the cops. Therefore Leo would probably draw the line just short of murder, unless persuasion failed to get him results. "It's like this: A gal who knows Paul Maitland came to my place and said she didn't think he was dead, and asked me to find him. There's no dough in it, but if the gal's right and he is alive, and I do find him, the publicity will be terrific."

"Look, Kane. Paul Maitland committed suicide."

"So?"

"No matter what anyone told you, he's dead. He had a swell wife, see? But he commenced to play around. His wife found out and threatened to leave him, and he did the Dutch." Leo leaned forward, put a hand out and tapped Kane's knee. "There's nothing to this case, pal."

"You should know," Kane said, "with an apartment right under Mildred Maitland."

Leo Lett blinked one eye.

"So why was I brought here, Leo?"

"I think you should lay off," Leo said. "Hell, Kane, you're in business for dough, and there's no dough in this. All you're doing is causing a nice girl to lose sleep. You're a good guy, Kane. I never hope to meet one better. Suppose I buy you off this case, for say five hundred fish?"

The five hundred was in Leo's hand. Kane looked at it.

"The boys will ride you back to town," Leo said, "and everything will be hunky-dory, pal. All you do to earn the five hundred is forget the whole business. I got a soft spot for Milly Maitland, see? I want this mess to die down without no more headlines."

"Well, hell," Kane said, "if it means that much to you—"

Leo Lett hunched forward and tucked the five hundred into Kane's pocket, and stood up. His grin was as craggy as his face. "I thought you'd see it my way, pal," he said. "Hey, Clinker!"

The door opened.

"Give Mr. Kane a ride back to town," Leo ordered. "Take him wherever he wishes to go." He put a hand out and Kane took it. "Thanks, pal. If you're ever in a mess, look me up."

"Will I take Joe?" Clinker asked.

"Hell, no. Mr. Kane is a friend of mine."

"O.K.," Clinker said. "Let's go, mister."

Kane followed him outside, to the car. It was dark. It was so dark that Kane held a hand up in front of him for a bumper. It occurred to him that he never in a thousand years would be able to find this place again, unless, like the kid in the fairy tale, he tied a string to it and unravelled the string as Clinker drove him to the city.

With that in mind, Kane settled himself beside the driver as the car growled down the road. He looked perfectly relaxed. Half a mile rumbled under the wheels. Suddenly Kane sat up. "Hey! I forgot something!"

Clinker applied the brakes. Disgusted, he growled: "You forgot what?"

"My wallet. I left it back there on Leo's table."

The car stopped. "Hell of a note," Kane said. "I'm sorry." He really was, too. Clinker was a little guy, and the explosion of Kane's fist under his jaw was needlessly brutal. You couldn't help feeling for a man whose teeth had suddenly bitten off one-third of his tongue.

Kane eased him out of the car and laid him tenderly in a patch of poison ivy. It would be quite a while, he thought, before Clinker felt the itch. He appropriated a gun from Clinker's pocket. Behind the wheel, he moved the car off the road.

Alert for trouble, he walked the half mile back to the farmhouse.

WHERE the fellow came from Kane never did know, but suddenly he was there at Kane's elbow, and Kane jumped

as though touched by the clammy hand of a corpse.

There was nothing hostile about the lad. His hands hung at his sides, empty. He said, "Wait a minute, Kane," and his voice was low, persuasive, but not threatening.

Kane said: "Bradley, hey? The insurance man."

"Not Bradley, Kane. And I'm not an insurance man."

"I didn't think you were."

"Name's Kershaw, and I work for a friend of yours." A small gold badge glinted in the lank man's outthrust hand. "Your Uncle Samuel."

Kane looked him up and down and was not greatly flabbergasted. He peered ahead, through darkness, to the house. "You interested in Leo Lett, too?" he murmured.

"Should I be, Kane?"

"I don't know. I thought the espionage angle in this was just a Moroni pipe-dream."

Kershaw looked at the house, too. It was about a hundred yards away, a blur in the night. He said: "I was told to look into this business. First, I shadowed Moroni, who thinks I'm an insurance man. That got me nowhere. Then you seemed to be up to something, so I shifted the tail to you. How come you were driven out here?"

Kane told him. Told him, too, about Clinker and the patch of poison ivy. "So now I'm about to call on Leo again," Kane said.

"You think he knows the truth of what happened to Maitland?"

"I think he knows where Maitland is hiding out. I wouldn't be surprised if Maitland is in that farmhouse," Kane declared.

"I'll tag along."

Kane welcomed the company. You could depend on these federal boys, he mused. They were level-headed and competent. H'd been a bit leery about barging in alone on Leo Lett and the man named Joe, but with Kershaw along he felt better. They moved toward the house warily. "Cover the door," Kane said.

Kershaw knelt beside the veranda railing, his gun out and ready. Kane climbed the steps and knocked. Standing at ease,

his empty hands dangling, he heard furtive footsteps and called out: "Open up, Leo. It's me, Kane. We had an accident."

The door opened and it was Joe. Joe was bigger than Clinker. His bulk filled the doorway and he stared at Kane suspiciously. Kane said: "It happened down the road a way. The crazy fool was driving too fast, and—"

His left hand clawed at Joe's shirt and yanked. The yank was prodigious. It whipped the big guy clear of the doorway and sent him sprawling the length of the veranda, where Kershaw, the federal man, was waiting. Big Joe lurched to his knees, yowling. He pawed for his gun. The gun he got was Kershaw's, briskly across the back of his head.

With that settled, Kane slammed over the threshold in a power drive, head down and legs churning. He thought that would make him a difficult target for Leo Lett, inside, and he was right. Leo was a bug-eyed gnome at the far end of the room, frantically throwing lead at the empty doorway.

Kane lurched into a divan and dropped. He thought Leo's gun was about empty. The room was noisy as a bowling alley, though, and in all that din you couldn't count shot. Taking no chances, Kane sighted beneath the divan, along the floor, and located Leo's legs. He couldn't miss. He squeezed the trigger four times.

Leo sat down, knifing the gunshot echoes with a banshee howl that shook the windows. He grabbed at his legs with both hands and rocked back and forth on his rump, screaming curses. He was a tough little guy, as Kane had known. He spat like a cornered cat as Kane strode toward him.

Kershaw came in. Someone in another room was pounding frantically on a door, yelling for help.

Kane found the door at the end of the hall, and it was locked. A voice yelled through it: "Let me out! If you're the police, let me out! They've got me locked in here!"

Kane frowned. This didn't fit with certain theories he was stuck with. He said darkly, "Stand away from the door," and blasted the lock with a bullet. He had his fist cocked and his gun ready when the

door clattered open and Paul Maitland, easily identified by his pictures in the papers, stumbled out at him.

"So you were locked in," Kane said. His scowl was terrific. He put a hand on the man's arm and led him into the parlor, where Kershaw and Leo Lett stared in taut silence.

"This man kidnaped me!" Maitland said hoarsely, stabbing an accusing finger at Leo Lett. "He and his friends have held me here all this time, a prisoner!"

THE craggy face of Leo Lett underwent changes. His mouth dropped open, his eyes bulged, glittering. His face had been white with pain; now it turned beet-red with rage.

"You double-crossing louse!" Leo screamed. "Don't believe him, Kane! If he was locked in there, he locked himself in!"

"I don't believe him," Kane said.

"He's in this of his own accord! Now he's trying to slide out of it and slap a kidnap charge on me!"

"Tell us about it, Leo," Kane said.

Leo Lett bared his teeth. "You go to hell!"

"You tell us, Maitland."

Maitland backed up, trembling. He was not much to look at. He had a slack, unshaven face and his eyes were swollen with fear. "My word's as good as his," he mumbled defiantly. "I tell you I was kidnaped!"

"Well, Leo?"

"Listen," Leo Lett said. "I met this tramp through his wife, and he told me about a new two-way radio he was working on. I figured I could use that radio in my bookie business, for a sneak-proof tieup with the horse tracks. O.K. I made him a proposition and he went for it, on condition we help him engineer a clean break from his no-good wife and all his old ties.

"The suicide angle was his own idea, see? He bought the poison from a Mickey Finn dealer in town. He wrote letters to Alma Payne, to establish a motive. He staged the drowning gag. Then he moved in here with us and went to work on his radio."

"I never did think that drowning was on the level," Kane declared.

Kershaw said: "Why?"

"A bunch of reasons. First, the letter to Alma Payne. If he could find time to write to Alma, why didn't he write his two-timing wife and blame her for what he was about to do? Most men would. That's the one satisfaction a suicide gets—telling the world his grievances."

"That's theory," Kershaw said. "Not fact."

"Sure. Then he was supposed to have taken off his clothes and swum out into the Atlantic. But if the guy never intended to come back, why did he shed his clothes? I know damn well I wouldn't—unless I wanted someone to find them."

"Still theory, Kane."

"The poison business was phoney. Why didn't he use the poison? Or anyhow, why didn't he take some before his midnight swim, to ease the way out? I'll tell you why. The poison was a plant, to fortify the suicide angle."

The federal man shook his head. "You still haven't—"

"Hell!" Kane snorted. "You Hoover guys. Did Columbus know he'd find America?" He grinned at Leo Lett. "Who copied Maitland's drawings and took them to the radio company?"

"Joe."

"Smart of you not to use Maitland's originals."

"Oh, sure," Leo growled. "I'm smart." He held onto his legs and made a face with his eyes shut. "Look at me."

"You look at him, Kane," Kershaw said, "while I check the stuff Maitland's been working on."

It was valuable stuff. The government would want it, Kershaw declared. The government would also want to talk to Leo Lett and his buddies, and to Paul Maitland. "Can you keep quiet about this for a while, Kane? Publicity right now might hurt."

"Why not?" Kane said. He studied his fingernails innocently. "If this radio stuff is really important, there's some more of it you ought to pick up, friend."

"Is there? Where?"

"At the Eben Snead Company. They told me it would be ready Friday at two o'clock."

"Friday," Kershaw said, "at two. I'll be there."

HE WAS, and it was beautiful. It was gorgeous. At 2:07 by Kane's watch, Kershaw walked into the place and went up to the desk. "You made some equipment for Mr. Philip Smith," he declared. "I have the receipt here for the deposit. If I may have the equipment . . ."

For over an hour, Kane had been perched on a stool behind a row of filing cabinets, quietly sipping at a pint of bonded rye—ultra special stuff, as befitted the occasion. The rest of the boys were strategically hidden in other parts of the spacious office.

Moroni had come in half an hour ago, talked to Mr. Snead, and seated himself at a desk, where he was trying to act like a stenographer.

Moroni rose, now, in all his glory. His jaw was out, his eyes a-glitter, his big face bristling with triumph. He had a horse-pistol in his fist as he loomed at the counter.

"You're under arrest!" Moroni bellowed.

Flash-bulbs exploded. Murchison, of the *Telegram*, got a beautiful picture of Moroni's bellow, with emphasis on tonsils and epiglottis. Kelley, of the *Post*, caught the Moroni profile in all its splendor, with the amazed countenance of Kershaw in the background. Sisson and McArdle, veteran newshounds, were there to put it in words. Fat, juicy words.

Kane got off his stool. With flash-bulbs still exploding, and the Magnificent Moroni frozen in frantic amazement, Kane walked unsteadily to the counter and grinned at Kershaw.

"We're holding a little party here, Mr. Kershaw," he murmured, "for the press. This—ah—is Mr. Moroni, whom no doubt you've seen around. Mr. Moroni, meet Mr. Kershaw, of the F. B. I."

Out of there, then, weaved Peter Kane with his pint. The pint was about gone. He thought that was a shame. There was a definite need, he felt, for celebration at this time.

Then he remembered he had five hundred dollars of Leo Lett's ill-gotten money. That would buy him a lot of happy hangovers.

First, though, he had a call to make. Anne and Moe Finch would want to know the news.