

DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

COMBINED WITH FLYNN'S DETECTIVE FICTION

EVERY STORY COMPLETE

EVERY STORY NEW—NO REPRINTS

Vol. 46 CONTENTS FOR NOVEMBER, 1944 No. 4

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Cover: "Drusilla had sat for her last portrait."

From: *Death On the Palette.*

The December Issue will be out November 3rd

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DIG A GRAVE FOR ME



By G. T.

FLEMING-ROBERTS

Author of "A Sleight Case of Murder," etc.

"You'd better look in that envelope," purred Myrna, my foster-father's Big Mistake, "because what's in it will make an orphan of you again." Just between you and me, Dad Hogins would have been a lot better off if he had opened his pix shop over the fire station and fallen in love with a hook-and-ladder wagon, instead of moving in over Calveric's Drugstore and marrying Myrna Calveric—even if she was plenty cosmo.



"I want you to dig the grave for me, Oswald," he told me, cocking the gun for emphasis. "Dig it quite deep. Of course, I'll fill it in afterwards."

Oswald Finch, age seventeen, who operates a molding machine in the foundry of the Quade Piston Ring Company plant here in Hattersfield, is of the opinion that Walter A. Hogins could not have shot and killed Jonathan Quade, because he has seen Mr. Hogins catch a fly that was bothering him and let it go outdoors to avoid swatting it.

Oswald Finch. That's my name, and nothing can be done about it. If you ran into me on Main Street and wanted to find out how to reach some address in Hattersfield, you'd begin with: "Hey, Fats." I know. Everybody does until they find out my name is Oswald, which strikes them a lot funnier, then it's "Hey, Oswald," from there on out.

Before I tell you any more about the murder, I ought to explain how it was with Walter A. Hogins and me, because that's the only way I can account for the crazy things I did that night. To most of the people in Hattersfield, Walter A. Hogins was just a stew-bum. I've heard Myrna, his second wife, call him an old stew-bum to his face about a million times. But he called himself a photographer, and I called him Dad because that's what he had been to me ever since my own father and mother were killed in an auto accident seven years ago.

CHAPTER ONE

The Picture of Death

IF you read anything besides *Li'l Abner* in the papers of June fifteenth and sixteenth, you noticed the item about the murder of Jonathan Quade of Hattersfield, Indiana. It was all over the front page with the war news.

But the papers didn't so much as mention my name. There wasn't anything like:

I was a kid of ten when that happened, and Mr. Hogins, a widower with no children, took me under his wing. He was drinking then, but he kept it under cover. I'd come into the kitchen when he thought I was out playing baseball and catch him with a glass in his hand. He'd squirm around in an old rocking-chair that sat near the stove, and give me a lopsided grin.

"Have to drink a lot of milk for my stummick ulcers, Ozzie, my boy," he'd say. "You never drink anything stronger than milk and you won't have stummick ulcers when you get my age."

But the fact was, he had gin in the milk and you could smell it a block away. He wasn't a photographer then, by the way, but worked, like nearly everybody else in Hattersfield, for the Quade Piston Ring Company. He had a job in Mr. Quade's office.

Which brings me to something else people said about Walter Hogins which burned me up plenty. They said he knew something he wasn't telling about four thousand dollars that disappeared from Mr. Quade's safe. There was enough talk about the missing money so that Dad Hogins gave up his job and opened this photographic studio above Calveric's Drugstore. That's how he began seeing a lot of Myrna, Old Man Calveric's daughter.

Just between you and me, Dad Hogins would have been a lot better off if he had opened his pix shop over the fire station and fallen in love with a hook-and-ladder wagon. Because Myrna had gone thirty-two years toward being an old maid, and it was too late to turn back then.

Not that Myrna didn't have the looks. She was plenty sharp and still is. A tall, brunet clothes-horse like they say Earl Carroll is looking for, and it's too bad he didn't find her before Dad Hogins did. Dad Hogins started acting about half his age and double his income, and before I knew it, Myrna had him.

About the first thing Myrna did after she and Dad Hogins were married was to try and get rid of me. Not with a bread knife or rat-paste or anything like that, understand. What she did was go to a mealy-mouthed stuffed-shirt named Peter Newsome and convince him Walter A. Hogins was an old stew-bum and not fit to bring up a child. Peter Newsome was chairman of the Civic Betterment League, and he threatened to have the juvenile court take me away from Dad.

All that came of it was that Dad Hogins started doctoring his "stummick ulcers" at his photography shop. And he'd frequently come home at night with what he called "an awful bad spell," so I'd have to help him to bed with an icebag, which, I noticed, he never applied to his stomach.

So he was an old stew-bum, Dad Hogins was, but the kindest man who ever lived, which made it hard for me to believe he could have shot and killed Jonathan Quade even when I saw the evidence.

You remember that on the night of the fourteenth, Jonathan Quade was the principal speaker at a Civic Betterment League banquet at the Shefford Hotel. You know how they found Quade—stretched out on the floor of a private dining room on the second floor, a bullet in his head and nobody standing around waiting to be arrested for murder.

It probably would have been a shock to old Quade if he had known that the plant didn't stop running as soon as he was dead, because he really had his fingers in the business right down to the green sand in the foundry. But we had a war to win, and on June fifteenth every unit was going full blast as if nothing had happened.

Everybody was wondering who killed Jonathan Quade and why. Mostly why. The old man didn't have any family. I'd heard him say in a dozen speeches that Hattersfield, Indiana, was his family, and there was Quade Park, the Jonathan Quade Hospital and the Quade Public Golf Links to prove it. He didn't have any enemies, either, except a few he'd made when he'd backed Edward P. Lawler for mayor.

About five-thirty that evening, I turned up the approach walk of Dad Hogins' house on Pearson Street and found Peter Newsome just about six steps ahead of me beyond the lilac bushes. He jerked around, blinked against the sun and shook his head gravely.

"Horrible, isn't it, Oswald?"

I said yes, it was. I didn't have to ask what was horrible because in Hattersfield we were talking about just one thing.

"The worst eventuality which could befall our charming community," said Peter Newsome. "Mr. Quade was such an active man in civic affairs."

Civic affairs meant everything to Peter Newsome, and the term included anything that was not strictly his own business. I never could see how such a small nose could pry into so many places at once. He was a prissy, gray little man of about fifty, neat as a kitten, and he always wore a black bow tie. He was Hattersfield's leading undertaker, and you could never forget it. His standard greeting when he met me was: "You're looking healthy enough, Oswald." It was supposed to be a gag, see, because of my fat, but somehow he made it sound as though he was sorry I didn't have one foot in the grave and the other on a greased pig.

He walked with me onto the front porch. The door and the Venetian blinds were closed

to keep Myrna cool, which made me think, honest to Christmas, I could have liked that woman a lot more if just once she would break out in a sweat. I must have taken my gripe out on the door, because it swung all the way to the rubber-nosed stop and bounced. Somewhere in the shadows of the living room there was a startled swish of skirts.

"Go on in, Mr. Newsome," I invited.

Peter Newsome stepped over the threshold ahead of me, but I think I saw Myrna before he did. She was sitting straight up in a lounge chair in the corner by the bookcase, elbows tight against her sides, one hand cramming something down into the crack between the cushion and the chair-arm. Sitting straight, I said, but stiff would be more like it. She looked scared stiff, her face pale except where the daubs of rouge stood out on her cheekbones like hives.

I don't want to give the wrong impression about Myrna's looks just because I don't like her. I'd say she had chiseled features—if Myrna had anything to do with them, I know they were chiseled. She had black hair which she wore pushed up as though any day now she expected to inherit a crown. Her eyes were big and gray, the kind you stare at a while before you start wondering whether they're looking at you or through you.

"My!" said Peter Newsome, taking off his straw hat. "How delightfully cool—" He broke off as Myrna stood up. His smile was the sort you'd expect if he'd called for the remains of your long-suffering grandmother. "Well, well, Mrs. Hogins! Good afternoon, dear lady. Is Mr. Hogins at home?"

Myrna put her hand out to Newsome as she always does, palm down, fingers limp. I guess she thinks that's cosmo, like the way she points at anything, with her palm up.

"How nice to see you again, Mr. Newsome," she said. And while Newsome was holding her fingertips as long as he dared, I got behind Myrna and plopped down in her chair just as though I didn't have any manners.

If Newsome hadn't been there, Myrna would have turned on me and said: "Oswald, get out of the only decent chair in the house! Do you want to break the springs in that one, too?" But she didn't turn, didn't say anything, though I could tell by the cock of her head that she knew what I was doing.

All I wanted was to find out what it was she had tucked down into the crack of that chair in such a hurry. My fingers closed on the ragged edge of an envelope that had been opened. I pulled it out, took a quick gander at the address side. It carried a Hattersfield postmark of 9:30 A.M., June fifteenth, which meant it had been delivered this afternoon. The handwriting directed the letter to Mr.

Walter A. Hogins, and nobody could have possibly made Mrs. Walter A. Hogins out of it.

I stood up. Myrna was saying to Newsome: "Shocked? I was positively stunned. . . . Won't you sit down, Mr. Newsome? Mr. Hogins should be along any moment."

"Thank you," Newsome said and sat on the sofa. I mumbled something about having to wash up and started out of the room.

"Oswald!" Myrna said, as though now I had sat down in the best chair. Only there was something else in the way she said, "Oswald!"—as if I'd sat down in the best chair with a lively garter snake in my pocket.

I STUFFED the letter or whatever it was under the front tail of my T-shirt and turned. Newsome was sitting on the edge of the sofa, twiddling his straw hat. Myrna was a little in front of him, facing me. She had on a short, summery yellow dress. Even if she was all of thirty-five, some guys my age would have whistled at her from across the street, but not me, because she was Myrna, and with my short chubby build I'm not exactly the whistling type anyway.

I said, "Hub?" and watched her red lips thin and her nose spread. She had one hand tucked in a dinky pocket in the front of her dress, and if she'd pulled a gun and slaughtered me, I wouldn't have been surprised.

"Oswald, wouldn't you like to pull up a chair and join us?" Her voice was sweet enough. She knew I had the letter and she didn't want me to get out of her sight.

I shook my head. "I'm pretty sweaty." I used the word "sweaty" on purpose, because Myrna insisted that only horses sweat, while men perspire and women glow. She wasn't glowing. She was all poise and ice, and if you run that together to make "poisoned ice" that's all right with me.

"But Oswald, dear, we have company." She bit her lower lip.

I looked at Peter Newsome who waved his hat upwards at me. "That's all right, my boy, you go right ahead. I know what it must be like, working in a factory all day in this heat and humidity."

So I was excused. I went through the dining room into the kitchen. There wasn't much use looking around to see what we were going to have for dinner, because we didn't eat before eight o'clock. Myrna thinks an eight o'clock dinner is cosmo, but in Hattersfield, Indiana, it's just slow starvation.

My room was back of the kitchen, a place where Dad Hogins used to store some of his photographic equipment. And what I mean, it was my room, because ever since I got out of high school and went to work for the Quade Piston Ring Company, I'd been paying

Myrna twelve dollars a week rent and board.

I took the letter out from under my shirt, put it down on top of the oak bureau which stood near the door. I weighted it down with a half of a piston that I'd picked up in the scrap heap at the plant and polished so that it made a real classy-looking paperweight. I intended that the letter should stay right there until I could hand it over to Dad Hogins. How I was going to explain why it was open bothered me a little, because you don't go up to even your foster-father and say: "Your wife has been reading your mail."

I skinned out of my shirt, which wasn't as easy as it sounds. I had just gone to the closet to dump the shirt into the laundry bag when I heard Myrna's high heels *tack-tacking* across the kitchen floor. She'd got rid of Peter Newsome and was on the hunt for me. I got back to the bureau and was standing there when she opened the door.

She didn't look at me, but noticed, instead, that I was guarding the bureau. Her gray eyes sharpened on the letter and she reached out a red-nailed hand for it. I was a couple of inches ahead of her, yanked the envelope from beneath the paperweight, and took two steps back to sit down on the edge of the bed. I grinned at her.

"Oswald, give me that," she said, biting off her words like pretzels.

I shook my head. "Nuh-uh. I'll give it to Dad when he comes in. And if you don't stop looking like that, Myrna, you'll get what no woman wants—namely, wrinkles."

She came around the edge of the door, and I remembered a cat I'd once had that came around door frames that way. She was in front of me, her back toward the bureau. She wasn't frowning now. Her gray eyes were narrow and bright. Her smile was so small I wouldn't have known it was there if I hadn't known Myrna. She leaned back easily, resting bare elbows on the bureau top.

I put the letter into my pants pocket.

"Well," she said, being chatty, "what do you think of it?"

"If you mean the letter," I said, "I don't read other people's mail."

"You're such a nice boy!" She was almost purring. "Why, you fat little slob, you'd better look at it so you'll understand you have to hunt for a new place to live. What's in that envelope will make an orphan of you again."

I didn't get it. All I knew was that she was up to something, and whatever it was, it wasn't good for Dad Hogins. I took the envelope out of my pocket. Inside was a photograph, a picture of a room, and the camera had been slanted to catch a portion of the floor. Against the dark carpet was old, white-haired Jonathan Quade wearing a dress suit.

There was a dark, wet-looking stain on the upper portion of his face, and it drew black, crooked lines down his cheeks to his square jaw. In the foreground of the picture was a tall, skinny man, his right side toward the camera. What hair he had was black, salted with gray. His mouth hung open loosely, and even if it was only a profile view you could see the dumbstruck expression on his face.

The tall man was Dad Hogins, and he had a revolver in his right hand.

I looked up from the picture, stared at Myrna. I shook my head, which said everything I had to say. I didn't believe the picture. It was some sort of a trick. Dad Hogins wouldn't have killed the meanest man on earth.

Myrna was standing straight now, both hands behind her. She had that same ghost of a smile on her painted mouth.

"I think, Oswald," she said lazily, "that Mr. Quade found out who took that four thousand dollars out of his safe five years ago. And your precious Dad Hogins didn't want to go to prison."

I stood up. She was all wrong. The picture was all wrong. I clenched the photo and the envelope in my fist and shook them at her. "What were you going to do with this?"

Her slim black brows went up. "Why, send it to the police, of course."

I don't remember what I said then, and it's probably just as well. As I started through the door I noticed out of the corner of my eye that the half piston wasn't on the bureau. That must have been what she hit me with, because I don't believe that Myrna could have laid me out with only her bare fist.

CHAPTER TWO

Dad Hogins' Last "Spell"

IT was the first time I had ever been knocked out. I opened my eyes for just a second and closed them again. I wished I was dead. I was flat on my belly—as flat as anybody with a belly like mine can get. My left hand clutched the rag rug that was just over the sill in my room, while my right tried to dig into the pattern of the kitchen linoleum. I had to hang on because the house was spinning and I was apt to shoot out the window any moment.

After a while, things slowed down a little. I could hear somebody moving around in the front part of the house. Myrna, I thought, and that brought me back with a jolt to the photograph and what Myrna had said she was going to do with it. I rolled over, sat up, but couldn't make it to my feet because the spinning started all over again. I leaned back against the door frame and sat still.

Somebody had opened the swinging door between the dining room and kitchen. A man's voice, one that I knew well enough, called: "Walt! Walt Hogins! Say, isn't anybody home?"

The man was Edward P. Lawler, who was not only the mayor of Hattersfield but held down an important job in the personnel office of Quade Piston Ring. Lawler handled the Quade employees' life insurance, which was one of Quade's pet ideas. You see, if you worked at Quade Piston Ring, you could get up to ten thousand dollars life insurance at low rates. It was a non-profit arrangement, backed by the Quade company. With what he got out of the mayor's job and the salary Jonathan Quade paid him, Lawler did all right for himself. He had a nice little house in town and a farm on the outskirts where he raised horses.

I'd often thought that it would be nice to look like Mr. Lawler when I got to be middle-aged. He was about medium height, lean through the waist, with a deep chest and square shoulders. He had the sort of skin that gets bronze in the summer instead of freckled like mine—bronze and sort of oily, as though maybe he was the skipper of a tramp steamer that made all the tropical ports. The only thing about him I wouldn't have wanted were those widely-spaced front teeth of his, and if I'd had a space like that I sure wouldn't have said "juvenile delinquency" as often as he did.

His dark eyes moved over toward me. His smile was quick and bright. I guess there's something funny about a fat guy sitting on the floor holding his head, but I couldn't see it from my angle. Then Mr. Lawler got serious all of a sudden.

"Sa—ay, Oswald!" That space between his front teeth didn't do my name any good, either. "Say, are you hurt?"

He came into the kitchen and let the door swing to. He had on a white suit, white shirt, and a dark red tie. He looked plenty sharp.

I couldn't think up an answer right away. I wasn't going to tell him that Myrna had hit me. Aside from letting family skeletons out of the closet, that wouldn't have sounded too good for me—a guy who is seventeen, weighs a hundred and seventy pounds, and goes into the Army next year.

I got onto my feet before Lawler could reach me. The floor started to move in the opposite direction from the one in which I was going. I plunged for the sink, hung onto it, got the cold water tap open. And then I darned near drowned, because about the time the sink was full of water I blacked out again. I came out of it with Lawler shaking me.

"Where's Walt?" he was asking. "Where's

Myrna? What's the matter with you, Oswald?" His dark eyes were like hooks that got into me and kept me on my feet.

"Food poisoning," I said, and didn't have any trouble gagging. "Myrna opened a can of something. She's sick, too." I decided that was a pretty good idea. Maybe I could get Mr. Lawler to let me alone and go chase Myrna. Somehow, I had to get to Dad Hogins. I wanted him to say with his own lips that he hadn't killed Jonathan Quade. Of course, if Myrna had gone to the police or mailed that picture, it wouldn't make much difference what Dad Hogins said to me or the jury. He'd be crucified in court, because the whole town was keyed up to a lynch-law pitch.

"You'd better go help Myrna," I said weakly and waved toward the door. "She was going for the doctor. Either Dr. Prescott or Dr. Morrison, and I don't know whether she'll make it or not. She was awful sick."

Lawler reached out a hand to the back of my head, and I ducked. He looked at me queerly, head on one side, half frowning and half smiling. "That's a funny place for food poisoning to show up," he said.

"I'm sick, see?" I tried to get it across. "Dizzy, Mr. Lawler. I must have fallen down and busted my head on something. You'd better go see if you can catch up with Myrna before she collapses in the street and gets hit by a truck."

Mr. Lawler put both big brown hands on my shoulders. He looked grave, as though he might sound off on juvenile delinquency any moment. "Look here, Oswald, you weren't brawling with a sneak-thief in the front part of the house? Nobody socked you?"

I tried to laugh, asked him where he got a notion like that. Lawler shrugged. He had a kind of foreign shrug that included his hands, his eyebrows and his mouth as well as his shoulders. Nobody, I thought, had ever called me a liar in fewer words.

"And you want me to go hunt for Myrna?" he asked.

I nodded. "She's seven shades greener than envy."

"O.K., Oswald." He smiled slightly. "I'm a public servant and you're the public." He turned, went out the side door which opens off the kitchen. I heard his footsteps on the walk that leads along the house and to the street. I was alone with my problems, the least of which was how to stay on my feet.

I SOPPED a tea-towel in the cold water, held that to the back of my head where Myrna had socked me. Across the kitchen, I opened the swinging door and right away I saw where Mr. Lawler had got the notion I had been fighting with a prowler. Somebody

had gone hurriedly through the drawers of the buffet and china-closet and left them all standing open. I worked my way into the living room, hanging onto things. Myrna's writing desk, the one she would never let anybody touch, had been given the same thorough going over, and the wastebasket beside it had been turned over to spill the contents all over the floor.

I went over to the desk, stared down at the big brown blotting pad with its red leather corners. Maybe it was because I had been hit on the head, but I didn't need a mirror to make out the address Myrna had written in ink and then blotted on the pad. *Hattersfield Police* stood out just as clearly as *Sizzling Steaks* does in the front window of the Puritan Restaurant on Main Street. Myrna had done just what she had said she was going to do.

The little clock on the desk pointed to three minutes after seven. Myrna had probably put the photograph in the mail box by now, and there wasn't anything I could do to prevent the police from getting it in the morning. That left Dad Hogins a little more than twelve hours. I've known the time when twelve hours seemed like a lifetime, but not now.

I staggered back through the dining room and kitchen again, got into my room. My head was thumping so hard it was a wonder I could think at all. I got a shirt out of the bureau drawer and put it on. Then I lifted the mattress of my bed and got out the roll of bills I had hid there to keep Myrna's lunch-hooks off it, and then I went out the side door of the house and back to the garage. I got out the old jalopy I'd been driving to work every other day in a share-the-ride plan I had with another guy who worked for Quade Piston Ring. I let the ruts of the alley steer me out onto the street, then squinted my eyes against the lowering sun and headed for Main Street and Dad Hogins' shop.

Right next to Calveric's Drugstore was a parking lot which the auto accessory store used for tire service. I swung in there, killed my engine and got out. My head was still thumping but still figuring a way out for Dad. We could slip out of his place by the fire-escape at the back, cut across the parking lot, and get into my jalopy. I had a tank full of gas and enough "B" tickets to take us seven hundred miles in any direction. And we had twelve hours. I couldn't see any farther than that, and I wasn't sure I wanted to.

As I passed Calveric's Drugstore, I took a quick look through the screen, thinking maybe Myrna was in there spilling everything to her old man, but there wasn't anybody in the store except Marty Beecher who jerks sodas. I stepped to the door that said *Hogins Photo*

Studio on the glass, pushed it open, started up the stairs.

All the way up, the walls of the stairwell were hung with framed portraits which Dad Hogins had taken recently—babies, sweet girl graduates, brides, some of the fellows I knew who were in the armed forces. Tomorrow, I thought, just about all of those people, except the babies, would be talking about me and about Dad. They were all smiling at me now, but tomorrow—I don't know, but it gave me a funny feeling as though right now they had started to whisper things that weren't true.

I reached the short hall at the top of the steps, went down it to the door of the reception room which Dad Hogins had fixed up as though he was at least half as rich as old Jonathan Quade. I pushed the door open, stepped across the sill and stopped cold in my tracks.

Dad Hogins was seated in a chair in front of his big walnut desk. He'd fallen forward onto the desk itself, his arms flung out. On the floor beside him was a quart bottle of milk. A glass on the desk contained milk, and I could smell gin all over the place even if I couldn't see it.

This was something I hadn't taken into account—the possibility that Dad Hogins would be having one of his "spells."

I said: "Hey, Dad, you can't—" and didn't get any further. Sore at him for getting himself tight at a time like this, I had taken a couple of quick steps into the room, and from this new position I got a view of Dad and the desk from another angle. His thin right fist was closed around the grip of a revolver and there was blood all over the right side of his face and down on the desk top.

I stumbled over to his side, dropped a hand on his shoulder and shook him. That didn't do any good. The sickening notion that nothing was going to do any good crept up on me. I must have stood there for quite a while, staring and swallowing.

On the desk, right in front of Dad Hogins' bald head was a sheet of paper weighted down with an open bottle of fountain-pen ink. His fountain pen, the cap off, lay right beside the bottle.

On the paper were five lines of Dad's neat-as-print handwriting, heavy at the beginning and scratching out at the end where the pen had gone dry.

Red Keys:

This isn't a poison-pen letter though I guess there is more poison than ink in my pen. But you know who stole Mr. Quade's four thousand dollars now, don't you?

That was all, and it didn't make much sense to me.

CHAPTER THREE

Red Keys

THE trouble with me is that I don't think along logical lines. I can remember how in physics class whenever I turned up with the right answer, I'd always got it by a different method than anybody else. So when I saw Dad Hogins lying there with a wound in the right side of his head and a gun in his right hand, I immediately began thinking along the lines of murder instead of suicide. Maybe that was because I didn't believe that Dad Hogins had killed old Jonathan Quade. Naturally, I didn't look upon the note on Dad's desk as a suicide letter. I thought, instead, that it was supposed to be some sort of a clue to the identity of Dad's murderer and maybe Jonathan Quade's murderer, too.

I picked the letter up, not without upsetting the bottle of ink all over the place, and took another look at it. I could see where some people might find it convenient to believe it was a suicide note and that Dad Hogins was actually referring to himself when he wrote: *But you know who stole Mr. Quade's four thousand dollars now; don't you?* Myrna would believe it was a suicide note, and possibly the police, but not if I fixed things up so

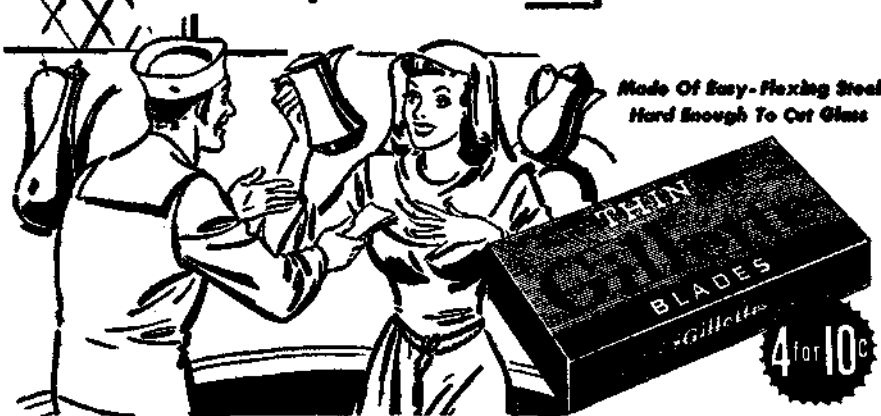
that the scene didn't look like suicide. So I fixed things up.

At first, I thought I would mail the letter to the police station to arrive about the same time as the incriminating photograph. I got out an envelope, put the note in it, picked up Dad Hogins' fountain pen, started to write the address. But the pen was dry, which was maybe a good thing because it wasn't such a hot idea anyway.

The "Red Keys" at the top of the letter was both the name of a person and a place—a roadside tavern called "The Red Keys" which was owned by a man named Keys who had red hair. The tavern was located out on the banks of Cripple Creek near a spot where Dad and I had gone fishing some years back. I remembered Mr. Red Keys would sometimes come out of his roadhouse, stand on the bank of the stream, and ask Dad if he thought it would rain. That was about all I had ever heard him say, and the only thing about him that had impressed me was that he could stand on top of the bank and spit clear to the edge of the water.

Usually, after Mr. Keys paid us a visit, Dad Hogins would get restless. He'd say his stomach was bothering him again and that he guessed he would go see if Mr. Keys couldn't spare him a glass of milk. He'd come back in

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about an hour with some peppermints for me, though I suspect he had helped himself to the candy on the way to kill the smell of gin on his breath.

All this came rushing back into my thumping head while I was standing there, swallowing at the ache in my throat. What it had to do with my decision, I wouldn't know, but I stuck the note in my pocket and decided that I would deliver it in person to Mr. Red Keys and see what happened.

I worked the revolver out of Dad Hogins' dead hand and put it in my pants pocket. There was a laugh there if I could have seen it at the time, because I'd often read about a man putting a gun in his pocket and how surprised everybody is when he pulls it to shoot up a bank. It could be the way I am built, but in my pocket that revolver was about as inconspicuous as a turret gun on one of the Navy's big ships. I finally had to stick it, barrel first, down inside my belt and pull my shirt tail out to cover the grips of it.

I left Dad Hogins' studio by the back way, went down the fire-escape, into the parking lot. I drove off in my jalopy with the gun barrel jabbing me every time I worked the clutch pedal.

The sun had gone down red behind a bank of thick, black clouds by the time I rolled across Cripple Creek bridge and sighted the Red Keys Tavern just beyond. The building itself was big and rambling, and it would have been hard to discover which was the front door if a string of red-painted electric light bulbs hadn't led right up to it. Great plummy willow trees arched across the gabled roof. The place looked cool and inviting, which was good for my throbbing head. At the same time, it was shadowy and mysterious, which wasn't so good for my nerves. I was beginning to have nerves. Everything I had done up to now had been a part of a nightmare, but now the shock of finding Dad Hogins was beginning to wear off and I knew I was awake. All this was real. I was feeling less like a hero and more like somebody's victim. On top of that, I was sick.

I parked the car in the cinder lot with about a score of others, got out, followed the string of red light globes to the front door. The place was noisy with a big fan blowing a gale and Harry James taking the paper off the ceiling from a red, translucent jukebox. I opened the screen, went inside. The room was all knotty pine, red leather and chrome plate, so small that I started to wonder right away what Red Keys did with the rest of the big building. But then that's always been my trouble—I wonder too much.

There were five men at the bar and a few men and women paired off in the dimly lighted booths on the other side. Of the two men

behind the bar, I picked out Red Keys right away, just as though it had been only yesterday that I had watched him spitting into the creek. He didn't seem quite as tall and broad as he had back then, but that was because I'd grown quite a bit in both directions since the last time I had seen him. Anyway, he was a big man with an expressionless, round, pushed-in face, hollow blue eyes, and shaggy, sandy brows. His red hair had faded to gray in streaks, but it was still coarse and brush-cut.

I got onto one of the leather-covered stools at the bar, as far away from everybody as possible, and let my left leg dangle so the muzzle of the revolver wouldn't jab me. Mr. Red Keys came mopping down the bar with a clean cloth after a while as though the mopping was far more important than waiting on any of his customers. He looked squarely at me, and said: "What'll it be, mister?"

I brought Dad Hogins' note out of my pocket, pushed it toward him, flattened it on the place he had just mopped. I said: "A coke, I guess."

HE turned a little way, stooped to reach under the bar and into the cooler. His hollow eyes were on the note all the time, and I would have studied the expression on his face if there had been one. He picked up a glass with a finger and thumb at the same time he was getting the cap off the bottle. He poured the coke fast so that it foamed all over the counter and he had to mop again. Somebody down the bar called for another beer, and while Mr. Red Keys was drawing it he was looking at the note. He slid the glass of beer along the counter and followed it without looking at me or saying a word.

I began to get that ache in my throat again. I didn't want to go home and I didn't want to stay here. As a detective, I couldn't put fish-oil on my shoes and catch a cat. I tried to drink my coke, but I didn't swallow so good. The red light from the jukebox was making my eyeballs feel hot. I don't know just what I would have done if Mr. Keys hadn't come back along the bar to take another look at that note. Then his eyes crawled over my face for an uncomfortable moment, dropped finally to about the middle of my shirt front.

"Where'd you get that, Fats?" he asked, and turned his thumb over toward the note.

"Mr. Hogins wanted me to see that you got it," I told him.

He jerked his head up and said: "Humph! What's it all about?"

I tried to shrug like Edward P. Lawler, managed all right with my hands and shoulders, but when I tried to raise my eyebrows my head pained me all the way from the bridge of my nose to the goose-egg Myrna had raised. Mr. Red Keys said, "Humph!"

again and went off down the bar to wait on a new customer who had just come in and was sitting two stools away from me. He hadn't so much as touched the note, and I wondered if that meant anything. I decided it didn't, peeled Dad Hogins' letter off the damp spot on the bar, and put it back in my pocket.

The new customer was a man in a blue shirt and faded tan wash pants. He wore a straw hat and I didn't notice much about his looks except that his backside must have been even broader than mine. He hunched across the bar and spoke to Mr. Keys.

"Say, Red, have you heard? They just found Walt Hogins."

My heart took a couple of extra licks and the barroom started turning slowly and off-center.

"Found him?" Mr. Keys asked. He came over in front of me to reach down for a cold bottle of beer. "Didn't know he was lost. Under what table?"

My face got hot.

The man in the tan pants said: "Hell, he was in his own shop, shot through the side of his head. They say it looked like the same damn caliber of a bullet that killed Jonathan Quade."

I looked hard at Red Keys, but it didn't do me any good. His face hadn't altered in the least. He was wiping off the bottle of beer with his rag, taking his time.

He said: "I'll be damned! Walt Hogins was always a pretty white guy, I thought. They got any idea who did it?"

The man in the tan pants shook his head. "Naw. Them damn cops give me a pain in the—" He looked over his shoulder to see if there were ladies present and didn't say where his pain was. He took a folded newspaper, the Hattersfield *Chronicle* from his hip pocket, put it down on the bar to his right and about two feet from me. Red Keys put the beer and a glass down in front of the man, walked down the bar to disappear through a door at the back.

It's a funny thing that sometimes when your mind is full of a lot of little things you're trying to connect, your eye will light on something that drives everything else out of your brain. It was like that with me and the item on the right side of the editorial page of the Hattersfield *Chronicle*. It was headed: **LIGHTNING STRIKES**, in big black type, and my eyes read down the column of smaller type beneath:

Everybody talks about the weather but how many do anything about it? Excuse us if we mention that severe electrical storm the night of June 12, but it was a humdinger. Lightning struck the garage on the estate of one of Hatters County's leading citizens, and the

building burned to the foundation. Well, they used to say lightning was the sword of God, but that's considered old-fashioned.

Right underneath, set off as though it didn't have anything to do with the above, was another little item headed: **OUR SOCIETY EDITOR MISSED THIS ONE**. It read:

Mr. Godfrey Peele left the evening of June 12 on an extended fishing trip in Canada. Mr. Peele motored.

Anybody in Hattersfield could have figured a connection between the two items. Godfrey Peele was auditor of Quade Piston Ring, but you'd have thought he was at least the governor of Indiana the way he talked and acted. He lived by himself in a six-room brick house on a secluded acre of land west of town, and he always referred to it as "my estate." It was a standard joke in Hattersfield. If you had a victory garden on a vacant lot you'd call it your estate, and practically everybody got the point.

But what the *Chronicle* editor was trying to imply was that Godfrey Peele must have used hoarded or black-market gasoline to take this motor trip to Canada while everybody else panted through the summer, and that maybe that was why the lightning had struck his garage.

I was staring at the paper when a white apron loomed in front of me. I looked up into the face of the fat, bald bartender who was standing there polishing a glass on a towel. He jerked his head toward the back of the room.

"Red wants to see you, Fats."

I got off the stool. Godfrey Peele and his garage fire were knocked completely out of my head. My heart was doing double-time, and every beat seemed centered directly behind my eyeballs. I was aware of a white apron following me, but on the other side of the bar, and at the back of the room the barkeep came around to push open a door for me. I walked down a hall toward the open door of a lighted room.

THAT room—it was plenty cosmo, what I mean! White fur rugs on the floor, red leather chairs, a big blond maple desk. I half expected to see Humphrey Bogart standing there in a dress suit, cleaning a forty-five automatic with a silk handkerchief. But instead, there was Mr. Red Keys, his white shirt open at the neck, his sleeves rolled up to show a big red rose tattooed on his right arm, and beer spots on his creamy flannel pants. He was sitting in one of the low, red-leather chairs beside the desk. His hollow eyes started crawling over my face. I swayed, stumbled to the desk and clung to the edge.

"What's your name, Fats?" he wanted to know.

"Oswald," I got out. "Oswald Finch."

Red's mouth quirked at the corners. He had the thinnest lips I've ever seen. "O.K., Oswald. I remember you, now. You used to come out to the creek fishing with Walt Hogins. I thought you were his kid."

I explains that Dad Hogins was my foster-father and Red Keys nodded. He asked: "Did you know Walt had been murdered when you came here tonight?"

I nodded. "I came right from his shop out here. Because of the note. That was lying right on his desk."

"You didn't call the police?"

"Nuh-uh."

He stared at me until everything blacked out but his eyes. I could hear him saying: "That's cooking up a mess of trouble for yourself, Oswald. Suppose somebody saw you leaving the shop?"

It had never struck me before that anybody might think I had killed Dad Hogins. It struck me now, hard. I knew it was sit down or fall down. I let go of the desk, turned, started for a chair. The floor tipped up in front of me at about a forty-five degree angle, and I would have fallen on my face if Mr. Keys hadn't bounced out of his chair and caught me.

"Ozzie," he said. "Ozzie, what the hell's the matter with you? You didn't kill him, did you?"

I jerked away from him and collapsed in the chair. I looked squarely at him and shook my thumping head. "Nothing's the matter with me except that I cracked my head on something," I said.

He grunted, came over, fingered the nob on the back of my head. His thin lips grinned. "You got something there, son! How about a couple of aspirin tablets?"

"I said: 'That would be fine.'"

He went to the desk for the tablets. I studied his face and it was just like solid geometry to me. He said: "Walt Hogins and I were pals. Went to school together, Ozzie. You know that?"

I hadn't known that. I watched Red Keys pour water out of a fancy thermos bottle on his desk. He brought me the two tablets and some water.

"I've got a room here you can stay in overnight," he suggested, as I took the tablets and washed them down. "Maybe you'd better do that. Just until I can see how the land lies in town. Those Hattersfield cops get a lot of screwy notions, and they're all hopped up over the killing of Jonathan Quade."

"That's fine," I said. I certainly didn't want to go back home. Then I remembered the note in my pocket. "Mr. Keys, that letter

I showed you— Do you really know who took Mr. Quade's four thousand dollars five year ago? Was it Dad Hogins?"

He shook his head, but his lips thinned out tightly as though that was all I was going to get out of him. He took hold of my left arm, helped me get to my feet. Then we went out into the narrow hall together and on back to a stairway that doubled back on itself going up. I thought that somewhere in the rear of the building there was a bigger crowd than out in the bar. There was that steady bumble of voices that goes with a crowd, and there was a mechanical sound, too—a clicking, as though a ratchet was being turned slower and slower until it finally stopped. Then the bumble of voices grew louder. I didn't think it was just the thing to do to ask Mr. Red Keys what went on in the rear of his big house, so I kept my mouth shut.

Upstairs, he showed me down the hall to a small room under a gable at the back. There was a good-sized window, curtained on the outside with willow branches. It contained an iron bedstead, a rocking chair and a bureau.

"It's pretty hot," Red Keys said.

I said that was all right and sat down on the edge of the bed.

He pointed to the chair. "You can hang your clothes on that, if you want to. Maybe you'd better do that, Ozzie. Stretch out and get some sleep. Maybe you'll get rid of that headache."

I thanked him for everything. Just before he snapped off the light switch and left the room, he gave me an over-the-shoulder glance which I didn't exactly like. But then I told myself that if he was solid with Dad Hogins, he was solid with me.

As soon as I was alone, I stretched out on the bed. The revolver that was stuck in the top of my pants bothered me, so I pulled it out and put it under the pillow. I was dead tired and the aspirin was making me sleepy. A cool breeze had sprung up so that the branches of the willow whispered lazily on the roof and on the screen of the window. I rolled over on my belly. I don't know why I sleep that way, but I do.

Just as I was dozing off, I noticed that I had a sharp pain in my chest, as though maybe I had a broken rib or something. I was startled awake, and I rolled over, sat up. My hand went up to my shirt front, pawed around where the pain was. I discovered a fountain pen clipped into the pocket of my shirt—Dad Hogins' fountain pen, I realized. I must have stuck it absent-mindedly in my pocket after deciding not to address that letter on his desk to the police. I pulled the pen out, reached to put it on the window sill. Just to show how tired I was, I missed the sill by several inches, the pen dropped to the floor, and I must have

been asleep almost before I flattened out on the bed again.

I dreamed that Myrna insisted I was dead, just to get me out of the house, and that Peter Newsome had taken me to his undertaking parlors. I was trying to get up off his canvas-topped table and he was saying: "Lie still, Oswald, or you can't expect me to make you look very natural." His hands were moving over my back, prodding me gently here and there.

And then suddenly I wasn't dreaming any more. Hands *were* moving carefully up and down my back, prodding me gently. Somebody's breath struck chill against the sweating back of my neck.

CHAPTER FOUR

More Poison Than Ink

I LAY perfectly still like I had read you are supposed to do if you find a cobra coiled up in bed with you. My heart must have been shaking the bed, but there wasn't anything I could do about that. My right hand was under the pillow, my fingers just touching the metal of the gun, but I couldn't get a good hold on the revolver without giving out that I was awake.

The searching fingers fished into the hip pockets of my pants, came out, moved on up my spine. If they touched my neck, I was going to move—but about that. The hand crossed to my left side, went down to the mattress, wedged beneath me as though trying to turn me over. I decided I'd be accommodating and get it over with. I had to do something before I lost my nerve and let out a yell they'd hear clear over in the next county. I got my hooks on the gun under my pillow, yanked it as I flopped over on my back.

A knee gouged down into my chest. The breath *wooshed* out of me and didn't come back because a big hand closed tight on my throat. I hacked aimlessly at the hulking shadow above me, struck something, drew a smothered oath. The hand that wasn't busy choking me to death ripped a piece out of the front of my shirt. I kept hacking with the gun, and about the third try I must have hit the bull's-eye, because the man came all the way down on top of me and rolled over beside me on the bed.

I lay there gasping, thinking how lucky I was to be able to breathe again. Pretty soon I sat up and looked down at the still figure beside me. The dim glow through the window wasn't enough so that I could see the man's features, but then I didn't have to. One arm was flung out directly in the path of the bright moonlight that flickered through the willow branches, and I could see the

tattooed rose on the arm of Mr. Red Keys.

Mr. Keys—my pal, Dad Hogins' pal, everybody's pal. I stood up, still breathing hard, patted myself all over to make sure I was all there. My wallet was safe in my back hip pocket. I had my key-case. Nothing was missing but the patch of my shirt pocket and that had been completely torn off. And then I remembered how those hollow eyes of Red Keys had crawled over my face and down to my shirt, and in a second I knew why he had so thoughtfully invited me to take off my clothes and hang them on the chair. He was after Dad Hogins' fountain pen that had been clipped to my shirt pocket. It was one of those thick jade-green pens and Dad Hogins had used it ever since I could remember.

I got around to the other side of the bed, went down on my knees, started patting the floor with my hands, trying to find the pen. On the bed, Mr. Red Keys was stirring slightly. I hunted feverishly, finally remembered that I was no cat. I stumbled back across the room, found the light switch, turned it on. The pen stood out, bright and shiny, against the dark oiled floor in front of the radiator under the window. I pounced on it, and this time I clipped it to the waistband inside my pants so that my shirttail hid it.

I took a final look at my pal, Mr. Red Keys. He was sprawled out on his back, his mouth open. A blow I'd landed with the gun had made a little red gash over one sandy eyebrow, but he was breathing heavily and groaning.

I gripped the revolver in my right hand, left the light on, and went out of the room, down to the hall to the stairway. At the foot of the steps, I noticed there were several doors in the hall. Mr. Keys' office door was open, but the others were closed and a mystery to me. I grabbed the knob of the one which I thought led out into the barroom. I thought it was stuck, tried twisting the knob in the other direction, gave it a yank and then kicked the bottom of the panel. The door gave suddenly because somebody had opened it from the other side. The somebody was short and thick, with a heavy, dark face and thick-lidded eyes. He started to say something, saw the gun in my hand.

"Geez!" he said, and stepped back fast. I just got a glimpse of the room beyond him. It had a low ceiling of cigarette smoke and there were a lot of people gathered around some sort of a table with a long fluorescent light tube suspended overhead. That clicking sound that I had heard when Red Keys and I had gone up the steps came from that table. Right away I knew what Red Keys did with all his extra space. The Red Keys Tavern was a gambling joint with roulette and every-

thing except Humphrey Bogart. And until Humphrey came along, this short, dark person in the door looked hard enough for me.

I turned all the way around, hit the door on the opposite side of the hall. This one gave into the front room, and I'll give three guesses as to what fat guy with a headache left what taproom in nothing flat.

On the way back to town, I was trying to make big pieces out of little ones, and not having too much luck. I couldn't fit old Jonathan Quade in with the gambling at the Red Keys Tavern. No doubt the high-salaried young executives from Quade Piston Ring played there a lot, but they wouldn't have cared to have old Jonathan know about it. Dad Hogins didn't fit in with the gambling joint, either. I could picture Edward P. Lawler standing at the roulette table with one hand in his pocket, a smile on his bronze face as he carelessly tossed chips onto the board, but, for Pete's sake, he was the mayor who had got himself in office with backing from straight-laced Jonathan Quade! Then there was Myrna. I could see her slinking around in a long dress with no back, looking cosmo in Red Keys' casino, but where would she get the dough it took to play?

I decided I was thinking too much. I'd better stick to facts, which were: Dad Hogins' fountain pen had something to do with his murder. That Dad Hogins had been trying to get information to Red Keys whom he had apparently trusted. That Red Keys wanted that information but didn't intend to let anybody know what it was.

Mr. Keys had seen through that note of Dad Hogins' as soon as he had looked at it, but he had been playing cagy. And the whole business revolved around that four thousand dollars which had been missing from Jonathan Quade's safe for the last five years.

IT MUST have been close to midnight when I drove by Dad Hogins' house. The place was lighted up like Christmas and there were two cars out in front—Peter Newsome's solemn black sedan and Edward P. Lawler's gray convertible. I cruised to the end of the block, turned onto the side street, and drove up the alley to the garage. I wasn't too steady as I walked to the side door of the house, and consequently the screen door slipped from my fingers and banged loudly as I went in. The murmur of voices in the house stopped suddenly, as though maybe they were all talking about me. I crossed the kitchen hopefully on tiptoe, heading for my room, but Myrna came through the swinging door of the dining room.

She had on a pale pink housecoat that fitted tightly from the waist up and fell in frosty folds to the floor. She looked cool as strawberry ice cream, except that her big

gray eyes were wide and a little wild. She had a black steel cash box under one arm. I'd seen the box before. Dad Hogins had pointed it out to me where it had rested on the top shelf of his bedroom closet. He'd pointed to it and said: "If anything ever happens to the old man, Ozzie—nothing's going to, of course—but if anything ever does, what's in this box will take care of things."

I looked from the box to Myrna's cold, lovely face. I said: "You never let any grass grow under your feet, do you?"

"Oswald, where have you been?" Her voice was an angry whisper.

"Out," I told her. "I want to talk to you. I want to know if you mailed that picture to the police. I know you addressed an envelope, but did you mail the picture?"

"Of course. It's in the mail right now. But the whole town knows about it. I've told the police, and Father, and Mr. Lawler—"

"I can bet on that," I cut in. "What happened to the envelope the picture came in?"

Her gray eyes wandered, searching over my face. "Why, it's in the wastebasket, I suppose."

I shook my head. "How did you happen to open it in the first place?" Funny, I thought, that I hadn't asked that question before.

She colored to match her rouge. "A perfectly natural mistake. I thought it was addressed to Mrs. Walter Hogins."

"Phooey! If it was a perfectly natural mistake, it wasn't because you thought the Mr. was a Mrs. It was because you recognized the handwriting and had been getting letters written in that same handwriting."

Myrna paled so suddenly I honestly thought she was going to faint. I thought, *Go ahead and fall on your face, I won't stop you.* But she got hold of herself, stood straight and queenly.

"How dare you!" Her words slapped my face. "Why, you—you fat little—little—"

"Slob," I concluded for her. I was almost as cool as she was. I nodded at the steel box under her arm. "How's it feel to be a rich widow?"

Her scarlet lips opened and she laughed, the kind of a laugh that can be written, "Ha-ha!" She raised the box in both hands and flung it at me. She was short about a yard. The box struck the corner of the kitchen table, bounced, broke open at my feet.

"Go on, look at it," she urged. "Feast your eyes on the accumulated wealth of a lifetime!"

I got down on my knees on the linoleum, and as I did so I asked of Myrna: "Is this the box that you searched the house for after you knocked me out?"

Her eyes narrowed. "Searched the house?"

You're crazy! Search my own house? So you're trying to blame that on me, are you, when you know perfectly well you went through every drawer in the place! You've got a lot of explaining to do, Oswald Finch, and you can start right in explaining to Mr. Lawler."

Maybe she had a point there. Why would she go through all the drawers in the house? But if she hadn't, who had? Hattersfield has had its share of sneak-thieves, but they didn't usually operate in broad daylight.

I looked down at the stuff that had spilled from the metal box. Papers, mostly—old bills with little pieces of white scratch paper clipped to each one. I picked up last year's coal bill, thumbed over the sheets of scratch pad attached to it. Each sheet from the pad had a notation in Dad Hogins' careful writing, such as:

George Perkins owes me twelve dollars for taking pictures of his two children 2/9/43

So that was how Dad Hogins had taken care of things in case something happened to him. For every bill he owed there were bills that were owed to him to cancel it. Maybe it seems pretty funny to you, but I could see how Dad Hogins would figure things just that way. Old Take-It-Easy Hogins who didn't ask for anything but to live and let live—he'd do things just that way.

I TURNED over some more bills, taking my time, because I knew I was irritating Myrna. In the entire mess was one life insurance policy for two thousand dollars. It named me as beneficiary, and clipped to it was another white sheet from Dad Hogins' scratch pad. On it was written:

Ozzie, maybe this will help you get a start toward the desk you ought to have to go with that classy paperweight you made from half of a piston.

My eyes got hot all of a sudden, because this reminded me of a lot of other thoughtful things Dad Hogins had done for me. It reminded me, too, of a lot of thoughtful things I might have done for him and didn't. I looked at Myrna and she was just a pink blur. I stood up. My hands clenched. About all I could do for Dad Hogins now was find out who had killed him. I turned toward my room, but Myrna swooped across the kitchen and caught me by the wrist.

"You're going right into the living room and talk to Mr. Lawler," she said. "You've got a lot of explaining to do, Oswald Finch."

I batted her hand down, turned toward the dining room door. I said: "O. K.,

Myrna," and walked ahead of her through the dining room and into the living room.

When I entered, Peter Newsome was saying: "I do hope it *does* turn out to be suicide, Mr. Mayor, because that will settle everything right away."

Newsome was sitting on the sofa, twisting the brim of his straw hat. Mr. Lawler was pacing the floor like the skipper of a tramp steamer caught in a heavy squawl. He even had a short black briar pipe clenched in his white teeth.

"Hi, fella," Mr. Lawler said to me. "Where've you been?" There were grin-crinkles in the corners of his dark eyes.

Mr. Newsome got up, came toward me with his hand outstretched. His eyes blinked rapidly, and I guess mine were blinking some, too.

"Oswald, I know that nothing I can say will lighten the burden of your grief, but I do feel the loss of your foster-father as everyone in the community must feel it."

I don't know what got into me, but I snapped right back at Mr. Newsome with: "Well, you can't say Dad Hogins was active in civic affairs anyway!"

Mr. Newsome stepped back as though I'd punched his button nose for him, and I followed right through with: "That's so much canal water, and you know it! Nobody'll feel the loss of Dad Hogins except me. As for you, if nobody died around Hattersfield, you'd starve to death!"

"Oswald!" That was Myrna's voice, coming from behind me. "Apologize to Mr. Newsome at once!"

I looked over my shoulder, and she was still just a blur of pink. "Nuts to you, Myrna. If you'll give with the name of the party who mailed that incriminating photograph of Dad Hogins and Jonathan Quade's corpse, it'll clear up a lot of mystery. You must have recognized the handwriting on the envelope. Some guy who has been writing to you secretly, I guess. It's either that or you'll have to admit you made a habit of opening other people's mail. And besides—"

That was as far as I got. Mr. Lawler was on me in a couple of strides. He caught me by the shoulder, shook me a little—about as much as he could shake a guy of my build.

"Now listen, fella—" he began, and what that pipe and the wide space between his front teeth did to the s in "listen" was something you could call a dog with. "Now, listen, I don't want to get hard-nosed about this, but I've a couple of questions to ask you. Did you go to Walt Hogins' studio this evening before the body was officially discovered?"

"No," I lied to him. His black eyes hooked into my face and he shook me again.

"Because," he said, "that photograph will

prove Walt Hogins murdered Jonathan Quade. And the police have already concluded that the same bullet that killed Quade also entered your foster-father's head. And there were powder burns on Hogins' temple around the wound, which means the shot was at close range, possibly with the gun in Hogins' own right hand. You *did* enter the studio, didn't you, Oswald? And you did find Walt Hogins a suicide. And you framed it to look like murder because of that life insurance policy—"

I broke in with: "What are you talking about? What insurance policy?"

His shrug called me a liar. "The one that named you beneficiary. It was in the steel box. Didn't Myrna show it to you? Walt Hogins just took that policy out four months ago, and if it could be proved he killed himself, you wouldn't collect on it because the suicide clause remains in effect for six months to two years, depending on how liberal the issuing company is."

I shrugged right back at him. "I didn't know there was an insurance policy until about five minutes ago."

He said: "O.K., Oswald. I'm just the mayor—not the police force. You'd have made it easier for yourself, talking to me, though." He picked up his Panama hat from an end table, smiled at Myrna. Peter Newsome sidled over toward the door. Myrna showed the two men out, and there were sympathetic murmurings at the threshold. I thought I could do without all that, and I stepped into the dining room, went back through the kitchen and into my bedroom. I locked the door, removed Dad Hogins' fountain pen from where it was clipped to the waistband of my trousers.

I DIDN'T have to reread that letter which Dad Hogins had written to Red Keys and which somebody had thought would pass for a suicide note. I remembered that it had mentioned that the note wasn't a poison-pen letter though the pen contained more poison than ink. And it hadn't contained any ink. Which meant, of course, that the pen contained something else—something that was poison to somebody.

I took the cap off the pen. There was a pair of pliers in one of the drawers of the bureau, and I used them to get a tight grip on the black rubber part that held the penpoint into the jade-green plastic barrel. I twisted and the black rubber finger-hold came out of the barrel. There was a piece of silk thread tied to the ink feed inside, and when you pulled on this that pulled a tightly rolled piece of photographic film from the portion of the pen barrel that usually contains the rubber sack.

The film, a fully developed negative, didn't mean a thing to me at first. For a long time I held it so that the light penetrated it and tried to make something out of it. It was a picture of the front of somebody's garage—a double garage with a cupola in the center of the peaked roof. There was a lot of shubbery, a straggling old pine tree in the back-ground. The garage was of frame that showed light gray in the negative. In front of the garage door stood a man, his back toward the camera. His head was turned just a bit to the left, and maybe in a print you could see something of his features, but not in the negative. He was apparently in the act of opening the garage door. On the ground beside him was one of those five-gallon gasoline cans with a pouring spout. The man wore a long coat—a rain slicker, I thought, which made me look twice at the pine tree and the shubbery. Tree and shrubs were bent far over as though by a high wind. I started to think about the last big storm we'd had. That was the night of June twelfth—

My mind streaked back to that item I had seen in the paper spread out on the bar in the Red Keys Tavern. On the night of June twelfth, lightning had struck and fired the garage of Mr. Godfrey Peele, auditor of Quade Piston Ring! Lightning—or was it this guy in the picture that Dad Hogins had snapped?

I rolled up the negative, jammed it back into the pen. I was putting little pieces together again, and this time I was coming out with the whole thing. Dad Hogins and Red Keys both knew who had stolen that four thousand dollars from Jonathan Quade's safe five years ago. Maybe they hadn't had any proof. Dad Hogins had simply been trying to find something which he could pin on the crook and make him confess to the theft of the money. This photograph was the evidence which Dad Hogins had supposed could force the crook to do just that, and in case of Dad's death, Dad had wanted Red Keys to take the same evidence and act on it. But maybe Red had figured he could do a little blackmail business if he could get the evidence away from me.

I could go quite a bit farther than that. I could see how Dad Hogins had approached the crook with this evidence and tried to get the man to confess. Then what had the crook done? He had invited Dad to the Shefford Hotel, the night of the fourteenth, maybe to talk things over. He'd got Dad drunk. Then he had got Jonathan Quade into that private dining room on the second floor and murdered Jonathan. He had taken Dad Hogins to the room with the corpse, pressed the murder weapon into his hand, and snapped a flash picture. He then had evidence of his

own—framed evidence—to check any that Dad Hogins had dug up against him.

The killer had mailed a print of that picture to Dad Hogins the following day, just to show Dad that he had the whip-hand. Myrna had opened the envelope and had sent the print to the cops. And that wasn't the way the killer had intended things should pan out. Maybe he had come to our house, had seen the police station address on the blotter, and had put two and two together just as I had. He didn't want the police to arrest Dad Hogins, because that meant the evidence which Dad had against the killer would be brought into the open. So he had gone to Dad Hogins' studio, killed Dad. Failing to find the negative which Dad had concealed in his fountain pen, the killer had come to the house. He had come while Myrna was out and while I was lying unconscious on the floor, and he had given the place a thorough tossing, still without finding what he wanted.

But just exactly what was there about the picture which Dad had taken that had scared the killer into taking a chance on still another murder? Maybe it proved the killer had fired Mr. Godfrey Peele's garage on the night of June twelfth. So what? So Dad Hogins could say the killer was a fire-bug? I didn't know, unless—

I was thinking so fast I couldn't keep up with myself. But suppose the picture Dad Hogins had taken of the man standing in front of Peele's garage meant a lot more than appeared on the surface. Suppose it meant that the killer had also murdered Godfrey Peele, concealed the remains in the garage, and set the whole thing on fire? That, I de-

cided, was the way it had to be, the only way things would stack up to make sense.

I clipped Dad's pen back to my trousers' waistband and left the room. I don't know where Myrna was at the time, but I didn't have any reason to stick around and bid her a fond good-by. I went out the side door, back to the alley, and got into my jalopy. The only missing link in the murder chain was the charred body of Godfrey Peele, whom everybody supposed was having himself a time in Canada.

CHAPTER FIVE

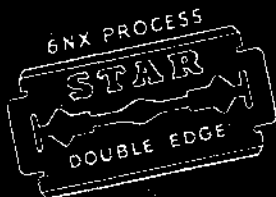
Dig Down Deep

THIS Godfrey Peele really thought he owned an estate, and one of the things that convinced him of it was the elaborate gate across the crushed-stone drive. I parked my car in the dusty weeds at the roadside, got out, walked back to the gate, which was unlocked. The house came at you all of a sudden just beyond a group of Scotch pine planted at a curve in the drive. It looked big, black and sort of menacing, scowling down at me from the top of a little knoll.

I moved around the house and saw plainly, against the dim sky-glow, the straggling pine that showed up in Dad Hogins' negative. But the garage was nothing but a heap of blackened rubble. It struck me then that I'd have a fine time trying to locate a charred corpse in a mess of charred timbers without a flashlight, but, as it turned out, I didn't have any worry on that score because somebody was there ahead of me—somebody who

**DOES THE
MOON AFFECT
YOU, TOO?**

**NO, I GET MY
EFFECT WITH
STARS -
STAR BLADES!**



4 for 10¢



had had the foresight to bring a light.

I saw the beam finger through a skeleton of burned timbers, drop down and disappear. I stood there, waiting for it to show again, but it didn't. I pulled out the revolver I'd been lugging ever since I had taken it from Dad Hogins' dead hand, started toward where I had last seen the light. I tried to work my way around the remains of the burned building so as not to make any sound that would give me away. I saw the light again, or rather rays of it shooting up from behind a section of roof that slanted at a crazy angle. I headed for it.

I got behind that section of roof without making a sound that I was aware of. It was a piece maybe six feet square that the storm had blown from the blazing building before it had burned through. On the other side of it, where the light was, I heard a sound that might easily have been a quiet footfall. I took a couple of quick steps to the right and around the end of the piece, the gun gripped in my right hand.

"Put 'em uh—" I began before I realized that I'd been taken in by the oldest trick in the book. There wasn't anything behind that section of roof except the flashlight, and I stood full in the beam of it while somebody in the shadows on my right slammed me across the right wrist with a length of timber. I lost the gun and for a second I thought I'd lost my right hand along with it. The man on the other end of the timber rammed me in the tummy. I sat down hard on the earth, stared like a prize dope while Edward P. Lawler picked up the chips.

The chips he picked up were the flashlight and the gun. He turned both on me, his dark eyes grave, as though he was going to deliver a lecture on juvenile delinquency.

"Oswald!" he chided. "What are you doing here?"

"I thought—" I gulped. That was just my trouble—I'd thought too much. I'd thought myself right into an early grave. Because Mr. Lawler was the man who showed up in that picture Dad Hogins had taken. True, it was mostly a backside view, but the raincoat hadn't hidden his big square shoulders entirely, and I didn't know but what, when that negative was blown up and printed, the left side of his face would show enough for positive identification.

So I'd thought too much. But since there wasn't any way to back out now, I kept right on talking.

"Why," I said, "I thought maybe you'd come out here and move Godfrey Peele's remains. Because of that item in the *Chronicle* tonight. You don't know but what the gas rationing authorities might come snooping around to see if the fire was caused by

hoarded gasoline. As long as that picture Dad Hogins took of you just as you were about to fire the garage is still in existence, you wouldn't want the charred remains of Godfrey Peele to turn up."

Mr. Lawler cocked his handsome head on one side, frowning a little, giving everything I had said a lot of consideration.

He said: "Damn it, Oswald, have you seen that picture?"

Seen it? I had it on me! More than that, it was the only thing that could keep me alive. I nodded my head.

"That," he said quietly, "is unfortunate, Oswald."

I said: "If you ask me, it's lucky for you. Because if Red Keys had got hold of it, he'd have blackmailed you out of your eye-teeth."

"Stand up, Oswald," he ordered.

What could I do? I said, as I stood: "You don't think I'm dope enough to travel around with that negative on me, do you?"

He didn't say anything, but dropped the lighted torch to the ground, stuck the gun in my middle, and started patting my pockets. His fingers passed right over the fountain pen, and I could have chuckled except for the gun pressing into me. Then his searching fingers went up to my shirt pocket which had been torn clear off by Mr. Red Keys. His hands stayed there, just a fraction of a second, and right away I discovered I didn't have any monopoly on thinking. Because his next move was to snatch Dad Hogins' pen from the waistband of my pants.

He said: "Well!" and sounded pleased with himself. "I ought to have thought of that before."

"Don't be a dope, Mr. Mayor," I said, bluffing. "I took the negative out of the pen about an hour ago."

He recovered the flashlight and turned it on me. He uttered a short laugh. "I don't think so. You're shaking in your boots." He motioned with the light a little way toward the left, spotted a long, shapeless sack of bur-lap. And I remembered the time I had admired Edward P. Lawler's flashing smile!

"Oswald, you can be pall-bearer. Godfrey Peele probably counted on having at least six vice-presidents at his funeral, but he'll have to be content with a foundry laborer."

I STUMBLED over to the sack, with Edward P. Lawler and his gun right behind me. I said: "You don't think you can get away with this, do you?"

"Why not?" he asked, mockingly. "Pick up the sack, Oswald. Over under that pine tree will make a nice place because it's mossy. You can transplant moss over a new grave and it heels over in a hurry."

I hoisted the sack to my back. It wasn't

as heavy as some of the molds I had to lift at Quade Piston Ring, but I grunted some.

"Because of Mr. Red Keys," I said. "That's why not. He's not dead yet, and what I've seen of him, he won't be a push-over like Jonathan Quade, Godfrey Peele, and Dad Hogins. He knows about the four thousand dollars you swiped from Mr. Quade's safe five years ago." I was thinking again, and I was going to keep right on thinking until Mr. Lawler put a bullet in my brain.

"He does?" Lawler sounded bored.

I started walking toward the tree with what was left of Godfrey Peele a dead weight on my back.

"He does," I said. "I figure it was like this. You lost more money than you could afford at that game room in the back of the Red Keys Tavern. You were scared that Red and some of his men would make you pay through the nose. So you swiped the money from Quade's safe to pay to Red Keys. When Dad Hogins and Red got to comparing notes, they found out that you made the payment right after the money was missed from the safe. There wasn't any proof, of course, and Dad Hogins was suspected of stealing the money. But Dad was laying for you, waiting to get something—"

Mr. Lawler wasn't paying any attention to me. He said: "Right here, Oswald. I've got the spot picked out. See that shovel sticking in the moss?"

I saw the shovel standing there about six feet from the trunk of this old pine tree.

"I want you to dig the grave for me," Mr. Lawler said pleasantly. "Dig it quite deep, you understand? And, of course, I'll fill it in."

I let the sack down carefully to the ground, looked over at Mr. Lawler. He was standing with his feet widely spaced, the gun in his hand. He was grinning something like Basil Rathbone might grin in the movies if he ever won a duel with the hero.

He said: "Get the shovel. And don't—please, don't, Oswald—don't make me shoot you until the grave is dug."

I walked over toward the shovel. My legs felt like stumps of wood. I had an ache in my throat. This was it—you know, it, I put my hand on the shovel handle, pulled the blade loose from the ground.

"Look," I said, and I wouldn't be surprised if my voice broke. "I'm damned if I'll do it!"

I gripped the shovel as though I was going to vault with it and ran straight at him. If I had tried swinging with the shovel, he'd have got me sure, but there was something about the cold steel coming right at his head that unnerved him. He shot at my head, and if anybody asks what chewed that piece out

of my left ear, it was Edward P. Lawler's bullet. He tried to duck the shovel, but didn't try soon enough. It took him somewhere in the face. We went down together with Lawler screaming. He'd dropped his flashlight, of course, and we went over and over in the dark. His gun let go a couple of times, but he might have been aiming at the branches in the top of the pine.

It was about that time that I realized this was no private squabble. Three men came running in from the road and around the Peele house. They turned out to be one Hattersfield cop, a reporter from the *Chronicle*, and an OPA investigator. What they were after was some evidence that Peele had hoarded gasoline in his garage, but what they got was a three-time killer.

I still wouldn't mind looking like Edward P. Lawler when I get to be middle-aged. That is, like Edward P. Lawler looked before I tried to feed him the large end of a shovel.

Why had Mr. Lawler killed Godfrey Peele and Jonathan Quade? Well, if your guess is as good as mine, you hit it right on the nail. He'd been gambling a lot. This time it was horses, which had turned out more expensive than roulette at Red Keys Tavern. He had found he could make up his losings by withholding the premiums which the Quade employees paid him on their life insurance. He'd got in deeper and deeper, had tried to cover up on his books. But the auditor, Godfrey Peele, had found him out, had gone to him the day before he (Peele) had intended starting on his vacation. Lawler thought maybe he could make good if he had more time. So that night he'd killed Peele at Peele's house, using the well-known blunt instrument. That was the night of the big storm, so what could be sweeter than just to hide the body in the garage and fire it?

It was the next day that Jonathan Quade thought he'd play auditor for a while. Like I said, he really had his fingers in the business at Quade Piston Ring, and he could pull a pattern in the foundry, direct a meeting of vice-presidents, or even balance books. So Lawler had to have still more time, which meant killing Quade.

All that came out at the trial. The gun which I had taken from Dad Hogins' hand and which, later, Lawler had used on me, was the gun that had killed both Quade and Dad Hogins. Just about all of my private deductions seemed to hold water, and I was pretty well pleased with everything except the fact that Myrna's name scarcely entered the thing at all. You can't tell me there wasn't something fishy between her and Edward P. Lawler. They were birds of a feather, what I mean. You know—smooth. Cosmo.