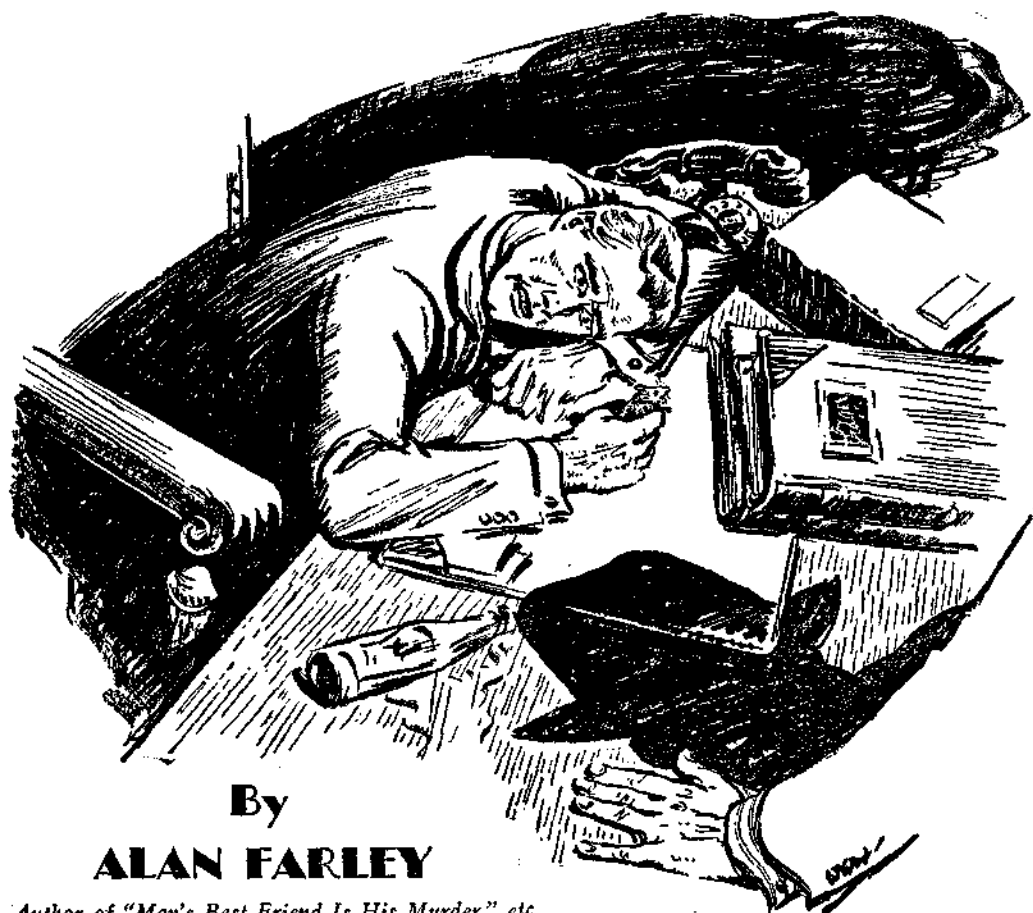


A MOUSE IN THE HAND



By
ALAN FARLEY

Author of "Man's Best Friend Is His Murder," etc.

Dusty was slumped over the desk,
a mouse clutched in his limp hand.

Dusty Ross's fear of mice was psychopathic, but no one knew to what extent, until his dead body was discovered with one lifeless hand clutching a small, gray, and equally lifeless mouse. "Heart failure due to fright," was the sheriff's report—yet Dusty had been pronounced physically perfect by the Navy only the day before.

CHAPTER ONE

Of Mice and Men

I WAS standing at the window watching the rain relieve the manpower shortage in window washers when the black Cadillac coupe with new-looking white sidewalls looped into the curb three stories down and stopped with its right front fender almost touching the sign. The sign said: **POSITIVELY NO PARKING BETWEEN THE HOURS OF 5 P.M. AND 7 P.M. BY ORDER POLICE DEPARTMENT.**

I looked at my watch. It was three minutes of six.

The door on the riders' side swung open and a girl got out. She slammed the door, hesi-

tated, turned and bent a little to say something through the half-open window. All I could see of her was a blue transparent slicker and dark hair, cut short and curled shorter.

The phone on the desk behind me rang loudly through the whisper of the rain. I stopped wondering who rated new white sidewall tires, threw my cigarette out the window and answered the phone.

The soft, husky voice of Dusty Ross said: "Mike? Dusty. Doing anything in 'bout a half hour?"

I said: "Nothing I couldn't do just as well some other time. How'd it go?"

"I'm in. Got twenty-one days to wind up my affairs and then its the bounding main and foreign ports for me."

I said, "Swell," and meant it, listening to the satisfaction in his voice.

"Mike, I want you to do a little job for me tonight. How about picking you up down in front of your office around six-thirty?"

I said, "O.K.," he said, "Be seein' you," and we both hung up.

AN imperious hand rapped on the outside door. Before I could do anything about it, the door opened and the girl I'd watched get out of the Cadillac came in. She shut the door behind her carelessly, turned and saw me standing beside the desk. She came into the office with purposeful, hurried steps.

She asked: "You're Mike Trye?"

"I am. I'm sorry but the offices are closed for the day. If you'll come back tomorrow—"

She said abruptly: "I'm Kit Stearns."

My eyebrows twitched involuntarily. No smart man handled the Stearns' name without asbestos gloves. It appeared on a half dozen letterheads along with four or five other names but it was the only one that counted.

When the name had had time to sink in, she added: "I wish to hire your services."

I smiled and leaned against the desk.

"As employer or employee, Miss Stearns?"

She frowned quickly.

"I'm afraid I don't undersand."

"I run an odd jobs agency. If you want to hire a cook, my job counsellors can arrange it. If you want a job as cook, they can place you. But, if you've gone away from home and left the fire burning under the beans, I'll handle that myself. 'No job too odd for Trye to fill'—that's my motto."

"Nonsense." She tossed her head angrily. "You are a private detective, a very good one. That's what Tony said."

She stopped and clamped her teeth on her lower lip as though the wrong thing had got past them.

I shook my head mockingly. "Those nasty rumors. I don't know how they start."

She jammed her hands into the pockets of

her slicker. She wore a businesslike suit and a soft shirt under the slicker. Her blue eyes were too big for her thin face, a face that was plain without much makeup or glamor, but with a great deal of what looked like intelligence.

She said: "This is important and immediate. Do sit down, Mr. Trye. I prefer to stand."

This time my mouth twitched. I sat down, put my elbows on the arms of the chair and hid my smile behind clasped hands.

"I—my brother has recently acquired property, the ownership of which will result in his eventual harm."

I nodded.

"He—you must dissuade him from a course of action which can only result in—"

"His eventual harm," I finished. "You mentioned that before. What kind of harm?"

In the street below, a horn sent up a sharp summons. It was an insolent blast calculated to cause pedestrians to leap for their lives and all other cars to crawl under the nearest rock. I pushed back my chair and went to the window.

A man was standing beside the Cadillac coupe, his hand inside on the horn. The horn stopped when he saw me. He glared at me and at my name on the window. He was a man in his early thirties, big, with a softness just beginning to show around his face and waist. He was Brewster Stearns, brother of the girl standing at my desk.

He continued to glower at me. I sneered politely and turned back to Kit Stearns.

I said: "Anyone who can read knows your brother. He's a fumblehead who thinks it's cute to play on the fringe of the underworld. Maybe it wouldn't be a bad idea to let him get a good burning once. Maybe he'd stay home then and behave himself."

Her face flamed red.

"A man in your business should be above personal prejudice."

I snorted. "All God's chillun got prejudices. For instance, I don't like rich young luses who make no effort to justify their existence. I got lots of company on that."

The hands in her slicker pockets clenched until the white of her knuckles showed through the fabric. She changed tactics. Her face softened, tears glimmered in her eyes like fireflies at dusk.

She said softly: "You're right. I know you're right. But Brew—my brother is involved in a transaction concerning a night club called the Brass Hat. He has proof that the owner is dishonest. Clever, yes, but still dishonest. That knowledge may be quite dangerous."

I said: "You're wasting our time. I know Dusty Ross, the owner of the Brass Hat. He isn't any saint but he isn't any crook either."

I'd suggest you take your brother and his proof and—"

I DIDN'T get to tell her where she could take them. The outer door banged open, bounced back against the wall and Brewster Stearns charged into the reception room and on into my office. He started talking loudly, angrily without paying any attention to me.

"I thought you said you wanted to make an appointment at a beauty shop in this building. The elevator man said you asked him if this—this Peeping Tom was in. I suppose you've been in here spilling what you know. You keep out of this and I'll handle it my own way." He laughed nastily and looked down at his big hands. "He's a little punk I can take with one hand. He's even afraid of mice, I hear."

I looked at my watch and said tiredly: "Take your cat-fight outside. I've an appointment and I want to get on with it. And don't go 'round town shooting off your big fat bazoo about what you're going to do to Dusty Ross, sonny. He's smaller than you are but smarter. That'll help."

He turned lightly on his toes and gave me the insolent once-over. Kit Stearns made "shushing" noises at him.

He said: "Who let you out? You crooks all stick together, don't you? I'll take care of Ross without any outside help."

I grinned. "I didn't know insanity ran in the Stearns family."

Stearns stepped around the desk. We faced each other like a couple of dogs getting set to go into battle. Stearns' hand suddenly became a fist and the fist was planted solidly on my chin. I planted my backside solidly on the floor, cracking my head against the chair seat as I went down.

Kit cried sharply: "Brew! Brew! Oh, you—you crazy idiot! Come on before you get in trouble." Her voice faded, saying: "I was only trying to help. You—you're so wild and rash. You shouldn't go around saying things like that." The door closed after them.

I hoisted myself to my feet and felt my jaw. It was tender but it could still waggle. I went to the window and watched the Stearns offspring get in their nice car with the nice white sidewall tires and drive away. After that I washed my face and cursed a little.

AT SIX-THIRTY Dusty Ross's Ford drew up to the curb in front of the office and Dusty leaned across and unlatched the door.

I said, Hi, sailor," and got in. He didn't smile.

In a tight voice he said: "I've got a little errand. Only take a few minutes if you don't mind going along."

I said I'd go along for the ride and settled

back, listening to the measured ticking of the windshield wipers and watched Dusty covertly. He was an average-sized man, compactly put together, with a handsome face that never seemed to cause him any trouble. His hair was a blond-gray, the color of dust on a country road in summer. His eyes were a darker dust shade. He was neat—even for the Navy. And right now he was as mad as any hornet that ever stung an innocent bystander. His tan eyebrows were pinched down in a murderous frown, his nostrils were distended until a white line showed on each side of his nose. He drove the car viciously, which was unlike Dusty Ross.

We went over to Broadway and north toward the warehouse and wholesale district. I smoked quietly and didn't say anything the whole way.

We stopped in front of a tall, gloomy building with a sign on the front that said it was the Superior Storage and Transfer Company.

Dusty got out of the car, said, "This won't take long," and went across the wet sidewalk. The iron grille hadn't been put across the doors. When his shadow fell on the glass doors, they opened as though someone had been watching for him.

I watched a dark blue Plymouth coach with a black front door on the right side drive by, pause and pull into the curb ahead. A rain-sodden felt hat was barely visible through the back window.

Dusty's errand took about ten minutes. When he came out, his face looked almost normal, a little thoughtful, but his eyebrows were back in place.

He said: "Sorry about the delay, but this couldn't wait. Let's go some place where we can talk without a lot of ears bent our way."

I said: "As far as I know, my office hasn't been wired yet."

He said that was all right and we drove away. As we passed the Plymouth I took a good look at the driver. He was a small man with a face shadowed by his pulled-down hat. He looked familiar but not too much so, like your bartender when you see him without his apron.

Before we got out of the car to go upstairs, I asked: "Does a 1937 Plymouth coach, black right front door, license C4-15592 mean anything to you?"

Dusty looked surprised, thought, then shook his head.

"Does a small man with a thin face and a sharp nose mean anything?"

Dusty grinned. "Goblins bothering you, Mike?"

I got out of the car and pointed unobtrusively down the street where the Plymouth was now parked.

"It's been tailing us."

Dusty shook his head again and we went upstairs to the office.

We took off our coats and hats and hung them on the tree and I went around and sat down. Dusty inspected the customer's chair, found it clean and sat down, adjusting the crease in his trousers. I pulled out the bottom desk drawer, got out a bottle and two glasses.

I said: "This calls for a drink."

I poured a short snort into two glasses and pushed one across the desk. Dusty looked at the label on the bottle and frowned.

I said: "One won't kill you."

He nodded, drained off the liquor and lighted a cigarette quickly. He took a deep drag and exhaled slowly, the way people will sometimes when they don't actually care for the taste of whiskey.

I tossed mine off and put the bottle away.

Dusty said: "I want you to hire an exterminator for me, Mike."

I asked: "Of mice—or men?"

"Men I can take care of," he said shortly, and for a second the white lines showed again around his nose. "Mice get me down."

His air of competence didn't match a fear of mice but I remembered the crack Brewster Stearns had made.

I said: "You mean mice, those furry little objects that haunt kitchens?"

"If they'd stay in the kitchen that'd be one thing. They hop at me from the desk drawers. They leap off the clothes-closet shelves. I had an exterminator out to give the place a going-over a couple of weeks ago. They still get in. Somehow."

"You serve food out at the Brass Hat."

Dusty waved an impatient hand.

"That's the same as saying a dog has to have fleas. I don't give a damn about the kitchen. I want to know how they get in my office."

He smiled tolerantly at something he saw in my face.

"You think it's funny as hell for a man to be afraid of mice. That's one reason I've never told you about it. I think it's funny, too—afterwards."

HIS eyes stared over my shoulder and out the window.

"The doctors tell me it all goes back to when I was a kid. I lived on a farm when I was a kid. My old man was out in the field one day and I was tagging after him." Dusty's soft voice roughened with memory. "A field mouse bit me. I yelled. The horses—we didn't have a tractor—the horses ran away and threw the old man off and he died."

I said gently: "Hell, that's just a guilt complex. You feel responsible for your father's death and it comes out as a fear of mice. That's all."

He moved his eyes until he was looking at me.

"That's what doctors tell me. But it doesn't help when one jumps at me. Think you can do me any good?"

I moved a pencil back and forth on the desk, looking at it and not at Dusty, and wondering what mice had to do with Brewster Stearns and Dusty's hurried trip to the Superior Storage building.

I said: "What you want is a private dick to find out who's bringing those mice in. And why. I just run an odd jobs agency. I'm not licensed as a private detective."

He corrected me firmly. "I want you to come out to the Brass Hat, look the place over, decide what kind of exterminator I need and arrange the details."

I tossed the pencil to the desk top.

I said: "Is that all? There isn't anything else mixed up with mice?"

He stabbed his cigarette against the bottom of the ashtray with an unsteady hand.

"That's all. Anything else I can take care of myself."

"When do you want me to start—looking?"

He stood up smiling.

"Come out tonight. Saturday's a good time. Everybody and his brother's wife will be there." He paused in the act of putting on his raincoat. "Uh—send the bill to my apartment. I've sold the Brass Hat."

I said: "I'd be damned if I'd let anybody run me off the place, mice or no mice!"

I waited for him to take the opening. When he took it, it wasn't in the direction I'd expected. He held his hat with both hands, his gaze direct, his voice serious, as though it was important that I understand what he was going to say.

"I'm in no physical danger. I just want things straightened out. Different people work different ways. I'm strictly a clean-break man, myself. When I leave, I don't leave any loose ends behind me."

"That's as good a way to operate as any, I guess. Still it's other people's loose ends that keep me in business. Who'd you sell to?"

"I offered it to George Devoe first but he couldn't make the price. Brewster Stearns bought it."

I put a look of surprise on my face.

"What's that sheep-in-wolf's-clothing know about running a night spot?"

"He ought to know something about night spots. He spends enough time in 'em. And he'll have Devoe to guide him."

Dusty held out his hard, square hand.

"Thanks, Mike. I'll see you tonight."

He went away. He didn't look worried. During the hour and a half I'd been with him he'd been pleased, raging, thoughtfully sober. But not worried.

CHAPTER TWO

"Private"—for Corpses

THE Brass Hat was a long, low, windowless building set well back from the road with a curved drive up to the door and a graveled parking space at one side. An Army officer's cap and the words "Brass Hat" done in neon made a modest sign that couldn't have been read more than three miles.

The awning was out for the protection of the customers but it didn't do much good. Cars parked at the side, squealing women and laughing men ran through the rain for the door.

A few minutes after midnight, I did the same thing, without the sound effects.

A doorman with enough gilt on his uniform to have outcrowned two full admirals, opened the door for me with a flourish and a few stray raindrops. I went in and a roar of sound smacked me in the face. Dusty Ross's patrons were having their usual Saturday-night fun.

I shook rain off my hat and gave it into the tender care of a leggy brunette dressed in a bad imitation of a Marine's tunic and not much else. A cigarette girl, undressed to the same degree, leaned against the check stand. I ransomed a pack of cigarettes from her and got a smile showing she had crooked teeth.

The main room was through a heavy curtain and down two broad steps. I hesitated on the top step, trying to adjust my ears.

There was a fairly large dance floor and the minimum of space required to get to it. The rest of the room was jammed with tables just large enough to hold eight elbows and four glasses. I don't know where they put dishes when anybody wanted to eat. If anybody ever did.

The music from the band at the other end of the long room filtered to me through shrill voices and more cigarette smoke than the air-conditioning system could handle.

A tall, muscular man with a face that would have looked good in a feed-bag rushed up the steps to me. He grabbed my right hand, clutched my right arm with his left hand and pumped vigorously. He was George Devoe, Dusty's right-hand man. The act he put on for me was standard with him.

His hair was the color and design of crimp-cut tobacco, his eyes a hard, dark glitter. Between a slightly hooked nose and a wide, sensual mouth a mustache wiggled when he talked, like a caterpillar on a hot stove lid.

He said delightedly: "Mike Trye! The old odd jobs man! How's the world treating you?"

I shrugged out of his grasp and grunted: "I'm still buying my own."

He laughed heartily at the chestnut.

"Long time since you've been out."

"Your stuff is good but on my income I can get along with a little less than the best."

He punched me in the ribs with a hard thumb.

"Don't give me that. I hear you're making the dough hand over fist. Well, you picked a right night. We're going to have a real celebration. Drinks on the house, special acts in the floor show. The works! Soon as Dusty gets back."

"Dusty not here?"

"He's at Leavenworth taking his physical. Ought to be back any time now."

I stared over Devoe's head and asked: "Then why the celebration?"

"If Dusty is inducted, he's going to sell the place. Plans to introduce the new owner and everything."

"New owner, huh?" I looked at him casually. "Would that be you?"

Devoe drew his mouth down modestly.

"I couldn't swing a place like this. I'm not smart enough."

I punched him hard in the ribs.

"The hell you aren't," I said, and winked.

He laughed again with a heartiness that showed wear.

"Dusty offered it to me but I couldn't meet his price. He got another buyer. You probably know him—Brewster Stearns."

"Is that so?" I was very surprised. "I hear he's a tough cookie. You want to watch your step there, Devoe. Don't steal his teeth, at least not at first."

Muscles knotted along Devoe's jaw. He measured me calculatingly, with the serious intentness of a mortician looking over a prospective customer for size. He held the pose a second, relaxed and smiled glassily.

He said softly: "You pull the crudest jokes. Can I get you a table? Or maybe you're not staying?"

I matched his tone. "I wouldn't think of missing the celebration. But I'll do my drinking on my feet."

He gave me another phony smile and rushed away to give someone else the glad eye. I pushed through the crowd at the end of the room and through the arched doorway into the bar. It was noisy and crowded, too.

I STOPPED at the end of the bar and ordered a drink from a fat bartender whose rimless eyeglasses showed sweat smudges. When I put a bill down to pay for the drink, he pushed it back and motioned with his head and eyes toward the back of the room.

"This is on him. He's buying the place."

I said sadly: "Wonder if he'd be interested in my shares of the Brooklyn Bridge?"

The bartender looked as hurt as a fat man can, and said stiffly: "It ain't no gag. This is a good buy. We got enough stock stashed

away to be feedin' rummies when the war's over."

I said: "The way I heard it, it's nothing but a mouse-infested joint."

He looked at me as if he'd have enjoyed hitting me with the bung-starter, but transferred his hurt look to another customer.

I looked along the row of shirtfronts until I saw Brewster Stearns. Just looking at him made my jaw ache. He was a busy man. With only one pair of hands, he smoothed his crisp black curls, tried to get down a drink, shook hands with the usual well-wishers and bounced a bunch of car keys on the bartop. In between chores he pushed up the right sleeve of his coat and stared unhappily at his long, elegantly-curved watch.

Devoe edged into the cluster around Stearns, put an arm across his shoulders and started talking. I emptied my glass and went to lean in the arched doorway to look at what Stearns had bought. Or might be going to buy, depending on who was telling the story.

The band finished the number they'd been working on and the pianist sounded a few rippling notes indicating intermission. Dancers started fighting their way back to tables.

A man's big face and well-tailored shoulders stood above the crowd. He guided his companion to one of the booths against the wall called "foxholes." I watched him and rubbed my jaw and thought about him. He was Tony Corrazo who had owned the Brass Hat when at was just a dump called the Paradise Club three years back. He would be the Tony who had recommended me to Kit Stearns. She was with him.

She was a little different from Corrazo's usual friends. Tonight she wore a dark dress designed to be looked at over a table. She had a figure designed to be looked at from any place at all but preferably close. Her face still looked intelligent but I didn't think it was intelligence that had attracted Corrazo.

Corrazo looked around for a waitress, saw me and waved a hand. I went across the main room toward their foxhole. He had himself hoisted to his feet by the time I got there.

He shook my hand and asked: "How's the odd jobs?"

"Getting odder all the time," I answered, and let my eyes crawl a little sideways toward Kit Stearns.

Corrazo put a big hand on my arm and turned me toward her.

He said proudly: "This is Mike Trye, the best damn detective in town."

I looked blank, waiting, giving her the lead. She put on a good show. No one would have thought us anything but strangers, met casually for the first, and probably the last, time.

She said, "I'm Kit Stearns," in precisely the same tone she'd used in my office.

I looked impressed.

"I've met your brother."

She raised an eyebrow.

"He just bought me a drink at the bar," I explained.

Corrazo said heartily: "Swell! Sit down and I'll buy one."

I SAT opposite Corrazo, hemming the girl in. Her hands, long and a little thin, clutched a half-emptied highball glass.

Kit told the waitress she'd work on the drink she had, I ordered a highball I didn't want, and Corrazo ordered ginger ale.

"Not that I like the stuff," he said heavily. "I got a bad stomach."

I said: "What you doing here? I thought you went to the Coast three years ago."

"I didn't like the rain all the time out there."

I thought of the rain pounding above us and laughed.

Kit stared at the table and said: "So you saw my brother." She raised an eyebrow again. "Plastered?"

"If he was, it wasn't showing much."

"Give him time," she sighed. She looked at me with a nicely restrained curiosity. "Do you like being a private detective?"

"I'm not."

I gave her the line about the odd jobs.

I said: "Aren't you forgetting your pose?"

"Pose?"

"The militant semi-dowager type. The wet-nurse to an adult adolescent."

She bit her teeth together and clenched her hands. I could almost hear her counting to ten by quarters. Corrazo looked at us dumbly and made a complaining sound in his throat. I grinned and watched the band come back, sit down and get comfortable.

Lights went out, leaving a softly diffused glow over the piano and the musicians' stands. A spot came on and traveled to our side of the room farther back, to a door that led to the dressing rooms and kitchen.

George Devoe swaggered out of the darkness to the dance floor, raised a mike and secured it at the proper level. He announced in a mincing tone that somebody whose name I didn't get would do his famous interpretative dance and song. The crowd roared its approval, Devoe pointed a finger dramatically toward the door.

A tall, lithe figure clad in a white satin blouse and blue tights pranced into the spot and out in front of the band. He tossed back his long hair, the music started a jungle rhythm and the blue tights writhed. He bleated the opening of a song that was neither witty nor entertaining—just smutty.

I said bitterly: "For that we pay an extra tax."

He was going into his third chorus when the waitress brought our drinks.

Corrazo said: "I began to think you had to go up to the still for the stuff."

The girl popped her gum, looked at us questioningly and asked: "Which one of you is Miss Kit Stearns?"

Kit smiled. "I'm Miss Stearns."

"You're wanted on the phone."

The girl lifted a hand and pointed through the gloom toward the back of the room on the opposite side, where two phone booths were squeezed in between the wall and the bandstand.

Kit thanked her and Corrazo stood up hastily to let Kit out into the aisle.

He sat down again, took a gulp of his ginger ale.

"Dusty should've moved the phone booths," he said. "You can't hear a word in 'em."

I said: "You thinking of going back in business?"

Corrazo's voice was cautious. "I got a kind of deal on now, see. I been tryin' for ten years to get clear of the rackets. This time I'm gonna make it or bust. Things are almost as bad as in the old alky days. I'm gonna make my pile and get out and nobody's gonna stop me."

"Who's trying to? The cops?"

"Nah, it ain't that. I'm square with the johns. I got stuck with a fine and I paid off, all fair and square. Cops don't worry me none."

"What does? Something like who tipped them off three years ago about your liquor sales?"

He looked at me bleakly, drained his glass and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Hell, I had that comin'," he said in an unctuous tone. "I was sellin' the stuff by the bottle and only had a by-the-drink license. That's O.K. Life's too short for that revenge stuff."

I shook my head. "I'll believe that when I see it."

NEAR the dance floor a large woman staggered up and pointed to Blue Tights who was on his twentieth or fortieth chorus. She said something about wanting to dance with the pretty man up there. A man tried to pull her back into her chair. Here and there someone tittered. Her voice grew louder. The band's tempo faltered, caught and went on. George Devoe was suddenly silhouetted against the lights talking to her.

In the darkness of our table a big figure loomed. A sour liquor breath drifted down.

Brewster Stearns said thickly: "Wheresh Kit? Wanna go home. Want the car keysh."

"I thought Dusty wanted you for some shindig later," Corrazo protested.

"Yah, that crook. Never should've trusted him." Stearns leaned closer. "Want the car keysh. T'hell with Dusty. Oughta bash in his head." He giggled. "He'sh afraid of mice. T'hell with the whole bish—bish—the whole thing."

He wavered, dipping his hands into his pockets.

"You'll never learn, will you," I asked, "about that big lip of yours?"

Stearns' hands stopped moving. He clutched at the table edge and peered at me.

"Who the hell are you, little man? Oh, yeah, one of Dusty's crook frien'sh. T'hell with you, too." He put a hand across Corrazo's shoulders. "Tony'sh on'y frien' I got. Always been m'frien'. Been a frien' for yearsh."

Corrazo stood up and steadied Stearns with a hand under his arm.

"I better get you out of here, I guess. Look after Kit, will you, Mike?"

"That'll be the least odd job I've had lately."

He chuckled amiably and propelled the protesting Stearns off toward the entrance.

Thunderous applause sounded the end of Blue Tights song. Devoe announced the next number in a voice drained of its exuberance. A pert, snub-nosed girl in a sparkling G-string and three or four sequins over each full breast

TEST SIGHT

TASTE RIGHT

If the ladder is placed against building, how far up will it reach?



ANSWER.

It will reach exactly to the top of the building.



came out and did a tap dance. The customers liked her, too.

Kit Stearns slid hastily into the seat opposite me. She breathed harshly, as though her throat were tight.

"Where's Mr. Corrazo?"

I explained about Corrazo and her brother.

She whispered urgently: "You must help me. I know what you think of us—" She fumbled hurriedly in her bag, took out a bill and pushed it at me. "It doesn't matter now. Brew's my brother . . . we've always been so close. I—surely you'll recognize Brew's danger after all he's said."

Her words were ragged, torn against each other in their haste to be said. I put a hand over her hand and shook it.

"Calm down," I said. "Make sense. What's this new danger to your brother?"

"I—I want to hire you to find a body," she tried to say calmly.

"A corpse?"

"Yes, yes. In Mr. Ross's office. I—that telephone call . . . the man said Mr. Ross wanted to see me. I—he said to go through the double doors beside the booth, cross the corridor and go in the door marked 'Private.' I thought it was about Brew. I went and— and Mr. Ross is in there. Dead!"

I sat stunned, remembering Dusty's unworried face when I'd last seen him. Kit quickly crumpled the bill and pushed it under my hand.

Corrazo's gentle voice came to us out of the half-light.

"Am I interruptin' somethin'?"

She stood up, clutched her handbag.

"Oh, my—my head aches. Do you mind if we go now?"

I stood up, too, and said: "Your brother can't go running around loose shooting off his big mouth about Ross. You'd better lock him up when you get home."

She looked blindly at me.

Corrazo said: "He couldn't find the car keys. I poured him in a taxi."

Kit sounded bewildered. "But, I gave them to him."

I said: "You'd better throw a hook into him as soon as you can and keep him under cover."

Corrazo looked from Kit to me, as though he doubted his own sanity.

"He ain't likely to go home." Corrazo's voice was reproving. "She can't go 'round lookin' in all the joints for the kid."

"O.K., you look for him then. I'm a sucker to do this but you get him and bring him up to my apartment. I'll call the janitor to let you in."

Kit said: "That's wonderful of you. Thanks—uh—Mike."

I said I hoped it was and watched them go away. After that I went into the bar where

the light was better and looked at the bill Kit Stearns had given me. It had a "50" in the corner. For any other job, it would have been beautiful.

CHAPTER THREE

Small, Gray and Furry

I WENT through a small arched door at the back of the bar into a wide, short corridor. No attempt had been made here to carry out any military ideas of decoration. A door in the right wall was lettered *Men*. Farther along was a door marked *Private*. At the end of the corridor, a heavier door was the back entrance. The swinging doors in the left wall went into the main room, next to the telephone booths.

The hall was silent, a little sinister, with the faint, machine-gun sounds of a tap-dance being done on a drum on the other side of the swinging doors. I walked to the door marked *Private*, opened it and shut myself inside the room. After a while, I wiped my sweaty hands on my coat.

The office was plain and neat. A wine-colored rug covered the floor. A couple of filing cabinets stood against the end wall and over the cabinets was an oil painting that I knew hid a wall-safe. There was a sofa and chair in matched rough gray-green fabric.

The desk was set at right angles to the wall, facing the door. It held a telephone, neat stacks of account books and papers, a turned-over coke bottle, and Dusty Ross's head, resting on one arm.

His eyes gleamed coolly in the light. He might have been a tired man resting after some tedious bookwork. A small, gray furry thing was clenched in his hand almost touching his face. I walked to the desk and opened Dusty's still warm fingers.

The furry thing was a mouse. It was dead and cold and stiff. Its eyes bulged as Dusty's eyes bulged. A thin thread of blood had leaked out of its mouth and had dried.

After looking at the mouse and not seeing it, I replaced it gently in Dusty's palm and folded the warm fingers over it.

Dusty wouldn't need to worry any more about guilt complexes. Or loose ends. Or mice.

His face was contorted, no longer very handsome, no longer very competent. The stiff whiteness of his dress shirt was untidy, a little crumpled, a little dusty.

I stared around the room and tried to make sense of what little I knew, without any luck. Corrazo had sold his club to Dusty to get money to pay a Federal fine. Corrazo had gone away and Dusty had made more money out of the Brass Hat than Corrazo had ever

dreamed of. Now Corrazo was back and obviously on intimate terms with the Stearns family. And Dusty was dead. With a mouse in his hand.

Metal glinted near the door, where it might have been pushed as the door was opened. I went over and picked up a small chain with four keys and a flat metal tab. A car license, No. C4-74, showed on the front of the tab. On the back, stamped into the metal, were the words, *Please deposit in nearest mailbox. Return postage guaranteed. The KarTab Company, and a local address.* They could be the keys Brewster Stearns had been bouncing on the bartop earlier. But all car keys look alike.

I was slipping them into my coat pocket when a discreet tap sounded on the door.

I held my hand in my pocket and watched the doorknob turn cautiously. The door opened inch-by-slow-inch and Devoe's hooked nose came into view.

He said: "Excuse me, Dusty, but it's—"

Some movement on my part stopped him. He turned his head and looked at me. His body was hidden by the door so that his head hung in the air, seemingly without support. No surprise showed on his face until he looked at my pocket where my hand still grasped the keys. His eyes widened.

I took my hand out of my pocket and motioned toward the desk. Devoe was across the room in a couple of graceful strides. He picked up Dusty's hand as I had done, stared incredulously at the mouse, put the hand down and turned to face me. He bent the fingers of his right hand back with the fingers of his left hand. Each finger made a separate, distinct cracking sound.

He said huskily: "Dusty said there were mice in here but I didn't believe him." He looked sick remembering his disbelief. "He was scared to death of mice."

"Yeah, so I heard."

"I—the mouse must have jumped out of the desk and Dusty caught it and the shock was too much for his heart."

I didn't say anything to that theory. We stood and looked at each other.

Devoe asked: "I'll have to call the sheriff?"

He asked it hopefully, wanting me to show him some way he could get out of calling the sheriff.

I said: "You'll have to call the sheriff. On one of the other phones. Better lock this office until he gets here, too."

We went into the hall and Devoe locked the door. While he called the sheriff from one noisy phone booth, I used the other to call the janitor and tell him to let Corrazo in my apartment when he showed up. All I had to do after that was watch Devoe trying to yank his fingers off at the roots until Sheriff Cole got there.

IT WAS all handled very quietly. Sheriff Cole thought the building should be cleared before some observing customer spread the word that the law had arrived and a panic started. He made the announcement to the crowd himself—that Mr. Ross was ill and everybody was asked to leave quietly. They were to give their names and addresses to the deputy who would be stationed at the front entrance.

I saw the list later. It had a high percentage of Smiths and Joneses who lived at highly improbable addresses.

The help were interviewed in the office after the tide of technical routine had ebbed and Dusty's body had been removed. Sheriff Cole was a husky man with a tough jaw, hard slate-colored eyes, a bald spot he kept covered by the simple process of keeping his hat on. A lipstick stain on his shirt collar ruined his tough-guy pose.

He stood in the center of the office and barked questions around the mangled remains of a cigar. The answers he got were the answers he wanted to hear.

Everybody in the place from band leader to bartender knew of Dusty's fear of mice.

Cole took his cigar out of his mouth, stared at it, and stuck it back between his stained teeth. He chewed thoughtfully and rocked gently on his heels.

He growled: "O.K. You can scram now."

I started to get up from the sofa where I'd stayed put during the past hour. Cole stopped me with a hand on my chest.

"Not you. And not George, here. There are a few things I want to get straight."

I shrugged and sat down again. When the room held only Cole and a big shapeless deputy in drooping pants, Devoe and me, Cole turned to me.

"You just come in here for a friendly call? Is that it?"

I looked down at my thumb.

"I'd heard he was selling the place. I thought maybe I could line up the new owner to supply him with help when he needed it."

"And how did you know Dusty was here? Nobody else knew it."

Cole leaned a little toward me, his eyes eager.

"I didn't. Mr. Devoe said he wasn't. But I never pay much attention to what Mr. Devoe says. And why did he say that, by the way?"

I looked at Devoe. He started popping fingers.

"Dusty had some work he wanted to do on the books. He said he wasn't to be disturbed for anything until one o'clock. We were going to put on a sort of special floor show at that time."

I said: "Seems odd, doesn't it, working on the books after he'd sold the place? They

weren't his books any more. And what I saw on the desk were warehouse receipts from the Superior Storage and Transfer Company. The inventory seems to be there, too."

Cole cut in in a choked voice: "I'll ask the questions. You know more'n you could have found out if George came in right behind you."

"Hell, I've been looking at the desk for an hour," I said disgustedly.

"Yeah. So George, here, came in right behind you? Is that it?"

I said that was it.

"And, George, you came in here to call Dusty. Is that it?"

Devoe renewed his finger-popping. He nodded without raising his head.

I mused: "Seems odd, doesn't it? Here Dusty had such a bad heart that catching a mouse popped him off, but the doctors at Leavenworth thought his heart good enough for the Navy."

I shook my head in mock bewilderment. Cole's face grew congested. The big deputy hitched at his pants and looked around as if he wanted to spit and couldn't find a place.

Cole made a futile effort to control his voice.

"Everybody knows you're the guy to see if they want a job. Or want a job done. That's O.K.—if you stay in your own back yard." His lips curled around the words. "No job too odd for Mike Trye. That's cute. It sounds good. Some people kind of wonder what you do around that flossy joint of yours beside sign paychecks."

I grinned. "Come in some time. Maybe I can get you a job with the street cleaning department."

"Let's see your gun permit."

Devoe stuttered: "But, but—Dusty was. . . He wasn't shot. Why. . ."

I said: "Let him play. He's got to earn his tin star some way."

I poked my gun permit under Cole's rage-swollen face. I took my car keys out of my pocket.

"The gun is in the compartment of my car. The car is out in the lot, if you want to check on it."

Cole sent the deputy out to get the gun.

"WHAT do you need a gun for in your business?"

I sneered: "I use it to shanghai employees and fight off employers. Times are tough in my racket."

Cole crossed the room until his knees touched mine, pinning them against the divan.

"I don't like you and I don't like your big mouth and I don't like that phony agency everybody knows is just a front. You'd have been run out of town long ago, if you didn't grease the right palms."

I stood up suddenly and pushed forward. He had to take a quick step back to keep his balance.

"Don't talk about grease, Cole," I tried to say it softly, "until you scrape a little off your own fingers. Until you explain why some night spots in the county have stake-outs ready all the time to smell everybody's breath while other places, like this one, are never bothered."

The deputy came in and handed Cole my gun and the keys. I hauled my voice down from the ceiling.

"The only reason you're not throwing your weight from here to Denver right now is because you haven't had time yet to find out just how far the new owner of the Brass Hat can be pushed by you. If he's handled right, he'll be a bigger source of revenue to you and the boys than Dusty ever was. He's got more jack in the bank. And Dusty wasn't a lad you could shove very far. So Dusty was afraid of mice. So all right. I believe it. So he gets one in his hand and his heart goes phfft! You eat that one. It makes me sick."

Cole shifted his cigar to the other corner of his mouth and stared at me with murder in his eyes. Devoe made bleating noises through his mustache. The deputy didn't do anything.

Cole lowered his eyes slowly and turned the gun in his hand. He looked at the safety, sliding it off and on a few times. He took out the clip, counted five shots. He jacked back the barrel, looked inside at the sixth pill. He sniffed, peered and fingered the .38 in the best Hollywood tradition.

I looked at the sofa and wondered why it made any difference that one cushion was a shade lighter than the other two.

Cole thrust gun, clip, keys and permit at me.

"Get the hell out," he said viciously, "and stay out! Keep in your own back yard or you're gonna step on a rusty nail some dark night and turn up with lockjaw. That'd be a shame for a lippy guy like you."

I said: "It wouldn't take me any time to learn sign language."

I put the clip back in the gun and stowed all the articles in my hands in various pockets. Then I leaned over the sofa, turned over the cushion that was too light, looked at the other, darker side. It was darker because it was somewhat soiled. Faint, small smudges showed on the fabric. They were flaky and silver colored—like dried saliva.

Cole was glaring at me when I stood up. I went out without saying any of what I was thinking.

I got my hat from an empty check stand, was told by a deputy to use the back door, and was too tired to ask why. The long room was littered and dirty with the backwash of a crowd leaving hurriedly. On the lower of the two steps, a tall, slender heel of bright red

satin told of some woman's haste in leaving.

I let myself out the back door into air that had been whipped clean by the rain. Not far away, leaves whispered in a light breeze and overhead, stars winked behind wisps of scudding clouds like the phony tears of Kit Stearns.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Pause That Depresses

THE lights at the end and along the side of the building hardly made a dent in the blackness over the wide parking lot. Most of the cars were gone. Mine was wedged in between two county cars. I found license C4-74 on a black Cadillac coupe, shiny with undried raindrops, white sidewalls gleaming in the dark.

I got out the keys that went with the license, fitted one into the door lock and opened the door. The name on the registration on the steering post was, *Kathryn Stearns*. I read that a couple of times, straightened up, and backed into a gun.

A voice that was tight and high ordered: "Hold it that way."

I held a double handful of nothing while light fingers dipped into my pocket and took my gun.

The gun prodded and the voice said: "Inside and don't fuss."

I thought of arguing. I thought of making a play. I thought of Dusty Ross and the mouse in his hand and his enraged trip to the Superior Storage and Transfer Company. I didn't want to die until I'd learned whether a mouse in the hand was worth two in the trap.

While I was thinking this, I climbed into the car and behind the wheel. I put both hands up on the wheel in plain view and turned to look at the man who had followed me into the car.

He was the man who'd done the sloppy tailing job on Dusty Ross, small, thin, dressed in dark clothes that were rain-soaked. His face was shadowed by a wet hat pulled down. The gun in his hand looked about the size of my gun which made me sad. It was a good gun and it usually hit where it was pointed. It was pointed at me.

The little man tossed the car keys to me. The gun was steady and so was his voice as he said: "Get this heap outa here. Behave yourself and you ain't comin' to no harm."

I asked: "Why this car?"

"Why not this car?"

"It isn't mine."

The gun moved belligerently. The man raised his head. In the light reflected against the windshield, I had a good look at him.

He said jerkily: "Come on—quit stallin'."

I shrugged and turned the ignition key. The gas gauge was hugging "Empty" but I didn't mention that.

I said: "Any particular place?"

He pointed toward a road that ran along the side of the parking lot.

"Out the Ridge Road. You go down this road about a quarter mile and you'll hit it."

The Ridge Road is the local name for the county line. It is a wide, frost-pocked road with steel poles along the side that feed juice to the trolley line going out to the bomber plant.

I drove toward it, not well and not fast but good enough to satisfy the gun. He was a nervous little man. The sharp, acrid odor of perspiration filled the car. I rolled my window down.

I said: "Is it all right for me to ask what you got against me?"

"I ain't got nothin' against you. I do what I'm paid to do." His voice was more relaxed, almost peevish. "You took all night back there and me waitin' in the rain for you to come out."

He sneezed. The gun didn't waver.

I said: "Why wait? I'm not worth it."

"I'm paid to keep you busy a while until a deal is fixed."

"Deal, huh? Now I recognize that puss of yours. You're 'Two-Bits' Moore. Used to be handyman for Tony Corrazo back in the old days when he owned that joint. You still doing his dirty work?"

Moore didn't answer.

I said: "I always thought you got your name because you were so small. Now I'm not sure. Maybe it's because you haven't got more than two-bits' worth of smart."

He didn't answer that, either, but he shifted uncomfortably. I turned onto the Ridge Road and started gradually increasing the speed of the car.

"A MAN died back at the Brass Hat to-night, Two-Bits. You wouldn't want to get tangled up in that, would you?"

He straightened away from the car door, brought the gun up stiffly.

"Slow down," he grated. "Ease up on this hack or I'll yank it off the road."

"Make it easy on yourself."

The car leaped forward smoothly under the pressure of my foot. The gun came closer. It was still steady, unaffected by the slight rocking of the car.

"You're near to pushin' daisies right now."

I said cheerfully: "Not daisies. Evergreen trees. We have nice cemeteries here. The air blows fresh and mourning doves come and call over the graves. You'll be right alongside me, if you try to slow us down by putting a hole in me."

I felt good. I had the world by the tail. No two-bit gungel was going to take Mike Trye for a ride and walk away from it.

So the car coughed.

A single, asthmatic sound that meant the gas tank had been milked dry. I depressed the gas pedal sharply three times. The motor made sighing sounds and the car started to lose speed. Moore chuckled.

I said, "So long, sucker," and wrenched the wheel toward one of the steel poles.

Moore yelled and made a grab for the door handle. My gun in his hand interfered. The car hit the pole, backed off, came back. The pole just stood there and took it.

Sounds filled the night. I held tight to the steering wheel and listened to glass shattering, metal crumpling and someone groaning. My head was down on the wheel. I raised my head and the groaning stopped. Blood oozed out of my mouth. My tongue delicately explored my teeth. I still had them all but they felt like a picket fence.

Moore had rammed the windshield and was spread over his side of the seat, his head back, his mouth open, his breath coming harshly. Spiderweb cracks went in all directions from the point of impact but the glass had held. A scraped bloody place showed on Moore's forehead.

I ground the starter. The motor made noises like Frankenstein's monster chewing up wash-tubs. There hadn't been any traffic on the road since I drove the car into the pole, but it wouldn't stay that way long.

I leaned over and retrieved my gun from the floor between Moore's feet. I wiped everything I could think of that might have my fingerprints—steering wheel, emergency brake, gear shift, car keys, and both door handles inside and out. My legs felt like wet binding twine as I set off down the road.

It was after three o'clock when I crawled into my car in the parking lot beside the Brass Hat. Two other cars were still there, one was a county car. Mine looked old and sounded older. But it was unbent. And safe.

On my way into town, I stopped at a small drugstore that bore two signs in the window. One said, *Boy wanted*; the other, *Open All Night*. I went in and back to the telephone booth in the corner.

A tall, scrawny-looking individual watched me through the glass in the door while I looked up the address of the Stearns residence. On the chance that he might be able to read lips, I turned my back to him when I called the police department.

To the gruff voice that answered I said: "I wish to report the theft of a motor car, please."

He switched me to another gruff voice.

I gave the Stearns address and added: "I'm

speaking for Miss Kathryn Stearns. She wishes to report that someone has stolen her car from the garage." I gave the license number and a description of the car.

The voice repeated the details unemotionally.

I said, "Thank you, sir," and hung up quickly, before he could begin to wonder why the theft had just been discovered at the rather unconventional hour of three thirty-five.

I had a cup of very old, very hot coffee at the counter and exchanged ideas with the counterwoman as to what ought to be done with Hitler. After that, my teeth felt less like a picket fence and more like a Shetland pony's shoe.

A LIGHT showed in the front windows of my apartment when I parked my car at the curb. The lobby of the building was quiet, the elevator held the usual faint odors of cigarettes and humanity.

My door was unlocked and I went in quietly. Tony Corrazo's big body was sprawled on the divan, one leg over the side with a foot flat on the floor. His arms were folded peacefully across his chest. His snores were peaceful. His coat was draped over the back of the divan. I went through it for a gun. No gun.

I looked through the apartment swiftly. No Brewster Stearns. I went across to Corrazo and touched his shoulder.

He snorted awake, flinging his arms and flailing his feet, trying to sit erect. He rubbed his eyes and stretched his long arms wide, his shirt smoothed tightly across his big chest.

He blinked and yawned and said: "I must've dropped off to sleep waiting for you. I couldn't find that lush Stearns any place. Uh, Kit told me about Dusty."

"Yeah. I want to talk to her and I don't want the whole house to know about it, if it can be helped. Does she have a phone of her own?"

He yawned and shook his head.

"Just call the number that's in the book. They got one of those little switch dinguses. Maybe she'll have it switched to her room—account of Dusty and her brother."

I pushed my hat back on my aching head, lighted a cigarette that tasted like the bottom of a foxhole in the rainy season, and sat down at the telephone across the room from Corrazo. My neck hurt and my back was stiff and my brain was a thing to keep my ears from caving in. I dialed the Stearns number.

Kit answered at once in a voice that sounded wide awake and fully-dressed.

I said: "This is Mike Trye."

She cut in breathlessly: "Was everything—is Brew. . ."

"Did you loan your car to him this evening?"

She sounded surprised. "Why—why, yes."

"I found the keys to it on the floor of Dusty's office. A punk tried to take me for a ride later in your car and I had to pile it up against an electric pole. I've reported it to the city police as stolen. They'll probably be calling you about it later."

"But—"

I interrupted impatiently: "You can tell them you couldn't sleep and thought a short ride would help and when you went to get the car out it was gone."

Her voice warmed. "I don't know how to thank you, Mike."

I remembered she'd said, "Mr. Ross," and "Mr. Corrazo," with stiff formality but I was "Mike."

A voice inside of me said: "So what, sucker?"

I SAID: "You can thank me now by telling me what went on between your brother and Dusty? Why that scene in my office? Or did you know he was going to hire me and wanted to get your bid in first, figuring I couldn't work both sides of the street at the same time?"

She spoke after a long silence. "I—I'm sorry, but I don't understand what you mean. I don't know anything about what Mr. Ross said to you. But Brew was being extravagant in his language and threatening Mr. Ross with all sorts of things. I thought perhaps you could get to the bottom of the situation before Brew did anything rash."

I grasped my left kneecap until it hurt but I didn't swear.

I said measuredly: "Miss Stearns, if you will just tell me what happened—what happened, from the beginning."

"Brew felt he had made a good buy. The inventories were all in order of course. Our lawyer is much too shrewd to overlook anything like that. After they had signed the papers this afternoon, Brew had some small-boy idea of going to the warehouse and looking at the stock. It had been on the strength of the stock in storage that he'd even considered buying the Brass Hat. Liquor is rather difficult to obtain." I winced and kept silent. "He—I suppose Brew was quite nasty to Mr. Ross. That was after we'd been to your office. I convinced him he should talk it over with Mr. Ross. Mr. Ross said he would certainly find out what had happened."

"And what had happened?"

Another silence. Reluctantly, she said: "Most of the stock was gone. Brew said killing was too good for Mr. Ross."

"Someone else decided it wasn't. Cracks like that put him in a spot. Your car keys in the office put you in a spot. But together, they wipe Dusty out as the one who rooked Brew on this deal. Didn't he consider Devoe?"

"Devoe!"

"Sure. Dusty got him with the building, like plumbing fixtures. He'd know at least as much about the stock as Dusty did."

It's the patented filter with its 66 mesh-screen baffles, that whirlcools the smoke—retains flakes and slugs—absorbs moisture—minimizes raw mouth and tongue bite. When filter is discolored, it has done its job. Discard it and put in a fresh one—costs only ONE CENT. Enjoy the benefits of Frank Medico Pipe, Cigarette and Cigar Holders.

\$1 WITH BOX OF FILTERS FREE!

REMOVABLE FILTER IS THE HEART OF MEDICO FILTERED SMOKING

ABSORBENT FILTERS for Frank MEDICO

GENUINE FILTERS FOR MEDICO PACKED ONLY IN THIS RED & BLACK BOX

X-RAY VIEW

She said slowly, in a voice of discovery: "Devoe. George Devoe. I thought Mr. Corrazo might have had something to do with it. That's why I went there with him tonight. He'd known Brew so long and—it was a silly idea, but I thought I could watch them both."

Behind me I heard a flurry of faint movement. I felt the cold bite of a gun muzzle laid against my neck. I jumped and grabbed the telephone tighter.

Corrazo whispered: "Chop it off quick."

I said heartily: "Well, thanks a lot, Miss Stearns. This clears up a lot of—"

The gun kissed my neck again.

Kit said: "I'm coming over there. If Brew's in trouble, I—"

"No! Stay home. You'd be in the way."

I slammed the phone down and tried to turn. I wasn't fast enough. The world blacked out in a spin of nausea, a burning pain at the base of my skull, a grunt from Corrazo as he hit me with a gun.

CHAPTER FIVE

A Mouse In the Hand Is Worth Two In the Trap

THE chair had been turned away from the phone and I was sitting in it with my hands behind me. My shoulders ached. I started to move my hands. They were tied together.

Corrazo's big form blurred in front of me, then cleared. He stood spread-legged, watching me intently. He had put his coat on.

I said foggily: "Did you have to do that?"

"Yeah, I had to do it. Come on, get on your feet. We got places to go."

I leaned back stubbornly and hurt my hands against the hard back of the chair.

"I like it here." I watched him. "Your punk wasn't too banged up. He'll talk when the cops get him."

"What punk?"

"Don't be coy. Two-Bits Moore, the chump you sent to throw a scare into me."

"That guy? I ain't seen him in years."

He looked faintly amused. He jerked his head toward the door.

"On the feet, chum. That'll be just one more thing to be explained where we're going."

He came toward me. I waited until he was close enough. I kicked him. He jumped back and doubled over and moaned, all in one motion. I licked sweat off my upper lip and watched him. His face was gray and lumped with sweat and pain but he stood up. He took a gun out of his pocket. It looked like a smoke-stack held horizontally. He picked a raincoat off another chair. It was a trench coat of mine.

"You gonna do like I say or do I have to tell the cops about the Stearns babe bein' in Dusty's office?"

I sighed and stood up. There was no weight in my right-hand pocket. He'd relieved me of my .38. For all the use I ever got out of it, I might as well sell it. If I had enough future to be selling things again.

He said conversationally: "I cased the joint before you got back. You got some nice clothes."

He maneuvered me around and draped the coat across my shoulders and chest, so that the buttons were at the back. I tried to move my elbows, to turn my hands outward. He jammed them brutally against my back and buttoned the coat all the way to the top, tight against my throat. He tied the coat sleeves across my back and fastened the belt. The whole thing made a neat impromptu strait-jacket.

I protested weakly: "Do you have to use this? It's a pre-war job. I couldn't replace it if it gets torn."

Corrazo walked around in front of me, inspecting his job.

He grinned and showed his white teeth.

"Don't let that worry you, pal."

He went over and opened the door and stood a little to one side of it.

"Outside. And no more fancy fireworks, huh?"

The hall seemed to waver and crawl. The waving and crawling was distortion made by sweat pouring down over my eyebrows. I went through the door. Corrazo closed it softly.

We went down through the quiet building. I thought of all the people a few feet away on the other side of all the blank doors, sleeping peacefully and not caring about two silent men, one with a gun and the other with a headache.

CORRAZO'S car was parked in front of an apartment building a couple of doors from mine. Our feet made hollow echoes in the stillness of the dawn.

He opened the car door and ordered me in. I started to get in head first and almost tipped over on my nose. I backed out, turned, sat down in the seat and squirmed around until my feet were in the car. The door slammed, Corrazo raced around the front of the car and was in on the other side, under the wheel. I squirmed another inch, heard a buttonhole tear and swore bitterly.

Corrazo laughed. "You're a nervy little banty at that."

"Nuts," I said. "Let's get on with it."

The motor purred to life.

"We'll go see George," Corrazo explained. "I got some questions to ask him."

George Devoe lived in an apartment over an empty store building. Corrazo's gun urged me out of the car and through the unwashed

street door. We went up steep, badly-lighted steps to a door with a brass *A* hanging to it by one nail. The big man reached around me, turned the doorknob and the door swung open.

I went in. The room was not what I would have chosen for the fastidious Devoe. A sofa and two chairs were overstuffed horrors of moth-eaten rust mohair. An oversized library table stood against the front wall between two windows. The drawers were pulled out and papers were strewn on the floor. They looked similar to, if not exactly like those Dusty Ross had been checking when he died.

Corrazo shut the door and called softly: "George! Hey, George!"

No one answered. The only sounds were the soft sighs of the windows shifting in their aged frames and me, breathing through my mouth.

"I don't get this," Corrazo muttered. "He ought to be here. Hey, George."

"Maybe he's guarding the loot," I suggested.

"Huh?"

A big hand spun me around. Corrazo's bushy eyebrows were drawn into an incredulous V over his nose.

I said: "Dusty's warehouse stock has vanished—gone—flown away. Short of outright hijacking, which hadn't been hinted at, manipulation of the warehouse receipts would be the easiest way to accomplish such looting. Dusty was examining his warehouse receipts. Dusty died. All this is A-B-C. Nobody would question George Devoe's orders or his signature at the warehouse. We'll start with Devoe. From there we can go one of two ways."

I licked sweat off my lips and tried to move my hands. I hadn't realized how often the hands move around. When they're free.

"One way," I continued, "would be to Stearns. Devoe and Stearns stealing the liquor doesn't make sense. Stearns will have to have it for the Brass Hat. If he doesn't have it, he'll have to buy it. And besides that, more important—at least to me—is Stearns' character. He talks big like all the rest of the family, but if anyone approached him with an idea that was illegal, he'd run shaking to the nearest cop. So we'll rule out Stearns. That leaves Devoe and you. You've known him for years."

Corrazo smiled widely and stabbed at his chest with a big thumb.

He boasted: "I'm the brains, see? George's been takin' a case now and a case then and peddlin' it. That's pin money. When he told me about Dusty selling the place, I pointed out a way to make real dough." He opened the door into the hall, pointed to a door opposite and said: "He's likely over there. Let's go see."

I went past him and as I did so I slammed his big chest with my shoulders. He went backward. His gun sailed out of his hand and fell into the hall. The momentum of the thrust sent me over and I landed on my shoulder with a thud that jarred my teeth.

I heard more ripping sounds from my coat but it held. Corrazo scrambled to his feet and picked up his gun. His face was livid with rage.

He said curtly: "Get up. George owns this building. There ain't anyone here but him. Next time you try anything like that, I'm gonna put a piece of lead through you and the noise won't make any difference."

I started to get up but couldn't make it fast enough to suit Corrazo. He grabbed me and heaved me to my feet. He opened the door and pushed me inside.

THE room was about the same size and shape as Devoe's room. But there the similarity ended. This apartment was not silent. Sounds of retching and suffering came from the back of the apartment.

This apartment was not furnished with anything ordinarily expected in apartments.

The shades were tacked tightly to the window frames, one light burned in the center of the room. Boxes were stacked to the ceiling. They formed a drunkard's dream come true. Whiskey, all the popular kinds—rum with labels you don't often see any more—wines, very old and very fine. The bartender at the Brass Hat hadn't been beating his gums.

It was all here—enough 'to be feedin' rummies when the war's over.' It was packed in wooden cases, cradled in raffia, stored in cartons. Neatly stacked with narrow aisles.

At the beginning of one of the aisles, the big, soft body of Brewster Stearns was crumpled on the floor. His black curls were matted and smeared with the blood from bullet holes in his face. What was left of his face held a faint expression of surprise.

Corrazo's breath hissed out when he saw the body.

The vomiting sounds stopped, a rush of water swelled and died away and George Devoe stumbled into the room, wiping his mouth with a handkerchief. He was less natty than usual. The cotton robe he wore over his shirt and slacks was dirty and rumpled and showed fresh spots.

He saw us, wiped his face again and put his handkerchief in his robe pocket. Corrazo prodded me aside.

He said gently: "Where you been, George? I was up here about an hour ago lookin' for you. You got things to explain."

Devoe's face was as white as store teeth. His mustache jumped, his mouth worked weakly.

He shrieked: "The—the sheriff held me up. I've only been home a little while." He pointed a shaking hand at Stearns' body. "He was here waiting for me, down the street where I didn't see him until I got to the door. He—he was like a crazy man. I had to kill him. I had to, Tony. He had a gun and—"

Corrazo purred: "That's too bad, George. Now who're we gonna sell the stuff to?"

A thin line of saliva seeped out at one corner of Devoe's colorless mouth and slid down his chin.

"I—we can find somebody else," he said hopefully, and cracked his fingers.

I worked with my hands. They were tied in some intricate way with what felt like a necktie looped over and under each hand, tied in a sweat-soaked knot on the inside, away from my fingers. Fire crept down from my shoulders and up from my wrists and met in a knot of pain in my elbows.

I said: "If you boys cleaned Dusty's stock and planned to sell it back later to Stearns, what's the point in killing Dusty Ross?"

Corrazo blinked. "We didn't kill him. He died on account of he was afraid of mice."

I said: "Phooey. He was smothered to death. That mouse he had in his hand was cold and stiff. It had been dead a lot longer than Dusty. Some smart cookie took a cushion off the sofa in the office, held it over Dusty's face until he died. The mouse in his hand made it look like heart failure. That's what the sheriff bought because he's scared to stir too deep. But the mouse was a plant. Just like Kit Stearns' car keys were planted. Devoe talked to Stearns around midnight. Stearns had the keys then. Devoe could have taken them at that time."

A NERVE jumped under Corrazo's right eye like the tick of a clock that measures only your last minutes.

Devoe said: "I—I had to, Tony. Dusty came in madder than hell. He'd been down to the warehouse. I've been catching mice and putting them in Dusty's office just to watch him jump. So I did like Mike says. That was the only way." Devoe's whole body pleaded with Corrazo. "Dusty was hell on wheels when he got started. I—No telling what he'd have done."

"And the keys, George?" Corrazo's voice was ominous.

"You know the Stearns pair, Tony. If one of them gets in a jam, the other rushes to help him out. I called the girl from one of the phone booths. I was going to go in the office while she was there and "find" her with Dusty's body. If I could show Brewster Stearns where his sister might be involved in Dusty's death, he'd buy back the stuff without a squawk."

Frustration slowed Devoe's eager words. He got out his handkerchief and did a little more mopping. When he put it back, his hand stayed in the pocket. The pocket seemed to be a little heavier than a hand and a handkerchief ought to have made it.

"That—that damned woman kicked up a rumpus over our dancer. I had to quiet her and by the time I had her settled it was time to announce the next number and then it was too late. So I planted the keys figuring I could discover them a little later. Stearns was already so drunk he didn't know I took them."

A hard light showed far back in Corrazo's eyes.

I said quickly: "Before you bump him off, I'd like to know who set Two-Bits Moore on me."

The gun in Corrazo's hand made its motion. "You get over by George. And don't come close to me neither."

I started hobbling the long way around.

I muttered: "How women walk with their legs bundled up is past me. This thing feels like a coffin."

Corrazo said tonelessly: "Could be. You know anything about Two-Bits?"

He looked at Devoe and Devoe's eyes dodged around the room.

"I—I had him keeping an eye on Dusty, just to be sure nothing went wrong. He told me Dusty went to see Trye. I was watching for Mike at the Brass Hat and he—he said not to rob Stearns blind. I thought he was wise. I—I just meant to throw a scare into him. I thought that'd give me time to talk to Stearns."

I stopped short and looked at Corrazo. He started smiling dreamily.

"You thought you'd talk it over with the kid, huh? You called him to come over here. Yeah. He wasn't waitin' like you said. And your call kind of tipped him off to who was doin' the dirty work so he got a gun." Corrazo laughed loudly. "You was gonna cut me out, huh, George? You figured on that all the time."

I said: "He's sure been a great help to you, Corrazo. I'm betting it was Devoe who tipped the cops off three years ago about your liquor sales. You could have been out of the rackets a long time ago if you hadn't had to pay that fine." I taunted: "That doesn't mean anything to you, does it? That revenge stuff is hooey."

Devoe sobbed: "I—I didn't mean to, Tony. I got to talking to the man at the bar. And I didn't know he belonged to the government."

Heels clattered against the wooden stairs outside but the sound was drowned in Devoe's shriek as he saw Corrazo's gun aimed steadily at him. He brought his hand out of the robe pocket and the hand held a small gun. I

didn't think he'd ever hit anything the way the gun wobbled. I dived at Corrazo.

Devoe shot three times. The first sliced through Corrazo's fat throat. The second hit his gun hand, knocking it aside. The third hit his right leg. Sweat popped out on Corrazo's face. He brought his right hand up and steadied it with his left. He smiled and pulled deliberately. A hole blossomed in Devoe's face, dead center over his hooked nose.

Devoe fell back against the stacks of wooden boxes. The gun fell from Corrazo's hand and the big man stood there looking at it for a long second. Then he sighed and slumped and fell over on his side. Blood came out of his mouth and made me think of the mouse that had been in Dusty's hand.

THE door banged back and Kit Stearns stood staring frozen-faced at the bodies and the blood. She saw her brother and screamed and started toward him.

I said sharply: "Stay out of here."

Her head swiveled toward me. She sobbed something over and over and watched me haul myself to my feet.

I said: "Go away. Get out of here."

"But, Brew—he . . ."

I walked into her and pushed her body back. I pushed her against the banister of the rickety steps.

I said: "It's too late to help your brother. There isn't anything you can do now. Beat it. Go on home."

"I—I wanted to talk to Mr. Devoe. I think it—he must have been the one who called me at the Brass Hat."

"He's all through talking. Go home. I'll

handle this." I turned around and snapped at her: "Unbutton this damned thing and get my hands loose."

Her hands were shaken by the sobs tearing raggedly out of her throat. She had the coat unbuckled, untied, and unbuttoned, and it dropped off me to the floor. Her hands were very cold untying my hands.

"How'd you get here?"

"In a taxi."

"Oh, God," I groaned. "Well, tomorrow we'll hunt up the driver and grease him enough to help him forget that he ever saw you."

My hands came loose and my arms swung numbly. I turned to face Kit Stearns. She looked at me and moaned and took a step forward. I put my arms around her and looked over her head.

I said: "Go home now." I stopped and cleared my throat and fought the tenderness out of it. "Take a bus or street car or something equally anonymous. Let me handle this. I'll see that the Stearns name comes out of this at least as clean as it went in."

She stepped away from me and stared at me with her big eyes, a funny look on her unglamored-up face. Tears kept coming out of her eyes and sliding down her face and dropping silently, measuredly onto her jacket. She tried to smile.

Then she put up a hand and touched my face once and said: "All right, Mike. Thanks. Thanks for everything."

I stood and watched her go down the stairs and out the dirty door. After that I went back and did what I had to do. My face felt cool for a long time where she had touched it.

"You're hornin' in on things that don't concern you,"

the voice over the phone cautioned Mike Shayne. An unnecessary and futile warning, since the red-haired private shamus was always concerned with murder—particularly with a case of pre-war Monet cognac in the offing. An exciting new yarn in the famous series by **BRETT HALLIDAY**,

A TASTE FOR COGNAC

Plus: the return of Cellini Smith, too long absent from our pages, in *Murder A.W.O.L.*, by **ROBERT REEVES**, a thrill-a-minute kill-fest that all began in Selective Service Board No. 246 and wound up in a three-cornered rat race with an exposition that blew up right in Cellini's face; the latest Luther McGavock novelette by **MERLE CONSTINER**, *Killer Stay 'Way From My Door*; and an absorbing new yarn about Ben Corbett, the D.A.'s bundle carrier, by **JULIUS LONG**.

November issue on sale now.



BLACK MASK