

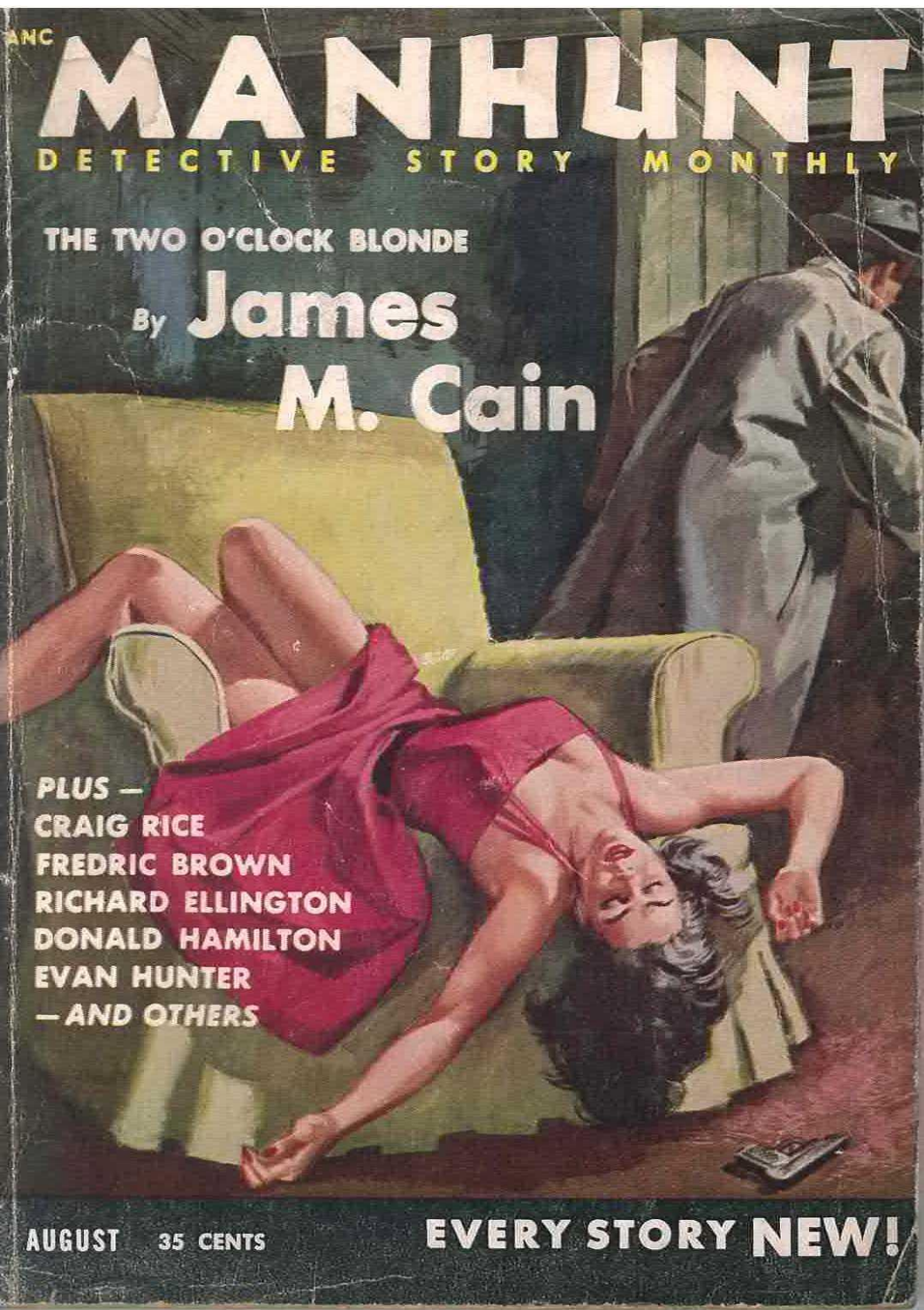
ANC

MANHUNT

DETECTIVE STORY MONTHLY

THE TWO O'CLOCK BLONDE

By **James
M. Cain**



**PLUS —
CRAIG RICE
FREDRIC BROWN
RICHARD ELLINGTON
DONALD HAMILTON
EVAN HUNTER
— AND OTHERS**

AUGUST 35 CENTS

EVERY STORY NEW!

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Throwback

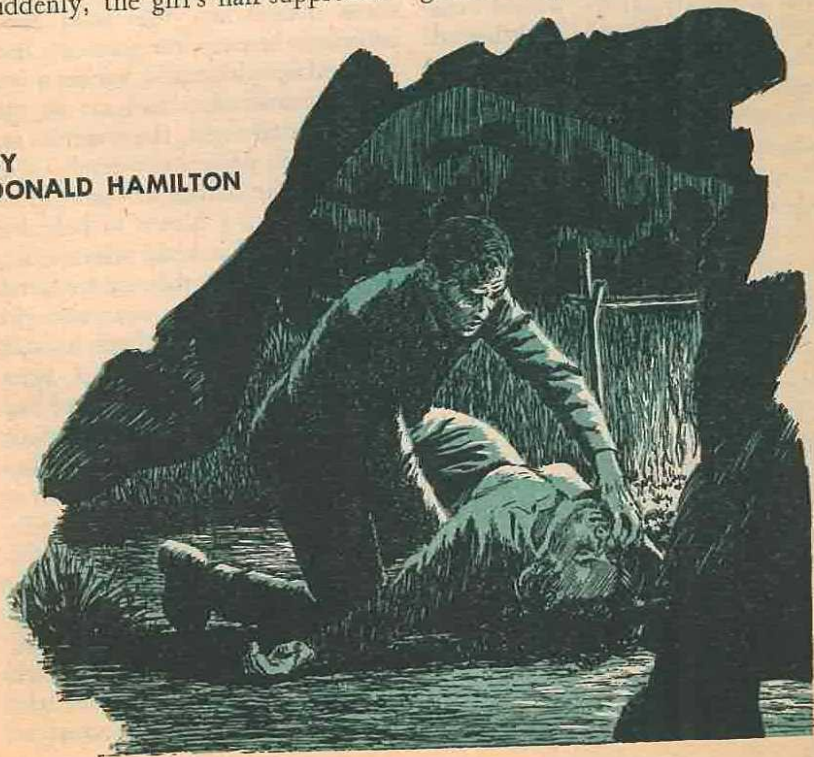
A few corpses more or less didn't matter. After all, the streets were already piled high with them . . .

THERE was a fight in the camp that night. It went the usual way; after three months of this kind of life, George Hardin could have written the script from memory: the firelight, the two men's voices rising suddenly, the girl's half-suppressed

scream as she was roughly swept aside. Then the men were flailing at each other in the flickering orange light; then closing in and grappling, tearing up the ground with their

feet. There was the usual officious character — this time a stranger in a tattered air force uniform — who waved everybody back. "Let the boys fight it out," he shouted, "let the best man win!" There was the girl standing back a little watching,

BY
DONALD HAMILTON



her tongue occasionally stealing out to moisten her lips.

Looking up, Hardin saw his wife come around the edge of the light towards him. He tried to catch her eye; failing, he looked back to the straining, panting, sweating men by the fire. They crashed to the ground and rolled almost to the feet of the girl. She stood unmoving, watching them, as if unaware that she could easily be knocked down by their heedless violence and badly hurt. In a world where most of the women along the roads had taken refuge in what durable men's clothes they could find, this girl still wore a wool suit, a sweater, and high-heeled pumps, all hinting vaguely of expensive origin, and all looking about the way you would expect expensive clothes to look after three months of campfires and sleeping in the bushes. But the firelight flattered her, emphasizing the long lines of her body and the strong planes of her face, and almost failing to reveal the uncut, unwashed, uncombed look of her hair and the state of her clothes.

The firelight gleamed on the tip of her tongue as she again moistened her pale lips, long strangers to lipstick. The action gave her a predatory, wanton look as she watched, unmoving, the two men fighting over her. Yet Hardin had a feeling that she was not really concerned over the outcome. He did not think it mattered to her in the least which of the men took her; any more than

another snag in her torn sweater would matter, or another stain on her grimy skirt, or another crack in her broken shoes. She did not care, because she was dead. She had died three months ago. Nothing more could happen to her now.

He recognized the look. Right afterwards, it had been understandable; they had all been dazed and unbelieving. He remembered himself and Ellen getting out of the car that morning on the highway, still dressed for the party they had attended at the home of a friend who lived outside of town. The jets had come over when they had been halfway home, the roads had jammed up with traffic within a few minutes, and they had sat in the stalled car all night, the windows up against the fine powdery dust, watching the unimaginable sight of the world being blown to hell. He remembered the little whimpering noise Ellen had made in his arms when the flame had gone up straight ahead of them. Sometimes he still wondered if the kids had been asleep when it hit, or if they had had time to wake up and be frightened; and if Mrs. Strong, the sitter, had been able to calm them. Not that it really mattered.

In the morning they had left the car and gone ahead on foot, neither saying anything about where they were going, but hurrying, breathless, along the miles of highway, the stalled cars powdered with dust, the thin sunshine that later turned to

rain. There were other people, some standing around, or sitting, dazed and blank; others moving quickly and purposefully like themselves, but with a kind of sleepwalking look about them.

The closer they came to it, the tighter the cars were packed; there had been collisions, bent bumpers, crumpled fenders, once important but now insignificant. In the blast area itself — long before the town was in sight — the going had got progressively worse, with fallen trees and telephone poles and snakelike coils of wire down across the pavement. The very pavement itself had no longer been smooth, as if the earth had moved a little during the night; embankments had run down over the road, bridges had fallen. There had been dead people and injured ones among the living.

Then they had come to the top of the rise above the town, and there had been no need to go further. Beyond there was only dust.

He remembered turning to his wife and looking at her for the first time since the morning, seeing a strange, haggard woman in a torn fur wrap and the remnants of a taffeta evening gown. Then there had been a sound in the air and they had fled together as a flight of jets went over.

He could never remember much about the next few days except that they had hidden in the woods and it had rained most of the time: they

had been the only people in the world for a while, sharing the warmth of each other's bodies against the cold spring nights in the places where they hid, hearing the planes overhead from time to time. He could not remember anything they had said to each other. Then the sun came out and there were no more planes and they left the shelter of the woods and, each shocked at the other's incredible appearance, as if they had not opened their eyes for the days and weeks that had passed, they had stolen soap and food and fresh clothes from a small country store that had already been looted several times. That had been while it was still easy, before the farmers and the scanty population of the untouched small towns had organized against the displaced, hungry hordes from about the destroyed cities. Since then he had twice had to use the revolver which, with a box of cartridges, he had found in the glove compartment of an abandoned car in which they had stayed one rainy night.

It had been another funny war, George Hardin thought, as he watched the two men on the ground pounding at each other with growing weariness: there had been the same year of preliminary skirmishing with the good old-fashioned weapons that just blew cities up a block at a time; for a while it had looked as if nobody would have the nerve to start the ball rolling. But when it started rolling, brother, he told himself, it

really rolled. And here these two jackasses, having avoided atomic death by a miracle, were trying to murder each other with their fists. And the girl would give herself numbly to the victor because it did not matter, because she didn't care what happened to her in this nasty world that wouldn't keep her hair in permanents. He had seen the attitude before, and he had no respect for it.

"Who is it?" Ellen asked, reaching him and sitting down beside him. He was always glad to look at her these days, proud of her for managing to keep herself looking clean if not exactly dainty in the overall trousers and the boy's denim shirt they had found for her. Some of the other women — and the men, too — had let themselves get pretty unappetizing; it was easy enough to do. But Ellen always looked nice, even at the end of a long day of walking. "Who is it?" she asked. "Anybody we know?"

"One's Jack Dodd," Hardin said. They both knew Jack Dodd; he was by way of being the group bully. He had once made a pass at Ellen, to be discouraged by Hardin's gun. The fact that they were married, which Dodd had claimed not to know, had let the man back down without too much loss of pride. "The other just joined up today with the girl," Hardin said. "I don't know his name." He glanced at his wife. "Where have you been?"

"I want to talk to you, darling.

Let's get out of here for a moment."

Hardin glanced at the fighters. "Well, Jack's got him licked, anyway. Looks like Miss High-heels has a new protector."

"Mrs. High-heels," Ellen said. "She's wearing a wedding ring."

There was something disturbing about the thought that a few months ago this young girl, now being fought over like a camp floozy, had had a husband, a home, perhaps even children. Hardin put the thought aside; every person you met on the roads these days had a tragedy. Come to that, if he was going to brood on tragedies, he had a perfectly good one of his own. He put this thought quickly aside as well, and followed his wife out of the camp.

Away from the fire, they could see the light of a farm in the distance, up the hill. The camp was down among the trees, between the highway and a creek. Out in the open it was quite bright from a half moon that, getting ready to set, still hung above the horizon. The silence was the thing you noticed, Hardin thought; no traffic on the road, no planes overhead, no radios or television sets playing in the distance.

"Let's not get too far away," he said feeling for the gun in his pocket. "I don't want some farmer to blow my head off with a shotgun. They're getting tougher all the time."

Ellen said, "Do you think we'll ever find a place where they'll leave

us alone? I—I never thought I'd know what it was like to feel like an Okie."

"We'll find some place," he said. "Or make one." They faced each other for a moment; then he took her in his arms and kissed her hard. "Don't go running off like that," he said at last, a little breathlessly. "Another couple of minutes and I'd have been chasing around looking for you. Don't get lost, darling. This would be a hell of a world to be alone in."

"George," she said presently, "George, do you really think it's this way all over the world?"

"I don't know. Perhaps not. Perhaps it's just such a hell of a big job of rehabilitation that the countries that weren't smashed can't figure out where to start. Or perhaps they simply don't want to."

"What do you mean?"

"When the big boys knock each other out, it gives the little fellows a chance. Why should they rush in to put us back on our feet again? Most of them were never very fond of us, anyway." He stroked her hair gently. "It's all right, Ellen. We'll make out."

"We're going to have to," she whispered.

"What do you mean?"

"I saw that doctor, George. He says there's no doubt about it."

He was silent for a moment, taking this in. "Is it . . . is everything all right?"

"Yes," she said. "He didn't think

I ought to have any trouble, particularly after having had two normal—" She checked herself; it was something to which they did not refer if they could help it. "In March, he said. And he's writing out exactly what we're to do if . . ." Her breath caught briefly. ". . . if there's no doctor handy when the time comes. I'll get it from him in the morning." He could not make out the expression of her face in the moonlight; but he could feel her trembling. "I'm scared, George. Doing it alone . . . it was all made so easy for me, the other times."

"I'm sorry —"

"Don't say that!" she breathed fiercely. "Don't ever say that. We wanted it and we're going to have it and to hell with this lousy world. Somebody's got to keep on living. I'm not a bit sorry. I'm just scared stiff."

The fight was over when they came back into camp. Somebody told them the stranger had lost and had beat it. Dodd, the victor, was lying back near the bushes, grunting occasionally as the girl, wiping the blood from his face with a wet rag, hit a sore spot. He looked rather exhausted from his victory. The girl did not seem to care greatly whether she hurt him or not; and after a while Dodd swore at her, sat up, and used the rag on himself.

The air force officer who had constituted himself referee had got himself an audience, and was holding forth. "I tell you people," he said,

"you should have seen it, it was really something. We came in like this at thirty thousand feet . . ." There were the usual gestures; if you tied a fly-boy's hands, Hardin thought, the poor guy would be unable to talk. ". . . just like going up in an express elevator. Christ, I thought the old bucket was a goner. The instruments went all to hell; I flew her home on the seat of my pants. Hit the coast at Charleston instead of Norfolk where I was heading. No radar, nothing. Christ. But you should have seen that blast, she was a beauty. Hiroshima was a firecracker beside it."

Hardin felt his wife's hand, cold, steal into his own and press it tightly. Somebody asked a question. "Moscow?" The airman laughed. "I wasn't there myself, but I talked to one of the boys. He said that what happened to Moscow shouldn't happen to a Rooshian. Haha. He was a real comic. . . . What's the matter?"

The man got slowly to his feet, facing the people who had gradually crowded in around him, as if only now realizing that their faces were hostile. Yet something in his attitude said that he had been through this before. Suddenly there was a big army automatic pistol in his hand.

"Get back there, children. Who do you think you're crowding?"

A middle-aged man said, "That's fine. But where were you boys while my wife and kids were being killed? That's what I want to know."

There was a murmur of approval through the crowd. Somebody cried, "If you were so damn brave, why didn't you stop them?"

"It wasn't my job to stop them," the airman said. "Nobody ever claimed we could stop them. All we said was that we could hit them, and we did." There was something pitiful and savage and lonely about him, Hardin thought; and wondered into how many camps this man had wandered, by how many fires he had told his story in the same challenging fashion, seeking attack so that he could defend himself. "Hypocrites," he said. "You damn hypocrites! We did what you sent us to do, yes, people like you. And now you're squawking because their fliers did the same to you. Did you expect to sit comfortably at your TV sets watching us fight your damn war for you? Well, now you know." He took a step backwards. "Stand back."

Then somebody rose out of the bushes behind him, and Hardin swept his wife to the ground as the pistol in the airman's hand discharged. They were a little back from the fire, and suddenly they were alone. Ellen sat up and shook the hair back from her face. She shivered, and turned away from the knot of people trampling, animal-like, over something on the ground. She buried her face in Hardin's shoulder.

He did not look away. There were certain things to be kept track of,

if you wanted to survive along the road, and he wanted to learn who would wind up with the airman's gun, but things were too confused to tell; and suddenly there was more confusion, the bushes crackling and snapping as armed men stepped out of the woods on all sides of the camp.

"All right, you Townies!" a man shouted. "All right, we've had enough of your kind around here. Get on the road and start moving —"

Somebody kicked the fire apart. A revolver went off, answered by the heavy report of a shotgun; and the revolver again, and the shotgun, and something that sounded like a deer rifle; and people were running and crawling through the darkness.

"Come on!" Hardin whispered urgently. "Let's get the hell out of here —"

He reached for his wife's shoulder, and suddenly the din and confusion seemed to move to a great distance, as he felt the terrible slackness with which her body yielded to his touch. When he touched her face, his hand came away warm and wet with blood. He picked her up.

"Ellen," he whispered.
"Ellen . . ."

Daylight found him crouching in the bushes near the stream. After a while he got up slowly, looked around, and went back to where the camp had been. It was very quiet now. The fire was still smoldering. Two bodies lay near it, and various items of personal equipment lay

discarded around it. He found a blanket and an army entrenching tool and went back to the edge of the creek, selecting a little rise overlooking a meadow as a suitable place to dig. Then he went back into the bushes with the blanket, wrapped up his burden carefully, and carried it to the grave, filling this and laying the sod back over it with care. He tried to remember a prayer but none would come to him.

He heard a splashing in the creek but did not turn at once, until footsteps stopped behind him. Then he rose to face the newcomers, Jack Dodd and the girl for whom Dodd had fought the previous night. They were both wet to the armpits and muddy to the knees from wading the creek and scrambling up the steep earth bank. The girl carried her high-heeled shoes in her hands; after a moment she leaned down to put them on, making no other effort to pull her wet clothes straight or wring them out; she would dry in time, her attitude said, and who cared, anyway?

"Your wife?" Jack Dodd asked, glancing at the place where the sod had been replaced.

Hardin nodded.

"Hell, that's tough," the other said. Hardin noted that Dodd carried the airman's .45 automatic. "Those damn farmers! Well they'll laugh on the other side of their mouths pretty soon." Dodd glanced at Hardin sharply. "Come along. You look like you ought to be handy

in a scrap. This ought to be right in your line."

"What?"

"We're sick of being kicked around. A bunch of us is going to raid that farm back there. Raid it and burn it to the ground. Show the bastards they can't kick us around. Just because nobody dropped any bombs on them they think they're God Almighty."

"What will you do after that?"

"Get the hell out, I guess. We just want to give them something to remember us by, for last night, until we get stronger and come back this way. . . . You've got a gun, haven't you? That's swell. Look, Hardin, I've got ideas. Get a bunch together — this raiding a farm is nothing, see — get a bunch of tough cookies with guns, like you and me and, hell, we can put the fear of God into these bastards. They'll pay us to lay off. Protection, like. Better than being driven up and down the roads like sheep, eh?" Dodd made a gesture with his big, battered hands. "Hell, I don't like to go in for the rough stuff, but what choice do they give us? It isn't our fault we haven't got a place to stay."

He still could not quite get it into his head that Ellen was dead; but he knew that he was getting very tired of people whose troubles were always somebody else's fault. The guilt for what had happened was everywhere; you might as well take a piece of it and start chewing. You had to get used to the taste.

"Count me out," Hardin said.

"That's a hell of a way to act," Jack Dodd said. "After the way they killed your wife?"

"Let me worry about my wife," Hardin said.

"You'll just leave her lying there dead?" the other man said. "So sorry, Mr. Farmer, my wife got in the way of one of your bullets . . ." Dodd stared at Hardin for a moment, then shrugged. "All right. But if you're that peaceful, you've got no use for a gun, so pass it over. I can find a guy who will use it." His voice became harsher. "Come on, come on! Listen, Hardin, I haven't forgotten that you slapped my wrist once just for speaking civilly to your wife . . ."

Dodd took a step forward, reaching for the gun in Hardin's fist. Hardin backed away quickly, swinging the gun around and then bringing it hip-high, tilting the muzzle up at Dodd's face.

For an instant, they faced each other, the silence between them as deadly ominous as a primed hand grenade. Their eyes locked, and they each read meaning into the other man's face, each striving to understand that meaning. It was Hardin who grasped it first. His finger tightened on the trigger of his gun. The pistol kicked in his fist, sent a shock rumbling up the length of his arm.

He saw Dodd's face erupt when the bullet took it, and then Dodd pitched forward into the dirt, and

the sound of the shot seemed to linger on the air for a long while, long after he had crumpled to the ground, his face holding a look of shocked surprise under the blood.

Hardin looked at the revolver in his hand and frowned; he was getting a little too handy with the thing. That was three times he had used it. He would have to watch that, he reflected, as he picked up the other weapon and felt the dead man for another clip. There was none, but .45 Auto was a common caliber and he had no doubt he would find more shells for it along the road.

Grief struck him suddenly, like the ache of a nagging tooth suddenly flaring into pain. *Where are you going now?* he asked himself. *What are you going to do? You with two guns and nobody, nothing.*

The girl, about whom he had completely forgotten, stirred a little on the spot where she was standing, from which she had not moved. In daylight, her wet and grimy clothes, her streaked face and stringy hair made it almost impossible to recall the hint of beauty that the firelight had suggested the evening before.

She looked merely hungry and dirty. The wedding ring, and a rather good diamond, gleamed on her hand like a forgotten memory. The fact that she had been allowed to retain her rings through all her experiences was, Hardin reflected, a commentary on the situation: it had not taken people long to realize that you could not eat jewelry. These days you could carry a bar of gold safely down the highway, but you were very apt to be killed for a can of Spam.

He looked at her for a moment longer. In his mind was something Ellen had said: *Somebody's got to go on living*. After a moment, he put the guns away, one in his pocket and the other under his belt. He did not look at the broken turf by his feet, but turned away.

Somewhere to the south there would be a place where a couple of people could endure the winter to come without freezing to death. After that, who knew?

"Come on," he said irritably over his shoulder, then flushed a little as he saw that the girl was walking right beside him.

