

You'll Die Laughing

Norbert Davis

THERE ARE HAPPY stories about the lives of the hard-working, hard-drinking writers for the pulps, those wildly creative typing machines who produced a hundred thousand words a year and up. Walter B. Gibson, who wrote most of The Shadow novels, famously produced more than a million words a year for more than twenty straight years. Some went into other kinds of writing: for Hollywood, slick magazines, books, radio, and, later, television.

And there are unhappy stories. One of the bright young talents who sold his first story to *Black Mask* while still a law student at Stanford, Norbert Davis (1909-1949), had so much writing success so quickly that he didn't bother to take the bar exam. As quickly as he could produce a new story, it sold—first to the pulps, then to the higher-paying slicks like *The Saturday Evening Post*. Combining the excitement of a fast-moving mystery with humor, there seemed to be no limit to his potential.

Several marriages went bad, his agent died unexpectedly, and the slicks started to reject some of his work. Having turned his back on the pulps where he got his start, he felt it would condemn him as a failure to return to those pages. At the age of forty, he closed his garage door, started his car engine, and died of carbon monoxide poisoning.

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You'll Die Laughing

Norbert Davis



*She kept the door almost closed.
"And who do you think you are, sonny boy?"*

*A soft-hearted loan-shark's legman
learns—the hard way—never to buy
a strange blonde a hamburger or
complain if the neighbor's radio
blasts too long and loud*

CHAPTER ONE BLOOD FROM TURNIPS



HE WAS A short pudgy man, and he looked faintly benign even now with his eyes almost closed and his lips twisted awry with the effort of his breathing. He had silver-white hair that curled in smooth exact

waves. It was almost dawn and it was bitter cold.

The outer door of the apartment lobby was open, and the wind made a sharp hurrying sound in the dark empty canyon of the street outside.

The pudgy man was sitting on the tiled floor of the lobby with his back against the wall, resting there, his stubby legs outspread in front of him. After a long time he began to move again, pushing his body away from the wall, turning very slowly and laboriously. His breath sounded short and sharp with the effort, but he made it and rested at last on his hands and knees.

He began to crawl toward the door and there was something inexorable about his slow stubborn progress. He opened the door wider,

fumbling blindly ahead of him, and crawled out into the street.

The wind whooped down and slapped the folds of his long blue overcoat tight around his legs, pushed with impatient hands as if to hurry him. But he crawled down the steps very slowly, one by one, and reached the sidewalk and turned and made his inching patient way down the hill toward the wan glow of the street light on the corner.

Behind him, the apartment lobby was empty and cold, with the wind pushing at the half-open door and making the hinges complain in fitful little squeaks. On the wall at the spot where the pudgy man had leaned his back there was an irregular smear of blood, bright red and glistening with a sinister light all of its own.

Dave Bly had hurried as much as he could, but it was after six o'clock in the evening when he came in from the street and trotted up the long dingy flight of stairs to the second story of the office building.

Janet was still waiting for him and he could hear the *tap-tap-tap* of her typewriter. He whistled once and heard the typewriter stop with a faint *ping*, saw her slim shadow through the frosted glass as she got up from her desk and started to put on her hat.

Bly ran on up a second flight of stairs to the third floor, hurrying now, with the thought of the interview ahead making something shrink inside him. He went down the third-floor corridor toward the lighted door at the end. The letters on its glass panel were squat and fat and dignified, and they made the legend—

**J. S. CROZIER
PERSONAL LOANS**

Bly opened the door and went into the narrow outer office. The door into the private office was open and J. S. Crozier's harsh voice came through it.

"Bly, is that you?"

"Yes, sir."

A swivel chair squeaked and then J. S. Crozier came to the door and said: "Well, you're late enough."

"I had to do quite a lot of running around."

"Let's see what you got."

Bly handed him a neat sheaf of checks and bills and the typewritten list of delinquent debtors. J. S. Crozier thumbed through the bills and checks, and the light overhead made dark shadowed trenches of the lines in his face. He had a thick solid body that he carried stiffly erect. He wore rimless glasses that magnified his eyes into colorless blobs and a toupee that was a bulging mat of black hair so artificial it was grotesque.

"Forty-three dollars!" he said, throwing the sheaf of bills on Bly's desk. "And half these checks will bounce. That's not much to show for a day's work, Bly."

"No, sir."

J. S. Crozier flicked his finger at the typewritten list. "And what's the matter with this Mrs. Tremaine? She's been delinquent for six weeks. Did you see her?"

"She's had a serious operation. She's in the hospital."

"Well, why didn't you try there?"

"I did," said Bly. He hadn't, but he knew better than to try to explain why. "They wouldn't let me see her."

"Oh, they wouldn't! When will they?"

"Next week."

"Huh! Well, you get in there to see her as soon as you can, and you tell her that if she doesn't pay up her loan—plus the back compound interest and the delinquent collection fee—she might just as well stay in the hospital because she won't have any furniture to come home to."

"All right."

J. S. Crozier grinned at him. "Haven't got your heart in this, have you, Bly? A little on the squeamish side, eh?"

Bly didn't say anything. J. S. Crozier kept grinning at him and he let his colorless eyes move slowly from Bly's shoes, which were beginning to crack through the polish across the toes, up along the shabby topcoat to Bly's face, pale and a little drawn with pinched lines of strain around his mouth.

"I can't afford to be squeamish, Bly. Maybe you can."

Bly didn't answer, and J. S. Crozier said reflectively: "I'm disappointed in your work, Bly. Perhaps you aren't suited to such a menial task. Are you contemplating a change soon?"

"No," said Bly.

"Perhaps you'd better think about it. Although I understand jobs are very hard to find these days... Very hard, Bly."

Bly was quivering with a feeling of sick hopeless anger. He tried to hide it, tried so hard that the muscles of his face seemed wooden, but he knew he wasn't succeeding. J. S. Crozier

chuckled knowingly. He kept Bly standing there for a full minute, and then he said with the undertone of the chuckle still in his voice: "That's all, Bly. Good-night."

"Good-night," Bly said thickly.

J. S. Crozier let him get almost to the door. "Oh, Bly."

Bly turned. "Yes?"

"This janitor at your place. This Gus Findley. He's been delinquent for three weeks now. Get something out of him tonight."

"I'll try."

"No," J. S. Crozier said gently. "Don't try, Bly. Do it. I feel that you have a responsibility there. He mentioned your name when he applied for the loan, so naturally I had confidence in his ability to pay. Get some money from him tonight."

Bly went out and closed the door. Janet was waiting there, a slim small girl with her face white and anxious for him under the dark brim of her hat. She took his arm, and Bly leaned heavily against her, his throat so thick with the choking anger that gripped him that he couldn't breathe. He pulled himself upright in a second and started walking because he knew J. S. Crozier would be listening for his footsteps and grinning. Janet walked close beside him. They went down the steps, and Bly's anger loosened and became a sick despair.

"He knew you were there waiting, Janet. That's why he talked so loud. So you could hear him bawl me out."

"I know, dear. Never mind."

"Every day he does something like that. He knows I wouldn't do his dirty work for half a minute if I could find something else. I wouldn't

anyway—I'd starve first—if it weren't for you and Bill and—and hoping..."

They were in the street now and she was standing small and straight beside him, looking up into his face. "We'll go on hoping, Dave."

"For how long?" Bly demanded bitterly. "How long?"

"Forever, if we have to," said Janet quietly.

Bly stared down at her. "Thank you," he said in a whisper. "Thank you for you, my dear." He grinned wryly. "Well, I'm through crying in my beer for the moment. Shall we go squander our money on Dirty Dan's thirty-five cent de luxe dinner?"

CHAPTER TWO

THE BLONDE IN 107



T WAS after ten when Bly got to the apartment building where he lived, and he had to use his key to open the entrance door. The air was thick and sluggish inside the small lobby, full of a wrangling jangle of sound made by a radio being played overly loud in one of the apartments upstairs.

Bly went on a diagonal across the lobby, rapped lightly on a door beside the staircase. He could hear limping steps inside coming across a bare floor, and then Gus Findley opened the door and peered nearsightedly at him.

"Hello, Mr. Bly. You come in?"

Bly shook his head. "No thanks, Gus. I hate to ask you, but how about the money you owe on that loan you got from Crozier?"

Gus Findley had a tired resigned smile. "No, Mr. Bly. I'm sorry. I ain't got it."

Bly nodded slowly. "All right, Gus."

"I honest ain't got it."

"I know. Gus, why did you borrow money from him?"

"I thought you worked for him, Mr. Bly. I thought he's all right if you work for him."

Bly said: "He's a shark, Gus. That contract you signed carries over a hundred percent interest. It doesn't show on the contract as interest, but there it is."

"It don't make no difference, Mr. Bly. You shouldn't feel bad. I couldn't read very well anyway, that fine print, with my eyes not so good. I had to have the money for the hospital. My sister's boy got an operation."

"Why didn't he go to the clinic—on charity?"

"No," Gus said gently. "No. I couldn't have him do that. Not my sister's boy. You know how it is."

"Sure," said Bly.

Gus moved his thin, stooped shoulders. "Now he's got to have cod liver's oil and special milk and tonics. It costs so much I ain't got none left for Mr. Crozier. I ain't tryin' to cheat him, Mr. Bly. I'll pay as soon as I can."

"Sure, Gus," said Bly wearily, knowing that as soon as Gus could wouldn't be soon enough for J. S. Crozier. It would be the same bitter story again—garnishment of the major part of Gus's meager salary, attachment of what few sticks of furniture he owned. And more humiliation for Bly. J. S. Crozier would never miss the chance of making Bly serve the papers on Gus.

The lobby seemed colder and darker. The muffled wrangle of the radio went on unceasingly and a woman's laughter sounded through it, thin and hysterical.

"Someone having a party?" Bly asked.

Gus nodded gloomily. "Yeah. That one below you—that Patricia Fitzgerald. She is no good. Six or eight complaints about the noise I got already. I called her up a couple of times and it don't do no good. I got the misery in my back and I don't like to climb them stairs. Would you maybe stop and ask her to keep quiet, Mr. Bly?"

"Sure," said Bly. "Sorry about your back, Gus."

Gus shrugged fatalistically. "Sometimes it's worse than others. How is your brother, Mr. Bly? The one that's in college."

Bly grinned suddenly. "Bill? Just swell. He's a smart kid. Going to graduate this year, and already they've offered him a job teaching in the college."

"Good," said Gus, pleased. "That's good. Then maybe, when you don't have to send him money, you can marry that nice little lady I seen you with."

"I hope so," Bly said. "But first I've got to get Bill through college. That's why I'm hanging on to this lousy job with Crozier so hard. I can't lose it now, just when Bill's all set to graduate. After he does, then I can take a chance on looking for another—something decent."

"Sure, sure," said Gus. "And you'll find it, too."

"If there is one, I will," Bly said grimly. "Well, I'll run up and see if I can tune that party down. So long, Gus."

He went up the grimy shadowed stairs and down the long hall above. The noise of the radio was much louder here, packing itself deafeningly in between the narrow walls until it was one continued formless blare. Bly stopped before the door through which it was coming and hammered emphatically on the panels.

The woman's shrill thin laughter came faintly to him. Bly waited for a while and then began to kick the bottom of the door in a regular thumping cadence. He kept it up for almost two minutes before the door opened.

Patricia Fitzgerald, if that was her real name, was a tall thin blonde. She must have been pretty once, but she looked haggard now and wearily defiant, and there was a reckless twist to her full-lipped mouth. She was drunk enough to be slightly unsteady on her feet. Her bright hair was mussed untidily and she was wearing what looked like a black fur mitten on her right hand.

"Well?" she said over the blast of the radio.

Bly said: "Do you have to play it that loud?"

She kept the door almost closed. "And who do you think you are, sonny boy?"

"I'm just the poor dope that lives above you. Will you turn that radio down a little, please?"

She considered it, swaying slightly, watching Bly with eyes that were owlishly serious. "If I turn it down will you do a favor for me, huh?"

"What?" Bly asked.

"You wait." She closed the door.

The sound of the radio suddenly went down to a thin sweet trickle of music and the

hall seemed empty without its unbearable noise.

Patricia Fitzgerald opened the door again. She no longer wore the black mitten. She was jingling some change in her right hand.

"You know where Doc's Hamburger Shack is—over two blocks on Third?"

Bly nodded. "Yes."

"You be a nice guy and run over there and get me a couple of hamburgers. If you do I won't make any more noise."

"O.K.," Bly agreed.

She gave him the change. "You tell Doc these hamburgers are for me. He knows me and he knows how I like 'em. You tell him my name and tell him they're for me. Will you?"

"All right."

"Be sure and tell him they're for me."

"Sure, sure," said Bly. "Just keep the radio turned down like it is and everything will be dandy."

"Hurry up, fella," said Patricia Fitzgerald, and neither her eyes nor her voice were blurred now.

Bly nodded patiently. He went back down the hall, down the stairs and across the lobby. The last thing he heard as he opened the front door was Patricia Fitzgerald's laughter, sounding high and hysterical without the radio to muffle it.

Doc's Hamburger Shack was a white squat building on the corner of a weed-grown lot. Its moisture-steamed windows beamed out cheerily at the night, and when Bly opened the

door the odor of frying meat and coffee swirled about his head tantalizingly.

Doc was leaning against the cash register. He was gaunt and tall and he had a bald perspiring head and a limply bedraggled mustache.

There was only one other customer. He was sitting at the far end of the counter. He was a short pudgy man and he looked pleasantly benign, sitting there relaxed with a cup of coffee on the counter in front of him. He had silver-white hair that curled in smooth exact waves. He watched Bly, sitting perfectly still, not moving anything but his round blandly innocent eyes.

"Hello, Doc," Bly said, sitting down at the counter and reaching for the crumpled evening paper on it. "I want a couple of hamburgers to go. They're not for me. They're for a blonde by the name of Patricia Fitzgerald who lives over in my apartment house. She said you'd know just how she wanted them fixed."

Doc put his hand up and tugged at one draggled end of his mustache. "Patricia Fitzgerald? Lives at the Marton Arms? Apartment 107?"

Bly nodded, engrossed in the sports page. "Yeah."

"She send you over?"

"Sure," said Bly.

"She tell you to give her name?"

Bly looked up. "Well, certainly."

"O.K.," said Doc. "O.K." He plopped two pats of meat on the grill and then sauntered casually down the counter and leaned across it in front of the pudgy man.

Bly went on reading his favorite sports column. The hamburger sizzled busily. Doc came sauntering back to the grill and began to prepare a couple of buns.

Bly had finished his sports column and was hunting through the paper for the comics when a siren began to growl somewhere near. After a while it died down and then another started up from a different direction.

“Must be a fire around here,” Bly observed.

“Naw,” said Doc. “Them’s police sirens. Fire sirens have a higher tone.” He put a paper sack on the counter. “Here’s your ‘burgers, all wrapped up. Be careful of ‘em. She don’t like ‘em mussed up at all.”

“O.K.,” Bly said. He paid Doc with the change Patricia Fitzgerald had given him and went to the door.

The pudgy man was sipping at his coffee, but he was watching Bly calculatingly over the rim of his cup.



HERE were several cars parked in front of the apartment building and one of them was a blue sedan with a long glittering radio antenna strung across its sloping top. Bly no more than half noticed it, and its identity didn’t register on him until he unlocked the front door of the apartment house and very nearly bumped into a policeman who was standing just inside the entryway. “What—” Bly said, startled. “You live here?” the policeman asked. He was standing, spread-legged, as immovable as a rock, his thumbs hooked into his broad leather gun belt.

“Yes,” Bly answered blankly. “You been in here before this evening?”

“Yes. I went out to get these hamburgers for the girl who lives below me in 107.”

The policeman’s expression was so elaborately disinterested that it was a dead give-away. “Dame by the name of Fitzgerald?”

“Yes. She asked me—” The policeman came one smooth sliding step closer, suddenly caught Bly’s right arm by wrist and elbow.

Bly struggled unavailingly. “Here! What— what—”

“March,” said the policeman. “Right up those stairs. Get tough and I’ll slap you down.”

He steered Bly across the lobby and up the stairs. He went down the hall with Bly stumbling along beside him willy-nilly like a clumsy partner in some weird dance.

The door of Patricia Fitzgerald’s apartment was partially open and the policeman thrust Bly roughly through it and followed him inside.

“This is the bird,” he said importantly. “I nabbed him downstairs in the lobby.”

Bly heard the words through a thick haze that seemed to enclose his brain. He was staring unbelievably at Patricia Fitzgerald. She was lying half twisted on her back at the end of the couch. There was a bright thin line across the strained white of her throat and blood had bubbled out of it and soaked into the carpet in a pool that was still spreading sluggishly. Her eyes were wide open, and the light above her glinted in the brightness of her hair.

There were two men in the room. One was sitting on the couch. He was thick and enormously wide across the shoulders. He sat with his hands on his knees, patient and unmoving, as though he were waiting for something he didn’t expect to happen very

soon. His eyes were blankly empty and he wheezed a little when he breathed.

The other man was standing in the center of the room with his hands folded behind him. He was small and shabby-looking, but he had an air of queer dusty brightness about him, and his eyes were like black slick beads. He had a limp brown-paper cigarette pasted in one corner of his lower lip.

“Name?” he asked, and then more loudly, “You! What’s your name?”

“Dave Bly,” Bly said. “Is—is she—”

“Claims he lives upstairs,” said the policeman. “Says he went out to get some hamburgers for the dame, here. I figure they was havin’ a party and he gave her the business and then run and got them hamburgers and came back all innocent, tryin’ to fake himself an alibi so—”

“Outside,” said the shabby little man.

The policeman stared. “Huh?”

“Scram.”

“Well sure, Lieutenant,” the policeman said in an injured tone. He went out and shut the door.

“I’m Vargas,” the shabby man said. “Lieutenant of detectives. This is my partner, Farnham. What do you know about this business here?”

Bly fought to speak coherently. “Nothing. Nothing at all. She was playing her radio too loud and I asked her to stop, and she said she would if I’d go get her a couple of hamburgers...”

The big man, Farnham, got off the couch slowly and ominously. He came close to Bly, caught him by the front of the coat. Effortlessly

he pulled Bly forward and then slammed him back hard against the wall. His voice was thick and sluggishly indifferent.

“You lie. She was drunk and you got in a beef with her and slapped her with a knife.”

Bly felt a sinking sense of nightmare panic. “No! I didn’t even know her! I wasn’t here—”

“You lie,” Farnham droned, slamming Bly against the wall again. “You’re a dirty woman-killer. She got sassy with you and you picked up that knife and stuck it in her throat.”

Bly’s voice cracked. “I did not! Let go—”

The policeman who had brought Bly in was having some trouble in the hall, and they could hear him say indignantly: “Here now, lady! You can’t go in there! Get away from that door! Lieutenant Vargas don’t want nobody— Lady! Quit it, now! There’s a corpse in there—all blood...”

A thin querulous voice answered snappily: “A corpse! Phooey! My dear departed husband was an undertaker, young man, and I’ve seen a lot more corpses than you ever will, and they don’t scare me a bit. You want me to jab you right in the eye with this knitting needle?”

Evidently the policeman didn’t, because the door opened and a little old lady in a rusty black dressing-gown pushed her way into the room. She had a wad of gray hair perched up on top of her head like some modernistic hat, and she wore rimless spectacles on the end of a long and inquisitive nose.

“Hah!” she said. “I thought so. Bullying people, eh? My husband—dear Mr. Tibbet, the mortician—knew a lot of policemen when he was alive, and he always said they were

extremely low-class people—rude and stupid and uncouth.”

Farnham sighed. He let go of Bly and went back and sat down on the couch again. The springs creaked under his weight, and he relaxed into his position of patient ominous waiting.

“Who’re you?” Vargas asked.

“Tibbet. Mrs. Jonathan Q. Tibbet—Q, for Quinlan—and you’d better listen when I talk, young man.”

“I’m listening,” said Vargas.

“Hah!” said Mrs. Tibbet. “Insolent, eh? And your clothes aren’t pressed, either, and what’s more, I’ll bet you drink. Go ahead and bully me! Go ahead! I dare you! My dear dead husband was a personal friend of the mayor, and I’ll call up and have you put in your place if you so much as lay a finger on me or this nice young man.”

“Lady,” said Vargas in a resigned tone, “I wouldn’t touch you for ten dollars cash, but this lad is a suspect in a murder case and—”

“Suspect!” Mrs. Tibbet repeated contemptuously. “Bah! Did you hear me? I said *bah!*”

“I heard you,” said Vargas.

Mrs. Tibbet jabbed a steel knitting needle in his direction like a rapier. “And why isn’t he a suspect? Because he has an alibi, that’s why! And I’m it. I was listening to this hussy carrying on in here. I saw this young man come and request her very courteously to stop playing her radio so loudly. I was watching right through my keyhole across the hall. He didn’t even go inside the room. And when he left I heard her laughing in here. There was another man in here all the time, and if you and your low-class companion on the couch weren’t so

stupid and lazy you’d start finding out who it was.”

“Did you see this other gent?” Vargas asked patiently.

“Oh! So you’re insinuating I’d snoop and spy on my neighbors, are you? I’ll speak to the mayor about this. Mr. Tibbet laid out his first two wives, and they were very friendly all Mr. Tibbet’s life, and if I tell him that his drunken policemen are insulting and bullying me, he’ll—”

“Yes, yes,” said Vargas. “Sure. Absolutely. Did you see the other guy that was in here?”

“I did not.”

“Did you hear his voice?”

“Yes. It was a very low-class voice—like yours.”

“Yeah,” said Vargas. He raised his voice. “O’Shay!”

The policeman peered in the door. “What, Lieutenant?”

“Escort Mrs. Tibbet back to her room.”

The policeman looked doubtful. “Take it easy with that needle, lady. Come on, now. The lieutenant is very busy.”

Mrs. Tibbet allowed herself to be guided gingerly to the door, and then turned to fire a parting shot. “And let me tell you that I won’t hear of you bullying this nice young man any more. He’s a very courteous and quiet and honest and hard-working and respectful young man, and he could no more commit a murder than I could, and if you had any sense you’d know it, but if you had any sense you wouldn’t be a policeman, so I’m telling you.”

“That’s right,” said Vargas, “you are. Goodbye.”

Mrs. Tibbet went out with her escort and slammed the door violently and triumphantly. Farnham, sitting stolidly on the couch, wheezed once and then said: “Back door.”

Vargas glanced at him with his beadily cruel eyes, then stared at Bly. “Maybe. Yeah, maybe. What about it, sonny?”

“About what?” Bly demanded, bewildered.

Vargas said: “Farnham thinks maybe you went around and came in the back after you left the front door.”

“I didn’t!” Bly denied angrily. “You can check up at the stand where I got these hamburgers.”

“Yeah. You said you didn’t know the dame. Then why did you get her those hamburgers?”

Bly’s face was flushed with anger. “I could have told you in the first place if you’d given me a chance!”

“You got a chance now. Do it.”

“Gus, the janitor, asked me to stop here on the way up and ask her to be more quiet. She was tight and she said she would if I’d run over and get some hamburgers for her. I didn’t want to argue with her and I didn’t have anything in particular to do, so I went. She gave me the money for them.”

“What hamburger stand?”

“Doc’s place—over on Third. He’ll remember.” Bly had a sudden thought. “I was in there when I heard your sirens. I was waiting then. Do—do you know when she was killed?”

“And how,” said Vargas. “She let out a screech like a steam engine when she got it. We got three calls from three different tenants. Did you see the guy that was in here with her?”

“No,” said Bly. “I thought there was someone, but I didn’t see him. She didn’t open the door wide.”

Vargas nodded. “O.K. Beat it. Stick around inside the building. I’ll maybe want to talk to you again.”

Bly stood his ground. “Well, you listen here. You have no right to grab me and push me around and accuse me—”

“Sure, sure,” Vargas agreed lazily. “Your constitutional rights have been violated. Write a letter to the governor, but don’t do it here. We’re going to be busy. Scram, now.”

CHAPTER THREE

FALL-GUY



LY went out into the hall. He was so blindly indignant at the manhandling he had received that it wasn’t until he had reached his own room that the reaction began to take effect. When he fumbled for his key, he found that he was still carrying the paper sack with the two hamburgers inside.

The odor of them and the feel of their warmth seeping through the wrappings against his palm suddenly sickened him. He went very quickly through his apartment and dropped them, still wrapped, into the garbage pail on the enclosed back porch. He sat down then in the living-room and drew several deep steadying breaths. He noticed that his forehead was wet with nervous perspiration.

Bly had never before run into violent and criminal death, and coming as it had without the slightest warning made it seem like a hazily horrible nightmare. Even now he could see Patricia Fitzgerald as plainly as if she were in the same room with him—lying so queerly crumpled on the floor, with the bright red thread across her throat and the light glinting in the metallic yellow of her hair.

Back of him the door into the kitchen swung shut with a sudden creaking swish. Bly's breath caught in his throat. He came up out of the chair and swung around, every muscle in his body achingly tense.

There was no other sound that he could hear, no other movement. He approached the door in long stealthy strides, pushed it back open again.

The kitchen was as empty as it had been when he had gone through it just the moment before, but now, standing in the doorway, he could feel a distinct draft blowing against the back of his neck.

Puzzled, he turned around. The door into his bedroom was open. There was no other place from which the draft could be coming. Bly went across the living-room and turned on the light in the bedroom.

One of the two windows on the other side of his bed was open. Bly started at it, frowning. He remembered very distinctly that he had closed and locked both of the windows before he had left for work in the morning because it had looked like it might rain.

He stepped closer, and then he saw that the glass in the upper pane of the window had been broken at a spot which, had the window been closed, would have been just above the lock. Fragments of glass glinted on the floor below the window, and there was a long gouge in the white paint of the sill.

Bly turned and walked quickly out of the apartment and down the stairs to the first-floor hall. The policeman was still on guard in front of Patricia Fitzgerald's apartment, and he surveyed Bly with evident displeasure.

"So it's you again. What do you want now?"

Bly said: "I want to see Vargas."

"It's Lieutenant Vargas to you," said the policeman. "And what do you want to see him about?"

"I'll tell that to him."

"O.K., smarty. He'll throw you right out of there on your can, I hope." The policeman opened the apartment door and announced: "Here's that dope from upstairs again."

Vargas and Farnham had changed places now. Vargas was sitting on the couch. He had his hat pulled down over his eyes and he looked like he was dozing. Farnham was standing in the center of the room staring gloomily at the crumpled contents of an ornamental desk he had hauled out into the middle of the floor.

"There ain't nothing like that in here," he said to Vargas.

"Look out in the kitchen," Vargas ordered. "Sometimes dames stick stuff away in the coffee cups or the sugar bowl. Don't paw around too much until the fingerprint guy gets here." He pushed his hat-brim back and stared at Bly.

"Well?"

Bly said: "There's something upstairs—in my apartment—I think you ought to look at."

"There's plenty of things I ought to look at around here, if I could find them," Vargas said. "O.K. Come on."

The policeman said: "You want I should go along with you, Lieutenant? This guy is a suspect and—"

"If I wanted you to go along, I'd say so," Vargas informed him. "You get out in that hall and keep your big feet and your big mouth out of this apartment."

"Yes, sir," said the policeman glumly.

Vargas jerked his head at Bly. "Come along."

They went back upstairs to Bly's apartment, and Bly took Vargas into the bedroom and showed him the broken window.

"So what?" Vargas asked.

"I locked both those windows when I left this morning," Bly told him. "This apartment is directly above Patricia Fitzgerald's, and the fire-escape goes past her windows and mine. I think the man who killed her came up the fire-escape from her bedroom, broke in this window, and then went through my apartment and out into the hall."

"You're quite a thinker," Vargas said sourly. "Just why should he clown around like that when he could just as well go out the back door of Fitzgerald's apartment?"

"Because of the lay-out of the apartment building," Bly explained. "If he went out her rear door, he couldn't get away without going past the front of the building because there is a blind alley on this side that doesn't go through the block. But if he came through here, he could go along the second-floor hall, down the back steps, and out through the garage underneath and at the rear of the building. He

probably didn't want to come out the front door of Patricia Fitzgerald's apartment because someone might be watching it after she screamed."

Vargas grunted. Hands in his pockets, he strolled closer to the window and examined it and the glass on the floor carefully. "Look and see if you're missing anything," he said over his shoulder.

Bly looked in his closet and the drawers of his bureau. "No. Nothing. There's nothing around here anyone could take except a few old clothes."

Farnham came quietly in the bedroom and nodded at Vargas. "I couldn't find it, but I found out why I couldn't."

"Why?" Vargas asked.

"She didn't pay none."

Vargas swung around. "What? You mean to say they let a tramp like her in here without payin' any rent in advance?"

"Yeah," Farnham said. "They had a reason for it. It seems another tenant—a party who's lived here for over a year and paid his rent on the dot every month—recommended her and said that she was a good risk."

Vargas' eyes looked beadily bright. "And who was this accommodating party?"

Farnham nodded at Bly.

"So?" said Vargas very softly.

He and Farnham stood there motionless, both of them watching Bly with the coldly detached interest of scientific observers, and Bly had the same sense of helpless bewilderment he had had when they were questioning him in the apartment below.

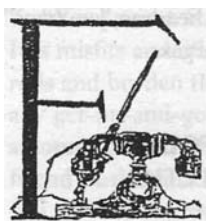
"What *is* this?" he demanded nervously. "What are you two talking about?"

"Sonny," said Vargas, "it seems like every time we turn around in this case, we fall over you. We're beginning to get tired of it. When you interrupted us downstairs, we were looking for Fitzgerald's rent receipt, just because we didn't have anything better to look for. We didn't find it, because she didn't have one, because she hadn't paid any rent yet. The reason she hadn't paid any is because *you* told the guys who own this building that she was O.K. and a good risk."

Bly swallowed hard. "You said that—that I recommended—"

"Yeah," said Vargas. "You. It seems mighty funny. You don't know this Patricia Fitzgerald at all, as you say, but you run errands for her and you recommend her as a good credit risk. You'd better come up with some answers about now."

"I never recommended her for anything to anyone!" Bly denied indignantly.



FARNHAM took a long step closer. "Don't pull that stuff. I called up the bank that owns the place, and I talked to Bingham, the vice-president in charge of all their rental property. He looked it up, and said you did."

"But I didn't!" Bly said. "I don't know—"

Farnham took another step. "Maybe you lost your memory. Maybe if you fell downstairs, you'd find it again."

"I heard you," said Mrs. Tibbet. She was standing in the doorway of the bedroom, nodding her head up and down meaningfully. "Oh, I heard you, all right. I'm a witness. Falling downstairs, eh? I know what that means. Third

degree. Dear Mr. Tibbet told me all about it. I'm going to report you to the mayor."

The policeman's anxious face appeared over her shoulder. "Lieutenant, I couldn't help it. She sneaked up the stairs when she seen Farnham come up—"

"Scram," said Vargas curtly. "You too, lady. I got no time for fooling now. I'm busy. Get out of here."

Mrs. Tibbet still had her knitting needle, and she held it up now and sighted down its thin shining length. "Make me. Go ahead. I dare you. You're not going to beat up this poor boy, and I'm going to stay right here and see that you don't. You can't bully me. I'm not afraid of you. Not one bit. Dear Mr. Tibbet always said that policemen were bums and that he could prove it by figures."

Vargas took a deep breath. "Look, lady. We just found out now that this guy Bly, here, is the bird that recommended the Fitzgerald dame when she came in here."

"That's a lie," said Mrs. Tibbet.

Farnham wheezed indignantly. "It ain't neither! I telephoned to Bingham, the vice-president—"

"I know him," said Mrs. Tibbet. "Horace Bingham. He's fat. Not as fat as you are, nor quite as sloppy, but almost. And he's even dumber than you are—if that's possible. If either one of you had asked me I could have told you who was responsible for the Fitzgerald creature's presence here, but no, you wouldn't think of a simple thing like that. You're too busy going around shouting and threatening innocent people. Mr. Tibbet always said that no detective could count above five without using his fingers and what's more—"

"That's enough for this time," Vargas told her. "You said you knew who was

responsible for the Fitzgerald girl being here. Who is it?"

"If you had any sense you'd know by this time and wouldn't have to go around asking. It is Gus Findley, of course. The janitor."

"Are you sure about that?" Vargas asked.

"I'll have you know," said Mrs. Tibbet, "that I don't go around lying to people, not even to policemen, although that would hardly count because they aren't really people. Mr. Tibbet always said that all you needed to do was furnish a policeman with a tail and he'd be at home in any tree. Gus Findley was in and out of that Fitzgerald hussy's apartment on the average of ten times a day, and in my opinion it's a scandalous affair and has been from the very-first."

Vargas jerked his head at the policeman, who was still waiting nervously in the doorway. "Get Findley."

Farnham said doubtfully: "Seems like this Findley is a pretty old boy to go in for—"

"Hah!" said Mrs. Tibbet. "Men! I could tell you a thing or two—"

"Don't bother," Vargas advised wearily.

They waited and in five minutes the policeman came back and thrust Gus Findley roughly into the bedroom. "Here he is, Lieutenant."

Gus Findley blinked at them fearfully. He looked old and sick and shaken, and in the strong light his face had a leaden pallor. "What—what is it, please?"

Vargas strolled over to him. "Now look here, you. We know that you're responsible for Patricia Fitzgerald coming to this joint, and we know you've been hanging around in her

apartment all the time. We want some facts, and we want 'em right now. Start talking."

Gus Findley's face twisted painfully. "She— she was my niece, sir." He turned to Bly. "Mr. Bly, I'm so sorry. Please don't be mad with me. She come here, and she didn't have no money, and I didn't have none I could give her on account of my sister's boy having the operation. So I—I said she could live here, and I—I told Mr. Bingham that you had recommended—"

"That's all right, Gus," Bly said uncomfortably. "If you had asked me, I probably would have recommended her anyway. Don't worry about it. It's O.K."

"It's not O.K. with me," said Vargas. "Just tell us a little more about this matter."

"She was no good," Gus said miserably. "She was never no good. Her name ain't Patricia Fitzgerald. It's Paula Findley. Her folks died, and I tried to raise her up right, but she wouldn't never do nothing I said, and then she run away with some fella and—and he didn't even marry her I don't think."

"What fella?" Vargas asked sharply.

Gus shook his head wearily. "I dunno. I never seen him. She said, when she come back, that he'd left her a long time ago. She said she was lookin' for the fella and that when she found him she was gonna get even with him and make herself a lotta money doin' it."

"What was his name?" Vargas inquired.

"I dunno, sir. Seems like he had a lot of names, from what she said. Seems like he wasn't no good, either."

"That's the boy we want," said Farnham.

Vargas nodded absently. "Yeah. Now listen, Findley—"

"*You* listen," Mrs. Tibbet invited. "Mr. Findley is an old man, and he's sick, and he's had a great shock. You're not going to ask him any more questions now. Not one more question, do you understand that? I'm going to take him right down to my apartment and give him a nice hot cup of tea, and I don't want to see any drunken, dirty, foul-mouthed detectives blundering round there while I'm doing it. You hear me, you two?"

"Oh yes, indeed," said Vargas.

CHAPTER FOUR GARBAGE COLLECTION



LY was ten minutes late to work the next morning, and J. S. Crozier was waiting for him, standing in the open door of his private office with his sallow face set in gleefully vindictive lines. "Well, Bly, I'm glad to know that you feel you are so necessary here that you can afford to disregard the rules I've been at some pains to impress on your mind."

"I'm sorry," Bly said tightly. "I was delayed..."

The bulging mat of black hair that made up J. S. Crozier's toupee had slipped askew over one ear, and he poked at it impatiently. "Yes, yes. I noticed, however, that you entered the building some fifteen minutes ago. I suppose your delay, as you so nicely term it, had something to do with the little lady who works as a typist in the office downstairs."

"I spoke to her on my way up," Bly admitted.

"No doubt, no doubt. I notice that you spend quite a little time speaking to her lately. Are you contemplating matrimony, Bly?"

"I think that's my affair—and hers," said Bly.

J. S. Crozier raised his eyebrows elaborately. "And mine, Bly, if you are talking to her when you are presumably working for me. Or *are* you?"

"Yes," said Bly.

"Thank you for telling me. I was wondering. If I may presume to advise you, Bly, I would say that it would be best for you to secure a position of a little more permanence before you take any rash steps. I'm not at all satisfied with your work, Bly. You're inclined to dawdle and find any excuse to keep from working. Aren't you, Bly?"

"I try to do my best," Bly answered.

"Yes," said J. S. Crozier. "Try. A good word. It is misfits and idlers like you who fill our relief rolls and burden the taxpayers. You haven't got any get-up-and-go about you, Bly. You'll never amount to anything. I feel sorry for your pretty friend downstairs if she marries you. I suppose you were so engrossed in her last night that you forgot all about the slight matter of the money Gus Findley owes me?"

Bly had to swallow and then swallow again before he could steady his voice. "I didn't really have a chance to talk to him about it. There was a murder at my apartment house last night and—"

"A murder!" said J. S. Crozier. "Now what kind of a fantastic fairy tale is this? I suppose you're going to try to tell me that someone murdered Gus Findley!"

"I didn't say so," Bly said, keeping a tight grip on his temper. "But the police were

questioning him about the murdered girl and the other tenants—”

“I see,” said J. S. Crozier. “Very interesting. Do you suppose you might possibly, by the exercise of some great ingenuity, get to see him tonight? I’m growing impatient with you and your excuses, Bly.”

“I’ll see him tonight.”

“You’d better,” said J. S. Crozier grimly. “Now I have a call for you to make, Bly. The party’s name is Perkins. He lives in the Marigold Apartments on Halley. Judging from that hovel that you live in, you wouldn’t know, but the Marigold is an expensive residence. This party called and wants to borrow five hundred dollars with his furniture as security. The furniture should be worth three or four times that. You go over and check up on it. Tell Perkins, if you find things satisfactory, that he can take a taxi and come back here with you, and I’ll have the money for him.”

“All right,” said Bly.

J. S. Crozier pointed a blunt forefinger. “Don’t make any mistake about the value of that furniture, Bly. And check up on the title. Do you understand? Have I made it perfectly clear to your limited intelligence, or do you want me to write it down?”

“I understand,” said Bly thickly.

“All right. And don’t you take a taxi, getting there. You take a street-car. I’ve noticed these delusions of grandeur in you. You seem to think you’re too fine and sensitive a person to hold such a menial position as this, but just remember that if you had any brains you’d have a better one. Get out, Bly. And don’t stall around with your lady friend on the second floor as you go, either.”



HE Marigold Apartments was an immense terraced gray stone building that filled a whole block. Even without J. S. Crozier’s word for it, Bly would have been immediately aware that it was an expensive residence. The doorman, after one look at Bly, was superciliously insolent and the glittering chrome-and-black-marble expanse of the lobby made Bly painfully aware of his own shabby clothes and cracked shoes.

Mr. Perkins, it seemed, lived on the fifth floor in a triplex de luxe apartment. The desk clerk— as supercilious as the doorman, but even more expertly insolent—made very sure Bly was expected before he would allow him to go up.

The elevator boy acted as though Bly’s appearance was a personal affront to him. He deliberately stopped the elevator a foot below the floor and let Bly step up, and he stayed there ostentatiously watching until he made sure Bly was going to the apartment where he was expected.

The doorbell of Mr. Perkins’ apartment was a black marble knob. Bly tried pushing it without effect, finally pulled it and heard chimes ring inside on a soft rising scale. The door opened instantly and a voice said: “Won’t you come in, please, Mr. Bly?”

Bly stepped into a long low room with a far wall that was one solid expanse of windows, facing out on a private flagged terrace that looked bright and clean in the sunlight.

“Shut the door, if you please, Mr. Bly.”

Bly pushed the door shut behind him, trying to place the man who was speaking to him. He was a short, pudgy man with an air that was benignly pleasant. He had silver-white hair that curled in smooth exact waves. Suddenly Bly

realized he was the same man he had seen in Doc's Hamburger Shack the night before when he had gone in to order the hamburgers for Patricia Fitzgerald. He realized that and, in the same second, without quite knowing why, he felt a little cold tingle along the back of his neck.

The pudgy man had small pink hands. He put the right one in his coat pocket now and brought it out holding a flat automatic. He was still smiling.

"Sit down in that chair. The one beside the telephone, if you please."

Bly went sideways one cautious step after another, sank numbly in the chair beside the stand that held a chrome-and-gold telephone set.

"If this is a hold-up," he said huskily, "you—you're wasting your time. I didn't bring the money you wanted to borrow with me. There's no way you can get it without appearing at the office yourself."

"No hold-up," said the pudgy man in his softly amiable voice. "My name is not Perkins. It is Johanssen—two's's, if you please. You have heard it, perhaps?"

"No," said Bly numbly.

"You recognize me, though?"

Bly nodded stiffly. "Yes. You were in Doc's Hamburger Shack last night when I came in."

"Just so." Johanssen stood staring at him for a second, his bland eyes speculatively wide. "You do not look like a thief, but then one can never tell in these matters. I would like to tell you a story, Mr. Bly. You do not mind? I will not bore you?"

"No," said Bly.

Johanssen smiled. "Good. Since you do not know my name I will tell you I am a pawnbroker. But not the ordinary kind. You believe me, Mr. Bly? Not ordinary."

"Yes," said Bly.

"Good," Johanssen repeated. "My business is under my hat. I have no office. I go to my customers. They are all rich people, Mr. Bly. But sometimes they need cash—lots of cash—very quickly and very badly. They do not want people to know this. So they call Johanssen. I come to them with the cash. You see?"

"Yes," Bly admitted.

"One year ago, Mr. Bly, a person called me and gave me the name of a very prominent person with whom I had done business many many times. This person wanted ten thousand dollars at once. He is good for much more, so I say I will bring it to him. But, he says, he is not at home. He is at the apartment of a friend. Will I bring it to him there?"

"So I bring the money where he says. But it is not my customer that has called me. It is a thief. You are listening carefully, Mr. Bly?"

"Yes," said Bly.

"Good. This thief, he is waiting for me on the darkness of the stairs of the apartment house. He gives me no chance, Mr. Bly. He stabs me in the back with a knife and takes my money and runs away. He thinks I am dead. But no. I crawl down the stairs and through the lobby and to the street. I crawl two blocks away before someone sees me and calls an ambulance. It was very hard, that crawling. I remember that, Mr. Bly."

Bly swallowed. "Why—why didn't you wake someone in the apartment house?"

“No,” said Johanssen gently. “That would bring the police. This is not a business for police. This is Johanssen’s business. You see?”

“Oh,” said Bly blankly.

“You do not understand,” Johanssen said. “It is known everywhere that Johanssen carries large sums of money with him. It must be known, also, that it is not safe to rob Johanssen. Not because the police will come after you, but because Johanssen will come after you—and find you. Now do you understand?”

Bly had the same sense of nightmare panic he had felt the night before when he had been accused of murdering Patricia Fitzgerald.

“You’re not saying—saying that I—”

“No, no. May I go on with my story? I found out who stabbed me. It took much money and time and then I did not find the man. Only some of the names he had used. I found out that he had done many crimes—not bad ones like this, only cheating and swindling. This time he is very afraid. He runs and hides, and hides so well that I cannot locate him. But I do locate his woman. He leaves her when he runs with my money. You can guess who his woman was, Mr. Bly?”

“Patricia Fitzgerald,” Bly said automatically.

“Yes. She is very angry because he left her. When I offer her five thousand dollars to point this man out to me she says she will do it if she can find him. She did. Last night he was in her apartment. He murdered her. Do you know who that man was, Mr. Bly?”

“No!” Bly exclaimed.

“I am willing to pay *you* five thousand dollars if you will tell me who it was.”

“But I don’t know!” Bly said. “I didn’t see him.”

“Then,” said Johanssen gently, “then you will give me back my five thousand dollars, please.”

“You—your what?”

“My five thousand dollars.”

“But I haven’t got—I never saw—”

“Yes. It was in an envelope in the paper sack that contained the hamburgers.”

Bly’s mouth opened slackly. “Envelope—hamburgers...”

“Yes. You see, this Patricia Fitzgerald did not trust me. First, before she points out the man who stabs me, she must see the money. We arrange it. I will wait in the hamburger stand. She will send someone who will mention her name. I will put the money with the hamburgers.

Then she will lead this man to this apartment. I will be waiting for them. The five thousand dollars is a reward I have offered, Mr. Bly. I have even put it in the papers that I will pay that much to anyone who shows me the man who stabbed me. But you have not done so. Give me the five thousand dollars back, please, at once.”

Bly shook his head dizzily. “But I didn’t know—”

Johanssen moved the automatic slightly. “I am not joking, Mr. Bly. Give me my five thousand dollars.”

“Listen,” Bly said desperately. “I didn’t even open the sack. I threw the whole business, just as Doc gave it to me, in the garbage.”

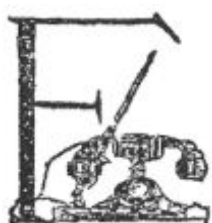
“Garbage?” Johanssen repeated gently. “This is not the time to be funny, Mr. Bly. You had better realize that.”

Bly leaned forward. “But it’s true. I did just that. Wait! Gus Findley! The janitor at my apartment house! He’s got a lame back and I hardly ever cook in my apartment...”

“Yes?” Johanssen said very softly.

“Maybe he hasn’t emptied the garbage! Let me call him up. It’s a chance—”

“A chance that you are taking,” Johanssen said. There was an icy little flicker deep back in his eyes. “You may call him up. I will listen. Be very careful what you say.”



FUMBLINGLY, with cold and stiff fingers, Bly dialed the number of the apartment house. He could hear the buzz of the telephone ringing, going on and on interminably while the icy little flame in Johanssen’s eyes grew steadier and brighter.

And then the line clicked suddenly and Gus Findley’s voice said irritably: “Yes? What you want, please?”

Bly drew in a gulping breath of relief. “Gus! This is Dave Bly.”

“Ah! Hello, Mr. Bly. How are you? I ain’t got that money to pay Mr. Crozier yet, Mr. Bly. I’m sorry, but—”

“Never mind that. Listen to me, Gus. Have you emptied the garbage in my apartment this morning?”

“No, I ain’t. I’m sorry, Mr. Bly, but my back has been sore like anything and them damned police has been botherin’—”

“Gus!” said Bly. “I want you to do a favor for me. Go up to my apartment. Go on the back porch and look in the garbage pail. There’s a small paper sack right on top. It’s closed. Bring the sack down with you. I’ll hold the line.”

“Well, sure...”

“Hurry, Gus! It’s very important!”

“You ain’t sick, are you, Mr. Bly? You sound—”

“Gus!” Bly exploded. “Hurry up!”

“O.K. Sure. Hold the wire.”

Bly heard the receiver bump as Gus put it down, and then there was nothing but the empty hum of the open circuit. He waited, feeling the sweat gather in cold beads on his forehead. Johanssen had come quietly closer, and Bly could catch the black slick glint of the automatic, leveled a foot from his head.

After centuries of time the receiver bumped again and Gus said cheerfully: “Sure, I got it. What you want I should do with it?”

Bly leaned back in his chair, sighing, and nodded once at Johanssen. “All right. What now?”

Johanssen’s eyes had lost their frosty glint. “This Gus—he is an honest man?”

Bly nodded weakly. “Yes.”

“Tell him to open the sack and the envelope.”

“Gus,” Bly said into the telephone, “inside the sack you’ll find an envelope. Take it out and open it.”

“Sure, Mr. Bly. Wait.” Paper crackled distantly and then Gus’s voice suddenly

yammered frantically. "Mr. Bly! It's money! It's thousands—millions! Mr. Bly! Mr. Bly!"

"Take it easy, Gus," Bly said. "It was put in there by mistake. I'm going to let you talk to the man who owns the money. He'll tell you what to do."

"I don't want so much money here! I'm gonna call a cop! I'm afraid—"

"Here's Mr. Johanssen. Talk to him."

Johanssen took the telephone. Gus was still shouting at the other end of the line, and Johanssen nodded several times, beginning to smile a little more broadly, finally managed to get a word in.

"Yes, Gus. Yes, yes. It is my money. No. Don't call a policeman. Just keep it for me." The receiver fairly crackled at that last and Johanssen held it away from his ear, wincing. "No, no. No one will rob you. All right. Lock yourself in. Yes, I will knock three times and then twice. Yes, I will bring a writing from Mr. Bly. All right. Yes. Just be calm."

He hung up the receiver and nodded at Bly. "That is a good man." The flat automatic had disappeared.

Bly wiped his forehead with his handkerchief. "Yes. Gus is a swell old gent. He has a tough time."

"And you have had a tough time," said Johanssen. "Yes. I am very sorry, Mr. Bly. I beg your pardon. Can I do something for you to show I am sorry, please?"

"No," Bly said. "No. It's all right."

Johanssen watched him. "Mr. Bly, I am very anxious to find the man who was in that apartment. You may still have the reward if you will tell me anything that will lead me to him."

Bly shook his head wearily. "I don't know anything."

"Think," Johanssen urged. "Something small, perhaps. Some little thing you may have noticed. Some impression."

"No," said Bly woodenly.

Johanssen shrugged. "So it will be, then. But please let me do something to show I am sorry for this today."

"No," said Bly in an absent tone. "If you want to do something for somebody, give Gus a couple of hundred out of the five thousand so he can get free of that shark I work for."

"I will do that. Surely."

"I've got to go," Bly said. "I'm—in a hurry."

"Surely," said Johanssen, opening the door. "I am so sorry, Mr. Bly. Please forgive me."

CHAPTER FIVE THE BLACK MITTEN



LY took a taxi back to the office. All the way there he leaned forward on the seat, pushing forward unconsciously trying to hurry the taxi's progress. When it stopped at the curb in front of the office building he was out of it before the driver had time to open the door. He flung a crumpled bill over his shoulder and raced up the steep stairs, past the second floor and Janet's office, up to the third floor and down the corridor.

The hammer of his feet must have warned J. S. Crozier, because he was just

coming out of his private office when Bly burst through the front door. Bly closed the door behind him and leaned against it, panting.

“Well,” said J. S. Crozier, “you’re back in a hurry, Bly. And I don’t see any customer. Have you some more excuses to offer this time?”

Bly was smiling. He could feel the smile tugging at the corners of his lips, but it was like a separate thing, no part of him or what he was thinking.

J. S. Crozier noticed the smile. “Bly, what on earth is the matter with you? You’ve got the queerest expression—”

“I feel fine,” Bly said. “Oh, very fine. Because I’ve been waiting for this for a long time.”

“Bly! What do you mean? What are you talking—”

Bly stepped away from the door. “You’ve had a lot of fun with me, haven’t you? You’ve bullied and insulted and humiliated me every chance you got. You knew I had to take it. You knew I had a brother in college who was dependent on me and my job. You knew I wanted to get ahead, but that I couldn’t unless I had more training. You knew when I came here that I was taking courses in a night school, and you deliberately gave me work that kept me late so I couldn’t finish those courses.”

“Bly,” said J. S. Crozier, “are you mad? You can’t—”

“Oh, yes I can. I can tell you now. You’ve had your fun, and now you’re going to pay for it. You’re going to pay pretty heavily and you’re going to know I’m the one who made you pay”

“You’re being insulting,” J. S. Crozier snapped. “You’re fired, Bly. If you don’t leave at once I’ll call the police.”

“Oh, no,” said Bly. “You won’t call the police, because that’s what I’m going to do. How does it feel to be a murderer, Mr. Crozier?”

“Eh?” said J. S. Crozier. The color washed out of his cheeks and left the lines on them looking like faint indelible pencil marks. “Wh—what did you say?”

“Murderer.”

“You—you’re crazy! Raving—”

“Murderer,” said Bly. “You murdered Patricia Fitzgerald.”

“Bly! You’re a maniac! You’re drunk! I won’t have you—”

“You murdered Patricia Fitzgerald and I’m the one who knows you did it. I’m the one who will get up on the stand and swear you did it. I’m the one—Bly, the poor devil it was so much fun for you to bully because you knew I couldn’t strike back at you. Was the fun worth it, Mr. Crozier?”

J. S. Crozier’s mouth opened, fish-like, and closed again before he could find words. “Bly! Bly! Now you can’t make mad accusations like that. You’re insane, Bly! You—you’re sick.”

“No. I happened to remember a couple of small things. When I came to Patricia Fitzgerald’s door last night and she opened it, she was wearing what I thought was a black fur mitten. It wasn’t. It was that wig of yours—your toupee. She had it wrapped around her right hand. She had been laughing at how you looked without it, or perhaps she had been trying it on herself.”

“You lie!” J. S. Crozier shouted, putting his hand up over the bulging toupee protectively. “You lie!”

“No. I saw it. I’ll swear I saw it. And another thing. Just a little while ago, when you

were speaking about the Marigold Apartments and how luxurious they were, you said, ‘Judging from that hovel you live in...’ You knew where I lived, but you’d never been in my apartment—until last night. You were then. You broke in the window after you murdered Patricia Fitzgerald.”

Under the toupee the veins on J. S. Crozier’s forehead stood out like purple cords. “You’re a liar and a fool!” He laughed chokingly. “You think that evidence is enough to base a charge of murder on? Bah! Get out! Go to the police! They’ll laugh at you! I’m laughing at you!” His whole body shook with insane raging mirth.

The door opened quietly and Johanssen stepped inside the office. “May I laugh, too, please?” he asked softly.



J. S. CROZIER’S breath hissed through his teeth. He seemed to shrink inside his clothes. The toupee had slipped down over his forehead and it fell now and lay on the floor like an immense hairy spider.

J. S. Crozier’s own hair was a blond, close-clipped stubble.

Johanssen smiled and nodded at Bly. “You should never play poker, Mr. Bly. Your face gives you away. I knew you had remembered something, so I followed you here. It is nice to meet you again, Mr.—ah—Crozier.”

“Bly,” J. S. Crozier said in a shaky whisper. “Run for help. Quick. He’ll kill me.”

“Mr. Bly will not move,” said Johanssen gently. “No.”

Bly literally couldn’t have moved if he had wanted to. He was staring, fascinated, from Johanssen to J. S. Crozier. Johanssen had his

right hand in his coat pocket, but he apparently wasn’t at all excited or in any hurry.

“I have been looking for you for a long time,” he said. “It is so very, very nice to see you at last.”

J. S. Crozier began to shake. His whole body shuddered. “Johanssen,” he begged hoarsely. “Wait. Wait, now. Don’t shoot me. Listen to me. It was an accident. I didn’t mean—Johanssen! You can’t just shoot me in cold blood! I’ll pay back the money I stole from you! I—I’ve made a lot! I’ll give it all to you! Johanssen, please—”

The door opened in back of Johanssen, pushing him forward. He stepped aside quickly and alertly, and Vargas came into the office. His eyes were bright and beadily malicious.

“Police,” he said casually to Crozier. “Hello, Bly. I’ve been following you around today. Checking up.”

J. S. Crozier caught his breath. “Officer!” he shouted hoarsely— “Arrest this man! He’s going to kill me!”

“Which man?” Vargas asked. “You mean Johanssen? Why, he’s a respectable businessman. Are you thinking of killing anyone, Johanssen?”

“No, Mr. Vargas,” said Johanssen.

“See?” said Vargas to Crozier. “You must be mistaken. Well, I’ve got to run along. Behave yourself, Bly.”

“No!” J. S. Crozier pleaded. “No, no! You can’t! Take me with you!”

“What for?” Vargas inquired reasonably. “I couldn’t take you with me unless I arrested you for something. And what would I arrest you for—unless it was maybe for murdering Patricia Fitzgerald last night?”

J. S. Crozier swayed. “That—that’s absurd!”

Vargas nodded. “Sure. That’s what I thought. Well, so long.”

J. S. Crozier held on to a desk to keep upright. “No! You can’t go and leave me to this—this... Wait! Johanssen thinks I stabbed him and robbed him! You’ve got to arrest me for that! You’ve got to lock me up!”

Vargas looked at Johanssen in surprise. “Did he stab you, Johanssen?”

“I have not said so.”

“So long,” said Vargas.

J. S. Crozier’s face was horribly contorted. “No, no! You can’t leave me alone with— with—”

Vargas stood in the doorway. “Well? Well, Crozier?”

“Yes,” Crozier whispered hoarsely. “I did it. I killed her. I knew—the way she looked and acted after Bly went for the sandwiches. I twisted her arm and—and she told me...” His voice rose to a scream. “Take me out of here! Get me away from Johanssen!”

Vargas’ voice was quick and sharp now. “You heard it, both of you. You’re witnesses. Farnham, come on in.”

Farnham came stolidly into the office. “Come on baby,” he said in his heavy indifferent voice. J. S. Crozier’s legs wouldn’t hold his weight, and Farnham had to half carry him out the door.

“Could have nailed him anyway on that toupee business,” Vargas said, casual again. “But this way made it more certain. Johanssen, you stick around where I can find you.”

“I will be very glad to testify. I will also wish to witness the execution, if you please.”

“I’ll arrange it,” Vargas promised. “Kid, that was clever work—that business about the toupee.”

“It just—came to me,” Bly said shakily. “It seemed all clear at once—after Mr. Johanssen told me about the arrangement for him to wait in the hamburger stand. I knew then that Patricia Fitzgerald was playing her radio loud on purpose. She thought Gus, the janitor, would come up and then she would have sent him for the sandwiches. And then I remembered the black mitten...”

High heels made a quick *tap-tap-tap* along the corridor and Janet ran into the office. “Dave! Are you all right? I saw Mr. Crozier going downstairs with another man. He—he was crying...”

Bly said: “It’s all right now, dear. Mr. Crozier was the man who murdered that girl in my apartment house. I’ll tell you about it later.”

“I’ll be going,” said Vargas. “Bly, you stick around where I can find you.”

“That will be easy,” Bly said bitterly. “Just look on the handiest park bench. I was so clever I thought myself right out of a job.”

“I will go also,” said Johanssen, “but first there is this.” He took a black thick wallet from his pocket. Carefully he counted out five one-thousand-dollar bills.

“The reward, which I have offered legally and which I have advertised in the papers. Mr. Vargas is a witness that you earned it and that I paid it.”

“It’s yours,” Vargas said. “He made a public offer of it. If he didn’t pay you, you could sue him.”

“Yes,” said Johanssen. “And then there is this.” He took a folded sheet of blue legal paper from his pocket. “This is a lease for my apartment at the Marigold, paid a year in advance. It is too big for me. For two people it would be good. You will take it, please, Mr. Bly.”

“No!” Bly said. “I couldn’t.

“Bly,” said Vargas conversationally, “I’ve been standing around here wondering when you were going to kiss this girl of yours. Don’t you think it’s about time you did?”