

42 KEYS TO MURDER



A Novelet by
EDWARD CHURCHILL

Newspaper correspondent Nick Burney and his wife Sue become a pair of high-powered sleuths when they take the trail after the killing of Homer Hansel, the snooping society editor!

CHAPTER I

One Column Less

NICK BURNEY, Rock City correspondent for the Las Verdes Sentinel, sat nervously in the battered Ford pick-up while his wife, Sue, stopped and started as the lights along Tremont Street turned red and green and red again. Although midnight had long since passed, Las Verdes, the gambling metropolis situated in a shallow desert bowl so big that the mountains seemed small in the distance, was still going strong.

Scores of the thousands of pedestrians enraged Nick Burney and his wife by crossing in front of them; the half-mile of neon signs gave the broad thoroughfare a glare of unreality; the casinos were packed tight with a tense humanity; cafes and even stores were wide open.

"They ought to try going to bed some time," Sue grumbled, as she slammed on her brakes to avoid hitting a pair of drunks.

Burney glanced at the luminous dial on his wrist watch as Sue tooled their battered truck through the alley in back of the newspaper offices.



Before Burney could act there was an explosion from the truck

"Good heavens, baby!" he exclaimed. "It's after three o'clock. They'll soon be coming in to get out the paper."

"Having worked since nine yesterday morning," Sue replied, as the brakes groaned the ancient conveyance to a halt behind the building, "I'm getting darned sick of giving my all for the rag."

Nick Burney ran his hand through his unruly black mop of hair, picked up an envelope full of copy, climbed out. He wished he hadn't had that last drink at the Estrella Club on the twenty-five mile drive in from Rock City. It was getting him down. He was weaving, half way between reality and never-never land.

"Coming along?" he asked.

"Whither thou goest, I goest," came from the car. Tall, thin Nick Burney watched Sue pile out, slim and boyish in a pair of tight-fitting dungarees and a sweater. Her short,

black hair was as snarled as her husband's. Her upturned nose was red from the sun. A smile flickered over her full lips as she looked up at him, made a genial moon out of her round face, even in the ghastly fluorescent light which poured from the windows of the ground floor offices.

"After we give the sheet our pound of flesh, how's about a snort?" she asked.

"That's a deal. I'm so groggy I don't know whether I'm coming or going. My system needs a shock."

Burney fished a long, slim hand into his trousers pocket, pulled out a bunch of keys, put one on the lock and turned it. As he opened the door to the deserted editorial rooms he peered beyond, saw a light in a small office ahead.

"Homer Hansel, our around-the-town columnist, has got caught and he's pushing the deadline, too," he said to Sue. "I wish I had a lush job like his at his salary—dishing out the dirt on this place—instead of being walled off down in Rock City."

He held the door for Sue and they went into the editorial office. He laid the envelope of Rock City trivia on the desk of George Ashton, the managing editor. He looked at the boxes against the wall, saw a note in his, took it and read it. Sue pulled his arm down so she could read, too.

It stated, in uneven rows of type which was hard to read because of the bitten off tails of the "t's" and other maladjustments:

Coral Crane, the movie star, is at the Rock City Hotel with her son, Bobby. Divorce? Interview Her. GDA

Burney's lips emitted a low whistle.

"That noise sounds like a mating call," Sue said. "I don't like it."

"I'll talk to her on the front porch, mommie, and you can hide behind a bush and watch." He paused. "Look—you run next door to the King's Bar and order up. I'll

be right along. Hansel's got the lowdown on everything in town, and he may be able to give me a tip on this baby."

Sue's smile erased the pale fatigue on her features. "I think I can take a drink easier than face Hansel," she said, her voice low. "I don't like that ape."

She turned, slipped through the door. Burney threaded his way among the desks which cluttered the crowded editorial room, turned the corner at the end, waved good-by to his wife, and went up a short corridor. He opened the door to the cubicle.

At first he thought the columnist was asleep. The red-head's arms were over the pullout of his desk and the back of his head was toward the correspondent. All that Burney could see was a mass of red hair. That is, until he leaned over so that he could see Hansel's face—or what was left of it. A bullet had entered it at the bridge of the nose.

BURNEY shuddered and turned away from the body. He got control of himself, and quickly surveyed the office. The first thing he noticed were the glasses, obviously feminine, in a harlequin frame, lying near the edge of the desk. He picked them up, sniffed them. They exuded a faint odor of perfume. He slipped them into the inside pocket of his gabardine jacket.

The next thing he saw was the opened padlock. It had held a steel bar running down the front of Hansel's filing cabinet, locking each of the four drawers in place. He pulled on the bar, freed the drawers, and started going through them. The one holding photographs hadn't been touched, but the others had received a thorough going over. They were in considerable disorder. He had seen Hansel open those drawers, and the columnist had kept them neat.

He could see that one envelope had been removed. This was clear to him because there was a clean space where it had rested, in the dust. The dust gave the exact

dimensions. His quick survey showed that nothing else had been taken. The dust disclosed that quite definitely.

Next he screwed up his courage, and forced himself to run over the body of the late Hansel. He found a large envelope in his inside coat pocket and thrust it into his own jacket.

Then he started looking for the murder weapon. He couldn't see it anywhere on the open floor and decided that it might be under the desk. He got down on his hands and knees, began exploring the shadows.

It was then that the shadows got darker—quite suddenly. First he saw a beautiful flash of light, which he decided in his waning moments had the color given off by atomic bombs. After that brilliant display he lapsed into complete darkness.

When he started coming back to life he had the feeling someone was dunking him by the heels in a large body of water.

"Hey!" he complained. "Stop it!"

He blinked, opened his eyes, and through the film of liquid saw Sue. He also saw the big, empty paper cup which had been used to inundate him.

"What happened?" Sue demanded, fright in her white face. "Are you all right, darling?"

Burney shook his head to clear it. He became aware that someone was standing besides Sue. He recognized Joe, the stoop-shouldered old night watchman.

"When you didn't come right away, I started getting worried," Sue said. "In fifteen minutes, I was positively jittery. I was afraid something might have happened to you. I ran back here. You had the key. I couldn't get in. I banged on the door. When nobody answered, I got panicky.

"I went looking for Joe here. I spent an hour finding him."

Joe pleaded in a high, cracked voice, "Don't tell the boss, please, Mr. Burney. I

was jest down at th' Frontier havin' a short one."

"It's out of my hands, Joe. If you'd been on the job, this wouldn't have happened."

"What?" demanded Sue.

Painfully, he pulled himself into a sitting position with Sue's aid. He shook his head to clear it further. He couldn't see the body of Hansel from his position.

"Look at him!" he demanded. "What's the matter with you two? He's dead!"

"Who's dead?" Joe asked, stupidly.

They heard a clamor in the editorial rooms. Burney knew what it meant. The early shift was coming in to get out the first afternoon edition. Sue and Joe swung around, satisfied themselves, and then Sue demanded, "What in the world are you talking about? Were you and Hansel drinking? Did you pass out?"

"I was knocked out. I tell you, Homer Hansel's dead. His body—"

He pulled himself on his feet as he spoke, looked down at the desk. The body of Homer Hansel was gone!

There were voices.

BURNEY looked at the door. He saw George Ashton, the managing editor, whose features looked as if they'd been drawn on a brown egg, husky and as disheveled as a wet airedale, backing up Sue. Beside Ashton, peering over his ample shoulders, were Phil Walsh, the general assignment man, Bill Hackwood, the sports editor, and Skeeter Simms, who was leg man for Homer Hansel. Hansel's column was a "must" for the Las Verdes readers; he had the dirt on everybody in the wide-open gambling community. Skeeter Simms, who looked like an involuntarily retired jockey, stared at him with red-rimmed eyes.

"Hi, Burney!" Ashton exclaimed. "Aren't you and Sue up a little late?"

Burney glared around him belligerently.

"Let's get this straight, everybody!" he snapped. "There's been a murder here."

Ashton grinned at him. "Crocked again, eh Burney? If you've got to get fried, do it in Rock City. You know that our revered publisher, Kramer, doesn't like his joint littered up with drunks."

"Can the clowning, George!" Burney snapped. "There's been a murder here and—"

A sudden thought struck him. The pullout had been shoved back into the desk. He grabbed the handle, jerked it out.

"Have you gone nuts?" asked Skeeter Simms. "What're you doing?"

"Looking for blood. The pullout was all bloody. Hansel's head was on it. Somebody's cleaned it mighty carefully."

Sue gave him a bewildered look, as if she, too, was beginning to doubt his sanity. Her face was troubled.

"Get this straight, everybody," he snarled. "I'm sane, sober, and in my right mind. Sue and I came into the editorial rooms. I got your note, Ashton, about interviewing Coral Crane. I saw Hansel's light on. He used to work in Hollywood, he knows all the stars and big shots who come up here, and I knew he could give me the background on her. Sue went for a drink when I dropped in to see him. He was dead on his desk. He had a bullet hole in his forehead."

"What?" exclaimed Ashton. "You'd better lay off the stuff."

"A bourbon dream," decided Hackwood.

"Let him go on," said Walsh. "This ought to be good."

"I'd like to hear it myself," added Simms.

"Nick wouldn't get crocked in the office," Sue protested.

Burney looked at the filing cabinet. The locking rod had been replaced, and the padlock had been snapped. He felt in his inner pocket and his hand touched both the harlequin glasses and the fat envelope he had

taken from Hansel.

Angrily, he blurted out the rest of his story. Ashton patted his back soothingly when he had finished. "Nice nightmare," he told him. "So you and Hansel had a few drinks and he left you to sleep them off when you passed out. Look, Burney, you'll be all right when you set some sleep."

"But, Ashton, I'm telling you—something hit me. Feel the bump." He bent over, pointed to his head.

"See that?"

Ashton laughed. "I used to get bigger bumps than that before I joined Alcoholics Anonymous," he said, his moon face beaming jovially. "Really, Nick, you'd better come to our next meeting. Now, beat it. We've got to get out a newspaper. Go back to Rock City, get some sleep and a story on Coral Crane, and we'll forget the whole thing. Hansel'll get a big kick out of this when he comes in tonight. Maybe he'll put it in his column."

Nick Burney shook his confused head. "You've got to do something about this, Ashton—" he declared.

ASHTON took one arm and Walsh the other. They propelled him through the editorial rooms and out the back door.

"Come back when you're sober," Hackwood jibed.

Sue took his hand, led him to the car, opened the door, helped him into the truck.

"We'd better go home," Sue said, unhappily.

"Not on your life," Burney replied. "Breakfast first. I want to look over my loot."

They found a parking place on Tremont Street. Nick Burney escorted his wife to a corner booth in a quiet restaurant. They gave their orders to a waitress. Burney first removed the glasses from his jacket, held them out to Sue.

"Smell 'em," he directed.

She did. "Feminine," she declared. "Very exotic, too."

Burney produced the fat envelope, began going through its contents. He glanced over the first packet, while Sue eyed him impatiently. A low whistle of amazement came through his pursed lips. Then, he asked: "Did you know," he asked, "that Mike Murdock not only failed to pay his half of the partnership of Murdock and Doach, but that he's been taking thousands out of the till to gamble?"

"Blackmail!" Sue exclaimed.

"That's right—and Hansel has Murdock pinned to the wall with affidavits, photostats, accounting forms and other stuff."

"What else?" asked Sue.

"Henry Farnum, the bank cashier, has been falsifying his accounts and spending the dough on some dame named Margalo Brown. Hansel has her statement."

He opened another and told Sue, "Henry Yates' son-in-law, Pete Withers, forged Yates' will to inherit half a million—"

"Good heavens!" Sue exclaimed. "There's enough dirt right there to blow the top off the city."

"There's a lot more here—a lot more. Listen to this—"

Sue put her trembling hand on her husband's arm.

"Sh-h—" she cautioned. "Somebody once warned me never to tell secrets in a restaurant booth. We know what Hansel's racket is—was—and we can go over the rest of the stuff later."

The waitress brought their breakfasts. Between bites, Sue asked, "What's next, darling?"

"See those harlequin glasses? Note those silly rhinestones in the frame?"

Sue nodded.

"Las Verdes Jewelry Company is the only firm in town handling them, and they announced the first shipment in only three days ago."

"You're making terrific sense, Nick. Eat fast—and we'll find out if the pair you have were bought there, and if so, who bought 'em."

They bolted down their food, hastily paid their check, and hurried to the jewelry store.

CHAPTER II

Short-sighted



S SUE began barreling the jittering old pickup out of spread-out, wide-open Las Verdes into the divided highway which led past the big, black metals plant to Rock City, Burney said, his voice positive, "I guess you believe now that I saw

Hansel's body."

Sue's glance left the road long enough to say yes to him. She turned her eyes back to the road and said, "Although it's baffling to have a murder without a corpse, we've got somewhere already. I knew you were right from the beginning, anyway. One reason is the bump on your head, which you couldn't have received unless you did a handstand, and the other is the fact you wouldn't 've left me alone, so long in the King's Bar—ever."

She paused. "What's on your mind now?"

"I want to talk to the glamorous Coral Crane. We think she's up here for a divorce. She's our number one lead right now—"

"You've got something there, Nick." She paused. "Why don't you go to the police, though?"

"Nothing to tell them. Nobody but you believes my story. The corpse and the evidence have disappeared. Wait'll Hansel doesn't show up and Ashton and his cohorts'll be rushing the cops all right. You and I are on the inside, and I want to stay there."

"Once I break this yarn I'll be sitting on top of the world, darling. They won't be able to get along without me in the main office and I can write my own ticket."

Burney's eyes shuttered, and his head fell forward as his ambition faded into a nightmare. He woke up with a start as the pick-up struck the choppy spots in the road near Railway Gulch. Then he dozed off again. When the car rolled by the airport just outside of Rock City he started living once more.

"Before we see this Crane person," he said, "we'll stop at the office."

With a shattering drone of dry brake bands, Sue sent the vehicle against the curb. Burney went into the tiny office on State Highway, and proceeded to beat an uneven rhythm on the typewriter. In a few minutes he was back on the seat beside her.

"To the Rock City Hotel," he told her. "Then, for you, bed."

Sue's sleepy but widening eyes showed alarm and jealousy. "You think I'm going to leave you alone with Coral Crane?" she demanded. "Besides, I want to help clear up this ghastly business. It frightens me."

"You win."

The car vibrated loudly to a halt. They both went inside. Burney asked the clerk to ring Miss Crane's room and announce him, and half a minute later they were pounding up the stairs of the three-story colonial hotel.

Coral Crane met them at the door of her suite.

"Come in," she said, her face smiling, Burney noticed, but her eyes cold. "I always see the press. There's nothing worse for a woman in my position than to get the newspapers down on her."

"That's right," Burney agreed, and introduced himself and Sue. He decided, from Coral Crane's manner, that she could turn her charm on and off like a faucet. She sat on the divan. He watched her take a cigarette from a package on the coffee table

in front of her while, at the same time, she introduced her son, Bobby, a blond, blue-eyed boy of about three. Burney noticed her jerky movements. She had trouble getting cigarette and match together.

He proffered her his lighter, and she lit the cylinder.

He looked at Sue. She was sniffing. She nodded her head emphatically. Burney got it.

She was telling him about the perfume on the glasses. It was the same odor she now smelled.

"I suppose you know why I'm here," he said to Coral Crane.

"Of course. It's about my divorce."

"I thought that you and Greg Gallery were Hollywood's ideally married couple."

"Don't believe everything you read. He was cruel—mentally cruel."

"That's what I figured. The usual grounds."

Burney pulled the typewritten sheet from his pocket, handed it to her.

"Here's a nice, dignified statement," he told her. "You can read and sign it."

She opened it, held it close to her eyes.

She squinted, finally admitted:

"I guess you'll have to read it to me. I've lost my glasses."

"That won't be necessary. Try these," he said. He pulled the harlequins from his pocket, held them out to her, saw her start.

"Why—I can't read with anybody's glasses!" she protested.

"You don't have to," Sue told her. "They're yours."

Coral Crane's face paled under her blanket of tan.

"I'm sorry—but—you're very much mistaken—I—"

"There's really no doubt about it," Sue persisted. "We found out you had your lenses put into these new harlequin rhinestone frames at the Las Verdes Jewelry Company. The clerk who waited on you recognized you."

CORAL CRANE shed her genial, benedictine-to-the-press attitude with the agility of a snake ridding herself of last season's skin.

Her eyes blazed at Sue. Then she glared at Burney. "Where'd you find them?" she demanded.

"Where you left them," said Burney. "On Homer Hansel's desk—"

Coral Crane's hand went to her throat.

"Why did you go to Hansel's office?" Nick asked persistently.

"He—well, I wanted to see him, that's all. He used to be my press agent in Hollywood. I saw his by-line and—"

Burney's smile was grim. "You're lying, Miss Crane. A big shot star doesn't come up to a desert city to see an ex-press agent—"

Coral Crane's anger brought her to her feet. "I told you I came up here for a divorce, not to see Hansel. Six weeks is a long time when you have nothing to do. Last night I went to the editorial offices of the paper after I'd seen Hansel's column. I pounded on the door. He came to it and let me in. We killed an hour talking about old times. Now, get out of here!"

Burney ignored a finger which gestured imperiously at the door. He said, "Woman prowls at night. Goes to see former press agent on a whim, knowing he's at the office when he shouldn't be. How'd you know he was working late? Miss Crane, he told you to come there at a certain hour."

"You're crazy!" the actress screamed. "Get out of here!"

Burney advanced on her. "Cut out the hysterics and tell the truth," he commanded. "He was blackmailing you, wasn't he?"

"This is absurd. I'll call the manager."

Burney beat her to the telephone, and clamped his hand over it.

"Homer Hansel's dead," he told the actress. "He was shot between the eyes. Your glasses were on his desk. He had something on you, didn't he?"

"I don't believe he's dead. Prove it."

"You'll take my word for it."

Coral Crane took strength from a deep breath. "If you have to go on with this," she said, her voice suddenly hard and rasping, "see my lawyer. I think you'd better get out of here before I start screaming and throwing things. If you're insinuating that I had anything to do with a supposed murder I don't believe ever happened and don't know anything about, you're insane. Now, get out!"

She pushed by Burney and opened the door.

"Let's go, Nick," said Sue. "We've gone as far as we're going here."

Burney got up and headed for the door.

"One of your better scenes, Miss Crane," he said, bitterly. He escorted Sue through the open door. "I'll be seeing you."

"Try it!" Coral Crane retorted.

Sue and Burney walked down the stairs into the lobby. Just as their feet hit the main floor, Burney grabbed his wife's arm, nodded his head toward the desk.

"Isn't that Farmer Jones, the guy that runs the Estrella Club?"

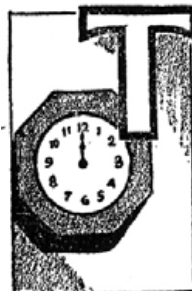
"Definitely, Nick. Nobody could mistake him."

As her voice died away, Jones' words floated toward them. "I'd like to see Miss Coral Crane," he said. "It's very important."

"And he looks angry about something," Sue muttered.

CHAPTER III

Third Story Work



THAT evening after being confined all day to what she and her husband called "The Manse," a three-room shack in Rock City, Sue Burney was ready to chew her fingernails. She paced

up and down while Burney went through the contents of the blackmail envelope groping for clues.

Suddenly she stopped pacing and studied her husband. "Why did you keep insisting to Coral Crane that she was being blackmailed, Nick?" she demanded. "There wasn't anything about that in those papers."

"Because the dust showed that an envelope had been taken from the files. It could have contained evidence of something illegal she's done. After all, Hansel had known her a long time. He might have got hold of it and made her pay through the nose. Now, don't bother me—"

"I will, too, bother you, Nick. What you're thinking is this: she came up here for a divorce; Hansel found out about it; he called her, told her to come see him so he could bleed her. Because of the hold he had on her she was forced to go. She went.

"They had a fight and she shot and killed him. She had an accomplice. They stole the evidence against her, tapped you on the skull and took the body away."

"Something like that," Burney answered. "For heaven's sake, let me—"

"How big was the envelope?"

"Standard size, about four by nine. Now, go away."

Sue busied herself about the room. Her husband noticed this new activity.

"What're you doing?" he asked.

"I'm going away. You've been smoking like a garbage dump. We need a carton of cigarettes."

"Okay," he said absently.

Sue picked up her heavy purse, kissed him on the back of his preoccupied head, went outside and drove to the Rock City Hotel. She slipped by the clerk, went to Coral Crane's room. When her knock wasn't answered, she tried the door. It was locked. She went downstairs, out of the building and looked up. The rooms of the suite were dark.

The fire escape was not hard to get onto, once Sue had thrown a piece of clothesline from the pick-up truck over it and pulled it down. It was dark now, and making the third floor was easy. The window catch was locked, but Sue remedied that problem with her husband's pocketknife.

Once inside, she turned on a light, went to work fast. She started with Coral Crane's dresser drawers, thinking that a woman would have been likely to tuck it under a pair of scanties or a couple of piles of handkerchiefs.

She wound up with Coral's suitcases, two of which were not entirely unpacked. At last she began exploring shoes; and found the envelope crushed into one of a pair of hiking boots. She took it out, glanced hastily at its contents and shoved it into her shirtwaist, a plain little number with a candy stripe. She made a last survey of the room and headed for the desk lamp with which she had illuminated the place for her search.

She didn't get there. She heard the key turning in the lock of the door to the hallway. Fascinated, she stared at the knob, saw it starting to turn. At the same time, she was backing toward the window, her only means of escape.

The door swung open, and she found herself looking at a man with a gun in his unsteady hand. The fellow's face was very hard, his jaw stiffly set, the lines of his face were very sharp. His graying hair was mussed, and he had murder in his eyes.

Sue kept moving backward to the window.

"Hold it!" the man snapped.

By this time she knew that she was facing Greg Gallery—she had seen his face often enough in film magazines and newspapers as the producer-husband of Coral Crane—and that this might be her last look at anyone's face if she didn't move quickly.

She rolled sidewise through the window, and heard the blast of the gun as she went, but felt no thud.

She went down the fire escape with such speed that by the time Gallery had reached the window she was protected from any further shots by the iron grillwork above her. She darted to the pickup, leaped in, started the engine and raced toward home.

WHEN she barged breathlessly into the tiny place she found her husband still intently studying the contents of the envelope he had taken from Hansel's pocket.

"How're you doing?" Sue asked.

"Can't make head or tail of it. Any one of the victims could have killed him. Get the cigarettes?" Burney didn't look up.

"No—I got detoured."

"Detoured?"

"Right. Did you know that Coral Crane's present husband, Greg Gallery, is in town and probably living at the Rock City Hotel? Nice kind of a divorce, that is. He even has a key to her rooms."

"How do you know that?" asked Burney, jarring himself away from his welter of evidence, and even looking up.

"I know because he took a shot at me in Coral Crane's room on the third floor of the Rock City Hotel.

Burney leaped to his feet, put his hands against his wife's arms.

"What are you talking about? Are you hurt?"

"I'm healthy. And I got the envelope."

"What envelope?"

"The one you wanted."

She pulled it out of her blouse, handed it to him.

"How'd you get it?"

"The hard way. Up the fire escape. You always say that a good newspaperman gets what he goes after."

"And I'm getting gray years ahead of time."

He took the envelope, looked at the contents, his eyes growing wider and wider as he read.

"Great guns!" he exclaimed. "Coral Crane's a bigamist! She has two husbands—Greg Gallery and none other than our old pal, Farmer Jones! That means that the boy, Bobby, isn't—"

"So it does," agreed Sue.

"There are photostatic copies of both marriage certificates, an affidavit from Farmer Jones saying he's never divorced the gal. What a spot she's in! If this ever got out, her career'd be ruined in nothing flat and she'd go to jail.

"Hansel was shaking her down, just as we thought."

"Makes sense."

He put the papers back into the envelope and shoved them into his pocket.

"Is Farmer Jones shaking her down, too?"

"Could be. We'd better see him at the Estrella Club." He reached into the top desk drawer, pulled his hand out. "Where's the thirty-eight?" he asked.

Sue pointed to her purse. He picked it up, guided her out of the door.

"Got the copy for tomorrow's sheet?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Come on."

Sue covered the twenty-five miles to Las Verdes in just that many minutes in spite of the wheezing, over-heating engine.

"We've got three direct suspects now, and more than a dozen indirect. Those silly harlequin glasses I found on Hansel's desk tie in Coral Crane. Either Farmer, her first husband, or Gallery, her second, might have been with her, or she might have called them in to help her get hold of the evidence against her and help her move the body. There's one thing pretty certain—she was there," Burney mused.

When the lights of the Estrella Club

came into view, Sue braked. She shot the truck into the parking lot.

"You grab a beer and a sandwich while I talk to Jones, darling," Nick said, as they went inside the combination casino, cafe and night club.

Old Tom Green was at the twenty-one table, as usual. Merle Lewis was handling the dice, and there was an excited mob around the table. Burney saw the reason for it, shriveled little Skeeter Simms, Homer Hansel's leg man.

Skeeter said, "Shoot three hundred."

BURNEY hurried to the table. Simms tossed the dice and they came to rest with one up on one cube and two up on the other.

"Easy come, easy go," Simms said. "Shoot the last two hundred."

Sue told her husband, "That guy doesn't make over seventy-five a week—and he's acting like a millionaire."

Burney shot a questioning look at Merle Lewis and got the answer from four fingers. Simms hadn't seen the Burneys yet.

"He's lost four grand," Burney whispered to his wife. "He's getting it from some place beside the Sentinel payroll."

Burney turned to Green. "Jones in?" he asked.

The old gambler thumbed over his shoulder. His finger indicated an office with a door of frosted glass.

"When I come out," Burney told Sue, "I'm going to talk to Skeeter Simms. Go eat."

Burney barged in, his hand on the gun in his pocket. Farmer Jones looked up from the contemplation of currency on his desk.

"Simms is doing pretty well for you," Burney said.

"That's right."

"You've been getting money from other sources than gambling, Jones," Burney said. "I want you to lay it on the line."

"How so?"

"You pulled a pretty rotten trick. You told your ex-wife, Coral Crane, that you'd got a divorce—and you hadn't. You let her get married a second time, and then you put the heat on her."

Jones leaned back in his chair. "You newspapermen get around," he said.

"That's right. And a lot of people have been getting around a lot faster than Sue and I. I'm just beginning to catch up."

"I suppose you've got plenty of evidence to back up what you just said?"

"That's correct, Farmer."

Burney produced the envelope, displayed the contents—but held onto them.

"You're playing with dynamite, Burney."

"I know it. Start talking."

Jones clasped his hands behind his head. "You might as well have it. We separated several years ago. I told Coral I'd got a divorce. I hadn't. I figured she was going to go two ways. She had a picture contract before we parted. I guessed she was going to go places in pictures—and she was going to get married again. A long chance, but right on both counts. You know how gambling is, up and down. I thought she'd be right for a touch any time I needed it. So I got it!"

"You're a swell guy, Farmer. I'm proud to know you."

"Anyway, that's the score, and I'm worried."

"Why?"

"I thought I had it exclusive, but somebody else is throwing a pitch."

"I know. How come you gave that affidavit to Hansel?"

"The rat caught up with me—that's all. He has the goods on me. I had to sign."

"I get it—blackmailing a blackmailer."

"Call it that. Now, scram."

"Where did Skeeter Simms get four grand to throw off on your tables?" Burney persisted.

"I wouldn't have any idea. You're wasting your time. You might go out in the mountains and get the rocks to talk."

"Okay. I'm going out and find where Skeeter Simms got four grand. He's leg man for Hansel."

"I wouldn't try. It wouldn't be healthy."

Burney started for the door. "And I wouldn't try shaking me down either, for the same reason," Jones warned.

"Thanks for the kindly advice."

Burney went outside, found Simms turning his pockets wrong side out. He went to him.

"Hi, Burney," Simms said. "It happened. I got clipped."

Burney grinned at him, held his hand on his gun.

"You've been around Las Verdes long enough to know that casinos have to pay help, buy drinks on the house and pay a state tax. That's why they need suckers like you with four thousand dollars and no will power."

BURNEY lifted the gun high enough so Simms could see it. "I want to talk to you about that four grand," he added. "You didn't get that working for the Sentinel."

Simms sidled toward the door. "I'm not saying anything."

"Look, pal—I've got the low on you. You've been stooging for Hansel in a blackmail racket."

Skeeter's eyes widened. "I don't know anything about it."

Sue, Nick Burney saw from the corners of his eyes, was playing twenty-one for dollars with Tom Green. He followed Skeeter outside the Estrella Club, under the glare of the bright neons.

"Look, Skeeter," he said, "you're lying. I've got a couple of Hansel's envelopes. They're full of evidence against a lot of people here in town who slipped. Just to show you I know what I'm talking about,

there's Murdock, who's been trimming Doach on their partnership; Sheriff Dahe, who's been spending money at ten times the rate he's made it; and young Withers, who forged the will—"

Skeeter Simms' lips were gray under the neons.

"You've got me, all right," he told Burney. "I started out as a good newspaperman, and I went sour. I don't want to play any more—his way."

"Whose way? Let's get out of here so we can talk."

The men walked into the parking lot. They were moving under the lights when it happened—one neat, quick shot from one of the parked cars. Skeeter Simms jarred back, grabbed at his stomach and then fell forward.

Burney tried to catch the jumble of frightened words on Simms' lips as he clutched at his stomach and jack-knifed. At the same time, he flattened to the ground, drawing the thirty-eight." The gun spat from the car again. Burney blasted all six shots from his revolver as the car's engine roared and it darted ahead through the shadows. He couldn't tell if he'd even hit it.

It ran into a patch of light. Burney, still prone, gasped. It was a '47 model, and Burney recognized it as belonging to George Ashton, managing editor of the Sentinel!

He rose, dusted his clothing, looked down at the crumpled body of Skeeter Simms as patrons, gamblers, croupiers and nightlifers dashed from the doors of the club.

"What's up?" panted Tom Green, who had left his craps table.

"Somebody in George Ashton's car drilled Simms," Burney snapped. "You'd better call the cops."

Green whirled, hurried back into the club while the curious clustered around the body and asked questions of Burney. Sue pushed her way to him, her eyes wide, her face white.

"Are you all right, darling?" she asked.

"Safe and sound. But he didn't miss me far." He pointed to chipped stucco on the wall behind him. "Let's get out of here."

"Was it a man or a woman in the car?" Sue asked.

"I couldn't tell. About all I could see was the muzzle of a rifle."

"Hadn't we better stick around?"

"Green's sending for the cops. We'll let them handle Simms. I've got a lot more important things to do than answer their questions."

He headed for the pick-up, with Sue close behind. She got into the driver's seat.

"Go to the Sentinel," he said. "I've got to get hold of Ashton."

SUE'S foot went heavy on the accelerator. The pick-up ended in the alley behind the offices. They climbed out. Burney unlocked the door of the editorial rooms.

As they went in, they saw Ashton back of his desk, editing copy. He looked up at them, a grin on his egg-shaped face.

"I hoped I'd find you here," Burney said. He tossed the envelope full of copy on Ashton's desk.

"Did you get the Coral Crane yarn?"

"It's in with the rest of the stories. I suppose Hansel showed up?"

Ashton shook his head dourly. "No. I'm worried. That story you told was incredible. But maybe he's on a binge."

"I tell you he's dead."

"Well, he's disappeared. I called his landlady. She hasn't seen him since night before last."

"You're losing a lot of your staff, George," Burney said, his voice crisp. Ashton sensed his tension, looked up at him.

"Losing my staff?"

"Skeeter Simms just got killed."

The editor leaped to his feet, pallor sweeping his round face.

"What?"

"Shot in the stomach. In the driveway at

the Estrella Club. This time I've got witnesses and there's a body to back me up."

"Good lord, Nick! Skeeter Simms—"

"I got shot at, too. Whoever did it was parked in the shadows just out of range of the neons. The odd part of it was the car, George. It belongs to you."

Ashton lifted a trembling hand to his jaw, rubbed it.

"Holy mud!" he exclaimed. "My car was stolen from in front of my house at about seven o'clock tonight. I notified the cops, and—"

Burney glanced at the wall clock as Ashton reached for his telephone.

It was two-ten. The editor dialed. "Headquarters?" he asked. "This is Ashton, at the Sentinel. Got anything on Skeeter Simms being rubbed out?" He listened for a moment, then said, "Good. I'll come right down after it."

He cradled the instrument, grabbed his hat, jammed it on his head.

"You're not kidding this time, Nick. Skeeter's dead and my car's at city hall with two bullets in the side. They found it parked near the high school. I'm going after it."

"I'll drive you," offered Sue.

"I'll go along," Burney said.

"I can handle this," Ashton replied. "Just have Sue drive me to city hall. You stay here and slug out an eyewitness' story to go along with the main yarn."

"Okay."

He watched Sue and Ashton go out the door, heard Sue's "I'll be right back, darling," and slipped into Ashton's chair, swung it around, and started batting out the tale of the shooting on the battered typewriter. He cursed its sluggish action, looked at the faulty print it made. His mill over in Rock City was a lot better, and he wished he had it.

His wife came back just as he put an "x" at the bottom of the fourth take of copy.

"How about a little sleep?" she asked.

"Ashton has the situation well in hand, as they say."

"Could use," he replied, yawning. "Home?"

"I don't mean maybe."

They went outside, piled into the truck, with Sue driving. The ancient hack rattled down the highway. They reached Rock City in half an hour, went to the little three-room duplex. As they started to undress, Sue asked, "Don't you think, Nick, we ought to put all that stuff in the envelopes in a safe place?"

Nick Burney pulled a bottle of beer from the ice box and uncapped it.

"Darned right!" he exclaimed. He looked into the refrigerator. He gazed longingly at a package containing four lamb chops which they had bought three days ago and hadn't had time to eat. He took out the bundle, laid the chops on a plate. Then he got the envelopes and wrapped them in the butcher paper. He put the new bundle directly under the freezing unit.

"Let anybody who wants it try and find it," he said.

"Nice going," Sue agreed.

They finished undressing and went to bed.

CHAPTER IV

Visitors



NICK BURNEY woke up first. He lay rigid in his bed, thinking that the click of the back door had awakened him. He set his bare feet on the floor, and stood up.

He moved from the bedroom into the combination living room, dining room and kitchenette. For the first time he realized that one of the famed Rock City winds had

started blowing at a fifty-mile-an-hour clip. The wind, whipping under the eaves of the little duplex, rattling windows and sending fine-blown sand into the place, covered his almost soundless advance.

He heard a noise in the corner of the room, saw the vague reflection of a figure against a window that gave out to a dawning sky, and lunged. His hands groped, closed over a small wrist. At the same time he smelled the heady, telltale perfume. He got hold of a hand. In it was a heavy metallic thing which he had no trouble recognizing, by touch, as being an automatic pistol.

He pulled the weapon free. A light switch clicked above the sounds made by the rushing wind, and the lights went on. Burney saw that he was clinging desperately to the wrists of Coral Crane, who was struggling violently for her freedom. At the same time he looked beyond her jittering form and saw Sue, clad in pyjamas, at the light switch, holding the .38.

Coral Crane looked at the gun and suddenly stopped struggling. Then she looked at Burney. As his glance met hers he thought that, probably for the first time in her life, she wasn't acting.

"You wanted the envelope." He made a statement rather than asked a question.

"That's right. I came for it."

"What makes you think we've got it?"

"My husband described the person who stole it—your wife. I want it—and you're going to give it to me."

"Not until you answer a lot of questions."

"I'm answering none."

"Don't be a fool, Miss Crane!" Sue snapped.

Burney went to the telephone. He told Sue as he reached the desk, "Keep her covered."

He dialed the hotel. "I'd like to talk to Greg Gallery," he said.

"We have no such person registered."

Burney looked at Coral Crane. "What's the name he's using?"

"Saylor."

"Mr. Saylor, then," Nick said into the instrument.

A moment later a sleepy masculine voice answered.

"Gallery?"

"Right."

"You'd better get on down here." Burney gave his name and address. "Your wife's here. I'm going to turn her in for breaking and entering."

There was an incredulous pause, then: "Hold it. I'll be there."

Burney heard a click on the wire, hung up. He turned to Coral Crane. "He's coming right along. Want to talk now?"

"No."

"You don't even need to tell us why you killed Homer Hansel now. All you have to do is confess. He was blackmailing you, threatening to ruin your career, and you drilled him. Then your husband, Gallery, got rid of the body—"

"I think you're crazy, Burney. There's no police report on either Hansel's death or disappearance. The newspaper doesn't know anything about it. I called, and—"

Burney looked at her, backed against the wall.

"Why," he asked, "did you drill Skeeter Simms?"

"I don't know Skeeter Simms. I don't know he's dead. Is this another Burney dream-up?"

Her green eyes were defiant and her lips stayed taut. There was a knock on the door. Burney got his thirty-eight and opened it. Greg Gallery stood there.

"Come in," snapped Burney. Gallery entered.

"What's this all about?" he demanded.

"We were asking your wife why she killed Homer Hansel, and were about to ask

her what you and she did with the body," Sue told him.

"That's nonsense. There's nothing to prove he's dead. You can put away the guns," Gallery said, wearily. "I'm not heeled."

"You were when you shot at Sue," Burney said, heat in his voice. He ran his hand over Gallery's clothing; and then lowered his weapon.

"This woman," said Coral Crane to her husband, "is the one who broke into my suite."

"So I see," replied Gallery.

"Your wife is stubborn," Burney said. "We thought maybe you could get her to loosen up."

Gallery looked at his wife. Then he looked at Burney.

"I'm sick and tired of all this," he said. "Look; here's the story. Farmer Jones never gave Coral a divorce and—"

"We know that," said Burney. "Get on with it."

"Coral has had this threat of exposure hanging over her ever since we were married. Her career would not only be ruined but she'd go to prison as a bigamist if we didn't payoff—and it's kept us broke.

"We decided to brazen out a divorce to square things off once and for all. Not long ago I came up here and got Jones to agree that as soon as Coral got a divorce from me in this state he would go to Mexico and divorce her. She was married to him under her real name, not her stage name, so nobody'd get wise. The price was ten grand.

"Jones is a rat, but he'll keep his word. He always has. He's a gambler, and they pride themselves on their honor.

"That'll make Coral a free woman—take the bigamy heat off her. Coral and I'll be married again on account of Bobby and because we love each other."

He shot a tender glance at Coral, who walked away from the wall and sat on the

divan. He joined her.

"Gallery, how come you're up here? Wouldn't you have been smarter to stay home?"

THE producer-director shot a questioning glance at his wife. She nodded. "Yes. That was the plan. Coral came up alone, stayed quietly in Rock City, hoping nobody'd pay any attention to her. Hansel got wise she was here, called her long distance and told her to come into the office. She refused. The next day she got a telephone call telling her that Bobby would be kidnapped if she didn't come in for the payoff."

As Gallery paused, Burney looked at Coral. She was crying softly, dabbing her eyes with a handkerchief. Was this, too, an act, he wondered? Coral exclaimed, "I was scared to death. I called my husband, told him the whole thing was off and I was coming home. If anything happened to Bobby—"

"I told her to stay, and that I'd come up," Gallery cut in. "I did. It was then that Coral got a third call. Whoever it was said that he was a friend and that Coral ought to protect herself. He said a pawn ticket would be sent her in the mail and she could go to a shop in Las Verdes and redeem a thirty-eight automatic. The pawn ticket came."

"What shop?"

"Gibson's."

"And you fell for that?"

"You have the gun now. We were terrified. Bobby had to be protected. I had no weapon."

"That's why you took a shot at me?" Sue asked.

"You walked into a trap. Bobby was sleeping in my room," Gallery said. "I was watching Coral's suite."

"Had you paid Hansel any money by this time?"

"Hansel wanted ten grand for not breaking the bigamy story. Coral went down to see him while I stayed with Bobby. She talked him into accepting eight thousand and giving her the evidence. She paid it to him in one hundred dollar bills. He gave the envelope."

"Bobby could furnish you with an alibi, Gallery?"

The producer-director shook his head.

"Bobby was asleep. At three years, he wouldn't be a reliable witness, anyway—"

"Your story's going to be hard to check. After Coral had got the evidence, why did you still lay a trap for kidnappers?"

"We weren't taking any chances. Hansel's tricky. He might have duplicates of the stuff made—photostats—and try again."

"And now you muscle in," Coral said, in a tired voice. "How much do you want for the evidence, Burney?"

The reporter shook his head.

"Not a dime," he said. "I just want to clean up a couple of murders."

"It's a good thing you don't want money," Gallery said. "We've been bled white."

Carol's voice was pleading, and her voice was shaking as she asked, "Can't we please have all that stuff? We want to live a normal life again. That's all we ask."

Burney saw the glance which went between man and wife.

"If you'll give us the evidence," Gallery said, "we'll be square with the world. We'll be divorced. Jones' divorce will go through, and then we'll be sailing easy—if Hansel plays square."

Burney looked at his wife.

Sue said, "I know how they feel. It's pretty tough on them."

Burney went to the ice box, opened it, removed the meat wrapper.

"You'd never have found it," he told Coral Crane.

He fished it out. "We know what the score is," he said. "Holding this won't do us a bit of good right now."

He looked at the affidavit of Farmer Jones, started, folded it up and put it back in the envelope.

He walked to Gallery. "Take it," he said. "I think maybe you ought to burn it."

"You've got something there," Gallery said. "Get rid of it. Of course, Hansel may try something yet—"

He glanced at Burney, who was still holding the automatic. "We'll take that, too," he announced.

"I think not," Burney told him. "We'll keep it. We ought to have your wife picked up for breaking and entering."

"I remember somebody else who did just about the same thing at the hotel," Gallery said, eyeing Sue. "Maybe we'd better call it even."

"That's all right with me," Sue agreed.

"Now, if you'll leave," Burney said, "maybe Sue and I'll be able to get some sleep."

Gallery turned toward the door.

"Come on, Coral," he told her.

Sue said, "Don't think for a moment you're not a couple of first class suspects in the Hansel murder."

"Find out he's dead before you bring murder charges," Gallery said. "I still think you're nuts."

"I hope he is dead!" Coral Crane exclaimed. "Then we can live in peace."

SUE and Burney watched them go. The wind was still blowing hard and a dusty blast whirled into the apartment as they left. It was fully light outside now. "Another day," said Sue, bitterly. "And now we can go to sleep for a few hours, with nothing bothering us but a couple of murders. It'll be a nice interlude."

Both got into bed. Sue mumbled, "If I ever get rid of this newspaper job, I'm a

going to sleep for a week."

She had hardly got the words out of her mouth before her eyes closed and she began to breathe deeply. Burney lay beside her, still wide awake, running back and forth over the entire sequence of events since he had found Hansel's body. He was beginning to doze, still seeking a vagrant clue, when the telephone bell sounded off.

He dragged himself out of bed and lifted the instrument. "This is Franklin, down at the ranger station," he heard when he had answered. "You'd better hop down to the boat landing. They've just found Hansel's body. Near the private docks, not far from Verdes wash."

"I'm on my way. Thanks for the tip, Franklin."

He replaced the instrument, looked at Sue. She had pulled herself into a ball and was sleeping as soundly as a pup on a hot summer day. He pulled on his clothes, slipped the automatic into his coat pocket, saw that his revolver was on the night stand by the bed if Sue needed it.

He tip-toed out, closed the door gently, and drove down the long slope to Lake Meadow, boiling under the wind. At the boat landing he found Chief Ranger Peters, his assistant, LeRoy, who handled his homicide work, and a couple of sergeants looking down at the soggy, distorted body of the late columnist. Wires extended from the corpse's ankles.

"What's the deal?" he asked LeRoy, pointing.

"Looks like somebody tossed him into the lake with weights on his ankles," LeRoy replied. "The wind raised Ned with the lake—set up a lot of currents. The body dragged with them and pulled free of the weights."

He asked LeRoy, "When are you going to take the bullet out of his head?"

"Right away."

Burney reached into his pocket, pulled

out the automatic.

"Check a shot from this against it, will you?" LeRoy looked at the weapon.

"Where'd you get it?"

Burney smiled crookedly. "I'll give you the whole story if the bullets match," he said. "If they don't, we'll skip it. I don't want to get anybody in a jam before we know for sure."

He yawned and stretched. "I'm going home and get some shuteye. When you get the results on the ballistics check, call me."

"Sure."

Burney dragged himself to the pickup, got in, drove back up the long slope, through the city to his home. He went inside, found Sue still asleep and threw himself on the bed with his clothes on.

CHAPTER V

A Gun Is Traced



BURNEY had no idea how long he had slept when the telephone woke him with insistent ringing. He rubbed the sleep out of his eyes and answered.

"This is Chief Peters," said a stern voice. "Get down here as quickly as you can and tell us about that gun."

"Then the bullets match."

"That's right. You've got some fast talking to do."

"I'll be right there, Chief," Burney said, and rang off.

Sue plied her husband with questions as he started for the door. "I'll be back in a little while," he told her. "Don't worry."

He turned back and kissed her. "Get some more sleep," he advised.

He drove to the ranger station, went inside. Chief Peters motioned him into a room behind the short wave radio

equipment.

LeRoy was there. The gun was on a table. "Let's have it, Burney!" snapped Peters. "First, whose gun is that?"

"Greg Gallery's," Burney told him. "He's at the hotel, registered under the name of Saylor."

Chief Peters nodded to LeRoy. LeRoy went to the door and spoke in low tones to a couple of lounging rangers. They went out.

The chief called to his secretary, who came in with pencil and notebook.

"Start at the beginning, Burney. I want the whole story. You're holding back plenty on me, and I don't like it."

Burney started with the finding of Hansel's body and its disappearance. As he told it, his mind began to click. He talked faster and faster, impatient to get it over with. When he'd finished, Chief Peters looked at him coldly.

"Can I go now?" Burney asked. He fished into one pocket after another, pulled out and unfolded a crumpled piece of paper. It was the note from George Ashton telling him to interview Coral Crane. He studied it, pocketed it.

"I ought to lock you up as an accessory after the fact, until I see how your story checks with this Gallery's," the chief said. "You've suppressed enough evidence to send you up for twenty years."

"Okay—but can I go, please?"

"Go ahead. But keep in touch with me. If we break Gallery, I'll want you here pronto."

"Thanks, chief."

Burney barged out the door through the main office. As he left the building he saw the two rangers helping Gallery from the government car. He jumped into the pick-up, raced home. Sue was dressed, and was drinking a cup of coffee.

"Want some?" she asked.

"No time for that. We're heading for Las Verdes," he snapped.

"What's up?"

"They've picked up Gallery for Hansel's murder. They found Hansel's body in the lake."

He told her about the ballistics test which he'd suggested, and how the bullets had matched. He told her how near he had been to going behind bars.

"I could almost hear the door clank shut on me," he said. "Come on—we've got work to do."

Sue untangled most of her hair with a comb, picked up her purse, dropped the .38 revolver into it, and said:

"I'm ready. But I don't see why you're in such a rush. They've pinched Gallery."

"I've got to get to the Sentinel."

THEY went out and climbed into the truck. As it racketed along the choppy highway toward Las Verdes, Burney told her all the details. She weaved through traffic, shot the truck into the alley behind the office.

"You wait here," Burney told her as he got out. "I'm going in the front door this time."

"Why?"

"I want to see Kramer, the publisher."

He left her, went to the front of the building, walked in. He knocked on Kramer's door and was told to come in. He sat down in a chair as Kramer swiveled around.

"What's on your mind?" Kramer asked, impatiently. "The place is in an uproar and I'm about nuts."

"I understand," Burney said, easily. "Tell me about Hansel."

"You can read all about him in the paper."

"I won't find what I want to know. How long has he been on the sheet?"

"Ten years. I tell you it's in—"

"How long on the column?"

"Eight."

"How long did he have Skeeter Simms?"

"All during the war. Ashton had the job first. Simms filled in for Ashton while he was in the service. When Ashton came back after four years in army public relations, during which he'd organized and published a couple of newspapers, we wanted to give him a better job. He worked for Hansel for a time while Simms did general assignments. When the news editor quit we gave him his job. Now, if you'll get out of here—"

Burney rose. "Thanks, Mr. Kramer. That's all I wanted to know."

He went out to the truck, told Sue, "When I come out and get in the car I want you to drive directly to Gibson's Pawn Shop."

She nodded. This time he went in the back way. He walked to Ashton's desk. The moon-faced editor looked up, trouble in his face.

"Hi, George!" Burney said. "I need your help. I want you to slip outside with me."

Ashton waved his hand above his littered desk.

"You need my help—good grief! I've lost two of my best men, I'm trying to get out a newspaper short-staffed, the police are investigating, and you want me to leave—"

"There's an angle to the case I've got to clean up and I want you to come along with me—"

Ashton stood up. "I've got to see Kramer. Sit down and bat out your story. We'll get an extra—"

"Wait a minute, George. Do you want to clean up this case? It's only going to take us five minutes. We're just going to see a man, that's all. Then you'll have the scoop of the century—"

"Okay." Ashton grabbed his hat. "But I don't see why you need me."

"Sue'll drive us." Ashton went out the back door with Burney on his heels. Burney pushed him into the car beside Sue. Sue shifted into gear, drove to Second street, found a parking place in front of Gibson's

and tooled into it. Burney got out. "Come along, George," he said.

George Ashton looked at the sign on the window and stopped cold in his tracks. His face went white.

"Say—where are you taking me?" he demanded.

Burney's eyes leveled on his. "I told you we were going to clean up this case," he said. "We'll see a man and—"

"Who's—this—man?"

"Gibson—come on, George."

Ashton whirled.

"You haven't got me yet!" he exploded.

As he spoke, his left hand shot into his coat pocket. Burney saw the glint of metal and waited for the gun to go off. But before he could aim there was an explosion from the truck. Ashton jarred backward at the shock of the bullet and grabbed his left shoulder. The gun clattered on the sidewalk. Burney picked it up, covered the editor. Sue was sitting at the wheel of the truck, the muzzle of the .38 giving off a wisp of smoke.

Burney seized the editor and shoved him into the pick-up.

"Headquarters!" he snapped at Sue.

CHAPTER VI

Desk Man



CHIEF of Police Holman came from the inside room of Las Verdes headquarters. Following him were Chief Peters and LeRoy of the Rock City Rangers. Burney and Sue walked up to them. Chief Holman waved some papers. "We got a complete confession, Nick," he said. "I still don't know how you broke it. Want to read what he says?"

Burney took the confession. "Let me see

if I can tell the story before I look at it," he said. "First of all, I wasn't smart enough to realize that the statement signed by Farmer Jones telling of his marriage to Coral Crane and the fact he'd never got a divorce was slugged out on Ashton's battered forty-two key typewriter. It wasn't until this morning, after using the machine, that I got a hunch and pulled out that note Ashton had written me wanting me to interview Coral Crane, that I realized both the note and the statement had come out of it.

"That got me thinking. It didn't prove Ashton was guilty of the murders, but it showed that he was mixed up in blackmail.

"I tied this up even tighter when Kramer gave me the murder motive. Before the war, Ashton worked with Hansel, getting a share of the extortion money. Ashton gathered the dirt and Hansel threatened to print it. The victim paid off under this threat.

"Ashton went into the service—and Simms took his place as leg-man for Ashton.

"When Ashton came back, he wanted in on the old racket. He probably used his G.I. seniority to move out Simms for a while—but Kramer made him editor. Simms moved back. Ashton, as editor, tried to get Hansel to kick in to him, and failed. I knew this when I learned first that Simms had dropped four grand at the Estrella Club right after the Coral Crane payoff of eight. Hansel took four, Simms took four, and Ashton was in the cold.

"Ashton found out about the Coral Crane deal and went to Hansel demanding a cut. Hansel refused. They had it out. Ashton lost his temper, there was a fight and he killed Hansel. Ashton no doubt figured to take over Hansel's end and keep on working the racket with Simms.

"He had killed Hansel and was looking for the blackmail evidence when Sue and I came into the editorial rooms. He heard us and hid. I found it. He didn't see me stick it in my pocket. Then he clipped me on the

head. After that, while I was out for more than an hour and Sue was trying to find the watchman to get into the offices, he cleaned the blood off the pullout, locked the files, dumped Hansel's body into his car, wired the building blocks to his victim and dumped the body in the lake.

"He got back just after I'd regained consciousness, came in with the other fellows, and told me I'd dreamed the whole thing.

"Simms, knowing what was going on, was pretty sure Ashton had bumped Hansel. He was getting ready to rat. A little honest blackmail was okay, but murder was out. He was going to spill over, and Ashton knew it. So Ashton played it smart. He reported his car stolen, then used it to trail Simms to the Estrella Club. When I came out of the club with Simms, he knew Simms either had talked or was getting ready to. He tried to kill us both.

"In the meantime he had planted the murder gun at Gibson's by hocking it. He built up terror in the mind of Coral Crane and then, when Gallery arrived, in his. When the pawn ticket arrived from 'a friend,' Gallery went and claimed it. If the body was recovered—and it was—Gallery would be accused.

"That's just what happened. But it can be proved now that Gallery claimed the gun after Hansel was killed, probably."

"How'd you tie the gun to Ashton?" Chief Holman asked.

"I suspected Ashton of the murder after I tied him in with the blackmail. I knew if I could get him to Gibson's, Gibson would be able to either identify him or not. Ashton knew Gibson would name him as the hocker of the gun, and that he couldn't go into the place. He tried to kill me and make a break for it. I guess that's all."

"You're a hundred per cent right," said Chief Holman.

"That's not all," said Sue. "You'd be a dead pigeon now, Nick, if Ashton hadn't been left-handed."

"Why?" asked Burney.

"When he got into the pick-up and sat next to me I could feel that gun in his left hand pocket—and I even got a look at it. I didn't know what you were up to, but I did know that Ashton wasn't carrying that gat to shoot rabbits. So, when you got out of the car, I took my gun from my purse. I was ready when he stalled in front of Gibson's."

The desk sergeant lifted a telephone, answered and held it out.

"It's for you, Burney," he said.

Burney took it.

"This is Kramer," he heard. "Have you got the full story?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then get over here and write it. And when you finish, take over the desk. The sheet is going to have a hard time living this down, and I need an honest editor who can really handle the job."