

Pratt's gun spat flame at the  
enraged man



## YOU CAN ALWAYS CATCH FISH

By EDWARD CHURCHILL

*Easy-going Ephraim Pratt, Chief of the two-man police force of Corn County, finds plenty of bait in his "evidence" file!*

**E**PHRAIM PRATT, Chief of Police of Corn City, gave the lie to the chestnut that fat men are always jovial, as he sat contemplating the sluggish waters of Enoch Creek. He held his rod in lifeless, hamlike hands. His small blue eyes stared drearily at a cork which had refused to bob since dawn. It was now well after eight o'clock and the world was about its business—all save Pratt.

He could not recall when Enoch Creek had been so low. Never had the fish failed

to nibble on the plump worms with which he beguiled them in this secret and guilty tryst on the vast, forbidden domain of old Jed Tatum.

Until now he had contended that the peculiar soil formation at this inaccessible spot on the creek had something to do with the avid way they took his hooks—this strange reddish clay, shot with black and gray, which cropped up for fifty yards or so—different from all other soil in Corn County.

He discarded this theory. Not that it mattered much in the state he was in. Nor was he concerned because Bart Crady, Corn County's treasurer, for the first time had failed to keep a dawn rendezvous in this hidden spot.

Bart Crady and he held their precious secret, poached at will on the red-black-gray banks beneath the overhanging trees, in the depths of the usually thick green undergrowth, now parched and dried by drought. Not even his brother and sister-in-law—Jason Pratt, who devoured the soul-satisfying messes and Cora, who cooked them—knew his secret.

Pratt felt himself quivering mentally beneath his vast, inert expanse. He rose from his log perch with a grunt, reeled in his line, and snapped the worms off his hooks almost viciously. He futilely tried to get out of his mind Peter Harrison, the humorless, stern-visaged banker running for mayor in the election just three days away. Pratt, having polled sentiment, knew Harrison would ride in on a landslide. He had not needed to plumb the banker to know that Harrison disliked him and his work, would oust him as Chief forthwith and with pleasure.

Pratt reflected that he had given his all for twenty years to the two-man Corn City police force—he was the day side-as he cleaned his hooks and drove them into a cork, snared the end of his line on his reel, disjointed his pole.

Making his way over a tortuous route through the underbrush, he propped himself with the thought that when an administration changed in a county seat as small as Corn City, you weren't demoted—you were out. Especially when the night side was a shiftless political appointee like Harry Adders, who had got his job through the offices of Banker Harrison.

When he finally reached the battered

police car which he had hidden in a clump of trees, his depression had sunk down to his fourth chin. It clung to him without surcease as he bumped across old Tatum's trackless fields, onto a little used dirt road, and thence to Main Street. It weighed him down as he brought the car to a rattly halt in front of the Corn City House, his bachelor abode.

He didn't hear Mary Tatum, daughter of old Jed, whose "no fishing" signs he had so flagrantly violated, until she called to him from her sedan for the third time.

"Oh—hello, Mary!" he finally gasped as he boosted his corpulence out of his vehicle. He managed a certain ponderous lightness of manner as he turned to her. "How's the debutante?"

She laughed as she held out her left hand. He saw a diamond on her ring finger.

"And that's not all, Chief Pratt! Papa's decided to sell his farm to the Armbruster syndicate—which Edward represents."

SHE indicated the young man beside her. Pratt looked him over. He was about twenty-five, the chief judged. He had blond hair, blue eyes, a boyish way about him and wore good, though citified, clothes. Pratt had seen him several times at a distance during the past fortnight, had secretly admired his trimness, his easy-going grace.

"You've met Edward, of course."

The chief shook his head.

"May I present my fiancé, Edward T. Armbruster, III, of Philadelphia?" She turned to Armbruster. "Edward, this is our police chief, Ephraim Pratt."

"And there's more news. As soon as the deal's closed with Mr. Harrison, Papa and Edward and I are leaving in the car for Omaha. Edward and I will be married there. Then we'll drive to Philadelphia to meet the Armbrusters and after that a trip

to Europe. Isn't that so, Edward?"

Pratt saw Armbruster's fingers close over Mary's.

"That'll be a right nice trip," Pratt said. He glanced at his watch. "Nice town, Philadelphia. I was there once. Thing I most remember is the scrapple—"

"What?" Armbruster asked.

"Scrapple. Mush and sausage all mixed together."

"It's great stuff, chief. Beg pardon. I didn't catch it."

"Well, I'll be runnin' along. Good luck to you both."

Pratt contrived an airy wave, creaked up the wooden steps and across the porch into the lobby of the Corn Center House, got a strong whiff of bacon and eggs from the dining room, which gave him strength to make two flights of stairs to his room. There, he laboriously pulled off his soft, battered hat, his coveralls and his heavy boots. He turned on his small radio, washed and shaved to the rhythm of the "Happy Hour" setting-up exercises. He was nearly finished when the buzzer on the wall sounded three times. With a sigh he put down his razor, pulled on his tentlike uniform trousers, and clumped down the hall in stockinged feet. He lifted the receiver on the wall telephone.

"Chief Pratt speaking. . . . Oh, yes, Mr. Harrison. . . . What's that? . . . That's terrible. . . . In the courthouse? . . . Yes, I know I'm late. . . . I'll be right over." He banged up the receiver and, with an alacrity which surprised him, he hurried back to his room, pulled on uniform shoes, his false dickey, snap cuffs, uniform coat and chief's cap. He shoved a small magnifying glass, two envelopes labeled "Evidence," a bug-bellows, a couple of small glass plates, a strip of cheesecloth and a pair of pliers in his coat pockets. The stairs rumbled under him as he made the

street, holding his breath as he went by the dining room.

He bounced into the police car, raced the motor, swung it around. He drove two blocks to the courthouse, banged the car into the curbing and huffed and puffed up the steps. Banker Harrison, heading a group of bug-eyed, white-faced citizens, awaited him. Wordlessly they escorted him down the first floor hall.

Pratt shuddered at the sprawled, crumpled body of Bart Crady, county treasurer. The body lay almost in front of the door so labeled—a yard or so, Pratt judged, down the hall. He was lying on his side. The handle of a deerfoot hunting knife protruded from his shoulder blades.

"I was walking down Main Street on the way to my offices when Miss Humphries, the recorder's clerk, came screaming to the street," Banker Harrison said. At the tone of his voice, Pratt felt derelict in his duty. "I returned and discovered poor Bart's body. I suppose you've some idea of the guilty party—or at least the motive? Or how Bart happened to be in his offices late at night?"

Pratt shrugged. So this was why Bart Crady had broken his date! Bart would have to come by the building on the way to Enoch Creek at about four o'clock in the morning. If he had seen a light, or a stranger had acted suspiciously, there wasn't a cowardly bone in Bart's body.

"Can't say's I have or do," Pratt replied. "Anybody touched anything?" He looked around him at the stern, puzzled faces. Heads were shaking from side to side. He crouched low over the body. Yes, the deerfoot handle was cracked. It belonged to Joe Lincoln, son of Art Lincoln, proprietor of the Owl Drug Store, which was being forced to the wall by that new cut-rate chain store run by the Omaha company.

"Last tax installment was due and paid yesterday after my bank closed," Harrison prodded. "Must've been a lot of money in Bart's safe."

He started for the door, his hand out toward the knob.

"Don't touch it!" snapped Pratt.

The banker drew back his hand and watched as Pratt went into action.

**H**E HOISTED himself to his feet, went to the door, took out his bug-bellows, blew his breath on the knob, and sprayed a fine powder over it. He fished out his magnifying glass, at the same time thinking about Joe Lincoln.

When he thought of Joe, he thought of Mary Tatum, and the poor boy-rich girl romance that had flourished until Edward T. Armbruster III had come to town to look over and buy farm lands for the Armbruster syndicate. A poor fellow, goaded by such wealth as Armbruster represented, could very easily be tempted to get wealth of his own by illegal means—especially if love was involved. Then, too, there was another angle.

The powder sifted down evenly.

"No prints," Pratt announced lugubriously. "You can go in now."

Harrison wrapped his lean fingers around the knob. He turned it, and the door opened. He whirled on the chief.

"This is an outrage! No wonder we have crime. Why, this door isn't even locked!"

Pratt bit his tongue to keep from telling Harrison that Harry Adders, the night half of the force, was specifically charged with the duty of checking the courthouse doors. Pratt reflected that after all he was to blame, for with him rested final responsibility.

He treated the knob and handle of the safe with his breath and the bug-bellows. There were no specific prints. He held his

breath as Harrison tried the handle. He let it out with a blast of relief as the banker announced with mystification:

"That's funny! It's locked!"

Pratt went outside, looked at Bart's body. Then, remembering his glass plates and his evidence envelopes, he looked for clues other than the knife. His quick eyes focused on something which struck him as strangely out of place in this drought-ridden area—a cake of dried mud!

It was a rough triangle about an inch and a half in size, thick on one side, which was curved, and tapered to waferlike thinness. He picked it up, studied it, tried to fit it into the instep of both of Bart's boots, like part of a jigsaw puzzle. The curved line should fit against the front of the heel—but Bart's were straight cut. He dropped the mud into an evidence envelope.

Harrison came out of the treasurer's office.

"Any clues yet?"

"I can't make any statement now, Mr. Harrison."

"See here!" Harrison bellowed. "I won't stand this any longer! For months—for years—I've been sick of your stupid bungling! Laziness! Inefficiency! Carelessness! I'll fire you so fast—"

"You aren't mayor yet," observed Pratt, his own voice even.

"Maybe I'm not mayor, yet! But as an influential citizen of our community and as a candidate for public office I feel the right to intercede. I'm going to call Omaha. I'm going to have a couple of good men come up here by plane. Crime shall not go unpunished in Corn City!"

Pratt felt an almost uncontrollable desire to applaud.

"And I've got work, so I'll go," he said. He turned and ambled out of the building, saying over his shoulder:

"I'll call Undertaker Powell."

On the way to the Owl Drug Store he fought his way past the Bon Ton Cafe, where Violet, the waitress, always served him double portions, and turned into the telegraph office. There he very carefully phrased a wire to the Police Commissioner, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Then he continued his waddling progress to the drugstore, turned in, sighted his quarry behind the fountain, and eased himself onto a stool. He studied Joe Lincoln's thin, tightly compressed lips, his thin cheeks, the eyes which were lighted by a dull, dark fire, the dark, level brows.

"Double thick malt, Joe," he ordered. "Ain't that one heck of a breakfast?"

"It isn't up to you, chief."

"Say, Joe—how's about a little fishin'—maybe up to Enoch creek some morning, eh?"

Joe picked a large glass, shot chocolate syrup into it.

"Never could go much for fishing."

"Mean to say a feller your age ain't even got a rod and reel?"

"That's right."

Joe put three scoops of ice cream into the glass.

"Better touch 'er up, son," Pratt admonished.

Joe gave him a crooked grin and plopped another ball into the mixture. Pratt pulled himself off his stool as Joe placed the glass under the mixer. The detective glanced over the magazine stand, picked up a copy of the Corn City Clarion, climbed back on the stool, studied it. Then, when he saw one item about Mary Tatum's engagement, he deliberately held it up so Joe could see it.

"Tough," he said, watching Joe's face. "I kinda figured you had the inside track there, until this Armbruster feller came to town."

"Sorta looked that way."

Joe didn't bat an eye.

"Say, Joe—maybe you don't like fishin'—but your huntin's okay. Remember last fall, you got that big buck when you and me and Red Hastings and Slim Hobart went up a Princeville way?"

"Yep."

"You even quartered him. Whatever become of that fancy knife of yours? Still got it?"

Joe put down the malted milk and Pratt took it at a gulp.

"Nope."

"I meant the one with the deerfoot handle. It was kinda split."

"I know the one you mean, chief. I traded it off to Bart Crady."

"You mean before you had that big fight with Bart over the time he took in your pa's ranch fer back taxes—the time you swore you'd kill him."

JOE leaned belligerently over the counter. "See here, now, chief—"

"Wait a minnit, Joe. I was jest thinkin' sorta out loud. Maybe you'd go after money so's you could keep up with another feller and marry a gal. And maybe, if you was crossed, you'd kill two birds with one stone."

"You're getting me sore, chief. I don't know what you're getting at."

"You got a bad temper, Joe. You ain't plannin' a trip away from town?"

"No. Say, what's this all about?"

"A lot of people know that deerfoot knife is—or was—yours, Joe. There's a couple of hifalutin' Omaha dicks flyin' up here. They'll ask plenty of questions. Those people'll talk. So will the ones that know about your fight with Bart."

"Talk about what?"

"About Bart Crady bein' done away with this morning, son."

"You're kidding, chief! Why I saw him walking down the street with my own

eyes last night!"

"And I saw him with my own eyes, completely dead, with your knife a-stickin' out of his back up in the courthouse jest a mite ago, Joe. The dicks—detectives'll be comin' 'round to pick you up. I wouldn't go nowhere."

Pratt left Joe with that thought, and the lad's eyes were wide and his mouth open. The chief ambled into the hot street, in which dust was swirling, impelled by a morning breeze. He went to his car, drove to city hall, half of which was occupied by the police department and cells. He went inside, slouched into his comfortable oversized chair, and felt none of his usual interest as he contemplated letters addressed to "Chief of Police, Corn City." Official, important letters. He opened them, read circulars about wanted criminals, official bulletins, an invitation to the state police chiefs' convention, catalogs of books dealing with penology and criminology, and found his mind wandering back to the crime.

He looked at the long row of books on modern criminal investigation, histories of violent deaths and poisonings, and several correspondence courses in detection in which he'd once reveled. All, he reflected, for naught.

He filed the circulars and bulletins, looked over Night Officer Adders' report with a feeling of distaste. All the time, in the back of his head, was that cake of mud. He emptied his pockets, took it out of its envelope. It had split in half—and inside was mud of a reddish hue, tinged with black and gray!

He sat up straight and pounded his fist on the desk. That meant only one thing, that somebody who had walked up the hall since it was last swept had invaded the sanctity of his secret fishing-hole! That cake didn't fit Bart's boots.

He looked up from the contemplation

of this new drop in his already overflowing cup of sorrow to see a boy of fourteen walk into his office with a yellow envelope in his hand.

"Telegram for you, Chief Pratt. Ninety-three cents due. Ain't it awful about Bart Crady, chief? I'll bet you've got lots of clues."

Pratt shook his head.

"No clues, Teddy," he said, as he took the telegram and opened it. He laid it aside as he fished out his coin purse, extracted ninety-three cents in silver and copper installments, and then added a nickel.

"That's for you."

"Why—thanks, chief!"

Pratt grinned after the young messenger as he hurried out, then picked up the telegram. He read:

PHILADELPHIA, PA.

IN RE YOUR QUERY EDWARD T. ARMBRUSTER, THIRD. HE SON MULTI-MILLIONAIRE FAMILY WITH VAST FARM HOLDINGS. NOW MAKING MIDWEST TRIP PURCHASE NEW PROPERTIES.

HALBERSTADT

SECRETARY COMMISSIONER

He tossed the message aside.

"Another lead shot," he said aloud. "I'd've sworn he didn't know what scrapple was, but I guess he jest didn't hear."

His stomach reminded him to look at his watch.

Noon!

He heard the drone of a plane motor low overhead. That would be Harrison's big shots from Omaha, arriving to cover themselves with glory. And he didn't have a clue!

He ignored his stomach's insistent calls. Whoever it was who had walked in the mud in that isolated spot by Enoch

creek would have left tracks! A slim and forlorn hope, perhaps, for the mud cake might have been lost by anyone walking in the hall—someone having no connection whatsoever with Bart's murder. But it was worth a gamble. He'd look for prints, make a moulage, even if the sole result was to take his mind off his troubles.

He got his moulage equipment—everything needed to make a composition impression and cast of a footprint. Spray gun, composition, plaster of paris, tin for the outside of the mold and chicken wire to hold it together.

After half an hour of study he found a fine specimen print. He set up his mold, sprayed it with plaster of paris, poured his moulage. He had identified three sets of prints. His own big ones. Smaller ones made by Bart on a previous visit. And a series of alien indentations plainly showing the heel with the curved front.

**I**T WAS late in the afternoon when he returned to the city hall with his hardened replica of the bottom part of what looked to be a new pair of shoes or boots. Two large-shouldered men wearing soft felt hats and blue serge suits advanced on him when he entered his office. Behind them, handcuffed, his head bowed dejectedly, sat Joe Lincoln.

"Where you been?" one of the men, who was chewing a cigar butt, asked.

"Out," replied Pratt. "I guess you want me to put young Joe away."

"You guessed it," said the spokesman. He flashed a badge. "I'm Homer Boland. He's Maynard Jackson. We're from Surety Bonded Agency, in Omaha. Open and shut case, chief. Surprised you didn't see it. You boys ought to catch up with the times, out here in the sticks."

"I'll put Joe away."

He wiggled a pudgy finger at the youth.

"Come along, Joe."

"You better be careful, chief. He's desperate. He give us a peach of a battle," Jackson was saying.

Pratt smiled inwardly as he saw the beginnings of a shiner around Jackson's right eye. Boland, he saw, had a cut cheek.

He led Joe to Cell Number One, unlocked it, made sure he had a pitcher of fresh water and a glass.

"Make yourself to home, son."

Boland and Jackson were on his heels.

Both tried the cell door as if they were not quite sure it would hold.

"Yep," said Boland, "got him dead to rights. Admits he owned the knife. Admits he threatened to kill this Crady. Says he was home in bed last night, but ain't got any proof. Could of slipped out a window from his room at home, first floor back. Admits his pa and him are against the wall, need money to keep from bein' foreclosed. Sore at Crady and the county on account of them takin' his farm for back taxes."

"He says he gave the knife to Bart."

"Cock-and-bull story," Jackson announced flatly. "I suppose you figure Crady up and decided to commit suicide for fun, picked the courthouse because the floor was soft, and then rammed the knife into his own back."

Boland laughed sourly.

"County prosecutor has our report. We'd stick around and show you some more things, but we've got a really important case back in Omaha. He'll probably talk after a couple of days in this dump. When he does, call us and we'll come up and take his statement."

"That's right neighborly," said Pratt.

They walked to the door.

"Take you to the field?" Pratt suggested. "Thanks. We rented what you hicks call a taxi."

Boland led the way to the car.

"Don't take any gold bricks," Jackson called over his shoulder.

Pratt watched them go, his face a mask of indifference. Then he went to his office, told Marion, the operator, to get twenty-seven, ring three. In a moment he heard the pleasant voice of Cora Pratt, his sister-in-law.

"You got a customer down here."

"I heard tell on the party line. Isn't it awful? Is he guilty? He seems like such a nice young man."

"Dunno. What you got for dinner?"

"We were going to have nice, fresh fish."

"Don't go jollyin' me, Cora Pratt."

"Chicken. A nice stew, with dumplin's and rich gravy, some fine blackberry short cake, mashed potatoes. When I bring down Mr. Lincoln's, how about a portion for you?"

"Ain't hungry."

There was a gasp and a pause on the other end of the line.

"Why, Ephraim Pratt! You ain't ailin'?"

"T'ain't my stomach—it's my head."

"Better see Doc Sutter. He's got some powders."

"Ain't that kind of a hurt."

"Well, I swan."

Another pause.

"I'll send Jason right down with a tray."

"Thanks, Cory."

Pratt hung up. He went to his car, where his moulage still rested, got in, and drove to the small, shabby bungalow occupied by the Arthur Lincolns and their son, Joe. Mrs. Lincoln greeted him with white face, red, shadowed eyes, and a tear-filled voice.

"I tell you, Chief Pratt, I just can't understand it."

She opened the door to admit him. He had his moulage tucked under his arm. He

patted her shoulder with his free hand.

"You can't never tell what sometimes is in the mind of even a loved one," he said. "Now, ma'm—will you let me see Joe's shoes? All of 'em."

"There isn't but one pair, beside what he's got on, and boots."

She gave him a bewildered look, came back with them. He studied them carefully. None remotely compared with the moulage.

"Thank you, ma'm," he said. "You're welcome to come see the boy any time."

He climbed into his car, drove back to the office. Another dead end. It was getting late. Almost nine o'clock. Joe had eaten his meal, Harry Adders had checked in and was out on his beat, which caused him to sigh with relief. He hadn't wanted to face Adders.

STEP by step, he went over the case. He had a pretty clear picture of what had happened. Bart had seen movement or a flashlight in the county offices. He had unlocked the outside door, probably making a noise which alarmed the thief and caused him to conceal himself. Looking around, he had perhaps discovered the thief. They had struggled.

The intruder had felt the knife, pulled it from its scabbard—Bart had always carried some kind of a knife to clean fish—and had driven it home, then had escaped, fear causing him to abandon his plan to rob the safe. Pratt thought of the mud again. It was sticky, gluelike. A fight would have dislodged it.

But the rest of the scattered ends didn't fit. What did the visit to the secret fishing-hole mean—if the thief had invaded it? How did that tie in with the murder and attempted robbery? Armbruster, who was interested in the farm, was planning to purchase it, had a clean bill of health. Pratt had checked all Joe's shoes, even the ones



he wore, and they didn't remotely resemble the cast. He ran over a list of names from Banker Harrison to Lem Coyle, the town drunk, and eliminated them from suspicion, one by one.

Belatedly, on an off-chance, he decided to check Armbruster's shoes. He lifted the receiver, told Marion to get him the Corn City House. He heard the voice of Ralph Mills, the night clerk.

"Mr. Armbruster come in yet?" he asked. "This is Chief Pratt."

"Yes, sir. He retired half an hour ago."

"Thanks, Ralph."

He hung up, glanced at his big silver watch again. Midnight! He had no idea it was so late. Well, checking those shoes could wait until tomorrow. He thought again of his criminological equipment. He'd used everything that could be used. That department was exhausted. But somehow, somewhere, there must be something which would guide him.

He looked at his cherished row of books.

"O'Slaven's Crime Detection." That had been one of his favorites. He reached up, pulled it down from the shelf, ran listlessly through the pages, found his attention slowly turning to the printed word. For a while he darted about, reading haphazardly. Then, almost desperately, he began to read a chapter headed "Criminal Psychology." He read many pages. Then he found a paragraph which glued his mind to the text. It stated:

"The criminal mind, although warped, is logical. It flows easily, logically, through cause to effect. Consider, for instance, the thought-sequence in relation to places of concealment. The criminal with something to conceal will, naturally and normally even without the function of conscious will, seek out the most secret place imaginable to hide evidence of his

crime. Uppermost in his thought is the need to avoid detection. Look for your evidence, even for your guilty man, in the most inaccessible place within a reasonable distance from the theatre of the culprit's operations. Perhaps you will find what you seek held with a thumb tack on the underside of a chest of drawers or deep in a well, long disused, nearby."

Pratt read the paragraph three times. It applied, and yet it didn't. Obviously there was no loot. Yet, having failed the first time, the criminal might strike again. And if he did—if he succeeded—if the slayer of Bart Crady had lost mud from his boot—it was possible that he might come again to that hidden spot by Enoch creek!

He rose ponderously, stretched, looked at his watch.

In another hour, it would be dawn!

He picked up his huge belt, from which hung a holster encasing a .38 police positive, and wrapped it around him. He went outside. The cool air revived him mentally and physically. He got into the car, drove as quietly as possible to his tree-shelter, parked the car there, hiked into the hiding-place.

Half an hour passed, marked only by the hoots of an owl, and, as dawn came, the scurrying of rabbits and squirrels in the underbrush. As soon as light filtered through the overhanging branches he rose, ambled around the vicinity of the water—and saw fresh footprints—prints made by shoes or boots with curved-fronted heels. The killer had come in the night, surely before he'd arrived—and had gone!

He followed the trail to many prints, to signs of freshly turned earth, covered with a few large rocks. And the brown-black stains of blood!

Swiftly he bent. Frantically, with his big hands, he scooped away the wet, heavy clay—and felt cold, clammy flesh. Not

long after, he had cleared enough to see the mute evidence of murder. Here was the pale face of old Jed Tatum, with death having erased the twisted expression which must have come in that last horrible moment.

For old Jed Tatum's throat was cut from ear to ear!

Pratt rose, scrambled excitedly out of the glade, puffed and panted as he threw himself into the car, drove over a rolling hill to the Tatum farm-house. He banged on the front door, the back door. There was a hush, a stillness, and the sedan was gone from the garage.

He piled back into his car. The deal on the farm—Mary Tatum had said it would soon be closed.

THE OLD car swerved and careened into Corn City. Pratt used the old red siren to clear Main Street as he barged down it, brought the car to a shuddering halt outside the Corn City National Bank. He soared like a balloon to the sidewalk, darted inside, faced Miss Wiggins, Peter Harrison's secretary, who sat in front of a thin walnut partition which preserved Harrison's sanctity.

"I want to see Harrison!" Pratt gasped. "It's about the Tatums!"

Voices came at him over the partition. Miss Wiggins pressed down a button on a dictaphone box and announced Pratt. The chief needed no dictaphone to hear Harrison's harassed answer.

"Tell him I'm busy. Tell him I'm going to be busy all day. The Crady case is closed!"

"I'll wait," said Pratt, after Miss Wiggins had formally repeated the message.

He sat—and listened. Voices came clearly over the partition.

"Now that everything's settled, Mr. Harrison, Edward and I are leaving

immediately for Omaha. Isn't that nice? We talked to Papa last night, and he said that he'd stay behind and look after packing our personal belongings, so that we'd have a real honeymoon before he joined us."

That was Mary's voice.

Then Armbruster's heavier tones.

"Here are the papers, all in order. You understand, we plan immediate improvements, Mr. Harrison. As you agreed, you'll advance in the form of a mortgage, twenty thousand in cash."

Pratt heard the crackling of documents.

"Of course," agreed Harrison. "I have here two thousand in cash and a cashier's check for eighteen thousand which can be cashed anywhere by a man in your position. With the recorded deed as security—"

Recorded deed? Ephraim Pratt felt things click in his head. Tatum was dead. How could a deed be—

He reached for the telephone on Miss Wiggins' desk. What a fool he'd been! The offices of Recorder Parsons were next door to Bart Crady's. And all the while he had been barking up the wrong tree!

"Give me three-two-three."

A feminine voice answered.

"This is Chief Pratt, honey." He kept his voice low and his mouth close to the transmitter. "Quick. Look up the record of a transfer of deed from Jedediah Tatum to the Armbruster Syndicate."

"I'm sure it hasn't—"

"Look it up, please."

Silence for a moment while a jumble of words came over the walnut partition. A medley of goodbyes. Then Tillie came back on the wire.

"I was right, chief. There is no record."

Pratt banged up the receiver, rolled toward the door into Harrison's office, waved back Miss Wiggins as she rose in protest. He entered, looked from one to

another of the trio.

"Wait!" he exclaimed.

"What's the meaning of this?" stormed Harrison.

Pratt sucked air into his lungs.

"Mr. Harrison—that deed you're holding—it ain't recorded."

"Why, you're mistaken," Armbruster protested. "See here, Mary and I are in a hurry. It's a long drive to Omaha."

"I ain't going—and you'll all listen to me. Mr. Harrison, we didn't figure right. Note that deed has the official stamp and seal of Corn County—that Recorder Parsons signed it."

"Of course," agreed Harrison, impatiently. "It's in order."

"It ain't in order. Parsons is lackadaisical. The only things he locks up are th' record books. Everything else lies around. The feller who stabbed Bart Crady wasn't tryin' to rob his office. He'd already been in Parsons' office, used the seal and forged the signature on that deed. Ain't it clear?"

"He's crazy!"

Pratt saw color rising in Armbruster's boyish face. He turned on him.

"You ain't Armbruster at all. You are a vicious, dirty crook who got next to Armbruster in Omaha or somewheres. You cottoned up to him, learned all about what he was doin', then done away with him. You come up here, posin' as him, knowin' Armbruster's syndicate was talkin' deal with old Tatum."

"The man's a maniac," Armbruster burst out to Harrison. "Dangerous—he should be—"

"We'll hear him out, Mr. Armbruster," Harrison said quietly.

"He told Tatum the Armbruster outfit would buy his land," Pratt explained. "Made false love to Mary. Went out and found a secret spot he was goin' to need. Talked Tatum into goin' to Omaha with

him and Mary for the weddin'. Laid his plans right smart.

"Yestidday mornin' he had the deed made out, forged with Tatum's name and Parsons' name. Then he goes to Parsons' offices, uses th' seal, which he has to have to convince you the deal's done. Bart Crady, goin' fishin' with me, sees somethin' goin' on in the courthouse and goes inside. Armbruster, as he calls himself, traps Crady and in a fight stabs Crady with his own knife.

"Then, last night, he talks old Tatum into sayin' he'll stay behind and meet him and Mary later in Omaha. Everything's all set. He purtends to leave the Tatum farm, doubles back, and cuts old Tatum's throat so's there won't be a chance of a slip-up when he gives you the false deed today."

He saw Armbruster's hand move backward.

"Lies—crazy talk—the man's insane!" the fellow blustered. "He can't prove a thing."

"No? Lissen, son. I've got a perfect mold of your boot, made right by the grave you dug down at Enoch Creek."

**A**RMBRUSTER'S gun came out and blasted. But a fiftieth of a second after Pratt's gun spat flame. The killer's weapon skittered across the floor. Clutching his wounded arm, he made a dash for the door, and Pratt stuck out his big foot and tripped him. He bent, put his knee in the small of his back, clipped manacles on him. Then looking up, he saw Mary Tatum fall back in her chair, sobbing. He looked at Harrison.

"All clear, now? He didn't have no interest in Tatum's farm. All he wanted was to pass off that phony deed on you and get twenty thousand dollars of your money. He didn't care nothing about poor Mary. He'd of ditched her—"

He jerked "Armbruster" to his feet,

frisked him, shoved him against a wall, where he stood, sullen and broken. He went to Mary, put his arm around her sagging, shaking shoulders and lifted her gently to her feet.

"I was a fool. Such a blind fool! Now Papa's dead and—"

"Now, now, honey," Pratt said, gently. "It's a case of off with the new and on with the old. I reckon poor Joe's mighty anxious to get out, and he'll like it right smart when you show up to welcome him. You need him now, Mary. The Tatum farm is a big place to run."

By noon, Tatum's body rested in Powell's mortuary, Joe and Mary were together, and "Armbruster" was in the cell

Joe had occupied. Ephraim Pratt had found the shoe which went with the moulage impression in the baggage in the sedan. He had also broadcast a national alarm concerning the real Edward T. Armbruster, III.

Suddenly he was overpowered with a hunger so great that he felt faint all over. So he waddled into the Bon Ton Cafe, gave his order for oatmeal, an order of bacon, an order of ham, a four-egg omelette, hot cakes and coffee. While he was waiting, Banker Harrison came in.

"Mind if I sit with you, Ephraim?" he asked.

"I reckon I can't think of nothing that would please me more, Pete," he replied.