

*Dade Collins' first guest at his tourist camp was . . .*

# The Transient Corpse



*By Robert Turner*

LIKE a slim little choir boy, Cheeks Magill had mussed-up yellow hair that dipped over his forehead where it had been combed and parted and slowly fallen. He had the apple cheeks of a school lad and round blue eyes with starred lashes that held an innocent stare. But his mouth was a cruel seam. In a high thin voice he said:

"Now let's start again, cousin. Where's the five grand?"

For the twentieth time to the same

question Dade Collins answered: "I don't know, I tell you. I don't—"

"Let's start again," Magill insisted.

The boyish face, white with anger now and the young lips sucked into a red-stitched line, came closer to Collins. The color spots in Magill's cheeks were like red poker chips. He raised his arm, slowly, deliberately.

Dade Collins winced and shook his head back and forth madly and squeezed his eyes shut until they ached from the

pressure. The waiting, waiting for the blow was agony.

Nothing happened for a few seconds. Collins slowly controlled his quaking and forced open his eyes.

Magill was in the same position, but he was smiling now. His small teeth were white as dairy cream. And then it came.

He didn't slap Collins; he didn't punch him. His fingertips snap-whipped across the mouth and the tip of the nose, the way kids slash wrists when they play *Scissors and Rocks*.

Collins felt his lips go numb. The hurt didn't come for a moment but then it was bad. The blood was brine in his mouth, and he no longer noticed the cold deadness of his hands below the wrists. His ears roared. He didn't know whether it was blood or tears of rage, but his eyes blurred until that apple-cheeked face was nothing but a distorted vision.

He began shaking again and to curse sputtering, the way he used to when he got in a fight on the way home from school and a schoolboy fist lumped his chin. It wasn't the hurt, the pain, it was the futile savage rage at not being able to stop such a thing from happening.

And through those seconds his brain worked fast as in a dream and with visions as kaleidoscopic. Dade Collins saw it all—the parade of the past. Himself a young dope of nineteen and thinking it was smart and easy dough stealing cars with the other guys. The day in court with the judge saying, “Three years,” and Judy telling him she'd wait and save money and he would come out and go straight with her. And she did all that.

There was enough for a down payment on this tourist camp. A perfect spot just inside the state line and the only one between there and the first big town. Then he and Judy got married and came right down here and cleaned up all the little

cabins and opened for business. This was their first night to receive customers. This—

“Let's start again,” the high, thin voice cut through. “That guy, Knox—Morris Knox—down in Cabin Two. He's dead. You killed him and robbed him. Somehow you learned he had five G's on him and you—”

“I didn't,” Collins choked. “I told you, I told you Knox checked in here this afternoon. He was all nervous and kept asking my wife and me about a blond woman that was supposed to meet him there. Then he went to his cabin and didn't come out again. That was three hours ago and I didn't think anything about it till you guys busted in here on me. I tell you I didn't even know he was killed. I don't know anything about it.”

THE door of the service station bungalow slammed open. A big man with stooped shoulders and a bulldog face came in and said:

“I searched Knox's body again, Cheeks. I went through all the cabins, like with a comb, and the house back there where this guy lives. I didn't find it.”

Magill didn't say anything. He turned back to Collins. His fingers snap-whipped out and cut across Collins' mouth again, smashing his already bloody lips.

“I knew this squirt was lying. He took the dough and hid it,” Magill said softly. “Let's start again, squirt.”

Something broke inside of Collins then. He choked and dry-sobbed out every oath he knew. He ended with something special he had learned in prison. Cheeks Magill must have known prison lingo. His starry lashes worked back until his eyes were more white than blue.

He went to business on Collins' face with his slashing fingertips, then doubled them into hard little fists. Collins felt his

neck crack and his head rock like a loose thing on his shoulders. His entire body teetered on the chair. The chair see-sawed and finally went over.

The blows stopped for Collins. There was a brief flashing moment of pain from the knots at his wrist and the chair digging into his armpits. The roaring and ringing in his head got worse and became everything in the world. . . .

How long that blank spot lasted Dade Collins wasn't sure, but he was alone in the one big room of the service station bungalow when he came to. He made a feeble move to get up. The cords held him, but he noticed that the back of the chair moved slightly. It had loosened with the fall. He worked it back and forth, patiently, and it loosened more.

While he worked at this, he thought: *It's good Judy went to town for supplies, that I can't drive on account of parole. It's good she missed this.* He thought about what he would do when he got free. He would go get the sheriff. He stopped at that.

He remembered Knox—well-dressed, prosperous looking. Cheeks Magill claimed Collins had killed Knox, robbed him. Collins was on parole, fresh out of the can. He couldn't tell his story even if it would be believed. He had no story.

Then his arms worked free of the back of the chair as it came away from the seat part. He stood up, stretched some of the ache and numbness from his limbs. The room swam around his head for a moment, and when the dizziness cleared he made for a workbench nearby. He took a knife used for cutting tire-tubing from the drawer and sliced the remainder of the ropes off.

He got the pistol from the same drawer. The pistol the last owner of the place had left for him—the one he was going for when Magill and the other man had come in and he had seen that they weren't going

to be customers. The huge, dog-faced man had slugged him across the back of the neck before he could reach the drawer.

Dade Collins stepped outside into the cool fall darkness that was as gentle as a nurse's hand to his battered face. He circled the service station to the little frame house in back. With each step his whole body ached and throbbed. He gripped the heel of the gun and swore softly through puffed lips.

STANDING in the shadows to one side of a lighted window of the house, he peered through the screen into his own living room. The two men were in there. They were giving the place a thorough going-over. Looking for the five grand that for some crazy reason they thought he had.

Lifting a picture from the wall and running his hand behind it, the big stoop-shouldered man said: "This is crazy. Something tells me we ain't going to find that dough. We can afford to skip this one, Cheeks. I don't like messing with murder. Suppose that cluck in the service station breaks loose and—"

Outside the window Dade Collins worked his fingers tighter around the gun butt as he watched Magill sling sofa cushions to the floor and dig his hand into crevices of the upholstery as he said:

"Listen, Kosky, *we* didn't kill Knox, so what you worrying about. Collins ain't going to run to the police. I knew we weren't going to have any trouble with him the minute I found his parole card when I was frisking him."

"Yeah," Kosky insisted, "but you can't tell what guys'll do in a spot. He might—"

"In the first place," Magill broke in, "he ain't gonna break loose. In the second place he won't dare make trouble because all we got to say is we were sleeping in one of his cabins and heard calls for help. We caught him leaving Knox's cabin after killing and

robbing him. He tried to get away from us and we gave him lumps. Now get busy and look for that dough!”

“But suppose his wife comes back and finds all this?”

Kosky said. “That’s just what I’m hoping for, you dumb cluck,” Magill said, irritated, as he yanked stuff helter-skelter out of a linen closet. “Maybe that guy Collins won’t be so stubborn about telling us where he hid the cash if he watches us mess up his wife a little.”

At that Dade Collins backed away from the window. The lump in his stomach was cold and heavy. He licked his already partly scabbed lips. He thought: *They’re going to get Judy. She’s due back any minute. I’ve got to catch her before—*

He started running toward the road before the thought was even finished. Just as he reached the highway a wave of nausea struck him. Half walking, half running along the road the way he knew Judy would come, Collins managed to fight off the swooning sickness of his aching, beaten body.

The lights of an oncoming car beat down on him and he hardly knew he was walking right into them, waving his arms and shouting: “I’ve got to stop Judy. Got to talk to her. Got to!”

He hardly knew anything until he slowly realized, a few minutes later, that he was sprawled half in half out of the front seat of his own car. His battered head was in Judy’s lap. Her hands were cool on his scabbed face, her voice was tender and soothing in his ears.

And then he was sitting beside her, pouring forth the story of what had happened since she left. Calmer, now, he finished:

“And that Magill guy was right, honey. The five grand is gone. Knox is murdered. Those two will swear I did that. I won’t have a chance, with my record. Let’s leave

the car here, walk back and snoop around and see what we can find. We’ve got to know more about this business before we can call in any law.”

“We’ll get out of this, Dade,” Judy said. “We’ll get out, honey.”

As they walked through the darkness toward the service station, Collins’ head cleared a little. He felt better already, just having Judy with him. She was like that. She steadied him. He began to think things out a little.

“Listen,” he whispered. “The first thing we’re going to do is fix their car so they can’t run out on this and leave me holding the bag. The way the big guy was talking, he’s scared already. If they don’t find out what happened to that money, Magill might get the same idea.”

JUDY squeezed his hand in silent agreement. As they passed near the house on the way to the little car parked down by the first overnight cabin, they heard Kosky’s booming voice raised in argument against the high pitch of Magill’s.

“I’m gettin’ nervous, Cheeks. Maybe Knox didn’t bring the cash. Maybe we’d better beat it. There’s plenty more suckers.”

“We’re staying,” Magill answered. “Knox was scared. He was ripe. I know he wouldn’t come without the dough. That punk Collins took it, hid it. We’re going to get it if it means tearing down this shack!”

With Judy holding tightly to his hand, Dade Collins walked toward the dim shape of the car. He was frowning as hard as a face like a kneaded lump of dough would permit.

Their car was a small sedan. There were thousands like it on the road. Just the right kind of a car for a pair like Magill and Kosky.

Judy held a match cupped in her hand while Collins raised the motor hood,

swiftly yanked out distributor wires. "They'll never get away in this buggy," he whispered, grimly.

After he closed the hood again, he said: "Say, let's get down to the cabin where that Knox was staying. How do I know there even was a murder? Maybe those guys are crazy or something.

"But first I want to make sure they haven't any extra weapons in the car," he added.

Collins looked inside and snapped on the ceiling light. There was a small suitcase on the floor in the back. He reached for the catch, tried to open it. It was locked.

In the dashboard cupboard he found a screw driver. He got into the car, knelt on the lid of the valise and pried at the cheap catch with the screw driver. It came open so suddenly that Collins almost went over backwards. It was crammed with woman's clothing. Dresses, stockings rolled into balls. A high heeled pump was wedged in at each end.

Disappointed he started to close the thing when he saw the yellow hair sticking out from under a slip. Both he and Judy reached for it at the same time. They pulled out a neatly curled and waved blond transformation.

Collins stared at the thing for a moment, then left it in Judy's hand while he delved under the clothing in the bag. Other things came up in his hands—a cheap cosmetic kit, and an expensive camera and a big brown envelope.

"What's the idea of all that?" Judy wondered aloud.

"I'm not sure yet," Collins answered excitedly. His fingers ripped open the top of the envelope, fished a bunch of negatives and one clear, snapshot size photo out of the thing. He let the negatives slide back and stared at the picture.

It was the photo of the door of one of his tourist cabins. Collins recognized the

moosehead over the door. Just inside, two people stared at the photographer. One of them was the man occupying cabin number three, the man who was murdered, Morris Knox. The other was a slim, brassy-looking blond woman.

They had their arms around each other and the girl was pressing her lips to Knox's cheek. The man was staring, wide-eyed, mouth gaping, through the door. Complete surprise was in his every feature.

**C**OLLINS let his eyes flick from the picture to the contents of the bag. One of the dresses was the same one worn by the woman in the picture. Collins squinted through the puffs of his eyes at the girl again and wondered where he had seen her before.

He was looking at the blond wig in the suitcase when for a brief moment the raised voice of Cheeks Magill came to him through the night and he got it all at once. He exclaimed:

"That girl in the picture—Cheeks Magill!"

He let that sink in while he snicked off the ceiling light, backed out of the car. Then he said: "I've got it, honey. Cheeks Magill is a female impersonator. He and Kosky are giving a new twist to the old badger game."

They started toward Cabin Number Three and Judy said hoarsely: "But why our place, honey? Why should they pick out our place for this business?"

"It isn't whose place it is, that caused this," he explained. It was suddenly all clear to him. "It's the location. This is the first tourist camp ever the state line. It's ideal for their setup. Here's what I think those two were working:

"Dressed as a fast-looking blond, Cheeks Magill would thumb a ride on the other side of the state line. If a driver didn't look prosperous, middle-aged and probably

married, he was turned down. The right victim, though, would be angled some way into stopping at the camp, here.

"Kosky, following in their own car, would break in with his camera at the right moment. If the sucker looked and acted particularly ripe and seemed scared of exposure, he would be asked for a large amount like five thousand bucks. He would get a few days to round up the dough and return to meet the blackmailers at the same spot to exchange the cash for the negatives. Knox was their latest victim. He came back here this afternoon to meet them, and—"

Judy interrupted: "We can prove most of that, but what about Knox being killed, Dade? Who did that? Magill and Kosky will swear by everything that you did that!"

They had become so enrapt in Dade's deductions that they had stopped just before they reached Cabin Three. Dade moved around in front of Judy, put his hands on her arms. "Darling," he said, "I—I'm tired. Can't think straight. Let's ask ourselves a few questions."

"Go ahead," she murmured. "I'm muddled, too, Dade, but I'll try to help."

"This Cheeks Magill," he began. "He's so positive that I killed Knox and stole that money because he knows that no one else could possibly have done it. Right?"

"But you didn't, honey. You didn't!"

"Magill doesn't know that. We do, but he doesn't. So I can think of something else. Something that's so obvious his criminal cunning can't conceive it. If Magill himself isn't bluffing, there's only one other person could have killed Knox and stole the money."

Judy didn't say anything for a second, but her eyes opened wider. She said: "You mean—you mean Kosky?"

"What's to stop one of those two crooks from double-crossing his partner? Kosky, or even Magill, could have gotten away from the other for a while, come

down to the place early, done the job and joined his partner again. Then played the thing through, innocently. That's got to be it. Let's go into Knox's cabin and see if we can find anything else to bear out those conclusions while they're still searching our house."

Just before they reached the door of the cabin Judy stopped, pointed down to one of the two rows of white-washed rocks that ran along each side of the path leading up to the door. They ringed in two little flower gardens on each side of the cabin. It had been Judy's own idea to decorate each cabin this way, make them look from the road as attractive as possible.

"Someone has stolen one of my rocks," Judy said. "I'll have a terrible job finding another one to match."

Dade Collins glanced down at the small crater in the soft earth where the rock had been set. He looked tenderly at Judy. Even at a time like this she stopped to take notice that something pretty had been spoiled.

"Just like a woman," he reprimanded gently. "Come on, Judy, we've got to get this thing settled."

THEY entered the cabin, snapped on the light. The crude but neatly furnished little cabin had been completely ransacked. Drawers were pulled out onto the floor. Collins clenched his fist as he looked at the clean white bedding which Judy had sweated over, piled in a dirty heap on the floor.

The corpse of Morris Knox was on the floor, fully dressed, half under the bed. All his pockets were pulled inside out. His mouth was open against the rough wood of the floor as if he were kissing it. There was a big red-smeared gash on his temple. That had done the job.

Collins stepped closer to the dead figure, bent and studied it at close range. "Yep," he told Judy. "No doubt about it

being Knox in that picture. . . . Say, what's this?"

He pointed a finger down close to the wound on Knox's temple. He saw now that all around the edge of it, in the hair, and even on the edge of the ear lobe, were tiny particles of white stuff.

"Those little white flakes, Judy," Collins said. "What are they? Where did they come from?"

Judy peered gingerly over his shoulder. He felt the shudder of her small body against him. But there was no squealing, no hysteria. That was Judy. She just said, tightly: "Looks like—like chalk, Dade. Or whitewash, or maybe—"

"That's it!" he interrupted, wheeling around. "Your rock! That's what happened to your rock from the garden outside. That was what was used to kill Knox. The murderer probably tossed it outside in the bushes somewhere."

Judy nodded, and Collins went on: "And that means it was Kosky who double-crossed Magill. Magill is a shrimp. Those stones weigh a good ten-fifteen pounds. It would take a big man to wield one hard enough to kill. Kosky is the murderer. . . . But, but I still don't know how we're going to prove that. I—I'm a big guy, too. It could still have been me."

Before Judy could answer to that, the blast of an auto horn sounded from up near the service station. Collins stared at his wife. They both stood still, listening as the horn blared again, impatiently. Collins was the first to speak.

"It's a customer stopped for gas or a something," he said. "Better put out the lights in here."

He leaped toward the door, clicked off the light. They both stood in the darkness of the doorway, looking toward the house and the service station. They saw the car parked there in front of the gas pumps. After a moment Kosky and Magill came

out of the house and around to the car. They fed gas into the car's tank.

"They're bluffing it. They'll get rid of those guys, then come looking for me," Collins whispered, as he watched Magill duck his head inside the service station. "They've discovered I've escaped."

A few moments later the car pulled away from the service station and back onto the highway. Collins pulled Judy closer to him as they watched Magill and Kosky run toward their car, get in.

The starter buzzed, the motor spluttered for a few seconds, then stopped. The starter whirred again and again. Finally Magill and Kosky leaped out, started toward the row of cabins.

"They're coming down here," Collins whispered. "Listen, Judy. I've got an idea how to clear up everything. You sneak around and up to the house and call the sheriff down here. It won't take him more than a few minutes to get here. Meanwhile, I'll wait here and when those two yeggs enter the cabin looking for me, I'll get the drop on them, hold them until the sheriff arrives."

"All right," Judy said and gripped his arm tightly. "Dade, don't tell them a thing of what we've learned. I—I've got a plan and that's important. You'll see why, later. If they ask about me, tell them I haven't got back yet."

She didn't even give him a chance to question her. She slipped her hand from his arm and ran into the dark around the rear of the cabin.

**D**ADE COLLINS stepped back inside the cabin, stood to one side of the door, within easy reach of the light switch. He pulled the gun from his belt, gripped it tightly.

He didn't have long to wait. Magill and Kosky came up to the door of the cabin, still arguing. "I told you we should have

scrammed,” Kosky whined. “That guy broke free and has gone for help, I tell you. He fixed our car so we’d be stuck here!”

“Nuts,” Magill said. “How’d he go? He’s more likely gone to get the five thousand from where he hid it. He might even be hiding in one of these cabins. Let’s go in here where Knox was bumped and see what’s what.”

Collins waited until they were well inside the door, then he flicked on the light, and slammed the door shut. Kosky almost jumped out of his skin. Magill pivoted and stood weaving like a deadly little snake about to strike. His hand darted to his pocket.

“Nuts on that,” Collins told him. “Put your hands up where I can keep track of ‘em. You two pets are going to do as I say, now. Try something else and I’ll make up for that batting around in one second flat.”

“I guess he’s got us, Cheeks,” Kosky said.

He was standing to the left of the smaller man and slightly behind him. Suddenly he leaped to the right, directly behind Magill and shoved his little accomplice sprawling toward Collins.

It was done so swiftly that Collins didn’t have a chance to pull the trigger before Magill’s slight figure slammed into him. The gun went off with a roar, muffled against Magill’s shoulder. Magill let out a shrill scream and fell back clawing at his shoulder. Before Collins could get another shot lined up, Kosky’s fist struck him in the side of the cheek like a hard-flung Indian club. Collins spun half around, staggered backward, the gun dropping from his fingers.

Kosky bent quickly, scooped up the gun, pushed it toward Collins who was coming toward him, fists balled.

“Stand there,” Kosky said and Collins stopped still. “All right, Magill. I’ve got

him. Let’s get out of here. You get going. I’m going to cut this guy down before—”

Before Kosky could finish, the door of the cabin opened. Judy Collins came in. She looked around in surprise. She shot her husband a warning glance, then turned to Kosky. She said:

“I’m Mrs. Knox. What’s going on here?”

Where he had fallen to the floor, Cheeks Magill obscured the corpse from view of anyone entering the door. He sat up, now, holding his shoulder and wincing, stared at Judy.

“You’re Mrs. Knox?” he said in his sneering soprano. “So what? We don’t know you, lady. You have no right to come barging in here.”

Judy Collins stretched her five feet two in semi-comic dignity. Her finely chiseled features were pale and grim. “You know me and you know my husband, Morris Knox,” she told them. “Where is he? If you’re trying to get him to go back and get the money, it’ll do you no good. I won’t let him do it. He broke down and confessed the whole horrid thing to me and I sent him down here to tell you men to leave him alone or he’d sick the police on you.”

“You—you say Knox came down here without the money?” Kosky rumbled. He jutted his big head toward her, bloodshot eyes half popping. “You—”

“Don’t interrupt,” Judy bit in. “I told my husband I would stick by him no matter what came of it. And I will. Blackmailing is the dirtiest business in the world and I told Morris, you go there and meet those men as planned, but you’re not taking a cent of our money with you. You’re going to tell them—”

“Cheeks!” Kosky broke in suddenly, so vehemently his voice broke. His popping eyes rolled nervously. “Cheeks, this dame is nuts. It’s a trick, a gag. Let’s get out of



here. I tell you she's up to something. Knox didn't come down here without—"

He stopped talking so suddenly his teeth clicked like billiard balls. To Collins, sweat beading his face, the silence that followed seemed interminable. He stood frozen trying to figure the best thing to do, the thing least likely to get Judy hurt.

Then Magill got up from the floor. He was staring at Kosky. He stepped slowly toward him. The dabs of color stood out like red spotlights against the pastiness of his smooth cheeks.

"So I'm a chump, eh, Kosky?" Magill said. His voice was a thin, high whine. "So I fell for your little double-cross. You took that money, Kosky."

KOSKY shifted the gun so that it bored into Magill's stomach. He shoved with it, hard. Magill doubled and stumbled backward. Kosky fanned the gun toward Collins and Judy. He said: "All of you get over into that corner." He watched while they obeyed his instructions, then went on:

"I couldn't help it, Cheeks. I had to have this dough without a split. There's a gamblin' mob in the hotel that's got to get it. It was my life or the money. This afternoon, I found Knox and told him to make the appointment a little earlier. I came down alone. I had to bump him. He wouldn't fork over unless he got the pictures, and you had them. Then I took the dough and went back and joined you, again."

Kosky turned his glance away from Magill's young twisted features. He looked at Judy. "It would have been all right if this smart dame hadn't hooked me off guard. I'm burning you both. Her first, then you, Cheeks. I'll give you that much, partner, in seconds to live."

Collins saw the gun swivel toward his wife. He saw Kosky's whole giant body

quiver, heard him whistle breath out through his broad nostrils and he leaped across the room. He wasn't thinking about what would happen to him. He was going to save Judy, if he had to take that slug himself.

Kosky was so intent on killing he didn't notice Collins' move until it was too late. Collins' fist knocked down the gun arm just as it went off. The bullet plowed into the floor. And then Collins was down in the crush of Kosky's arms and legs and body, on the floor. He couldn't afford to abide by the rules. He brought his knee up with all his strength against Kosky's paunch.

He came to his feet just in time to see the local sheriff miss Cheeks Magill with a tackling lunge. Magill spun free. Collins timed it neatly. His fist came up from his knees and all his knuckles split open on Magill's pointed little chin. The blackmailer took a flip over the bed.

It took a few minutes through the nauseous daze that followed before Collins was straightened out on just what had happened. Finally he realized that the sheriff, following Judy's instructions, had been listening to the whole thing outside the door, that he had burst in at the last moment.

After the sheriff had carted Kosky and Magill away and it was quiet around the tourist camp again, Judy and Dade Collins went to their little house behind the service station, alone.

"You shouldn't have tried that stunt," Collins told Judy as she bathed his wounds. He bent and touched his lips to her soft hair. "If—if anything had happened to you—"

"The sheriff had to hear for himself, didn't he? Who'd take the word of an old con like you—except me?" she asked. "Now hush, this iodine is going to sting."