

YOU'LL DIE LAUGHING

By

William Lawrence Hamling

This story originally appeared in the July, 1946 issue of *Mammoth Detective*.

YOU'LL DIE

By William Lawrence Hamling

When Hank Sayler began to steal plots from his friends in the writing game, they decided just to laugh it off . . . in a deadly sort of fashion!

I LEFT the elevator on the seventh floor of the Michigan Square building and unconsciously, through long habit, patted the envelope I was carrying under my left arm. Every time I walked down this corridor, the home and nerve center of the Alliance Publishing outfit, I felt as if I were walking the last mile. For at the end of the corridor was a door I knew very well. Behind it wasn't an electric chair. Just an ordinary swivel chair with a comfortable pad. But the guy who sat in it could give me a shock that either filled my pocketbook or emptied it.

I walked into Art Stebber's office hoping to get my pocketbook filled.

"Hello, Art," I said.

He looked up from the dummy of the next *Colossal Detective*, and nodded. "Hi, Larry."

Behind him, Johnnie Lane, associate Editor of the Alliance pulps, grinned at me through his thick-lensed glasses. Johnnie always blames his poor eyesight on the task of wading through reams of jumbled wordage that I turn in. I should tell Johnnie about some of his own stuff. I don't because I don't buy from him. It's the other way around.

"What's the good news?" Johnnie asked.

I plunked the manuscript I was carrying down on Art's desk. Art looked at the envelope with baby-blue eyes and feigned astonishment.

"I hope to hell you're not bringing in a story, Larry," he said. I'm way over my quota for the month!"

I grinned. There wasn't anything else to do. This announcement always put me in my place. "Nice day out," I countered.

Johnnie reached over and pulled the manuscript from the envelope. He dropped it in

front of Art and I could see them both grimace.

"Murder Takes A Hayride!" Art squawked. "Fifteen thousand words! How the hell can you write fifteen thousand words around such a title?"

Johnnie thumbed through a couple of chapters. "Hell of a job of typing—haven't you any pity on an editor? No wonder I'm going blind!"

I dropped into a chair beside Art's desk and fished out a cigarette. Johnnie snagged one for himself before I could pocket the pack.

"Thanks, Larry," he said grinning. "Got a match?"

I held a light to his smoke and blithely asked: "How are you fixed for lungs?"

Johnnie coughed.

"If I keep smoking these weeds of yours, I'll need a new set!"

I switched my gaze over to Art. He was sitting back in his chair looking sober as all getout. He was looking at me with those dreamy blue eyes of his and I had the feeling he was looking right through me. I wouldn't have been surprised if he was. Art has been toying with science, fantasy and detective fiction for so long that he has developed an editorial hypnosis all of his own.

"I hope you don't expect me to read this thing. I'm busy as the devil."

ART'S three pulps are all quarterly now because of the paper shortage. That means he has one magazine to get out every month. He can slap it together in a week. That leaves three weeks to figure out his bowling average, occasionally filter through the unrush mail, and spend a couple hours a day down in the coffee shop. He grinned

LAUGHING



"But I don't see what the gas has to do with it," I said

suddenly. He knew what I was thinking.

"I suppose you'll want a fast check," he said.

Behind him, Johnnie scoffed. "If this yarn is as bad as the last one he turned in, he owes us some dough!"

"Look, Johnnie," I put on my best trying-to-please-the-baby routine and pointed to the door, "if you'll be a nice little boy and go back to mutilating some of my masterpieces you've got on your desk, I'll buy you an all-day sucker when I leave."

Johnnie thumbed his nose at me and started to walk out. I called after him. "Is Frank Haskell in today?"

He shook his head. "He left a little while ago."

Haskell belongs to the Chicago Pulpateers, and is a good writer, even if he does turn his stuff out in longhand. We've been after him to learn to use a typewriter and for the past month he'd been using one of the spare machines in Johnnie's office. I turned back to Art, who had suddenly started reading my yarn. My fingers were crossed.

Three cigarettes and a half hour later Art shuffled the manuscript back together and put a clip on it. I looked at him hopefully. I was thinking of the three hundred bucks waiting for me.

Art shook his head. "I'm sorry, Larry, I can't use this one."

My heart hit the bottom of my shoes. "Huh? You're not joking, Art? What's the matter, isn't it a good yarn?"

"I didn't say that. Sure it's a good yarn. Some of the best writing you've done yet. Trouble is I just bought a yarn from Hank Saylor using the same idea. If I had seen yours first. . ."

I was looking out the window and trying to control the nerves that were jumping inside me. Saylor! This wasn't the first time he'd stolen an idea of mine and jumped a sale on me. I thought back to the last meeting of the Pulpateers over at Vince Parker's house when I had talked over my idea for Hayride. Saylor had been there. Now he had my three hundred bucks.

"Saylor got my idea last week, Art, at our last meeting!"

I guess I nearly screamed the words out. Art shook his head.

"I'm sorry about this, Larry. I've been suspicious of him for some time. I'll put the clamp

on him from now on." I nodded glumly. But that didn't help matters any. I'd lost another week's output. Art could see it on my face. He looked at his watch.

"Just about time for lunch, Larry. Care to join me?—I can put through an advance during the lunch hour if you need it."

I shook my head. "Thanks just the same, Art; I can manage until next week. Besides, I've got a luncheon date with Betty Kane." I could manage, all right. But it was going to be a tough squeeze. I knew I'd have to work like hell to get another story out before my bills got too high. An advance would have looked pretty good. Maybe I had too much pride.

I left Stebber's office with the manuscript back under my arm. I was walking down the corridor with my eyes on the plaid pattern of inlaid tile when somebody loomed in front of me.

"Hello, Mr. Colter. Just leaving?"

I looked up and saw George Weldon, a tall, scrawny youth with a sallow complexion, standing there in the hall. I was in no mood to be bothered with Weldon. He was one of the ardent followers of the Alliance pulps and had a collection of the magazines dating back to the first issues. Technically guys like Weldon were known as fans, but Weldon was also a tyro writer—he had the urge to write, but had never sold anything. He was always pestering me with his crazy ideas for fantasy yarns, and more than once I thought he was going to suggest moving right in my flat. God knows he was over there enough.

"Hello, Weldon," I answered, and paused, mainly because he was in my way.

"You in a hurry, Mr. Colter? I got a couple ideas I'd like to talk over with you. You going home?"

"Sorry, Weldon, I'm too busy. And I'm not going home. See you again."

I sailed around him and walked to the elevator. I knew he was standing there watching me, with that peculiar expression of dreaminess that was always in his eyes. The kid always impressed me as a little neurotic. But now all I could think about was a guy named Saylor. Not even the thought of meeting Betty helped. The elevator door opened.

SHE WAS waiting for me outside of the City News Bureau on North Clark. I picked her out

of the crowd like an incandescent bulb glowing among a mass of candles. That's how she looked to me. She has the purest gold hair that I've ever seen short of the sun. And when you add a peaches and cream skin with a dash of hazy blue eyes and curves that Lana Turner herself hasn't got . . . well, you've got a good picture of the girl I planned to marry. She started out to be a model but ended up as a feature writer for the News Bureau. She could write the story of my life anytime she wanted.

"Hi, kitten."

She flashed me a smile and hooked her arm through mine. I had to hold the manuscript in my other hand.

"What's the matter, Larry, does Art want some revision?"

I didn't feel like talking about it. "Let's eat, kitten. Henrici's?"

She nodded and for the first time I noticed the shiny lines under her eyes. Lines that only tears could have made.

"You've been crying," I said flatly. She pretended she didn't hear me and turned her eyes away.

It was only a short walk to Henrici's. We turned east on Randolph and I shouldered us through the noon rush crowd that only Chicago's Loop can produce. It was like a steady stream of cattle running down the chutes at Armour's on the South Side, with all the noise and rattle of taxis, street cars and the el thrown in for good measure. The inside of Henrici's was a relief.

We got a table off to the side and after ordering, I repeated my question.

"You've been crying, kitten. What's wrong?"

She pulled out a powder puff and mirror and went to work. Then she asked for a cigarette. It was a stall. She wouldn't look at me.

"Come on, spill it," I said.

She looked at me for a long moment, and her eyes were suddenly wistful. I remembered at that moment the first time I met her over at a party Art Stebber threw. I had just come to Chicago after selling five straight yarns in a row to Stebber. It was kind of an introduction to the Chicago Pulpateers. Betty Kane didn't write for Stebber, but she knew him through Hank Sayler. Sayler had brought her to the party. I'd often wondered what she saw in him. She was good, clean, everything a man wants in a woman. Sayler was

just the opposite. I never asked her about it. There are some things you don't ask.

"Larry, I'd like to tell you something."

She broke in on my thoughts, and it was almost as if she had read my mind. I nodded.

"You won't like it, Larry."

"I don't like beer, kitten, but I drink it."

I could see her take a deep breath.

"Larry, you remember the first time we met—at Art's home?"

I had just been thinking about it. I nodded again.

"Larry, you remember, Hank Sayler brought me to the party. You knew I had been seeing him for some time."

I WAS trying to figure out what she was trying to say. I almost felt like a confessor about to hear some secret sin from the past. I didn't like thinking that.

"I was just finding out about Hank, Larry. In the beginning he was sweet, and every inch a man. I didn't know at the time it was only an act . . ."

That was Sayler. Sayler. Why the hell should he be brought up again? I hated him at that moment. For everything he had done to me, to others, and now—

"When I met you, Larry, I saw just what kind of a man Hank Sayler really was. He couldn't be honest even with himself. I've regretted every minute I ever spent with him. And now those letters . . ."

"Letters?" I couldn't keep the word back. What was she trying to say?

"Hank had gone out to California to talk over the movie rights on his *Vanishing Thief* series, and during the month he was out there, before the deal fell through, I wrote him some letters."

I sat there waiting. The waitress came up and I studied the tablecloth while she put the food on the table. After she left I looked back at Betty. She wasn't touching her food and there was a mistiness in her eyes that shouldn't have been there.

"I said some things in those letters that—well—I didn't know about him, Larry, and now he wants to break things up between you and me, and he threatens—"

Her voice almost broke. I sat there looking at her and wanted to leap across the table and take

her in my arms. She was afraid not for herself, but for what I might think!

"Kitten," I gripped her small cool fingers in my hand across the table, "I wouldn't give a hoot if he screamed those letters from the Wrigley Building! Do you think anything that rat could do or say about you would make any difference to me? Don't worry, I'll get those letters, and give him something in exchange. I have a score that's going to be settled with Sayler myself!"

She frowned. And her eyes rested on the envelope I had been carrying. I told her what had happened.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"I'm going over and beat hell out of him. He's had it coming for a long time. And then I'm going to cram those letters down his throat!"

"Larry, I don't want you to go over there."

I looked closely at her. It didn't click in my mind. "What did you say? I'd like to know why not?"

"In the first place, Larry, it won't do you any good to start a fight with him—you'd only get yourself into trouble. Why don't you and Vince Parker and Frank Haskell see that he's kicked out of the Pulpateers. Art Stebber and Johnnie Lane must know what is going on too. Won't they help?"

I thought back to what Art had said a little earlier about putting the squeeze on Sayler. She was probably right; it would only cause trouble, but there was the matter of—

"Besides, Larry, I want to handle those letters myself. That would be just what Hank would like to have you do, come over and make a scene about me. He'd spread it all over town, and I don't want that to happen. I'll see him tomorrow morning."

"Damn it, kitten, I don't want you going over to see Sayler. That rat might try anything—I won't have it!"

"I want it that way," she said softly.

What's a guy going to do. She kept looking at me with that hazy misty blue gaze of hers that could turn my heartstrings into jumbled chords of emotion. I looked down at my food. It was growing cold on the plate. But I wasn't hungry.

"You win," I said. "I'll talk to Vince this afternoon. But something is going to be done." She was smiling now. I liked that. "I'll see you tonight, huh?"

She nodded, and it was like a halo of gold bobbing before my eyes. "You better eat something now," she said.

I found part of my appetite.

CHAPTER II

The Fight

VINCE PARKER lived just east of Broadway on Diversey. I got off the bus at Broadway and footed back a half block to the apartment hotel. Vince answered the door.

"Hello, Larry! What's up?"

He seemed surprised to see me. I didn't answer but walked into his basement flat and threw myself into a chair. Behind me I heard him close the door.

There was a funny odor in the room. Smelled like something halfway between a rotten egg and an open garbage can. I looked toward the door leading to the rear of the flat and sniffed.

Parker let out a short laugh and ran his fingers through an unkempt mass of limpid black hair. He was a tall, bony fellow, with a persistent boyish stare looking out at you from behind a pair of horn-rimmed glasses. His shirt collar was open and there were brownish streaks running down his sleeves.

"I've been making a little hydrogen sulphide," he apologized.

I wasn't surprised. You had to expect that when you came over to Vince Parker's. Chemistry was his hobby and he had a sizable laboratory in what was supposed to be a kitchen. He was always fooling around back there when he wasn't writing. Frank Haskell always said that there were only two things in Parker's life, and both of them were formulas. One he used to turn out wordage; the other to turn out substances that science hadn't got around to yet. Stebber added that both of them smelled.

"So I notice," I said, not trying to hide the grimace that was screwing up my nose. This was only a mild example of what Vince could do.

"I'll open a window," he said.

"Might not be a bad idea." I replied, pulling out a handkerchief and blowing vigorously. I often wondered how Parker got away with this stuff in an apartment hotel. At any rate they managed to keep him in the basement.

"I guess it did smell a little," he said sheepishly.

I could almost breathe now. "That's putting it mildly," I said.

"How come you're not working?" he asked, folding his six-foot-three into a low-slung lounge chair.

"I was working. But not for myself. Seems as if my checks find their way into Hank Sayler's pockets."

He looked at me with a frown. "Huh?"

I glanced over at his desk beside the window. His Royal standard had a half-typed sheet of bond in it. "Better put a padlock on that, Vince, from now on."

I could see the question written all over his face. I pointed to my manuscript which lay on an end table where I had dropped it. The doorbell rang.

"Just a second, Larry," he said. He lifted himself lazily from the chair and stalked over to the door. Frank Haskell walked in.

"Hi, twerps."

HASKELL is a short lean fellow in his early thirties, with prematurely gray hair. He's a flashy dresser, and today sported a loud plaid sport jacket with creamy slacks and saddle shoes. A corduroy knockabout was tilted at a jaunty angle over his right ear.

"I could say something," I countered, sweeping my eyes up and down him with a sad shake of my head.

"Don't bother, chum, you're just jealous." He grinned and tossed his hat into my lap. He sniffed. "What's been going on in here?"

I motioned over to Vince who had settled himself back in the lounge chair. "He's been at it again. H₂S."

"Oh. Thought it might have been something else."

"Don't be funny. I'm not in a joking mood." I followed him with my eyes as he walked over to Vince's desk and picked up the half-finished manuscript. Vince pulled my gaze away.

"What were you going to say just before Frank came, Larry?"

I pointed to the envelope containing my story. "In there lie fifteen thousand words of some of the best detective writing I've done. You remember last week at our meeting I discussed my

Hayride plot? Well, that's it."

"Why so glum? It'll net you around three hundred, won't it?" Vince cut in.

"It would have if Hank Sayler hadn't taken the idea and wrote the yarn himself. Stebber bought his piece. I'm out the three hundred and a full week's work!"

Vince took off his glasses and said: "Well, I'll be damned!"

Over by the desk, Frank Haskell was looking at me with his mouth hanging open.

"Why, the dirty dog! The same thing happened to me a couple of months ago, but I thought it was just a coincidence!"

"It wasn't. This is the third idea he's stolen on me. I'm fed up!" I said hotly.

Haskell was shuffling Vince's manuscript back together. He put on the title sheet, and I saw him jump.

"What the hell!"

Vince looked over at him. "What's the matter?"

"Where did you get this title?" Frank pointed to the caps halfway down the first page.

"*You'll Die Laughing*?" Vince said frowning. "Why, where do you think I got it? It's an idea I've been working on for the past couple of weeks. I mentioned it when we met over at your place last month."

"Do you know where I've been this morning?" Haskell asked. We shook our heads.

"I've been over to Hank Sayler's. He was just finishing a yarn and getting it ready to bring over to Art Stebber in the morning. It was a story called *You'll Die Laughing*."

Vince Parker jumped from his chair. He was trembling and for a minute I thought he was going to have a fit. He grabbed the manuscript from Haskell's fingers.

"Is this on the level, Frank?"

Haskell nodded. I got to my feet.

"Now you know how I feel about that rat!" I said savagely. "What are we going to do? Personally I'd like to beat hell out of him. Maybe worse!"

Vince was walking slowly up and down the room. Haskell was standing over by the desk, his hands in his pockets, his face lined with thought. Suddenly he laughed. A short, mock laugh.

"You'll Die Laughing! Too bad we can't make his wish come true!"

I fished a cigarette out of my pocket and lit up. As the match flamed I could see Vince. He had stopped in front of the lounge chair and was staring off in the distance. He had put his glasses back on.

"You'll Die Laughing. *You'll Die Laughing!*" He kept repeating the words and looking down at his unfinished story. I had a funny feeling running up and down my back. I had never seen Parker like this before. It was as if the boyish pleasures of life that were so much a part of him had suddenly run out like acid eating through a cardboard flask.

"Snap out of it, Vince!" I said sharply.

He looked at me. I didn't know him. There was a light in his eyes I had never seen before. It made me shudder.

"If you fellows don't mind, I'd like to be alone for a while," he said simply.

I looked over at Frank. He shrugged his shoulders, and wasn't smiling.

"Art's putting the squeeze on Sayler, Vince," I said. "That'll help."

He didn't hear me. He just kept looking down at his story. I could see his fingers tremble. I knew how he felt.

"How about having dinner with Betty and me tonight?" I asked him. He didn't answer. I looked at Haskell. He was motioning toward the door. I picked up my script and turned once more.

"We'll be at Helsing's around nine," I told him.

"Come on, Larry, let him alone," Frank called from the hall.

I left.

BETTY was her old self again in the evening. She was laughing and seemed to have forgotten about what had happened.

We had dinner at a little place on Madison, where the food is good, the service swell, and the prices low. Vince didn't show up, but I wasn't surprised. I didn't tell Betty about him. It would only have spoiled our night.

We walked around for a while, down State to Jackson, over to Wabash, and down again to Randolph. We picked out about ten different sets of furniture along the way. I almost forgot about Sayler.

Helsing's was crowded, as usual. But there were still a few tables left, off to the right of the

bar. We got a booth behind the tables where we could watch the floorshow, which goes on continuously, and sat sipping old-fashioned. I was content to sit there and watch her.

"You're very quiet, Larry." She was smiling over the top of her old-fashioned.

"The scenery's too nice for comment," I answered. She laughed.

The Mimic trio came on, three fellows who, by use of a hidden phonograph and loudspeaker, imitated the Andrews Sisters and the Ink Spots. They were good. I didn't see Vince Parker until he bumped against our booth. I could see he had a couple of drinks under his belt. Behind him Frank Haskell winked at me.

"Hello, Vince," I said lightly. "Have a seat and join the party. You too, Frank."

"Hi folks! Hi, Bettsie girl! Let's have fun!"

Betty smiled, but I could see the question in her eyes as she glanced over at me.

"Hello, Vince." She looked up at him and nodded to Frank. "Out celebrating?"

"That's right. Out celebrating!"

I pulled him down on the seat beside me. Frank slipped over beside Betty. Jake caught my signal over behind the bar, and a couple more drinks were on the way.

"What's the big occasion, Vince? Did you write a best seller?" Betty asked before I could veer the conversation off.

"Ha ha! Yep, I'm a writer's writer—I write for a writer!"

I looked over at Frank. He shrugged his shoulders. Jake came up with the drinks.

"Get us another round, Jake old boy!" Vince popped out and took a big swallow. "Easy on the bitters and heavy on the rye!"

"Maybe you ought to take it easy," I told him. He looked at me with a laugh.

"What's the matter, Larry? You should be on a bender a hell of a lot more than me! He got you too, didn't he?"

I could see the frown on Betty's face as she listened. I could have kicked Parker in the pants.

"Why don't you forget about it, Vince," Frank cut in.

"Forget?" Vince shook his head solemnly. "I don't forget, and he'll be sorry, you wait!"

"Would somebody mind telling me what is going on here?" Betty asked, glancing rapidly at the three of us.

I let out a sigh. "Sayler pulled the same trick on Vince that he did to me."

"You mean he took one of Vince's plots . . ."

Vince clinked his glass roughly on the table. "That's right. But he ain't going to get away with it! I'll fix him!"

"Oh!" Betty said sharply.

I looked at her. But she wasn't looking at any of us. She was starting off toward the bar, and her eyes were wide. I looked.

Hank Sayler was standing there with George Weldon. They must have just come in. And they saw us.

"Speak of the devil!" Frank Haskell muttered.

SAYLER had been drinking. He was leaning against the bar, a stool shoved aside, with his fingers hooked into his belt. He was a big man with sharp, good-looking features and a mop of well-groomed blond hair. The lighting wasn't very bright, but I could see that his eyes were bleary, even at that distance. Beside him Weldon was talking earnestly, but Sayler waved him away. He started for our booth.

I looked over at Betty. The color had drained from her face and she was very pale. "Ignore him!" she burst out.

"Huh?" Vince suddenly followed our gaze and saw Sayler walking up. Sayler wasn't drunk enough to wobble, but he lurched as he came through the tables.

"Well, well! Having a little party, folks?"

I looked away. But Frank stared up at him.

"Beat it, Hank. You're not wanted."

"What's that?" Sayler was leaning over us now, hanging on with one hand to the side rail beside Vince Parker. Vince was sitting very quiet. But his lips were thin white lines.

"You dirty swine!" The words hissed from between his tightly compressed lips. "Whose money are you drinking on tonight?"

I gripped Vince's arm tightly. Sayler continued to grin.

"What the hell have you got to kick about, do you have a monopoly on ideas?"

Vince was struggling to pull away from me. I stared at Sayler and tried to keep my emotions back. "Get out of here, Sayler!"

He ran a hand through his blond hair and laughed. "So our Don Juan is sore at me too!" I

saw him flick his gaze over to Betty. She was looking down at the table and her fingers were white around the glass she was holding.

"You're going to be nice to me, aren't you, Betty?" he said mockingly. "After all, we have a little secret, don't we?"

That did it. I let go of Vince's arm and smashed my fist into Sayler's mouth.

He staggered back and bumped into a table. People started to look around. Then he was coming back at our booth, the grin gone, a snarl of hate in its place.

Somehow I managed to get around Vince. He was trying to get up but I shoved him back. Sayler hit me before I could get clear of the booth, and I landed up with a sharp pain in my back against the connecting partition.

Anger, hot searing anger. Hate, deep burning hate. They rushed through me like a tidal wave. All I knew was that I wanted to hurt Sayler. Smash him. Kill him.

I felt his heavy fists thudding into me as I staggered back from the booth. Then I had my balance again. I drove a hard one right into his mouth. Another and another. He fell back. I lowered my head and smashed into him, bowling him over into a crowded table. Women started screaming.

Then I was on top of him and pounding my fists into his face. He tried to throw me off but I clung like a leech, tearing, smashing, beating him into a pulp. He was limp beneath me but I kept on. Somebody grabbed me from behind.

"For God's sake, Larry, he's had enough!"

Frank Haskell dragged me back. I was weak and trembling. My coat was torn across the front and I could feel a warm wetness around my mouth.

"Let's get out of here!" I said.

The place was in an uproar. People were crowded up against the bar, caught behind the overturned tables. I could see Jake going for a phone. I grabbed Betty by the arm and hustled her to the door. I forgot about Vince and Frank, I pulled the door open and as we went through I could see George Weldon standing over by the bar, staring at me, his mouth open, with that funny dreamy look in his eyes.

I hailed a taxi outside on State Street.

CHAPTER III

The Laughing Death

I DIDN'T sleep very well that night. After I took Betty home and turned in myself, I expected every minute to hear the doorbell ring with a couple of cops waiting outside to pick me up for inciting a riot. If I ever have a will, I'll remember Jake in it. As a bartender he's certainly a good friend.

The morning dragged slowly. I had a cup of coffee down at the corner drug store and then pulled out the typewriter to do some work.

Ideas wouldn't come. I kept seeing Hank Sayler, limp and beaten on the floor, and while it was a nice soul-satisfying thought, it didn't produce wordage. I had a half a pack of cigarettes smoked when I looked at the clock amid the litter of my desk. It was a quarter past nine.

I reached for the phone and called the City News Bureau. Betty wasn't in yet. Then I remembered.

I sat back and got sick inside. She had said yesterday that she was going to see Sayler this morning about those letters. And I had beat hell out of him only the night before.

I kicked a couple of chairs around finding my hat and slammed out the door. The open transom rattled under the impact and I looked back expecting a shower of glass on my head. Then I was out on the street, hurrying for a bus.

HANK SAYLER lived in a three flat building on Belmont just east of Broadway. I got off the Sheridan Road bus and footed it over to his address.

He lived on the first floor at the end of the hall. The hall was empty. I was thinking of all the things I'd do to Sayler if he had gotten tough with Betty. I could see his door was ajar. I went in without knocking.

Betty wasn't there. Sayler was.

He was lying on the floor beside his desk. He had a black eye and swollen lips. His eyes were open, staring, laughing. His whole face, puffed and swollen, had a foolish grin on it.

He also had a hole in the side of his head.

I got sick. He was dead. Dead. Blood still seeped into the rug beneath him. And then I started to tremble.

Betty! Where was she? Had she been here?

Had she killed—

I looked around the room. Sayler had one arm outstretched. His hand was touching the edge of the desk. On the desk his typewriter was uncovered and a sheet of bond was rolled halfway up the platen. It was the first page of a story he had just started. Dimly my mind caught the title: *Vanguards of Eros*. Then I hear a gasp behind me.

"Good God!"

I whirled. George Weldon stood in the doorway, his mouth hanging slack, his eyes wide, horrified.

"Is—is he dead?"

All I could do was nod. He walked slowly into the room, his tall gangly figure slouched over as he peered horrified down at Sayler's body. Then his eyes rose and met mine. The way he looked at me brought a shudder scurrying up and down my spine. I could see it in his eyes. It was just as if he were saying: *You killed him!*

"Don't get any funny ideas, Weldon!" I snapped. "I just got here too. He was like this when I walked in a few minutes ago."

I could see that he didn't believe me. And I couldn't very well blame him. My mind raced back to the previous night. Weldon had been at the bar when I fought with Sayler. Others had seen the fight too. It would look as if I had done it. As if I had shot—Shot!

"Where's the gun?" I heard Weldon say suddenly. It was as if he had read my thoughts.

"Look!" He pointed to the floor beside the desk. I walked around the body. Next to the desk lay a foot-long metal cylinder.

"What's that?" Weldon said shakily.

I could feel my jaws tighten. I knew what it was.

"It's a gas cylinder," I said.

"Gas?" Weldon looked at me puzzledly. "But he's been shot!"

I didn't want to talk. I didn't want to do anything but get the hell out. My mind was all mixed up. First all I could think about was Betty—she had said she was coming over here. Where was she? Had she been here? And now the gas cylinder.

"You crazy fool!" I snapped. "Don't you know better than to pick that up—it may have fingerprints on it."

Weldon didn't seem to hear me. He was turning the cylinder over in his hands. There were

some figures stamped on the side. "N₂O" he said.

N₂O. Nitrous Oxide. Laughing Gas. The words pounded through my mind. Laughing gas. I looked down at Sayler's corpse. I saw the foolish grin on his features, his bruised and swollen features. Laughing gas. Laughing—

The thought struck me like a spray of cold water. "Good Lord!" I muttered. For I was thinking of some other words—*You'll Die Laughing!*

"Whoever killed him left this behind! It wasn't you, Colter, was it?"

I heard Weldon talking and looked up at him. My eyes had been riveted to the grinning features of the dead man.

"No," I said slowly. "I didn't kill him. But—"

"But we both know who did—don't we!"

THE HORROR had left Weldon's eyes now. He was excited and his hands shook as he hefted the gas cylinder.

"Whom do we know that would have something like this—a chemical ready to use?"

I knew. I knew that he knew. It was so obvious. I started walking for the desk even as Weldon said in a low voice: "Vince Parker has a chem lab. Vince Parker would have gases and things . . ."

Vince Parker. Yes, Vince had a lab. But there was something else, a manuscript. Frank Haskell had said Sayler was getting it ready to bring in to Stebber today. Where was this manuscript?

I searched the top of Sayler's desk. There wasn't any story. Either Sayler had put it away, or *someone else had taken it.*

"What are you looking for?" I heard Weldon ask. "Is it this?"

He was pointing to a small blue ribbon lying beside the typewriter. A small blue ribbon on a man's desk.

"That's a funny thing for Sayler to have lying around," Weldon said.

He didn't know how funny it was. A small blue ribbon—the kind that could fit around a packet of letters.

Sudden fury ran through me. I felt a hate for Sayler that I never had felt possible before. This man had never been any good. Now, even after death he was making it possible to ruin the lives of people he had never stopped at hurting.

"The rat—death was too good for him!" I

muttered aloud.

Weldon suddenly began to shake. "What are we going to do? What if somebody should walk in and find us like this—it would look pretty bad!"

It would look worse than bad. But where was the gun? My eyes searched over the room. There wasn't any.

"Let's get out of here!" Weldon was scared now. "I only came over to talk about a story idea—I don't want any part of murder!"

I looked at him, and almost felt like smiling. "Your fingerprints are all over that gas cylinder, Weldon. You're a part of it whether you want to be or not."

He looked down at the nitrous oxide tube that he was still holding. He nearly dropped it. His eyes were wide as he glanced up at me.

"Look, Mr. Colter—I know Sayler was a louse. I heard about what he was doing to you fellows. He deserved to die—whoever did it—but I don't want to get in this—maybe it would even help if I took this cylinder and hid it—then Parker wouldn't have to worry, and—"

He was babbling like a school boy caught stealing green apples from a farmer's tree and trying to talk himself out of a tanning. But it suddenly dawned on me that maybe it would be a good idea.

"Listen, Weldon," I said coldly. "Both you and I could get in a pretty bad spot if anybody found us here like this. The police are very touchy about people touching evidence. If you can keep your trap shut, and want to help Parker out at the same time, go ahead and ditch the gas drum. But remember one thing—we were never here!"

I had the blue ribbon in my pocket when we walked out the door.

"HELLO, VINCE," I said, and walked into his basement flat. I walked in, shut the door and stood there staring.

Betty was sitting on the couch. Both of them had smiles on their faces.

"This is a fine time for humor!" I said angrily. I was thinking how it seemed as if everybody had been staring at me all the way over from Sayler's. I had been careful about leaving. Weldon had gone out first. There were few people on the street and nobody, luckily, had entered the building. But once out the door I could feel eyes on me. All the way I had been thinking about

Parker and Betty. Wondering, hoping it wasn't true—and here they both were, happy about the whole thing.

"What's the matter, Larry?"

Vince Parker had eased his long frame into the lounge chair and was busy loading a pipe.

"What's the matter!" I yelped. "You two have the nerve to sit there and ask me what's the matter after what happened to Sayler?"

"Oh, that!" Vince laughed. "A pretty good joke, eh? Were you over there?"

I don't know how I kept from slapping the grin off his face.

"So you were both in on it!" I looked wearily from Parker to Betty. She was still smiling.

"I got the letters, Larry!" she said. This time I laughed. I pulled the blue ribbon from my pocket and dangled it before her eyes.

"You forgot to take this along!" I said dryly.

"I don't understand—I've got the letters, why should I have taken the ribbon?"

"Did you ever hear of circumstantial evidence?" I asked hotly.

"Hey, fella, calm down. The whole thing is just a gag." Vince Parker laughed again. "Wait till Sayler wakes up—he won't find that manuscript on his desk. I've got it!"

"Wakes up?" That was a hot one. "What makes you think he's going to wake up?"

"Hell, I didn't give him enough nitrous oxide to kill him—just enough to put him to sleep. He was still pretty groggy from last night and it was easy. You remember Haskell suggested making him die laughing? Well, that gave me the idea.

"I went over there earlier this morning and dosed him up. He went out like a light. Then I took the manuscript he was going to turn in to Stebber. I left the cylinder there so he'd know I wasn't fooling. Betty walked in a little after I left, sized up the situation, took the letters she wanted, and came over here. Let's celebrate!"

"Who put the bullet in his head?" I asked.

They looked at me. The smiles faded from their faces. Parker dropped his pipe and stammered: "Did you say . . . bullet?"

"He's dead. Shot through the head," I said grimly.

Betty had straightened in her chair. She gave a short unsteady laugh. "Larry, you're joking!"

"Sure, I'm joking. It's a great joke. He's lying there with a nice hole in his head. I felt like

laughing when I saw him."

"God!" Vince Parker sank back in his chair. He pulled off his glasses and there was incredulous wonder in his eyes as he looked up at me. "Sayler—dead! Shot! But who did it? You know I don't have a gun, Larry—and Betty doesn't . . ."

HIS VOICE trailed off, and suddenly they were both looking at me. I didn't mind that, but I suddenly realized just what they were thinking. "You have a gun, Larry . . ." Vince said slowly.

"You think that maybe I could have shot him!" I blurted out. "For God's sake, you know that I never even kept that old .38 of mine clean—let alone loaded! I don't even know where the damn thing is—I only used it for a paperweight!" I paused as a new thought struck me. I didn't like to say it: "Anyone could have bought a gun and used it on Sayler. Anyone with a good reason to want to kill him."

"He was alive when I left. Betty saw him," Vince said stubbornly.

"He was alive when I left," Betty said nervously, the color gone from her face.

"And he was dead when George Weldon found me standing beside the body," I said.

"Weldon?" Parker frowned.

"He came in shortly after I did. Went to see Sayler about another of his story ideas. Incidentally, he took that damned gas tube of yours and ditched it. He made the mistake of picking it up. I thought it might help you at the time. Frankly I thought you killed him, Vince."

Parker put his glasses back on and started pacing the room.

"What are we going to do? They're sure to perform an autopsy on him, and when they do they'll find out about the nitrous oxide!"

"That's your problem, Vince," I said coldly. There was something too cocksure about his story, and he could have gone back after Betty left the apartment. And Betty . . .

"You don't have to get so damned businesslike about it!" Parker snapped angrily. "After all, I'm not the only one that had a motive and a good opportunity to kill Sayler!"

I didn't reply. I grabbed Betty by the arm and high-tailed it for the door.

"What are you going to do?" Vince Parker

called anxiously.

I looked back over my shoulder as I pushed Betty through the door. "Nothing. I'm going to sit tight. If you have any sense, you'll do the same. You can say a prayer for a little luck too!"

I slammed the door on him.

WE WENT to a little bar on Diversey. Betty was still white, and her lips kept trembling. I ordered us a couple of straight shots and piloted her to a small booth in the rear.

"Kitten, tell me something," I said quietly. "You didn't—do anything to Sayler, did you?"

She looked at me with those wide blue eyes, shook her head savagely, and tears streamed down her face.

"I—I didn't do anything, Larry. Vince told just what happened—I went there to get those letters back, found Hank unconscious on the floor with the gas cylinder beside him. I searched his desk and found the letters. I left the ribbon on his desk and went right over to Vince's. I knew that the gas must have come from his place. Larry, you—"

"No, Kitten, I didn't kill him."

The barkeep brought the drinks and I gave him a bill.

I didn't cough when the whisky hit my throat. It would have taken more than that to make me cough. And it didn't make me warm inside. The police were sure to trace the gas to Parker when the body was found. That would take a day or so, but once they got to Parker, they'd find out about Betty. Not to mention me. I wasn't worried so much about myself.

"Larry."

I looked up. She had stopped crying and was wiping her eyes.

"Larry, does Frank Haskell know yet?"

I had forgotten all about Haskell. Did he fit into the picture? Sayler had lifted some of his stuff, he had admitted as much. And he had no reason to like Sayler. I suddenly was wondering if Haskell had a gun.

"Larry, you haven't answered me."

"Huh?" I tried to give her a smile. It's a hard thing to smile when your mind is racing, trying to keep one step ahead of a murder charge. I had written plenty of stuff about corpses. This wasn't fiction. It was the real McCoy. Somehow I was scared.

"You better go down to the office, kitten," I told her. "Tell them you've been shopping. And try and forget about this mess for a while."

She looked at me with a worried frown. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going home and work on a yarn," I lied. "Come on, it's nearly noon."

AFTER I put her on a bus for the Loop, I hopped a Broadway car and got off at Irving Park. It was just a short walk over to Haskell's flat. He wasn't home.

I lost track of time after that. I remember stopping in at a few taverns and brooding over some drinks. I walked a lot. And then I suddenly became aware that street lights were on and it was evening. I wondered if the police had found out about Sayler. I wondered if they were checking on Parker and had gotten to Betty Kane.

I walked up the steps of the rooming house where I lived, entered the dimly lit corridor, pulled out the key to my room, and suddenly found out.

A cop and a guy in plain clothes were waiting for me at my door.

CHAPTER IV The Trap

"YOU Larry Colter?"

I felt sick all over. I hadn't expected this. How could they possibly have checked through to me already? I was grateful for the dimly lit hallway. It hid the startled expression that I knew had crossed my face.

"That's right," I said guardedly. "What do you want?"

The guy in plainclothes spoke. He was a short, stout guy, with a dark fedora pulled down across his forehead so you couldn't see his eyes.

"We'd like to ask you a few questions. You don't mind, do you?"

"What about?" I asked.

"I'd rather talk that over inside." There was nothing else to do. I slipped my key into the lock and opened the door. The cop shoved me aside and elbowed his way in first.

"Why didn't you just crawl through the transom and wait inside for me!" I said dryly. Behind me, the plainclothes guy gave me a nudge.

He followed me into the room. The cop had found the light switch.

The plainclothes bird perched himself on the edge of my bed.

"Make yourself at home," I said. I put enough sarcasm in my voice to let them know I wasn't nervous. If somebody had said boo behind me just then I'd have probably jumped ten feet.

"Sit down, Colter," he waved me toward my desk chair.

"Thanks," I replied. "Would you mind telling me what this is all about?"

The cop was nosing around the room. He had the closet door open and was thumbing through my clothes.

"My good shirts are in the bureau, if you need one," I told him. He turned his head around and wasn't grinning. The dick cut in.

"I'm Blaine, of the Homicide Detail," he said, as if that explained everything I'd want to know.

"You won't find any corpses here," I answered, fishing for a cigarette among the pile of papers on my desk.

"I don't expect to. Do you know a fellow named Sayler?"

I nodded. "Sure. Why?"

Blaine pushed his hat back on his forehead and for the first time I got a look at his eyes. I've seen the same kind of eyes in an eagle down at Lincoln Park. They were hard, close set, and seemed to stare right through me.

"We got a phone call this noon that said he wasn't very healthy any more. He's dead. Shot through the head with a .38. You wouldn't know anything about it?"

I was trying to decide how far to push my act when the cop suddenly gave a grunt from across the room. He was leaning over picking something off the floor beside the door. When he turned around I saw what it was. He held it gingerly in a white handkerchief.

My .38 revolver. I took a deep drag on my cigarette and decided to play ball. They had nothing on me.

Blaine took the gun, still in the handkerchief, and hefted it slowly in his hand. His eyes never left me. I managed a grin.

"If you're trying to say that you think I killed him, and with that gun, you're crazy. I've had the thing for a couple years, but it's never been

loaded. I use it as a paperweight."

He raised the barrel to his nostrils and sniffed. The faintest semblance of a smile crossed his face. Then he broke open the cylinder.

My throat tightened into a knot. I heard the cop chuckle.

"Never been loaded, eh? Hah!"

The cylinder was full. Six slugs.

They were both looking at me. I felt the blood draining from my face and bit my lips hard. I heard Blaine say casually:

"One round has been fired, Colter."

I TRIED to think. I was in a spot. I knew as well as I knew my own name that that gun had never been loaded since I bought it in a swap shop down on Madison over two years ago. But it was loaded now!

"You said somebody phoned you about Sayler. Who was it?" I asked, and my voice was hoarse.

Blaine kept staring at me. His lips barely moved when he spoke.

"I don't know. It was an anonymous call. The party said that Sayler was dead and that you had a good reason to kill him, and a gun."

It suddenly hit me. The transom!

"Look." I leaned forward and felt sweat rolling down my face. "I've told you the truth—that gun has never been loaded. Somebody must have taken it from my room, used it, and thrown it in through the open transom!"

The cop laughed. "Tell me another one! You had a fight with Sayler last night, didn't you? You were sore at him for stealing some of your fiction, and he had been monkeying around with your girl!"

I looked blankly from the cop over to Blaine. He clicked the cylinder back in place.

"We've checked up on a few facts in the past hours, Colter. You had a good motive to kill Sayler. If this gun checks with the ballistics of the bullet that's in Sayler's skull—and I have every reason to believe it will—we've got you."

It was like being in the middle of a nightmare, when you try to wake up and can't do it. I felt as if somebody were pinning me to the floor while a mechanical sledge-hammer was pounding away into my guts. All along I had been worrying about the others—wondering who could have killed Sayler, and hoping that whoever it was

wouldn't get caught. Now it was me. I had no doubt in my mind that the bullet in Sayler's head would check with the revolver Blaine was now holding. My friends! It was a perfect frame. And anyone could have lifted that gun any number of times from my room. I was sick.

"Do you want to confess now, Colter?" Blaine's eyes might have been those of a vulture waiting to pounce on its victim.

"I didn't kill him," I said.

He sighed and pushed his hat down over his eyes again. Then he got up from the bed.

"Okay, Colter, if that's the way you want it. I'm booking you on suspicion of murder. I'll have all the evidence I need when this gun is checked. Come on, we're going downtown."

I got slowly to my feet, my mind racing. There was something wrong about this whole thing. And I was getting a one-way ticket to the hot seat. I had to have time to think. There were things to do.

"Come on. Let's go."

They were standing beside the door. I could see into the hall and the key was still in the lock where I had left it. The cop was to the right of the door beside a cane-backed chair. I picked up my hat and walked toward them.

"Snap it up!" the cop said.

I did as I walked past him and Blaine and into the doorway. I hooked my foot under the leg of the chair and kicked back. The chair caught the cop around the knees and threw him into Blaine. Almost in the same instant I switched off the light and slammed the door behind me. Even as I turned the key in the lock they were pulling at the door.

I heard Blaine shouting threats. The cop was swearing, and together they were smashing at the panel. I knew it wouldn't hold them long. But it was long enough for me.

I was out in the street and running. I slipped around the corner and entered the alley. It was dark. I couldn't see three feet ahead, but I ran.

There were more alleys. Countless ones. I lost track of them after awhile. And the breath inside my lungs was a burning fire. But I had gotten away. They wouldn't be able to track me for awhile. And then suddenly it all seemed like a big joke. And the laugh was on me. They would be certain now that I had killed Sayler, now that I had taken a powder. And how long would I be

able to stay loose? A day—a week, maybe? Where would I go? I didn't have more than a couple bucks in my pocket. I leaned against a backyard fence and laughed in wracking sobs.

AFTERWARD, I started walking again. I walked for blocks, miles, it seemed. There were alleys and dark side-streets. I was tired, thirsty, I wanted a place to lie down. Once a squad car prowled slowly around a corner and I hugged the side of a two-flat, my heart pounding.

Where could I go? The alarm was probably being broadcast to every precinct in the city. From now on every cop I saw would have my description. It was only a question of time. I couldn't go to Parker; the cops probably had a tail on him now. Stebber and Lane were out of the mess, no sense dragging them in. Betty? I wondered what she was doing. I wondered if the cops had got to her yet. I couldn't go there, they'd expect me to. I thought of Haskell. I'd like to see Haskell. I wondered where he was.

I came out onto a trash-littered street with yellow glowing lamps hanging from corner poles like witch lanterns. I stared up at a street sign. George street. And it suddenly hit me. George Weldon—of course! Maybe he'd help me, the cops wouldn't be after him, they wouldn't even know about him yet.

I looked at the street numbers. Somewhere off in the darkness I heard a freight chugging, and then I knew where I was. The Milwaukee Road freight sidings for their Fullerton Avenue offices was close by. Weldon lived just a few blocks away on Southport. I pulled my hat down further over my eyes and strolled along the street to the carline. A few minutes later I pushed the bell in the hall of a dumpy three-flat. Weldon opened the door on the first floor.

His mouth dropped open when he saw me. I managed a wry grin and walked inside without waiting for an invitation. He closed the door behind me.

"I—I wasn't expecting you," he said.

"Got company?"

"No, no, sit down—here, I'll take your hat."

I looked around the room. I'd only been over here once before but it hadn't changed any. There was a large six-foot bookcase on one wall, loaded to the gills with all kinds of magazines. A desk stood before the two windows facing the street.

There was another smaller book case on the opposite wall, filled with cameras and knick-knacks. I sat down by the desk.

"Mind if I bunk with you tonight, Weldon?" I asked.

He was fidgeting around, nervous-like. "Huh? Why, no . . . I guess it would be all right."

I looked at him steadily. "What's the matter? You seem nervous."

He plunked himself on the edge of the desk and pushed aside a bundle of clipped manuscripts. "I've been on edge all day," he said. "I kept thinking of Saylor and the way we found him. Do you think the police will be able to trace me?"

"If I thought so I wouldn't be here," I told him.

"What?" There was surprise in his voice.

"Relax, Weldon. They've discovered the body and they're out checking now. That's all I know." There was no sense in getting him haywire. I knew he was extremely sensitive, even a little neurotic at times. I didn't want to be chucked out on the street now. So I didn't say that they were out looking for me.

I GLANCED around the room and lit a cigarette. My hand was still unsteady as I held the match. Over the flame I looked at the small book case with the knick-knacks.

"You've got quite a collection of stuff," I said.

"Yeh, I dabble around a little." There were a couple of nice cameras, a graflex and candid, a sweet looking Winchester .22 Repeater, an old crystal radio set, some assorted boxes of shells, and a stack of fan magazines.

"What's the rifle for?" I asked.

"I do a little target shooting down in the basement," he replied. He pointed to the stack of scripts. "As long as you're here, would you mind looking over a couple of these yarns—maybe you can tell me what's wrong with them."

I did mind. My thoughts were a thousand miles from story ideas. But I was in a spot. I had to string him along.

"Sure. Be glad to."

I reached over and started thumbing through the pile. He got off the edge of the desk, rubbed his hands together nervously, and glanced toward the door leading to the rear of the flat.

"Would you like a drink? I'll go and mix a

couple."

He didn't give me time to answer. But a drink would go good anyway. He walked swiftly from the room. I laid my cigarette down and spread the scripts out. I glanced over some of the titles. *Beasts of the Void*; *Stellar Mission*; *Vanguards of Eros*; *Havoc On the Moon* . . .

Something clicked in my mind. It was like seeing a window shaded against the sun and suddenly having the curtain torn aside. I sat up in the chair and picked up one of the scripts with a trembling hand.

In the other room I heard the clink of glasses. I also heard something else. Was Weldon talking to himself out there? I heard a faint click which might have been the cap on a liquor bottle.

I glanced from the script over to the book case. Then my eyes were fastened on one of the shelves. The pieces suddenly fell into place!

"Here they are."

Weldon walked into the room with two glasses. He placed one on the desk beside me. I didn't touch it. I put the script down and picked up my cigarette.

"What did you do with that gas cylinder, Weldon?" I asked him.

He started. "I—I've got it in the other room—I didn't know what to do with it—I wish I had never touched the damn thing!"

He took a deep swallow of his drink and pointed to the script I was holding. "Do you think it's any good?"

"I think this one is very good, Weldon. Very good."

He started talking. He kept talking for the next ten minutes. He seemed to want to talk, to keep my attention. I sat back and listened, and my pulses began to throb. I was waiting for something. Something that I was sure would happen soon. I wanted it to happen.

I didn't have to wait much longer. Someone started pounding on the front door. "Open up!" I heard a shout from outside.

I looked up at Weldon and smiled. "Go ahead, Weldon, let the cops in."

CHAPTER V

The Killer

BLAINE strode into the room, gun in hand. Behind him came the same cop he had with him back at my place. I could see some others standing outside.

"We got your phone call, Weldon. Good work."

Blaine had his hat pushed back and his beady eyes were cold and set. "Thought you'd take a runout, eh, Colter? Well, it won't happen again. Come on, there's a nice little cell waiting for you!"

I grinned up at him. "Hello, Blaine. I wondered how long it would take you to get here. Don't worry, I'm not going to run this time. You see, I know who killed Hank Sayler—and why."

I heard the cop laugh over by the door. But Blaine didn't. He kept looking at me and I saw a frown crease his forehead under the hat brim. I looked over at Weldon. He was nervously licking his lips.

"You haven't performed an autopsy yet on the body, have you Blaine?" I asked.

He shook his head. "We'll get the report in the morning. So what—we know he died from a bullet wound."

I told him everything. I started at the beginning when I walked into Art Stebber's office with my story. I told him how Vince Parker had used the nitrous oxide on Sayler shortly before he was murdered, and how I walked in on the body. I told him that Weldon had found me there, picked up the gas cylinder and ditched it from the scene of the crime. Blaine gave Weldon a nasty look at that, but shrugged it off.

"So what? We'd have found all that out in routine checkup by tomorrow after we got the autopsy report. Your story only proves that you shot him. Weldon walked in just after it happened."

I got up and picked a manuscript off the desk. "You made a careful check of everything that was in Sayler's room?" I asked him.

The cop behind Blaine snorted. "Naturally! I've got the whole list in this notebook!" He waved a small black loose-leaf.

"Did you notice the sheet of paper in Sayler's typewriter—the beginning of a new story he was working on?"

The cop thumbed through a couple pages. "Sure, here it is, a yarn called: *Vanguards of Eros*."

I pushed the manuscript toward Blaine. "Take a look at this. It's a story titled *Vanguards of Eros*, by George Weldon."

Blaine looked at the script, over at Weldon, and then back to me. "I don't see what you're driving at, Colter. What difference does it make if this is the same story?"

"It makes this much difference," I told him hotly, "that Hank Sayler had been stealing ideas from the *Pulpateers* and selling them as his own. What I didn't know was that Weldon was having the same trick pulled on him by Sayler—Hank had stolen Weldon's plot and Weldon knew it! He had a damned good reason to want to kill him!"

George Weldon laughed nervously. "Are you going to let him get away with all this? Sure, I admit Sayler stole my idea—but he stole some of Colter's and Parker's too. Besides, the evidence shows he killed Sayler—I knew he always kept a gun, everyone did, that's why I called the police today and told—"

I WALKED over toward Weldon. He backed up against the bookcase. "Sure I had a gun, Weldon. And of course everyone knew I had it. You did—you were over at my place pestering me more than anyone else. You knew that Sayler was hated by the rest of us. You knew that he had been selling our plots, so when he took one of yours you wanted to get even with him—you thought your motive would be lost because everyone had the same reason to hate Sayler.

"On one of your visits at my place you managed to sneak out my gun. You knew I wouldn't miss it for a few days. You loaded it, went over to Sayler's this morning, found him unconscious on the floor, shot him, and left. But you forgot something, that's why you came back. You remembered the sheet of paper in his typewriter with your story title. You wanted that so there wouldn't be any possible clue to you. But I was there. You couldn't get it.

"After we left, you went over to my place, wiped the gun off so your fingerprints wouldn't be on it, and threw it through the open transom. It was a perfect setup."

I knew Blaine was watching me. I was watching Weldon. His sallow face was writhing

nervously.

"You can't prove anything like that!" he shouted.

"I can." I shoved him aside and pointed to the bookcase. One of the shelves had the .22 rifle and the boxes of shells. I pointed to one of the boxes.

"Why have you got a box of .38 caliber shells, Weldon? You don't have a gun like that! You knew my gun wasn't loaded. You bought this box of ammunition and stole my gun, and loaded it yourself."

Weldon ran over to Blaine. "He's trying to pin this on me! Those aren't my shells—I never had them before—he put them there himself!"

Blaine nodded. "That's a good story, Colter, but there's nothing to back it up. Weldon's right."

"He forgot one little thing, Blaine. And I would have missed it too if it hadn't been for Vince Parker's gas cylinder."

Blaine raised his eyes. "Go on."

"Weldon knew that the gas cylinder wouldn't point to him. That's why he didn't hesitate to pick it up and get his fingerprints on it. But it was that one thing that is going to prove he killed Sayler—his fingerprints with the gun!"

Weldon laughed. I knew what he was thinking. Blaine snorted. "There were no fingerprints on the gun. It was wiped clean!"

"Sure it was. Weldon saw to that. *But what about the bullets that were put in the cylinder—have you examined them yet?*"

It was a long chance. I was banking on the neurotic tendencies of Weldon to crack him. I could see Blaine start visually. And then he had turned on Weldon.

Weldon was shaking. His eyes were bulging

and his lips trembled in spasms. Then suddenly he let out a scream and ran through the door leading to the rear. Blaine and the cop were after him. I heard a door slam. Blaine's bellow echoed through the night: "Stop him!"

There was the blast of a shot somewhere outside. Then silence. I sat down and for the first time noticed that I was wringing wet.

WE WERE all over at Vince Parker's. Stebber, Lane, Haskell, Betty, and I. Vince was handing out drinks, and for once the place wasn't stunk up.

"I hear they got a confession out of Weldon down at the hospital." Haskell was lounging against the desk and nursing a tall Collins.

Johnnie Lane looked at me through his thick lenses and shook his head. "Why the hell can't you create a detective smart enough to figure these things out in your yarns, Larry? Personally, I think you're in the wrong racket."

I looked up at Betty. She was sitting on the edge of the lounge chair where I was sprawled contendedly.

"He's going to enter a new racket very shortly, Johnnie," she said smiling.

Johnnie let his eyebrows raise. "Oh? When's the ball going to be welded on?"

I looked over at Stebber. "As soon as Art raises my rates," I said.

Art Stebber grinned. "Oh, an early wedding, eh?"

Johnnie grinned. "That reminds me: I'll tell you a funny story I heard today. It's so funny you'll die laughing!"

But it wasn't that funny.

THE END