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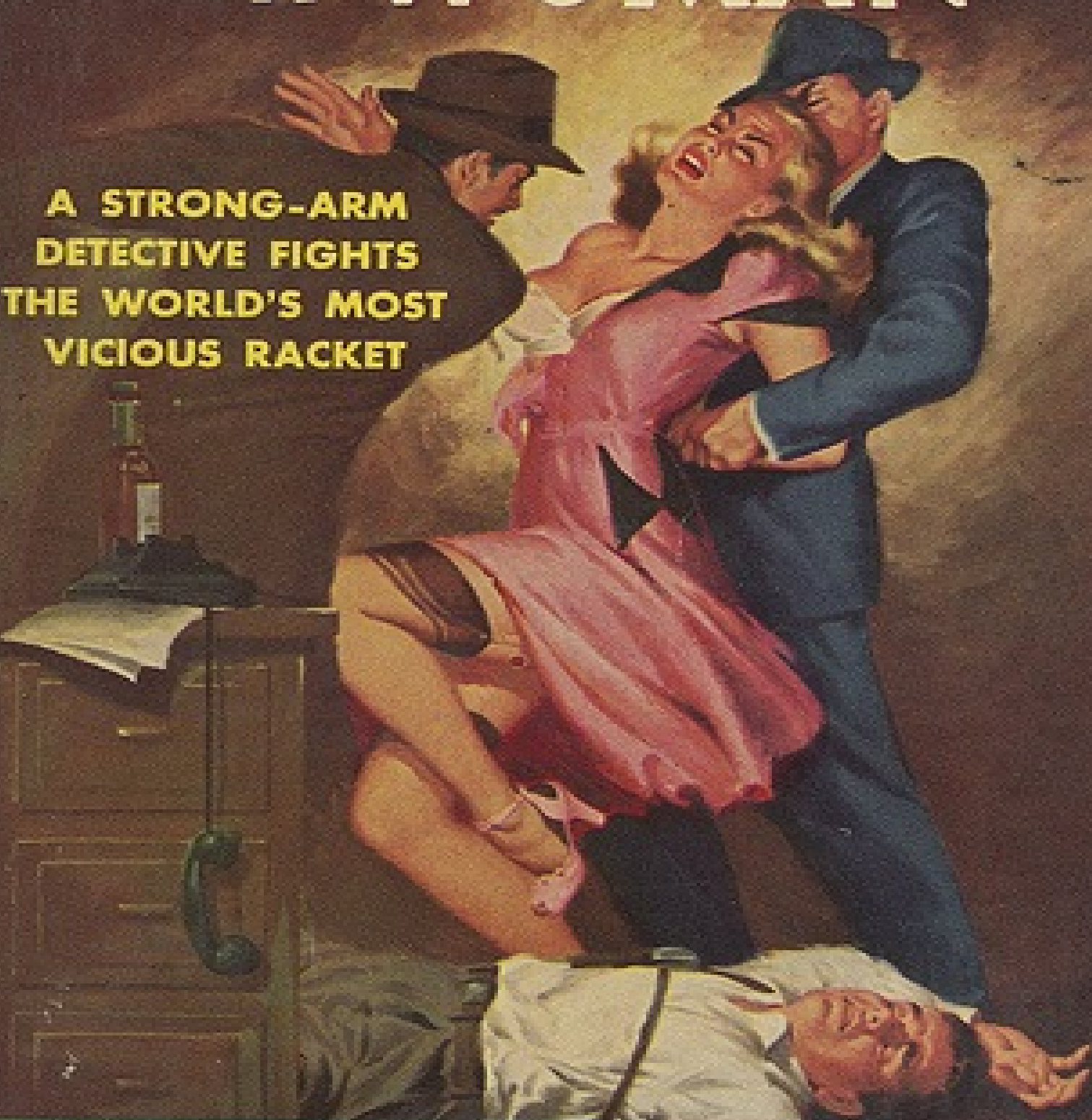


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JAMES HADLEY CHASE

12 CHINKS AND A WOMAN

**A STRONG-ARM
DETECTIVE FIGHTS
THE WORLD'S MOST
VICIOUS RACKET**



COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

TWELVE CHINAMEN

AND A WOMAN

JAMES HADLEY CHASE

Only one man could satisfy Glorie Leadler's craving for love and affection. And though the golden-haired bit of feminine dynamite could have had a dozen men at her feet for the asking, it was a solitary Oriental who made her heart beat fast. When jealous rivals tore that midnight love from Glorie's arms, her over-heated emotions burst forth in a volcano of love-stricken vengeance that rocked Florida and left a mark on many men's souls.

The characters of this novel are entirely fictional and any resemblance to actual persons or situations is accidental.

FENNER opened one eye as Paula Dolan put some elegant curves and her fluffy head round his office door. He regarded her vaguely, and then settled himself more comfortably. His large feet rested on the snowy blotting-pad, and the swiveled desk chair inclined perilously at an angle of 45°. He said sleepily, "Run away, Dizzy, I'll play with you later. Right now I'm thinking."

Some more curves filtered through the half-open door, and Paula came to the desk. "Wake up Morpheus," she said; "you got a client."

Fenner groaned. "Tell him to go away. Tell him we've gone outta business. I gotta catch up some sleep sometimes, haven't I?"

"What's your bed for?" Paula said impatiently.

"Don't ask questions like that," Fenner mumbled, settling himself further down in the chair.

"Snap out of it, Dave," Paula pleaded; "there's a passion flower waiting outside, and she looks as if she's got a load of grief to share with you."

Fenner opened an eye again. "What's she like?" he asked. "Maybe she's collecting for some charity."

Paula sat on the edge of the desk. "Sometimes I wonder why you keep that plate on your door. Don't you want to do business?"

Fenner shook his head. "Not if I can help it," he said. "We're in the dough, ain't we? Let's take it easy."

"You're passing up something pretty good. Still, if that's the way you feel . . ." Paula slid off the desk.

"Hey, wait a minute." Fenner sat up and pushed his hat off his eyes. "Is she really a passion flower?"

Paula nodded. "I guess she's in trouble, Dave."

"Okay, okay, send her in, send her in."

Paula opened the door. She said, "Will you come in?"

A voice said, "Thank you," and a young woman came in. She walked slowly past Paula, looking at Fenner with large, smoky-blue eyes.

She was a shade taller than average, and pliantly slender. Her legs were long, her hands and feet narrow, and her body was very erect. Her hair, curling under her prim little hat, was raven black. She wore a severe two-piece costume, and she looked very young and very scared.

Paula gave her an encouraging smile and went out, shutting the door quietly behind her.

Fenner took his feet off the desk and stood up. "Sit down," he said, "and tell me what I can do for you." He indicated the arm-chair by his desk.

She shook her head. "I'd rather stand," she said breathlessly. "I may not be here very long."

Fenner sat down again. "You can do just what you like here," he said soothingly. "This place isn't anyone's home."

They remained looking at each other for a long minute. Then Fenner said, "You know you'd better sit down. You've got a lot to tell me and you look tired."

He could see she wasn't scared of him, she was scared of something that he didn't know anything about. Her eyes were uneasy, and she held her high-breasted body as though she was ready to jump for the door.

Again she shook her head. "I want you to find my sister," she said breathlessly. "I'm so worried"

about my sister. What will it cost? I mean, what are your fees?"

Fenner squinted at the inkwell by his hand. "Suppose you don't worry your head about the cost. Just relax an' tell me all about it," he said. "Tell me who you are for a start."

The telephone jangled at his elbow. The effect on the girl was startling. She took two quick graceful steps away from the phone, and her eyes went cloudy and big.

Fenner grinned at her. "I guess I get the same way," he said quietly, pulling the receiver toward him. "When I fall asleep an' the bell goes off, I guess it scares the shirt right off my back."

She stood very tense by the door, watching him.

Fenner said, "Excuse me a moment," as he took off the receiver. "Yeah?" he said.

There was a lot of crackling on the line. Then a man said with a very liquid accent: "Fenner?"

"Yeah."

"Any moment now, Fenner, a girl is going to call in and see you. I want you to hold her until I get round to your office. I'm on my way now. Do you understand?"

Fenner let his eyes fall on the girl, and he smiled at her reassuringly. "I don't get it," he said to the telephone.

"Well, listen, only get this right. A girl will come and see you about a story of her missing sister. Well, hold her for me. She's suffering from delusions. She got away from an asylum yesterday, and I know she's heading for your office. Just hold her for me."

Fenner pushed his hat on to the bridge of his nose. "Who in hell are you?" he said.

There was more crackling on the wire. "I'll explain when I get around. I'm coming right away. Your fee will be paid on a generous scale if you do this."

Fenner said, "Okay, you come on up."

The girl said, "Did he say I was crazy?" The hand that wasn't holding her bag fluttered up and down the seam of her skirt.

Fenner put the receiver on its prong. He nodded shortly.

She shut her eyes for a second, then her lids rolled back like a doll's that has been sat up suddenly. She said desperately, "It's so difficult not to believe him." Then she put her bag on the desk, stripped off her gloves and hastily pulled off her coat. Fenner sat quite still, his hand on the telephone, watching her. She gave a little sob and then, with trembling fingers, she began to undo her shirt blouse.

Fenner shifted. "You don't have to do this," he said uneasily. "I'm interested in your case without any act."

Once again she caught her breath in a sob and turned her back on him. She pulled the blouse off. Fenner's hand strayed to the bell. Maybe this dame was nutty, and was going to hold him up for assault. Then he stiffened and took his hand away. Her back was covered with weals. The thin red streaks that crisscrossed on the white flesh made a strange and terrifying pattern. She pulled on the blouse again, fastened the buttons, and then put on her coat. Then she turned round and looked at Fenner with her eyes bigger than ever.

"Now do you believe I'm in trouble?" she said.

Fenner shook his head. "You didn't have to do that," he said. "You came to me for help. Okay, what do you look further? You don't have to be scared."

She stood there, torturing her lower lip with her glistening teeth. Then she opened her bag and took out a roll of notes. She put them on the desk. "Will that do as a retainer?" she said.

Fenner touched the roll with a thick finger. Without actually counting the money he couldn't be sure, but he was willing to bet that there was at least six grand in that roll. He got up swiftly, picked up the roll, and stepped to the door. "Stay here," he said, and went outside into the outer office.

Paula was sitting at the typewriter, her hands in her lap and her eyes expectant.

Fenner said, "Grab your hat quick, an' take this baby to the Baltimore Hotel. Get her a room there and tell her to lock herself in. Take this roll and when you've fixed her, sock it in the bank. Find out all you can about her. Tell her I'll look after her. Give her the you're-in-good-hands dope: Feed her a good line of syrup. She's got the jitters; she's in trouble and she's still young enough to need a mother."

He went back to the office. "What's your name?" he said.

The girl beat her hands together. "Do get me away from here," she said.

Fenner put his hand on her arm. "I'm sending you out with my secretary. She'll look after you. There's a guy on his way up who's interested in you. I'll take care of him. What's your name?"

"Marian Daley," she said. Then she swallowed and went on hurriedly: "Where shall I go?"

Paula came in, pulling on her gloves. Fenner nodded. "Go with Miss Dolan," he said. "Go down the back way. You'll be okay now. Don't get scared any more."

Marian Daley gave him a timid little smile. "I'm glad I came to you," she said. "You see, I'm in a lot of trouble. It's my sister as well. What can she want with twelve Chinamen?"

Fenner blew out his cheeks. "Search me," he said, leading her to the door. Maybe she liked twelve Chinamen. Some people do, you know. Just take it easy until I see you tonight."

He stepped into the passage and watched them walk to the elevator. When the cage shot out of sight he wandered back into the office. He shut the door softly behind him and went over to his desk. He opened the top drawer and took out a .38 police special. He was playing hunches. He put the gun inside his coat and sat down behind the desk. He put his feet up again and shut his eyes.

He sat like that for ten minutes or so, his mind busy with theories. Three things intrigued him. The six thousand dollars, the weals on the girl's back and the twelve Chinamen. Why all that dough as a retainer? Why didn't she just tell him that someone had beaten her up instead of stripping? Why tell him *twelve* Chinamen? Why not just say, 'What did she want with Chinamen'? Why twelve? He shifted in his seat. Then there was the guy on the phone. Was she fresh from a nut farm after all? He doubted it; She had been badly scared, but she was normal enough. He opened his eyes and glanced at the small chromium clock on his desk. She had been gone twelve minutes. How long would this guy take to come up?

As he was thinking, he became aware that he was not concentrating as he should. Half his mind was listening to someone whistling outside in the corridor. He moved irritably and brought his mind back to the immediate problem. Who was Marian Daley? Obviously she was a rich girl of the upper crust. Her clothes must have cost a nice pile of dough. He wished the guy outside would stop whistling. What was the tune, anyway? He listened. Then very softly he began to hum the mournful strains of *Chloe* with the whistler.

The haunting tune held him, and he stopped humming and listened to the fluting sound, beating off the time with his index finger on the back of his hand. Then he suddenly felt a little chilled. Whoever was whistling was not moving. The low penetrating sound kept at the same degree of loudness, as if the whistler was standing outside his door, whistling to him.

Fenner took his feet off his desk very softly and eased the chair away gently. The mournful tune continued. He put his hand inside his coat and felt the butt of the .38. Although there was only one entrance to his office, and that was through the outer office, he had an exit in his own office, which he kept locked. This door led to the back entrance of the block. It was from outside this exit that the whistling was coming.

He walked to the door and softly turned the key in the lock, carefully keeping his shadow from falling on the frosted panel. As he eased the door handle and gently began to open the door, the whistling stopped abruptly. He stepped out into the corridor and looked up and down. There was no one about. Moving fast, he went to the head of the staircase and looked down into the well. The place was deserted. Turning, he walked the length of the corridor and looked down the well of the other

flight of stairs. Still nothing to see.

Pushing his hat on to the bridge of his nose, he stood listening. Faintly, he could hear the roar of the traffic floating up from the street, the whine of the elevators as they raced between floors, and the persistent ticking of the big clock above his head. He walked slowly back to his office and stood in the open doorway, his nerves a little tense. As he went in and shut the door, the whistling started again.

His eyes went very bleak and he walked into the outer office, the .38 in his hand. He stopped just in the doorway and grunted. A small man in a black shabby suit sat hunched up in one of the big padded chairs reserved for visitors. His hat was pulled so far down that Fenner could not see his face. Fenner knew by just looking at him that he was dead. He put the gun into his hip pocket and moved nearer. He looked at the small yellow bony hands that rested limply in the man's lap. Then he leant forward and pulled the hat off the man's head.

He was not a pleasant sight. He was a Chinaman all right. Someone had cut his throat, starting just under his right ear and going in a neat half-circle to his left ear. The wound had been stitched up neatly, but just the same, the Chinaman was quite a nightmare to see.

Fenner blotted his face with his handkerchief. "Quite a day," he said softly.

As he stood, wondering what the hell to do next, the telephone began to ring. He went over to the extension, shoved the plug in and picked up the receiver.

Paula sounded excited. "She's gone, Dave," she said. "We got as far as the *Baltimore* and then she vanished."

Fenner blew out his cheeks. "You mean someone snatched her?"

"No. She just took a runout on me. I was fixing up her room at the desk, turned my head, saw her beating it for the exit, and by the time I got into the street she'd gone."

"What about the dough?" Fenner said. "That gone too?" "That's safe enough. But what am I going to do? Shall I come on back?" Fenner looked at the Chinaman. "Hang around the *Baltimore* and buy yourself a lunch. I'll come on out when I'm through. Right now I've got a client."

"But, Dave, what about the girl? Hadn't you better come now?" Fenner was inclined to be impatient. "I'm runnin' this office," he said shortly. "Every minute I keep this guy waitin' he gets colder and colder, an' believe me, it ain't with rage." He dropped the receiver into its cradle and straightened up. He looked at the Chinaman unemotionally. "Well, come on, Percy," he said. "You and I gotta take a walk."

Paula sat in the *Baltimore* lounge until after three o'clock. She had worked herself up to a severe tension when, at quarter past three, Fenner came across the lounge fast, his eyebrows meeting in a heavy frown of concentration and his eyes hard and frosty. He said, pausing just long enough to pick up her coat lying on a vacant chair beside her, "Come on, baby, I wanta talk to you."

Paula followed him into the cocktail lounge, which was almost empty. Fenner led her to a table at the far end of the room, opposite the entrance. He took some care to pull the table away from the wall so that he could sit facing the swing-doors.

"Are you usin' booze as perfume these days," he said, sitting down, "or do you think we can get some hard liquor in this joint?"

"That's a nice crack," Paula said: "what else can a girl do in a place like this? I've only had three pink ladies. What's the idea? I've been sitting on my fanny for three hours now."

Fenner beckoned to a waiter. "Don't say 'fanny'. It's vulgar." He ordered two double Scotches and some ginger-ale. He sat with his back turned to Paula and watched the waiter order the drinks and bring them all the way back. When the waiter had set them down he reached out and poured one of the doubles into the other glass, filled the empty glass half full of ginger-ale and pushed it over to Paula.

"You gotta watch your complexion, Dizzy," he said, and poured half the neat Scotch down his throat.

Paula sighed. "Well, come on," she said impatiently, "let me in on the ground floor. I've been out of circulation for three hours."

Fenner lit a cigarette and leant back in his chair. "You're quite sure Miss Daley walked out on you without any persuasion?"

Paula nodded. "It was like I told you. I went up to the desk and started making arrangements for the room. She was standing behind me. I took off my glove to sign the book and I felt sort of lonely. I looked round and there she was drifting into the street. She was on her own and moving fast. By the time I'd got through the revolving door she'd gone. I tell you, Dave, I got a nasty shock. What was worrying me more than anything was I'd got all that money on me. I guess you were nuts to have given it to me."

Fenner grinned unpleasantly. "You don't know just how smart I was, baby," he said. "I guess I did myself a nice turn sending you out with that dough. Anyway, go on."

"I went back to the hotel, asked for an envelope, put the money in and gave it to the cashier to hold.' Then I shot out into the street and had a look round; didn't get anywhere, so I phoned you."

Fenner nodded. "Okay. If you're sure she ran out without some guy pushin' her to it, we'll let it ride for a moment."

Paula said, "I'm positive!"

"Now let me tell you somethin'. There's somethin' mighty phony about this business. Someone planted a dead Chink in the outer office after you'd gone, and tipped the cops."

Paula sat up. "A dead Chink?"

Fenner smiled mirthlessly. "Yeah. This Chink had a slit in his throat and had been dead some time. He would want some explainin' away. Soon as I saw him, I asked myself why. Either that guy was leavin' as a warnin' or else as a plant. I wasn't takin' any chances, so I moved him out quick and tossed him in an empty office at the end of the corridor. Well, I was right. It was a plant. I hadn't got back more than a few minutes before three tough bulls bust in. They were lookin' for that Chink, and, believe me, they took all I had not to laugh in their faces."

"But why?" Paula asked, her eyes very wide.

"Suppose they found him there? I should have been taken down to the station and held. That's what I was wanted. To get me out of the way long enough to catch up with this Daley dame. These bulls softened up a lot when they found nothin' to holler about, but they searched the two offices. I had my fingers crossed. If they had found that six grand it might have taken a little explainin' away."

Paula said, "But what's all this mean?"

"Search me. It just amuses me; but it don't mean anythin' yet. What did you get out of Miss Daley?"

Paula shook her head. "She just wasn't talkin'. I asked her the usual line for our records, but she said she would only talk to you."

Fenner finished his Scotch and stubbed out his cigarette. "Investigation seems about to peter out," he said. "We're six grand to the good an' no work to do for it."

"But you won't sit around doin' nothing?"

"Why not? She paid me the dough, didn't she? Then when I fix it so she can talk in comfort, she'll give me the blows. Why should I worry? When she wants more advice, she'll contact me."

An elderly man with a lean face, all nose and chin, came into the lounge and sat down a few tables from them. Paula looked at him curiously. She thought by the look of his eyes he'd been weeping. She wondered why. Fenner broke into her thoughts. "What did you think of this Daley dame?" he said abruptly.

Paula knew what he wanted. "She was educated. Her clothes were class and cost plenty. She was scared about something. I could guess at her age, but I'd most likely make a mistake. I'd say twenty-

four. I might be six years out either way. If she was anything but a good girl, she was a good actress. Her make-up was mild and she'd been living in the sun a lot. She was modest—”

Fenner nodded his head. “I was waiting for that. Sure, she was the modest type. Then why should she take off her clothes to show me that someone had thrashed her?”

Paula put her glass down and stared at him. “This is a new one,” she said.

“Oh, I'll get round to everythin' in time.” Fenner waved his glass at the waiter. “You don't know about the guy who phoned me while I was talkin' to her an' told me she was nuts. That's when she went into the strip-tease. That's what's gettin' me. It don't line up with her type. She just took off her corset and blouse and stood around the office in her brassiere. It don't add up.”

“Someone had beaten her?”

“I'll say someone had beaten her. The marks on her back looked like they were put on with red paint.”

Paula thought for a moment. “Maybe she was scared that you'd think she was crazy and, by showing you that, you'd see she was in a jam.”

Fenner nodded. “It might go like that, but I don't like it.”

While the waiter was fixing him another drink, Paula glanced at the elderly man again. She said to Fenner, “Don't look now, but there's a man over there taking a great interest in you.”

“What of it?” Fenner said impatiently. “Maybe he likes my face.”

“It couldn't be that. I guess he thinks you're made up for the films.”

The elderly man got up abruptly and came over. He stood uncertainly, and he looked so sad that Paula gave him an encouraging smile. He addressed himself to Fenner. “You'll excuse me,” he said, “but are you Mr. Fenner?”

“That's right,” Fenner said without any enthusiasm.

“My name's Lindsay. Andrew Lindsay. I wanted your help.”

Fenner shifted restlessly. “I'm glad to know you, Mr. Lindsay,” he said, “but I couldn't be any help to you.”

Lindsay looked disconcerted. His eyes wandered to Paula and then back to Fenner.

“Won't you sit down, Mr. Lindsay?” Paula said.

Fenner shot her a hard look, but Paula wouldn't see it.

Lindsay hesitated and then sat down.

Paula went on with a show of manners that almost embarrassed Fenner. “Mr. Fenner's a very busy man, but I've never known him to turn down anyone who was in trouble.”

Fenner thought, “This little smartie's goin' to get smacked when we're alone.” He nodded his head at Lindsay because he had to. “Sure,” he said. “What's bitin' you?”

“Mr. Fenner, I've read about how you found the Blandish girl when she was kidnapped. I'm in the same trouble. My little girl disappeared yesterday.” Two tears ran down his thin face. Fenner shifted his eyes. “Mr. Fenner, I'm asking you to help find her. She was all I had, and God knows what has become of her.”

Fenner finished his whiskey and put the glass down on the table with a click. “You've told the police?” he said abruptly.

Lindsay nodded.

“Kidnappin' is a Federal offense. I can't do better'n the F.B.I. You must be patient. They'll turn her up.”

“But, Mr. Fenner—”

Fenner shook his head. He got to his feet. “I'm sorry, but I can't get round to it.”

Lindsay's face puckered like a disappointed child's. He put out his hand and held on to Fenner's sleeve. “Mr. Fenner, do this for me. You won't regret it. You can charge what you like. You can find

my little girl sooner than anyone. I know you can. Mr. Fenner, I beg you to do this.”

~~Fenner's eyes were chips of ice. He took Lindsay's hand off his arm gently but firmly.~~ “Listen,” he said. “I'm my own boss; I don't work for anyone. If I want to take an assignment, I take it. If I don't, I turn it down. Right now, I've got something that's giving me an itch. I'm sorry your kid's got herself into trouble, but I can't do anythin' about it. The F.B.I. is big enough to take care of your daughter and hundreds of other guys' daughters. I'm sorry, but I'm not doing it.”

He jerked his head at Paula and walked out of the lounge. Lindsay dropped his hands helplessly and very quietly began to cry. Paula patted his arm. Then she got up and went out of the lounge. Fenner was standing waiting for her. He said savagely, as she walked up, “You must start crimping. What the hell do you think we're runnin'—a dog's home?”

Paula gave him a mean look. “That old guy's lost his daughter; doesn't that mean anything to you?”

“It means a pain in the neck to me, that's all,” Fenner snapped. “Come on back to the office—we've got work to do.”

“There are times when I think you're cute,” Paula said bitterly, moving towards the reception-hall. “But right now I'd swap you for a lead nickel and a bad smell.”

A tall young man uncurled himself from one of the big lounges and stepped up to Fenner. “I'm Grosset of the D.A.'s office. I want to talk to you.”

Fenner grunted. “I'm busy right now, pal,” he said. “Call round at my office tomorrow sometime when I'm out.”

Grosset apologetically indicated two big cops in plain clothes who stood right in Fenner's exit. “We can talk here, or at my office,” he said primly.

Fenner grinned. “A hold-up? Okay, let's talk here, and quick.”

Paula said, “I've forgotten something. I'll be right back.” She left them and went back into the cocktail lounge. Lindsay was still sitting there. She sat down beside him. “You mustn't feel that Mr. Fenner means to be unkind,” she said softly. “He's got a case that's worrying him. He gets like that. It doesn't mean anything.”

Lindsay raised his head and looked at her, “I guess I shouldn't have asked him,” he said helplessly. “but my little girl means a lot to me.”

Paula opened her bag and took out a flat note-book. “Give me the facts,” she said. “I can't promise anything, but I might be able to persuade him.”

The heavy eyes lit up a little hopefully. “I can do that,” he said huskily. “What facts do you want?”

In the lounge outside, Fenner followed Grosset to a quiet corner and sat down with him. He was very watchful and distrusting.

Grosset was smooth, just a shade too smooth. He flicked open a thin gold cigarette-case and offered it to Fenner. He then lit the two cigarettes with a gold lighter.

Fenner said dryly, “You guys live well.”

Grosset said, “I don't think we've run into you before.” He crossed his legs, showing black-and-white check socks. “I've checked your license. You were the guy who made so much money out of the Blandish kidnapping case. That was when you were a down-at-heel investigator new on the job. You got a lucky break and you pulled out of Kansas and put up a plate here. That's right, isn't it?”

Fenner forced a long stream of smoke down his nostrils. “You're tellin' the story,” he said; “you've got it right up to now.”

Grosset looked wise. “You've been in New York six months. You don't seem to have done much in that time.”

Fenner yawned. “I pick an' choose,” he said indifferently.

“We got a pretty hot tip about you this morning.”

Fenner sneered pleasantly. "Yeah? So hot you sent some bulls out to haul me in and they were away with fleas in their ears."

Grosset smiled. "Since then, we've looked over the block," he said. "We've found a murdered Chinaman in an empty office near yours."

Fenner raised his eyebrows. "What you squawking about? Want me to find who killed him for you?"

"The tip we got this morning was about a dead Chinaman who was to be found in your office."

"Ain't that sad? What happened? Did they plant him in the wrong room?"

Grosset dropped his cigarette butt into the ash-tray. "Listen, Fenner, you and I don't have to fight. I'll put my cards on the table. That Chink had been dead thirty-six hours. The tip was clumsy and we guessed it was a plant, but we had to look into it. Well, we're interested in this Chinaman. We want to get a line on him. Suppose you give us your angle of this?"

Fenner scratched his nose. "Brother," he said, "I feel like I want to beat a drum in the Salvation Army after that speech. If I knew a thing about it, I'd tell you. If that Chink meant anything to me I'd give it to you fast, but he doesn't. I've never had a Chink in my office. I've never set eyes on your dead Chink, and I hope to God I never will."

Grosset looked at him thoughtfully. "I've heard you were like that," he said gloomily. "You like to run on your own and then turn the whole thing over to us after you've got it sewn up. All right, if that's the way you want to play it, go ahead. If we can help you, we will, but if you get into trouble, we'll crack down on you so hard you'll think the Empire State building is on your neck."

Fenner grinned and got to his feet. "All set?" he said. "If you're through, I got some work to do."

Grosset nodded. "Hang around, Fenner; I'll be seeing you again before long." He jerked his head toward his two watchdogs, and the three of them walked out of the lobby.

Paula came out of the cocktail lounge and caught up with Fenner as he moved to the exit. He said, "Where have you been?"

"Listen, Dave," she said, "I've been talking to Mr. Lindsay. I've got a record of what's been happening to his daughter. Why don't you have a look at it?"

Fenner regarded her with a cold eye.

Listen, not another word about Lindsay and his daughter. I ain't interested, I've never been interested, and I never will be interested. I've got enough on my mind to last me a lifetime."

"Considering the size of your mind, it doesn't surprise me," Paula said coldly, and followed him out into the street.

Back in the office, Fenner went straight to his desk and sat down. He lit a cigarette and shouted at Paula. "Come on in, Dizzy."

Paula slid through the door and sat down at his elbow, her pencil poised over her note-book. Fenner shook his head. "I ain't dictating," he said. "I want you to keep me company."

Paula folded her hands in her lap. "Okay," she said. "I'll be your stooge."

Fenner brooded. "Maybe I could get an angle if I turned that money over to the cops to track up. They should be lettin' 'em in if I did. Grosset is worried about the Chink. He'll keep his eye on me. Anything I do is goin' to be shared with that bright boy."

"Why not? He might find the girl for you if you let him have a chance."

Fenner shook his head. "I'm still playin' hunches," he said. "Somethin' tells me that the cops are the best outta this."

Paula glanced at the clock. It was getting on to five. "I've got some work to do," she said. "You won't get anywhere right now."

Fenner said impatiently, "Stick around, stick around. Ain't you on my payroll no more?"

Paula settled herself more comfortably. When he was like this she knew it was better to let him have his way.

“Unless this dame contacts me, the case will peter out. I've got no lead to go on. I don't know who she is. She might come from anywhere. All I know is she's got a sister who's interested in twelve Chinamen. If the dead Chink was one of them, there are only eleven for her to be interested in now. Why did she give me all that dough, and then take it on the lam?”

“Suppose she saw someone she knew, got scared, and lost her head?” Paula put in softly.

Fenner thought this one over. “Did you see anyone who might have given her a scare?”

Paula shook her head. “You know what the *Baltimore* lobby's like that time of day.”

“It's an idea.” Fenner got up and began walking up and down the gaily patterned carpet. “If that's how it went, then we've gotta stick around this telephone for her to ring back. Maybe she won't ring, but if she does, I want to know about it quick.”

Paula groaned.

“Yeah, I guess you'd better run home, pack a bag an' move in. You can sleep on the lounge.”

Paula got to her feet. “You go home and sleep in your nice warm bed, I take it?”

“Never mind what I do. I'll let you know where you can get me.”

Paula put on her hat and coat. “If the office downstairs knows that I'm sleepin' here, they'll begin to think things.”

“That's all right. They know I'm particular. It won't blow into a scandal.”

Paula swept out, shutting the door with a firm click behind her. Fenner grinned and grabbed the telephone. He dialed a number.

“D.A. office? Give me Grosset. Tell him Fenner wants him.”

Grosset came through after a barrage of crackles. “Hello, Fenner. You changed your mind and want to talk?”

Fenner grinned into the receiver. “Not just yet, pal,” he said. “I want you to talk instead. This Chinaman you found lyin' around. Did you find anythin' on him that might help?”

Grosset laughed. “By God, Fenner! You've got a nerve. You don't expect information from me, do you?”

Fenner said seriously: “Listen, Grosset, this case hasn't started to break yet. I got a hunch that when it does, someone's goin' to yell murder. I want to stop it before it starts.”

“I warn you, Fenner, if you're holding back anything it's going to be just too bad for you. If something happens that I could've stopped, and I find you knew about it, I'm going to ride you.”

Fenner shifted in his chair. “Skip it, Jughead,” he said impatiently. “You know I'm in my rights to keep my client covered. If you like to play ball an' give me the information, I'll turn it back to you with interest if I think trouble's startin'. How's that?”

“You're a smooth bird,” Grosset said doubtfully. “Still, what I know won't be much good. We found nothing.”

“How did they get him in?”

“That wasn't so difficult. They brought him in a big laundry basket, up the trade entrance, and unpacked him in an empty office before shooting him into your room.”

“Don't try to pull that one,” Fenner said. “They didn't bring him to me. They left him in the empty office.”—Grosset made a noise like tearing calico.

“Did anyone see the guys who brought him?”

“No.”

“Well, thanks, pal. I'll do the same for you one day. Nothin' else? Nothin' that seemed odd to you?”

“Plenty that seemed odd, but nothing that adds up. The guy had his throat cut and someone sewed it up for him. That's odd. Then he'd marks all over his back as if someone had beaten him up with a wh

some time. That's odd too."

Fenner stiffened. "What was that? Someone had beaten this Chink up?"

"That's right. He'd got weals all over him. That mean anything to you?"

"Not just yet, it doesn't, but it helps," Fenner said, and hung the receiver on its prong. He sat staring at the telephone for several minutes, his face blank, and a puzzled look clouding his eyes.

Paula, coming back a couple of hours later, found him sitting slouched in his chair, his feet on the desk, tobacco ash all over his coat, and the same puzzled look in his eyes.

She put a small suit-case on the lounge and took off her hat and coat. "Anything break?"

Fenner shook his head. "If it wasn't for that dead Chink, I'd write it off as easy money. Those guys wouldn't have risked carting the stiff all the way up to my office unless they were mighty anxious to get me out of the way."

Paula opened her case and took out a book. "I've had my dinner," she said, sitting in the padded chair near the desk. "I'm all set. If you want to be excused, you can go."

Fenner nodded. He got up and brushed himself down. "Okay," he said. "I'll be back in a little while. If she rings, tell her I want to see her bad. Get her address and still feed her syrup. I want to get close to that dame."

"I was afraid of that," Paula murmured, but Fenner went to the door without hearing her.

Just outside, two men, dressed in black suits, stood shoulder to shoulder. They looked like Mexicans, but they weren't. Fenner thought they were Spaniards, but then he wasn't sure. Each of them had his right hand in the coat pocket of his tight-fitting suit. They were dressed alike: all in black, black fedoras, white shirts and dazzling ties. They looked like some turn that comes first on a vaudeville bill, only when you got a look at their eyes you began to think of snakes and things that hadn't any legs.

Fenner said, "Want to see me?" He knew without being told that two guns were pointed at his belly. The bulge in the coat pockets couldn't lie.

The shorter of the two said, "Yeah, we thought we'd drop in."

Fenner moved back into the office, Paula slid open the desk drawer and put her hand on Fenner's. The short guy said, "Hold it." He talked through his teeth, and he made his message convincing.

Paula sat back and folded her hands in her lap.

The short man walked into the outer office and looked round. There was a puzzled expression on his face. He went over to the big cupboard where Paula kept the stationery and looked inside. Then he grunted.

Fenner said, "If you'll care to wait, we can give you a hot meal and a bed. We like you guys to feed at home."

The short man picked up the heavy ash-tray that was by his hand and looked at it thoughtfully, then he smacked Fenner across his face with it very hard. Fenner dropped his head on his chest, but he didn't move quickly enough. The embossed edges of the tray caught him high up on the side of his face.

The other man pulled out a blunt-nosed automatic from his pocket and jammed it into Paula's side. He jammed it so hard that she cried out.

The short man said, "Start something and we'll spread the twist's guts on the mat."

Fenner pulled out his handkerchief from his breast pocket and held it to his face. The blood ran down his hand as he did so, and stained his shirt cuff. "Maybe we'll meet again," he said through his teeth.

"Back flip against the wall. I want to look this place over," the short man said. "Get goin' before we hang another one on you."

Fenner suddenly recognized them as Cubans. They were the kind you ran into on the waterfront

any coast town if you go south far enough. He stood with his back to the wall, his hands raised to his shoulders. ~~He was so furious that he'd've taken his chance and started something if Paula hadn't been there.~~ He somehow felt that these two were just a shade too tough to take chances.

The short Cuban ran his hands over Fenner. "Take your coat off and give it to me," he said.

Fenner tossed it at him. The Cuban sat on the edge of the desk and felt through the lining very carefully. He took out Fenner's note-case and examined that. Then he dropped the coat to the floor. Again he went up to Fenner and patted him all over. Fenner could smell the spiced food he had been eating recently. His fingers itched to grab this creature round the neck.

The Cuban stepped back and grunted. He then turned his head. "You— come here."

Paula's mouth set in a line, but she stood up and took a step forward. "Don't put your filthy hands on me," she said quietly.

The Cuban said something to the other man in Spanish. The other man jerked his head at Fenner. "You come here."

Fenner moved across the room, and as he went past the short Cuban hit him on the back of his head with his gun butt. Fenner went down on his knees, dizzily, and fell forward on his hands. The Cuban kicked at him with his square-toed shoe, catching him where his collar ended, below his ear, in the soft part of his neck. It was a very hard kick and Fenner rolled over on his side.

Paula opened her mouth to scream, but the other Cuban poked her with his gun barrel. Instead of screaming, she caught her breath in agony, and folded up at the knees.

The Cuban caught her under the armpits and held her straight. The short man took hold of her dress by the bottom of the hem and peeled it over her head, entangling her arms and smothering her in it. Then he searched her, ripping her clothes when he had to. He didn't find what he was looking for, and with a vicious spurt of rage he slapped her with his open hand. The other Cuban tossed her on the lounge and then sat on the corner of the table.

The short Cuban searched the office quickly. He didn't make any mess and he acted as if he'd done that sort of job before many times. Then he went into the outer office and searched that too.

Fenner heard him moving about, but he couldn't get his muscles working. He tried to get up, but nothing moved at his frantic efforts. A red mist of rage and pain hung like a curtain before his eyes.

It was only when they had gone, slamming the office door behind them, that he managed to drag himself up from the floor. He put his hand on the desk to support himself, and looked round the office wildly.

Paula was sitting in a huddle on the lounge. She'd got her head free from her dress, and she was crying with rage. "Don't look at me, damn you!" she said. "Don't look at me!"

Fenner lurched into the outer office and into the small washroom on the left. He ran the cold water into the hand basin and bathed his face carefully. The water was very red when he had finished. He walked a little more steadily to the wall cupboard and found a half bottle of Scotch and two glasses. He took a long drink. His head ached like hell. The Scotch burnt him, but it knitted him together. He poured another two ounces into the other glass and wandered back into the office.

Paula had got herself straightened out. She had bundled her torn underclothes into a corner of the lounge. She was still crying quietly.

Fenner put the Scotch on the edge of the desk, near her. "Put it down, baby," he said. "It's what you want."

She looked at him and then at the Scotch. Then she reached forward and snatched up the glass. Her eyes blazed in her white face. She threw the whiskey in Fenner's face.

Fenner stood very still, then he took out his bloodstained handkerchief and wiped his face. Paula put her face in her hands and began to cry properly. Fenner sat down behind his desk. He unpeeled his whiskey-soaked collar and dropped it into the trash basket, then he wiped his neck carefully with the

handkerchief.

~~They sat there for several minutes, the silence only broken by the harsh sound of Paula's sob~~ Fenner felt like hell. The back of his head threatened to split open. The side of his face ached with a deadly throb, and the grazed, livid bruise on his neck smarted from the whiskey. He selected a cigarette from his case with fingers that trembled a little.

Paula stopped crying. "So you think you're tough," she said, without taking her head from her hands. "You think you're good, do you? You let two cheap gunmen walk in here and do this to us? My God, Dave! You're slipping. You've got soft and you've got yellow. Did you see what they did to me while you were lying about on the floor, you sleeping beauty? I teamed up with you because I thought you could look after yourself and you could look after me, but I was wrong. You sat around and got soft . . . do you hear? You're yellow and you're soft! Then what do you do? You let them walk out of here and you crawl round to the bottle. Okay, Dave Fenner, I'm through. When I want a guy to rip my clothes off, I'll ring you up. You can hold the lamp for him." She beat the cushions with her clenched fists and began sobbing again. Then she said, "Oh, Dave . . . Dave . . . how could you let them do this to me?"

While she had been talking Fenner just sat there, his face wooden. His eyes were half shut, and they looked like chips of ice. He said, when she had finished, "You're right, honey. I've been sittin' around too long." He got to his feet. "Don't run out on me now. Just take things easy for a day or so. Shut up the office. I'm goin' to be busy." He jerked open his desk drawer, snatched up the .38, shoved it down the front of his trouser band, and adjusted the points of his vest to cover the butt. Then he walked quickly out of the office, shutting the door behind him.

An hour later, changed and neat again, Fenner thumbed a cab and gave a downtown address. As he was rushed through the heavy evening traffic he sat staring woodenly before him. Only his tight, clenched fists, that lay on each knee, indicated his suppressed feelings.

The cab swerved off Seventh Avenue and plunged into a noisy back street. A moment later it stopped, and Fenner climbed out. He tossed a dollar to the driver and picked his way across the pavement, avoiding the group of fighting kids milling around his feet.

He ran up a long flight of worn steps and rang the bell. The door opened after a while, and an old, disreputable woman squinted at him.

"Ike in?" he said shortly.

"Who wants him?"

"Tell him Fenner."

The old woman slid the chain on the door and pulled it open. "Careful how you go up, mister," she said. "Ike's restless tonight."

Fenner pushed past her and mounted the dark stairs.

The stench of stale cooking and dirt made him wrinkle his nose. On the first landing he rapped at a door. He heard a murmur of voices, and then a sudden hush. The door opened slowly and a slim, muscular lad with a pointed chin like a hog's looked him over.

"Yeah?" he said.

"Tell Ike I want him. Fenner's the name."

The lad shut the door. Fenner heard him say something, then he pulled the door back and jerked his head. "Come on in," he said.

Ike Bush was sitting at a table with four men; they were playing poker.

Fenner wandered in and stood just behind Bush. The other men looked at him suspiciously, but went on playing. Bush studied his cards thoughtfully. He was a big, fat man with a red rubbery face and ingrowing eyebrows. His thick fingers made the playing cards look like a set of dominoes.

Fenner watched him play for a few minutes. Then he leaned over and whispered in Bush's ear. "You're goin' to take an' awful hidin'."

Bush studied the cards again, cleared his throat and spat on the floor. He threw down the cards in disgust. Pushing back his chair, he climbed to his feet and led Fenner to the other end of the room. "What you want?" he growled.

"Two Cubans," Fenner said quietly. "Both dressed in black. Black slouch hats, white shirts and flashy ties. Black square shoes. Both little punks. Both wear rods."

Ike shook his head. "Don't know 'em," he said; "they don't belong here."

Fenner regarded him coldly. "Then find out quick who they are. I want to get after those two fast."

Ike shrugged. "What've they done to you?" he said. "I wantta get back to my game—"

Fenner turned his head slightly and showed the gash on his cheek-bone. "Those two punks came into my joint, gave me this . . . stripped Paula . . . and got away."

Ike's eyes bulged. "Wait," he said. He went over to the telephone that stood on a small table across the room. After a long whispered conversation he hung up and jerked his head at Fenner.

Fenner went over to him. "Find them?"

"Yeah." Ike rubbed his sweaty face with the back of his hand. "They've been in town five days. No one knows who the hell they are. They've got a joint out Brooklyn way. I got the address here. Seen they've taken a furnished house. Got dough, an' no one knows what their racket is."

Fenner reached out and took the paper on which Ike had written the address. He got to his feet.

Ike looked at him. "You goin' into action?" he asked curiously. "Want one or two of the boys?"

Fenner showed his teeth in a mirthless smile. "I can manage," he said shortly.

Ike reached out and picked up a dark bottle without any label. He looked inquiringly at Fenner. "One before you go?" he said.

Fenner shook his head: He patted Ike on his shoulder and walked out. The cab was still waiting. The driver leaned out as Fenner ran down the steps. "Didn't think that was your home," he said with a grin, "so I hung around. Where to?"

Fenner pulled open the door. "You might get far," he said. "You been learnin' your job by mail?"

The driver said seriously: "Things are pretty bum these days. You gotta use your nut. Where to, mister?"

"The other side of Brooklyn Bridge. I'll walk the rest."

The cab shot away from the curb and headed for the lights of Seventh Avenue.

"Someone been knockin' you around?" the cab driver asked curiously.

"Naw!" Fenner grunted. "My Aunt Fanny likes to keep an edge on her teeth."

"A tough old lady, huh?" the driver said, but after that he shut up.

It was almost dark by the time they crossed Brooklyn Bridge. Fenner paid the cab off and went in to the nearest bar. He ordered a club sandwich and three fingers of rye. While he bolted the sandwich he got the girl who waited on him to find out where the address was. She took a lot of trouble, finding on a map for him. He paid his bill, had another short rye, and went out again.

Ten minutes' quick walking got him there. He found his way without asking and without making a mistake. He walked down the street, looking closely at every shadow. The house he wanted was on the corner. It was a small two-story affair, with a square box hedge so arranged that it masked the front door completely. There were no lights showing in any of the windows. Fenner pushed open the gate and walked up the slightly inclining path. His eyes searched the black windows for any sign of movement. He didn't stop at the front door, but went on round the back of the house. There were no lights there. He found a window that was open a few inches at the top, and he shone his small torch into the room. It was empty of everything. He could see the dust on the floor boards. It took him a few seconds to raise the window and step into the room. He was careful not to make any noise, and he trod

on the boards tenderly.

Quietly he tried the door, pulled it open and stepped into a small hall. The light of his torch picked out a carpet and a large hall cupboard. The stairs faced him. He stood listening, but no sound came to him except the faint hum of distant street traffic.

He went up the stairs, the .38 in his hand. His mouth was drawn down a little at the corners, and the muscles of his face were tense. On the landing he paused again, listening. He was conscious of a strange unpleasant smell that was vaguely familiar to him. He wrinkled his nose, wondering what it could be.

There were three doors facing him. He chose the centre one. He turned the handle softly and edged the door open. The smell came to him stronger now. It reminded him of the smell from a butcher's shop. When he got the door half open, he paused and listened, then he stepped in and pushed the door to behind him. His torch lit up the light switch and he snapped it on.

He looked round the well-furnished bedroom, his finger itching on his gun trigger. There was no one there. He turned and twisted the key in the lock. He wasn't taking chances. Then he wandered round the room thoughtfully.

A woman's room. The dressing-table had the usual stuff. The bed was small, and a big nightdress case in the shape of a flaxen-haired doll lay on the pillow.

Fenner went over to the wardrobe and looked inside. There was one costume hanging on the pegs. Nothing more. There didn't have to be anything more; it was the costume that Marian Daley had worn when she called on him.

Fenner touched it thoughtfully while he tried to visualize Marian Daley. He took the costume out of the cupboard and tossed it on the bed. There was more spring in his step as he went over to the chest of drawers. In the top drawer was the prim little hat. He tossed that on the bed too. In another drawer he found a bundle of underclothes, a suspender girdle, stockings and shoes. He threw all these on to the bed. Then he went over to the dressing-table and jerked open the small drawer under the mirror. Stuffed inside was her handbag. He pulled it out with difficulty, and walked with it across the room. He sat on the bed, slapping the bag on his open palm and staring hard at the carpet. He didn't like the carpet at all.

He opened the bag and spilled the contents on to the bed. The usual junk a woman carries around clattered into a small, rather pathetic pile. He stirred the pile with his finger and then looked in the bag again. There was nothing there that he could see, and he put two fingers inside and ripped out the lining. Crumpled at the bottom of the bag, either hidden there, or else slipped through the lining, was a piece of paper. He spread it out and peered at it. It was a letter on a single sheet of notepaper in a large, careless hand. It read:

Key West.

Dear Marian,

Don't worry. Noolen has promised to help me. Pio doesn't know anything yet. I think things will come out all right now.

The letter was unsigned.

Fenner folded the paper carefully and put it in his cigarette-case. He sat on the bed, thinking. Key West and the two Cubans. Something was beginning to add up. He got to his feet and made a systematic search of the whole room, but he found nothing else. Then he unlocked the door, snapped off the light and stepped quietly into the passage.

He eased his way into the room on the left. His torch showed him that it was a fair-sized bathroom. Making sure that the curtain was drawn over the window he reached out for the light switch. The smell

in the room was making him feel a little sick. He knew now what it was and he was steeling himself to turn on the light. It flashed on as he turned the switch down with exaggerated care.

In the hard light the room looked like an abattoir after a full day's work. The bath stood against the wall and was covered with a blood-spotted sheet. The wall was marked red and the floor by the bath was red. A table stood near the bath and that, too, had a blood-soaked towel on it. Fenner could see that it covered something.

He stood very still, looking round the room, his face white and set. He took a slow step forward and, hooking his gun-barrel under the towel, he flicked it off the table. A slender white arm, ruthlessly hacked off at the shoulder, wobbled on the table and then rolled off and fell on the floor at his feet.

Fenner felt the cold sweat of sickness break out all over him. He hastily swallowed the sudden rush of saliva that filled his mouth. He looked at the arm carefully, but he couldn't bring himself to touch it. The hand was narrow and long, with carefully manicured finger-nails. There was no doubt about it. The arm and hand belonged to a woman.

With a hand that shook a little, he lit a cigarette, drawing the smoke down into his lungs and forcing it through his nostrils, trying to get rid of the nauseating smell of death. Then he walked over to the bath and turned back the sheet.

Fenner was tough. He'd been in the newspaper racket for years, and sudden death didn't mean much to him. Violence was just another headline, but this business shook him. It shook him more because he'd known her. She was his client, and only a few hours before she had been a living, pulsing woman.

The thing in the bath told him he couldn't be wrong. The tell-tale crisscross patterns still decorated the bruised body.

Fenner dropped the sheet and stepped out of the room. He pulled the door gently to and leaned against it. He'd have given a lot for a drink. He stood there, his mind blank, until the first shock drifted away from him. Then he wiped his face with his handkerchief and moved to the head of the stairs.

Grosset had to hear about this. He'd got to get those two Cubans fast. Then he stopped and stood thinking. The legs and one arm were missing. The head was missing too. A heavy enough burden for two men to carry without exciting comment. That was it. They were planting her somewhere, and they'd be back to get rid of the rest of the body.

Fenner's eyes narrowed. All he had to do now was to wait for them to come back, and then give it to them. Before he could make up his mind whether to hunt for a phone and get in touch with Grosset or to just wait and handle it on his own, he heard a car draw up outside and a car door slam.

He stepped quietly back into the bedroom, letting the .38 slide into his hand. He stood just inside the room, holding the door open a few inches.

He heard the front door open and shut. Then a light snapped on in the hall. He moved out a little and peered over the banisters. The two Cubans were standing in the hall. They were very tense, listening. Fenner remained where he was, motionless. The Cubans each held a large suit-case in their hands. He saw them exchange glances. Then the short one murmured something to the other, who put his case down and came up the stairs fast. He came up so fast Fenner hadn't time to duck back.

The Cuban saw him as he rounded the bend in the stairway and his hand flew to the inside of his coat. Fenner drew his lips off his teeth and shot him three times in the belly. The noise of the gun crashed through the still house. The Cuban caught his breath in a sob and bent forward, holding himself low down.

Fenner jumped forward, heaved him out of the way, and dived down the stairway as if he were taking a header into the water.

The short Cuban had no chance to get out of the way. The sudden crash of gun-fire had paralyzed him, and although his hand went unconsciously to his hip, he could not move his feet.

Fenner's two hundred pounds of bone and muscle hit him like a shell. They both crashed down on

to the floor, the Cuban underneath. The Cuban had given one high-pitched squeal of terror as he saw something coming at him, then Fenner was on him.

The crash made Fenner's head spin and for a second or two he was so dazed that he could only lie on his back, crushing the Cuban flat. His gun had shot out of his hand as he went down, and as he struggled to get up on his knees he was dimly conscious of a jabbing pain in his arms.

The Cuban didn't move. Fenner cautiously got to his feet and stirred him with his foot. The odd angle of the Cuban's head told him all he wanted to know. He'd broken his neck.

He went on his knee and searched the Cuban's pockets, but he didn't find anything. He looked inside one of the suit-cases, but it was empty. The smear of blood on the lining confirmed his idea that they were taking the body away in bits.

He found his gun and cautiously went upstairs to have a look at the other Cuban. He, too, was dead as a sausage. He lay twisted in a corner, his mouth drawn up, showing his teeth. Fenner thought he looked like a mad dog. A quick search revealed nothing, and Fenner went downstairs again. He wanted to get out of this fast. He turned off the light in the hall, opened the front door and stepped out into the night.

Outside, the car still waited. There was no one in it, but Fenner let it stay. He walked down the street, keeping in the shadow, and it was only when he got into the Fulton Street crowds that he relaxed at all.

A taxi took him back to his office. During the short ride he had decided on a plan of action. He took the elevator up to the fourth floor and hurried down the passage to his office.

A light was still burning, and for a moment he hesitated before entering. Then, keeping his hand on his gun, he turned the handle and walked in.

Paula was sitting in an arm-chair before the telephone. She jerked up her head quickly as if she had been asleep.

"Why haven't you gone home?" Fenner said shortly.

Paula indicated the telephone. "She might have rung," she said quietly.

Fenner sat down beside her wearily.

Paula said, "Dave, I'm sorry about—"

"Skip it," Dave said, patting her hand. "You were right to blow off. Right now things are happening. Those two Cubans got hold of that girl, killed her and carved her up. I caught them cartin' her away. They're dead. I killed 'em both. Don't interrupt. Let me tell you fast. The cops must be kept out of this. This is between me and whoever started it. Those cheap punks are only the dressin'. They ain't the whole salad. Take a look at that." He gave Paula the letter he'd found in Marian's bag.

Paula read it through. Her face had gone a little pale, but otherwise she was calm. "Key West?" she said.

Fenner's smile was mirthless. "That make you think?"

Paula puzzled.

"That dame wanted to find her sister. She said she didn't know where she was. Why didn't she tell me Key West? You know, baby, it looks like a plant. There's something very funny about this business."

"Who's Pio?" Paula said, reading the letter again. "And who's Noolen?"

Fenner shook his head. There was a hard look in his eyes. "I don't know, baby, but I'm goin' to find out. I've got six thousand dollars of that girl's money, an' if I have to spend every dollar of it, I'm goin' to find out."

He went over to the telephone and dialed a number. While the line was connecting, he said, "Ike, I'm goin' to earn some of that dough I've been slippin' him."

The line connected with a little plop. Fenner said, "Ike?" He waited, then he said, "Tell him Fenner"

Tell him not to be a jerk. Tell him if he don't come to this phone at once, I'll come down and kick his teeth in." He waited again, his right shoe kicking the desk leg continuously. Then Ike's growl came over the wire.

"All right, all right," Fenner said. "To hell with your game. This is urgent. I want to find someone I can contact in Key West. Do you know anyone down there? He's gotta have an in with the guys that count."

"Key West?" Ike grumbled. "I don't know anyone in Key West."

Fenner showed his teeth. "Then rustle up someone who does. Ring me back right away. I'll wait." He slammed the receiver down on its cradle.

Paula said, "You going down there?"

Fenner nodded. "It's a long way, but I think that's where it'll finish. Maybe I'm wrong, but I'm going to see."

Paula got to her feet. "Do I go with you?"

"You stick around here, baby. If I think something's goin' to start, I'll have you down. Right now you'll be more of a help here. Grosset's got to be looked after. Tell him I'm out of town for a few days but you don't know where."

"I'll go over to your place and pack a bag for you."

Fenner nodded. "Yeah," he said, "do that."

When she had gone, he went over to his reference shelf and checked the air time-table. There was a plane for Florida at 12.30. He glanced at his watch. It was five past eleven. If Ike phoned back quickly he could just make it.

He sat behind his desk and lit a cigarette. He had to wait twenty minutes before the phone jangled. He snatched the receiver.

"The guy you want is Buck Nightingale," Ike said. "He's got his finger in most pies down there. Treat him easy, he's gotta brittle temper."

"So have I," Fenner said unpleasantly. "Fix it for me, Ike. Tell him that Dave Ross'll be down on the next plane an' wants introductions. Give me a good build up. I'll tell Paula to put a check in the mail for five hundred bucks for your trouble."

"Sure, sure," Ike's voice was quite oily. "I'll fix it for you," and he hung up.

Fenner dialed another number. "Paula?" he said. "Hurry with that packing. I'm catching the 12:30 plane. Meet me at the airport as fast as you can make it."

He pulled open a drawer, took out a check-book and signed five blank checks quickly. He put his hat and coat on and looked round the office thoughtfully. Then he snapped off the electric light and went out, slamming the door behind him.

Fenner arrived at Key West about nine. He checked in at a nearby hotel, got himself a cold bath and went to bed. He was lulled to sleep by the drone of an electric fan that buzzed just above his head.

He had two hours' catnap, then the telephone woke him. The telephone said "Good morning" and he ordered orange juice and toast and told the brittle voice at the other end to send him up a bottle of Scotch. While he was waiting he went into the bathroom and had a cold shower.

It was half past eleven when he left the hotel. He walked south down Roosevelt Boulevard. All the time he walked he kept thinking about the heat. He thought if he was going to stay long in this business he'd certainly have to do something about the heat.

He stopped a policeman and asked for Buck Nightingale's place.

The cop gaped at him. "You're new here, huh?"

Fenner said, "No, I'm the oldest inhabitant. That's why I come up an' ask you. I wantta see if you know the answer," and he went on, telling himself that he'd have to be careful. The heat was doing things to his temper already.

He found Nightingale's place by asking a taxi-driver. He got the information and he got civility. He thanked the driver, then spoiled it by not hiring the cab. The driver told him he'd take him all over the town for twenty-five cents. Fenner said that he'd rather walk. He went on, closing his ears to what the driver said. It was too hot to fight, anyway.

By the time he reached Flagler Avenue his feet began to hurt. It was like walking on a red-hot stove. At the corner of Flagler and Thompson he gave up and flagged a cab. When he settled himself in the cab he took off his shoes and gave his feet some air. He'd no sooner got his shoes off than the cab forced itself against the oncoming traffic and pulled up outside a small shop.

The driver twisted his head. "This is it, boss," he said.

Fenner squeezed his feet into his shoes and had difficulty in getting his hot hand into his trouser pocket. He gave the driver twenty-five cents and got out of the cab. The shop was very clean and the windows shone. In the right-hand window stood a small white coffin. The back of the window was draped with heavy black curtains. Fenner, fascinated, thought the coffin looked lonely all by itself. He read the card that stood on a small easel by the coffin.

MAY WE
LOOK AFTER YOUR LITTLE ONE
IF THE LORD DOES NOT SPARE HIM?

Fenner thought it was all in very good taste. He went over to the other window and inspected the shop too. Again it was draped in black curtains, and on a white pedestal stood a silver urn. A card bearing the simple inscription "*Dust to Dust*" impressed him.

He stepped back and read the facia over the shop:

B. NIGHTINGALE'S FUNERAL PARLOR.

“Well, well,” he said, “quite a joint.”

~~He walked into the shop. As he opened the door the electric buzzer started, and stopped as soon as~~ the door shut. Inside, the shop was even more impressive. There was a short counter dividing the room exactly in half. This was draped with a white-and-purple velvet cover. Several black leather arm chairs dotted the purple pile carpet. On the left of the room was a large glass cabinet containing miniature coffins made of every conceivable material, from gold to pine wood.

On the right was a six-foot crucifix cleverly illuminated by concealed lights. The figure was so realistic that it quite startled Fenner. He felt that he'd wandered into a church.

Long white, black and purple drapes hung behind the counter. There was no one in the shop. Fenner wandered over to the cabinet and examined the coffins. He thought that as a permanent home the good one was a swell job.

A woman came quietly from behind the curtain. She wore a tight-fitting black silk dress, white collar and cuffs. She was a blonde, and her big gashlike mouth was very red with paint. She looked at Fenner and her mouth shaped into a smile. Fenner thought she was quite something.

She said in a low, solemn voice, “Can I help you, please?”

Fenner scratched his chin. “Do you sell these boxes?” he said, jerking his thumb in the direction of the glass case.

She blinked. “Why sure,” she said. “They're just models, you know; but was that what you wanted?”

Fenner shook his head. “No,” he said; “I was just curious.”

She looked at him doubtfully.

Fenner went on. “Nightingale in?”

“Did you want to see him particularly?”

“That's why I asked, baby. Tell him Ross.”

She said, “I'll see. He's very busy right now.”

Fenner watched her go away behind the curtain. He thought her shape from behind was pretty good.

She came back after a while and said, “Will you come up?”

He followed her behind the curtain and up the short flight of stairs. He liked the scent she used, and halfway up the stairs he told her so. She looked over her shoulder at him and smiled. She had bright white teeth. “What do I do now?” she said. “Should my face go red?”

He shook his head seriously. “I just like to tell a dame when she's good,” he said.

She pointed to a door. “He's in there,” she said. Then, after a little pause, she said, “I like you. You've got nice eyes,” and she went downstairs, patting her blonde curls with long white fingers.

Fenner fingered his tie. “Some frill,” he thought, and turned the door handle and walked in.

The room was obviously a workshop. Four coffins stood in a line on trestles. Nightingale was screwing a brass plate on one of them.

Nightingale was a little dark man with thick-lensed steel-rimmed glasses. His skin was very white and two large colorless eyes blinked weakly at Fenner from behind the cheaters.

Fenner said, “I'm Ross.”

Nightingale went on screwing down the plate. “Yes?” he said. “Did you want to see me?”

“Dave Ross,” Fenner repeated, standing by the door. “I think you were expectin' me.”

Nightingale put down the screw-driver and looked at him. “So I was,” he said, as if remembering. “So I was. We'll go upstairs and talk.”

Fenner followed him out of the workshop and up another short flight of stairs. Nightingale showed him into a room which was large and cool. Two big windows opened out to a small balcony. From the window, Fenner could see the Mexican Gulf.

Nightingale said, “Sit down. Take off your coat if you want to.”

Fenner took off his coat and rolled up his sleeves. He sat by the window.

Nightingale said, "Perhaps a drink?"

"Sure."

When the drinks were fixed, and Nightingale had settled himself, Fenner sparred for an opening. He knew he'd have to go carefully with this little guy. He didn't know how far he could trust him. It was no use getting him suspicious.

He said at last, "How far you carryin' me?"

Nightingale fingered his glass with his thick weak fingers. He looked a little bewildered. "All the way," he said. "That's what you want, isn't it?"

Fenner stretched out. "I want to get in with the boys. New York's got too hot for me."

"I can do that," Nightingale said simply. "Crotti said you were an all-right guy and I was to help you. Crotti's been good to me; I'm glad to even things up with him."

Fenner guessed Crotti was the guy Ike got on to. "Maybe five C's would be more concrete than win' Crotti," he said drily.

Nightingale looked a little hurt. "I don't want your dough," he said simply. "Crotti said 'help the man,' and that's enough for me."

Fenner twisted in his chair. It quite shocked him to see that the little man was sincere.

"Swell," he said hastily. "Don't get me wrong. Where I come from there's a different set of morals."

"I can give you introductions. But what is it exactly that you want?"

Fenner wished he knew. He stalled. "I guess I gotta get into the money again," he said. "Maybe one of your crowd could use me."

"Crotti says you've got quite a reputation. He says you've got notches on your gun."

Fenner tried to look modest and cursed Ike's imagination. "I get along," he said casually.

"Maybe Carlos could use you."

Fenner tried a venture. "I thought Noolen might be good to throw in with."

Nightingale's watery eyes suddenly flashed. "Noolen? Noolen's the south end of a horse."

"So?"

"Carlos has Noolen with his pants down. You won't get any place with a piker like Noolen."

Fenner gathered that Noolen was a wash-out. He tried again. "You surprise me. I was told Noolen was quite a big shot around here."

Nightingale stretched his neck and deliberately spat on the floor. "Nuts," he said.

"Who's Carlos?"

Nightingale got back his good humor. "He's the boy. Now Pio'll get you somewhere."

Fenner sipped a little of his Scotch. "That his name—Pio Carlos?"

Nightingale nodded. "He's got this burg like that." He held out his small squat hand and closed his thick fingers into a small fist. "Like that—see?"

Fenner nodded. "Okay," he said, "I'll be guided by you."

Nightingale got up and put his glass on the table. "I've got a little job to do, and then we'll go down and meet the boys. You rest here. It's too hot to go runnin' around."

When he had gone, Fenner shut his eyes and thought. The lid was coming off this quicker than he'd imagined. He'd have to watch his step.

He felt a little draught and he opened his eyes. The blonde had come in and was gently shutting the door. Fenner heard her turn the key in the lock. "Jumpin' Jeeze," he thought, "she's goin' to grab me!"

He swung his legs off the chair Nightingale had sat in, and struggled to his feet.

"Stay put," she said, coming over. "I want to talk to you."

Fenner sat down again. "What's your name, honey?" he said, stalling for time.

“Robbins,” she said. “They call me Curly round here.”

“Nice name, Curly,” Fenner said. “What’s on your mind?”

She sat down in Nightingale’s chair. Fenner could see bare thigh above her stockings. He thought she had a swell pair of gams.

“Take my tip,” she said, keeping her voice low, “an’ go home. Imported tough guys don’t stand u long in this town.”

Fenner raised his eyebrows. “Who told you I was a tough guy?” he said.

“I don’t have to be told. You’ve come down here to set fire to the place, haven’t you? Well, it won’t work. These hoods here don’t like foreign competition. You’ll be cat’s meat in a few days if you stick around.”

Fenner was quite touched. “You’re bein’ a very nice little girl,” he said; “but I’m afraid it’s no soa. I’m down here for, a livin’, and I’m stickin’.”

She sighed. “I thought you’d take it like that,” she said, getting up. “If you knew what’s good f you, you’d take a powder quick. Anyway, watch out. I don’t trust any of them. Don’t trust Nightingale. He looks a punk, but he isn’t. He’s a killer, so watch him.”

Fenner climbed out of his chair. “Okay, baby,” he said. “I’ll watch him. Now you’d better blow before he finds you here.” He led her to the door.

She said, “I’m tellin’ you this because you’re cute. I hate seein’ a big guy like you headin’ f trouble.”

Fenner grinned, and, swinging his hand, he gave her a gentle smack on her fanny. “Don’t you worry your brains about me,” he said.

She leaned towards him, raising her face; so, because he thought she was pretty good, he kissed her. She wound her arms round his neck and held him, her body close to his. They stood like that f several minutes, then Fenner pushed her away gently.

She stood looking at him, breathing hard. “I guess I’m crazy,” she said, color suddenly flooding h face.

Fenner ran his finger round the inside of his collar. “I’m a bit of a bug myself,” he said. “Scran baby, before we really get to work. Beat it, an’ I’ll see you in church.”

She went out quietly and shut the door. Fenner took out his handkerchief and wiped his han thoughtfully. “I think I’m goin’ to like this job,” he said aloud. “Yeah, it might develop into somethin’,” and he went back and sat down by the open window again.

Nightingale led him through the crowded lobby of the Flagler Hotel. Fenner said, “This guy do himself well.”

Nightingale stopped before the elevator doors and thumbed the automatic button. “Sure,” he said. “what did I tell you? Pio’s the boy to be in with.”

Fenner studied the elaborate wrought ironwork of the gates. “You’re tellin’ me,” he said.

The cage came to rest and they stepped in. Nightingale pressed the button for the fifth, and the cage shot them up. “Now I’ll do the talkin’,” Nightingale said, as the lift stopped. “Maybe you won’t g anythin’, but I’ll try.”

Fenner grunted and followed the little man down the corridor. He stopped outside No. 47 and rapped three times fast and twice slowly on the door.

“Secret signs as well,” Fenner said admiringly.

The door opened and a short Cuban, dressed in a black suit, looked them over. Fenner shaped h lips for a whistle, but he didn’t make any sound.

Nightingale said in his soft voice: “It’s all right.”

The Cuban let them in. As he shut the door after them, Fenner saw a bulge in his hip-pocket. Th

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