

Lovely Brenda Delmar was a brassiere model and she had all she wanted; money, a plush apartment, plenty of boy friends. . . . But when they found her in bed, clad in a slip and smelling of cyanide, it looked like suicide. Then Dr. Standish noticed a clue that proved otherwise. Mr. Coxé here spins one of his most exciting yarns, where . . .

MURDER MAKES A DIFFERENCE

by George Harmon Coxé

THE THURSDAY NIGHT CROWD WHICH had turned out to see *Bright Harvest* in its final week, filled the lobby of the Lyceum quickly after the second act curtain and Doctor Standish smiled proudly about him as he brought out cigarettes.

There was a fine glow of expansiveness inside him, standing there with Louise Allison, knowing she was his girl. He liked the way people looked at her, the way their glances approved of her upswept blonde hair and radiant skin and cool fragile beauty.

The dress may have helped this approval, with its sleek black simplicity, and the mink jacket may have influenced the overall impression, but Paul Standish was interested mostly in the way her eyes smiled and the music in her voice as she chatted on about the play. For perhaps thirty seconds the glow he felt was warm and bright; then he saw Barry Corwin. So did Louise.

"There's Barry," she said. "Barry . . . you're not just getting here?"

"Hello," Barry Corwin said, and grinned. "Had to work on a thing."

He shrugged out of a covert-cloth topcoat, and that left him smoothly handsome in a double-breasted suit of dark gray, faultlessly tailored. He took the girl's hand and held it, and Standish, missing nothing, decided sourly that M-G-M could have cast him just as he stood as a successful young advertising man. Which he was. The Corwin Studios — Say It With Photographs.

"What a shame," Louise said.

"How's the show?" Corwin said. "Any point in seeing the third act when you don't know what the first two are about?"

Paul Standish didn't hear Louise's reply, for just then he glanced towards the sidewalk and saw a solid-looking man in a blue coat start through the crowd, his glance sweeping the lobby.

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Standish turned quickly, his spirits diving and despair settling in. *Oh, no!* he prayed. *Not tonight, Lieutenant. This is my night for fun. I promised Louise.*

He kept his glance averted and listened to Louise and Barry. He drew his neck in, like a turtle sensing trouble, and waited helplessly, asking only for justice. Seconds later a hand touched his arm.

A quiet voice said, "See you a minute, Doc?" and then Standish turned and looked into Lieutenant Ballard's keen grey eyes, and knew there was no justice.

Ballard lifted his hat. "Hello, Miss Allison."

"Now really, lieutenant." The music had gone out of the girl's voice, leaving it cool, annoyed. "Don't tell me you've found another body."

Ballard colored and his voice was embarrassed. "I'm sorry."

Standish sighed. He shrugged. He put on a half-hearted smile and tried to sound casual.

"Be back in a minute, darling," he said and went with Ballard to the edge of the crowd.

"The James apartments on Oak Street," Ballard said. "A suicide. A dame . . . The sergeant says it's cyanide."

Paul Standish stood there a silent moment, a lean, straight-backed man with a clean-jawed, bony face and dark wavy hair. Somehow, seeing Ballard move into the crowd, he had known that something like

this would happen. He knew, too, that it was not Ballard's fault but that did not help his own mood.

"Fine," he said. "Great. Of course you had to find her now."

There may have been a veiled smile in Ballard's eyes, because he understood how it was with young Doctor Standish, but nothing showed in his face. He said:

"You're the acting medical examiner. We can't move her until you say so."

Standish nodded; then he offered a reluctant, twisted smile to show his resentment wasn't personal. "Yes," he said. "Okay, Tom."

Louise was waiting with Barry Corwin as the lights in the lobby blinked to warn the smokers it was curtain time.

"Look, honey," Standish began.

"I know," Louise said, her glance cool. "You have to go."

"I won't be long," Standish said. "I'll be back by the time the show is over."

"Say, that's too bad," Corwin said, his grin belying his words. "Tell you what. Since you're not going to be here I'll use your seat. Then Louise can be telling me about the first two acts."

"If we should miss you," Louise said, "we'll be at the *Blue Parrot*."

The James apartments was an imposing beige-brick building with a marquee over the entrance and a lobby switchboard, attended by a sallow-faced youth who told Ballard

where to go. The apartment he wanted was on the fourth floor and when Standish followed the lieutenant through the door he was vaguely aware that there were three men in the room, but he saw first the in-a-door bed and the woman who lay there, clad in a slip and a black, maribou-trimmed negligee.

A blocky, blunt-jawed man sitting on a chair arm said, "Hi, Doc."

Standish said hello to Sergeant Kane from Station 5, nodded to a plain-clothesman he did not know. A third man stood up.

"You're Doctor Standish, aren't you?"

"This is Mr. Fielding," Kane said.

Ballard acknowledged the introduction. So did Standish, finding Fielding a stout, balding man, neatly dressed in a brown Shetland that looked imported.

"Mr. Fielding found her," Kane said. "The kid on the switchboard downstairs came up with him and unlocked the door when she didn't answer her phone."

Standish went over to the bed, seeing now something familiar about the girl who lay there, a slimly voluptuous girl, tall, and well proportioned. Her hair was red and he knew that in life she would have the milk-white complexion that so often went with that hair; now there was a marked cyanosis of the face and neck and, on one cheek, a faint, off-color mark.

"Who was she, Mr. Fielding?" Ballard said.

"Brenda Delmar," Fielding said. "She was a model. Worked for Corwin Studios."

Paul Standish, in the act of bending over the body, straightened. Then, listening to Fielding's story, remembered things came back and he knew why the girl seemed familiar.

The Corwin Studios specialized in advertising photographs and in most of these there was a girl. Not merely in a decorative sense to glamorize some prosaic product, but as models for a product. For here in Union City were two companies making women's foundation garments, and another which made underwear. As a result Corwin illustrations and Corwin girls could be seen in any women's fashion magazine; Corwin girls in bras and panties, in nightgowns and pajamas, in corsets and girdles and slips.

Arthur Fielding managed one of these companies which his wife had inherited — The NuForm Company. And Nu-Form was a client of Corwin's. All of which added up to make the dead girl familiar to Standish. He had seen her with Corwin in restaurants and night clubs, and he had sometimes wondered how it would be to have a business in which pretty girls were part of the stock in trade.

"She used to work in some dress shop here in town," Fielding was saying, "and Corwin spotted her and put her to work posing for underwear. She was out to our place

several times to model our line; that's how I got to know her."

Paul Standish bent over the dead girl. She was lying on her back and he was at once aware of the odor of bitter almonds that came from her mouth as he took her head in his hands and moved it gently, testing the *rigor*. He did the same with the arms, experimented with the knees. Then, as he examined the hands, he saw that on the right one the pointed tip of the red-painted nail had been torn from the middle finger.

He straightened finally and glanced at the glass on the table beside the nail-polishing kit. There was an inch or so of liquid in the glass and without touching it he leaned over and sniffed, smelling the whisky and again the unmistakable odor of cyanide.

Arthur Fielding was still talking when Standish finished calling the morgue. Brenda Delmar, Fielding explained, had phoned him in the afternoon and said she wanted to see him. She would not tell him why. He did not know whether she sounded distraught or not; she may have. He did know that she was divorcing her husband, a lieutenant in the army, who had returned from overseas the day before.

"I don't know if that had anything to do with it or not," he said. "I told her I'd be tied up until nine thirty or so but she said she'd wait. When I came I had the boy downstairs call her. He didn't get any answer but he said he was pretty

sure she was in, so we came up to see if anything was wrong." He shrugged and took a handkerchief from his breast pocket. . . .

When Fielding went, Sergeant Kane went downstairs to question the clerk on the switchboard about the soldier husband. Ballard moved over to the table next to the bed and sniffed of the glass. "No doubt about the cyanide, is there?"

Standish shook his head and moved about the room. He saw then that there was a small kitchen beyond the dinette and when he strolled out there he saw the half-filled bottle of whisky. He came back and moved into the dressing room connecting the bath. There were two big closets here and he opened them, glancing at the long rows of dresses, the line of shoes on the rack on the floor. Ballard was looking down at the dead girl.

"A good-looking doll, all right. A yummy figure, good clothes, a nice place to live and yet" — He gestured emptily. "Probably neurotic . . . You going to do a p.m.? When?"

Standish had been thinking about this very thing and the result was discouraging. For he also thought of Louise Allison enjoying the third act of *Bright Harvest* — with Barry Corwin — and he found the mental picture distasteful. He looked up at Ballard, scowling, and the door opened and the white-coated men from the morgue came in.

Paul Standish supervised the re-

removal of the body, seeing then the two small red spots on the sheet and, up at the head of the bed, the larger smear. Cataloguing the first two as polish from newly painted nails and the other as lipstick, his mind moved on to other things.

If he left now it would be a cinch to break up the Louise-Barry combination at the *Blue Parrot*. Here, apparently, was a cut and dried suicide with ninety-five percent of the evidence supporting such a conclusion. All he had to do was sign a certificate as to the cause of death and he was about to say so when something he could not explain stopped him and discontent settled heavily upon him.

There was just one little thing that did not satisfy him and only by a post mortem could he be sure. And then he remembered old Doc Lathrop who was recuperating in Vermont; he recalled the promise he had given, the trust the old man had always placed in him. There was, he knew, an obligation here, not only to Lathrop but to the job and his own self-respect. Maybe with luck, he could still make the *Blue Parrot* before closing time.

"Yeah," he said, "I'll do a p.m." And he looked ahead to the full day scheduled for tomorrow and said, "I'll do it tonight."

As it turned out, his optimism was unjustified. It was five after two when he drove past the *Blue Parrot* to find it dark, and not until he was in bed could he accept philosophi-

cally his personal disappointment over his interrupted date and be truly thankful that he had made the right decision. For the autopsy he had performed with the help of a young interne from City Hospital, had shown conclusively that Brenda Delmar had not died a suicide; she had been murdered.

When Doctor Standish entered his office from the private entrance the next morning, Mary Hayward, his newly acquired nurse, was dusting his desk. A slender, neatly made girl with fair skin, hazel eyes and the sweetness of youth in the corners of her mouth, she gave him a bright, "Good morning."

"Hi, Mary," he said, and as he came round his desk she pointed to the top letter of the little pile she had placed there.

"There's one from Granddad," she said. Then, her smile upturned, "I got one too . . . Also" — she bobbed her head towards the reception room door — "Lieutenant Ballard is here."

"Ballard," Standish said, frowning, remembering now the things that had happened last night. "Let him wait."

He tossed his hat into the closet, and while Mary Hayward took his coat and hung it up he sat down and picked up the letter. *F. W. Lathrop* had been written in a shaky scrawl in the upper left hand corner of the envelope; under that, *Cold Springs, Vermont*.

He pried open the envelope and began to read, a slow smile softening the angles of his bony face. When he finished time slid swiftly back and there was distance in his eyes. It was 1940 again and he was just setting up his office.

It had been tough going that year. The city had not yet filled up with war workers and there were plenty of young doctors not yet needed by the Army and Navy. It was a long time between patients and the rent was overdue and the worries were piling up when Doc Lathrop, who had known and liked him as an intern, suggested that maybe Standish might like an assistant medical examiner's job on a fee basis. Six dollars a call was what the State would allow on a routine check when an examiner's man was necessary; twenty for a post mortem.

"It'll give you an opportunity for research," Lathrop said.

"It'll pay my rent," Standish said.

"You'll get a chance to know anatomy you couldn't get any other way," Lathrop added. "Without dissecting rooms a man can't know anatomy. The trouble is in college you really never get enough. You figure you want to be a really competent diagnostician some day? Then, maybe this'd be something you'd like."

Standish had nearly a year with Doc Lathrop before he put on a uniform and went away to save the lives of fighting men and make the

wounded sound again. He saw the Aleutians and Kwajalein and after that he saw six months in a hospital — from a mortar shell that came too close. When, finally, they sent him home he found Doc Lathrop still at it and the retirement he had worked for all his life relegated to some distant Utopia of the future.

"Can't quit now," he said. "Nobody around but a few old crocks like me and a couple of 4-F's. Hurry up and get your office going, son, and take the strain off the rest of us."

Standish didn't believe it was that bad.

"You think so," Doc Lathrop said. "Wait'll you see these people pile in with belly aches and measles and sprained backs and busted arms and mashed fingers. You'll find out."

Doc Lathrop was right, as Standish quickly learned. But there were compensations for the pressure of work. He began to have a bank account and he met Louise Allison and presently the future looked very bright indeed. There was only one cloud on his personal horizon and that was Miss Vance, his nurse. Miss Vance wanted to get into the Army Nurse Corps and when the months went by and no replacement was found her complaints became more and more insistent.

It had been that way until one night three weeks previous, a night much like last night. They were having dinner, he and Louise, at a corner table at the *Parkside* when

Lieutenant Ballard appeared, hat in hand, to stand in front of them.

"Miss Vance, from your office, told me where you were," Ballard said. "A guy's been shot—up on River Street."

Standish looked at him, not understanding.

"Doc Lathrop said I should get you," Ballard said. "The guy's dead and we can't move him until the Doc or one of his boys says so."

Louise Allison looked wide-eyed at Standish. "But why, Paul?" she said. "I mean, why you?"

"I used to be Lathrop's assistant," he said. "I know the routine . . . Is something wrong with Lathrop?"

"Well—he says it's just a little upset," Ballard said. "He says he'll do the p.m. tomorrow all right but tonight he'd appreciate it if you'll help out. He says he knows he can trust your judgment."

In the end Standish had to do the autopsy too; for when he called on Lathrop the next morning he found the old man sitting in a chair while Mary Hayward, his granddaughter, hovered about, insisting that he close his office for the day and send his patients elsewhere. Lathrop, a Falstaffian figure with a fringe of white hair around his skull and an acid tongue, glowered at Standish when the young doctor concurred.

"She's crazy," Doc Lathrop growled, "and so are you."

Standish grinned and took off his coat, and the fact that he was able to bully Lathrop into submitting to

a thorough examination was proof enough that the old Doc was not up to par physically. In the end Standish said:

"You're going fishing . . . And don't give me any of your lip or I'll advise the Medical Board of your condition."

Doc Lathrop argued. It was, he said, all poppycock, and who would be the medical examiner if he went away?

"I will," Standish said. "There's only one condition." He told them about Miss Vance and her desire to be relieved. "Mary," he said, winking at her, "will have to take Miss Vance's place while you're gone."

"You'll not bully her," Doc Lathrop said, but even as he spoke he saw the sudden brightness in his granddaughter's smile and knew he was whipped. . . .

Standish put the letter back into the envelope and the faraway look in his eyes faded. He smiled at Mary Hayward's trim young back and watched her busy hands dusting and straightening the office furniture and it came to him then that having her here compensated him for whatever his medical examiner duties had caused him.

"All right," he said, sighing. "Tell Ballard to come in."

Lieutenant Ballard, looking very neat in his pin-striped suit, fresh white shirt and dark blue tie, glanced approvingly at Mary Hayward.

"I didn't get your report on the Delmar woman yet," he said.

"I haven't made it out yet," Standish said. "I thought I'd better hold it up. It's not suicide any more."

Ballard opened his mouth to speak, closed it, stared. He put his hands on the desk and leaned stiff-armed on them.

"You mean somebody gave her that cyanide?"

"Somebody gave it to her — but she didn't drink any."

"Nuts," Ballard said. "You could smell it on her. There was cyanide in that glass and —"

"Somebody poured some of that cyanide highball in her mouth," Standish said, "but by then she was dead. Of asphyxia. She was smothered to death and no cyanide was ingested."

Ballard took another second to examine Paul Standish's bony face, the steady blue eyes; then he believed it.

"That's great," he said disgustedly. "Here I've got a nice clean-cut suicide and you come along and louse it up for me. Now what am I supposed to do?"

"For one thing, I'd get the sheet from that bed." Standish mentioned the two red spots he had seen, the other smudge higher up. "She might have just finished fixing her nails," he said. "But that smudge is lipstick, I think."

"So —"

"Somebody tipped her over face down and put a pillow over the back of her head and leaned on it.

But before that somebody slapped her face. Hard." He stood up and examined the slip on which Mary Hayward had listed his morning calls. "Maybe it would be a good idea to pick up Brenda Delmar's husband."

It was twelve thirty by the time Paul Standish had finished his house calls and now, nosing his car into the parking space behind police headquarters, he was not sure just why he was stopping in to see Ballard. His job, insofar as Brenda Delmar was concerned, was finished. The law said his duty was to determine the cause of death and to ascertain if anyone was culpable; yet, with this case as with others in the past, he found himself reluctant to dismiss the matter so easily. Some impulse he did not stop to analyze had brought him here and now he went directly to the second floor hall. Halfway along this he ran into Barry Corwin just coming out of Lieutenant Ballard's office.

Corwin was still a walking example of what the successful young advertising man should wear. Now, however, his grin was absent, his face was moist, and sorry replaced the ready charm he so often displayed.

"Are you the one that said Brenda was murdered?" he said. "What the hell do they mean by getting me down here, questioning me about where I was last night."

Standish looked him over calmly.

"She worked for you, didn't she? You used to run around with her?"

Corwin's brows bunched angrily. He seemed about to speak, thought better of it, and strode hard-heeled down the hall. Standish opened Ballard's door and stepped inside.

Ballard had his feet on the desk and was staring morosely out the window. When he saw who it was he went back to his staring.

"Corwin's very unhappy," Standish said. "I think you hurt his feelings."

"Yah," Ballard fumed. "How do you like a guy getting coy with me about where he was last night — before he went to the Lyceum?"

"Did he tell you?"

"No, damn it! He had a date. He'll tell if he has to and not until. Pfuie." Ballard swung his feet down and leaned across the desk. "Not that it matters. We got the husband. A lad named Garvey. And you were right about the dame getting cuffed. By him . . . He's our boy all right."

Standish said, "Figure it for me."

"This Garvey's an infantry lieutenant," Ballard said. "He's back here for thirty days after being two years across and he wanted Brenda to come back to him. She turned him down the night before last and yesterday he did a lot of drinking and went up there last night for another try. He admits he was pretty drunk and what happened was she wouldn't play and he lost his head, socked her and then smothered her.

"That sobered him enough to make him realize what he'd done and he covered up by putting poison in a highball. He saw she wasn't marked up because he'd used a pillow and he figured it would look like a suicide. It would have gone down that way too, if it hadn't been for you."

"Where'd he get the cyanide?"

"How do I know?" Ballard shrugged the question aside. "Where does anybody get cyanide? Maybe he had it with him. Maybe he originally figured on using it himself; he was drunk enough."

Standish lit a cigarette and examined the end. Presently he shifted his gaze to Ballard. "Mind if I talk to him? Alone?"

Walter Garvey was a rangy young man with a sinewy neck and big hands that trembled slightly. To Standish's practiced eye he looked underweight and there was a nervousness about him that came not so much from the present situation as from the things he had seen in battle, the things he had done.

He sat down at Standish's invitation and the doctor began to talk. Drawing on an experience with soldiers that covered a year and a half of active service, it was not difficult for Standish to get the rest of the story, and this, too, was one he had heard before — from men in his own outfit.

Walter Garvey had had just two weeks of married life with Brenda Delmar. He had met her at a party

and Brenda was young and two years ago she had not been doing so well as a clerk in a dress shop. Furthermore, Walter Garvey with his spotless uniform and money in his pockets, had been a persistent and charming suitor and in the end Brenda was not hard to convince. So they had their two weeks and everything was lovely — until he had gone; then, as with so many other couples, absence began to work against this marriage which had, in the beginning, no solid foundation.

Letters became fewer and more skimpy. Other men appeared on Brenda's horizon. She began to model for Harry Corwin and life became more interesting. What had once seemed a lark now loomed as bad judgment and Brenda was not one to carry on for the sake of appearances.

Garvey explained all this in a hurt soft voice, remoteness in his gaze now and his present predicament forgotten. He told how he had called on Brenda that first night and how he had gotten drunk the following day and stayed that way until he went back again to her apartment last night.

"She wouldn't go out," he said. "She wouldn't even take a drink with me. She just sat there on the bed waving her hands to dry that red paint she had just put on her nails."

The rest of the story — how he had jumped up in his exasperation and slapped her face and rushed

from the room — he had already told Ballard and he would not change it now. Standish heard him out, watching the brown eyes, that stared so steadily back at him. In the end he rose and opened the door.

"There's one thing you might do," he said to Lieutenant Ballard when Walter Garvey had gone. "Send someone up to Brenda Delmar's place and have him go over everything with a vacuum cleaner."

Ballard looked over at him. "And what're we supposed to be looking for?"

"A piece of fingernail."

Ballard did not hesitate long. He eyed Standish speculatively and remembered how the doctor's laboratory work and clear thinking had helped solve other cases. Even as a young intern riding ambulances Standish had shown a certain knowledge of practical criminology and Ballard knew that his interest in crime had influenced him in taking the job as Doc Lathrop's assistant. And Ballard was not a man to overlook any bets.

"Okay," he said. "I'll let you know."

Louise Allison was waiting at the *Parkside* and for a little while, sitting opposite her at a window table, Doctor Standish forgot about Brenda Delmar and Walter Garvey and Lieutenant Ballard. It was pleasure enough to be with her, to examine closely the radiance of her skin, to watch the light glisten in her blond hair. It was not until they were

waiting for dessert that she mentioned the murder of Brenda Delmar.

Standish frowned. "How did you know she was murdered?"

"Barry told me," she said. "He phoned to ask if we were going to the Taylors for cocktails," she added quickly, seeing his frown deepen. "He said he'd had to go to police headquarters."

"She worked for him," Standish said, nettled by what Louise had said and not knowing why. "He used to run around with her."

"Of course. But that was all over. He told me so." She hesitated and Standish didn't say anything and now some of the softness went out of her eyes. "Look, darling. How much longer are you going to keep on with this medical examiner work?"

The fine warm glow that had been inside Standish went away. He had explained why he had to take this job. He thought she understood that had he not taken it, Doc Lathrop would have hung on until he dropped. Now he saw she did not understand, that it was no good explaining any more.

"Until he comes back," he said, "or until they appoint someone else."

Louise Allison turned the ring on the third finger of her left hand absently. It was a diamond solitaire that had been his mother's. Louise glanced at it and then reached under the table for his hand. Suddenly she smiled.

"I'm sorry, darling," she said. "I didn't mean to scold but —"

"Yeah," Standish said and grinned. "I know." He glanced at his watch and said he had to run.

"Don't forget the Taylors," Louise said. "I'll pick you up between five and five thirty."

At four-forty that afternoon, ten minutes after the last of his office patients had gone, Paul Standish parked his car near the corner occupied by the James apartments and went down the side street to a ramp that led to the basement garage. There were a half dozen cars parked in the gloomy cavern, and a tall thin Negro appeared from behind one of these and looked at him.

Standish asked him if he was on duty all day and when did he quit. The fellow told him eight o'clock.

"Any night man on?"

"No night man," the Negro said.

Standish thanked him, walked to the elevator and rode to the main floor. The sallow-faced youth who was on the switchboard the night before was on duty again. His name, he said, was Albert. He was quite familiar with everyone in the building and he remembered no strangers who had entered the place between nine and ten the night before. Only the fellow who said he was Miss Delmar's husband.

Watching the other's face, it seemed to Standish then that Albert was telling the truth; yet he was reluctant to accept it because there was one conclusion he could not

escape. Either Walter Garvey was lying or else someone had gone up to her apartment — through the front door or through the basement garage.

"Do you know Barry Corwin?" he asked finally.

"Oh, yes, sir," Albert said and grinned. "He used to be in and out of here pretty often."

"But not last night."

Albert shook his head. He was quite positive about it.

In the basement again, Standish took out a dollar when the Negro approached him. He let the man see it and then asked if he was sure there was never anyone here at night.

"Ain't no one here regular," he said. "Old guy comes sometimes to polish cars. Works as a nightwatchman down the street and comes in here evenings to see can he make an extra couple bucks."

"Was he here last night?"

The Negro's face lit up. "Come to think of it, he was. He was doin' a waxin' job on Mrs. Waters' car when I left."

Standish passed over the dollar, a sudden excitement stirring in him. "What's his name? Know where he lives?"

"Name's Cerroni," the Negro said. "Nick Cerroni. Lives over on Fiske Street but I don't recollect the number." . . .

Fiske Street was a narrow, two-block-long afterthought of City planning in the Italian section of

town, and in a corner grocery store they told Standish where Nick Cerroni lived. The top floor of number 118, they said, and presently Standish found it, a shabby wooden tenement in the middle of the block.

Once inside he found a small hall with a door on the left and stairs mounting straight ahead through a thick gloom that became darkness as he climbed. He felt his way along the second floor landing and found the last flight of stairs and started up, one hand on the rickety banister.

The third floor hall was narrow and cramped. He could make out, vaguely, a door ahead of him which was slightly ajar, and a second door on the left which was closed. He knocked here, leaning close in order to hear any sound that might come from within. He was standing like that when it happened.

There was no tangible warning. There may have been some whisper of a sound, there may have been a faint breath of air around his ankles where none had been there before; or perhaps it was pure instinct born of urgency that brought him here and nursed by nerves already taut and sharply tuned. Whatever the reason he glanced over his shoulder and in that same instant saw the figure loom darkly towards him.

Behind it the door which had been ajar stood open and he sensed rather than saw the object swinging towards him from above. He did what he could, half-turning to meet

the attack, knowing that he could not get away and lurching sideways as he tried to duck. He knew also, in that split instant before the blow fell, that this was the killer, that he had been to see Nick Cerroni and that even now he, Standish, might be too late. Then something hard slammed glancingly from his head and smashed against his shoulder.

Off balance now, he felt himself start to go down. He swung desperately at the man as he turned, his fist crashing solidly, missing the jaw but, with the weight of his falling body behind it, staggering the man against the wall as he himself fell.

He hit the floor on one knee and pivoted on it, trying to get away, to protect himself until he could regain his feet. He pushed up, lurching against the wall and then, sliding along it and trying to turn, he heard the pounding on the stairs.

For another second he did not understand. He peered into the darkness. The man was not there and he knew then that the killer no longer liked the odds, now that his first assault had failed. He was running down the stairs. He was already on the landing below and Standish swore softly and started after him and then, suddenly, he stopped, knowing that this was not the thing to do.

Reason told him something was terribly wrong in Cerroni's rooms, that this attack on him by one who could have remained undetected

was not personal, but to stop him from entering the flat.

He tried the door and it was locked. He pounded on it and found the panel thin and dry and hit it hard with his shoulder. He lunged again and this time the lock ripped off and he was in a dim, warm room that smelled strongly of illuminating gas.

There were two windows, with shades pulled low, and he snapped them up and threw the windows wide, seeing now the man upon the floor but stepping to the hotplate which had been knocked from a table so that the rubber tube was pulled from the nipple in the wall. Then he began to work over the man on the floor, a small, thin man, quite bald and no longer young.

A sound behind him made him look up. A squat, black-browed fellow in shirt sleeves stared at him and Standish gave him orders in crisp incisive tones. He told him to phone police headquarters, to have Lieutenant Ballard call an ambulance and come at once. . . .

Standish worked automatically then, his eyes moving about the poor neat room. There were two pictures on the buffet, one of a smiling youth in a Marine's uniform, the other of a girl dressed as a Wave. Each had something of the man on the floor in his face and thinking of this, Standish's anger was a tight hard knot inside him. There was a curious weakness too, from the thought of what might have happened, so that

it was another minute or two before he realized Cerroni was breathing regularly.

He stopped, aware that the gas smell had vanished. Thinking back he realized that even at the first it had not been too strong. He turned the man over and checked pulse and respiration and then he knew something besides gas had made Cerroni unconscious. He told Ballard about it five minutes later.

"Probably chloral hydrate," he said. "They must have had a drink here and Cerroni was handed a micky. When he passed out the killer tipped over the gas plate to make it look like an accident. We'd have found Cerroni dead of asphyxia."

Ballard had already heard the rest of the story and now he pushed back his hat and watched Standish with those keen gray eyes that were seldom still.

"You sure you didn't get a look at him?" he said.

Standish shook his head.

"But you know who it was?" Ballard said.

"Did you vacuum that room?"

"We did. We got dirt and hair and pins — but no fingernail."

"Then," said Standish, "I guess I know who did it." He glanced at the two pictures on the buffet and back at Ballard. "With a pillow over her head and somebody leaning on it, Brenda Delmar couldn't do much struggling. She tried to reach up and pull the guy off with one hand,

and she tore off part of a red-painted nail, and if you didn't find it, it must have got caught in the guy's suit.

"Garvey wore a uniform," he said. "It's hard cloth. A fingernail wouldn't catch in it. Corwin had a worsted suit last night when I saw him — a smooth hard finish. . . ."

Ballard's brows climbed. "Arthur Fielding?" he said in amazement.

"Fielding wore a Shetland suit last night. You know the cloth? A soft, coarse weave that's worse than a sweater for snagging on to things."

"Well, come on," Ballard said. "Let's get up there."

"Not me," Standish said. "I'm going to the hospital and check on Nick Cerroni."

Ballard started to argue, stopped abruptly; finally he put on his crooked smile. "Okay," he said. "Sure. What am I crabbing about."

"Tell Fielding Cerroni's going to live. Get that Shetland suit. You ought to find the missing fingernail stuck in it."

When Doctor Standish drove past his office at six twenty and saw Louise Allison's car parked out front, he knew what to expect but this time he had a good excuse and he told himself that she would understand. He parked out back and entered his office by the private entrance to find Mary Hayward bent over his desk marking out bills.

"Hey," he said, "I thought you'd be gone."

Mary smiled. "I wanted to get

these done," she said and then her eyes got apprehensive and she added, "Miss Allison is waiting for you."

"Yeah," Standish said and opened the door to his waiting room. "Hello, darling," he said and his heart leaped when he saw her rise and smile at him. "I'm pretty late, I guess."

"Yes," Louise said.

"It's that Brenda Delmar thing," he said, full of eagerness now, and wanting to tell what had happened and how it had come out.

"Yes," Louise said before he could find a place to start.

He looked at her quickly, hearing something in her voice he had not heard before. She was still smiling and even now her tone was humorous but without warmth.

"I have something for you," she said, and he looked down and she was putting his mother's ring in his hand. Then as he stared and something died inside him she came up on tiptoe and kissed him. "I love you dearly, Paul," she said lightly, "but it just wouldn't work."

He stood quite still, feeling his face stiffen, knowing finally that he had lost her. He did not know quite what he said but somehow she was at the door and saying that Barry Corwin was waiting in the car. Barry would drive her to the Taylors, she said. There was still time for a cocktail or two. Then she was gone and the office was still.

After a while he slumped down in his chair. "I lost my girl," he said.

"I — I heard it," Mary said. "You can get her back."

Standish shook his head. He said, "Not this time, Mary."

She slipped into the chair where his patients sat, hands on her knees and her hazel eyes softly troubled. She asked what had happened and he told her about Arthur Fielding and Nick Cerroni and presently, because it was all so important to him, he was talking easily and explaining how he saw the motive.

"Mrs. Fielding had the purse strings," he said. "If she tossed him out he wouldn't have a dime," he said. "And I guess he got in too deep with Brenda. I don't know yet if she was blackmailing him or whether she threatened to go to his wife, but he had to get rid of her."

"You think he went there last night to poison her and make it look like suicide?" Mary said.

Standish nodded. "He must have had murder in his heart or he wouldn't have gone up through the garage. But he did, and then his plan wouldn't work because Brenda didn't want a drink. So he lost his head, and it was still murder — but not the way he planned."

He paused, continued slowly. "At that he didn't get panicky. There were no marks on her that he had made and he still had the poison so he poured a little in her mouth and left the glass on the table. The trouble was Nick Cerroni must have seen him when he was leaving.

"Yes," Mary said.

"So long as the death was listed as suicide, everything was all right. Murder made it different. Cerroni could talk and Fielding went there this afternoon and the old man probably didn't know it was murder yet and they had a drink and —"

"And if you hadn't come when you did," Mary said. "He'd be dead now."

Remembering how close he had come to postponing his hunch, Standish shivered unconsciously. If he had kept his date with Louise, she would still be his girl, but Cerroni . . .

He saw again the two pictures on the buffet and the poor neat room and somehow he did not feel so

badly. He looked at Mary and saw the warm glow in her cheeks and the way her brown hair framed her sweet young face. He thought, *She's lovely, and she understands.*

He felt his grin come. He pushed up in his chair and all at once, though he did not know why, he felt better. "Hey," he said. "I'm hungry. How about you?"

"Yes," Mary said.

"Then let's eat." Standish rose and pulled her with him. "Get your coat," he said. "A martini and then some food, huh?"

She bobbed her head. She didn't say anything; but her eyes did and what Standish saw there was sufficient.

ALIBIS ASSORTED

A Cincinnati man, explaining to police why he stole three white-wall tires: "I found one and needed three more to match it."

A Chicago man, arrested for drunkenness: "I really didn't intend to drink the whole bottle all at once, but I lost the cork."

Washington police who caught a man working with file and pliers on the back door of a local church were told by the offender that he was merely seeking "spiritual guidance."

A man in Wellington, New Zealand, told a court that he had jumped from a theatre balcony into

the lap of a woman seated below in order to practice what to do in case of an earthquake.

A patron in a Mexico City restaurant, explaining why, after eating 100 sandwiches and refusing to pay his check, he stuck around until police appeared: "I was so full I couldn't move."

A nurse of Youngstown, Ohio, who, ignoring a railroad brakeman's red lantern and driving her car around him, crashed into a train: "I didn't want to stop in that neighborhood after dark."

PAUL STEINER

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