ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

***including* BLACK MASK MAGAZINE**

The best of the new and the best of the old

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PRIZE-WINNING STORY

Another original for our* Black Mask *department . . .

We are happy to welcome back to EQMM the erudite columnist of "The Saturday Review of Literature" — Ben Ray Redman. Most of you, we are sure, will remember Mr. Redman's classic short story titled "The Perfect Crime," which we once called The Detective Story to End Detective Stories, and which, paradoxically, still cries out for a companion tale about the same characters. Pending that consummation devoutly to be wish'd, we now offer Ben Ray Redman's newest story — a shrewd and expert yarn in the highest tradition of Black Mask's more restrained toughness — and, it should be added, more realistic toughness. Meet Jerry Clegg, insurance investigator . . . and when you have finished — please, not before! — we will tell you more.

THE TOUGHER THEY COME

by BEN RAY REDMAN

ON THE NIGHT OF JANUARY 15, Mr. and Mrs. Bert Taylor were driving fast on New York City's West Side express highway, heading downtown. As they were taking a slight curve, not far below 50th Street, their sedan went out of control and crashed into the guard-wall. The right-hand front door was flung open and Mrs. Taylor was hurled through it. In fact, she was thrown completely over the wall and onto the street twenty feet below, while the hood of the automobile crumpled behind her. When the first witness of the accident reached her, she was dead with a crushed skull. When a motorcycle cop by the name of Jim Ryan reached the wrecked car, he found Mr. Taylor slumped over the wheel, gasping for the breath that had been knocked out of him, but otherwise unhurt. The moment Mr. Taylor could speak he asked for his wife. When he learned what had happened, he went into a fit of hysterical weeping, terrifying in its intensity, that lasted almost twenty minutes. But after he had recovered he refused to be taken to a hospital, or even to have a physical examination. He insisted that he was perfectly all right, that he hadn't really been hurt at all — and once Mr. Taylor had got his control back, the young ambulance doctor was inclined to agree with him.

"He must be a pretty tough bird," said young Dr. Lawrence to a pal of

his, when he got back to the hospital.

"It's hell to see a big guy like that go all to pieces," Officer Ryan told his wife.

Three days later Mrs. Taylor was buried, after a perfunctory service in a respectable funeral chapel on East 22nd Street. Meanwhile, The American Insurance Company had been notified of Mrs. Taylor's death, and had been requested to pay her husband the $15,000 to which he was entitled as beneficiary of a policy drawn in his favor. This policy was now six years old, and the records showed that Mr. Taylor had taken out a policy for an equal amount, with his wife as beneficiary, on the same day that Mrs. Taylor's had been issued. Jerry Clegg, investigator for American, was assigned to the case and instructed to give it a routine investigation.

Clegg studied the scene of the crash, went over the wrecked car with an expert eye, interviewed Dr. Lawrence, and talked at some length with Officer Ryan. After that he paid an evening call on Mr. Bert Taylor in his three-room, East 19th Street apartment.

He was impressed by Mr. Taylor's handshake. In fact, he was more than impressed, for his own hand hurt for a couple of hours after Mr. Taylor had shaken it.

The bereaved husband was subdued and low-voiced, despite his hearty grip, but he was almost pathetically eager to answer any questions Clegg wished to ask him. He described the accident as well as he could, but he couldn't pretend to explain it. He had been driving for years and had never before been in any kind of crackup. Perhaps he had been doing 50, maybe 55, he couldn't be sure. And then — wham! The only thing he could think was that maybe he had had a blowout. Of course, both front tires were completely blown out after the crash, but perhaps one had gone just before. He couldn't remember hearing anything, but it all happened so quick. It was as quick as . . . Pausing, he made a quick circular motion with the forefinger of his right hand, while he seemed to be searching for a comparison. Then, apparently, he decided that he didn't need a comparison after all, for he left his sentence unfinished and simply added lamely, "Yeah, it was damned quick."

Just before he left, Clegg noticed a framed snapshot on the desk that stood between the two living-room windows.

Leaning towards it, he asked, "Is that you?"

Bert Taylor hesitated for a second. Then he said with a faint grin, "Well, yes and no."

Clegg looked at him for an explanation, and Taylor explained. "It's me twenty years ago. Twenty years can play the devil with a guy. I had hair then."

"I'll say you had." Clegg looked more closely at the photograph. It was the picture of a man in his early twenties, wearing slacks, and a sports

shirt open at the neck, with a great shock of hair that was apparently being blown about by a stiff breeze. In the background were some vague blurs that looked like a line of high hills.

"Lord, yes. Hair!" said Mr. Taylor wistfully. "The guy who invented something that would keep *that* on your head would have a supercolossal production all right."

"If you hear of anyone who's getting even close," said Clegg cheerfully, "let me know. I'd like to crawl in on the ground floor."

After leaving the 19th Street flat, Clegg had another chat with Officer Ryan.

"I thought you told me he was a big fellow," said Clegg.

"That's right, I did. He is."

"Not in my book," said Clegg. "He isn't any bigger than I am."

"The hell he isn't," said Ryan. "When I said big, I didn't mean tall. I meant husky, big in the chest. Why the guy's built like a bull."

"Not when I saw him he wasn't."

Ryan looked thoughtful. "Did you see him in an overcoat?"

"No, I saw him at his own place — indoors."

"Well," said Ryan, "that's probably it. I saw him only in a coat, one of those heavy winter overcoats. I could never wear one myself, I don't care how cold it is. Maybe it was the overcoat that made him look bulky."

"Could be," agreed Jerry Clegg. "Look me up when you want to have a traffic ticket fixed."

The next day was Thursday, and one of the things that Clegg had learned was that Thursday was Mr. Taylor's day off from work in the big Fourth Avenue liquor store where he was employed as a clerk. Clegg introduced himself to the manager, Mr. Morse, and explained that he would like to ask a few questions about Bert Taylor. Mr. Morse was more than happy to oblige. He was very fond of Bert. Bert was a great guy. Everyone in the store was fond of Bert. What had happened to him shouldn't happen to a dog.

Jerry Clegg remarked that he supposed Mr. and Mrs. Taylor had been a pretty happy couple. Mr. Morse supposed so, too. But he had never met Mrs. Taylor. Bert had intended to bring her to their store party last Christmas Eve, but then he hadn't. Perhaps it was just as well, after all. Mr. Morse chuckled over fond memories. It had been quite a party — yes, *quite* a party. And Bert Taylor had ended up by being the life of it. The things that guy can do! You wouldn't believe it. Mr. Morse pointed.

"See that counter over there?"

Clegg nodded.

"Well, it's three feet high and more than two feet across. I've measured it. And the evening of the party, damned if Bert Taylor didn't take off from a standing start behind that counter, go straight over it in a dive, land on the floor on the back of his neck, and come up on his feet as pretty as you please, all quicker than you could say Hiram Walker."

"Quite a trick," said Clegg.

"I'll say!" agreed Mr. Morse. "Of course, he had a few stiff drinks in him, but I don't see how that would help much even if God is as good to drunks as he is always supposed to be. And the guy must be over forty, if he's a day. I wish I was in that kind of condition." Mr. Morse patted his small paunch.

"Me, too," said Clegg. "I think I'll start running around the reservoir every morning."

After his talk with the store manager, Clegg had a chat with a couple of the clerks and with the bookkeeper, Miss Moroni, a remarkably pretty young woman with large, dark, liquid eyes. There was no doubt about Bert Taylor's popularity among his fellow workers. The two clerks were all for him, and Miss Moroni warmly assured Jerry Clegg that you could travel as far as you liked — all around the world, in fact — and never meet a finer gentleman than Mr. Taylor.

That evening Clegg rang Bert Taylor's bell again, and again he found him in. On the table beside the chair in the living-room, where he had been sitting, there was a Pocket Book with a cover that showed it was a Western, and a half-finished drink.

"Just one to keep the cold outside," explained Mr. Taylor. "What'll you have?"

"I'll sit this one out," said Clegg. "Perhaps later."

"Suit yourself," said Mr. Taylor. "There's plenty more where that came from. Bonded. That chair there's comfortable. What is it — more questions?"

"If you don't mind."

"Why should I?"

"Well, at a time like this . . ."

Taylor nodded. "Oh, if you mean that talking about things connected with Min isn't easy, you're damned right. It isn't easy."

For an instant Clegg was afraid the man was going to burst into tears, but instead he picked up his drink and took a couple of quick swallows. Then he said, "Shoot."

"You were married quite a while, weren't you?" asked Clegg.

"Eighteen years," Bert Taylor told him. "And when you've been married eighteen years and a thing like this happens — well, you feel somehow as if the whole damned world had come to an end. Maybe it would be better if it had — for the guy himself, I mean. Maybe it would be better if you couldn't remember anything. But you can't help remembering — all the time you just can't help it!" He looked at the little book on the table. "I can hear Min right now, laughing at me for reading Westerns so much. She said they were just a waste of time. She liked mysteries."

Clegg nodded sympathetically. "She was a little older than you?"

"Four years, but I don't think you'd ever of known it."

"And where were you married?"

"On the Coast. Los Angeles."

"Los Angeles?"

"Yeah. Well, it wasn't really Los

Angeles. It was Beverly Hills, at the City Hall, and I remember I could only get a day off from my job, so we never had a real honeymoon until a couple of years later. Then we had a week at Laguna."

"The next thing the unions ought to go for," said Clegg, "is honeymoon time for every guy who gets married. That would be a fringe benefit worth fighting for."

"I'll say! But things were a lot tougher in those days. There weren't any fringe benefits."

"What were you doing then?"

"Driving."

"Driving? How do you mean."

"For a laundry," Bert Taylor explained, after the merest hesitation. "You know the sort of thing — pick up and deliver. And what some of those dames tried to get away with! They'd say you'd torn their sheets when the sheets were ripped when they gave 'em to you, and they'd swear you hadn't sent back stuff that they'd never given you at all. What a job!"

"When did you move East?"

"Right after Pearl Harbor. Min was scared to death the Japs were going to ring the doorbell any night. Not that I blamed her much, because I thought they might myself. So we tried Chicago first, and then after the Germans quit we came on to New York."

"And you've been working in the same place ever since."

"That's right."

"All these questions," said Clegg, "must seem an awful waste of time to you, Mr. Taylor. And pretty impertinent, when I come to think of it."

"No, they don't — not at all." The widower looked at his empty glass. "I know it takes time to collect on any insurance. Why, I remember how long it took me to collect on a broken collarbone once. More red tape!"

"How did you do that?"

"Break it, you mean? Why, it was when I was driving — that is, I missed my step jumping out of my laundry truck one time, and damned if it didn't crack as easy as you'd crack an egg."

"They go that way sometimes," said Clegg. "I've seen plenty of them. By the way, was what you said when I came in about my having a drink a firm offer?"

"I'll say." Bert Taylor picked up his own glass enthusiastically. "I'm just about ready for another myself. What'll it be?"

"Is there a lemon in the house?"

"Sure. Every so often I like a collins."

"Then if it isn't too much trouble will you make me a whiskey sour? — just a little sugar and a little lemon juice and not too much bourbon."

"Coming up. *Prontito!*"

Bert Taylor headed for the kitchen, and the kitchen door closed behind him.

As a rule Jerry Clegg didn't like whiskey sours, but he figured it would take Mr. Taylor quite a bit longer to

mix a whiskey sour than to make a highball or pour some straight bourbon over ice. And just at this moment Jerry Clegg wanted a little time.

The kitchen door was out of sight from where he stood in the living room, and the moment he heard it swing shut he stepped to the desk, picked up the framed snapshot, and held it under the light, studying the photograph closely. The leatherette frame was made so that a picture could be slipped in from the top. Almost unconsciously, Clegg began to push the snapshot up and out of the frame with his thumb, but as he did so he told himself sharply that he could never get away with it. Then he noticed that there was a second photograph under the first. He kept on pushing until he saw that the second snapshot was almost a duplicate of the first. But not quite. Obviously it had been taken at the same time as the other one, but not from the same angle. It was more full-face. Taylor or Mrs. Taylor must have put it in the frame and then decided that the other one was better, and slipped the preferred shot over the first one. It was a stroke of luck, Clegg told himself, but sometimes you don't get very far without a little luck.

By the time Bert Taylor came back from the kitchen with the drinks, the frame was back on the desk, the familiar snapshot still in it. The other one, the full-face shot, was in Jerry Clegg's pocket.

Both men enjoyed their drinks, but Clegg firmly refused a second. Some other time, he said. "I'll be seeing you. I'll keep in touch."

When Clegg told his boss what he wanted to do, Emerson looked at him, tapped his desk with the eraser end of a No. 3 pencil, and said, "It seems to me you're playing a whale of a long shot."

"So I'm playing a long shot."

"Sure you don't just want the trip?"

"I could do with it," said Jerry frankly.

"Without using your own money?"

"It isn't my money no matter how it turns out — if you know what I mean."

"I know what you mean," said Emerson. "O.K. Go ahead." He liked Jerry, but he also knew that Jerry had a head on his shoulders and that even longer shots had paid off. "Keep the swindle sheet down," he added, "and take care of yourself. Thar's babes in them thar woods."

Jerry grinned. "I've been there before — and I've brought myself back alive."

Seventeen hours later he checked in at the Roosevelt Hotel on Hollywood Boulevard, slept ten hours, had three eggs for breakfast, and started out on what might or might not prove to be a wild goose chase. In and out of offices he went, with his snapshot of Bert Taylor, and in every office he talked with men and women, but neither Mr. Taylor's name nor Mr. Taylor's likeness meant anything to any man or woman with whom he

talked, and all he seemed to be accomplishing was to give the Yellow Cab Company a hearty boost on the profit side of the ledger.

This went on for two days. At the end of two days he suddenly found himself humming *They tried to tell us we're too young* and he stopped dead in his tracks. That was it! They were probably all too young, or, even if they weren't, the chances are that they wouldn't remember Bert Taylor's face. But who would remember? The question required thought. Its proper consideration also required a thick dinner steak at Chasen's. It would have to be a New York cut, of course — the kind of cut one never hears of in New York.

By the time he had finished the steak he had an inspiration, and the next day, at about noon, he acted on it. To put the inspiration in working order was simple. All he had to do was to step into a cab and tell the driver to drop him off at the corner of Sunset and Gower. In other words, to drop him off in the section known to old-timers as Gower Gulch, the few blocks that had long been the hangout of the more picturesque male extras who scraped a thin living out of motion pictures — cowboys in high-heeled boots, gaunt miners and Canadian trappers, bearded pirates, Mexican bandits, Lascars, Senegalese, rascals from all the ports in the Seven Seas. Of course, the same man might be a trapper one day and a pirate the next, but that didn't detract from the authenticity of appearance, on stage and off, that was the hallmark of Gower Gulch. Some of them were the genuine article, and some were so conscientious in their roles that the Gulch had more than once heard the staccato fire of six-guns and seen the flash of murderous knives. But for the most part they were a friendly, lazy lot, easy to talk to in lunchrooms, easy to buy drinks for at bars. Jerry Clegg began to talk and buy drinks and ask questions. And he struck pay dirt just seven hours after he had hailed a cab in front of his hotel.

It was in the Little Scorpion Cafe, and he struck it in the bearded person of Big Pete. He knew that was the man's name, because that is how he formally introduced himself before he consented to down the first free drink. After the third free drink, Clegg showed Big Pete the snapshot. The seven-footer took one look at it, banged his fist on the bar, and shouted, "Gawdamighty! The old son-of-a-burro!"

"Know him?" asked Clegg.

"Know him?" roared the giant. "I'd know him any place, even in his diapers."

"Taylor?" said Clegg.

"Perkins," said Pete, not paying any attention to the difference in names. "Bert Perkins — but better known as The Cat."

"The Cat? Why?"

"Because he had nine lives, of course. Why, blast it, he had a hundred! He was the best in the business — the very best. Until he went and quit."

"Just what was his business?" asked Clegg as quietly, as gently as possible.

"Why," began Big Pete. Then, suddenly, a shadow of suspicion darkened his usually candid countenance and he said, "But see here, Mister —"

"Clegg," said Clegg.

"Mister Clegg, then. How come you're carrying The Cat's picture round in your pocket and don't seem to know the first thing about him?"

"I know one thing," said Clegg evenly, looking at his drinking companion. "I know he has quite a wad of money coming to him if certain things can be straightened out. I'm trying to straighten them out, and I need some information."

"That's on the level?"

"That's on the level."

"What kind of thing is it you want to know about him."

"Well, it wouldn't do any harm if I knew a little more about his business."

Big Pete grinned. The shadow had gone from his face now. It was obvious that he didn't enjoy being suspicious of anyone, even briefly. "A little?" he said. "I can tell you plenty, if you want to hear it." He looked at his empty glass. "Could I just draw against you, maybe, for another one of these little flea-bites?"

"It's on its way," said Clegg, looking at a table. "But I think we might do better sitting down."

"Wait until you hear about that time at Zodiac with the airplane and the elephant," said Big Pete.

"At Zodiac with the airplane and the elephant?" repeated Clegg.

"That's right. You had to see it to believe it."

They went to the table.

When Jerry Clegg arrived at Zodiac Pictures the next morning, he immediately ran into what looked like a dead end. There was no one at Zodiac who cared who he was or what he wanted, and it seemed for a while that if he wished to indulge in the art of conversation at Zodiac he would have to indulge in it with the policeman at the reception desk, and with no one else. But Clegg was both persistent and persuasive. Having finally driven a wedge into the policeman's hard heart, he made his way step by step, from lower echelon to higher echelon, until he found himself on a very high plane indeed — in the private office of Alec Stein, sitting at the far side of the producer's big desk.

One of the things that Stein prided himself on was that he remembered every man, woman, and child who had ever worked for him. And he certainly remembered Perkins.

"Why wouldn't I remember," he asked, "when I kept him busy right on this lot for five years — no, five years and a half — and he was the best guy at his job I ever had? Or anyone else ever had either. What's this about insurance? The American Insurance Company, is it?" He looked again at Clegg's card. "What do they want to know about Perkins?"

When Clegg told him — not what he wanted to know but what he

wanted to see — Stein threw up his hands.

"Are you crazy?" he asked. "Or just plain nuts. It can't be done. It couldn't be done even if it didn't mean digging out stuff that hasn't been dug out for years, and maybe isn't even here."

Jerry Clegg spoke briefly and to the point. Alec Stein eyed him moodily.

"So that's the way it is," said the producer. "Well, I'll be damned! Bert Perkins."

"No," said the insurance investigator, "that isn't the way it is. That's the way it may be. But that's what we've got to find out."

Clegg spent the next two hours in Projection Room #4, alone with a projectionist. He would have stayed there longer, but it took him only two hours to find what he wanted — to find something much better than anything he had hoped to find. When he went back to Stein's office, the producer said he was very happy to have been of help. But when Clegg said that he wanted the producer to do him one more small favor, and explained what it was, the mogul of Zodiac Pictures almost screamed. This time it definitely could not be done.

Jerry Clegg asked if he could put through a call to New York. Stein shrugged — he called New York almost as often as he called his secretary in the next office.

Clegg spoke to Emerson at American. Emerson said he would speak to one of the top brass and ask him to get in touch with the New York office of Zodiac Pictures. Clegg told Stein what he had done. Stein looked doubtful. Twenty minutes later a call came through from New York.

"Yes, he's here now, right beside me," began the producer, but after that he did little more than listen. Finally, Stein hung up and said, "You win."

When Clegg boarded the plane that night, his suitcase was heavier than it had been on the flight West.

Back in Manhattan, he went to see Detective Lieutenant Duffy of Homicide. Duffy was an old friend of his. After he had told his story and explained his plan, the Lieutenant shook his head wonderingly and exclaimed, "What a lad, what a lad! And what will you be dreaming up next?"

"Can you think of a better way of breaking it?" asked Clegg.

"Not at the moment I can't," said Duffy, scratching his left ear.

"Then it's a date?"

"It's a date."

"And when I say that I want the two boys with you to be big and tough, I really mean big and tough."

"Don't worry," said Duffy, "they'll be big and tough. Everyone on the force isn't a shrimp like me." He stood six feet three inches and stripped at 230.

When Mr. Bert Taylor walked into the handsome American Insurance Company Building on Madison Avenue, keeping an appointment that had been made at the request of Mr.

Jerome Clegg, he did so with the hope that all the technicalities in connection with the settlement of his wife's policy had finally been attended to. Clegg met him in Emerson's office and introduced him to Mr. Emerson. The latter suggested that they all take the elevator to the sixteenth floor, where they could complete their business. When they reached the sixteenth floor, Mr. Emerson led the way to a door, opened it, and ushered them into a long narrow room that had some twenty chairs in it and a motion picture screen at the far end. Three men were already seated in the chairs. They were big men. Mr. Taylor stopped dead in his tracks.

"A projection room!" he exclaimed. "What's the idea?"

"We are going to look at some film," explained Jerry Clegg. "We often have to look at film in connection with accident cases, but it won't take long because we're only going to look at a part of a reel. Here's a good chair right here, Mr. Taylor. Make yourself comfortable. Mr. Brown, Mr. Smith, Mr. Duffy," he waved his hand at the three big men, "let me introduce Mr. Taylor. These gentlemen," he explained to Mr. Taylor, "are what you might call technical experts. And now I think we can all get ourselves settled and be ready to go. I'll sit here at the control desk. I'm sure the projectionist's ready — everything O.K., gentlemen?"

Clegg's words were glib, his voice was smooth. He took his place at the desk, and Mr. Taylor found that he had been steered to a chair that was directly in front of two of the technical experts. Clegg picked up the phone and said to the projectionist, "Any time now, Joe." Then he flicked the light switch and the room was dark. An instant later the screen came alive with a picture that refused to come into focus for a few frames. Suddenly all was clear.

"It's confusing cutting into the middle of the action like this," said Clegg apologetically, "but I think you will be able to pick up the threads in a minute."

The first shots seemed to be of a dance that was breaking up, with everyone saying shrill good nights to everyone else, and everyone more or less high. Women and girls were getting into their minks, men were putting on their overcoats. An exterior shot showed a building that looked like a country club, and a lot of parked cars. Then the camera picked up a young couple and stayed with them. The girl was beautiful, and the young man would have been handsome if he hadn't been a little on the effeminate side. They kissed as they walked towards their car, they kissed in the car before he started it, and they snuggled close together as he stepped on the accelerator. Interior shots of the car alternated with exterior shots of the automobile as it gathered speed on the dark, deserted highway. At this point Clegg could have sworn that he could feel the man

who called himself Bert Taylor stiffening in his chair; but that could hardly be, as Taylor was four chairs away.

The car tore through the night. The lovers clung tighter, while the man held the wheel with only one hand. A long shot showed the car racing down a sweeping curve towards a bridge. The car swerved. Then, as if by magic, the camera moved in as the car crashed against the right-hand railing of the bridge. The right-hand door was flung open, and the girl was hurled through it and thrown over the railing to the river below. Then the camera moved even closer and fastened on the broken figure of the effeminate young man, apparently crushed to death against the wheel.

Jerry Clegg flipped on the lights.

The eyes of five men were fixed on the sixth man in the room.

The sixth man was sweating, sweating in streams, but his lips seemed to be dry for he was trying to moisten them with his tongue. He was looking at Jerry Clegg with a strange expression, as if he were trying to solve a difficult puzzle and couldn't quite make it. Clegg began to speak as easily as before.

"The film you have just seen, gentlemen, is a small part of a picture called *They Die in the Dark*. It was produced by Alec Stein, and directed by Lewis Carr, at Zodiac Pictures in 1935. The girl's part, as you may have recognized, was played by Babs Gordon — it was one of her first — and the boy's part was played by a youngster named Stanley Hunter. The stunt man who drove the car was Bert Perkins — the top stunt man in Hollywood — nicknamed The Cat because he had nine lives, and a few to spare."

Mr. Taylor jerked suddenly in his chair, and the policemen leaned closer to him; but then he was still again.

"You may have thought when you saw the crash," continued Jerry Clegg, "that it was done with miniatures, but it wasn't. Stein always wanted the real thing, even if it was a lot more expensive, and Bert Perkins could always give him what he wanted. He could give him what no other stunt man in Hollywood could — even when Stein dreamed up a sequence with an airplane and an elephant that you wouldn't believe if your own mother swore she had seen it. Isn't that right, Mr. Perkins?" Clegg looked straight at Big Pete's old pal.

Bert Perkins looked back with his eyes staring, and his expression even stranger than before. It was the kind of expression that you might expect to see on the face of a man who suddenly suspects he is going crazy. Then, abruptly, he said something that sounded very silly.

"It wasn't a girl — it was a dummy that was thrown out of that car just now, that you saw on the screen."

For an instant there was silence in the projection room. Then Clegg said very quietly, "But it wasn't a dummy the other night on the express highway — it was your wife."

Bert Perkins twisted his head slowly from side to side, as if his neck were stiff and hurting him.

"It was your wife, Perkins," Clegg repeated. "And you planned to kill her just as carefully as you ever planned one of your most difficult stunt jobs. You knew exactly how to do it because you had done the very same thing before — with a dummy. It was all perfectly planned and the only wonder is that you didn't get away with it. Perhaps I would never have been suspicious at all if Ryan hadn't described you as a big man, husky, built like a bull. When I saw you, I saw you were no bull, and I told Ryan so, and he said that perhaps the overcoat had made you look big. I was still chewing over that when your boss at the store told me about your dive over the counter at the Christmas Eve party, and I asked myself what sort of fellow could get away with a stunt like that — and then the words 'stunt man' flashed into my mind, and I remembered seeing dives like that in Westerns."

Clegg paused. Perkins was absolutely motionless now, except for the tongue that kept licking his lips. But Clegg could feel the tension building up inside the man who was watching him with bulging eyes.

"The moment I thought of a stunt man," Clegg went on, "it suggested possibilities. You fellows often wear crash harnesses, and sometimes they are pretty bulky. That would explain why you looked so big that night to Ryan — if you were wearing a protective harness under your overcoat. Perhaps there is one hidden in your apartment right now. Anyway, I decided to go to Hollywood to see what I could find out."

Jerry Clegg was obviously all set to keep the pressure, but at that instant Perkins sprang from his chair with the violence of a snapped spring. And at precisely the same instant the two big policemen reached out and held him fast. But Perkins did not fight. He slumped like a bag of sand between them, sobbing over and over again, "I did it, I did it! I killed her, I killed her! I killed Min!" And then his sobs became a violent retching that shook his body as if it would tear it into bloody fragments . . .

Over drinks, at the bar opposite The American Insurance Company, Duffy remarked to Jerry Clegg, "the ones you think are going to be the toughest — sometimes they go to pieces just like that, all of a sudden."

Jerry Clegg nodded. "Yep, the tougher they come . . ."