

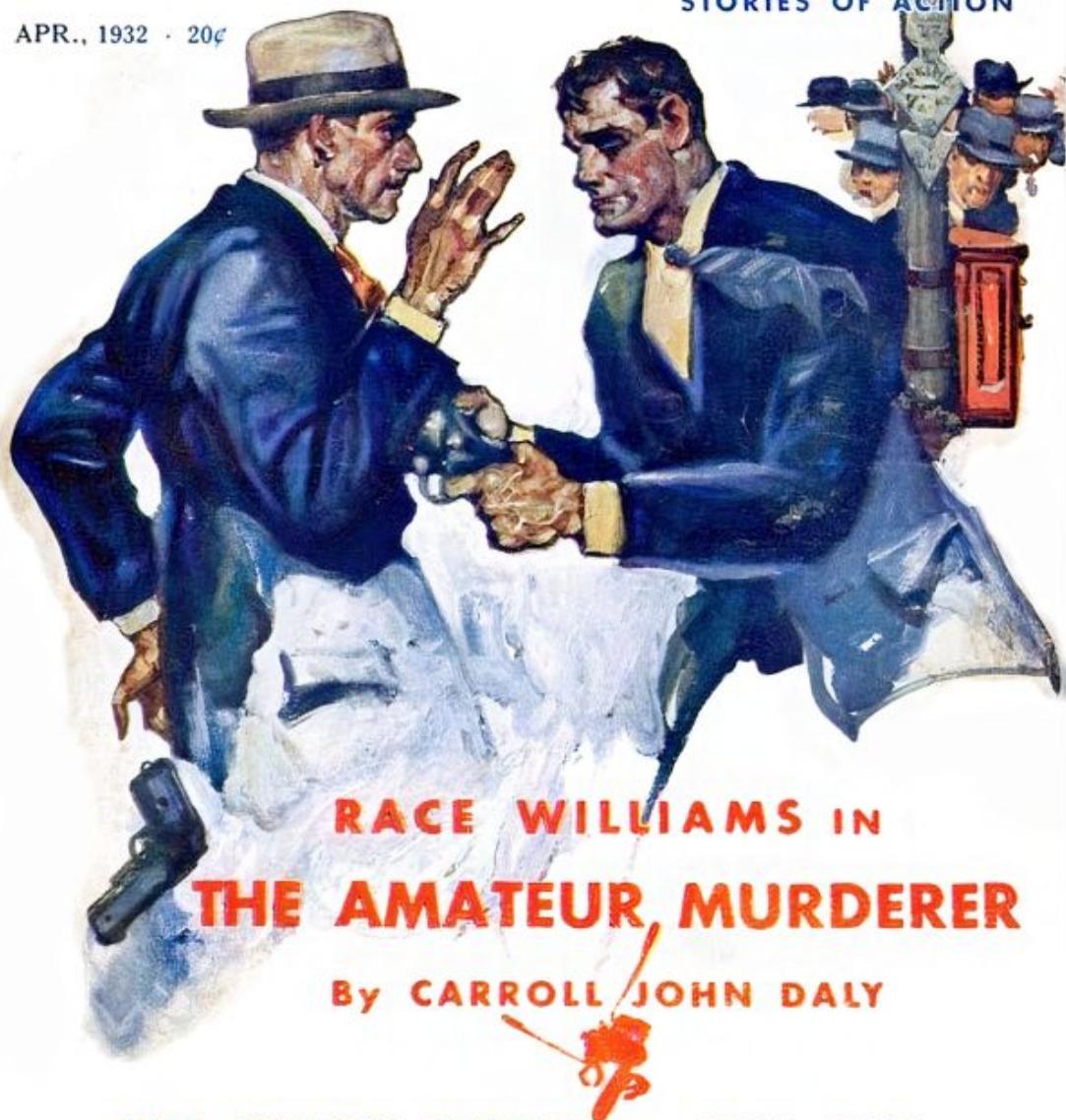
"MAN KILLER" By RAOUL WHITFIELD

★  
S.M.

# BLACK MASK

DETECTIVE, WESTERN,  
STORIES OF ACTION

APR., 1932 · 20¢



RACE WILLIAMS IN  
**THE AMATEUR MURDERER**

By CARROLL JOHN DALY

ERLE STANLEY GARDNER • PAUL CAIN

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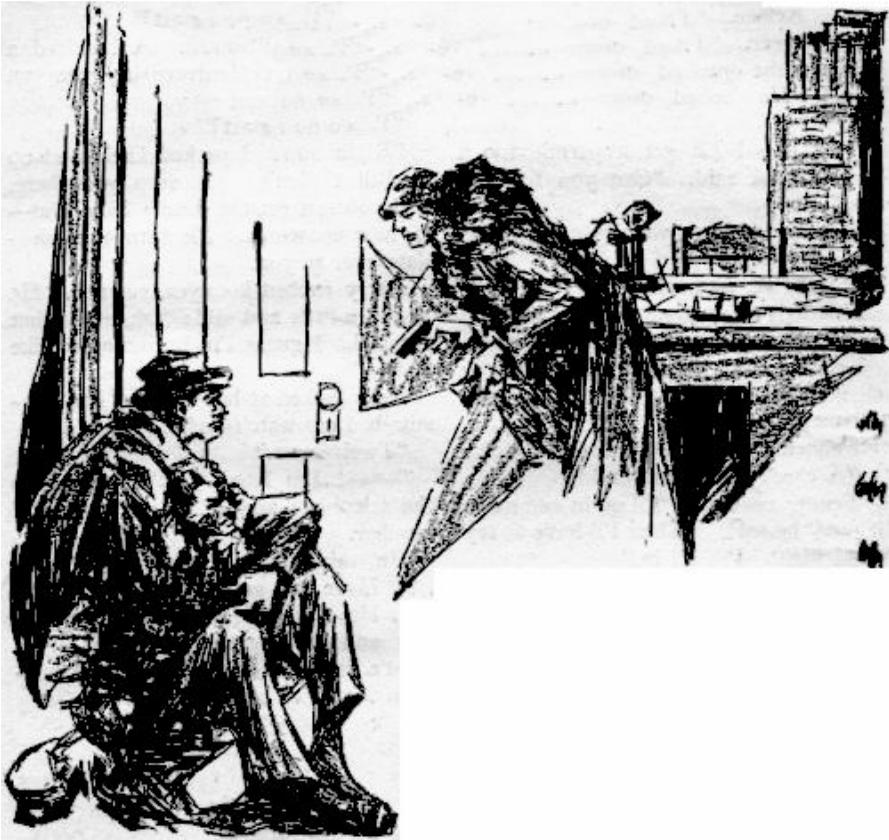
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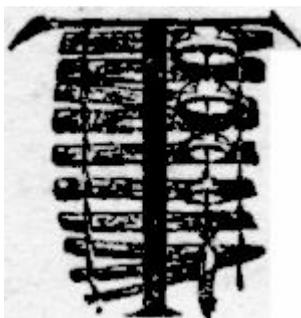
# Straight Crooks

By ERLE STANLEY GARDNER

First published *Black Mask*, April 1932.



*Ed Jenkins, dodging a murder rap, finds time to help another crook who is trying to go straight*



he Cracker paused before the door of the apartment and listened. It was a fool move. We'd already determined, as nearly as we could, that the apartment was empty. Standing before the door, bent over, was simply suicidal. We couldn't tell when someone was going to pop out of one of the other apartments, even if it was after midnight.

I pushed him to one side and fitted a skeleton key.

The Cracker started to whisper. I kicked viciously at his shin. He shut up.

A skeleton key is a difficult thing to handle. It nearly always makes more or less of a noise, and sometimes has to be held at just a right angle. It isn't like a regular key that fits the guides perfectly.

The Cracker was peering nervously up and down the hallway, looking like a bum actor trying to register guilt. I could have killed him with pleasure.

The bolt clicked in the door. I pulled in on the knob so the latch wouldn't make a racket, turned, and pushed the door noiselessly open.

The apartment was dark as pitch.

The Cracker started to whisper something again.

I grabbed him right by the knot of the necktie and dragged him in the apartment with me, turned, closed the door and talked to him there in the dark.

"No wonder you're a cheap crook with a list of petty convictions as long as your arm," I snarled at him. "For ——— sake don't stand out in the hallway and whisper. Talk out like a man. A whisper always attracts attention, low-voiced conversation sounds on the up and up. People strain their ears to listen to whispers."

He was yammering.

"Don't make so much racket. Maybe this apartment ain't empty."

"Listen," I told him. "You shadowed the broad out. You telephoned the apartment, you sent a telegram. The telephone didn't answer, and there's the telegram notice on the knob of the door right now. What more do you want?"

"I admit we're taking a chance, but when we've done all we can to smooth out the way ahead of us, we've got to quit worrying and barge right ahead.

"If the apartment was occupied do you think we'd stand any more chance of a getaway by hissing out a lot of whispers than by talking right out?"

And I clicked on the light switch.

The Cracker jumped back, shielded his face with his arm.

"No, no, not the lights! Use a flash!"

I laughed at the cheap crook. Use a flash! Signal to anyone who saw it through the windows or against the shades that a burglar was in the place! No wonder The Cracker was a cheap hanger-on of the underworld! Turn on the lights and no one would think anything of it. Use a flash . . . oh hell, what was the use of trying to educate the bum?

The curtains were drawn, the shades down. The apartment might have been left to order for our visit.

The Cracker got his nerve back after a second or two.

"I guess you're right," he said, speaking out of one side of his mouth.

He was a tall, skinny cuss, and he carried his head thrust forward, his stomach pulled in in a sort of a crouch, as though he'd been trying to make himself look inconspicuous. It's the sort

of a humped up appearance one sees sometimes on a tall girl who's tried to make herself look short by humping herself down—and not kidding anybody except herself, and ruining what might have been a good figure.

The Cracker was the sort of a bird who looked like a crook. He gave the impression of trying to hide behind something, even when there wasn't anything to hide behind.

The apartment had four rooms. It was furnished with a pretty good grade of furniture, and there were a few individual touches to it.

The sitting-room was spick and span. The bedroom was a mess of clothes. There was a dress on the floor, lying in a crumpled circle, just as though a girl had walked out of it and left it right where it had dropped. Some stockings had been washed out and hung over the foot of the bed to dry. The bathroom had some filmy underthings hanging over the edge of the bathtub, on faucets, over the towel hangers.

There were trays filled with cigarette ashes, a flask of whiskey, some tubes of cosmetics, a piece of soft paper smeared with wiped-off facial cream.

The Cracker stood in the doorway and rubbered about him.

"Well," I snapped, "let's get busy!"

He started at that, walked over to the davenport, moved the sofa cushions, and began exploring around in the cracks between the upholstery.

"It won't be there," I said.

"Why not?" he wanted to know, twisting his head on his long neck and leering at me. "I guess I got as much right to think as you have!"

I sighed, then started to explain, because I really didn't want to have trouble with him.

"It's because the bedroom's so mussy," I said. "That shows the kind of a girl she is, careless, sloppy. But this room is cleaned up all spick and span. That means she doesn't live in it much of the time, or else that she has a maid. In either event she'd have the stuff in the bedroom."

The Cracker got sore.

"Say," he said, "I don't know what gives you the right to be so damned superior! I'm in on this job, the same as you are, and I guess I gotta right to look where I want to."

"Okey," I said, and moved into the bedroom.

The mattress didn't show any signs of having been tampered with. I ran my hand around the inside of the pillow cases and found nothing. Back of the pictures showed dust, nothing else. I went through the bureau drawers as a matter of habit, not that I expected to find anything there.

I'd about finished with the conventional places when The Cracker came to the door.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I was nervous. I had no business flyin' off the handle."

"Forget it," I told him, "and look around the edges of the carpet."

He got down on his hands and knees and started searching.

I covered every place I could think of, and drew a blank. I even dipped down inside a big jar of cold cream and smeared my fingers all up, on the off chance that this might be the hiding place.

The Cracker got up from the floor and shook his head lugubriously.

I eyed him speculatively.

"Not here," he said.

I moved over towards him.

"How sure were you that they were here?"

“Awful sure.”

“And you don’t think she’s got them with her?”

“I know she ain’t. She’s afraid the bulls may search her.”

I frowned.

The Cracker started questioning me again.

“Why are you so anxious for them? Why not just go ahead and call in the cops and let them shake her down?”

I shook my head.

“If we find ’em it won’t prove anything,” he said.

“It’ll prove all I want to prove.”

“Well, just what is that?”

And I saw the eyes of the man slit a little, as though he was laying a trap for me.

I repeated the story I’d given him before.

“You know the case. Two people hold up a cabaret party, Mr. and Mrs. C. Carton Wright; Mr. and Mrs. Stanley Simpson. They get jewels from Mrs. Wright, and then Simpson makes a charge. There’s a shot and Simpson dies. Now I want to solve that murder. My client is paying me to turn up the killer. If this broad has got the bracelet and ring, we’ve got something to base a third degree on. You claim you know she has the stuff. I’m checking that knowledge, that’s all.”

The Cracker kept his eyes slitted.

“They had Ed Jenkins, The Phantom Crook, tagged with that crime for a while,” he said.

“Sure they did. They pin everything on him that they can’t pin on anybody else. But he got himself in the clear by showing the thing couldn’t have been pulled by him. One of the chorus girls gave him an alibi.”

The Cracker continued to study me.

“You’re a funny detective,” he drawled. “You act more like a high-class crook.”

I didn’t know what he had in mind, but if he had thought that statement would have got a rise out of me, he had another guess coming. I yawned and reached for a cigarette.

“Maybe,” I said. “My methods are my own.”

He continued to watch me. I wondered then if the man had more brains than I’d give him credit for. Did he suspect that I was The Phantom Crook? That I wasn’t a detective at all, but Ed Jenkins, himself?

I lit the cigarette and held the match for a second or two, so that he could see my hand was steady.

“And there was a mysterious girl mixed up in it,” he said.

“Yeah,” I told him. “But you know who pulled the job, and so do I.”

As a matter of fact, it was on account of that mysterious girl that I was mixed up in my present surroundings. Norma Gay had been the queen of the diamond thieves. She’d reformed and started to go straight. But a couple of men had framed her, had her present when what was intended to be a gem robbery was pulled. But Simpson had become impulsive, his wits muddled perhaps by a few too many highballs, and the robbery rap had become a murder case, a frying job.

I’d been accused for a while, then Norma Gay had helped me clear my name. But, until the men who had actually pulled the job had been uncovered, Norma Gay could be brought into it at any time.

I don't think Norma had figured the play out. But I had seen it from the minute I won into the clear. The two crooks knew who Norma was. They had only to spill the information to the police, and Norma would be in bad on account of her record. And the chorus girl hadn't given Norma any alibi.

So I'd started out to solve the case, on the quiet, and here I was, in company with The Cracker, in the apartment of a girl who was supposed to be the moll of the bird that had done the killing, and the moll was supposed to have the ring and bracelet that had been taken from Mrs. Wright.

The Cracker had turned stool pigeon. He figured me for a private dick, or I thought he had. Now he was talking funny. I moved over towards him, carelessly, but I kept the balls of my feet on the floor and my weight balanced over them. If I had to, I could slam home a right that would put The Cracker out of the way for a while and I didn't like the way things were going.

The Cracker had put his finger on the weak spot. If I'd been a detective I'd have gone after the evidence in another way. As it was, it was a case of a crook chasing a crook. The police had pinned everything on me they couldn't explain any other way. I was a convenient goat—and I was too damned weary of the perpetual fight to try and keep my name clear.

Let 'em go ahead and pin things on me, and then let them try to catch me. What the hell did I care? I'd earned the nickname of "The Phantom Crook" because I'd always been able to slip through the fingers of the police, and I was willing to keep right on slipping.

It gave life a zest anyway, my wits against those of the police. And, if they caught me, they were welcome to me.



he Cracker sucked in his under lip and gnawed on it in an ecstasy of nervousness. He seemed to be waiting for something to happen.

"Well," I said, "if it's not here, it may be somewhere else. Let's take a look in the kitchen."

He snorted.

"That baby never used the kitchen!" he said. "This apartment was a gift to her. It's just so much velvet. She sleeps here and that's about all."

"Yeah," I told him, not really paying too much attention to what he had to say, "it's pretty soft for Mabel Morgan."

"I'll say," said The Cracker.

He moved out towards the living-room again, stared at the davenport.

I followed his eyes and shrugged my shoulder. The bedroom had been a blank. Maybe I wasn't as shrewd at doping out hiding places as I thought I'd been.

I went to the kitchen.

The Cracker was right. It hadn't been used. Not by the same baby who had littered up the bedroom, at any rate. Here again everything was slick and clean, spick and span.

"Sugar sacks and flour sacks are always nice hiding places," I told The Cracker.

There was a little uncurtained window up over the sink.

I didn't want to switch on the light with no cover over that window—not until I saw whether or not somebody's bedroom was where I could be seen prowling about the kitchen.

So I walked towards the back door, found the key in the lock, twisted it, and looked out on a little balcony that ran down to a court.

It was a sort of a service entrance for the rambling apartment building. The place was a network of wooden stairs and landings. There was a moon, and that, coupled with the reflections of light from a globe that burned in the alleyway, showed the deserted court with its twisting staircases.

There wasn't any bedroom that had a view of the kitchen window. There was the window of another kitchen opposite, but it was after one o'clock. People wouldn't ordinarily be in kitchens at that time, and I wanted light, so I decided to take a chance.

I went back into the kitchen, switched on the light and then looked into the living-room.

The Cracker was standing over by the davenport, running his fingers around the cracks in the upholstery.

I grinned at him.

"Thought you covered it the first time."

"No," he said. "I only got half way around, and you was so sure it wasn't here, that I gave in to you. I still figure it's a good place."

I watched him while he ran his hand around, saw the crestfallen expression on his face as he drew a blank, and laughed at him.

"Come on," I said, "we'll try the kitchen."

I looked up at the window over the sink.

It was a square affair, and, on either side of the frame were the little brass fasteners for a roller shade. But the shade wasn't there. There wasn't even any lace curtain there. That window was just as bare and blank as though the kitchen was part of a vacant, unfurnished apartment.

I didn't like it, but life is always a question of taking chances. The man that doesn't take chances simply doesn't live, that's all. If he acts so blamed cautiously that he doesn't take the risk, he just doesn't act at all—and life will get him in the end, anyway, so what's the difference?

I found the flour bin, and rolled up my sleeves and started groping around.

The Cracker was over in the cupboard on the other side, moving cans around.

The bin was deep. I had to lean way over and grope. I made a good job of it and drew a blank.

"Any luck?" I asked The Cracker.

"No luck," he said. His surliness had left him. Perhaps I'd convinced him, after all, that my methods weren't so irregular.

I found the next bin loaded with potatoes. It wasn't much of a lead, but I worked through them. I could hear The Cracker, behind my back, working through the cans of baking powder and spices. I finished with the potatoes, took a few steps, and stopped in my tracks.

The kitchen was covered with linoleum, and my feet made a peculiar, rasping sound against the linoleum.

The Cracker looked up at me, his face stamped with alarm.

"What is it?" he whispered.

"Have you found the sugar?" I asked.

"No," he said.

I grinned.

"Then that's our lead. Somebody's been into the sugar recently—after the kitchen was swept out, and the place is so neat that that means after the last meal was cooked here. I just stepped on a crystal of sugar."

“Gee!” he said, and there was awe in his voice. “You sure called the turn.”

I walked towards a cabinet, and found I was walking on sugar all the way. I walked back towards the back door, and my feet crunched again.

I grinned at The Cracker.

“The cabinet,” I said.

I opened it up. There was a big tin of sugar. I pushed my hand down in it. My fingers felt something solid. I pulled it out. It was a platinum bracelet set with diamonds and emeralds. I fished down into the sugar and pulled out the platinum diamond ring. It was engraved.

There wasn’t any doubt about it. The two pieces that had been taken from Mrs. Wright by the man, or by one of the men, who had killed Stanley Simpson.

The Cracker hissed a jubilant chuckle.

“I gave you the straight dope! I told you she had ’em! You didn’t think so, for a while. You thought I was stringing you. I could tell it when you didn’t find anything in the bedroom!”

I nodded. He’d called the turn there.

All of a sudden the expression of joy died from his face. His mouth sagged. He cocked his head on one side as though he was listening.

“Good ——!” he said, and jumped for the light switch.

“Did you hear that?” he asked, his voice quivering.

“Hear what?” I asked.

The switch clicked. The lights went off.

“A woman screamed,” he said.

I waited. There was nothing save darkness and silence, a silence that was broken only by the heavy breathing of The Cracker.

After a minute or two that breathing became more quiet.

“Shucks,” he said, “I’m getting jumpy,” and switched on the light. His grin was sheepish.

“Well,” he said, “we did what we started to do, so let’s get outa here. We don’t need to stick around any longer than we have to.”

I nodded at that. It was good logic.

“Whatcha goin’ to do with the stuff?” he asked.

“Put it back in the sugar, tip off the police,” I told him.

The Cracker extended a long arm.

“Sure it’s the stuff?” he asked.

I dropped them into his palm.

“Sure,” I said.

“Well,” he observed, “we gotta be careful about leaving anything to show we——”

And he made one great leap for the light switch.

“The bulls!” he hissed.

The switch clicked off, and I knew he was right. There came the shrilling noise of a police whistle, and it sounded from the corridor, out in front of the apartment we had burgled.

The Cracker went for the back door. I could hear his feet crunch on the sugar as he ran across the linoleum. He jerked the door open.

“Come on,” he whispered. “It’s suicide to be trapped here.”

I knew he was right, but I waited.

I wasn’t at all certain there weren’t police at the back of the house, and if The Cracker wanted to do the exploring and find out, I was willing to let him.

I'll say one thing for him, he made a quiet getaway. He may have been alarmed, but he didn't make the mistake of rushing down those wooden stairs, making enough noise to alarm the entire place. He went down smooth and easy.

After about five seconds, I followed. If there was any fire to draw, The Cracker would draw it. But everything was quiet and peaceful save for a light flashing on in an apartment across the way, and the muffled sound of the police whistle from the hallway.

The Cracker was first out into the alley.

I let him take the chance. Then, as there was no sound of a hail, no shots, no sirens, I went after him. It was a boob play, running out exactly the way the police would have expected a crook would go, and I had my heart in my mouth, waiting for a hail.

But everything was going nicely. The Cracker was getting the breaks. Left to myself, and I'd have done something the police wouldn't have expected a crook to do, gone into another apartment, or slipped off my clothes, and padded around in my underwear, as though I'd been an alarmed sleeper who hadn't acquired the pajama habit, for it was a cinch there'd be a crowd gathering around the corridors. That whistle was making an awful racket.

But I wasn't at all certain about The Cracker. I figured he hadn't had presence of mind enough to slip those tell-tale articles of jewelry back into the sugar. He probably had them in his pocket.

And I needed to get those little bits of jewelry; so The Cracker was like a magnet for me. I had to follow.

He burst out of the alley way and had sense enough to slow to a sauntering walk. He strolled to the corner. I kept about fifty feet behind him. The sound of the whistle didn't carry out this far, and there weren't any sirens.

It began to look as though some hysterical dame had started tooting on the police whistle to call the police. If the officers had been in the hallway, they'd have busted in the door instead of making all that commotion.

But one thing's sure in the crook racket, and that is that a crook has no business hesitating in a strange apartment when somebody's bearing down hard on a police whistle in front of the door of that same apartment.

A cruising cab came along and The Cracker signaled. It came to the curb.

I came up, walking a little more rapidly.

"I beg your pardon," I said, formally, for the benefit of a passing pedestrian who happened along, "but I had telephoned for a cab, and I think this is mine."

The Cracker was quick enough to take the hint.

He bowed and grinned.

"No use getting sore about it, or starting an argument," he said, "we can both take the cab—if we're going the same way. I'm going out on Virginia Avenue."

I bowed and let my smile match his own.

"Right on my way," I said.

We both climbed in the cab.

The Cracker gave an address, out on Virginia Avenue.

"What did you do with the trinkets?" I asked.

"Gosh, I stuck 'em in my pocket! I guess I pulled a boner, I should have left 'em there!"

I nodded.

He fished a hand in a side pocket, pulled them out.

“Here,” he said, “you take ’em. It’s all right for a detective to have those things, but it’s sure dynamite for a crook to have ’em!”

I put the things in my pocket.

“Step on it!” called The Cracker to the driver. He was nervous.

The cab made time through the deserted streets, pulled up at a little flat building, a four-family affair that looked respectable but gloomy.

“C’mon in,” said The Cracker. “I got some more dope I can spill.”

“Fine,” I said.

I paid the cab. The Cracker fitted a key to the door. The cab ground into gear and breezed out into the quiet street. I could see it swing at the corner, then the close air of The Cracker’s staircase assailed my nostrils. The Cracker slammed the door behind us.

I went up the stairs first.

“I’ll set out the milk bottle,” said The Cracker, and took a milk bottle towards the stoop. “Make yourself at home. There’s a bottle o’ hooch in the cabinet over the radio.”

I switched on the lights, walked towards the cabinet.

There sounded a succession of backfires from a couple of blocks down the street. At first I thought they were shots, but there was a certain lack of crack about them that labeled them as exhaust backfires.

I walked through the living-room into a corridor and opened a door. It was a bedroom. There was a little stand by the bed and an ugly six-shooter in a holster on the stand.

Evidently The Cracker always played it safe.

I grabbed the gun, taking care to touch only the leather holster, and stuffed it in my inside pocket. Then I ran through the corridor to the kitchen, found some back stairs and went down them on the run.

There was a board fence at the alley and a gate that was locked. I jumped, grabbed the top of the fence and shinnied over. As I dropped on the other side, I heard running footsteps coming around the side of the flat.

I sprinted down the alley, paused at the street, turned left and picked up a cruising cab at the next corner. I gave him an address on Virginia Avenue that would make him swing around and run past the entrance to The Cracker’s Flat.

There was a low touring car parked in front, a car that had a blue light over the license in back. A man was standing near the car, and the motor was running.



he cabbie ran along to the Virginia Avenue address, then I saw, to my audible consternation that the building there was all dark, and gave him an address that would take me uptown.

I left him there, stowed the gun under an armpit where it wouldn’t show, and bought a newspaper from one of the early truck drivers that was taking a shipment out to the suburbs.

The paper had headlines smeared all over it. The headlines accused Norma Gay of the murder of Stanley Simpson.

I’d known that was coming.

I went directly to Norma Gay’s apartment. It was in a cheap house where whatever anyone did was nobody’s business. Norma had done things to her face which made her pretty well immune from casual recognition, but she hadn’t been able to do

things to her fingerprints, and it looked as though somebody pretty close to the inside was gunning on her trail.

Norma answered the door at the fourth ring. Her voice over the telephone was far from being patient.

“What the hell!” she wanted to know.

That was Norma. Hardboiled and not letting anyone call her at two o'clock in the morning.

“A friend,” I said, “with a newspaper.”

I heard the electric buzzer showing that the catch was off the door, and went up. Some people were having a party in one of the apartments on the second floor. Outside of that, the place was quiet.

I padded down the hallway. It was cold, dank with the peculiar atmosphere which emanates from crowded sleepers.

Norma Gay opened the door. She had a kimono wrapped around her shoulders, and her eyes were wide and dark with emotion.

“I knew it was you,” she said, and that was all the greeting.

I walked in and she closed the door. She put down the window, lit a cigarette and reached for the paper. Her face turned a shade paler as she read the article. Then she looked up at me.

“Well, Ed, that’s the end.”

“How so, Norma? We can beat the rap, if we work fast.”

She shook her head.

“It can’t be done. There’s something back three years that hasn’t been cleared up with me, and there’s my record. What’s more, *I* haven’t got any alibi. You know that the couple who sat at my table did the job. I know it. Beyond the fact that we know it, we haven’t got a shred of proof. The chorus girl let you out, but no one’s going to let me out. I was wandering around there in the dark, and I can’t prove I didn’t pull the job. With my record, the D. A. wouldn’t have to prove I *did* it. I’d have to prove I *didn’t*.”

I tried to argue with her.

“We can find those two,” I said. “If we use our heads.”

Her shake of negation was flatly final.

“You’re game enough to help me try, and then we’d both get into hot water. Nope, Ed, I’m going to dust out of the city and hit the trail. I’m on the lam, and I’m lamming right now.”

“Where?” I asked.

She shrugged her shoulders.

“Got any money, Norma?”

For a second or two I thought she winced. Then she made a laugh out of the grimace, whether it had been a wince or the beginnings of mirth.

“You talk like a fish, Ed. I’m lousy with the coin.”

“I could let you have some.”

She made a gesture with her hand.

“Be your age, Ed. Think I’d be broke in a time like this? Get out of here and let me put some clothes on.”

“Can I see you off?” I asked.

She snorted.

“And me wanted for murder! You cannot! You can’t see me any place. I trust you, Ed Jenkins, trust you a lot, but not enough to let you know where I’m going. I’m that sort of a

woman. I can't bring myself to trust anyone. I'd feel uneasy if my own mother had any idea where I was going."

"You got a place picked—a hideout?" I asked.

"Of course!" she said.

I got up and gave her my hand. She took it.

"I'm sorry, Ed. I got you in a mess, trying to help me. I should have lammed long ago. Good-bye."

"Good-bye," I told her, and walked to the door.

I felt the pressure of her hand on my shoulder, then I was pushed out into the dank corridor and the door slammed.

I went down the stairs, past the apartment where the party was in full swing, and some girl was shrilling with alcoholic laughter, out into the crispness of the before-dawn air.

I had to walk a couple of blocks before I got a cab.

"Swing around the block, slide down the avenue, turn out your lights and park when I tell you," I told the driver, "but keep the motor running—and the lights out. I pay the fines."

"Okey," he said, and made the swing.

I ordered him into the curb when we were half a block from Norma's apartment, and then slumped down in the cab so that I could just see over the top of the windshield.

Ten minutes slipped by and then a cab came grinding down the avenue, stopped at the curb in front of Norma's apartment entrance. She came out, trimly tailored for the street, carrying a couple of suitcases.

The cabbie jumped out and put the suitcases in the cab.

"Follow that car," I instructed my driver. "Don't crowd. When it stops, swing into the curb well behind it, and then wait."

"Okey, buddy," he said. "You pay the fines?"

"I pay the fines."

"Okey."

The cab ahead swung into motion. We lurched away from the curb and tailed it.

We ran for about a mile, well down into the district of exclusive shops. The cab ahead turned a corner, slowed in speed, stopped.

My driver turned.

"Close enough?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said, and got out, standing right close to the cab, keeping in the shadows.

There was a hotel on the corner up where Norma's cab had stopped, and Norma walked in the front entrance. I figured I knew the answer, and doubled back around the side street where I could watch the side entrance.

Norma had left the suitcases in the cab.

She came out of the side door, walking like a young lady who knew exactly where she was going. I managed to tag along, although she was nervous and stopped once or twice to size up the back trail.

She took to an alley at last, and I didn't dare to go in after her until she'd had a few seconds start. Then I eased into the shadows and waited where I could watch the lighted exit of the alley on to the other street.

Norma didn't come out. The alley had swallowed her.

I slipped along the shadows, looking and listening and came clean to the end of the alley without having anything give me a clue as to where she was.

I worked on back.

There was a fence along the alley and some gates. Then there was an iron grille and a gate in the grille that had a formidable lock. I paused, ran my hand over the lock and had my answer.

The lock had been wired for a burglar alarm, and there was a concealed switch along the bottom of the lock. The switch had been kicked out, and the lock was open.

I paused to put on gloves.

Then I opened the gate and eased my way inside.

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There was a protected runway and a door. The door was ajar. I caught a glimpse of big bars which had been pushed back. It had been a clean cut job of lock work. There wasn't a trace of violence.

I went through the door, taking my time and listening every few steps. I caught the stale smell of a room where there's little ventilation. Coming in out of the fresh air of the night, the place stunk, a reek of stagnant smells.

There was a light burning in the front of the store, and I could see one corner of a massive safe. I thought I heard the rustle of motion, and paused.

Then, listening, there was the sound of swift motion right beside me. I ducked back and something "whooshed" through the air where my head had been.

Someone had taken a swing at my head with a club that must have been the size of a baseball bat. The impetus of the swing carried past, and there was a terrific racket as the assailant floundered over some obstruction.

Instantly, I heard the quick rasp of an exclamation, and saw the stabbing beam of a flashlight. Then someone fired a shot. A moving body came running from the lighted interior of the store, and I could see it silhouetted against the gleam, crouched, running swiftly.

There was another shot.

This time the spurt of streaming fire came from the darkness near my side, and the fire was directed at that running figure.

I thought I knew the answer, but it was a case of act first and do the thinking afterwards.

I flung myself forward in a football tackle, crashed down on the figure that was pulling the trigger. A flashlight beam stabbed the darkness again, settled on my face, and I felt the pressure of something cold against my neck.

"Stick 'em up—*high!*" hissed a voice in my ear.

Then there was a gasp of surprise. I recognized the gasp. It came from Norma's lips.

"What are *you* doing here?"

"I think," I said, "that I'm holding the watchman."

"They don't have one," said Norma.

"Let's look," I said.

She swung the flashlight down to the huddled figure that was under my arm.

It was in uniform, one of those "merchant patrols" that are hired by groups of stores to prowl around, switch off lights and report suspicious circumstances. There was a gun on the floor near his hand, and his eyes were glassy with fright.

He'd evidently seen Norma go in, or else had stumbled on the open door and had walked in, not certain of what was happening. Then he'd heard me following along and had crouched in the darkness, figuring on taking a full swing at my head with his nightstick. That would have been a sweet mess.

I reached down, jerked the coat up and over his head. It made a pretty effective blindfold.

“Yell and you’ll be shot,” I told him.

I looked up at Norma.

“Ready?”

“Ready.”

We went out on the run. The figure behind us got to its feet and let out a husky bellow, heedless of the admonition I’d given him.

I pushed Norma through the gate, pulled it shut and shot the bolt. The Merchant Patrol was locked in. He bellowed and screamed.

“Follow me,” I told Norma.

We got to my cab before the chase got too hot. There was a police whistle blowing somewhere, and a bull was banging a nightstick on the pavement, but no one knew exactly where the commotion was centered.

Norma was almost all in as I got her to my cab.

“Can they trace you from your suitcases?” I asked her.

“I don’t know,” she gasped.

I ordered the cabbie to pull up alongside of the other car.

“We’ll have to crawl in a hole,” whispered Norma in my ear. “It’s a mess. The cabbies will testify.”

“Sure they will,” I said, and chuckled.

“Well,” snapped Norma, “I don’t see the joke.”

“You will,” I told her.

We slowed alongside her cab. I had the driver fling in the suitcases. I was careful to keep my hat pulled way down over my eyes, and I paid him off by flinging a five dollar bill at him, and telling him to drive to a certain apartment, wait five minutes, and, if no one was there, to call it a day.

The apartment I gave him was the one The Cracker and I had burgled.

The police whistles were sounding, and there was a siren.

My cab driver glanced around him, curiously.

“Sounds like a raid,” he said.

“Yeah,” I grunted at him. “Make it snappy. Out Virginia Avenue. I’ll tell you when to stop.”

He shifted into gear.

“Okey,” he said.

I figured from the noise, that the bull on the beat had located the trouble in the jewelry store. He and the Merchant’s Patrol were good for a few minutes rag chewing before they found out what it was all about, but the siren indicated that the Patrol had managed to hook in the burglar alarm.

I don’t know whether my driver was suspicious or not. I think he was. But he couldn’t figure the play.

When we came to the place where The Cracker had his flat, I stopped the cab.

“This’ll do,” I said.

We got out.

I dragged out the suitcases. Norma looked at me doubtfully, started to say something, then thought better of it.

I paid off the cab driver. There was a calculating look in his eyes.

"I got a short memory for an extra five spot," he said.

I gave him the five. He drove away—in a hurry.

"He's going to double-cross us," said Norma. "Oh, Ed, why did you cut in on it?"

I stared at her.

"You said you had plenty of money. What you meant was that you were broke, but you figured on pulling a job and making getaway money. You had that jewelry store all planted!" I charged.

She didn't say anything for a minute, then she straightened her shoulders, looked me in the eye.

"You're damned tootin' I did," she said. "Know why? Well, the bird that runs that place was the one that gave me my last rap, ten years ago. I ranked a job for him and got nothing. He caught me, claimed that I'd got away with five thousand dollars worth of sparklers. I claimed I hadn't. But I had to admit I'd sprung the joint and they all laughed at me. I got an extra jolt because I wouldn't tell where the sparklers were.

"The place was covered by the insurance company. It paid the loss. The guy that runs the place had the insurance, also the sparklers, that he'd salted away.

"When I said I had getaway money I meant it. That bird just owed me five grand with interest, and I figured on collecting. I had the lay all figured out. If anything happened and I had to make a fast getaway, I planned on copping from him.

"You followed me—and then—hell!"

"Did you get anything?" I asked.

"Don't be a simp," she said, and stuck her hand down the front of her dress. She pulled out a chamois bag, thrust in her hooked forefinger, pulled the bag open. The light glittered on an assortment of sparklers that represented a wad of money.

"Give 'em here, Norma," I said.

She thrust out her jaw.

"Ed, you're going to give 'em back!"

"Sure I am, but not just the way you think."

She hesitated.

"Don't argue. Time's precious. You're going straight."

"Ed, it ain't worth while."

There were tears in her eyes now, and she was fighting to keep them back, blinking her lids, but keeping her gaze on mine, straight and unfaltering.

"I've done the best I know how. I worked and saved a little money, and a damned ex-cop blackmailed me out of it, bled me white. They've done nothing but hound me from pillar to post, and now I'm—" She passed over the stones.

"Now you're going straight," I said, picking up one of the suitcases. "Grab that other bag."

She was a crook who knew her onions and didn't lose her head in an emergency, and she'd been in tight places before. She knew it was no time for argument.

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he followed me up to the door of the flat. I rang the bell.

There was a moment of silence.

"Do you know what you are doing Ed?" she said. "The bulls will come here."

"Sure they will," I told her.

"The taxicab driver will spill what he knows."

I laughed.



“There’s a better reason than that,” I said.

“What is it?” she asked.

But there were steps on the stairs, and I pushed her to one side, stood where only my face was visible through the diamond shaped pane of glass in the doorway.

The Cracker switched on the porch light, looked into my face, and switched it off again. He hesitated with his hand on the door knob, then suddenly turned the bolt and opened the door.

“You!” he said. “What happened to you?”

“I heard a car backfire, and it sounded like a shotgun squad answering a hurry-up call, so I played safe and ducked out. Did anyone come?”

He grinned at me.

“Boy, but you’re a wise baby. It’s a good thing you’re weren’t here. I’ll say there was a squad out. I was registered here, and could prove it. They were looking for some prowler someone had seen earlier in the evening, half an hour or so before we got here. They might have asked you embarrassing questions. . . . Who’s the broad?” he asked.

“She’s okey. We’re spending the night, or what’s left of it. You got a spare?”

“Yeah, sure. C’mon in.”

We trooped in. It was significant of the character of The Cracker and the way he fitted into things that he didn’t offer to take the suitcase Norma was carrying, but let her lug it up the stairs.

We all filed into the living-room. Norma dropped the suitcase with a bang. The Cracker was still dressed. He looked from one to the other of us.

I sank into a chair.

“So you figured out who I was?” I asked.

His eyes flickered away from mine for a split fraction of a second.

“Why, you’re a detective, just like you said.”

I grinned at him.

“You know better than that, Cracker. I’m Ed Jenkins, The Phantom Crook, and you tried to two-time me.”

His knees buckled and he dropped into a chair.

“No, no, no. Honest to Gawd, I—”

I got up and walked over to him.

“Get up,” I said.

“No, no! Honest I didn’t know. I thought. . . .”

“Get up!”

He grasped the arms of the chair, pulled himself slowly up. He couldn’t face me.

“You’re crazy,” he mumbled.

I laughed, and the laugh didn’t have much pleasantry in it.

“Listen,” I told him. “You wanted to frame me with possession of the jewelry from Mrs. Wright. Then you knew that’d throw me into the mess with Norma Gay. So you thought up a slick scheme, you and the man that’s backing you.

“You picked an apartment, had a deal all planned. That apartment didn’t belong to any Mabel Morgan any more than it did to me. There was some woman in there who was a fair housekeeper, but you had her called out of town by some fake message, and then planted the scene so I’d bite.

“The woman was called away in a hurry, probably had some confederate of yours visiting her, that would account for the mess in the bedroom. That would account, also, for the curtain being pulled out of the square window over the sink. When the kitchen light went on and off, and on and off again that would be the signal that you’d ‘planted’ the stones with me.

“You had them with you all the time. They never were in the apartment. You planted them in the cushions of the davenport when we first went in there. Then, when I told you how absurd it would be for the stones to be hidden there, you figured you’d let me ‘discover’ them some place else.

“You didn’t have them when you were in the bedroom, or you’d have ‘found’ ’em under the carpet. You wished you’d had ’em then, because I indicated I thought that was a likely place. But you wanted me to be the one who actually made the find.

“So when I said the flour or the sugar might be nice places, you figured on planting ’em there. You had to go back to the davenport to get them, and you did it on the theory that you hadn’t made a complete search. Then, when you got the chance, when my back was turned in the kitchen, you stuck ’em in the sugar, knowing I was going to search there.

“The thing proves itself because I walked all over the kitchen floor when I went in the first time, and there wasn’t any trace of gritty sugar under foot. But there was sugar that stuck to your hand and in your fingernails when you plunged your hand down into the sugar pail, and then when you slipped back to the cupboard and the spices, you dropped this sugar on the floor, scattered it all around so that we could hear it when we walked.

“So I ran along and played your little game, just to see what it was. And you played the signal nicely on the light. That brought the police whistle into play, which was blown by a confederate of yours who had been watching the kitchen window for the signal.

“Then you made your ‘escape,’ keeping me with you. You planned that so I wouldn’t leave the ring and the bracelet in the sugar. And you had your confederate all primed to call the bulls for a rush raid just as soon as I reached your flat.

“Think of how nice and pretty you’d have been sitting with Ed Jenkins, The Phantom Crook, caught, and, in his pocket at the exact moment of his capture, the jewelry that had been taken in the robbery that led to the murder!

“And you might have done it, if it hadn’t been for the grit of that sugar underfoot. But that tipped me. So I walked into your little trap, only to walk right on through and out again.

“Now, by ——! you’ll tell me who that confederate is, or I’ll have you frying on the electric chair like an egg in a hot skillet! You’re mixed in this thing deep enough so you can’t explain unless you cave in.

“Now cave. You’ve got until I count three.”

I could see Norma Gay’s face. The eyes were wide with astonishment. And The Cracker’s face was a study. Hatred, bewilderment, chagrin and fear, all struggling at once.

“Listen, you’ve got me wrong. I swear that I was. . . .”

“*One!*” I started.

His voice took on a sharper, almost hysterical note.

“No, no! Now listen. I don’t know a thing about that police whistle. If there was any—”

“*Two!*”

He braced himself.

“Well, if you feel that way about it—”

“*Three!*” I said.

He clamped his jaw, started his fist.

I had been waiting for that. My right took him square in the stomach, a short arm jab that had the weight of my body behind it. My left slammed him on the jaw as he started to wilt.

He dropped into the chair—out.

“Okey, Norma. The bureau drawers,” I said.

“What about ’em?”

“Your things,” I told her. “Let’s make it a homelike party.”

I ran to the bedroom, ripped out the bureau drawers, jammed the things from two drawers into one, unpacked Norma’s suitcases and put the things in the bureau drawer I’d emptied.

“The taxi driver will squeal,” she said.

“He won’t have to,” I told her, jamming things from suitcase to drawers. “I played a little joke on The Cracker. When I went through here the first time, he’d left his gun on the dresser. I knew it’d be lousy with his fingerprints, so I took it along to plant on a job.

“It happened that you furnished me with just the opportunity I wanted, and I dropped the gun and holster there by the Merchant Patrol. He’ll find it when he goes to look for clues. They’ll develop latents on it, and check over the men that might be in on it. They’ve got The Cracker’s fingerprints in the identification bureau, and they’ll have the job tied on him inside of ten minutes after the prints come in for classification, particularly in view of the lead they’ll have on the place from the cab drivers.

“Come on, we’re going out the back way!”

She was a baby who had been trained in a hard school, which was a good thing for me. There were none of the gasps or hysterics. She blinked her eyes once or twice to keep her mind concentrated, nodded once, gulped and grinned.



et’s go,” she said.

We went.

“What’s next?” she asked as we slid down the fence into the alley.

“Make certain the bulls come,” I told her. “We’ll wait. After that we’ve got to act quickly.”

We slid around to the Avenue, and waited.

The bulls were slow. It was ten full minutes before they came. They came in numbers.

I grinned at Norma.

“Okey. Now we start.”

“For what?”

“For the girl that’s about the only witness that’s worth a hang, the chorus girl who gave me the out, the one who said she’d know the two men who were with you if she saw them again.”

“You mean Gertrude Brown?”

“That’s the one.”

“What’ll she do?”

“She may have a chance to do some good identifying.”

Norma shrugged her shoulders.

“You’re running the party,” she said.

We walked a ways before we called a cab, and then we went out to the place where Gertrude Brown had her apartment. Day had broken, a drab day that had wisps of fog drifting

over the tops of the buildings. The morning was chill. It was a bad time to wake up a chorus girl.

We had to lean on the doorbell for a while. Finally the latch clicked. We went up.

Gertrude Brown blinked at me. She'd known me as a private detective when I'd called on her before and secured a written statement.

"My Gawd," she said, "I lose more sleep over you than I do over my debts."

She was big and blonde, hardboiled as a picnic egg, and a square shooter.

She sucked in a prodigious lungful of air in a great yawn.

"Baby," I told her, "you're going to lose a lot more sleep."

"Yeah?" she asked, and her tone was one of extreme cynicism.

"Yeah," I told her. "You're going to clear up the rest of that murder case this morning."

She snorted.

"I'm goin' right back to poundin' the pillow," she said. "If I hadn't thought you was a telegram from a sweetie, I'd have let you lean on that doorbell until you were black in the face."

I grinned at her.

"Come on, Gertrude, be a sport!"

She sneered.

"How often I've heard *that* line!"

I tried another angle.

"This will clear the thing up and release an innocent man of suspicion."

"Uh huh," she said. "I was willing to tell all I knew and all I saw. And I told it just that way, and about got laid out on a marble slab for tellin'. But that was what a square shooter should do, and that's what I did.

"But when it comes to runnin' out in the chill of the morning for some Phantom Crook that's nothing in my young life, and playing detective . . . yeah, a fat chance!"

I jerked my head towards Norma Gay.

"She's asking you to do it to right a wrong for a working girl."

The blonde turned her ponderous head, let her eyes slither over Norma in cold appraisal.

"How do you cut in on this?" she asked.

And Norma told her, told her in clear, crisp, clean-cut sentences.

"Because I'm Norma Gay, the girl that's 'wanted,' that's how I cut in on it. I'm a crook. I've been a crook. I tried to go straight. Two men fastened down on me like leeches and bled me white. Then when there wasn't any more for them, they tried to pull a robbery and frame me for the rap. The robbery turned out to be a murder, and I'm left holding the sack, unless I can get the two men who sat at that table. . . ."

That was as far as she got.

"Sit down," said the blonde chorus girl, "both of you. The gent can close his eyes if he's easy shocked, 'cause I'm dressin'.

"Why the hell didn't you come clean in the first place? Afraid I'd turn you in—and you a girl that's had to support a flock of blackmailers! Hell! Wait until I get my clothes on!"

She probably was trained in the lightning change stuff on the stage. But it seemed to me she just walked as far as the bathroom, turned on the water, made a splash and came out, clothed for the street.

"Let's go," she said.

Norma turned to me.

“Where do we go?”

“*We* don’t,” I said, “because it’s too dangerous.” I explained recent happenings to her. “We’ve got to lay low. But either one of two things will happen. Either The Cracker’s accomplices or masters, whichever way you want to figure ’em, will leave The Cracker in the lurch, or else they won’t.

“If they leave him alone he’ll squeal and spill the whole play. If they come to his support, they’ll naturally bail him out. And they won’t let any grass grow under their feet in getting bail.”

The girl squinted her eyes.

“You think they’ll question him in connection with the Simpson murder?”

I grinned.

“If they don’t they’re dumb. I planted those diamonds in his apartment where the police will be sure to find ’em, and I put the bracelet and ring that tie up the murder case with the diamonds. When the police get those—well—”

The blonde blinked her pop eyes at me.

“What do I do?”

“Go plant yourself in front of the jail,” I told her. “Keep a watch for the men you saw at the table in the cabaret on the night of the murder. One or both of ’em will probably come up, perhaps with a lawyer, trying to get cash bail for The Cracker. When you see them make a commotion.”

“How much of a commotion?” she asked.

“Plenty,” I told her.

I loaded her in the cab, sent her on her way. Norma and I picked up another cab.

“Where?” I asked Norma.

Tears came to her eyes.

“I’m on the dodge, Ed. They’ve got me hooked in with that murder case. You’ve brought pressure to bear on The Cracker by tying him up with me, my clothes in his apartment and all that.

“It puts The Cracker on the spot, but it puts me on the spot, too. If The Cracker weakens and spills what he knows, it’ll be okey. But if he sits tight—well, it’s a frying job, and I’m on the dodge.”

She looked pathetic in the morning light, with her face showing what she’d been through.

“Two of us together,” I said, “two crooks on the dodge.”

“—! Ed,” she said, after a minute, “how glad I am you took those diamonds away from me . . . I guess I can make it now, but it seemed like that bird owed me the stones he’d sent me up for stealing—anyway. Let’s stick together until this thing breaks.”

“Let’s go,” I told her.

We went. It was touch and go whether the newspapers and the cops would start playing back trail and yelling for a mysterious man and a girl. We got a suite in a downtown hotel and waited.

The extras hit the streets around nine o’clock. They gave us the answer.

The blonde had waited in front of the jail. She’d collared a flatfoot cop on the way up and sold him on her idea. About seven, there had been two men and a lawyer drive up in a closed car. The men had bail for The Cracker, and they’d have made it stick, too.

The blonde barged out of the car and made a vociferous identification. The flat foot cop had been dubious. The lawyer had gone into action with a barrage of gab, and it looked as

though the party was off, until one of the men, figuring it was getting pretty close to a showdown, tried to make a sneak. The copper got into action. He couldn't handle the situation. The blonde did a football tackle, got one of the men down on the sidewalk and sat on him.

The Cracker saw what he was up against, and saved his own hide by squealing, and he squealed plenty. That had started the show. The lawyer tried to get his men to keep quiet, but they were each one trying to pin the fatal shot on the other.

It was a complete blow-up. I looked across at Norma.

The hardboiled little cuss was sitting there, reading the newspaper.

"It gives me a chance, Ed! It gives me a chance to begin over," she kept saying. She repeated the words mechanically, over and over.

After a while she got up. Then she tiptoed to the door, looked out.

"You ain't sorry, Ed?" she asked.

I laughed at her. "Sorry for what?"

"Getting tied up with a crook again?"

"A straight crook!" I told her.

She slipped into the corridor, closed the door. I waited for her to come back. After a while I began to wonder. There was a knock on the door. I opened it. A bellboy handed me a plain envelope. I knew what it was, even before I ripped open the seal.

*"Dear Ed: You are a lone wolf. You tied up with me to give me a break, and now I've got it. I won't come back, so don't wait. I don't think you'll see me again. You're too damned straight, Ed, to be teamed with a crook—and I went bad on that gem job. If it hadn't been for you. . . ."*

*"Bye bye,  
Norma."*

That was the note. I knew she'd faded from the picture.

Perhaps, some day, in the teeming millions of the big city, our paths were destined to cross again. In the meantime she'd walked out of my life—to give me a break.

I got up and closed the window, shivered a little bit.

It seemed hard to be always on the dodge, always ducking for cover, always avoiding my fellow man . . . she may have been a crook, but she was a straight crook. That was the game we'd played with the law—and won.

Straight crooks!



[The end of *Straight Crooks* by Erle Stanley Gardner]