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A Black Band MYSTERY

MURDER IN TEXAS

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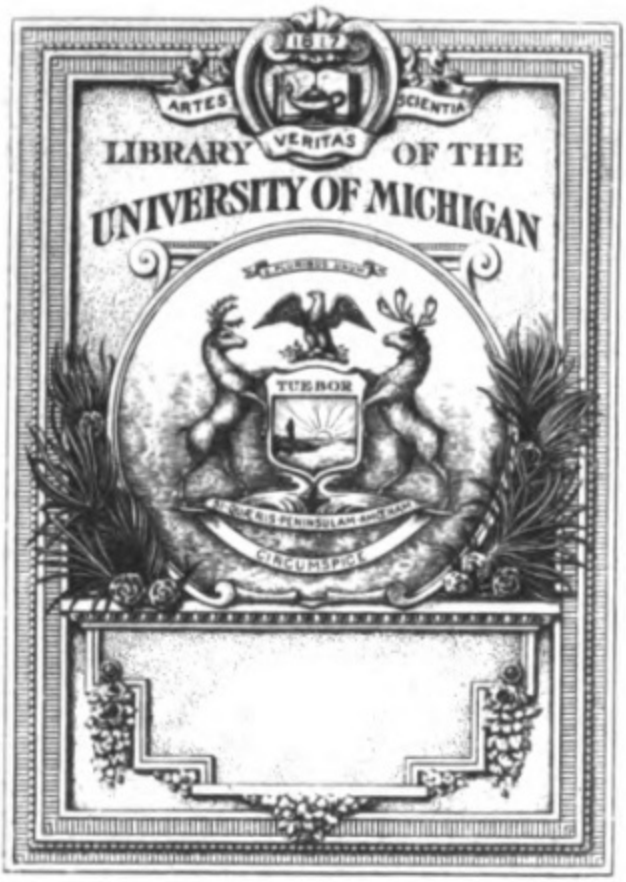

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A Black Band MYSTERY

MURDER IN TEXAS

By ADA E. LINGO

Boston and New York
HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
The Riverside Press Cambridge
1935

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FOR

CLARA R. POOL

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If any character or name used in this book resembles that of any living person it is merely a coincidence, for all have been drawn *entirely* from my imagination.

THE AUTHOR

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CHARACTERS

JOHN FORDMAN: Victim Number 1 — For him they changed the front page.

SAMUEL ROSS: A banker — 'Alice in Wonderland' sat beside 'Married Love.'

CLARENCE JONES: Grocer — They called him 'Chick.'

AGNES JONES: His wife — Cherchez la femme?

MILDRED JONES: Their daughter — Men were her forte.

MITCHELL WHITE: Reporter — Whiskey saved him.

EDWARD FRANK: His boss — Nothing meant much to him!

JOAN SHIELDS: Gal reporter — The cynic or the 'dick'?

MARION FORDMAN: Heiress — No local belle, she!

GERARD DREXELL: Fordman's assistant — No local Don Juan.

MRS. GLIETH LAWRENCE: Fordman's fiancée — Her happiness was brief.

JOSEPH LEVY: Merchant — Do fat men ever kill?

TEXAS WILLS: Chauffeur — He cursed and cried.

JIMMIE SHIELDS: Joan's kid brother — In at the kill!

VAL DAY: Driller — His truck backfired.

RICHARD FIELDS: Private detective.

JIM READ: Sheriff.

TOM HARTE: Deputy.

JUDGE WILLIAM CONNOR MILLBANK: County Attorney.

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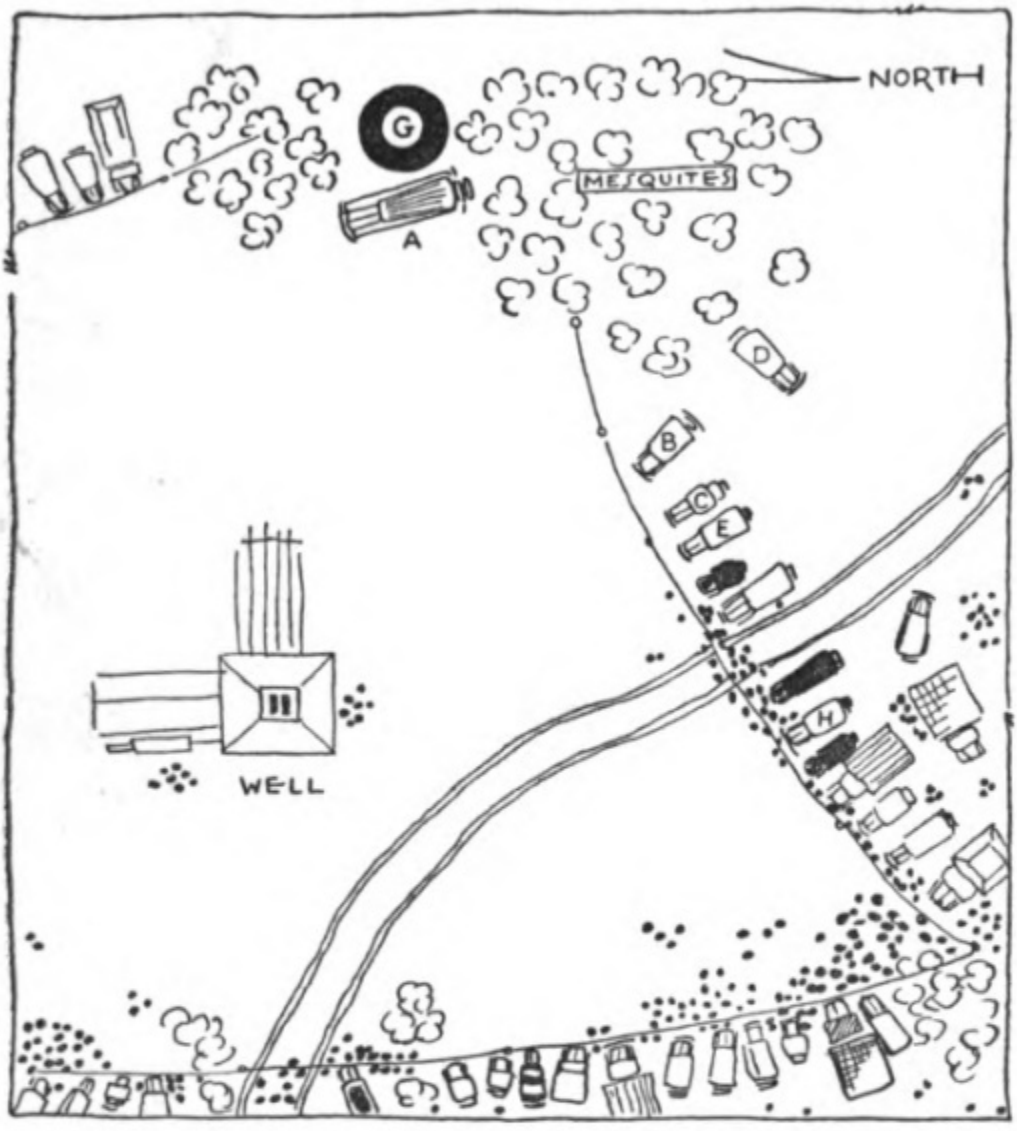

A. Fordman's Fraschini
B. Jones's LaSalle
C. White's Ford
D. Ross's Cadillac
E. Levy's Buick
G. Storage Tank
H. Trotter's Car

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I: Monday, July 3: 2.15 P.M.

'Yes, Mrs. Shaw. I got that. And who'd you say won high-score prize? Mrs. Hall for members and Miss Vanna Belle Smith for guests? Yessum. I'll remember to put in about Janice giving tallies. Thank you so much, Mrs. Shaw. Good-bye.'

And Joan Shields, society editor of the Fordman *Daily News*, dropped the receiver of her telephone back onto its hook and leaned back in her hard desk chair with a sigh of relief. Damn Mrs. Shaw and her Laff-a-Lot Bridge Club, anyway.

It was hot, hot as hell, she thought, as she lighted a cigarette and then wiped her damp face with her handkerchief. The brassy afternoon sun seemed hung forever motionless just above the parched locust tree across the street in front of the little building. It concentrated intense heat fiercely on the plate-glass front windows of the office, and the little room, with its crowded desks and filthy paper-littered floor, was like an oven. The acrid odor of hot lead and scorched shavings stung Joan's nostrils and left a flat metallic taste in her mouth. The incessant clatter of the linotypes and the shouts of the back-shop men came distractingly loud over the top of the wall-board partition that divided the office from the newspaper plant.

Joan rose and went to look at the A.P. printers in the front of the room. Lord, but the news was dead. Dallas was typing through:

Flagstaff, Ariz., July 3 (A.P.). Fifteen persons were injured seriously, two perhaps fatally, and 26 others

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received minor hurts in a miscalculated explosion of black powder and dynamite...

Flagstaff was too far away, thought Joan. No one in this hot, dusty, depressed little Texas town really cared how many people were injured in an explosion a thousand miles away. They were more interested in the daily business of their neighbors — in the fact that Mrs. Harris was pregnant again; that Doc Ross had taken the new manicure girl at the Frederick Hotel to the movies last night; that John Fordman was bringing in a new gusher right on his Paw's old farm and out of soil that even the hens had refused to scratch.

She turned to the clock, 'CORRECT TIME BY WESTERN UNION,' and noticed that it was already two-thirty. Mitchell should be back with the story on the well soon. The paper was being held up until three, waiting for confirmation on the story of the new strike. The story itself, written several days before, had been in type for hours. Fordman had known that there was oil in his well, but he preferred to tell the world about it dramatically on the front page of this paper he owned — immediately after the public strike had been made.

Joan decided to type the story of Mrs. Shaw's party now, while it was still fresh in her mind, so she returned to her desk, turned the little cushion in her chair, sat down and pulled her machine toward her on its rolling stand.

'Soc. #1,' she pecked in the upper left-hand corner of the yellow sheet, and under that, 'Mrs. W. H. 18 pt.' She threw the carriage back into position with a

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bang, spaced five times mechanically, and began rapidly:

> Mrs. W. H. Shaw, 305 West Eighth Street, was hostess to the members of the Laff-a-Lot Bridge Club at its last meeting of the season Saturday afternoon. She used a tasteful color scheme of red, white, and blue in her decorations and refreshments.
>
> Flowers of patriotic colors carried out the July 4th motif. The hostess served white mountain cake squares and red, white, and blue brick cream. Small American flags were used as plate favors. Mrs. Shaw's little daughter, Janice, dressed as Martha Washington, stood at the door and presented the guests with hand-painted tallies.

Joan groaned aloud, seeing Janice, her straight, straw-colored hair powdered white, presenting hand-painted tallies to perspiring women who had gathered to partake of Mrs. Shaw's red, white, and blue ice cream and her bridge prizes.

The screen door slammed at her back.

She turned to see Mitchell White, general news reporter, walk unsteadily toward his desk behind her.

She glanced at the clock. 'CORRECT TIME BY WESTERN UNION' proclaimed it to be two-forty-five.

White dropped into his chair and pulled his typewriter to him.

'Hi, snooty,' said Joan. He had not glanced toward her.

The reporter pushed his dusty brown felt hat back from his wet white forehead and passed a dirty hand across his mouth. The hat had a dark crescent of greasy dampness where the sweat had soaked through from his forehead. Joan could smell the mingled odors

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of creosote, perspiration, dust, and gin that clung to his rather untidy clothes.

'Well, hi, snooty,' she said again, more slowly. She decided that he was pretty stewed.

'God, it's hot, honey,' he replied, clearly enough.

'Did Johnny's gusher gush?' she asked.

He stared at her for a moment, then beyond her. 'Did it gush!' he replied. 'It's raining the damned stuff out there yet.'

'Well, that's his fifth producer and his second gusher. He's never even drilled a dry hole, has he?'

'No, and he won't,' Mitchell said flatly. 'He's dead.'

'Dead?'

'Yeah, dead. Shot. Dead.'

'Aw, pooh, Mitch, I don't believe you. You shouldn't drink that lousy gin out in the hot sun, anyway. You'll be sick. You look sick now.'

She leaned toward him over her chair-back and looked at his white face closely. He was good-looking, she decided, with his large, deep-set brown eyes and his thin, oval, sad face. Dissipation had left small dark pouches under his eyes, and exhaustion from being on the job constantly, day or night, had drawn his features until they were rigid and set. By contrast, his full rather sensual mouth was hanging slackly with a cigarette in its corner, his left eye squinted against the smoke. He grinned wanly at her, and said, 'Oh, I'm O.K., baby.'

'What'd you mean, Mitch, about John Fordman?' Joan asked, curious now.

'What I said,' he replied. 'He's dead. Somebody

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shot 'im when the well came in. I sent A.P. a flash as I came by Western Union.'

'Who? Was he murdered, you mean? It was an accident.'

'No, it wasn't an accident. The sheriff says he was murdered.'

'Murdered! Great day, Mitch, what a story!' Joan's voice rose with excitement. She bounced quickly from her chair and ran to the door into the back shop. 'Mac!' she cried, 'hold the front page! Mitch has the biggest story we ever cracked. Somebody shot the Old Man.'

Mac, short and stocky, dressed only in trousers and an undershirt, appeared at the door. He shifted his quid of tobacco and said laconically, 'Bad hurt?'

'Dead,' said Joan.

'My God!' he murmured; then turned and shouted into the shop, 'Boys, hold PI, somebody just shot the Old Man!'

Mitchell had pulled his machine closer to him and inserted a sheet of yellow telegraph paper. Joan and Mac crossed over and stood behind him to watch him type rapidly:

Special to the Associated Press
by Mitchell White

add — Fordman Murder

FORDMAN, TEX., July 3. (A.P.) An explosion of nitroglycerine 1300 feet under the ground was the clever and effectual shield used by the murderer here today to mask the noise of the pistol shot which took the life of John Fordman, multimillionaire oil-man, rancher, and newspaper owner.

The three hundred odd spectators who had gathered

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to watch the one o'clock shooting of Fordman's newest oil well were unaware of the tragedy until Fordman's daughter, Marion, who discovered the body slumped into a corner of the family's Isotta-Fraschini limousine, screamed and fainted. No one heard the shot. In fact, it is impossible that anyone could have done so, for it was obvious that it had been timed to coincide with the explosion of the nitroglycerine which sent oil and mud high into the air, deluging everyone within a radius of several hundred feet with its spray. The attention of almost everyone was riveted to this monster fountain of liquid gold.

Here White reached the end of his sheet and stopped typing. He took a cigarette from the pack which Joan held out to him, lighted it, and then said, 'Twist that Western Union call buzzer, honey. I want a boy here by the time I finish this.'

All sounds of work in the back shop had ceased and the linotype operators and pressmen were crowded together in the small doorway, looking curiously at the group in the outer office.

Mac, who had been as engrossed in the story as Joan, remembered his own obligations and swore quickly. 'Hell,' he said, 'I've got to rip up that front page and get this damn paper made over and to bed. When can you give us our copy on this, Mitch?'

'I'll copy Mitch's first page, Mac,' said Joan, 'and he can give you carbons on the rest. Then we'll have something to work on and the telegraph office can get the story off, too.'

'Lock that front door, Mac,' said the reporter. 'There'll be a mob around here when this gets out in town. We can't afford any interruptions. I beat every-

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body else back, but they'll be in before long. I wish Ed would come. We could use his help.'

'Oh, well, he's just the editor,' said Joan, pulling Mitchell's completed first page from his machine. 'We've put the sheet out without his aid before.'

Mac closed the front doors and pulled down the large green shades in the face of the smouldering sun. The office was dim in the greenish light. Joan lighted the desk lamps under their green and white cones. They swung slowly back and forth on their long cords from the high ceiling.

'We'll have to have the fan, even if it does blow things,' she said as she lifted it off the counter, put it on the floor and flicked its base switch to 'on full.' It swung slowly in a broad semi-circle, gaining power. The balls of crumpled yellow paper on the floor rolled quickly out of its path and the loose sheets of a discarded newspaper caught under Mitchell's feet, fluttered in the strong, hot, artificial breeze.

Mac went back to prepare for this unexpected change in page one's sensation from the shooting of an oil well to the shooting of its owner, and Joan began to copy White's first sheet.

The lock on the front door clicked and the door was flung violently open. Ed Frank, the editor, looked in and then vanished. In his place appeared a stout, weather-beaten country woman. She peered into the dim office and then came slowly in, followed by a younger woman in a limp calico dress, and a farmer in new blue overalls. Frank came in after them and urged them around the counter to his desk.

He glanced at Joan and Mitch, the latter lost in rapid composition on his machine. To Joan's inquiring

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look he said, 'I suppose you know what's happened? Is Mitch doing the outside stuff?' Joan said 'yes,' and he replied, 'Then here's something for you. This is Mrs. Millie Trotter, who saw Marion discover the body. She seems to be the only one who was looking at her. She'll tell you about it in her own words and you can use it for a local story. I'll do the lead, while you take what she has.'

Joan smiled at the flustered woman and her frightened family and led them to the chairs in the advertising department's corner.

'Now,' she said to the woman, 'take your hat off and be comfortable and tell me what happened. I'm dying to hear about it, you know.'

Mrs. Trotter wiped her red face on her sleeve and sat down, but refused to remove the rusty black straw hat which perched at a surprised and raffish angle on the side of her head.

'No'm,' she said, 'I'll jest set down, though. Crystal, you an' Paw set down, too,' she directed the man and the girl. They looked embarrassed, but they sat down and the man took off his large felt sombrero.

'He said,' began Mrs. Trotter, jerking a large red thumb at Frank, who was on his way into the back shop to talk to Mac — 'he said as how I'd git five dollars if I'd tell all about what I seen. Will I?'

'I'm sure you will,' said Joan, 'if he said so. He's the boss. Now you tell me just what happened. Begin at the very beginning.' She looked at her pad of copy paper and her pencil on the desk, but did not make any motion toward them, as she was afraid of checking the spontaneity of Mrs. Trotter's story which was obviously about to burst forth. 'Just begin at the beginning,' she said again, encouragingly.

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'Well,' said Mrs. Trotter, hitching forward in her chair, 'it was thisaway. We-all come in town from the ranch early this mornin'. We done our shoppin'. Me'n' Crystal boughten some piece goods an' Jason, he's my husband, boughten a sack o' oats an' a block o' salt down to Miller's Feed Store. We-all started home about twelve. The road to the ranch runs through the oil field an' we got into the crowd of cars that was goin' out to see the well shot off. We reckined we'd stop an' see it too, so we pulled up at the rope to the left of the road.'

'What time was that?' asked Joan.

'About twelve-thirty, I reckin, don't you, Jason?' said Mrs. Trotter to her husband. Jason mumbled that it was nearer twelve-thirty-five, but Mrs. Trotter had swept on, growing more and more confident of her ability to tell her story.

'About twelve-thirty,' she said, 'an' we-all got outen the car an' stood by the rope. I seen Mr. Fordman up to the well with a lot of other men an' pointed him out to Crystal. Crystal hadn't never seen him before, but I had. I seen him in his bank onct. An' a fine-lookin' man he was too, so big an' handsome.

'But anyways, there he was. They was a-lookin' at the well an' pretty soon they started off toward their cars which was parked across the road from us. They hadn't got but a little piece away, when a man at the well shouted real loud an' they all begun to run. They run every which away.

'I kep' a-watchin' Mr. Fordman an' he run too. He had on a white suit an' a white hat an' I reckin he didn't want to git any oil on 'em. He run toward his own car. He opened the back door an' got in an' set

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down. Then I looked back at the well. They was all millin' around an' yellin'. In a few minutes I looked back at that there big car of Mr. Fordman's. I heerd tell it cost over twenty-five thousand dollars, but it didn't look so different from any other; jest lower an' longer. I noticed that he had pulled down the window curtains in the back.'

Here Mrs. Trotter stopped short and wiped her face off with her sleeve again. 'Kin I have a drink o' water?' she said. Joan went to the cooler and brought her water in a Lily cup. She drank a swallow and set the cup down.

Crystal said, 'Kin I hev one too?' Joan nodded to her and said to Mrs. Trotter, 'Yes, yes, go on.'

'Well, as I said, he had pulled down the curtains. I thought, that's funny, don't he want to see his own well shot off? An' then there was a big hullabaloo at the well an' the explosion went off. It like to of scared me to death. Everybody was a-shoutin' and a-blowin' their car horns. Jason was a-blowin' ours.

'Then after a little while I looked back at Mr. Fordman's car, a-wonderin' what he thought with all this new oil an' the money an' ever'thing an' I seen Miss Fordman, all in white, walk over from another car near-by and start to git in hers. I poked Crystal an' said, "That there's Miss Fordman," an' right then she must of found her father dead because she sort o' crumpled up on the runnin'-board, an' half into the car, an' then slid out onto the ground. She must of screamed because people begun runnin' toward her an' they all crowded up so I couldn't see nothin'.

'But in a minute I could see that Miss Fordman's

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faintin' wasn't all the excitement, because somebody busted outen the crowd around their car an' come runnin' over our way an' he was a-yellin' for th' sheriff.

'Then the sheriff pushed up past me an' he run over to the Fordman car. He stayed there a while an' then he come back. Everybody got kind of quiet an' he said, real loud, "Is there a doctor here?"

'Doctor Phillips got outen his car next to us an' said, "Yes, I'm a doctor. What's the matter?"

'The sheriff said, "Come on," an' then he turned 'round to us an' says, "Did anybody here see anybody gettin' into or out o' th' Fordman's car?"

'An' I spoke up an' said, "No, but I seen Miss Fordman gettin' in. Did she faint? What made her faint?" An' the sheriff jus' said, "Never mind," an' he an' Doc Phillips started away. But I was real interested, so I said to Paw an' Crystal, "Come on," an' we ducked under the ropes an' follered 'em.

'There was some more cars parked by th' Fordman's, but not so close, an' I seen Mrs. Levy an' Mr. Levy an' lots of other people all crowded around. I crowded up close, too, an' there stretched out on a coat was Miss Fordman. She had come to an' was lookin' white an' faint-like an' starin' up at the car. Then I looked up, an' through the open door I could see the sheriff an' the doctor bendin' over somebody on the seat.

'Pretty soon they got out, an' by that time Miss Fordman was standin' up. The doctor said, "Yes, he's dead," an' at that she jest nodded an' burst out cryin'. The doctor tried to hush her up, but she couldn't stop, so he an' she got in the car with Mr. Fordman's

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mortal remains an' the sheriff got in front with the nigger man, who was a-cussin' under his breath an' a-cryin' at th' same time, an' they drove off towards town.

'We was jest standin' there when Mr. Frank come up. He knowed my husband, Jason, you see, an' he says, "Didn't I hear you say you saw what happened?" An' I says, "Well, I seen part of it." So he ast us to all come in here, an' here we are,' she concluded rapidly, and looked at Joan expectantly.

'But,' objected Joan, 'who shot Mr. Fordman? Didn't anyone know?'

'Well, now, I'm sure I don't,' said Mrs. Trotter, as if the idea was new to her. She looked crestfallen that Joan should have picked on the one weak spot in her story. 'But,' she said triumphantly, 'the sheriff don't know neither, 'cause he said to th' doctor, after they got outen th' car, "Now who in hell could have done this?" an' th' doctor said, "Lord knows, but I'm surprised somebody ain't done it sooner."'

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II: Monday, July 3

Mrs. Trotter beamed expectantly at Joan again, and Joan said, 'Well.' She rose and went over to Frank, who was now seated at his desk up front. He looked at her. 'Get it?' he inquired shortly.

She nodded and said, 'Mrs. Trotter expects five dollars.'

He handed her a bill and she went back to the Trotters. She gave it to Mrs. Trotter and watched the excited woman herd the limp Crystal and the lackadaisical Jason out of the front door into the late afternoon heat.

Feeling Frank's eyes upon her she turned and smiled down at him.

'Her stuff any good?' he asked.

'Make a feature,' said the girl. 'She didn't actually know anything, but what she saw was interesting.'

'Yeah. I thought so, too. She gave me an outline coming in. I had to ride in with them. White went off and left me.' He glanced at the reporter with amusement in his eyes and then looked seriously up at the girl. 'Drunk?' he questioned.

'Not very,' said Joan. 'I think he's sort of sick, don't you?'

'Whatsa matter with him lately?'

'He's in love, Ed.'

'Marion Fordman?'

'Yes.'

'No go?'

'No go.'

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'He isn't bearing up so well. No guts.'

'What would you do under the circumstances?' asked the girl hotly.

Frank smiled and said: 'Well, I wouldn't make myself a laughing stock, anyway. I'd say, "Well, what th' hell!"' He snapped his long fingers.

Joan smiled too and regarded him more favorably. 'But you're older, Ed, and things don't mean much to you, anyway, do they?'

'Not much,' he agreed.

'Not anything?' inquired the girl curiously.

'Well, maybe one or two things.' His voice dropped, but he held her blue eyes steadily with his intense brown ones.

Joan's composure was a little shaken, so she said, 'Well, I've got to get that story out. It's late.' She looked up at the clock.

'CORRECT TIME' said four o'clock. The paper would be hours late tonight, thought Joan. Then she became aware that the telephones were clamoring for attention. 'Daily News,' she said into the first one she reached. An excited voice inquired, 'Can you please tell me who won the baseball game between Dallas and Fort Worth?'

'No, I cannot,' said Joan, and hung up. The telephone promptly jangled again, but she unhooked the receivers of all three instruments and sat down to her machine to write her story.

Mitchell was still typing rapidly, a wide-eyed Western Union boy beside him. Joan reached over and took the completed yellow sheets that lay on his desk. His story continued from the first page that she had seen:

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People were slow in reaching Miss Fordman and she had slipped to the ground before the first arrived. Only after she had been revived was the lifeless figure of the multimillionaire discovered on the back seat. He was sitting back in the rear, or left-hand, corner of the seat, his head sunk on his chest and his white Panama hat pulled low over his forehead. His left arm lay along the arm-rest and his right arm was in his lap.

He had been shot through the heart. The shades at the two door windows, as well as at the seat windows, had been lowered completely. The interior of the car was dark and cool and the small electric fan mounted against the back of the chauffeur's partition was whirring softly.

The chauffeur, Joe (Texas) Wills, had left the car sometime before the explosion was scheduled to occur, with a note from Mr. Fordman to his chief driller, Val Day. When he returned and was told of the tragedy, the colored boy almost collapsed. He had been in Fordman's employ for over ten years.

Sheriff Jim Read, of the local force, who also holds the office of local coroner, has the case under his supervision. No definite statement could be gotten from the sheriff at this late hour.

Fordman's body was brought back to a funeral home in the city, where it will rest pending funeral arrangements.

The deceased, who was forty-two years old, left only one close relative, his daughter Marion. She is said to be his sole heir.

Widely known throughout the Southwest, Fordman has been one of the most prominent figures in this section of the state for several years. He has been mentioned as a likely candidate for governor following Governor Allred's present term.

Mr. Fordman's wealth has been estimated at approximately ten million dollars. Twenty years ago he was a reporter on this sheet at twenty-five dollars a week. He

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had just graduated from the University of Texas. Within a year he had been made editor of the paper and during the next year he married Miss Lillian Schumaker, only daughter of John L. Schumaker, owner of the *Daily News* and its companion paper in Franklin, the *Daily Record*.

When Mr. Schumaker died, two years later, he left his papers to his daughter. Mrs. Fordman died a month later in childbirth. Fordman inherited the papers in trust for his daughter Marion.

Good fortune followed close on Fordman's heels after this tragic beginning of his life. A wildcat oil company struck the discovery well of the Fordman field on the old Fordman Ranch which had been owned by his father, Thomas. Thomas, who died when John Fordman was eighteen, had left the miserable barren farm to his son. Within a few years, Fordman made his first million. With it he bought controlling interest in six other newspapers in this section of Texas.

According to close friends, Mr. Fordman was not known to have any avowed enemies. Thus the reason for his sudden death has proved a puzzle to the local authorities, who admit that they do not know just where to begin the search for his assailant. The theory that Mr. Fordman was hit by a stray bullet and killed by accident was scouted immediately by the sheriff.

Mr. Fordman, as has been stated in earlier dispatches, was attending the 'shooting' of the newest of the Fordman Company's wells, number five B. He was accompanied by his daughter and a party of business men and their wives.

As the time of the event was widely known in the district, quite a large crowd had gathered. Some three hundred spectators stood behind a rope strung across the field at a distance of several hundred yards from the well, and watched the proceedings.

At the exact moment of the shooting of Mr. Fordman, the noise was at its height...

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Here Joan put the paper down, as she knew the rest of the story. She thought for a moment and then went over to Frank. 'Who made up the Fordman party?' she said. 'Are you using their names in the local story?'

Frank said, 'Yes,' and handed her a list scribbled almost illegibly in pencil on the back of an old envelope. Joan saw that it was quite long, and then she noticed the names of Clarence Jones and his wife Agnes.

It was funny, she thought, that they should go with the party as Fordman's guests. Everybody in town knew that Agnes Jones had been Fordman's mistress for the past three years — that is, everyone except Jones.

She wondered if Jones knew it, too. Then she wondered if Agnes Jones knew that Fordman was in love with a young Houston widow and that they had expected to be married within the month. This she knew from Marion, who had told her the story in strictest confidence.

She went to work on her local angle description of the scene of the crime and finished just as Mitchell White looked up from his machine. He gathered the telegraph blanks together and thrust them at the Western Union boy. 'Hop to it, son,' he said. The boy left on a dead run.

Frank called them both over to his desk.

'White,' he said, 'you'd better get up to the courthouse. And you, Joan, look things over there, if you like, then go on over to Fordman's. We'll want an inside interview with Marion for the early morning edition. She'll talk to you. Pick up anything you

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can on that rumor about Fordman's engagement to some dame in Houston. Know anything about it, yet?' he inquired suspiciously.

'Yes,' she said, 'but it's supposed to be a secret.'

'Well, it's no secret now. Everybody's talking and nobody is sayin' the same thing twice in succession. It's up to us to give 'em the first clear story. Get me? Tell the sheriff I'll be up there in a little while.'

'O.K.,' said Joan as she turned away.

Mitchell grabbed a new pencil, ground half of it away in the sharpener, put it in his pocket with several sheets of paper, and started out. Joan took up her white Panama hat and followed him. In their separate cars they drove to the courthouse, a red sandstone atrocity in the center of the town square.

Pushing their way through a mob of curious onlookers, they entered the building. The traffic cop on guard at the door recognized them and let them by. The office of the sheriff was halfway down the long hall. As Joan and Mitch arrived the sheriff began his investigation, and in response to his genial invitation the men in the room seated themselves about the walls in yellow folding chairs with 'From Scott & Scott, Undertakers' stenciled across the back rest. They stopped talking among themselves and looked toward the officer. There were only four, and Joan knew them all. Samuel Ross, the banker, sat near the sheriff's desk. Chick Jones sat next to him and stared sideways out of the window. Then there was Gere Drexell, Fordman's assistant, and next to him, Joey Levy, the town's leading merchant.

Joan sat down beside Levy, who promptly leaned toward her and whispered:

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'Miss Joan, have you seen her yet? How's she taking it? My wife stayed there.'

'I haven't had a chance to get out to Marion's yet, Mr. Levy,' answered the girl.

He was perspiring heavily — large, plump man that he was — and his bald dome glistened with tiny beads of sweat. Dark crescents of perspiration showed under his arms, on his blue shirt. Like the majority of the other men in the room, he wore neither coat nor vest. His shirt billowed limply over the top of his trousers and his fat stomach bulged forward, straining the tight linen.

He started to speak again, but the voice of the sheriff interrupted him. 'I won't keep you-all long,' it boomed, and Joan turned from Levy to watch Sheriff Read lower himself into his worn leather desk chair which immediately tilted backward so that he could rest his feet comfortably on a pulled-out drawer of the scarred oak roll-top desk.

The officer was a large man of the type called 'typical Westerner.' He filled the chair completely, and for further comfort hitched his heavy pearl-handled six-shooter in its leather holster around into his lap. He rested a huge hand on it affectionately, but unconsciously. His other hand he brushed softly across the nap of his stiffly roached gray hair. He looked disturbed and uncertain, but began bravely.

'As you-all know, our admired and respected fellow citizen, Mr. John Fordman, was murdered this afternoon.' He looked about him gravely, aware of his own rhetoric. 'I have asked you gentlemen to come here so that we can get at this thing right away. You was all members of Mr. Fordman's party at the time

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of the shootin' and somebody must of seen somethin' that might have some bearin' on the matter. Hit don't stand to reason that a man can be shot in a crowd of three-four hundred people without nobody seein' nothin'.' Here the sheriff paused and took a long breath. He stared around the circle of faces in a puzzled fashion.

'Now, folks,' he resumed, 'let's get some facts together.' Pulling a scratch-pad and pencil toward him he said:

'First I wanta know who made up Mr. Fordman's private party an' how you-all rode.' He indicated Mitchell White and suggested, 'You, White, you're a reporter. You tell us how things was.'

Mitch scratched his chin and thought for a moment. Then he began:

'Well, Ed Frank and I went out together in my car. Mr. Fordman and Miss Fordman and Mr. Drexell here all rode in the Fordman car with th' chauffeur driving. Mr. and Mrs. Levy were in their car — and their little girl was there too; and Mr. and Mrs. Jones and their daughter were in their car.'

'You left out Mr. Ross,' remarked the sheriff. He turned to the banker and said, 'Where'd you ride?'

'My own car,' answered Ross shortly.

The officer jotted down his information and, glancing around the room, stated:

'Well, that's that. Now I wanta know if any of you know anything or saw anything that might help us out? Did you, Mr. Ross?'

Samuel Ross, president of the First National Bank of Fordman, was one of the two men in the room wearing a coat. It was gray seersucker, carefully buttoned.

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Although it and his trousers had been liberally spotted with oil, they did not look untidy, only spotted. He wore nose-glasses which he took off and balanced on his right forefinger whenever he spoke. Their absence gave his thin white face a rather naked look, emphasized the twin furrows between his pale blue eyes.

He took his glasses off now and looked calmly at the sheriff. 'Why, no,' he said quietly. 'Although I have been associated with Mr. Fordman in business, I am not familiar with his private affairs. You know that he did not talk particularly freely with anyone. He was a very wealthy man and must have antagonized any number of people as he rose in power. He was undoubtedly ruthless. But as to knowing who could have shot him, I am afraid that I cannot even essay any conjecture.' He replaced his glasses and unbuttoned the top button of his coat. In this sweltering little room, he must have been just as hot as anyone, but he looked exceedingly cool.

He was discreet, thought Joan, and so damned correct. He could cover his feelings, if he had any. She wondered how much truth there was in the gossip about the quarrel that he had had with Fordman in his office last week. The paying teller, Gerald Stokes, had spoken of it to his wife, Juanita, and Juanita, always anxious to make some sort of stir, had promptly spread it over town via the afternoon bridge tables.

The sheriff rubbed his gray fuzz again and then looked at Clarence Jones, seated next to Ross. 'Well, Chick,' he said, 'can you offer anything?'

Jones, never prepossessing, looked his worst. The heat, excitement, and momentary position in the limelight all conspired to bring about his demoralization,

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and as the sheriff's attention singled him out he crouched lower in his chair and stammered a few words in a low voice. Joan could not hear him at all. What an unfit mate for the lush Agnes, she thought. The thin, unhappy little man with his drawn, white face and his stringy, straw-colored hair looked like an undernourished boy rather than a man nearing fifty years.

Joan could see the perspiration on his upper lip, the great drops rolling down his high, bulging forehead.

The sheriff, leaning forward, repeated kindly for the second time:

'Whaja say, Chick? You ain't sick, are you?'

The little man sat up suddenly and found his voice.

'No, I ain't sick, Jim. This business has kinda upset me, though.' He wiped his face on his sleeve and continued, 'I ain't one to slander a man that's dead, but you know as well as I do that there's many a one as would have been purty glad to see Fordman put away. But as to who would come right out and shoot him in cold blood — well, I dunno.'

He looked about defensively, as if afraid of condemnation, but the group was silent. Everybody liked the grocer and sympathized. To Joan he was the worm that never turned. His wife ran his business successfully. She despised him and mocked him publicly. He was a Caspar Milquetoast to the life.

Joan's reflections were interrupted by Gerard Drexell's voice. It was a smooth, cultivated voice, but strong and authoritative as well. This man, John Fordman's chief engineer and assistant in the oil business, was everything that poor Chick Jones

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was not. Handsome, well-educated, he commanded the attention of the little group.

'I've worked for John Fordman, as you all know, for about five years now,' he was saying. 'And though I've often found him high-handed and ruthless, I've never known him to be dishonest or mean. Many of you may not have liked him, but if only for the sake of upholding the law you must forget personal feelings and give the sheriff here a little co-operation.'

This rather smug speech fell a little flat and Chick Jones muttered something too low for Joan to hear.

The girl whispered to Mitch, 'Nobody wants to know who killed him, do they?'

The reporter shook his head. 'As an investigation it's a flop,' he agreed, smiling slightly.

Drexell spoke again. 'But surely, sheriff, you've done something about this murder. Did you search the field? Have you found anything?'

The officer's face turned red and he looked angrily at Drexell. 'Of course,' he said, 'we've searched the field. We've done everything possible, but that stampedin' mob ruined any chances we might have had at findin' any clues.'

'He wouldn't know a clue if he saw one,' Joan whispered to Mitch. The corner of his mouth pulled downward in response.

'Now let's get this thing straight,' continued the sheriff. 'First, I wanta know just where everybody was when Fordman was killed.'

He drew the pad toward him and put the tip of his pencil in his mouth. Joan opened her folded scratch-paper and copied the answers in shorthand.

'Well, Mr. Ross, where was you?'

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Ross shifted in his chair and frowned. 'Why,' he answered slowly, 'I ran with the rest of the group. I think that I ran toward my car. I know that I came around the edge of the derrick and started that way. I stopped on the fringe of the crowd and turned to watch the well. After the explosion occurred, I started toward my own machine and had almost reached it when I heard Miss Fordman scream. I ran, with others, toward her — and it was several minutes after that before the body of Mr. Fordman was discovered.'

The sheriff took his feet from the drawer and shifted his weight forward. The chair tilted to even keel reluctantly.

'Where'd you go to, Mr. Drexell?' he asked.

'I don't know just where I was when the shot was fired, of course. I left the well before the actual setting of the nitro, and went around south to speak to a farmer whom I knew. I was just returning when I noticed the commotion and walked across to learn its cause.'

'Who was you talkin' to, Mr. Drexell?' inquired the sheriff.

Drexell's rakish black eyebrows rose, but he answered evenly enough, 'Lonnie Stephens.' Leaning against the back of his chair, he put his hands in his trousers pockets. He wore a white linen suit, excellently tailored, and like Ross, had not removed his coat. His silk tie was surprisingly blue, but not more blue than his clear, large eyes. His very short curly black hair was sprinkled with gray.

The sheriff noted Drexell's statement down and then turned to Levy. Before he spoke, Levy burst out excitedly.

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'I was right behind Mr. Ross,' he declared. 'I went on over to my own car. My wife was there and she can bear me out!' He looked around the room as if expecting contradiction.

'O.K.,' said the sheriff shortly. 'An' you, Chick?'

'Me?' The grocer spoke suddenly and turned from the window in confusion. Evidently he had not been listening to the testimony.

'Yeah. Where was you when Mr. Fordman was shot?' repeated Read.

Jones stared at the sheriff, his eyes blank. Rubbing his hand across his face he finally said, 'I dunno, Jim. I can't seem to recollect.'

'Didn't you hear the explosion when the well was shot?' questioned the officer.

'Oh, yes,' answered the little man. 'I know now. I was sitting in the car with my wife. I believe that Mildred and Ed Frank were there, too. Yeah, they were there, too.' He sighed and arose, saying, 'I gotta go, Jim. I don't feel good. I'm goin' home.'

There was a general silence as he walked across the room and out of the door without looking at anyone.

The sheriff rumbled in his throat and said loudly: 'You, young fella. Where was you?' He pointed a long brown finger at Mitch White, and Joan felt the boy jerk upright in surprise.

'Why, I was everywhere. I couldn't say exactly,' answered Mitch, with a short laugh. 'A reporter's got to get around, y'know.'

'You can't remember where you was when th' explosion happened?' prompted Read.

'No,' answered the reporter, shaking his head.

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The sheriff shrugged his shoulders and wrote the information down carefully. While he was thus occupied, Ed Frank came into the room and sat down beside White.

Read looked up and grinned at him, saying, 'I already know where you was when Mr. Fordman was shot, Ed, but for th' record...' he paused, pencil uplifted.

Frank looked about him and said cheerfully, 'Well, I don't know what these fellows been saying about me, but if I remember rightly, I believe I was with Miss Jones in their family car when the well was shot, anyhow. She and I had been walking around before that.'

'O.K.,' declared the officer, writing. He scowled upward through his shaggy gray eyebrows at Joan, and to her surprise said, 'Young lady, I hear you're mighty smart — college education an' such — whadda ya' think about this here business? Know who done it, huh?'

'Goodness, no, Mr. Sheriff!' declared the girl hastily, and Ed Frank laughed softly.

Read looked at him and chuckled. 'She ain't so smart as she's cracked up to be, is she, Ed?'

'She shines in other ways,' answered Frank, glancing at Joan. 'A good many other ways,' he added thoughtfully.

The girl smiled her thanks at him and looked at her watch. It was five-thirty. She rose to leave, when three men pushed past her and entered the room. They were Tom Harte, deputy sheriff, Doctor C. T. Ross, official county doctor, and Val Day, Fordman's chief driller.

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'Well, Doc, whadda ya' say?' queried the sheriff.

'To put it plainly, Jim, Fordman was shot with a gun of surprisingly small caliber, either a .22 or a .25. The bullet entered his heart and is still lodged in his body. Death was probably instantaneous. I haven't had time to go after the bullet yet, but I'll get right at it. Those little guns' — the doctor spoke scornfully — 'toys — it's amazing how seldom they kill. It was held smack against his breast and fired only once, as far as I can tell. The cloth around the bullet hole is burned and black with powder discharge. I suppose there'll be a formal inquest tomorrow? I'll do the autopsy right away. He's up at Scott's and I reckon the family'll want immediate interment. This weather, you know — and Scott's ain't equipped to keep 'em long.'

'Yeah,' agreed the sheriff, and to Harte, 'Well, Tom, find anything?'

'Not a thing, Chief,' replied the tall officer. 'We're pullin' in all of the questionable characters we kin find. That mob out there sure did tromp down everything. It was easy done. The murderer lost himself in the crowd and was safer'n if he'd hopped a plane to Mexico.'

'My God,' whispered Joan to Mitch, 'lemme out of here. The air is foul. Why don't they go into a bigger room!' She climbed over his knees, patted his shoulder, and escaped into the dirty but less congested hall. The drinking-fountain was out of order as usual and an old-fashioned water-cooler, with an inverted tin cup hung over the spigot, stood in the corner of the hallway. Joan went into the county clerk's office to borrow a glass from the girl at the desk.

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'Isn't it excitin'?' gurgled the girl, chewing her gum vigorously. Joan said, 'Yeah,' and went into the hall for her water. It was too cold and she had to hold each sip in her mouth before swallowing. It cooled her tongue and she could feel the first swallows as they slid downward to her stomach. She drank three tumblerfuls and returned the glass to the chewing girl. 'Thanks, Mabel,' she said.

'You're sure welcome, Miss Shields.'

Joan went out and sat in her roadster for a few minutes before starting for the Fordmans'. It was nearly six o'clock and the sun was behind the courthouse. She had parked under one of the locust trees which bordered the sidewalk in front of the building. The leather cushions were hot and the metal of the door burned her bare arm. She looked over her notes and made a careful list of the people, who, to her mind, might conceivably be suspected by the sheriff. Naturally it included the members of Mr. Fordman's party and ran as follows:

Mr. Ross, who said that he was at the cars.

Chick Jones, who was with his family and Ed Frank.

Ed Frank, who was with Jones and his family.

Gere Drexell, who didn't know exactly where he was, but thought he was talking with a farmer south of the well.

Agnes Jones, who was with her husband, daughter, and Frank.

Joey Levy, who was 'right behind Ross.'

Mitch White, who didn't know.

Marion Fordman.

Etta Levy.

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Texas Wills.

Val Day.

Mildred Jones, who was with her family and Ed Frank.

Of course she knew that the murderer might be an entirely different person, one unknown to her or to the police, but it hardly stood to reason that John Fordman would have allowed a stranger or a casual acquaintance to sit beside him in the car. Then, too, if a stranger had been in town recently the fact would have been known, for Fordman was too small to harbor an unknown.

Joan didn't feel at all horrified at Fordman's death. She hadn't liked him. In fact, she had scarcely known him, even though he did own the paper on which she worked. For the past ten years, since her graduation from high school, she had not lived in the village. First college had kept her away, then several years working on newspapers in New York. Until the past year she had only visited her family every year or so, seeing little of the natives on her flying trips. But the opening of a good job on the local paper, which had recently been only a weekly sheet, plus her mother's illness had brought Joan back to her home for an indefinite stay. It had been a boring stay so far, unpleasantly crammed with bridge club items and other unimportant routine events. This, then, the death of John Fordman, was an event.

Joan was starting the roadster when she saw two men come out of the courthouse and recognized them as Gere Drexell and Levy. She waited until they neared the car and then called to Drexell. The men had been in earnest conversation and Drexell looked

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up, startled. Seeing Joan he waved, and nodding to his companion, stepped down from the curb and came to the car, saying, 'Hello, there, Joan. Saw you inside, but couldn't get over to speak to you. Going out to see Marion?'

'Yes, can I give you a lift out?' offered the girl.

The man ran a brown hand through his hair, glanced at his watch and shook his head. 'No, thanks,' he said. 'I'll go out later when all those women leave. I've got a lot to do now, anyway.'

'It's sad for Marion, isn't it?' ventured Joan.

'Yes,' he agreed, looking beyond her. She could see the small play of muscle at his jaw as he shut his mouth tightly and firmed his lips. Joan could see why he fascinated Marion; why Mitch failed to hold her interest. The reporter was a child in comparison, gauche, unsophisticated, soft. Drexell carried himself with the air of a man who accomplished things. He was well educated, cosmopolitan, and extraordinarily self-assured, an unusual man to find in a small West Texas town.

He did not seem in a great hurry to leave Joan. There was an air of something still to be said between them. He placed a foot on the running-board of the Packard and leaned against the door. The girl waited. But Drexell only asked a question.

'Who is this Mrs. Lawrence?'

Joan was surprised and must have shown it, for he qualified his question with, 'I mean, you know, I haven't met her. What's she like? I've wired her to come up as Marion seems to want her. I know that John was going to marry her and I just wondered.'

'Well,' began Joan, 'I haven't met her either, but

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to take Marion's word for it she must be a pretty swell person.'

'Yes?' Drexell asked this politely and left the silence there between them.

The girl broke it. 'Why?' she countered.

'Knew her husband during the war,' explained Drexell.

'I feel sorry for her,' said Joan.

The man's expression did not change. He nodded and said: 'Well, I must be going. Tell Marion I'll be there later.'

Joan watched his white-clad shoulders as he walked away from her and thought to herself: 'Well, I certainly didn't get much out of him. He's a poker-face.' A small spasm of excitement unknotted itself under the region of her breast-bone and spread quivering tentacles of delightful shivers down her shoulders and arms. She started the car and shot backward out of the parking place with a roar of exhaust through the forbidden cut-out. The Fordman house was five miles out of town and she wanted to see Marion and get home in time for dinner at seven-thirty.

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III: Monday, July 3

Joan skidded dangerously into the drive leading up to the Fordman home. She shifted into second for the long, winding road up the hill, but soon had to shift into first as the road grew steeper. It was cut diagonally across the east side of the hill.

The mountain, which was in reality only a large finger of rock mesa-land jutting out sharply from the higher ground to the north, overlooked the low rolling prairie land to the south, east, and west. Fordman had built his home near the edge of the serried red sandstone cliffs which marked an abrupt end of the jutting finger.

The house was always amusing to Joan. Formally colonial in architecture, it gleamed white and barren on the red hilltop. Its six slender porch pillars supported a roof of vivid green.

This country, which called for architecture as simple and as solid as the rocks themselves, was insulted by the intrusion of this slender, delicate building. Loud and blatant with its vivid cobalt sky, its red earth and its lush green cedars, it shouted insults at the slim white house perched on its beloved hilltop. The strong prairie winds pushed at it and rattled its green shutters, and the frequent sand-storms enveloped it grimly, but John Fordman's house was truly builded firm upon the rock! It held itself aristocratically aloof, returned no bawdy word.

The car reached the level top of the hill panting, and with relief it turned into the road winding through the

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young new trees that had just been planted during the past year. They were Chinese elms, very slender and erect. Each had been set out in a pit blasted in the rock and refilled with rich prairie loam. Joan remembered the day that the holes had been blasted out and the small geysers of dirt that had risen incongruously into the sky above the red hilltop. She had been amused by the fact that the geysers had risen and fallen again before the sound of the blast had reached her ears.

The house did not look so odd from the drive, which curved smoothly around the edge of the hill and swept up to the front veranda edged with flower-beds filled with varicolored zinnias. The lawns had been well rolled and trimmed and were as vivid as the roof. An underground sprinkler system was on, and the wind swept the cool geysers of spray over the walks and into the graveled driveway. As the day drew to a close and the sun dropped lower and lower, the air gained in freshness and vitality.

Joan stepped out of her car and cut through the spray, feeling it soak coolly through her stockings and linen dress. She mounted to the veranda on which stood green-and-white striped canvas chairs on tubular frames grouped about a low glass-topped table. A bowl of crimson zinnias stood on the table and a brown-and-white leather bag of golf clubs leaned against a chair.

The girl reached for a cigarette from a red bowl and was clicking the silver golf-ball lighter when the screen door clapped shut behind her. She turned and saw Texas Wills, the Fordman chauffeur. He was a small mulatto, very dapper, always courteous, and quite

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well-educated according to the standards of the Southern negro. He smiled at her, showing even white teeth between thin, well-moulded lips.

'Good evening, Miss Joan.'

'Hello, Texas,' the girl replied. 'How's Miss Marion?'

'She's takin' it real fine,' answered the man. 'Now who could have done such a thing, Miss Joan?'

'I don't know, Texas. Where were you?'

'Why, I was looking for Mr. Day with a note from the boss,' he replied.

'Looking for him? Wasn't he at the derrick?'

'No'm, he wasn't at the derrick and I never did find him,' declared the negro.

Joan looked at him over her cigarette. She thought rapidly, and then changed the subject. 'You knew him real well, Texas. Who'd want to shoot him? Who were his enemies?'

'Lawd, Miss Joan, I don' know. Not many people liked him, you know. People was always sayin' that I was his bodyguard, but I wasn't. I never toted no gun. He wasn't scared o' no one as I knew of.'

'Who'd you know of particularly that didn't like him?' asked Joan, and added, 'Anyone who threatened him, for instance.'

'Well, there was a driller back in Ranger that shot at him once over a card game, and a feller in Borger that had sold out a lease to Mr. Fordman an' thought he got cheated, threatened to kill him, but nothin' ever come of it. He was plumb easy to annoy, come to think of it, an' mighty free with his fists. I remember he beat up Mr. Day somethin' awful once, too. You see Mr. Day was drunk. He said he'd kill Mr. Ford-

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man, but when he sobered up they laughed about it an' I saw 'em shakin' hands.'

'I mean townspeople, Texas. Did you ever hear anyone in Fordman threaten him?'

'Well, yessum. That reporter man that you go aroun' with — he was here just the other night and they argued something fierce. He didn't even give me a tip when I brought his car around, and I wiped it all off an' washed th' wind-shield. It sure was dirty, too. I brushed out th' inside, an' back of th' seat was two strings of beads and three lady's vanity cases.'

Joan laughed. 'I guess that's where mine vanish, Texas. Thanks for the tip. Where is Miss Marion?'

'She's up in her room, miss. There's a bunch of ladies in th' parlor, Mis' Levy, Mis' Jones, Mis' Brush, 'n' th' minister.'

'Thanks. I'll go up the back way, Texas. I want to see Miss Marion first. By the way, did you ever deliver that note to Mr. Day?'

'Lawd, Miss Joan, I plum' forgot that note! No'm, I never did.'

'Why not?'

'Well, miss, you see, I couldn't find him when I went to look for him, and since then ——' he stopped sadly.

'Of course. Do you still have it, Texas?'

'Yes, ma'am,' replied the man, fumbling in the pocket of his uniform coat. He brought forth a folded slip of blue paper and looked at it. Joan reached out a naturally commanding hand.

He gave her the note without hesitation and she read it without a qualm. Written in a bold hand were the words, 'I want to see you before I leave. J. F.'

Joan refolded the paper and returned it to Wills.

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'Better give it to him, Texas,' she advised; 'and about our little talk — don't say anything to anyone.' Then she walked around the house and reached the second story by the servants' stairway.

She found Marion Fordman lying on the quaint four-poster bed in her lovely room, but she was not alone. As Joan entered, she was surprised to see Mildred Jones rise from a wing-chair by the window. She waved at Mildred and went over to Marion.

'Hello, darling,' she said. 'I came as soon as I could get away.'

Marion sat up, glad to see her. She and Joan had known each other since childhood, renewed their acquaintance in the East where Marion was attending a fashionable school, continued it warmly during the past few months that the younger girl had spent in Fordman. Joan admired her Nordic handsomeness, her excellent sense of humor, her intelligence. She was a tall, strong girl, with large hands and feet that were remarkably slender and well-formed. Her uncropped hair was ash blonde, with glinting highlights of silver. The undiscerning called it 'platinum,' but it did not have that metallic vulgarity of tone. And her eyes, unlike those of most blondes, were a deep sea blue.

Joan took off her Panama, ran her fingers through her own curly black mop. The coolness of the prairie evening was sifting through the open windows. It carried the smell of the spray, the new-cut grass, and the odor of the thousands of tiny prairie wildflowers.

Mildred Jones wanted to talk. 'Have you heard anything, Joan?'

'No, nothing new. You-all know as much as I do, I guess.'

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Marion dropped back on the pillows and sighed. 'It's a dam' shame, Joan. He was so alive. I wish I'd known him better. This is the first summer I've been home in four years. And there's Glieth. She'll be coming soon, I hope. I had Gere wire her.'

'Listen, Marion. What'll they do at the paper? I mean, who'll be in charge?' Joan had just thought of this.

'Why, Ed Frank, I guess,' replied the girl, puzzled. 'I don't know anything about it. Mr. Drennan, Dad's lawyer, rang up a few minutes ago. He's coming out right away. There's a will, you know. I'd just say, go on with them like always. He'd want that.'

'I'll tell Ed, then,' said Joan. 'And don't you want to make a statement of some sort?'

'Statement?' she repeated. 'Why, no, I guess not. Should I?'

'Not unless you want to, honey. We'll just carry the fact that you had no statement to make and that you've left everything in the hands of the sheriff. Is that all right?'

'Yes. When Mr. Drennan comes, we'll see. There must be trustees. Oh, Joan, who did it, do you suppose? I want it found out. I don't believe that the officers are capable of tracking down a murderer. They might do all right with rustlers or with Mexicans selling liquor — but this is real and clever and deliberate. I'll never forget getting into the car and finding him. It was so dark and cool-looking. I opened the door and stepped onto the running-board and said, 'Well, hail to the oil magnate,' or something silly like that, and when he didn't answer, I looked at him and saw that blood on his shirt. It was so dark red against the white. I never thought *I'd* faint. It was so silly of me.'

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'Where had you been?' asked Joan.

'Well, when all of the men left, I went over and sat in the car with that fat Mrs. Levy. Our car was somewhat away from the group and the top is so low that I couldn't see very well. I wanted to see the well shot. I'd never seen one.'

Mildred Jones moved out of the wing-chair, to sit on the foot of the bed. She was a large, plump, capable girl. Joan thought her fat, but men liked her roundness. They described her with two out-waving downward sweeps of their hands. She was like that. Full and round. Soft. She liked men. They liked her and called her 'red' or 'rusty' because of her dark-red hair. She had just finished her four years at State University and was home having a good time. She made all of the dances in town and in the neighboring towns, and went often to El Paso or Dallas or San Antonio for parties. She sat on the bed and scowled slightly at Joan, for she disliked her.

'Why don't you offer a reward, kid?' she asked Marion.

'I don't know what to do. I want to see Gere Drexell first. Do you know where he is, Joan?'

'I saw him in town,' answered the girl. 'He said he'd be out later.'

'Well, he ought to call me. Maybe he will soon.' Marion got up and went toward the bathroom door. 'I'm going to take a shower. I feel so dirty and hot. 'You will wait, won't you?'

Mildred said 'yes,' but Joan got up and started out. 'I've got to get some supper,' she said, 'and go back to the office.' She went over and kissed Marion and said, 'I'm sorry.'

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At the door she turned. 'I'll come up early to-morrow.'

She went out and down the long hall to the stairs. It was a double stairway, curving smoothly upward from each side of the large entrance foyer. Joan walked slowly and silently down the right flight and paused at the door of the living-room. Here the voices of the women inside sounded intermittently. She breathed deeply and went in.

Across the room, seated on the deep-red divan, was Etta Levy, large and darkly Jewish. Agnes Jones faced her from an armchair. The Reverend Mr. Brush and his tall, militant, English wife were seated on the chesterfield near the door.

The minister rose at the sight of her and came forward. 'Ah, Miss Shields,' he said, 'and how is Miss Fordman? You've seen her?' His accent was very broad and Bostonian. He was an addition worthy of the new Episcopal Church with its leaning toward ceremony. As tall as his wife, but very thin, he swayed forward and bowed his narrow dark head. 'It is hard, very hard, to bear a thing like this,' he said.

Etta Levy called to her and Joan went across the room to sit beside the woman. Her lovely face, with its clear-white skin and its contrast of smooth black hair, rose incongruously from her squat, uncouth body.

'There is nothing that we can do, I know, but I do hate to leave Marion, Joan. She *is* alone.' Etta was kind, but so deeply interested in the fortunes or misfortunes of her friends and neighbors that she caused acute discomfort among those whom she desired to aid.

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'No,' replied Joan, 'there is nothing that anyone can do.'

Agnes Jones rose from her chair. She was a larger, older edition of her daughter. Her dark, burnt-umber hair was badly mussed and her eyes were swollen and bloodshot from crying. Joan was sorry for her. She had loved John Fordman for years, in the face of public opinion which had branded her with side glances and wise, knowing looks as That Woman! Her position had been made easier since her husband's stores had succeeded so well and the all-powerful money had come to aid her.

She wandered vaguely toward the hall door, caught the eye of the minister's wife, and stiffened immediately. 'Joan,' she said too loudly, 'is Mildred upstairs?'

'Yes, ma'am,' Joan replied.

'I will go up and get her. We must go home.' She stared steadily at Mrs. Brush, who looked viciously back at her. The minister had risen and stood uncertainly beside his wife.

Agnes Jones turned her back and left the room. It was silent as her footsteps were heard on the stairway.

Etta Levy looked at Joan, and said, 'How on earth could she come here?'

The minister's wife snorted violently.

The minister was silent.

Joan said 'Good-bye' and went out.

It was almost dark now. The afterglow had vanished and the clouds on the eastern horizon were high-piled purple masses, tipped with silver. Joan shivered, for the prairie wind was cold.

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IV: Monday, July 3

Joan drove slowly down the mountain and into the lighted town. Her own home was on the main street, and, as she drew her roadster to the curb, she noticed that the chairs on the lawn under the large china-berry tree were empty. The family was at dinner.

She went in quietly, took a shower, and put on another fresh linen dress.

Her father and her mother and her young brother Jimmie were still at the table. They were eating strawberry shortcake for dessert, but even Jimmie looked up eagerly when she entered.

'I don't like you to be involved in this, Joan,' said her mother.

'Say, Sis, can I go back to the office with you? I'll run errands an' answer the 'phone if you'll let me,' said Jimmie.

Her mother rose and went into the kitchen. 'I've kept some supper hot, dear,' she said.

'Say, can I, Sis?' begged the boy.

Joan looked at her father, who smiled at her. 'It is going to be a pretty big mess, isn't it, Sister?' stated Joan's father.

She nodded and turned to Jimmie. 'Yes, you can come with me.'

'Does anyone know anything?' inquired her father. 'The town is humming.'

'Not that I've heard. What do they say?'

'Well, some say the nigger man; some say an escaped lunatic; some whisper Chick Jones, and

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I've even heard that there was bad blood between Ross and Fordman.'

Joan nodded. 'But he was reported broken off with Mrs. Jones,' she offered.

'Maybe so,' said Shields thoughtfully, 'But ——' He paused and began eating his strawberries as Mrs. Shields entered with Joan's plate.

'Do you *have* to go back tonight?' she said as she set it down.

'Yes, Mom. There'll be a lot to do.'

'Well, I don't like it. A murder! Have you been to see Marion?'

'Yes, Mom — just before I came home.'

'Who was there?'

'The minister — Brush, I mean, his awful wife, Mrs. Levy and Mrs. Jones and Mildred.'

Mrs. Shields shook her head sadly and rose. 'You'll find your shortcake in the icebox. The whipped cream is in a bowl.' She looked at her husband. 'Let's go out, John.' she said. 'It's so awfully hot in here and I feel somewhat upset.'

They left Joan and Jimmie together, Mrs. Shields's voice returning faintly from the living-room — 'Leave the dishes right where they are. Minnie will clear up when she comes home.'

'I'll get your strawberry shortcake, Sis,' said the boy.

'Thanks.'

He returned from the kitchen a few minutes later with the dessert, its crisp short biscuit covered with crushed berries and topped by a mound of cream.

'It's kind of rich, Sis,' he said. 'Sure you want it?'

She said 'yes' and ate half of it while he watched

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her sadly. 'Here, bum,' she said, and pushed the rest to him. He gulped it down and caught her at the front door. They called good-bye to the two in the chairs under the dark china tree and drove back to the newspaper office.

There they found work going in full blast. The regular edition had come off the press some half-hour before their arrival and the newsboys were getting their stacks to hawk on the streets. Joan noticed that each stack was twice as large as usual. Jimmie vanished into the mêlée of the back shop. The machines drew him like magnets.

Frank, looking worn and haggard under his green eyeshade, was sitting at his desk reading a smudgy first section. Mitch White was nowhere in sight. The advertising men were at their desks also reading first sections. Joan went into the back shop and procured one for herself.

A two-column cut of Fordman was set up in the center of the page. A seventy-two-point banner head proclaimed:

JOHN FORDMAN KILLED

The story, under a four-column, thirty-two point head, was the one that Mitch had written, with a little change in the first paragraph localizing the story. Her own interview with Mrs. Trotter had been dropped under the same heading, but to the left of a 'box' which held a short story to the effect that the paper would continue to function under the direct management of Edward Frank, Editor. The story was authorized by Patrick Drennan, Fordman's lawyer, and had been confirmed by Marion.

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Frank looked at Joan over his paper and said, smiling wearily, 'See *you've* been home. 'Ja see Marion?'

'Yes. She wouldn't say anything definite for publication. Wants to wait and see Drennan and Gere Drexell.'

Frank raised his eyebrows, moving the eyeshade with them. 'Drexell, hmm.'

'And likewise "hmm,"' said Joan. 'Where's Mitch?'

'He's gone over to the boarding-house to grab some supper and a shower — and a drink, I guess. Goddamn him. If he don't keep sober while this thing is goin' on, I'll fire him.' He slapped his hand on the paper in front of him. 'I'm goin' home, too,' he said. 'You keep an eye on things and I'll be back in a couple of hours. Want to see some of these people. If anything breaks, just sit on it and I'll call in every now and then. You c'n head up some of the A.P. stuff. We're goin' to get a mornin' edition out. Won't change much but the front page. That's all anybody'll want to read.'

He took off the eyeshade and picked up his coat and hat. 'I got oil on everything I have on,' he said.

'Yeah, I smell it,' sniffed Joan.

'There'll be a mob of fellows from the other sheets down on us soon. Hall has already called from *The News*, and the Fort Worth man wired he'd be over from Abilene right away. Give 'em as much as you know, without openin' up too wide. So long.' He banged the screen door behind him and disappeared into the darkness.

Joan straightened her desk and wiped away the

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inevitable yellow dust that perpetually powdered everything in the country of daily sand-storms. As she crumpled up and threw away the collected paper, she came across the story of Mrs. Shaw's red, white, and blue bridge party. 'Omygod,' she thought, it missed the evening edition. Still, it could go in the morning sheet if Mac would recast the Soc. page for her. She started writing fourteen-point heads for it —

MRS. SHAW ENTERTAINS
LAFF-A-LOT BRIDGE CLUB

MESDAMES HALL AND —

No — that wouldn't do —

MISS SMITH AND MRS. HALL
WIN HIGH SCORES

The telephone burred at her elbow. She recognized Marion Fordman's voice.

'Can you talk?' it said.

'Yes,' replied Joan; 'everybody's gone for the moment.'

'Oh, Joan, I'm so worried. I don't know what to do. Gere called up, but he said he couldn't come out until tomorrow. Mr. Drennan has come and gone. He said that the will would be read tomorrow. It's in the vault at the bank.'

'Are you there alone?' interrupted Joan.

'Right now, but Mildred is coming back to spend the night, and Mrs. Smith, the housekeeper, is here. Mildred went home to take her mother.' Here she faltered.

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'Hello,' said Joan into the silence. 'Well, I'm glad that you aren't alone. Is Glieth coming?'

'Yes, I wired her and she will be here tomorrow afternoon, she said. She wired awhile ago.'

'Is she in Houston?'

'Yes. I suppose so. She got my wire and I sent it there.'

'Of course.'

'Oh, Joan, there's so much I want to ask you ——'

'Not over the 'phone, Marion. I'll come up tomorrow, early.'

'I guess you're right. I imagine that Central *is* listening in, don't you? Anyway, I don't care much. It's about the police. They are nice enough, but not very bright. Shouldn't I get someone else? You ought to know. Drennan hemmed and hawed, and Gere said "no," but — what do you think?'

'I think so. Most decidedly. And I know someone, too. Go to bed now and try to sleep. Lord knows when I'll get to bed!'

'Well, thanks a lot. Good-bye.'

Joan sat back in her chair and smiled. Then she pulled a telegraph blank out of her desk drawer and wrote:

TO RICHARD FIELDS
3001 LINDELL BLVD.
ST. LOUIS, MO.
CON TEXAS PAGE ONE'S ACCOUNT LOCAL MESS STOP FT. WORTH DALLAS SHEETS SURE TO CARRY STOP IF I WIRE OKAY CAN YOU HOP HERE BY PLANE STOP MAY MEAN BIG RETAINER AND BIGGER BRAIN TEASER STOP AIR MAIL LETTER FOLLOWS

JOAN

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She called a boy and sent the message as a night wire. She knew that Fields read every important paper within a radius of a thousand miles and that by morning he would be sure to find the story of John Fordman's murder staring at him from every front page of the Texas papers, at least.

Joan had known the big red-headed detective during the two years that she had functioned as refined sob-sister and feature writer on the New York *World*. The same depression that spelled an end for that ancient sheet and thus ousted Joan from her post had sent Fields west to join an agency in St. Louis.

He had been one of Joan's most ardent admirers in his hard-boiled way, and under the influence of the girl's sympathy had revealed several interesting facts about his early life. He was the only son of a wealthy hat manufacturer of Danbury, Connecticut, and to papa's supreme disgust refused to follow in his footsteps and help cover the heads of the nation's citizens with derbys, svelt toppers, straw sailors, and business-man felts. He made a record at Brown — on the football field, but was firmly expelled during his senior year after blacking the eye of an official who aroused his ire.

Hesitating to face papa after this fracas Dick had joined the New York State Troopers and later resigned to become a junior member of a newly organized private detective agency. Dick, with his entrée into several top-notch clubs and his acquaintances in New York society, had been able to bring his agency much welcome business until the depression curbed the desires of wealthy New Yorkers to hire operatives at several hundred dollars a day. The

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agency went rapidly to the wall and Dick was glad to get a good opening out in the 'sticks.'

Joan knew that he had done remarkably well there, for several of his cases had received wide publicity. He had written recently to say that business was going slack again, however, and why the hell didn't she invite him to Texas?

Thrusting aside the papers on her desk, she got out her notes and began to type the letter to Dick. She clipped the stories in the *News* and added them to her own résumé. She listed the people who had been with Fordman and characterized them fully, so that Dick would waste no time on his arrival. She outlined the rumors and told of Fordman and Agnes Jones — of Fordman and his fiancée, Glieth Lawrence.

Joan thought about Glieth Lawrence. Mrs. William Cameron Lawrence she had been. But Mr. William Cameron Lawrence had been shot down over the German lines, two days before the Armistice had been signed. The two had been married a week before he sailed for France. Marion had told Joan this. Marion liked her father's fiancée. She had met her in New York and had introduced her new friend to her father about a year ago. Marion said that she was thirty-eight and beautiful. The news of Fordman's sudden death must have been a severe blow to this woman, twice within sight of possible happiness.

She included these thoughts in her letter and was just finishing the long missive, when a shout from the door interrupted her. She looked up and saw two unmistakable newspaper men, both lighting cigarettes, regarding her over the counter.

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'Hi, Sister,' said one, 'I'm Davis, the *Telegram's* West Texas correspondent. This is Jackie Jackson of the Dallas *News* and *Journal*. That Texas Bible has decided to break down and print a murder story. Can you imagine! We jus' got in. Anythin' new happened?'

'No,' admitted Joan, 'but you boys come on around and sit down. Here's our evening sheet. It has everything so far.'

The 'boys' grabbed the paper and read quickly. 'Hell,' said Davis, 'we've got that much!'

Jackson queried Joan, 'Who gets the billion berries? The gal?'

'I suppose,' she answered.

'You know her?'

'Yes.'

'Good-looker?'

'Very.'

'Pitchers?'

Joan laughed. 'Yes, I've got pictures. I had Mac run some mats off a plate — two-column. It's a good one, too. Steichen did the photo. In New York, you know?'

'Steichen? Holy Gee!' said Jackson. 'Then she's no local belle. She's been around. Finishing school — abroad — all that?'

Joan got her index card devoted to the life of Marion Frances Fordman from her files and held it close to her. The boys held out pleading hands.

'No, sirs,' she declared. 'You can both copy this. I'll read it out, but I won't let you carry my files away.' She read to them the notes she had collected on the activities of Marion Fordman for her own private

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