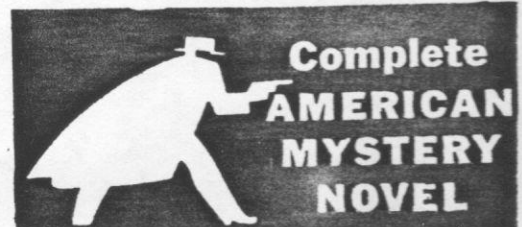


by  
*Virginia Faulkner*  
and  
*Hugh Pentecost*



# MURDER ON THE FRED ALLEN PROGRAM



# CAST OF CHARACTERS

FRED ALLEN  
PORTLAND HOFFA  
*Mrs. Allen*

JIMMIE WALLINGTON  
*The announcer*

JACK SMART *Radio actor*

LAURY HARDING  
*Director, CBS*

IRVING MANSFIELD  
*Allen's press agent*

UNCLE JIM HARKINS  
*Allen's man Friday*

BILLY BOLTON *Movie star*

LEE CURTIS *His ex-wife*

EDDIE IRISH *His press agent*

McEVoy FULLER  
*His business manager*

SID LANDSEER *Actors' agent*

KEOGH PENNY  
*M-K-G representative*

DIANE CRANE  
*Beautiful starlet*

LILY-IDA  
*Her ambitious mother*

*Sudden death strikes in Fred Allen's radio  
hour, and the famous comedian turns from actor to  
"real-life" detective . . . A gripping  
masterpiece of bewilderment and laughter, involving  
Fred, Portland, and the entire  
Allen cast in a baffling, fictional guess-who murder*



M-K-G CORPORATION believed in nothing but the best for its employees—or, at least, those among them who happened to be in the top twenty at the box office. It also believed in keeping an eye on these favorite sons and daughters, particularly when they visited such unsecluded spots as New York. And so, in order to kill two birds with one stone, which it was fond of doing, M-K-G maintained a hotel suite there—a home from home for stars who had come east on affairs of state, or of the heart, or just to give the gong a kicking around.

These quarters occupied the entire top floor of the Staffordshire Tower, and were too high above Manhattan to have a view of anything except passing stratoliners and, on occasion, clouds. Since M-K-G had yet to learn the secret of doing anything by halves, the furnishings included such super-Hollywoodiana as a special rumpus-room for dogs, with genuine grass and a herbaceous border; and a pipe-organ which, when pressed in a sensitive spot, whirled around and became the business end of an old-time saloon.

It was a layout to set even cinema planets—hardened exponents of frantic living though they might be—back on their heels; and Billy Bolton was no exception. The moment he saw the neon moon glimmering on the green patent-leather bay trees in the foyer, he began to kick like a steer; and his griping reached a climax when he was ushered into the master bedroom, a chamber which was, perhaps, the most harrowing of all. Fur and glass, cork and chromium, feathers and steel, all somehow had been incorporated in the decorative

scheme, and the result was both sinister and bawdy.

"It looks," Billy summed up, "like the ideal place for a couple of robots to spend their wedding night. I can't take it. Come on, fellas; let's get the hell outta here."

"Take it easy," said his business manager, McEvoy Fuller, a rotund gentleman whose deceptively guileless exterior—chubby face, pink cheeks, and baby-blue eyes—had led one irate dupe to describe him as a shark in rompers. "You're only going to be here three, four days, so what's the difference?"

"Yeah, relax," said Keogh Penny, the M-K-G representative, who was on hand to do the honors. "You'll feel better when you've had a long, cool breakfast."

"Nuts," said Billy stubbornly. "I'm through with all this lousy chichi, see? I—"

HE WAS interrupted by Eddie Irish, his press agent, who had been in the business of making big ones out of little ones for too many years to stand on any ceremony. "If you're going to stew, why not stew about something important?" he demanded. "Has it slipped your mind you're back here to keep a radio date with a guy called Fred Allen?"

"Hm," said Billy. "You think Allen's gonna make it tough for me, huh? You think he's gonna pour it on?"

"You've heard the show," said Eddie. "You know what happens when some bird tries to top him." He whistled. "That's all, brother!"

Mac Fuller flashed a warning glance at Eddie. "Don't let old sourpuss get in your hair," he told Billy. "He's just kidding; he knows better."

"If he doesn't, he ought to," blustered Billy. "I can top Allen with my tongue tied behind me." Apparently, however, Eddie had given him some food for thought, for he said no more about leaving, but, instead, seated himself gingerly on a tiger-skin pouffe and watched in glum silence while the bellhops brought in his luggage.

The telephone rang, and Keogh answered. "It's Sid Landseer," he said. "He's downstairs."

"I don't wanta see him," said Billy. "I've got enough harpies around here without a picture agent, too."

"Tell him to come on up," said Mac. "You grab yourself a shower, boss," he added placatingly. "I'll talk to him."

"The boys from the papers are waiting," Keogh reminded them.

Tersely, Billy described what the boys from the papers could do with themselves.



*Billy stood, helpless and horrified, between the two  
baleful women who had converged upon him*



"Yeah, we know," said Eddie patiently, "but just the same they're going to be right around your neck until you make a statement about this tootsie on the coast."

"Okay," rejoined Billy. "Tell 'em I said Diane and I are a hundred per cent washed up."

Keogh turned back from the telephone. Oh, you are, are you? Does she know it?"

"Sure, she knows it," said Billy. "Mac's got a canceled check that proves she knows it."

"Then how come she starts shooting off her trap all over the lot? Sounds like a headache in the near-offing to me."

Billy shrugged. "She's just trying to knock herself off a few extra sticks of publicity. Diane's a very savvy tomato; she knows when to stop. She won't pull any rough stuff."

"That's what you think," said Eddie. "I never knew the dame yet that didn't have something up her sleeve, and ten times out of ten it's an eight-ball with some guy's name on it. An eight-ball with a steam-roller attachment," he concluded ominously, "so if I were you, kid, I'd not only see the boys from the papers, I'd make it a point to be real sweet to 'em."

AS IF the first call had been a signal, telephones and doorbells all over the apartment now began to sound off, and for the next two hours a steady succession of rings and buzzes prodded the eardrums of the Bolton entourage. At the end of that time, the master bedroom was looking considerably more homelike, owing to the presence of mounds of cigarette ends and cigar butts, beer and mineral water bottles, sticky glasses containing slowly expiring ice cubes, a sea of newspapers, and a wastebasketful of flash bulbs.

The room was considerably enhanced by the person of Mr. Sidney Landseer, king of picture agents. Sid spent his days slaving away at the rainbow's end, up to his umbilical in the pot of gold, and, since ten per cent of all that he touched adhered to his fingers, it was not unnatural that he chose to array himself in fabrics of such cheerful hue that he looked as if he had stepped right out of a Ringling Brothers three-sheet.

When Billy emerged from a long-delayed shower and began to draw on a pair of natty silk-voile shorts, Landseer broke off abruptly in the midst of a passionate harangue to Mac Fuller.

"Say!" he exclaimed enviously. "Those are some panties, boy! Where'd you find 'em?"

Billy grinned, and Eddie cut in impatiently, "Look, Billy; Laury Harding called from CBS. The rehearsal for the Allen show's at one o'clock, and we've got a lot of ground to cover before then. I figure we ought to hold off breaking the story about the overseas tour you're going to make, and let Fred do it on the broadcast, see? And—"

"Hey!" rasped Sid. "I been waiting around all morning, how about I should have a chance to get a word in endwise, huh?" And then, dulcetly, to Billy, "It's like I've been telling Mac, I got this proposition from M-K-G. It's so terrific I don't want to telephone it, I want to be here and see your face light up."

"You mean," said Billy, "they're gonna play ball? They're gonna let me do *Happy Days*?"

Sid's face lengthened. "Oh, now, pal, be reasonable!"

"Okay," said Billy grimly. "I don't wanta hear any more." He selected a shirt and began

to slip in the links, in deep blue silence.

"But that's strictly a comedy part," said Sid. "That's not for you."

"What do you mean, it's not for me?" thundered Billy. "Maybe you forget why M-K-G happens to hire me in the first place. Because I'm a pretty funny lad, that's why! But when they come up with this brain storm I should play straight man to a bunch of well-filled sweaters, did I get up on my ear? I did not! I string right along, I go all the way with 'em. I say, 'Okay, if that's what pays off, go ahead; bill me as a heartthrob.' But—"

"Yeah," said Sid quickly, "and so you got to look at it from the angle that for five years M-K-G's been spending thousands and thousands of dollars, building you up as one of these romantic joes, it's bum business they should switch types in midstream."

"Sid's right," chimed in Eddie. "You've heard the old saying: Not even a leopard can pick his spots."

"Will you lugs let me finish?" roared Billy. "I told 'em, 'Some day a sock comic role turns up, I feel I can give it the works, I get first crack at it, see? Otherwise you're gonna hafta get yourself another boy.' I warned 'em. They thought, 'That jerk, he'll never be in the financial position he can tell us to go to hell.' They never figured I'd have the sense to get a guy like Mac to guard my dough for me." He stamped his feet into his shoes. "But the laugh's on them, see? This is one guy Hollywood didn't make a stooge out of. Either I get that part, or I'm through with pictures!"

"What kind of talk is that?" expostulated Sid. "You're too young, you should think of retiring from the entertainment world."

"Who said anything about retiring?" demanded Billy. "You listen in Sunday night, Sid; I'm gonna show those boys on the coast what a bet they overlooked."

"Well," said Keogh. "The boys'll all be pulling for you."

"Yeah; pulling for me to stink," said Billy bitterly. "They can't stand to be wrong, those loogans. And neither can all the smart characters back here. They think anybody stays in Hollywood five years, it's in the books they got a swelled head and a wet brain."

THE telephone rang. "Irish speaking," said Eddie. "Okay, sister. . . . It's Lee Curtis," he said to Billy. "She's on the way up."

"Gosh, I got to step on it," said Billy.

"Where the hell'd I leave my watch, Mac?"

"Look on the basin in the bathroom," Mac suggested.

Keogh waited discreetly until Billy had disappeared, and then turned to Eddie: "Who's Lee Curtis?"

"The former Mrs. Bolton," said Eddie. "Lee used to be in his act; they take an interest in each other's careers."

"If they take so much interest in each other's careers," said Keogh, "why didn't they stay married?"

"Oh, I guess she was one of those managing dames," said Mac. "She stepped out of the picture just about the time M-K-G picked up his second option. Came back here and got herself a job reading plays for Al Seabolt."

Billy came galloping out of the bathroom. "Toss me my coat, Mac," he said. He dashed out the door, shrugging on his coat as he went.

In the lounge, the pretty redhead looked up, startled, as Billy charged in.

"Welcome to Wuthering Heights, baby!" he cried.

"Hello, darling," said Lee. "Mercy me!



*The murderer waited until the doorman had gone; then he called to Diane*

This is strictly the Nightmare Department, isn't it?"

"And it gets worse before it gets worse," Billy told her. "Look; let's have lunch on the terrace. It's a little plainer out there," and, as they started to walk across the lounge, "That's quite a hat," he said respectfully. "Is it alive?"

Lee looked at him. "I know I wait five seconds for the laugh," she said, "but would you mind throwing me my line? I'm out of training."

"You have a cherce," said Billy. "Either you say, 'No, but I picked it fresh this morning,' or else, 'Why not smell it and see?' And then I say, 'What do you do when you take it off? Hang it up in a glass of water?'"

"And I say, 'Sure enough. Do you happen to have a glass of water on you?'"

"No," corrected Billy. "You say, 'That's right. Would you mind finding me a glass of water?' And I say, 'Here's a hazel twig. Go find your own water.'"

"Hazel wand," Lee corrected automatically. "I may say," she added as they came out on the terrace, "it looks as if somebody had been making with a wand out here. I guess this is what they call a veritable fairyland: riot of blossom division."

"Yeah," said Billy. "All we have to do is lay down a tap mat, and we could go right into a boy-and-girl number."

"Not in a strong light, we couldn't," said

# CAUSE FOR DIVORCE BY WM. STEIG



## Crime Is Not Play

In a surprise move today, Mrs. Leila Yoicks filed suit for divorce against her husband, Chutney Yoicks, in Domestic Relations Court, charging that their marriage had become "a living death."

High point in the plaintiff's bill of particulars was Mrs. Yoicks's assertion that her husband had become such an addict to mystery and horror tales that she feared some suppressed part of his nature, something evil and dangerous, was boiling to the surface. "A date with a zombi," she declared, "would be delightful compared to

an evening spent with Mr. Yoicks.

"My husband's reactions are extremely intense," she went on. "He chuckles fiendishly and exclaims with delight as he reads the most horrible passages. His eerie laughter and baleful eye are frightening. It became unbearable as he began to show a marked preference for stories that dealt with the torture and murder of wives.

"And when he demanded that I re-enact scenes from such tales it was too much," said Mrs. Yoicks. "I can't take crime and punishment, too."

Lee. "Or anyway I couldn't," she amended.

"Nuts," said Billy. "You look very trixie, baby. You always do."

"You look very trixie yourself," said Lee. "All nice and clean in your little white suit. Hollywood must agree with you."

"A MIRACLE has been passed," said Billy. "I never thought the day would come when I'd hear you say a kind word about Hollywood." He stood watching her while she sat down in an ornate plastic garden chair. Then, when she looked up inquiringly, "It's swell to see you again, baby. Tell me, what's with you?"

"Like what?"

"Well . . . for instance, what're you going to do this summer?"

"What I usually do. Switch from highballs to rum drinks, and put my fur coat in storage. What're you going to do?"

"I've got a tour lined up," said Billy. "Overseas."

"Really? I do envy you. You couldn't use an aging but agile redhead to hand you props, could you?"

"Matter of fact," said Billy, "I'm doing a single."

"Yes," said Lee, a little maliciously. "So I see by the papers. . . . Or don't we talk about that?"

"You mean Diane?" Billy shrugged. "What's there to talk about? It was just—you know—one of those things."

"Those many things," reflected Lee.

"Not so many," said Billy. "You know

me, baby; I get a night off, I like to sit home with my feet in the oven. That stuff you read about me and the ladies, ninety-nine per cent of it's malarkey. The studio giving me the old Lothario build-up. Why, gosh, most of 'em I didn't even get palsy enough with to tear their hair nets."

"Hm, hair nets," said Lee. "That dates you, brother."

"You're not kidding," said Billy somberly. "I'll be forty in a couple of months."

"Forty-two," said Lee.

BILLY grinned. "I should've stayed married to you," he said. "Then you couldn't testify against me."

"And that brings us right back to Miss Diane Crane," said Lee. "I gather she's threatening to have the law on you."

"She'd better not try," said Billy. "Funny thing," he went on; "that whole business started as a gag. You know the setup: Star makes protégée of bit-player—big photographs of him coaching her in his dressing-room between takes—on the beach, reading a water-repellent copy of Shakespeare—at the circus, nibbling caviar out of an ice-cream cone. Crash! Boom! Bing! Love sets in—until the picture's released."

"Only, in this case, I take it, love really did set in?"

"Love, or a reasonable facsimile thereof. Diane had her points."

"A wonderful cook, I suppose," murmured Lee.

"A crackajack," said Billy. "The thing was, I already had a cook; people might have thought I was hoarding 'em. Besides, she has a mother." He shook his head. "Her name's Lily-Ida—that gives you a rough idea. And there were other things. What it all simmered down to—Diane just isn't the kind of gal you want for a wife."

"What kind do you want?"

"Somebody more like you, I guess," said Billy. "You know, I still can't figure out why things went sour on us all of a sudden. I'm not such a bad guy, am I?"

"At times," said Lee, "you are a surly, temperamental, thickheaded, egotistical baboon. But just the same," she added, "I was nuts about you."

Billy blinked. "You were?" he said. "You were?"

"I certainly were," said Lee. "For months and months after the decree was final my heart was nothing but a mass of scar tissue."

"You poor kid," said Billy sympathetically.

"Yes," said Lee, "I was an object of general pity. I couldn't so much as look at a beer glass without wanting to cry in it. But then, thank God, pride came to my rescue. I forced myself to have a henna rinse, facial, manicure, pedicure—the works—and, believe it or not, that very evening a man came into my life."

"What man?" snapped Billy.

"Frank Sinatra," said Lee. "And ever since I've spent all my nights by the radio, sewing on a pair of tiny blue bobby-sox."

"Ah, nuts!" said Billy. "I bit, but good! You really had me going; I thought you were handing me the straight dope. . . . Come on; loosen up. Who is your big moment?"

"A guy by the name of Legion," said Lee. "I've been playing the field," she amplified, when Billy looked puzzled.

"So? You didn't used to be a Rover Girl. What's the big idea?"

"Well, it's fun to shop," said Lee, "but you know how things look when you get them



Now let's talk about you. I

"Hold it! There's just one thing I've got to know— When you walked out on me, was I know this sounds corny—but was it because I was doing so good in the fillums?"

Lee nodded. "Yes, I suppose it did. It wasn't just that overnight you were a big success, and I was suddenly a home-girl—"

"But we went into that! You could have had a picture job. I could have had 'em write in my contract."

"As I recall," said Lee, "Sid Landseer, that shady agent of yours, made the crack that your contract had as many riders as a Central Park pony on a sunny Sunday, even without what he called the 'wives and brothers-in-law clause.' But it wasn't my career that was worrying me, Billy; it was yours. There you were, after years of plugging away in burlesque and cheap floor-shows and Number Two companies, and at last you get your foot in the door in that Hartman musical; you really go to town. Everybody says you're the comedy find of the year! And then Hollywood lifts its pinky and—"

"Hang on to your hair, friend," said Billy.

The way I remember it, you were against going to the coast because you thought I'd be lousy in pictures."

"To be exact," stated Lee, "I said your type of comedy wouldn't get across on the screen. But I guess we'll never find out. You seem to be permanently typed as Handsome Hero."

"Just the same," persisted Billy, "you've got to admit I've been doing all right, kid."

"You've been doing dandy. But—the whole idea was that you'd pick up some quick dough, and then we'd beat it back to Broadway."

"HOW could I know I was going to hit the jack pot?" said Billy. "And, gosh, when I did, it would've been insane not to cash in. I mean, why the hell should you go into a tailspin just because I saw my way clear to loading you with rocks?"

"I've told you," said Lee. "I was nuts about you. So I couldn't stand it."

"Stand what, for God's sake?"

"Seeing you make a prize jackass out of yourself. Kicking money around, supporting sixteen stooges, shooting up the town every night."

"But everybody acts like that, at first," said Billy sheepishly. "It was only a phase, see?"

"That's what I thought for a while," said Lee. "But you showed no symptoms of snapping out of it; and you signed that long-term contract, in spite of what you'd promised me. And when you made that play for the Russian doll I decided it was high time we got shet of each other."

"It was vice versa with the Russian doll," Billy protested. "And I'm quitting pictures now, see?"

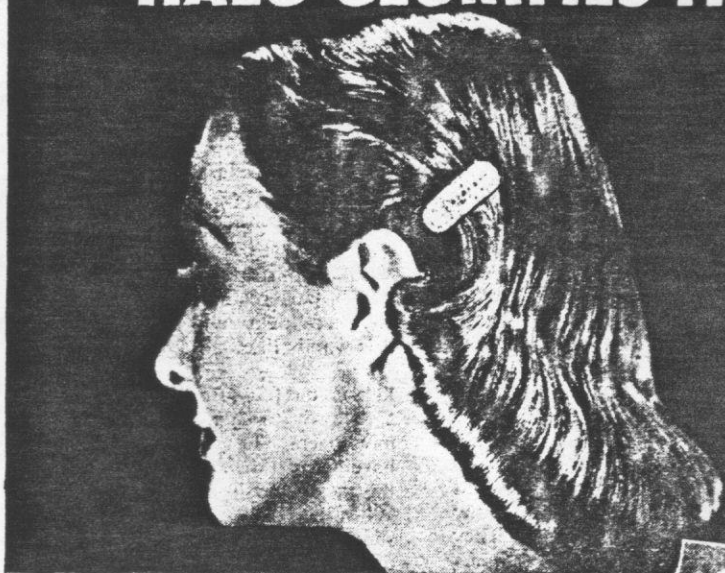
"Oh, sure," scoffed Lee. "That's why you're roughing it, up here in M-K-G's little rose-covered palace."

"No; on the level," said Billy. "After this overseas tour I'm going to be doing business at the old stand. I've told those jerks at M-K-G where they get off!" He snorted. "They think I can't handle comedy, huh?"

Why, I could play that guy in *Happy Days* in my sleep! But I wouldn't take the part now, not if they offered it to me on a platter of steak! I'm through with Hollywood. . . . Well, so why don't you say something? Don't just sit there giving me the fishy eye!"

"Right now," said Lee, "what interests me

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- |                                | YES                      | NO                       |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Do you have headaches?         | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Do you lack pep or vim?        | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Do you get irritable easily?   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Do you feel depressed—nervous? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

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is lunch, which maybe you remember I was invited for. The mention of steak—"

"I get it," he burst out. "You don't think I've got anything on the ball any more! You think that just because I read a lot of sappy lines in pictures I've lost the touch! Well, let me tell you—"

"For heaven's sake, stop jumping around," said Lee. "Sit down."

"I'll be damned if I'll sit down!" said Billy violently. "What is this complex everybody back here's got, that just because a guy's been in pictures, he's not fit to mingle with the citizenry?"

"So everybody has a complex but you," said Lee. "If that's the way you really feel, my advice to you, mister, is you'd better go split a personality with some good psychoanalyst."

"Listen," said Billy through clenched teeth. "Why do you think I stopped coming back here? First year or so I'm on the coast, every chance I get I hop a plane, I'm so anxious to see my old pals. Pals! Yeah! I blow into the Stork, glad hand well out, and what do I get? The mental hot-foot, that's what I get! A bunch of snide remarks about how do I like plantation life—"

"Plantation life?"

"That's their dumb way of hinting I sold myself down the river. They ask me if it's my own hair, or did it come with the hat. They want to know is it true I'm gonna do *Hamlet* in technicolor, and will I play it in white-face, black-face, or red-face? They say, no kidding, do I have a sunken bath with a springboard—"

"So what?" said Lee impatiently. "Good Lord, Billy, many's the time I've heard you riding some bozo you thought needed whitening down. Naturally, they were primed to pin your ears back."

"This was different," said Billy grimly. "I don't mind the razzberry; I know that's strictly the voice of sour grapes. But it was the way they acted after we'd all had a few drinks. As if Billy Bolton was dead—as if I was some other guy."

"AREN'T you ever going to face it? You are some other guy. You can't have it both ways. You can't be both Zilch the Zany and Smoldering Steve the Smoothie—at least, not till the day comes when they start playing love scenes for belly laughs!"

"To hell with what I do on the screen!" shouted Billy. "I can still be a regular guy, can't I?"

"I expect that's what the boys at the Stork Club were trying to find out," said Lee. She eyed him searchingly. "And if you couldn't laugh off a few wisecracks—if you were sucker enough to let them get a rise out of you—why, sweetie, I guess you should have stayed in Hollywood."

"At least," said Billy furiously, "I've got a few friends out there."

"Only a few?" said Lee. "I understood you had all the friends money could buy." And then, impulsively, "Ah, baby, I shouldn't have said that. Forgive me, will you? You have lots and lots of—"

"Skip it," said Billy. "And, anyway, you're a hundred per cent correct. A boy's best friend is his bank roll. . . . Uh—let's have a drink, why not? I'll send Eddie Irish out to keep you company while I rustle up the booze."

As he disappeared inside, Lee heard several voices raised in argument, among which she recognized Sid Landseer's penetrating whine and Mac Fuller's more soothing chest tones. A door slammed, shutting off the sounds of

# TRICKS OF BATTLE

By ARTHUR LANSING



SCREAMING PLANES, rushing tank monsters, infantry pushing forward with guns spitting death—these are just part of the story. Here are a few of the front-line ingenuities which, perhaps as truly as anything else, provide a vivid picture of what this war is like. . . .

IT'S an old trick, stretching wire across a roadway to stop enemy motorcycle messengers. But Yugoslav guerrillas have given it a new twist. They string the line diagonally at a 30-degree angle. When the Nazi cyclist hits the wire, he slides to the side of the road into a ditch where the guerrillas are waiting for him. And the road is left clear to catch another unsuspecting cyclist.

JAP cleverness showed up again at Tulagi. This time: wooden bullets. They were designed for troops whose job was to infiltrate behind American lines, shoot Yanks in the back. Wooden bullets travel just far enough to hit our boys but not to reach Jap troops attacking from the front.

ANOTHER sly Nip trick: They cut paths through the jungle that cross right in front of their pillboxes. If American patrols aren't wary, they follow what seems like the only visible natural passage through the thick growth, and get picked off.

OUR soldiers in Italy have learned a hard lesson. They no longer tell captured enemy sentries to put up their hands. The Nazis often carry bombs, about egg size and shape, which they hold in their palms and toss forward.

IN FRANCE, guerrillas sabotage enemy vehicles parked in the street at night by putting three or four lumps of sugar into the gas tank. After a few miles, the car stops running.

THE DANES wreck Nazi vehicles at night by rigging a couple of old car headlamps, fed by dry batteries, across a sharp road curve. Just as the car reaches the curve, the lights are suddenly switched on and the glare almost never fails to cause the driver to swerve sharply and crash.

EVEN a dead Jap's water can't be trusted. American soldiers have learned the hard way never to drink water out of a Jap's canteen unless he has just been killed. The enemy have been known to poison the canteens of their dead

battle, and in a few moments Eddie slouched out on the terrace, looking more harassed than usual.

"To think," he grumbled after he had greeted her, "I had a chance to be a horse thief and I passed it up for the press-agent racket!"

"What's the current headache?" asked Lee.

"I got so many I can't keep 'em separate: It's not enough I've got the papers on my neck about this Crane cookie, I have to listen to Sid Landseer screaming all morning."

"What gives?" said Lee.

Eddie searched his pockets for a cigarette, and finally took one from Lee. "Billy is all hot on this idea he's gonna make a comeback as a comedian. He's got to get that out of his system before he'll talk turkey with Sid or anybody."

"He's serious about it, then?" said Lee.

"So he says, anyway. Can you imagine? A guy that drags down five grand a week—and he talks about making a comeback!" He wagged his head sadly. "Boy, oh, boy, what a screwball!"

"I don't see anything screwy about wanting to do the job you do best," said Lee. "And Billy was darned near tops as a comic. Did you ever see him work?"

"Yeah, he was terrific," said Eddie. "But time marches on, girlie. You know how it is—a fella lays off three months even, he gets out of the groove. Only, try and tell Billy that! He's just like every other actor—he don't know his ear from a hole in the ground. I guess it's too much to expect him to know when he's well off."

"IT MAY be," said Lee sweetly, "he doesn't even realize how lucky he is to have you and Mr. Fuller doing his thinking for him."

"Aw, now, don't get me wrong," said Eddie. "Personally, I think Billy is a very sweet guy. I just don't like to see him make a sap out of himself, that's all. Believe me, sister, after Sunday night Billy is going to be all in the spirit of singing 'Let's Be Buddies' with M-K-G."

"What do you mean? What happens Sunday night?"

"Didn't he tell you? He's doing a guest shot on the Allen show," said Eddie, "and the poor dope's got some idea he's gonna match wits with Fred. Now you know! Billy tries to get smart, Allen will unleash a flock of ad libs. I'll have him so dizzy he'll feel like a yoyo top in a whirlwind." He flipped his cigarette over the parapet. "It's going to be murder!"

"I can see," began Lee dryly, "that you'll be a tower of—"

And then she broke off, for Billy had come out of the apartment, followed by a waiter with a tray of drinks.

"Here you are, baby," he said. "Gnaw on a daiquiri while we order lunch."

"You haven't time for lunch now," said Eddie. "We've got to leave in ten minutes. . . . The rehearsal for the Allen show," he told Lee.

Billy snapped his fingers. "Hell, I'm sorry, baby. We got to gabbing, I didn't realize it was so late."

"Would it be against the rules for me to sit in?" Lee asked. "At the rehearsal. I mean. Because I'd love to."

Billy hesitated. "I don't see why you can't," he said at last. He forced a laugh. "I'm gonna need someone to hold my hand."

"Not as much as you're going to need



Someone to hold your tongue," said Eddie early.

At the CBS reception desk, Keogh and Sid were waiting with Allen's press agent, Irving Mansfield, who greeted them and led the way in the rehearsal studio.

There was always a feeling of tension, of pressure and suspense, in a broadcasting studio, Lee thought. You sensed it even in the quiet corridors. The world was tuned in on this building, and you couldn't forget it. You kept looking at the time; you found yourself checking your watch with the studio clocks. Visitors, Lee noticed, lowered their voices, as if they were afraid a too-loud word might accidentally be picked up and transmitted over the air. In fact, it seemed to Lee that everyone she saw—habitues and visitors alike—behaved with an extra self-consciousness, an overdone usualness, like people pretending they didn't know they were being photographed.

As they reached the studio in which the company of the Star Theater was assembled, Billy hung back to speak to Lee.

"Maybe you better kick me for luck," he said. "From what Mansfield tells me, the rehearsal's as much of a show as the broadcast. And," he added ruefully, "it lasts three times as long."

"What's ninety minutes?" said Lee. "You made me laugh for nine solid years." And, as Eddie opened the door, "You're on, baby! Hit it hard and cut it deep!"

There was, thought Lee, a certain slap-happy resemblance between Billy's reception of Fred Allen and the arrival of a visiting monarch at the court of a fellow potentate. Standing by the microphone (the imperial

symbol), flanked by his agent, press agent, the advertising agency's agent, representatives of CBS and the sponsor, the senior members of the cast, Mr. Allen greeted Mr. Bolton, who, in turn, was attended, as befitted his rank, by agent, press agent, business manager, M-K-G representative, and ex-wife. And, as is customary in the presence of royalty, the members of both retinues were bareheaded; only the star and the guest-star retained their hats.

Right in the best court tradition, moreover, was the opening exchange of compliments, in which Fred said it was great to have Billy there, and Billy said it was great to be there; Fred's agent, Walter Batchelor, remarked that Billy was looking great, and Mac Fuller, quick as a wink, countered with the information that Fred was looking great, too; Irving Mansfield expressed his belief that it would be a great show, and Eddie, not to be outdone, asserted that with a couple of great performers like Fred and Billy, it certainly ought to be a great show.

WHILE the head men continued to peck each other with tired noseays, Mrs. Allen came over to speak to Lee. A small, chic woman with a charming voice, she bore not the slightest resemblance to the character she portrayed on the radio—the Portland whose lunatic comments, delivered with mad-denying complacency in a far-from-tinkling soprano, instantly evoked the picture of a glassy-eyed village maiden who, during early infancy, had been dropped on her head.

All during her chat with Portland, Lee kept an ear cocked in Billy's direction and, every now and then, caught a fragment of repartee

which indicated that the handshaking preliminaries were over, and that proceedings had advanced to the stage of Lighthearted Banter and Good-natured Insults (with the 32-ounce gloves).

"Come on over and say hello to Fred," Portland suggested to Lee, at last. "He'll probably be tied up after rehearsal, and I know he won't want to miss seeing you."

They crossed over to the group around the mike, and began to make their way through the circle of listeners.

"You and Fred have known each other quite a while, haven't you?" Laury Harding, the program director, was saying.

Billy nodded. "Matter of fact," he declared, "we met back in the days when people used to think he was a second Fred Allen."

"That's right," drawled Fred. "And, believe it or not, Laury, I knew Billy long before he became a pin-up boy. Why, I can remember him when he was just a man."

This remark caught Billy cleanly on the button. Too dazed to come up with anything in return, there was nothing for him to do but cover up and spar for time. "Uh, yes," he said lamely. "Our paths have crossed before, all right, all right."

"This is the first time we've ever tripped over them, though," observed Fred.

At this point, Lee took it upon herself to secure Billy a breather. "May I get in on these reminiscences?" she asked.

"Fred, you know Lee Curtis," said Portland.

"Why, sure. How are you, Lee?"

"Prettier than ever, I keep kidding myself," said Lee. And, noting that Billy still appeared

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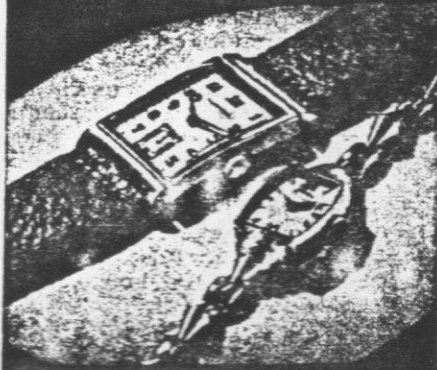
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to be groggy, she added hurriedly, "I was just telling Portland about the first time I met you—when you were in *The Little Show*. Do you remember your first entrance? There's a shot, and all the chorus girls come rushing out, half dressed—"

"Half half dressed," amended Fred. "That was a hot summer."

"And then you came on, and gave all the gals the once-over—"

"And why not? I was supposed to be a detective looking for clues. I remember I had a line: 'Gad, I'd better get out of here before I pull a bloomer!'"

"Well," said Lee, "I was supposed to be a chorus girl, and a pair of the bloomers you didn't pull were on me."

"By golly, they were," said Fred, "and if we only had those bloomers now, our reunion would be complete. Let me know the next time you're coming around, and I'll be waiting for you in my reunion-suit."

"Say, look, I hate to break up this old-home week," said Laury Harding, "but we'd better get rolling, hadn't we?"

Fred glanced at the clock. "Jeepers!" he exclaimed. "Half past one! This rehearsal is off to a flying standstill. Okay; let's go!"

AS FRED and Jimmie Wallington, the announcer, stepped to the mike to begin the commercial, a sort of division of the sheep from the goats took place, members of the cast and the production staff remaining in the front of the studio, the executives, entrepreneurs, and innocent bystanders retiring to seats in the rear.

Lee was shown to her place by a genial-looking white-haired gentleman known as Uncle Jim. Uncle Jim, a former vaudevillian, had for some years been Fred's man Friday (and every other day of the week, too), performing widely assorted duties as trouble-shooter, smoother-over, brusher-offer, and general looker-outer.

Lee knew that the first fifteen minutes of the Star Theater broadcasts followed a regular pattern: the opening exchange between Fred and Jimmie, then Portland's entrance and her spot with Fred, and finally their visit to "Allen's Alley," that fabulous cul-de-sac inhabited by amiable crackpots ready to speak their minds on any conceivable subject at the drop of a cue. It was not until after the second commercial, and vocal and orchestral numbers, that the guest-star was introduced, so until then, at least, Lee could relax and enjoy herself.

Now that the decks were cleared for action, she was surprised to see that, in addition to Fred, Portland, and Jimmie Wallington, there were only four other members of the regular cast, but, since each one was an expert in a variety of characterizations—and with the sound-effects man to supply crowd noises—radio listeners would be justified in supposing that the program used a vast corps of performers. The orchestra was not present at this rehearsal, but the maestro, Al Goodman, was on hand, and a pianist to supply background and transition music.

As was often the case, the script had been built around a leading topic of the day, and, since June was the month of the Republican Party Convention, Fred's opening routine had a distinctly political tone. Fred, it seemed, was toying with the idea of being a candidate for chief executive himself, news which sent Portland off into gales of laughter.

"What is there so funny about my run-



The Month's AMERICAN  
Mystery Novel

ning for President?" Fred wanted to know.

"Why, we've already got a President," she pointed out. "I saw it in the papers."

"His term of office expires in January," Fred explained. "That's why we're having an election."

"But, Mr. Allen, why are you running for President?"

"Why not?" demanded Fred. "Everybody else is."

"My mother thinks Mr. Roosevelt is just wonderful on the radio," Portland confided. "She thinks it's a shame he didn't make a career of it."

"He did," observed Fred. "If you don't believe me, just look up his Crossley rating—it's higher than Jack Benny's blood pressure."

"But, Mr. Allen," objected Portland, "you always told me Jack Benny didn't have any blood."

"No, Portland, I only said he was so niggardly with it, he let his pet mosquito starve to death. . . . But let us not dwell on the picayune pantaloons of Pomona. . . . Tell me: If I get the nomination, may I count on your vote?"

"Oh, no!" she said, shocked at the idea. "I always vote for Mr. Roosevelt."

"Force of habit, eh?"

"But," she added kindly, "you'd be my second choice."

"Hm!" said Fred. "That's just dandy. 'That's a great comfort. Think of it—Fred Allen: The People's Second Choice!'"

Undaunted, however, Fred concluded that it might be a good idea to take the public's pulse before deciding on his platform, and suggested to Portland that they visit the good folk of Allen's Alley.

"All right," agreed Portland. "Shall we walk?"

"Walk!" exclaimed Fred. "No, indeed! As Mr. Willkie once said to Mr. Dewey, 'Let's run!'"

THE inhabitants of Allen's Alley—Senator Bloat, an old-line politician propelled entirely by wind; Mr. Rappaport, the sage of the corner delicatessen; Mrs. Prawn, a beset housewife to whom everything happened—in spades; and Falstaff, mellow-voiced poet-laureate of the stuff-and-nonsense muse—all were champing at the bit, anxious to speak their minds. But for the time being, at least, they were doomed not to be heard from. For as Fred—abetted by the sound-effects man—knocked on the first (imaginary) door, the very real and substantial door to the studio swung open, and a number of very real and substantial persons swarmed in.

Even if she had not guessed the identity of the first three newcomers, Lee would have known something special was cooking, for several gentlemen of the press, equipped with copy-paper and cameras, were hard at their heels.

Of the three central figures, two had been in the news often enough before to be quite easily identified. The pudgy man with bushy hair and octagonal pince-nez, sprucely clad in an oyster-colored gabardine suit and peach shirt, was, of course, Benedict Z. Zinzer, the Los Angeles lawyer who had earned a name—in fact, several names—in the legal profession

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as a champion of outraged womanhood—and, in particular, womanhood which was under thirty, photogenic, and had been outraged by a gentleman of means. Although eloquent in the courtroom, Mr. Zinzer much preferred to try his cases in the newspapers, working on the theory that though he might be fresh out of the good, honest bread of admissible evidence, he could still win over the populace by letting 'em eat cheesecake. And it must be admitted that though many of Mr. Zinzer's cases had no legs to stand on, other than those belonging to his clients, the publicity was usually so sensational that the defendants hollered "Uncle!" and made with the checkbook long before their scheduled day in court.

THE young lady on the counselor's arm had all the outward qualifications of the perfect plaintiff. She was a real Zinzer girl from the tips of her open-toed antelope pumps all the way up—and a pleasant trip it was—to the tiny pancake hat, which was held in place by some concealed mechanism. In addition to her legs, the tourist eye might well note and approve her shoulder-length champagne-colored locks framing a set of features which could hardly fail to give almost any man ideas.

All this, however, would have had no value to Benedict Z. Zinzer unless it had been outraged by a person of the required financial standing; and in this department, too, the young lady was well up to the mark. For, thanks to the studio publicity and to Eddie Irish, the world was well aware that the maiden had found favor in a very solvent film star's eyes; and if that wasn't an outrage, it would certainly do until one came along. Yes, definitely, the case of Diane Crane vs. Billy Bolton was well adapted to Mr. Zinzer's special talents.

It was the third member of the party, however, who sounded the trumpet-blast which opened the assault on Mr. Bolton's good name and good money. This lady was evidently torn between the hope she would be taken for Diane's elder sister and the desire to make the most of her status as a sorrowing mother valiantly standing by her chick. Unwilling to doff the picturesque habiliments of a Hollywood debutante, she had compromised by adding a headdress, complete with veil, faithfully copied from a picture of the late Queen Marie of Rumania. In point of fact, Lily-Ida Crane looked like a cross between the world's oldest Little Eva and the world's toughest Charlie's Aunt.

Now, detaching herself from Diane and Mr. Zinzer, she confronted the popeyed speculators, and, after a quick gander around to make sure the press photographers weren't caught napping, pointed an accusing finger at Billy.

"There he is!" she bawled in a husky growl. "Don't let him get away, the dirty little rat!"

"Oh, for heaven's sake, shut up, Mamma," said Diane. "Let Mr. Zinzer do the talking."

Billy stood, helpless and horrified, between the two baleful women who had converged upon him.

But now the general paralysis induced by the unexpectedness of the interruption was suddenly replaced by the most frenzied activity. Agents and press agents and studio staff members of all denominations poured forth and flung themselves upon the intruders. Trained for just such emergencies, they formed

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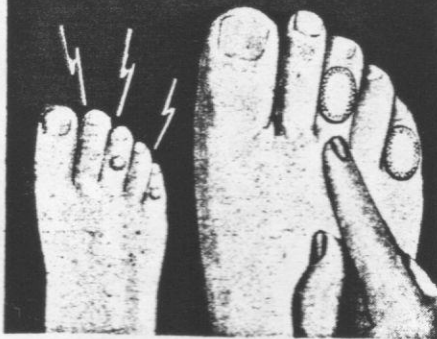


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a flying wedge and, despite a steady flow of threatening legal verbiage from Mr. Zinzer, Diane's ear-piecing squeals, and Lily-Ida's far-too-successful impersonation of a baying hound, succeeded in hustling them out in the corridor, and the reporters along with them.

As the awful sounds gradually died away in the distance, Fred turned to Billy.

"These autograph-hunters," he said, with truly royal tact.

If it had happened anywhere else, and if his state of mind had been anywhere near normal, the descent of the ladies Crane would not have devastated Billy so completely. Unfortunately, during the half-hour prior to their arrival, he had been experiencing all the emotions of a fighter who returns to the ring convinced that he is as good as ever, and, before the end of the first round, discovers that his timing is off, his footwork clumsy, and his punch conspicuous by its absence.

Given a little more time, Billy would have snapped out of this defeatist mood. But he was still in the midst of presiding at his own post-mortem when Diane, Lily-Ida, and Benedict Z. Zinzer charged in.

He might have been able to laugh matters off if the incident had taken place on his own home-grounds in Hollywood, where such episodes were fairly routine, but that the scene should occur in Allen's back yard, in territory where he was not a star, but merely a visiting firecracker, and a damp one at that, went a long way toward making it the most embarrassing moment in Billy's life.

**I**NSTEAD of taking his cue from Fred and, for the present at least, glossing over the hullabaloo, Billy went into a first-class wing-ding. He characterized Diane, her mother, and Mr. Zinzer in a series of searing epithets, and described in sinister detail the fate in store for Miss Crane if she did not speedily disentangle herself from the Bolton ringlets. To the wide-eared listeners, it appeared a toss-up whether the morrow's headlines would carry the story of Miss Crane's assassination or of Mr. Bolton's succumbing on the spot to thundering apoplexy.

At what seemed awfully long last, Mac and Eddie succeeded in muzzling their master, and the rehearsal was able to continue, but, though it was not interrupted again, it could hardly be said to have gone with a swing. The sparkle would have to be injected at the dress rehearsal Sunday noon, by which time, it was to be hoped, Mr. Bolton would be under control.

As the company was preparing to go, Billy stammered a general apology for the display he had made of himself, and then, not unnaturally, felt that his next step should be to seek out the deepest, darkest hole in Manhattan and seal himself inside like a time-capsule; or, failing that, to get pie-eyed.

This latter course seemed the more feasible, and he resolved to take the necessary steps with a minimum of horsing around.

With his psyche in its present bruised and battered condition, Billy did not feel up to being sympathized with, and, as his retinue started toward him from the rear of the studio, he scrambled out the exit next to the control-room. Once in the clear, he made a beeline for a South Street bar, far down on the tip of the island.

Billy was aware that, in some circles, tying one on would not be considered the most rational approach to a problem, but drinking, at least, was something he could do unassisted by a stooge. When finally he ran out of money and was forced to telephone his fretting entourage to come and rescue him, he felt neither pain at the past nor fear for the future, and had absolutely no statement to make except: "What the hell, tomorrow's another day, what the hell!"

Tomorrow is, of course, another day; but it is not necessarily a better one. And actually, Black Friday was not even in the same league with Sable Saturday, as Billy discovered almost as soon as he awoke with, among other headaches, one directly traceable to overindulgence in alcohol. Now, he learned, he really had trouble.

The source of this information was Eddie Irish, who, accompanied by Mac and Meredith Crumberg, an eminent Eastern shyster Mac had dug up to match Zinzer, had just come



"If you must know—it fell off a desk!"



on a conference with Miss Crane and her adviser.

"I might as well slip it to you quick, kid," said. "It looks like, as of day and date, your shirt belongs to Daddy Zinzer."

"What's the matter with you?" snarled Billy. "Diane's got nothing on me. I never wrote her a letter in my life. Why should I? We can't read."

"Well, she must have learned about breach of promise by word of mouth, then," rejoined Eddie. "Anyway, that's the rap—or will be, if you don't shower down."

"You're crazy! You can't sue for breach of promise any more. I read that in the paper."

"Yeah? Well, maybe you can't sue here in New York, but there are about a dozen states where you can, and you and Diane hit about all those states on your personal appearance tour. She can take her pick of states, and you can bank on Lily-Ida backing her up to the hilt."

"That lush! She was never sober enough to remember if I promised anyone a drink of water!"

"She'll remember in court," Eddie said.

"SO WHAT? So they sue! So I breached a promise, it says here!"

"So she can blast you clean out of movies," Eddie said sourly. "Not that you care, of course. You're through with movies. But likewise the Army will cancel your tour. They're particular about who associates with our boys."

"Why, it's nothing but a lousy shake-down!" Billy said. "It's the damn'dest—!"

"Sure, it's a shakedown. But what are you gonna do about it? Go to jail?"

"I'll—I'll— How much do they want?"

"Hang on," said Eddie. "A hundred G's."

"Are you kidding?"

"What do you think?"

"But this—but they can't think I'd fall for no guy'd be such a—they can't get away with it."

"If you want a legal opinion," said Eddie, "Crumberg's outside. Shall I send him in?"

"No, no, for God's sake; I don't want to see anybody. I— Where's Mac?"

"On the wire to the coast; he'll be here in a minute."

"What did he—? I mean, he doesn't think I ought to—"

"Listen," said Eddie; "when Zinzer sprang this on us I thought Mac was gonna faint. That's how serious he thinks it is."

"He does, huh?"

Eddie nodded. "And you better get it through your head, too; those babies aren't bluffing. It's pay up, or else."

"But, a hundred thousand—"

"Yeah," said Eddie grimly. "They're not interested in fifty or seventy-five or ninety-five, even. A hundred thousand is the sum."

Mr. Zinzer wanted me to be sure and tell you."

Billy said what Mr. Zinzer was, and while he was still at it Mac came in. As Eddie had hinted, the business manager looked plenty worried. He glanced inquiringly at Billy.

"Our boy don't think they can do this to him," observed Eddie. "You talk to him, Mac. Tell him if he sees the light he's got to let it quick."

"How quick?" grated Billy.

"They want a down payment consisting of the works by Monday noon," said Eddie.

"The only break we got is today's Saturday."

"How do you figure this one, Mac?" asked

Mac hesitated. "I don't know what to tell you," he said.

"All right," said Eddie suddenly. "Be a sap, Bolton. Let 'em sue. Hire a flock of high-priced lawyers. Lose the case. Appeal. Lose the appeal. Appeal again. Lose that one. Keep it up till you've shot two hundred grand. In the end you land behind the eight ball, anyway. But it's your life, brother."

Billy looked at Mac, who said nothing. Then he began to walk up and down the room. A pile of newspapers on the desk caught his eye. He picked them up, and rustled through them, reading the headlines and the captions on the accompanying pictures: STAR DENOUNCED BY MOTHER OF JILTED SWEETIE—RAT, NOT WOLF, CLAIMS IRATE PARENT. . . . GLAMOUR GIRL SUPPLIES STATIC AT RADIO REHEARSAL—REUNION IN ALLEN'S ALLEY ENDS IN BUM'S RUSH. . . . EX-WIFE PRESENT AS DIANE CONFRONTS BILLY.

Dropping the last of the papers to the floor, he turned around. "Okay," he growled. "We pay."

"I'll call Zinzer," said Eddie.

He dialed the number. Mr. Zinzer answered with a promptness which indicated he must have been sitting on the phone. "The terms are satisfactory," said Eddie. "We'll see you, as arranged, on Monday." And he hung up.

"Now what do I do?" asked Billy. "Write a check?"

"It's not as simple as all that," said Mac.

"Eddie, tell Crumberg we won't need him any more today. Tell him I'll call him if anything new develops." After Eddie had gone, he turned to Billy. "We're going to borrow the money from M-K-G," he said.

"What do you mean—borrow it?"

"You need cash for this deal," said Mac, "and you haven't anything like enough on hand."

"Well, sell something, then. I don't want M-K-G doing me any favors."

"It won't be any favor," said Mac. "They'll advance a hundred thousand; and they'll get it back with five per cent interest."

"Advance it on what? You gonna give 'em a note and bunch of collateral, or whatever they call it?"

"We'll give them a note; but you'll have to sign a contract, too."

"A contract for what?"

"Why, to make pictures for them," said Mac impatiently. "The hundred thousand will be an advance on your salary. What it amounts to is they'll pay you twenty-five hundred a week, instead of five thousand, for forty-two weeks. Then you'll be square, don't you understand?"

"I DEFINITELY do not understand," said Billy. "I was under the impression I'm a rich guy; how about it?"

"Sure, you're rich."

"Well, if I'm so rich, why haven't I any money? Why should I have to borrow from anybody? Why should I have to work out a contract like I was cheap slave labor? Where in hell's all my dough? What have you done with it? Stuck it in a hollow tree and lost the combination? Or have you—?" He stopped abruptly. "Well?"

"Well," said Mac, "in order to realize a high yield, and, at the same time, protect your principal with diversified investments—"

"Don't hand me that double-talk! What I want to know is: Am I broke, and if so, why?"

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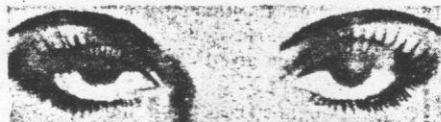
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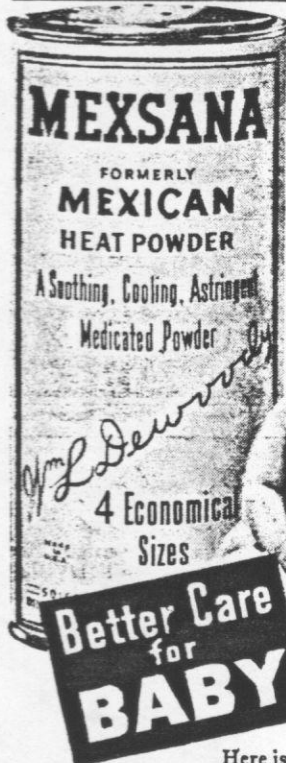


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"Of course you're not broke," said Mac. "That's absurd—a man with your earning power. I'm just trying to tell you that for the present—well, for one thing, because of your overseas tour, you'll be drawing no salary for the next couple of months, and I've had to reserve certain sums for special accounts, funds sufficient to take care of your tax installments as they fall due, payments on your various annuities—"

"All right, all right," said Billy wearily. "We'll go into it later; I'm not in shape to listen to you now. I need a drink."

Eddie stuck his head in the door. "Pull yourself together, kiddo," he said. "I've got some gag-writers here; they're going to go over the Allen script with you and see if they can't spot some places where you can sneak in a few extra laughs. If he can ad lib., you can, too. And Lee Curtis is on the wire. You want to talk to her?"

"I don't wanta talk to anyb— Yes, I do!" He picked up the phone. "Hello, baby." And then, putting his hand over the transmitter, "Go on; beat it. Get outta here, you two." . . .

THE dress rehearsal had been called for eleven o'clock Sunday morning and was to be held in Columbia's playhouse at 1697 Broadway, which also would be the scene of the broadcast that evening. This playhouse was formerly the Hammerstein Theater, and, except for the remodeling necessary to perfect the acoustics and permit the installation of a control-room and client's booth, the interior had been left unchanged.

When Billy and his quartet of retainers arrived at the stage door on Fifty-third Street, just around the corner from Broadway, they found Lee Curtis waiting outside.

"I didn't have the proper credentials to get by the doorman, I guess," she told Billy, "and I didn't want to bother Fred, so I just thought I'd wait until you showed up."

"You've become kind of a radio fan lately, haven't you?" said Mac. "I'd have thought you'd've had a bellyful of this show by now. God knows I have."

"I asked Lee to be here," snapped Billy.

"Yes," said Lee quickly. "I'm still chairman of the Hand-Holding Department." She looked at Billy. "Will we have time to go off in a corner for a little hand-holding now?"

"You'd better check in first, hadn't you?" said Eddie.

As he opened the door into the theater, Irving Mansfield popped out at them like a jack-in-the-box, wearing an expression in which professional cordiality and apprehension were not too subtly mingled.

"Oh, here you are!" he exclaimed. "I just got through calling the Staffordshire. We've been wondering where the—if you'd got lost." And, as the Bolton party filed past the doorman's cubicle and into the corridor which led to the wings, Mansfield pointed to an iron stairway adjacent to the entrance. "There's a dressing-room up there you can use," he told Billy. "After the first run-through, there may be a little delay. Maybe you heard: One of Fred's writers was inducted yesterday, and the other one called up bright and early this morning with the glad tidings he's got the whooping cough. So whatever fixing the script needs, Fred is going to have to do, himself."

"I guess I'm a hex," said Billy gloomily.

"Oh, now, none of that," said Mansfield with rather terrible cheerfulness. "Comes broadcast time, everything'll be as smooth as sirup."

"Cough sirup, huh?" suggested Eddie sourly.

"If you people want to go out front," Mansfield went on, "just carry on right down past the control booth. Or there's a cubbyhole back here we call the greenroom."

"Stick around, baby," said Billy to Lee. "We'll have a talk later." He turned to Mac. "We'll probably be here a couple hours," he said, "so you and Sid will have plenty of time to go in a huddle about that contract. And," he added venomously, "since you can't stand listening to the show, maybe Irving can find you a little soundproof niche where you two can be alone with your percentages."

"Yeah," said Eddie. "Keogh and I'll take turns passing out the aspirin. All we got to do is locate the water cooler and the lily cups."

"Shut up, and gimme my script," growled Billy. And when Eddie had handed it to him, he walked out on the stage, where Allen was standing by the mike with Laury Harding, the director.

The stage was lit and already set up for the evening's performance, but the auditorium was illuminated only by a worklight in one of the aisles. Most of the cast were in the wings or on-stage, but there was a sprinkling of people seated in the orchestra, and others standing outside the control booth. At all times, even when the rehearsal was actually in progress, people showed a disinclination to stay put, and there was a good deal of wandering around.

"I suppose Irving told you," Fred said to Billy. "My last remaining writer's just come down with the whooping cough." He shook his head. "That's the old draft headache," he said. "Now we have to take writers that are so young they haven't even finished having the children's diseases." He flicked the script which Billy was holding. "Too bad he couldn't have written a few whoops into this monstrosity; if there's a laugh in it, it's strictly noncontagious."

"Oh, I don't know," said Billy. "It seemed pretty funny to me."

"Yup," said Laury Harding. "I tell Fred he's too conscientious, but I guess he just likes to worry."

"If we were running a hatchery," said Fred, "I wouldn't have a care in the world. That script would lay enough eggs to make an omelet which'd cover the U. S. from coast to coast. But since this is supposed to be a radio show—well—" He shrugged and handed Billy a thick document which was black with marginal notations, deletions, and blends. "Better see if you can decipher this; there'll be some clean copies up in about an hour."

"But—but—" stammered Billy. "You don't mean you've thrown out that routine we do together, where I'm gonna be your campaign manager, and we talk about the ladies' vote?"

"See if you don't think this is punchier," said Fred. "And we'll probably be changing stuff around until air-time, so if you've got any suggestions don't hesitate to make 'em." He turned to Laury: "All right now; where's Wallington? I guess we can start."

WHEN Lee saw Billy leave the stage, she came around from her place in the audience, and, after hunting about, finally located him with Eddie Irish in one of the several rooms beneath the stage—rooms where later on the musicians would gather to wait their call, which also were used for the last-minute reading before the broadcast.

"So now whaddaya think's happened?" moaned Billy when he saw her. "Fred's





## The Month's AMERICAN Mystery Novel

ached scripts on me! I spent all yesterday afternoon and evening—uh—familiarizing myself with this setup, and now it's out!"

"He means," said Eddie, "he hired a couple of gag-men to cook him up some prepared ad lib, but now, with this new routine, he's got nothing to bounce 'em off of."

"As I remember," said Lee, "it was your idea to call in the gag-men."

"Yeah, that's right," said Billy. "That was Eddie's brainwave." And, as Eddie snorted and walked away, "But what the hell! He was just trying to help me out of a spot."

"Look," said Lee; "since when did you need anybody to needle up your wits? What if the routine has been changed? The angle's still politics, isn't it? And if you can't fit in some of your own gags that you've been getting laughs with, ever since you were knee-deep in a cracker-box, then, by golly, brother, you don't deserve the right to vote!"

"Aw, nuts," said Billy. "I'm so bollixed up now that if anybody asked me who was that lady they seen me with last night, I'd probably tell 'em. . . . It's no use tryin' to give me a pep-talk."

"Very well," said Lee crisply. "Keep right on beating your breast and moaning, if it makes you any happier." She took an envelope out of her purse. "I checked up on those figures you asked me about yesterday—aren't you interested in that any more?" And, as Eddie came in, she added hurriedly in a low voice, "Here—stick this in your pocket, and look it over when you get the chance."

"If you kiddies will cut out passing notes and whispering," said Eddie, "maybe Master Motion will condescend to go up on-stage. They're waiting for him."

SINCE some sequences were gone over several times, the first run-through took nearly an hour. Then there was a brief break before the beginning of the second, which would be timed in order to determine whether the show was running long or short.

It was during the break that Fred called to Lee as she was crossing the stage on her way to the greenroom. He was standing by the mike, gnawing reflectively on a pencil and staring at a fistful of scribbled notes.

"I just had an idea for what might be a better pay-off to that sequence Billy and I have together," he said. "I don't see him around anywhere, but you know the way he does his stuff, so I thought I'd get your reaction."

"You bet," said Lee. "Shoot."

"Well, we'd slant it that Billy is after the presidential nomination, too, and he wants to make a deal so I'll swing my votes to him. He says if he's elected he'll appoint me ambassador-at-large, and I say that sounds more like a job for Bob Hope, but he says, no, I'd get to meet some civilians, too. . . . 'It's a wonderful life,' he goes on. 'Think of it! Breakfast in Moscow, lunch in London, and dinner in New York.' And I say, 'Hm! I'd be nothing but an international table-hopper!' and Billy says, 'Oh, there's more to it than that. On all your trips, you'd observe conditions.' And I say, 'What conditions?' and he says, 'Well,

one condition would be that you'd pay for the gas.'"

Lee laughed. "It's funny, all right," she said, "but, frankly, Fred, what with one thing and another, Billy is in kind of a tailspin, and I think it might be wiser just to let well enough alone. I mean, the less you change the routine that's set, the better off he'll be."

"Heck," said Fred, "I'm not trying to cross the guy up. It just occurred to me that this might go better, that's all; it's a fresher twist, and—"

"I know," said Lee, "and it's swell of you to let him take the snappers, but—well, he's so rattled now, and so afraid he'll muff the lines he's already rehearsed, that—"

"Okay," said Fred. "Maybe you're right. We'll forget it."

WHEN the second run-through began, the show at last began to sound more as it would that evening, with something of the pace and punch and crackling vitality of a real performance. There had, however, been so many script changes that Lee thought it merely a new bit of business when Jack Smart, the portly, bearded gentleman who played Senator Bloat, hurtled on-stage, bellowing for Fred. "Call the cops!" he panted. "There's been a murder!"

Fred shoved his hat far back on his head and, after one exasperated grunt, turned his back on Smart. He signaled to the control booth and, addressing Laury through the mike said, "We'll take it back from the commercial. Start timing from Portland's—"

"For God's sake," roared Smart, "didn't you hear me? There's a dead woman in the upstairs dressing-room!"

"Oh, sure," snapped Fred, rounding on him. "A beautiful blond stranger about five foot six, weight one-twenty, clad in a pink satin bathing suit, high-laced wedgies, and a sash lettered in gilt. 'Miss Beer of 1944.'"

"No, no—you don't get it!" spluttered Smart. "I tell you—"

"And when last seen," continued Fred witheringly, the words coming out of his mouth in deadly bullet-shaped tones, "she was accompanied by a sinister slicker in a straw hat, striped suit, stag-tooth studs, and a steel stickpin, sitting stinking in a Stutz straight-six on the State Street side of the Statler. . . . This happens to be a run-through for a broadcast, Mr. Smart, not a rehearsal for horseplay and hot times in Paddy's back room; so if you'll—"

The rest of his speech was lost in a mighty, shattering noise, for Smart, in a transport of rage and frustration, had picked up a folding chair and smashed it against the proscenium arch, reducing it to kindling.

In the ensuing appalled hush, Uncle Jim's voice, weirdly unperturbed, could be heard at the backstage phone: "Sixteenth Precinct? . . . Is this Arnie? . . . Arnie, this is Uncle Jim Harkins. . . . What? Oh, I'm glad your missus enjoyed the show. But what I called about, Arnie, I think you'd better tell some of the boys to get right over to the Broadway playhouse. Tell 'em to come to the backstage entrance. . . . What? Well, uh, as a matter of fact, a body's turned up on the premises and—"

Allen did not wait to hear any more. With Irving Mansfield and Eddie Irish right after him, and the Star Theater troupe hard at their heels, he tore across to the stage-right exit, plunged through the wings, and clattered up the iron stairway to the dressing-room. At the



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# HYGEIA

NURSING BOTTLES  
NIPPLES AND  
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doorway he paused, the others crowding the landing behind him.

The little room was sparsely furnished with a pair of straight chairs, a chaise longue, a dressing table and mirror, and, in one corner, a playback attachment which enabled the room's occupants to hear what was going on down on the stage. Now, in addition, the room contained one other object: on the floor lay the body of a woman.

A single glance was sufficient to convince the most unobserving beholder that something had happened to this lady which no doctor could do anything about; and that Murder was the cause.

For a suspended and interminable moment, no one spoke. On the playback they could hear shouts and trampling noises, as the people who had been seated in the auditorium swarmed up on-stage; they could hear Uncle Jim's exhortations for calm, that the police were on their way.

Then, at last, Eddie Irish pushed past Fred into the room.

"Diane!" he blurted. "It's Diane Crane."

**A**LIVE, Diane Crane had converted a rehearsal into a riot; dead, she plunged it into chaos.

But long before the stunned agents, press agents, account executives, sponsor's representatives, and studio officials had grasped the full implications of Miss Crane's demise, long before questions of policy and prestige and protection had arisen, Lee, whose world was a good deal smaller, had realized what Diane's death must mean to Billy. For, not forty-eight hours before, he had declared that if that

lady continued to crop up in his life, he, personally, would supervise her extinction.

And where was Billy? Not there in the crowd outside the dressing-room; not on the stairway, nor in the corridor, nor the wings. Not on-stage, nor backstage, nor out front. Not in the client's booth, nor the control-room; not in the basement rooms. Afraid that questioning would only serve to point up an absence which must, she felt sure, already be conspicuous, Lee feverishly went back over the trail. And as she was completing a second circuit of the auditorium, she saw Billy emerge from the shadows at the back of the house and start down the aisle. Cutting across a row of empty seats, she managed to catch up with him before he reached the stage.

"Billy!"

"What the —'s going on?" he asked. "Has everybody blown their tops? I never heard so much cackling—"

"For the love of Mike, where have you been?" Lee demanded.

"Where do you think?" he said irritably. "Out in the lobby having a smoke. Anything wrong in that?"

"Out in the lobby? Was anyone with you?"

"Listen; I just went out for a smoke, see? Who would I take with me? A motorcycle escort?"

"How long have you been gone? Did anyone see you go?"

"How the hell would I know? And what's biting you, anyway? You sound like a dick in a Grade B whodunit. . . . Well, flatfoot, I'm not talkin'." And then, when he saw the expression on her face, "For God's sake, Lee, what's happened?"

She took a deep breath. "Diane Crane is dead. They—they just found her body."

"Dead?" He stared at her. Then, "Who says so? When did you hear? Are you sure?"

Lee nodded. "They found her upstairs in a dressing-room."

"Upstairs? Here? But that's—that's just not possible."

"That's not the worst," said Lee. "She—well, I heard someone say she'd been choked to death."

"No!" said Billy. "No!" For a long moment he continued to stare at her; then he began to fumble through his pockets for a cigarette.

**"BILLY,"** said Lee, "you've got to pull yourself together. The police are on the way; they may be here now."

"So what am I supposed to do?" he said roughly. "Go and give myself up? Or shoot my way out?"

"Stop that kind of silly talk!" flared Lee. "For once can't you behave like a rational human being instead of a tenth-rate ham? Nobody's accused you of anything."

"Don't worry; they'll get around to it," grated Billy. "Why, it's a natural. Who else but me would have bumped—but, damn it, Lee, I didn't! I haven't even seen the dame since that clambake on Friday."

"That's what people are going to ask you," said Lee. "So you'd better start thinking where you've been and who's seen you there. Because they'll check! . . . Now, come on. Let's go see what's what."

Billy hesitated, surveying the stage. Most of the cast, musicians, and production staff

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were milling about up there, all talking loud and fast. "Where's Fred?" he asked. "And where's my bunch?"

"I guess they're still in the greenroom," said Lee. "I saw them when I was looking for you. They were in a big huddle with Walter Batchelor and Irving Mansfield and God knows who all."

As they reached the stairs leading from the front of the house to the stage, Fred emerged from the wings with Laury Harding.

"All right now, everybody! Let's have it quiet!" shouted Laury. And when the buzz of talk had subsided, "Fred's got a few things to say to you. After he's finished, members of the regular cast and the production staff please stay on-stage; orchestra members report to Mr. Goodman in the musician's room; and visitors go to the greenroom. Is that clear?"

There was another outbreak of buzzing, which quickly died down when Fred came forward.

"First," he said, "I want to tell you that the police are here, and from now until further notice nobody's to leave the theater. I guess you people realize that you'll all be expected to answer a few questions, but it's nothing to get in a swivet about. Inspector Matson knows the situation here, he knows we've got a show to do tonight, and he's ready to co-operate with us in every way he possibly can—so let's do the same by him. He has asked me to say that if anybody has anything important to communicate—anything which might have a bearing on Miss Crane's death—don't wait till they get around to you, but go at once to the downstairs rehearsal-room."

He paused a moment, and then, when no one budged, went on: "I know it's natural, after what's happened, to want to talk about it and sort of blow off steam, speculating about things. But that doesn't mean we have the right to start tossing around names and making wild guesses. If you have any ideas, and facts to back 'em up, go to Inspector Matson or one of his assistants; don't discuss them with anybody else. And if you don't know anything, don't go pointing fingers at anybody."

THERE was a general murmur of assent. Fred's expression was unusually grave. "Until Matson makes a pinch, don't forget there's somebody floating around this theater who won't hesitate over a little matter of murder if he thinks the wind's blowing his way. I advise you to stick together and talk about the weather."

People looked at one another, doubt and fear on their faces.

"Okay," Fred said. "One thing more: Don't throw your scripts away. Where or when I couldn't tell you, but there'll be another run-through some time this afternoon."

As Fred turned to leave the stage, he saw Billy coming up the steps and went over to him. "You'd better beat it to the greenroom," he said. "Your manager and those birds from M-K-G are stomping around having kittens." "I'll bet," Billy said. "This is—this is kind of a thing, isn't it?"

"It's not good," Fred admitted.

"I seem to have missed the fireworks," Billy said. "Have the cops found out anything?"

"Jeepers, brother, they just got here! Matson's upstairs now with about six dozen scuths of all sizes and flavors. I don't suppose they'll start taking statements until they've had the joint apart and stuck it under a

slide, but I really haven't any idea how they're going to handle things. All I know is what I read in Dick Tracy. . . . Look; I'll see you later. I've got ninety different guys on my neck—and, after all, I only have the two heads."

There were policemen in the wings and the corridor outside the greenroom, and a continuous procession of grim-looking gentlemen hurrying up and down the iron stairway to the dressing-room. Uncle Jim and Joe Schuster, the doorman, were being marshaled down the steps to the basement rehearsal-room as Billy and Lee went by. Uncle Jim was still wrapped in his majestic calm, but the doorman was very obviously in a state of high tizzy.

AS FRED had intimated, Mr. Bolton's four musketeers had all the self-possession of men who expected a blockbuster to drop in on them at any moment. Pacing, nail-gnawing, brow-mopping, finger-tapping, water-drinking, pill-taking, and cigarette-shredding were going on like mad when Billy and Lee entered the greenroom. The stream of questions which burst at them simmered down to two things: Where had Billy been? and: How long had he been there?

"Believe it or not," Billy said, "I was in the lobby having a smoke. I don't know how long I was there—long enough to have a couple, three cigarettes. I went out right after the first run-through—it was a few minutes before twelve. I remember I figured I had plenty of time because Fred said it'd be a while before the second run-through started, and I don't come on till the last half. . . . The first I knew about anything was when I came back in and met Lee. . . . Now, is there any other information I can give you birds? Because, if not, there's a few things I want to ask you."

"Before you start asking," said Mac tensely, "maybe you'd better do a little listening. Eddie was with Mansfield and Uncle Jim when they questioned the doorman—that was before the cops came—and he says that Diane turned up here—guess when?—at five minutes of twelve. He says she asked for you, and he went to look for you but couldn't find you. So then he went back to tell Diane you didn't seem to be around anywhere and—guess what?—she was gone. The next person who saw her—"

"You mean who admits seeing her," corrected Eddie.

"—was Jack Smart. Uncle Jim saw him go up the stairs to the dressing-room, start to go in, stop, and shoot back downstairs like he had a rocket on his tail."

"I'll say he did," said Eddie. "I was standing in the wings with Irv, and he damn' near knocked us down getting on-stage."

"For your information," Mac went on, "the run-through began at 12:06 and was interrupted at 12:10:23—the boys in the control booth were holding a clock on it, see? So whoever it was that got to Diane must have done his stuff between five minutes of twelve and ten after. . . . And what do you think of that?"

"I'll answer that," Billy told his manager belligerently, "when you tell me what you think of this." He pulled out the envelope Lee had given him, and took out a typewritten sheet of figures. "This is one of the things that detained me in the lobby," he said, tossing it over to Mac.

"What gives?" Eddie inquired

"Ask Mac," Billy snapped. "Ask him how come last year I paid thirty thousand bucks



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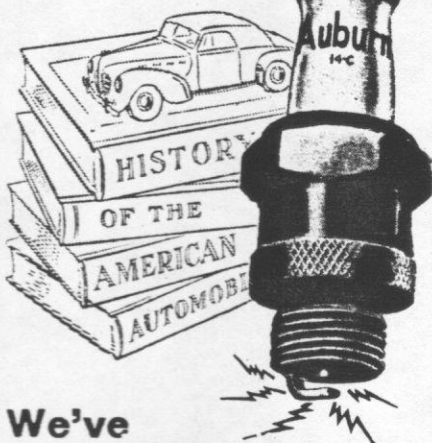
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more federal tax, and eight thousand more state tax, than I should have. Ask him if Uncle Sam got that thirty-eight G's, or if it's just in the books that way."

"Listen, boys," Sid said uneasily; "don't you think we're getting off the main subject of importance? I mean, the way I look at it, this isn't the time we should any of us go off maybe only half-cocked about something."

"Who's going off half-cocked?" Billy demanded. "You know how much money I've made and who's been handling it for me. And yesterday when Zinzer put the—"

"Shut up!" hissed Eddie. "Isn't it tough enough you haven't got an alibi, you want to yell at the top of your voice that you've got a honey of a motive."

"IT'S like I said," quacked Sid; "we all got to be much calmer. From experience I've had of a similarly comparable nature, my advice is to say absolutely nothing con mittal, unless your lawyer gives you the green light. Keogh's already contacted M-K-G, and they're gonna send over DeWitt Pulaski, only he's in the country, he can't get here right away. And Mac was in touch with Crumberg, but he's got this reputation for cutting corners, so we thought it's more dignified not to have him, not until there's an actual arrest."

"So," Billy said, "you guys had me in the can before you even knew whether or not I had an alibi. . . . I feel like a sinking ship leaving a buncha rats."

"Why don't you ask them where they were around noon?" Lee suggested.

"I was just getting to that," Billy said. "Well—Mac?"

"I happened to be in the client's booth," Mac said.

"Not by any chance all alone?"

"No," Mac said sweetly. "Not by any chance. Sid was with me."

"That's positively correct," Sid said. "We were going over your new M-K-G contract. Keogh was with us part of the time, but he went out—"

"And I came right to this room," Keogh said. "Portland and Jimmie Wallington were here—it was just after the first run-through. I stayed with 'em all during the break, and then I went out front when the second run-through was called. Maybe I was alone three minutes, but if you can make something of that, you're good."

"Well, you're all fixed up fine, aren't you?" Billy said acidly.

"Don't I get checked up on?" Eddie asked. "Just for the record, I was down in the basement—in the musicians' room—kibitzing a poker game. And then I came upstairs and was watching the second run-through with Mansfield, when Smart—but I already told you that."

"So I guess it just must have been a passing tramp that croaked Diane," Mac said.

"Ah-ah, now!" said Sid, as Billy made a move forward.

"Listen," Eddie said. "Mac and Billy and I have gotta make up our minds about something. So why don't you other people call up some more lawyers, or something?"

Sid and Keogh accepted this suggestion with alacrity, but Lee hung back, until Billy said, "You run along, baby. This is just between us boys."

"I'll do the talking," Eddie said, when they were alone, "and if you two guys have any sense you'll stay away from each other's

throats, or we'll never get this rap squared. You got to realize, Billy, that if it comes out about the breach of promise business and Mr. Z's play, you're a dead pigeon. But there's no reason why it has to if we three keep our traps shut. Z. isn't gonna stick his neck out, now that there's no chance of collecting, and I don't think Lily-Ida, the old bat, ever knew what the score was. Our angle is that Diane came back here, hoping if she made a big enough nuisance of herself you'd give her some dough just to get her out of your hair and turn off a lot of sappy publicity. I mean that ties in with what's been in the papers. How's it sound to you?"

"I'm not gonna do any lying for a guy that calls me a thief," Mac said.

"Well," Eddie said. "How about it, Billy? Is Mac a thief? Or do you want him on your side?"

"You're damn' right he's a thief," Billy said slowly. "And I don't want any part of him." He faced around toward Eddie. "What I got to know: Are you gonna lie for me?"

"Why not?" said Eddie. "I always have."

"Thanks, kid," said Billy. He flicked his eyes back to Mac. "I'm not making any deal with you, Fuller. If you feel like shooting off your trap, go right ahead. But the minute you start talking, so do I. If you play ball, maybe I'll give you a break; maybe I won't. And that's all I got to say." . . .

Inspector Matson of the Homicide Division was a tall, gangling, sloppily dressed man in his late forties, whose sharp gray eyes belied his easygoing manner. Matson had been on the Broadway beat for years. Celebrities were

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Nothing new to him. When he got home, his wife and three kids would be in his hair for days for a description of Fred Allen, Billy Bolton, and the rest of the people in the show. He would patiently recall every word the great Allen and the great Bolton had said to him, but to him they were just people like anyone else.

Matson was tired. The experts—fingerprint, photography, laboratory—had taken apart the tiny dressing-room where Diane had died and put it together again. The net result was a round zero. Inspector Matson himself had been at work on witnesses for more than two hours. He had come to certain conclusions. The case was really open and shut. All he needed was a few bits of positive evidence to hand to the District Attorney and his job was done. He wasn't worried about it. He'd get what he needed sooner or later.

Matson had finally found time to deal with a frantic group of gentlemen connected with the Allen show. They consisted of Fred himself, Fred's agent, the CBS representative, the sponsor's representative, and Sid Landseer and Mac Fuller representing Billy. They gathered in a small room in the basement of the theater next to the rehearsal-room. The gentlemen of the show had been waiting for Matson for a good hour when he arrived. Upstairs the theater had been taken over by the Gladys Swarthout show.

"Well, gentlemen," Matson said as he came in. "Sorry to keep you waiting. Anyone got a cigarette?"

Everyone had a cigarette. Everyone had a match. Everyone started to talk at once.

IT WAS Fred who got the floor. "Maybe it seems cold-blooded to you, Inspector, but we've got a show to do and we don't know where the hell we're at. . . . What about Bolton? Can he go on? What about restrictions on any of the rest of our people?"

"Even if he can go on, do we want him?" the sponsor's man said. "This kind of publicity, you know . . . bad stuff. Everybody in New York will have had the news flash over their radios by now. Can we afford at this time—?"

"You can't convict a man before he's convicted, can you?" Sid Landseer said. "We got an investment in Bolton, too. I mean, M-K-G has. Keep him off the air and you as good as call him a murderer."

"Maybe Billy would have grounds for a suit," Mac said. His face looked like damp putty. "Defamation of character, libel—"

"Quiet," Fred said. "Let's get Matson's angle before we start worrying about lawsuits."

Matson sighed and knocked the ash off his cigarette. "You better count Bolton out," he said. "The rest of your people are clear."

"You're arresting Billy?" Fred asked.

"I'm holding him," Matson said, "either as a material witness or on a direct charge of suspicion of homicide. I don't think there's much doubt about the answer, Mr. Allen."

"You got to have evidence, Inspector," Mac Fuller said. "You can't blast Bolton's career just on suspicion."

"Suspicion," in this case, is a technical term," Matson said. "I'll let you have it straight. The papers'll get it later. Let's add it up: Bolton claimed he was quitting pictures, see? Under no circumstances will he sign a contract unless he gets a certain part he wants. And then yesterday morning, right out of the blue, he changes his mind; he's practically

knocking Landseer down he's so anxious for a job."

"Is it a crime for a man to change his mind?" Mac asked.

"No, Mr. Fuller. No, it isn't," said Matson quietly. "The joker about this mind-changing is the studio's got to loan him a hundred grand in cash and they got to get the dough to him not later than ten A. M. Monday. You know, Mr. Fuller, when a guy like Bolton needs that much cash quick it means only one thing: Somebody's got their hooks in him."

"That's guesswork," Mac said, wiping his face with a large white silk handkerchief.

"Not entirely," Matson said. He sounded very tired. "Mr. Landseer contributed some information." Sid looked embarrassed as everyone looked at him. Matson went on: "After the murder had been discovered, Bolton blew his top with Fuller here, and later with Landseer. The deal's off. To hell with the loan; to hell with the contract. And why would he change his mind?"

"Like Mac said, it still ain't unconstitutional," Sid said.

"I'll tell you why he changed his mind." Matson's voice hardened. "Because the party who was going to collect that hundred grand has been taken dead. That's why. Bolton can't or won't explain why he needed the dough in the first place; he can't or won't explain why he doesn't want it now. If that doesn't tell the story I don't know what does. He's got a motive. He's threatened Diane Crane before witnesses. And he's the only person in this theater who doesn't have an alibi for any part of the twenty minutes before the Crane dame's arrival and the discovery of her body. He was out in the lobby smoking." Matson shrugged. "What more do you want?"

"Maybe I can explain about the hundred grand," Mac said. "I—"

"I wouldn't talk, Fuller," Fred interrupted, "if you're Billy's friend. Wait till his lawyer shows."

"That's good advice, Fuller," Matson said, lifting his sharp gray eyes to Mac's face. "If you're Bolton's friend."

Mac moistened his lips. "I don't like the way you say that."

"Don't you, Mr. Fuller? Well, I'll tell you why Bolton isn't locked up in the Tombs right now. I've had my eye on you!"

"Me!" Mac croaked.

"That's right, Mr. Fuller," Matson's voice was silky. "Anybody got a cigarette?"

Sid Landseer produced one. His hand shook as he held a match for it. "But Mac was with me," he offered. "At least, I think, according to what I hear about when the calamity took place."

MATSON ignored Sid. "I know why Bolton quarreled with you, Fuller. I got that from Miss Curtis. I know you've been taking him to the cleaners. A guy who's been making Bolton's kind of dough shouldn't have to swing a loan, even to pay off a blackmail demand. That's what it was. Blackmail. If you'd take him the way you have in your straight business dealings, maybe you'd cut yourself in for a piece of blackmail, too. I wondered if perhaps you weren't in cahoots with Miss Crane, her mother and her lawyer."

"That's crazy!" Mac said. "You've got no proof I've been gypping Billy. The Curtis dame don't like me. She always didn't like me."

"I figured," Matson said, "that maybe the Crane dame decided she could collect the

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whole chunk of dough without cutting you in. You wouldn't like that, Fuller. You wouldn't like it at all. Besides, you didn't know then that Bolton was wise to you. It would have been very much worth your while to keep the Crane dame quiet if you were on her team. I looked you over plenty, Mr. Fuller. I hate a chiseler."

"You got no right to—"

"I know, I know," Matson said wearily. "It's not my job to arrest you for embezzlement. That's up to the California authorities. Unfortunately, Mr. Landseer insists on providing you with an alibi. That leaves Bolton. Too bad. He's a nice guy."

Fred Allen shook his head. "I just can't go for it, Matson. Billy is no killer. Have you placed him at the actual scene of the crime during that twenty minutes?"

"He'll place himself there eventually," Matson said. "He'll crack. They always do." He signed. "Too bad. My wife is crazy about him in pictures. She'll probably blame me for not being able to see him any more." He stood up. "You're still not to leave the theater. I'm going to have another session with Bolton before I make the actual arrest. You can get food sent in if you like. I'll send a man for you. Sorry to put you on a spot, Mr. Allen, but I didn't think this up."

AS SOON as the inspector left, Mac Fuller slipped out of the room, mopping his face. Sid Landseer followed. Fred was left with his corps of assistants.

"What are you going to do, Fred?" the sponsor's man asked. "It's too late to find another guest-star."

"We'll have to dig something out of the files, won't we, Fred?" Laury Harding said. "Some sketch we've used before."

Fred nodded, but he didn't seem to be listening.

"Something we could freshen up with a few political gags to tie into the rest of the show," Harding said.

"Yeah," Fred said thoughtfully. "Yeah, that's an idea. You know, I'm no flatfoot, but I just can't see Billy strangling that dame. Do you suppose Fuller—?"

"We've got to snap out of it, Fred," the sponsor's man said. "That's not our head-ache. You got ten minutes of a show to fix over."

The people connected with the Swarthout show had left. Fred started up from the basement to the stage level. At the head of the stairs he met Lee. Her face looked drawn.

"Fred," Lee said, "can I see you alone for a few minutes?"

"Why, gee, Lee," Fred said, "I—" And then something in her expression got to him. He took her arm and led her through the corridor to the client's booth.

"I'll try to make this short," she said. "I know how many things you've got on your mind, and I—"

"Now, just take it easy," said Fred. "What can I do for you?"

"I can't ask you to keep any of this confidential," said Lee, "because it might—might make you an accessory-after-the-fact. But I'll go to Inspector Matson after I've talked to you. . . . You see, I'm the person who asked Diane to come here."

Fred blinked. "Oh," he said, "are you?"

"The reason why—" She hesitated. "Well, yesterday I learned from Billy that he was in a dreadful jam. He didn't want to go into detail over the phone, but, as I understood



## The Month's AMERICAN Mystery Novel

it, Diane and this lawyer—this Zinzer—had framed Billy in some way, so that it was a question of his paying them off or facing a nasty lawsuit. And so on Monday he was to give them a hundred thousand dollars."

"Matson already knows about the dough," Fred said. "That's an awful lot of money, Lee."

"Yes," said Lee, "and Billy didn't have it—not anywhere near that much."

"He didn't? But he's been making all kinds of jack in Hollywood. What's become of it?"

"That," Lee said, "is what puzzled Billy."

She went on to explain how Mac had been handling all Billy's affairs; how he had tried to stall Billy with talk of taxes and special accounts; and how Billy apparently had accepted his explanation, but actually had decided to investigate matters.

"Billy knew there wasn't time before Monday to find out anything from the California end," said Lee, "and he's awfully vague about finances in general. The only thing he did know was his 1943 income, and the amount Mac told him he had paid out in taxes. So he asked me to get hold of a tax expert and check up—see if there was a discrepancy between the amount actually due and the figure Mac had given him."

"And was there?"

"Was there? Mac's figure was just thirty-eight thousand dollars higher than the government man's! And what do you want to bet that Mac Fuller, not Uncle Sam, pocketed that odd thirty-eight thousand? What do you want to bet that Fuller's been milking him a hundred other ways, all the years he's been handling Billy's funds?"

"Mayor La Guardia keeps us kids after school if we bet," Fred said cautiously.

"What's Billy have to say about all this?"

"I didn't have a chance to go into it with him. I gave him the paper with the figures, but that was right before the first run-through; he had to go on. Since then—well, you know, he's had other things on his mind."

"You said you asked Diane to come here," Fred reminded her.

"AFTER I got hold of the tax man," said Lee, "I got to wondering if maybe there wasn't some way of getting Billy out of this jam. I've got him out of jams before. He—oh, he's not stupid, but he's lazy—he just doesn't use his head. He lets other people look after the practical, everyday things he doesn't feel like coping with. And I'm afraid Billy has got so he depends pretty much on others to make up his mind for him. . . . Not that he realizes it, of course. He thinks he's his own boss, but—"

"You don't have to tell me," Fred said. "I used to be an actor myself."

"Well, you understand how I felt, then," said Lee. "I had an idea maybe this Crane mess wasn't as bad as Billy believed; maybe paying up just was easier than bucking it, working things out. . . . And I thought: If Mac is a crook, couldn't it just be that he's in on this shakedown?"

"But would Mac want Billy to know that he was pinched for cash? And he'd be bound to find out the minute anyone tapped him for a hundred thousand dollars."





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The DASH that  
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couldn't have got out of the theater without being spotted. He could have got in, all right, when the doorman was hunting for Billy; but Joe was back on the door inside of two or three minutes, which wouldn't have been time for Mr. X to do what he did and beat it. So that leaves us Fuller, but he has an alibi; he was with Sid Landseer."

"But supposing Landseer were in on the shakedown, too! It's not impossible."

"WAIT a minute, now," said Fred. "What do we know for sure about this Mr. X?"

"He's somebody connected with Billy," said Lee, "and he was already in the theater."

"And it seems likely he's someone Diane knows, or she wouldn't have gone up to the dressing-room with him. Not without making a fuss; and if she had, somebody would have heard her."

"Let's see," said Lee. "Diane would have known Mac and Sid and Eddie from the coast. And it's possible Keogh Penny may once have had a studio job out there. Aside from Billy—and myself—there doesn't seem to be anyone else."

"Anyway," declared Fred, "we know that about three or four minutes of twelve, Mr. X and Diane went upstairs. Then there still must have been an interval before he killed her; he's not a mind reader, and he has to find out why Diane is there."

"I doubt if that took long," Lee said. "Diane wasn't a very subtle person."

"Well, then, let's say that by twelve or a minute after, he's decided she has to be killed, and he—he gets right to work."

"How long does it take to be strangled?" Lee asked.

"I've never held a clock on anyone," Fred said, "but there was a case here recently—in his confession the man said it took three minutes. I think it's okay to assume that the murder was committed between twelve and five after. If either of us saw any of our possible Mr. X's during that time, we can definitely eliminate 'em. . . . Where were you then?"

"Why," Lee said, "I was talking to you. You had an idea for changing your routine with Billy, and you wanted my reaction."

"That's right," Fred said. "Shucks! I was hoping we were in different places. What a time I picked to try out a routine! Kind of sets a man back on his heels when he thinks that he's speling off some corny jokes and right over his head somebody's— Gosh! If the playback was on, those gags must have been the last thing Diane heard!"

"It was on," Lee said. "Don't you remember? It was going full blast when she was found. Probably the murderer turned it on to—to cover up any sounds of struggle."

"And so Mr. X must have heard me, too," said Fred slowly. "Um. . . . Lee."

"Yes?"

"Lee, did you happen to mention that routine—tell any part of it to anyone?" And, when she shook her head, "Was there anyone around us? Anyone who could have overheard what I was saying?"

"There was no one on-stage but you and me," Lee said. "Or, wait—Al Goodman and a couple of people were standing over by the organ, but they were talking, not paying any attention to us, and I'm pretty sure they couldn't have heard you."

"You're positive about the time?" pursued Fred.

"Positive. You know how it is in a studio; you keep looking at clocks. It was exactly noon when I came up on-stage."

"Well, then," Fred said, "sit tight and hang on to your blood pressure. The old man's had an idea. Be back in a minute."

He was, however, gone quite a bit longer than a minute, and Lee was a hundred and eight pounds of solid jitter when he returned.

"I was just checking about the other playbacks," he said breathlessly. "The one downstairs and the one in the greenroom. They were both turned off; the one in the upstairs dressing-room was the only one on. . . . Do you see what that means?"

"I'm sorry to be dense," said Lee, "but—"

"It means a couple of things," Fred said



Jefferson Machamer

"He's my favorite customer—tips with red tokens!"



And maybe—maybe one of 'em is that we're going to catch a murderer. Come on!" . . .

Downstairs in the rehearsal-room a police sergeant clacked away on the typewriter.

"Almost through?" Matson asked.

"Yes, sir," the sergeant said. "I'm on the last one."

Matson got up from the littered table. "All right," he said. "Get Bolton in here. And—let me see." He consulted a memorandum.

Sidney Landseer, McEvoy Fuller, Keogh Panny, Edward Irish, Lee Curtis, Joe Schuster, and Jim Harkins. And one of you other boys ring up and get the wagon."

He stood sorting out the pages of typescript until the little group had assembled.

"Well, I guess most of you people can go as soon as you've signed your statements," he said. "I'm going to have to book you as a material witness, Mr. Landseer, but I understand from your attorney he's arranging bail for you."

"How about me?" asked Billy wearily.

"For the time being," Matson said, "you're being held without bail on suspicion of homicide."

BILLY tossed his cigarette on the floor and stamped it out. "Well," he said, "what are we waiting for? Let's get going."

"We'll be on our way as soon as the wagon gets here," Matson said. He nodded to a couple of detectives, who went over and stood beside Billy.

There was a knock, and Fred stuck his head in. "Say, Inspector," he said, "when can we have this room? I tell you I'm going nuts. We've got to rehearse some place and the band's up on-stage—we can't hear ourselves think."

"That's all right," Matson said. "We'll be leaving you now in a couple of minutes; you folks can come in any time."

"You mean you've—" began Fred, and then, looking past Matson, saw one of the squad members snapping the handcuffs on Billy. Fred hesitated for a moment, and then went over to Billy. The other members of the Star Theater troupe came in after him and began to take their places around the table.

"I'm sorry as hell about this," Fred said. "Keep your chin up, brother. Things'll work out yet."

"Thanks, Fred," Billy said. "I—well, if it had to happen I only wish it had been Benny's program I was guesting on."

"I'll tell him that," Fred said.

"But," Billy said, "if anybody can pull a show together after a day like today, why, I guess you can."

"Gosh, I don't know," Fred said doubtfully. "It's going to be an awful long half-hour. I—you don't by an chance—oh, but, Gad! This is no time to bother you with trifles."

"What is it?" asked Billy. "I don't know what I can do to help—write a fan letter from the Bastille maybe—but if there's anything, just name it."

"Well, I didn't mean to bring it up," Fred said, "but there was a routine—"

And then, as if aware for the first time that everyone in the room was listening, he broke off and looked around, abashed. "I suppose you people all think I'm the original Hard-boiled Harry, worrying about gags at a time like this."

"Nuts," Billy said quickly. "Which routine do you mean, Fred? Seems to me we tried out about sixty different ones."

"That's the hell of it," Fred said. "This one was just spur-of-the-moment stuff—I didn't even bother to write it down—and naturally that's the one I've got a hunch I could use in the sketch we're using. . . . It was the one where you said if you were elected president, you'd appoint me ambassador-at-large."

Billy frowned, and pressed his fingers against his eyeballs. "Ambassador-at-large? Let's see; I remember the ladies' vote stuff and about being a pin-up president but—ambassador-at-large—Gosh, Fred, I can't recall anything about it."

"There was a Bob Hope crack in there somewhere along the line," Fred said. "Does that ring a bell?"

Slowly, Billy shook his head. "I'm sorry; I must have a mind like a sieve. I'm a total blank. Gee, I—"

"Hey, Fred," said Eddie Irish, "I remember that routine."

Allen turned toward him. "You do?"

Watching, Lee felt her heart jam against her ribs.

"Sure. You said ambassador-at-large sounded more like a job for Bob Hope, and Billy was supposed to say no, you'd get to meet some civilians, too. That the one?"

"Yeah," Fred said, "that's the one. But wasn't there more to it? A gag about table-hopping?"

Eddie smiled cheerfully.

Lee thought, *He's walking straight into it!*

"That's right. You said you'd be nothing but an international table-hopper, because you'd be having one meal in London and the next in Moscow and the next in—Washington or New York. And then there was some crack about observing conditions, and one of the conditions was that you pay for the gas."

Eddie hesitated. "Maybe that isn't just the way you had it set up, but—"

"It's close enough," Fred said. "It's remarkable, in fact, that you were able to remember it so exactly—when you consider that the only time you heard it you were pretty busy choking a woman to death."

THERE was a long, scraping breath. "What—what the hell do you mean?" Eddie said.

"I mean, it was you who strangled Diane Crane," Fred said. "I mean, you had to be in the dressing-room when it happened in order to know the twists of that gag."

"You're crazy," Eddie said. His face was white, sweat-beaded. "I was talking with Irving. . . . Tell him, Irving! Tell him I was talking to you."

Irving Mansfield dropped his cigarette on the floor and stepped on it. "You were," he said, "when Smart came down from the dressing-room. Before that I don't know where you were."

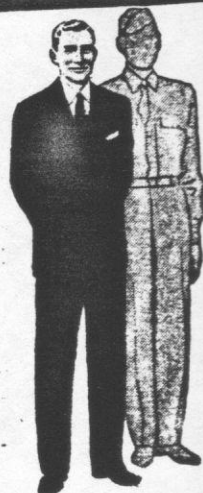
Inspector Matson was at Eddie's side. His hand rested heavily on the press agent's shoulder. He looked at Fred. "As neat a trap as I ever saw sprung, Mr. Allen."

"Thanks, Inspector." Then he looked at Billy and grinned. "And will you please, Inspector, for Judas Priest's sake take the chains off my guest-star? We've got a show to do!" . . .

It was still nearly an hour before air-time when Inspector Matson sought out Fred with the cheering news that Irish had cracked, and was at that very moment on his way to the station. From what the inspector said, it appeared that Lee's analysis of the situation and the motive for the murder had been correct.

To be completely entertained—read *The American Magazine*

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except in one extremely important particular: She had cast the wrong man for Mr. X.

It was Eddie, not Mac, who had devised the Diane shakedown; in fact, it had been in the back of his mind when he suggested that Diane be engaged for the publicity stunt "romance," and arranged the personal-appearance tour. And it was sheer luck—bad luck—that he had left off kibitzing the poker game just at the moment Diane arrived at the theater. He had been coming up the basement steps when he heard her voice. He waited until the doorman had gone to look for Billy; then he called to Diane and they went on up to the dressing-room.

"The little so-and-so was gonna double-cross me, see?" Eddie said. "She was gonna make the play all on her own hook. She had the sappy idea she'd tell Billy he was being framed, and outta sheer gratitude he'd marry her. So what could I do? There's only one sure way to shut a dame up. . . . And everything broke slick. I was down and out of there, and not a soul saw me. The boys playing poker didn't notice when I left, and I was standing in the wings with Mansfield when the run-through started. . . . All I had to do was keep my own trap shut—I thought."

Having told so much, the inspector looked expectantly at Fred. Now was the time for the amateur mastermind to hook his thumbs in his lapels, and recount to the awed and open-mouthed professional sleuths just how he had laid the villain by his heels.

"I suppose you suspected Irish from the first, huh?"

Fred shook his head. "Nope," he said. "As the saying goes, you could have knocked me over with a fender when Irish came up with that routine. All I knew was that he couldn't know those gags unless he'd heard 'em over the dressing-room playback. They were just fresh-hatched—see?—when I talked to Lee about them. And since nobody overheard us—the other playbacks were switched off—that meant Lee and I, the man in the control booth, and—just possibly—the murderer were the only people who knew that particular sequence of gags. And it seemed to me there was a pretty good chance the murderer would remember 'em. After all, he'd be listening like crazy so he could make a break if he thought anyone was coming upstairs. Of course, it was about a fifty-to-one shot the idea'd lay an egg, but—" He shrugged. . . .

AT NINE-FIFTEEN the Star Theater Company came on-stage for a ritual known as the warm-up. Ordinarily, Fred introduced the members of the cast to the people out front and made a little speech which served the double purpose of putting one and all in a suitably hilarious frame of mind and instructing them in the technique of audience-participation.

Tonight, however, he departed from his usual practice and, instead, gave the enthralled audience a concise résumé of the day's happenings. "And so," he concluded, "what with one thing and another, maybe you'll understand why the show might sound as if we were fresh from playing split-weeks in the nut-

## NEXT MONTH'S MYSTERY NOVEL

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factory circuit. But it'll certainly help if we can feel you're with us."

The audience indicated by all but blowing the roof off with cheers and applause that Mr. Allen could indeed count on them.

"Thank you," said Fred. "That's fine."

And then the "Stand By" sign flashed on, and the Allen show was on the air. . . .

. . . And here he is, ladies and gentlemen . . . the Man Most Likely to Be Voted Most Likely . . . Candidate for President on the Complimentary Ticket—Billy Bolton!"

Lee, listening in from the greenroom, made a sound of anguished protest when Sid switched off the playback. But, ignoring her, and keeping his hand firmly on the button, he continued his diatribe to Keogh:

"So we don't even talk about salary! You hop right back to that phone and tell B. J. this is the kind of a sensational miracle that happens maybe not even once in a lifetime! There ain't a studio in Hollywood that won't—"

"Oh, Lee! Lee!" called Irving Mansfield. "Winchell's on the wire. He wants to know if it's true that you and Billy—"

"Seventy-five hundred!" screamed Keogh. "And he gets the part in *Happy Days*!"

"Irv," roared Walter Batchelor, "for God's sake, come and help these reporters off-stage, anyway till after the broadcast!"

"Eight thousand!" howled Sid. "And bonuses after every—"

"Mr. Batchelor!" thundered Uncle Jim. "The newsreel men are trying to back a sound-truck right into the theater! And there's a crowd outside clear from Broadway to Seventh Avenue!"

Desperately, Lee wormed her way through the mob in the corridor, but there was no getting through the solid phalanx of policemen, reporters, and studio attendants in the wings. So there she stayed, wedged in between two photographers and the water cooler. Too far off to distinguish the words, she could hear Fred's drawl and Billy's more staccato responses—and, punctuating every interchange, a sound which, to a comedian, is far more beautiful and inspiring than any harmony concocted by Beethoven or Bach or Brahms: the sound of 1,500 people in the throes of a belly laugh. . . .

IT WAS Uncle Jim who rescued Lee in the stampede after the sign-off; it was Uncle Jim who steered her around to the control booth, where Fred and Portland and Billy had been hustled for safekeeping until the situation outside was more under control.

"We didn't run over, then?" Fred said.

The engineer shook his head. "You were right on the nose."

"Uh—look, Fred," Billy said. "I—you haven't given me a chance to say it, but you've got to listen now. Uh—I don't know how to tell you—I mean, there's not any words—I can't—"

"He means: Thank you," Lee said.

"Yeah," Billy said. "And—well, and much obliged."

"If I knew now to pronounce it," Fred said, "I'd say, 'Oh, pshaw, Bolton!'"

"Try," Tut-tut," suggested Portland. She turned to Lee: "What did you think of the show?"

"I didn't even near the last half," said Lee. "Sid Landseer was screaming at Keogh and—oh! Billy!"

"Yeah, baby?"

"Keogh's been talking to the coast. You can have that part you wanted and—well, I guess you can write your own ticket."

"Right now," Billy said slowly, "the only thing I want to do is get on a Clipper and do my stuff for the fellas overseas." He looked at Lee. "How about it? You still wants be in the act?"

"I'd—offhand, I'd say yes, but—"

"If you're worried about the billing," Billy said, "it'd be Bolton & Bolton, same as always."

"Well, it's certainly a very handsome offer," Lee said.

Portland took her husband by the shoulders and turned him around. "Don't look now," she said, "but you used to have a line: 'And so they lived nearly ever after.'"

"Um," Fred said abstractedly. "Jeepers! I hope we won't be here all night. I have to start laying out that script. After all, we've got a show to do next Sunday!"

THE END ★★

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