

Call from Hell

by **Emile C. Tepperman, 1899-1951**

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That low eerie moan coming out of the darkness was driving Jerry Taylor crazy. It seemed to come from nowhere, yet he knew it was the anguished call of a woman in agony.

I'LL admit when I first heard it, my instinct was to get back in the car and step on the gas and go away from that place very fast.

In plain English, I was scared; and if any wise egg thinks he can get a belly laugh out of Jerry Taylor being scared, why, go ahead and laugh, egg! But get the picture before you laugh.

This tourist camp was just off Highway Fourteen, which goes right spank through the middle of Towanda County. There's the gas station alongside the

road, and about, say, a hundred feet in, and surrounded by birch trees, are the cabins—twelve of them.

Now, Mr. Egg, suppose you drove up to this gas station at two A.M., and there was nobody around; and suppose just as you got out of the car to take a look-see if you could rouse somebody, you hear this weird moan that seems to come from right next to you. And you look around, and there's no place that sound could have come from!

Would you be scared, egg, or wouldn't you?

Well, I was scared. But I didn't go away, for the very good reason that this was the place I'd been sent to by the sheriff of Towanda County.

So I kind of braced myself against the shivery feeling that crept up between my shoulder blades, and peered around to make sure there were no bodies lying around.

There weren't.

There were just these two pumps. One was red, and it had a sign that said, "Hi-Test—\$.18 plus tax." The other was green, and its sign read, "Seabord Gas—\$.14—plus tax."

My car was in the narrow drive between the pumps and the comfort station in back of them. There was a big hundred and fifty watt bulb glaring over the roof of the comfort station, and it lit up a sign that was tacked to the front of the shack. The sign was newish, and it had black letters painted on a white background:

**STOVER & DAUGHTER
TOURIST CAMP
GAS STATION**

**Flats Fixed
24-Hour Service**

The cabins in back were all dark. Right next to the shack, about a dozen cars were parked with the lights out. I assumed they were the cars of tourists who were staying over night, and business seemed to be good for the Stovers.

I should tell you that I noticed all this when I first got out of the car. That was before I heard it.

The first thing I did when I climbed out of the car was to poke my head in the comfort station. It was empty, but there were two doors in the rear, a gents' room and a ladies' room. I figured that the guy in charge would be right out, and I walked around to the front of the car to see if that slow leak in the right hand tire had got any worse.

And that's when I heard it.

It was a low moan of agony, like a person makes after he's been, hurt bad—I mean, real bad. Only it wasn't a "he," because that voice was a woman's.

Well, I can tell you that I jumped a little; the voice seemed to come out of the air right alongside of me.

My heel bumped a pail of water that stood next to the middle pump, and it clattered over and spilled. I didn't pay any attention at all to the pail I just stood

still for a minute till I got over the shivers, and then I looked around to try to trace the source of that moan.

There wasn't any source.

I peered into the shadows of the parked cars, but I was sure it hadn't come from that far away; the parking space was at least ten feet distant from the pumps. The tall trees on the other side of the road rustled a little in the wind, and made little soughing noises; but I knew that wasn't what I had heard. I'd heard a woman moan in agony, and nobody could tell me different.

There was just that single moan, and then it was cut short, as if the woman had been suddenly gagged. And there was no more sound, except for the wind whispering along through the trees, and stirring up a little dust on the road.

I felt like taking out the gun from the holster that was sewed in my right hand pants pocket, but I figured what a laugh that might hand to the gas station attendant when he came out and found me flourishing a cannon for nothing. So I didn't yank out the gun; I walked around the car, opened the door of the comfort station, and yelled in, "Hey! Anybody there?"

I waited a minute, and then stepped inside. It was a little room, and it was crowded with furniture and tools. At one side was a work bench with a little vat of water that was used for testing tubes and fixing tires. And in back were these two doors that I told you about.

I WAS getting kind of leery of this whole thing, and I figured there was something that was not all right, especially in view of the reason that had brought me here. So I unbuttoned my coat to make it easier to grab the gun, and went over to the door of the gent's room and pulled it open.

And here was this guy, sitting on the floor, with his head popped back, and his eyes wide open, staring up. Only he didn't see me, because he was dead. I knew he was dead, even though I didn't see the back of his head at first I've seen enough stiffs to be able to tell 'em.

His knees had been up in front of him, with his feet resting against the door, and when I opened the door his knees went down, and his feet came sliding out at me. At the same time his whole body slumped, and his head lolled forward, and I saw what had killed him—the back of his head had been smashed in. And right beside him lay a tire-iron; you know, one of those things they use to pry the tires off the rims with. One end of it was all bloody and messy. The white stuff, I figured, was brains.

This guy wore a dirty, oil-stained windbreaker, and a pair of greasy, baggy work-pants. His hair was a brownish color. He was about thirty, and looked like he might have been handsome if the grime was washed off his face.

Well, I didn't stop there taking stock of him; that was just the impression I got in a flash. Because the next thing I did was to back away from that door, and get my back to the wall. I didn't like to think of the bird that had socked him, coming back on the prowl for more customers.

I ran my eye over the rest of the room; everything seemed to be in order. I looked at the door of the ladies' room and hesitated, and said to myself, "Nix, Jerry. Leave bad enough alone. If there's another one in there, it would be too much of a strain on you."

So I put my hand on the butt of the gun, and went out in the darkness. You can be sure I took a good look around before I stepped out; if there was a head-smasher around, I wanted to see him first. But you couldn't set anything except where my headlights cut a swath through the trees on the other side of the comfort station from the parking lot.

I looked back toward the cabins; they were still dark. All asleep.

I took a quick step over to the car, stuck my hand in the window, and rested it on the horn. It wasn't a musical horn—it just made a loud, strong noise. And after about four pushes, I saw a light go on in one of the cabins.

I let up on the horn then, and a minute or two later I saw a girl's shadow passing in front of the shade of the cabin with the light, and I could see that she was putting something on over a nightgown. Then the door opened, and this girl stood framed in the doorway. I could see that her hair was a goldish yellow, reflected in the light from the cabin, and her face was small—and boy, was she pretty!

She called out in a low voice, "Isn't the man there?" and started to come over.

And just then I had to hear that damn wailing moan once more!

It rose in a chilling scream of pain, then ended suddenly. I whirled around because that weird sound had seemed to come from the air right around me. But there wasn't anything—only the bloody body of that dead man framed in the doorway inside the comfort station.

The girl had stopped short, one hand over her mouth, the other holding her bathrobe together. I could see that she was scared stiffer than I, and that was something. She swayed a little, then started to come toward me, and her little oval of a face was very white in the darkness.

I went in her direction, putting my gun away, because I didn't want her to see the body of the dead man. She'd be sure to keel over if she saw it after hearing that yell.

I called out to her, "It's all right, miss. I'm the detective from New York," and came up close just in time to catch her as her knees started to buckle. She didn't faint, as I expected she was going to do, but hung on to my shoulder for a minute. She had her mouth closed tight, and she was trembling.

I turned her around and said, "Let's get back to that cabin, miss. You can tell me all about it in there. I guess you're Wanda Stover, aren't you?"

She nodded weakly, and allowed me to lead her back. "Yes. I'm so glad you've come. The local police are worse than useless; and I couldn't have stood it here another night. I wake up a dozen times, and imagine the most horrible things."

I had her inside by this time and sat her down on the bunk that was built into the wall. The cabin was nicely furnished. It had this bunk, and another one at the opposite wall. In one corner was a wash basin, and there was a dresser and two chairs. Everything clean and tip-top.

But the girl's eyes held a sort of dazed terror, like a person who has just seen or heard a ghost.

I STILL had a vivid picture of the dead man back in the comfort station, and my ears still rang with the echo of that last unearthly shriek. I didn't blame

her much for feeling the way she did if she'd been hearing those damn noises that came from nowhere at all.

In my job as trouble expert for the Jewelers' Protective Association, I had run into many a queer layout in my day; but this was the damnedest set-up I'd ever hit.

My reason for being out here was that I'd been asked to look into a delicate matter for one of our largest members—the firm of Larkin Brothers and Company, wholesale jewelers. Caleb Larkin, senior member, had been making his usual annual trip with his wife, combining business and pleasure. Every year he stayed over at this tourist camp, which was his second stop out of New York, and this time, the girl, Wanda Stover, had phoned the firm that he and his wife had both disappeared, together with his baggage. And Larkin Brothers had frantically informed that old man Caleb's baggage contained one hundred thousand dollars worth of jewelry stock!

Larkin Brothers had requested the local constable to lay off summoning the county police till I got on the scene—they didn't want any undue publicity if the story was unfounded. So here I was, and the first thing I smack into is a guy with his head staved in, and the next thing is these uncanny moans that come from nowhere.

I gave the girl my name now, and said, "All right, Miss Stover, see if you can get yourself together and hand me the low-down on this business. Just what happened here?"

She nodded eagerly, as if anxious to get the thing off her chest "We didn't think much of it at first—that is, dad and myself. Mr. and Mrs. Larkin had this very cabin. Last night, about twelve-thirty, I was just going to sleep, when there was the sound of a scuffle of some sort from in here, and then a low cry from Mrs. Larkin. I had cabin number five, right across the row, and I came out for a minute.

"Dad was outside, and he said not to pay any attention to it, because a man had a right to have a fight with his wife if he wanted to. We didn't do anything about it—and this morning there was no Mr. and Mrs. Larkin in here. They were gone! But their car's still here. They couldn't have walked away in the night, carrying the three heavy suit-cases." She clenched her hands. "I was sure something happened to them. And then, tonight, those moans. I can't tell where they come from. They seem to grow right out of the air. It's—"

She stopped and shuddered, as a thin wail cut through the air from somewhere outside. It was bloodcurdling, like a call right out of hell. I jumped up, yanked the door open, and peered into the night. There was still nothing to be seen. The comfort station was brightly lit, and I knew what was in there. It wasn't that guy that was doing the moaning and wailing.

The other cabins were all dark. The sound hadn't been loud enough to awaken any of the tourists—just enough to curdle the blood of anybody who heard it. I said to Wanda Stover, "Maybe in the morning we'll find somebody else disappeared out of one of the other cabins."

She shivered. "That sound isn't coming from the cabins. It seems to come from the road. It's as if—as if some soul in torment were haunting the place!" She wrapped her robe more tightly about her to keep out the chill of the night

air. "I wish dad would come back. He went to get Constable Jaeger when we started to hear those noises tonight. And Kellman—I wonder where he is. He's supposed to be on duty at the tanks tonight."

"This Kellman," I asked dryly, "is he a young fellow, about thirty, with brownish hair, kind of dirty looking?"

She stared at me wide-eyed. "That's Kellman, the handy-man. Where did you see him?"

"Out near the road as I came," I answered evasively.

She might have asked me some more, but just then a car pulled in to the driveway from the road. Two men get out. Both were tall; one was lanky, the other was fat and round, and had trouble squirming out.

The girl exclaimed, "There's dad—and he's brought Constable Jaeger." She started to run toward them, but I grabbed her arm, held her back.

"Never mind," I said hastily. "They'll come here." I didn't want her to see the body of Kellman in there. I urged her back into the cabin, sat her down on the bunk.

Pretty soon I heard loud talking from the direction of the comfort station. They'd discovered the body. After a while we could hear them walking over to the cabin, still talking loud. They barged in, looked me over like I was a freak, and their mouths clamped shut.

The girl said to the fat man, "Dad, this is Mr. Taylor from the Jewelers' Protective Association. And this," indicating the lanky individual, who was eyeing me awful suspicious, "is Constable Jaeger."

Constable Jaeger stretched out a long arm, shook hands with me. "I hope you fellers appreciate what I done fer you, not notifyin' the county officials till you come out. I'm sorry now I didn't. It's murder now!"

Wanda Stover put her hand to her mouth, eyes wide. "Murder!"

Jaeger nodded vigorously. "Head bashed in. We cain't fool around with this no longer. I got to phone the Sheriff of Towanda County."

"Wait a minute, constable," I broke in. "I was in touch with the sheriff before coming. He's going to have some county detectives out here in the morning."

JAEGER was a pretty keen fellow for a hick cop. He looked searchingly from me to Stover, then eyed the girl speculatively. "I can't take a chance on not phoning him," he said slowly. "You may be all right, young feller, but I don't know you from Adam. I'll just call him up anyway, to make sure there'll be somebody here in the morning to take the responsibility off my shoulders."

He turned to open the door, said over his shoulder, "There's a phone over at the roadhouse down the highway a piece. Don't none of you leave, till I get back."

He cast a queer look at Stover, seemed to hesitate, and said, "Come along with me, Stover. There's somethin' I'd like to talk to you about!"

Stover shuffled uneasily, shifted from one foot to the other. "Look here, Bill," he exclaimed. "They ain't—"

He stopped, because Wanda suddenly uttered an ear-piercing shriek. Her face was white with fear, and she was pointing to the window. The shade was

down, and I couldn't see a thing. But she cried, "Some one's out there! I saw the shadow!"

Jaeger flung the door open, slipping a gun out of his side pocket with amazing speed. I was right after him into the night, and we both saw a figure running fast toward the shadows at the left of the gas station where the cars were parked. Jaeger roared out in a voice that shattered the stillness of the night, "Stop right there!"

The figure didn't stop, but kept on running, disappeared into the shadows of the parking space. And just then we heard that damn screech once more. It seemed to come from the edge of the road, just beyond the lights of the comfort station. Jaeger paid no attention to the screech. He had launched himself after that fleeing shadow, with me right close behind him. I had my own gun out now. In back of us I could hear Stover yelling, "Get back in the cabin, Wanda. Close that door!"

Jaeger and I had reached the parking space now, and we separated, going in different directions between the darkened, parked cars. I saw a little blur of movement inside a big door closed silently. The starter whirred, and gears clashed. I raised the butt of my gun, smashed in the glass, and jumped on the running-board. The car was already in motion. I saw a thin, desperate face in the darkness of the interior, and I slammed out with my reversed gun. I felt the butt crunch into the face, and there was a gasp from within. The car stalled, came to an abrupt stop. The figure slumped away from the wheel.

Jaeger had come running, and now I reached in, opened the door from inside, and the two of us lifted out the semi-conscious man from within. My gun butt had done plenty damage to his face. His nose was broken, and the butt had raked his cheek. He moaned a little, and offered no resistance as Jaeger clamped handcuffs on, pinioning his hands behind him. The man's eyes shifted desperately from me to Jaeger, and his mouth twitched peculiarly. I couldn't tell if the twitch was natural, or the result of the sock I'd given him.

Stover came puffing up to us, looked down at this guy's face, and exclaimed, "Why, that's Mr. Birch, from cabin number four!"

Jaeger grunted, turned his flash down on the man's face. "I've seen that mug before," he muttered. "Seems like I seen it on a handbill in the office. Take him into cabin number eight, next to Wanda's."

We carried him back to number eight. A lot of doors in the other cabins were open now, and people were peering out—people in all states of undress, awakened from their sleep by the rumpus.

Jaeger yelled at them, "You can all go back to sleep, ladies and gents. It's just a little accident. Ever'thing is all right"

Some of the people crowded up to the door of the cabin, but Jaeger growled at them, and closed the door in their faces. Birch was breathing hard now, and his eyes were closed.

Being a Jewelers' Protective man above everything else, I sneaked across to number four while Stover and Jaeger were attending to Birch, and took a quick look around for Larkin's baggage, which contained the jewelry stock, which was what I wanted. But there wasn't a sign of it in there. Birch's only baggage was a small overnight bag, and there was nothing in that to show who he might be, or

where he came from. I had noted that his car had a New York license, and that was all I knew.

I went back to cabin number eight. A couple of the tourists were still hanging around, but they went back to their cabins when they saw that nothing else was happening. In number eight, Stover was saying as I came in, "I cain't find no identification on him. He's out from the pain. Wait'll he comes to; we'll make him talk plenty!"

Jaeger looked up, said to me, "He'll need a doctor after what you done to him. I'll phone for Doc Swiggins from the village when I go down to the roadhouse."

He made for the door, and I went out with him. I was kind of worried about Wanda Stover, alone in the cabin there. Jaeger ordered Stover, "You stay by him till the doctor comes. Don't let nobody in here. He must be workin' with some one else, an' they may try to rescue him."

Stover looked up from where he knelt by the injured man's bunk, opened his mouth as if to say something, looked from the constable to me, and then gulped, stayed silent.

I didn't like it. There was something still wrong in the set-up, and it was emphasized for me as Jaeger and I went out. The people from the other cabins had gone back to sleep. There was still a light in number ten next door, where Wanda Stover was waiting, and there were lights in a couple more down the line. Some of them went out as we stood there.

And then, from down the road came that eerie wail once more. This time it was a little weak, as if the ghost of somebody or other had kind of tired himself out. I looked at Jaeger, and his face was sweating a little—I could see it in the darkness. He said, "Hully gee, Taylor, that ain't no human voice. I never believed much in ghosts, but this—"

"What about Birch?" I asked him dryly. "Does he look like a ghost to you?"

He shook his head. "I reckon you're right. This is human bein's doin's. Especially that there jewelry of Larkin's. Ghosts don't wear no jewelry, do they?"

I lit a cigarette, offered him one which he refused. He took out a battered corn-cob pipe, stuffed it full of vile tobacco, and lighted up. He pursed his lips, allowed a cloud of milky-colored smoke to seep out, and looked at me speculatively. "Look here, Taylor. You got the look of the kind of guy that can handle himself. I want you to stick close to Wanda Stover while I'm gone; don't let nothin' happen to her!"

I HAD that idea myself. In fact, the idea was very strong with me, ever since I'd seen that picture of Wanda framed in the doorway of the cabin, with her goldish-yellow hair and her white, soft face and throat. But I didn't let on. I only asked him, "What's on your mind, constable? You thinking of something in particular?"

He nodded somberly, puffing away at the corn-cob. "Aye. Something on my mind." He bent closer, his eye on number eight where Stover watched our prisoner. "Ye don't know, do ye, that Stover ain't Wanda's real father? He's her step-father. That ain't so much by itself."

He hesitated, seemed to come to a decision, and spoke swiftly. "I'm tellin' ye this confidential, of course—Stover an' me, we used to own this here tourist

station in partners. It never paid as a tourist camp. But we made it pay—outten—bootleggin'! We run liquor outta here, supplied the whole territory. It was sweet while it lasted. Then we had to go an' sock our dough in Wall Street, an' them wolves took it away from us."

I grinned, and he grinned back at me sheepishly, went on. "Bootlegging wasn't no real crime; plenty of law officers made their fortunes outten it. The only thing is, we let it slip. Then, when prohibition came, we was practically put outta business. I got smart, an' sold my half interest to Stover, an' he got Wanda back from boarding school to help run the place on the level. Well," he paused, continued reluctantly, "my guess is, he found he couldn't get by on the level; he's got a loan due at the bank that he can't meet. He's in danger of losing the whole place here. A man pushed like that'll do awful things." He reached out, put a pleading hand on my lapel. "If Stover turns out to have a hand in it, go easy on him. I couldn't stand to have Wanda faced with all that misery. I'll help you to get the jewels back, if possible, but give Stover a break. All you want is to get the jewels back anyway, ain't it?"

I shook my head. "Sorry, constable. I know how you feel. But this is murder. I may be working for the Jewelers' Protective, but I can't condone murder."

He eyed me silently for a moment, then bowed his head. "I—guess you're right." He sighed. "Well, look out for Wanda till I get back."

I watched him go, then stepped toward cabin number ten. And just then the wailing shriek came again, this time with a note of appeal in it that was enough to drive one frantic. I saw the constable stop short, peer around in the darkness, throwing his flash every which way. He had his gun out again, and he seemed scared stiff. The shriek tapered off into silence, ending in a moan.

Jaeger turned to me, and his face, reflected in the light from the comfort station was drawn, apprehensive. He saw that I was looking at him, and kind of straightened out, sort of ashamed of himself. He called out to me, "Jist stay there a minute, will you, Taylor, till I git in the car?"

I said "Okay," and watched him get in his flivver and drive away. The night was silent now. The people in the other cabins didn't come out any more. They were probably making up their minds to get away from this place the first thing in the morning. Ghosts don't mix well with vacations.

I looked over to number eight, where Stover was watching Birch. The light was on, and everything in there seemed quiet enough. The thought occurred to me that if Stover was in on the thing with Birch, it would be a good spot for him to let Birch make a getaway. However, Birch was semi-conscious; he'd be hard to move noiselessly; anyway, I was anxious to get to Wanda Stover and kind of console her—like the constable had asked me to, only for reasons of my own.

I knocked on the door, and went in. The girl was sitting on the bunk; and that was a kind of a surprise to me—the damn place was getting on my nerves so that I'd almost expected to find her gone, the same as had happened to Mr. and Mrs. Larkin. But she wasn't gone. She was there all right.

She had been crying, and had wiped her eyes, and I could see streaks on her cheeks where the face powder had caked from her tears.

I sat down on the bunk next to her, and tried to sort of cheer her up, but she didn't cheer much. She did snuggle her hand in mine though, and say,

stuttering like, as if she was about to burst into tears once more, “Poor Kellman! He w-was saving up his money to go in business for himself n-next year. Now he’s dead; and this place is ruined. N-nobody will come here any more.”

I did the best consoling job on her that I could. I handed her the line about Fate, and Kismet, and some more blooey. All the time I was thinking about how nice it would be for her if it came out that her step-father was mixed up in this business, but I acted cheerful, even if I didn’t feel that way. After a little more of the old blarney, I had her thoughts away from the murder, away from the disappearance of Larkin and his wife. She was telling me about her school life, and everything would have been hunky-dory, if that scream hadn’t come to us again from out of the night.

She stiffened. Her little hands tightened on mine, and a shudder went through her whole body. “Jerry!—” she was calling me Jerry by this time—“where in God’s earth can that be coming from?”

I started to say something, to reassure her, but I stopped short in the middle of a syllable. I don’t remember what it was I had been about to say to her, for then the lights went out with a suddenness that made me gasp.

I spun off the bunk, sneaked my gun out, and started for the door, dragging her along. I could hear her breathing hard, terrified like, and she clutched my hand, whispered, “W-who did that?”

I said “Sh!” and gently disengaged my hand. It was the hand with the gun in it, and I wanted that free. Somebody had turned those lights out from outside, and whoever did it must have a purpose—he wasn’t playing pranks at two-thirty A.M. I wanted to be ready for the next act.

But she grabbed onto me again, pressed close. “I’m frightened!” she whispered.

I wanted to say “So am I!” but that wasn’t the right thing to say, so I kept quiet. I stuck my free hand in my pocket to get the flashlight out, and suddenly I felt the girl’s whole body shiver. Her lips, close to my ear, murmured, “Look—the bunk!”

IN the darkness the bunk in the opposite wall was nothing more than an indistinct blur, but I could see what she meant. That bunk was moving! It was swinging out on some sort of pivot, and it disclosed an opening underneath it, even darker than the interior of the cabin.

I wrenched my gun hand free from her grip, shoved her behind me, and faced the opening. Nothing came out of it. I got out the flashlight, clicked it on, and stepped close. My light illuminated a short ladder that led downward into what seemed to be a sort of cave. And while I listened, a moan came out of there!

Wanda Stover had come after me, and she stood close behind me now, clinging to my coat. I said to her over my shoulder, “Are you game to stay here while I go down? I think this is the answer to the whole story.”

She shivered. “No, no. Don’t leave me alone. Wait till the constable comes back.”

“That moan,” I said, “sounds like somebody’s in a bad way. They may get killed while we’re waiting. I got to go now.”

She hesitated, then said reluctantly, "I'll go with you."

I didn't wait for her to change her mind, but started down the ladder, she right close above me. I got to the bottom—there were six steps; it's funny how you notice things like that at such a time. I don't think I've ever counted steps before, but I did then. It wasn't important, it didn't matter, but I counted them. I helped the girl down the last couple, and swung my flash around.

This was a natural cave in the rock. Farther on I could see two bulky steel objects, about four feet high and ten in diameter. Pipes led upward from them to the surface of the ground. I knew what they were—the two gasoline tanks that supplied the pumps up above. The builders had made use of the natural cave to place the tanks there. Farther on, to the left, was a circular opening cut into the ceiling of the cave—the manhole which permitted the attendant to go down and clean the tanks.

I started to walk forward, keeping my gun ready, when the girl cried out sharply. I turned, and followed her finger pointing upward. The opening through which we had come down was closing; the bunk above was swinging back in place. We were trapped!

I sprang up that ladder, but too late. The bunk had slid back in place and I couldn't move it from underneath.

I glanced down, saw the girl gazing up at me with terror-stricken eyes, and climbed down again.

And once more we heard that moan.

It was quite distinct now, and I could have sworn that it came from one of the gas tanks. Wanda Stover threw her arms around my neck and screamed. I patted her shoulder, said, "Take it easy, girlie."

I started toward the tanks, and heard another sound; this was a masculine shout, and the words were plain enough—"Help! Help!"

That came from the tanks all right, and no mistake. I played the flash on the nearest one, and sure enough, there was a round plate set in the wall of the tank. It had been cut out probably with an acetylene torch. A handle had been fitted to it so that it could be removed. I grabbed that handle, yanked, and the plate came out. I threw the beam of my flash inside, and got the full impact of the gasoline fumes. I didn't even notice the fumes, because of what I saw. There was about five inches of gasoline in the tank, and on the floor, right in the gasoline, lay four trussed-up figures. Two of them lay there inertly, while the other two were struggling, straining to free themselves. One of those two was a man, and he was gagged; the other was a woman, and she, too, had been gagged, but she had worked the gag off. It was she who had been doing all the moaning and shrieking.

Mr. and Mrs. Larkin—that's who it was. I couldn't see the faces of the other two, but I could make a good guess who they might be.

I started to step into that tank, and just then I heard the sound of an automobile starter from up outside. I don't know what made me look up, what made me wonder about the starter. It was the smartest thing I ever did in my life—so smart that I can't get over it yet. For there, hanging out of the manhole entrance, I noticed two wires. I played the flash along those wires, and saw that their ends were connected to a spark plug.

For a minute my mind didn't function. The starter was whirring up above, and I was looking at that spark plug as if it didn't mean a thing in my life. But it did. And suddenly I got it.

I let out a wild yell, dropped the gun, and jumped about four feet in the air. My frantic fingers just caught that spark plug, tore at it wildly; and when I landed back on the floor, I was holding the plug and the wires were dangling loose. I felt cold sweat all over me. The starter above had just caught on, and I could hear the motor running, being speeded up.

Wanda Stover said, "W-what's the matter?"

"The matter! When that motor started it would have created a spark at the plug there, and all this free gas would have been ignited. We'd be three quarters of the way up to heaven by this time!"

Wanda exclaimed, "That man, Birch! Maybe he was shamming that he was hurt. I wonder what he did to dad!"

I COULD have told her where her dad was. She was too excited to notice, but I had seen that one of the unconscious figures in the gasoline tank was big, bulky, like her stepfather.

I heard footsteps crunching on the gravel above, and hissed, "Keep quiet. He's coming to see why we haven't exploded!"

I turned out the flashlight, whispered to Wanda, "Go in there and untie those people while I watch here."

She had got some of her courage back, and she pressed my arm, stole away toward the tank.

I looked upward toward the manhole, saw a dim shape peer over, saw him turn a flash down at the loose ends of the wire, and curse under his breath. He started to pull the wires up, evidently intending to try again with another plug. This time he would not lower it so far down I guessed.

I raised my gun, aimed at the head, and stopped. I had just thought of something. The explosion of my gun would do as much to the free gases in the cave as that spark plug would have done. No good. No shooting.

I dropped the gun quick, made a flying leap for the ends of the wires. I just caught them, gripped hard, and yanked downward with my descending body. The guy up there had a grip on those wires, was probably kneeling over the manhole. The drag on the wires pulled him forward, took him by surprise, and he came toppling down through the manhole. He landed on top of me with a grunt, but I grunted more—the wind was almost all knocked out of me.

He jabbed an elbow into my face, and things got jumpy for me, but I held on, lifted my knees, lashed out with my feet, and turned over. He was thrown off me. My flash had gone out when I dropped it, and I could hear him swear like hell in the dark.

I let a fist go fast in the direction of the swear words and it crunched into teeth. The swear words stopped.

My face hurt like the devil. I was sore. So I drove a couple more fast ones at that face that I couldn't see, and then reached out and grabbed a neck in both hands. But there wasn't any resistance. The guy was out for the count.

I scrambled up to my feet, saw shadowy figures coming out of the tank. Wanda was helping her stepfather out, and after them came Mr. and Mrs. Larkin. Larkin was being supported by his wife. It looked like a case of the women had all the stamina.

Last of all came the fourth man who'd been tied up in that tank.

Larkin said, trying to sound like he'd never been scared, "Good work, my man. You're from the Jewelers' Protective, aren't you?"

I didn't bother answering. "Give us a lift, somebody," I called out, "so I can get out through that manhole; I'll go see if I can open the bunk from up in the cabin."

"I can open it," came Stover's voice. "There's a couple of switches down here. We used this place for storing liquor in the old days, and the bunks in number eight an' number ten are fixed to swivel out so's we could load the cases in."

It took us about fifteen minutes to get everybody up in the cabin. The fourth man who had been tied up in the tank proved to be Birch, the little guy I had caught in the car, before.

I went down again, got the unconscious body of the bird I'd knocked out in the cave, and slung him over my shoulder, climbed the ladder into the bunk. When I got him into the light, Wanda gave a gasp. "It's Constable Jaeger!"

"Sure." I nodded bitterly. "He was fixing to send us all up in bits, and not leave a shred of evidence. He had the jewels, and he was going to destroy everybody who might have been able to give the cops a clue. He's the one that bashed in Kellman's head. Kellman probably got wise to him."

Jaeger was stirring, regaining his consciousness. "Wait'll he comes to," I told Larkin, whose wife was wiping his face for him with a wet towel. "We'll make him tell us where the jewels are."

Stover broke in. "They're in number eight. He brought the suit-cases up through the bunk in there—it opens up the same as this one. That's why he told us to bring Birch in there. He surprised me while I was watching Birch, knocked me out, and dragged us both down in the tank. It's my fault for not telling you about that cave before. I kinda suspected what was going on, but I couldn't talk to you while Jaeger was around. I was afraid he'd shoot up the two of us. I was goin' to come in to see you in number ten, but Jaeger got me first."

I swung around on Birch. "What did you have to do with all this?" I demanded. "What were you listening at the window for? And what did you take it on the lam for?"

He hung his head, then raised his eyes to mine with a pleading look. When he spoke his voice was strangely refined. "I-I'm on the—er—lam, as you put it—from my wife. She's got an order for me to pay her five hundred dollars a month alimony, and if I don't pay it, I go to jail. So I just packed up and took a trip. When I heard the constable talking here, I thought he was on my trail, and I came over to listen." He was certainly in a pitiable state. "W-what are you going to do to me? For God's sake, don't send me back to that wife of mine!"

I bent down and put handcuffs on Jaeger, who was waking up.

Then I straightened up and grinned at Birch. "As far as I'm concerned, I don't even know you're here. I can sympathize with you—some guys pick wrong when they marry. I won't."

I knew I couldn't pick wrong, because I saw the look in Wanda's eyes. Larkin began talking, telling me something about the send-off he was going to give me at the Jewelers' Protective, but I didn't really pay any attention to him. I was busy.

And I'm sure Wanda wasn't listening to him either.

