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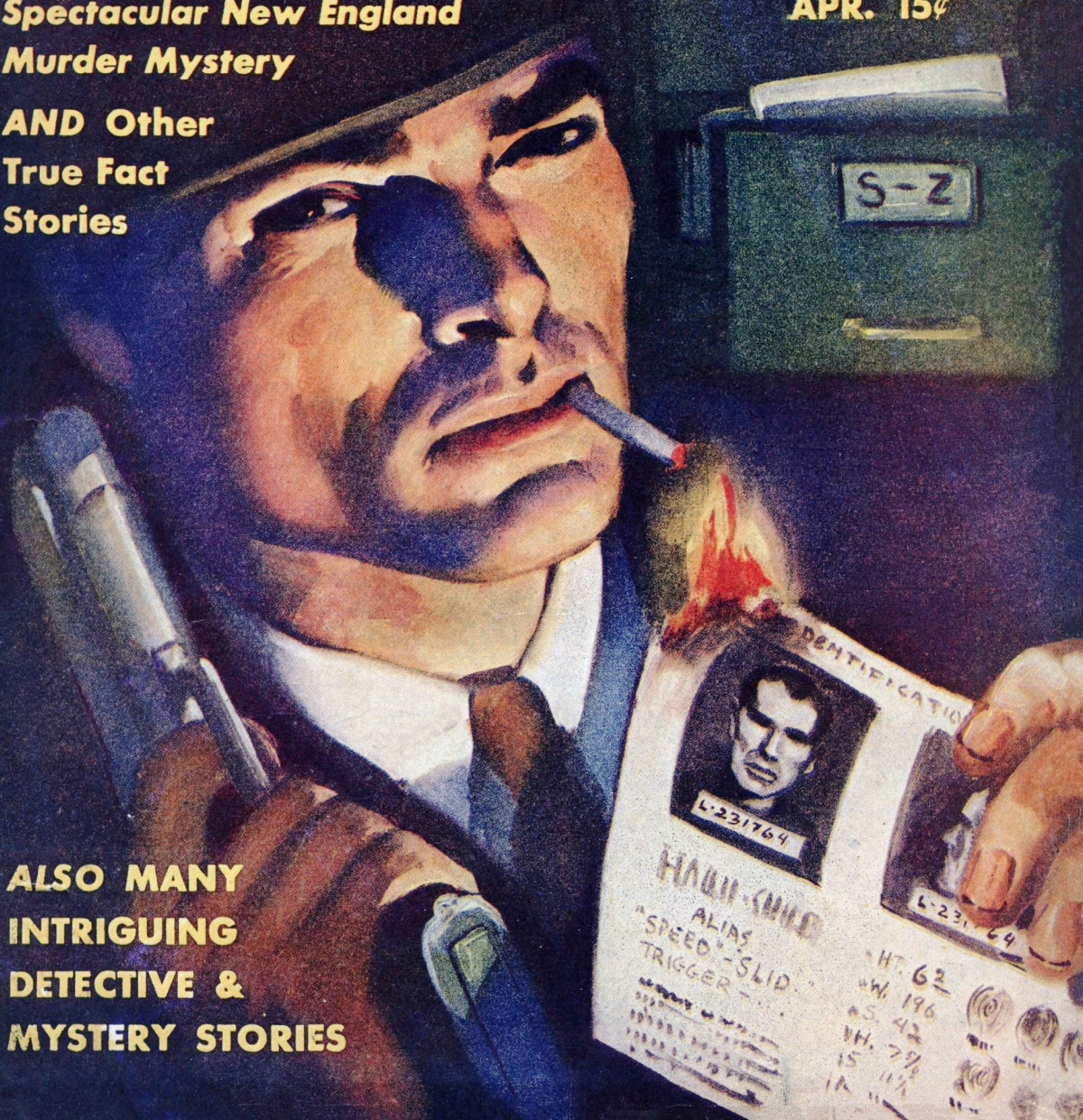
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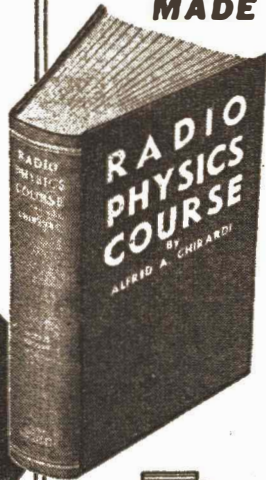
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April, 1942

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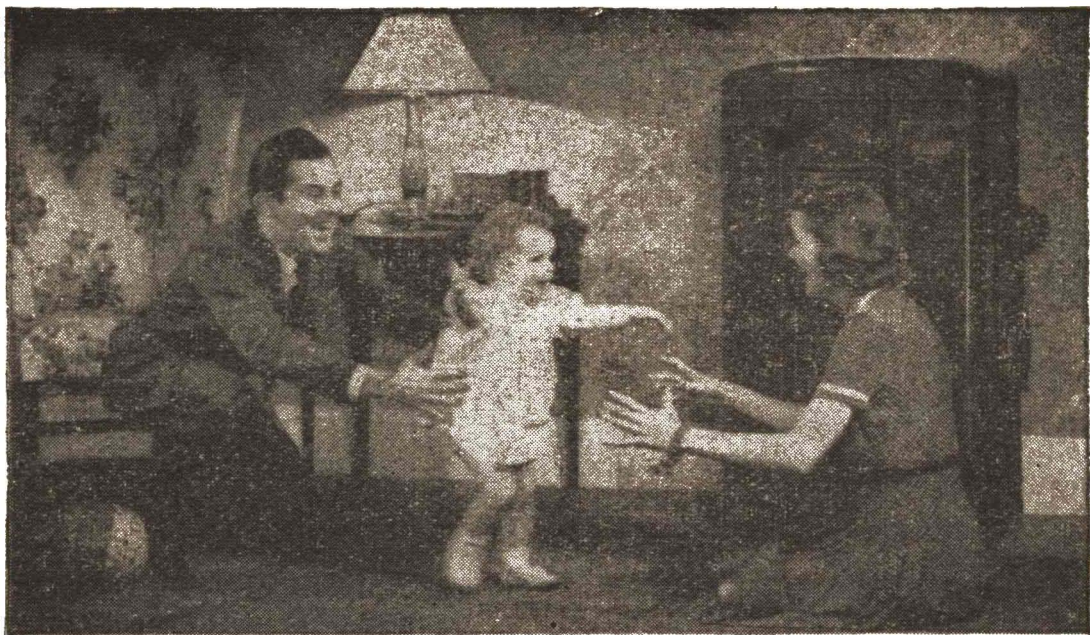
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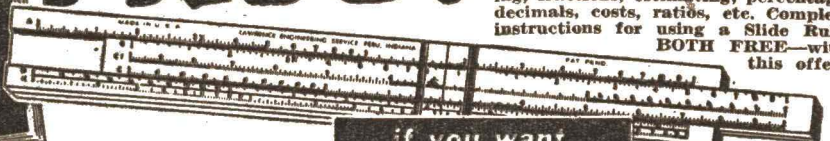
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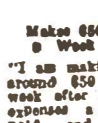
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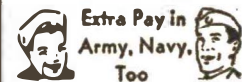
Makes \$50
a Week

"I am making around \$50 a week after all expenses are paid, and I am getting all the Radio work I can take care of, thanks to N. R. I." **H. W. SPANGLER, 128 1/2 S. Gay St., Knoxville, Tenn.**



\$5 to \$10
a Week in
Spare Time

"I am engaged in spare time Radio work. I average from \$5 to \$10 a week. I often wished that I had enrolled sooner because all this extra money sure does come in handy." **THEODORE K. DUBREE, Hershman, Penn.**



Extra Pay in
Army, Navy,
Too

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Nearly every neighborhood offers opportunities for a part time Radio Technician to make good money fixing Radio sets. I give you special training to show you how to start cashing in on these opportunities early. You get Radio parts and instructions for building test equipment, for conducting experiments that give you valuable, practical experience. You also get a modern Professional Radio Servicing Instrument. My fifty-fifty method—half working with Radio parts, half studying my Lesson Texts—makes learning Radio at home interesting, fascinating, practical.

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J. E. Smith, President
Dept. 2DA2, National Radio Institute
Washington, D. C.



BROADCASTING STATIONS (top illustration) employ Radio Technicians as operators, installers, maintenance men and in other fascinating, steady, well-paying technical jobs. **FIXING RADIO SETS** (lower illustration) pays many Radio Technicians \$30, \$40, \$50 a week. Others hold their regular jobs and make \$5 to \$10 a week extra in spare time.

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THE KEY TO MURDER

A Sensational New England Murder Case Taken Direct From the Records of the Waterville, Maine, Police Dept.

as Told by **BUD MARTIN**

"IT'S going to be pretty hard to identify it," mumbled Alfred Poirier, Chief of the Waterville, Maine, Police Department. The blackened thing on the mortician's slab was minus hands and legs, a charred gargoyle of something that had once been human. "Is it a man or a woman, Doc?"

"A man," Medical Examiner Dr. Napoleon Bisson was brusque. "And a patient of mine. I recognize the scar of the appendectomy. But the features are gone. I cannot identify him."

Captain George P. Beckett, chief of detectives of the Waterville police department, entered. "The hay barn burned to the ground, Chief. The firemen cooled off the ruins enough so that we could look around. There wasn't a scrap of clothing left except this. He must have been lying on it."

Chief Poirier placed the charred bit of cloth beside a blood-spattered pair of spectacles which had been found near the blazing barn on the Marston Road.

"Let's see that!" Eagerly Dr. Bisson studied the rude pocket which had been sewn to the cloth with coarse black thread. "A week ago I noticed just such a patch as this on the lining of the vest of one of my patients. Napoleon Lessard."

"Nappy Lessard, the taxi man!" Chief Poirier examined the large patch with his fingertips. Cautiously he slit the black threads and drew out a flat bundle of bills in large denominations. "One hundred eighty dollars. It's Lessard all right, but where's his taxi?"

While Chief Poirier phoned headquarters to send out an alarm for the Lessard taxi Dr. Bisson found a small hole punched into the base of the victim's brain. "Looks like it might have been made by a hammer," he muttered. He promised an imme-

diately autopsy and the two officers left in a hurry.

Nothing remained of the Eustis hay barn on the Marston Road except a blackened square in a white field. Crowds who had come from the city and the surrounding countryside to witness the fire had remained to shiver in the cold winter night. It was December 29, 1938.

A patrolman handed Chief Poirier a few blackened coins and the remains of a pocket knife, all that had been found after careful search of the ruins where the body had been.

Waterville Fire Chief Grover Lovejoy showed the officers a pool of blood at the roadside. "This is where the glasses and the bloody stick were found. Drops of blood made a trail to the doorway of the blazing barn. That's how we happened to find the body."

Chief Poirier noted that the fire alarm had been phoned in at 5:40 o'clock. He interviewed the lad who had given the alarm, Eugene Marshall, neighbor of A. E. Eustis, owner of the barn. The young man had seen the flames from a window of his home, several hundred yards from the auxiliary hay barn. He had seen no car or person near the barn.

Florian Halley, farmer, said he had seen a gray sedan driven at a reckless pace over the rough road toward Waterville shortly before the fire was discovered. He could not tell how many passengers the car contained. Already it was quite dark.

It was useless to search for tracks or tire marks. Poirier and Beckett returned to headquarters.

"I don't believe Nappy Lessard had an enemy in the world," murmured Captain Beckett.

"A lot of guys around here would bump off their own grandmother for half the roll Lessard carried," Poirier offered.



Mrs. Lilla Crosby, whose complaint to Chief Poirier about a car left in her garage broke the case, enters the Kennebec County Superior Court, Augusta, to testify.

Napoleon Lessard, sixty-year-old taxi man was well known to both officers. His taxi stand was in front of the Crescent Hotel, where he lived alone in a three-dollar-a-week room. He was extremely frugal, reputed to be wealthy, and it was common knowledge that he carried large sums upon

his person. Robbery, obviously, was the motive for this brutal murder.

It looked like an easy case to solve.

I WAS assigned to the case next morning, to search for the missing Plymouth sedan. Together with another deputy sher-

iff, Wallace Breard, and Chief Burt Dyer of the Oakland police department, I searched for three solid weeks. We covered every woods road, abandoned dwelling and summer camp in the entire Belgrade Lakes region and we didn't get a single lead. State and local police all over New England had been notified within an hour after the finding of the body. Several 1939 gunmetal Plymouth sedans were found but not one was the one we were looking for. It was as if the car had vanished into thin air.

Checking back on Lessard's activities it was found he had sat in the lobby of the Crescent Hotel most of the afternoon he was killed. Shortly after four o'clock he was seen in conversation with a burly man in a green mackinaw in front of the hotel. Pretty nearly every man in Maine with a green mackinaw was picked up and questioned. And released.

Several persons were found who saw Lessard's cab wending through the city streets and bumping over the country road toward the Marston Road. Each witness noticed a single passenger in the back seat.

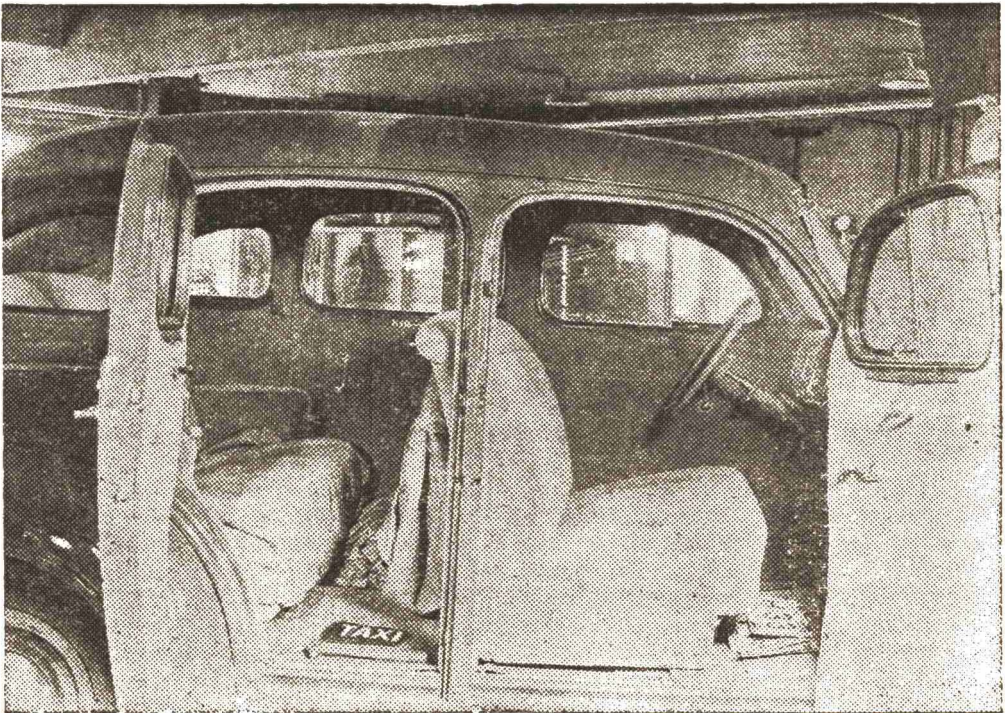
No one was found who could give the slightest description of the passenger.

Poirier and Beckett interviewed half a hundred unsavory characters and checked their alibis. Police in other cities did the same. Suspects were trailed, even, to other states, questioned and released. The Waterville police force and the Waterville division of the Kennebec County Sheriff's department began to get red-rimmed eyes and jumpy nerves from lack of sleep. And still we didn't get anywhere.

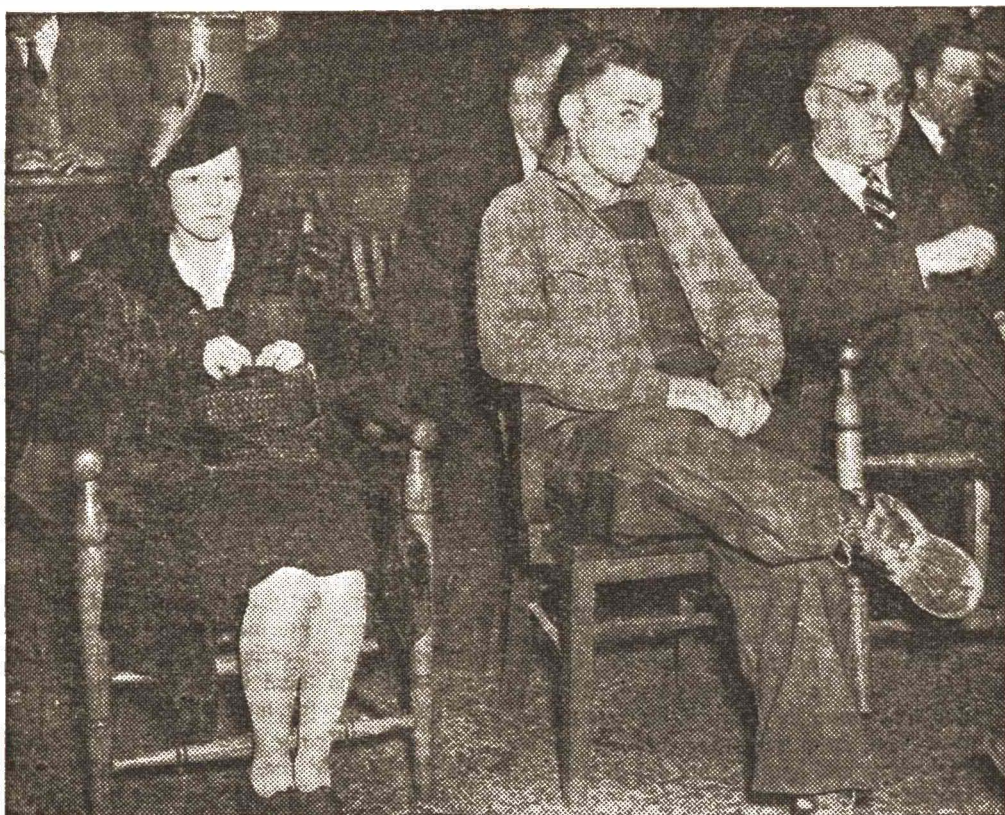
Six months later Captain Joseph F. Young, ace State police investigator, was assigned to the case. It is Captain Young's belief that in almost every murder case, if you'll look deep enough, you'll find a woman in it somewhere. Captain Young found two.

The large French Canadian population of Maine is a pretty close-mouthed unit so far as the English speaking population is concerned, but among themselves they chatter like magpies. Anastasia and Marie LaFlamme had talked to friends who had talked to friends who had whispered to Captain Young.

The girls were not exactly over-joyed when Captains Young and Beckett called at their home on the "Flats" just outside of Waterville. Captain Young, however,



Interior of the murder car showing plates removed and murder hammer, as found by the police five months after the crime.



Mrs. Louis Lacroix, Lacroix, and Capt. Joseph Young of the State Police, in court.

had heard just enough to be able to induce them to tell all—or nearly all.

The story was that at seven o'clock on the night that Napoleon Lessard was murdered a young man appeared at the house where the girls were staying and invited them out for the evening.

"What was his name?" demanded Captain Young. The girls said they did not know. "But he said the man with him had a lot of money and he would give us a good time."

"So?"

"So we put our things on and went out to the car."

IN THE rear seat of the sedan, the girls said, was a thick-set man hunched over in an overcoat with his hat pulled low over his forehead. He had gold teeth. He showed the girls a large roll of bills but something in his attitude frightened them and they ran back into the house.

No, they did not know the name of the man but thought they had seen his picture in the newspaper at some time. They did not know, or said they didn't, whether the car had two or four doors, whether it was gray, black, blue or red.

The girls described the two men again and Young and Beckett went away from there.

"The big man in the car might have been Freeman Desrosier," murmured Beckett. "Lord knows his mug has been in the paper often enough."

"Thought he'd skipped the country after he got out of Atlanta?"

"Yeah. I thought so too. But maybe he's back again."

And Freeman Desrosier, ex-king of Waterville bootleggers, had revisited his old haunts, Captain Beckett learned after a bit of judicious questioning in the right places. He had come back a week before the murder of Napoleon Lessard with the an-

nounced intention of painting the hot spots a flaming vermillion. He'd disappeared the morning after the fire on the Marston Road. Where did he come from? And where did he go to? Who were his companions while he was in Waterville?

While Captain Beckett sought the answers to these questions a little old lady went to her telephone and spoke the words which placed her name upon the front pages all over New England. Her name was Mrs. Lilla Crosby, age 80, and she owned a string of garages in her backyard on Main Street, Fairfield, next town to the City of Waterville.

"I want you should tell me whether I'd be right in putting another padlock on one of my garages?" she enquired of Fairfield Chief of Police Charles J. Poirier. (No relation to Chief Alfred Poirier of Waterville.) She explained that some months ago a stranger rented one of her garages, paying five months' rental in advance. Now it was going on for the sixth month and the stranger had not showed up. She did not know who he was. What was to prevent him from removing his car in the night time and gypping her out of the sixth month's rent?

"I'll be right over!" promised Chief Poirier. He picked up a state detective, Berle Randall of Fairfield, and he streaked for the Crosby address.

The thumping in Chief Poirier's breast increased when he saw the automobile in Mrs. Crosby's garage. It was covered with sheeting and old coats. The sheeting ends were nailed to the floor with wooden cleats.

Quickly they uncovered the car. It was a 1939 Plymouth sedan, gunmetal. They raised the hood, checked the motor number.

For half a year the murder car had remained hidden within half a block of the Fairfield State Police barracks—to be disclosed only when an old lady began to worry about a month's rent!

The right side of the car, the right running board, the steering post and the front cushion were bloodstained. The car plates—H-33—were on the front seat. A ball pein hammer, encrusted with dried blood, rested upon the floorboards in the front compartment. Chief Poirier sent out the alarm and Waterville, state, local and county police descended from all directions.

It was impossible for Mrs. Crosby to re-

member a single detail of the stranger's appearance, she said. He came to her house just after supper "the night of the big fire on the Marston Road." He paid ten dollars in advance for five month's rent. He asked Mrs. Crosby to have removed some ladders that were in the garage.

Next morning Mrs. Crosby hired a boy to remove the ladders. She couldn't remember who the boy was.

But the folks upstairs had callers that evening. Mrs. Crosby had rapped upon the water pipes to tell them their visitor would have to remove his car from the driveway. Perhaps this man had seen the stranger.

Captain Beckett showed Mrs. Crosby a picture of Desrosier. "He's a nice looking man," said she. "I think I've seen him somewhere, but I couldn't be sure."

Lieutenant Leon P. Shepard and his assistant "Skip" Freeman, state police identification experts, arrived to photograph the car, and then toted it away to Augusta to be gone over for fingerprints.

Captain Young and I located Alfred Baker, Fairfield mechanic, who had visited the Leach family in Mrs. Crosby's house the evening the garage was rented. Baker remembered moving his car so the new tenant could occupy the garage but he had not paid any attention to the man. He could not tell whether he was tall or short, old or young.

Captain Beckett and Chief Poirier set out to identify the two women's coats which had been tied to the trunk of the car, while others sought the source of the long strips of unbleached sheeting and the wooden slats which had been nailed to the floor to keep the sheeting over the car. The following morning Captain Young and I again called upon Mrs. Crosby. This time she remembered the name of the boy who had removed the ladders from the garage for her.

We went across the street and questioned Earl Damon, 21. He remembered moving the ladders. "There was a man there covering the car with cloth," he said.

Captain Young exchanged meaning glances with me. Here was where we got our description of the murderer!

"I said, 'That's a nice looking car you've got there,'" Damon continued.

"He said, 'It's a new car. I'm not going to run it this winter. I don't want anyone to touch it.'"

Captain Young drew a deep breath. "What did the man look like?"

Damon looked blank. "Why I never paid no attention."

"Was he tall or short?" I asked.

Damon shook his head.

"Was he an old man or a young man?"

"He stayed on the opposite side of the car and I never saw him."

Three people had seen and two of them talked with the man we wanted. Yet we couldn't get even the slightest description of him.

IN THE meantime Chief Poirier's men had located the source of the fifteen yards of forty-eight inch unbleached sheeting which had covered Lessard's car. Captain Young and I interviewed Jerry Bridges, paymaster of the Lockwood Mill, who showed us the sales records of the Company for the period prior to January 1939.

Ten yards of the forty-eight inch material had been sold to a Massachusetts concern in October of 1938. The next purchase was by one Louis Lacroix, who bought fifteen yards December 30, 1938, which was the day the murder car had been covered in Mrs. Crosby's garage.

"This stuff doesn't seem to sell very well. Is this a complete record of sales?" asked Captain Young.

The mill man explained that forty-eight inches was an unusual width for sheeting. The company sold a large volume of the fifty-four inch material.

Captain Young guessed we better have a talk with Louis Lacroix.

I knew Louis Lacroix, had evicted him from a dwelling in Waterville for non-payment of rent. With Chief Poirier we went to Lucien Lacroix, a brother, to learn the present address of the man we wanted to see. Lucien did not know his brother's address; knew only that he was employed in the tire department of the Montgomery-Ward store in Waterville.

The personnel manager at Ward's told us that Lacroix was in Aroostock County selling tires. He showed us Lacroix's employment record. One of the places Lacroix had worked was on the farm of Elmer Eustis, in whose burned barn was found the charred body of Napoleon Lessard.

Captain Young obtained the license plate number of Lacroix's car from the State

House in Augusta and Chief Poirier phoned Sheriff Lycette in Houlton, in the northern part of the state, to locate Lacroix and hold him for questioning.

The three of us, with Mrs. Thelda Lee, a stenographer, met Lacroix in the Sheriff's office in Houlton the next morning. Lacroix remembered me and greeted me without rancor. He was a good appearing young fellow and well mannered, married and with three children. We told him we were investigating the Lessard murder and Captain Young asked him if he had ever bought any cloth from the Lockwood Mill.

"No," said Louis Lacroix. Captain Young informed him that the records showed otherwise.

Lacroix thought a minute. "Come to think of it I did buy some somewhere near the first of November. My wife made sheets and pillow slips of it."

"Didn't you buy any cloth after that?"

"No."

Again Captain Young refreshed the lad's memory from the records and he admitted he had bought sheeting the second time and taken it home 'or his wife to sew on.

Lacroix said he knew Lessard very well, had driven his taxi for him and helped him with his mail. He met the well-to-do taxi man while employed at the Park View filling station in Waterville, where Lessard's car was serviced. He admitted that he had helped store hay in Eustis's barn—but that was a long time ago and he had not been on the Marston Road since he was a farm-hand on the Eustis farm.

Chief Poirier asked Lacroix when he planned to return to his home in Fairfield and he replied, "Not until Friday," which was several days off. We warned him that we might desire to question him again and departed for home.

We were half way home, still discussing the case, when a sudden thought struck me. "If Lacroix is the man who hired Mrs. Crosby's garage the chances are he would have had the key on him."

"And we never thought to search him!" Young and Poirier were chagrined.

Back in Fairfield we questioned Lacroix's wife. She remembered the sheeting brought home by her husband in late October or early November. A Mrs. Herard, a sister-in-law, helped her make sheets and pillow cases of it. No sheeting had come into the house since then, she averred.

We checked with Mrs. Herard, who said she assisted Mrs. Lacroix with all of her

sewing. There was only one lot of sheeting she knew of.

Next morning I passed Lacroix's house at the corner of Summer and Main Streets, Fairfield, on my way to Waterville and I saw Lacroix's car in the driveway. "I thought you were staying in Houlton until Friday," I said when he answered my rap on his door.

Said Lacroix, "I think I should make some changes in the story I told you yesterday. So I came home." He agreed to meet us at the state police barracks in Fairfield at two o'clock that afternoon.

LACROIX kept his appointment on the dot but he had "forgotten" what change he wished to make in his story. He still insisted he had taken the cloth from the Lockwood Mills home to his wife and that she had used it about the house.

"Then it still would be there?" suggested Captain Young.

Lacroix nodded.

Young continued the questioning while Chief Poirier and I went to the Lacroix house with a tape measure. We searched high and low with Mrs. Lacroix's help and we accounted for the fifty-four inch material Lacroix had taken home. But not a stitch of forty-eight inch sheeting could we find.

Still Lacroix insisted upon his story. He was questioned about his activities upon the day of the murder which he "remembered well because that was the day Mr. Eustis's barn burned." He was at home all day, he said, caring for the children while Mrs. Lacroix was at work.

We knew that Louis Lacroix needed money. We knew Napoleon Lessard had the reputation of carrying large sums upon his person. We were pretty sure the taxi man had been murdered for robbery. But we had found nearly two hundred dollars sewed into the portion of Lessard's vest which had miraculously escaped the fire. Had the taxi man carried other money with him? Had Lacroix found and taken it?

Everything seemed to be against our ever being able to solve the murder of Napoleon Lessard. Not a single fingerprint could Lieutenant Shepard lift from Lessard's taxi. He photographed portions of thirteen prints from the registration plates. Not one tallied with the prints of Lacroix or any other suspect.

Captain Beckett had traced ownership of the coats used to cover the trunk of the sedan to previous occupants of the Crosby garage. The rope with which the coats were tied and the slats which battened the sheeting to the floor were traced to the lumber mill of Ralph Jewell, near the Crosby house.

And then Captain Beckett produced a red hot lead.

Freeman Desrosier, the ex-racketeer who had returned from nowhere to paint Waterville red, had quietly disappeared the morning after Napoleon Lessard's mangled body was found. Freeman Desrosier had been in Waterville for a week just prior to the finding of Lessard's car. He disappeared again as soon as the car was found.

Captain Beckett, with patrolman George Mahieu, since a state detective, set out hot foot upon the trail of the ex-bootlegger and ex-convict, while Captain Young, Chief Poirier, Deputy Breard and myself stayed with the Lacroix angle.

We learned that Lacroix had received help from the town up until January first, 1939, but that he had seemed to be quite flush after that. Checking here and there we found where he had spent at least seventy dollars during the first ten days following the murder. We desired to question him about this but he was in Sister's Hospital with a dislocated shoulder as the result of an automobile accident.

While we were waiting for him to get out of the hospital Chief Poirier unearthed two more clues which more than ever convinced me that Louis Lacroix was our man. The Waterville chief located a Mrs. Lillian Gibson who had served as housekeeper for Mrs. Crosby at the time the garage was hired to store the murder car. Mrs. Gibson's description of the man she saw at that time tallied closely with that of Louis Lacroix. And Poirier learned, too, that the same Lacroix had been heard to remark that he, "knew where Nappy Lessard's taxi was, and it isn't far from here."

I too had a stroke of good fortune when I located a Miss Bernadette Thibodeau of Fairfield who had kept house for the Lacroixs, and who stated that Louis Lacroix did not stay at home the day of the murder as he had told us, but had been out most of the afternoon and did not return until nearly seven o'clock—an hour after Miss Thibodeau was supposed to be through

work for the day. Mrs. Lacroix had not returned from work at that hour, either.

A week or so later Breard and I had Lacroix in to the Fairfield state police barracks again for questioning. His story was substantially the same as he had told all along. He explained his sudden affluence after the murder by saying he had had exceptional luck in a house to house canvassing job. He gave us the names of the companies he had worked for.

Captain Young and Chief Poirier went to Bangor where the books of the Eastern Furniture Company and the Wear-Ever Aluminum Company revealed no payments to Lacroix during the period in question.

I checked the records of the Wyandotte Mill where Mrs. Lacroix had gone to work the last week in December. She was not paid until January 6, when she received eight dollars.

Now we thought we had the man we'd trailed all these months. But still he evaded our charges. Some of the money he had spent had come from clothing and house furnishings he had pawned in Fairfield and Waterville. Some came from odd jobs, he "could not remember" just where.

Captain Young went for Earl Damon, the lad who had talked with the man who had been covering the car in the garage. Lacroix was placed in a line-up with officers and others and Damon was asked to point out the man he had talked with. Damon hesitated, bit his finger.

And then he pointed that finger at—me!

We took Lacroix to Mrs. Crosby's house and had another line-up. Mrs. Crosby hesitated, then pointed—you've guessed it. . . .

At me!

Captain Young's eyes twinkled. "I always thought there was something not just right about you," he chuckled, "but I never thought I'd see two witnesses point you out as a murderer!"

Hardly had we recovered from this shock when Captain Beckett came through with what appeared to be, finally, the solution to the murder mystery. He had found Desrosier's companion of the murder night to be a young Waterville man by the name of Armand Belanger. He located the car Belanger had used at that time in a used car lot of the Scribner Motor Company—and he found blood stains upon the rear seat and the back of the front seat! Beckett

and his partner Mahieu sped back to Canada for more information on Desrosier, of which they found—plenty.

Freeman Desrosier, Atlanta graduate and ex-Waterville big shot, had become a big shot in Canada. If he had a roll of bills in Waterville it did not mean necessarily that it had come from the pockets of Napoleon Lessard, for Desrosier was operating one of the biggest illegal stills that had ever fouled the air of the Province of Quebec.

On Beckett's tip the Mounties closed in on Monsieur Desrosier and put him where he would be available in case the American authorities wished later to charge him with murder.

Desrosier took the bootlegging rap because he had to but he announced that he would strenuously resist extradition to the United States and he refused to discuss the Napoleon Lessard case.

While all this was going on the rest of us decided to have one more fling at Louis Lacroix.

WE again contacted Mrs. Gibson, Mrs. Crosby's housekeeper, who assured us that she had seen the man who hired the garage; first when he paid Mrs. Crosby the advance rent; again the next morning when he borrowed a hammer to nail the cleats upon the floor, and the third time when he had returned the hammer to her.

Captain Young asked her if she thought she could pick that man from a police line-up and she replied that she was willing to try. "To save embarrassment to Deputy Bird," Captain Young threw a sly glance at me, "please say nothing at the line-up. Tell me later if you think you see the man who hired the garage."

So again we had Louis Lacroix at the Fairfield State Police barracks. We repeated all the questions and he gave us carbon copy answers. Then we stood him up in a line of several men and asked Mrs. Gibson to come in.

Not by so much as the flicker of an eyelash did Louis Lacroix indicate that he had ever seen Mrs. Gibson before. Her eyes swept twice over the line of men and then she left the room with Captain Young.

"She did it!" he exclaimed when I joined them. "She picked out Lacroix."

"Are you certain, madame?" Captain Beckett asked.

"Well, as sure as I can be after all this time." "

"Certain enough to testify in court?" Deputy Breard asked.

Mrs. Gibson's face blanched. "Oh I—I couldn't testify in court!"

"Why?" Chief Poirier saw our case gone a-glimmering, almost on the threshold of success.

"My—my heart. I have a very weak heart. I wouldn't dare go to court."

We argued, we pleaded, we cajoled. We talked of duty to the state. Nothing would change the mind of Mrs. Gibson, that lady said.

Sadly we had to admit that our months of work had gone for naught. Many, many circumstances pointed toward Louis Lacroix but unless we could place him, definitely, at the scene of the crime, or at least with Lessard's car, we knew it was useless to bring him before a jury.

Our only hope now lay in securing another witness. At no time had it appeared that more than one man was implicated in the Lessard murder. But drowning men will grasp at straws. If we could find that Desrosier, too, was mixed up in it...

Captain Beckett brought in Armand Belanger, questioned him regarding the night Napoleon Lessard was slain.

At first Belanger could not remember that far back but with a little prompting from the captain he recalled that he had been with Freeman Desrosier all that day and evening. This Captain Beckett already knew.

Beckett asked him to explain the presence of blood in the car he had traded soon after the murder day. Belanger had a prompt answer. A friend of his had cut his hand on the rear seat ashtray. We demanded the name of the man and, after considerable search, found him. Now we were going to crack the case wide open.

But the lad corroborated Belanger's almost unbelievable statement. More, he produced witnesses to the effect that he had suffered a pretty bad hand cut at the time.

Desrosier and Belanger appeared to be eliminated as suspects.

A day or two later Chief Poirier received a letter from one Paul Woodworth, Fairfield attorney, to the effect that he had been engaged as counsel for Louis Lacroix and had advised his client to answer no more questions of the police unless ar-

rested, and then only in the presence of counsel. And that was that.

For months the Lessard case dragged. I passed the bar exams for which I had been studying, resigned my post as deputy sheriff and opened a law office in Waterville. Still I could not get my mind off the unsolved murder case upon which I had labored so long.

One day in the summer of 1940 there walked into my office, jaunty as ever, Louis Lacroix, requesting that I represent him in a case involving an action brought by his now estranged wife. I replied that I would gladly do so but that I was still interested in the Lessard murder and felt it my duty to hand over to the authorities anything which I might learn about that case.

Lacroix shrugged and grinned.

I had many discussions with Lacroix about the Lessard murder after that. I told him he should do his best to have that case cleared up if he ever wanted to get ahead in Kennebec county. "The only thing they have against me is that damned sheeting from the Lockwood Mill. If only I could remember what became of it..."

I DID not tell him of Mrs. Gibson's identification of him, though I had a suspicion it was to learn about this that he had sought me out. "There seem to me to be only three possible answers to that cloth business," I told him. "Either you bought that cloth and covered the car with it or gave it to someone else to cover the car with; or you bought it and honestly cannot remember what became of it."

"If only I could remember..."

I told him that often the memory could be assisted by hypnosis. He seemed interested. I told him I would make an appointment for a session with a prominent psychiatrist. He agreed. I made the appointment.

Louis Lacroix never came to my office again.

One evening I sat at home, my mind in that relaxed state which sometimes comes after a hard day's work. I imagined that I had killed Napoleon Lessard, hidden his taxi cab within sight of a state police barracks. I tried to think what I would do then.

I thought that the paying of the garage rent in advance was a clever move. And I could appreciate the murderer having everything removed from the garage so that

no one would wish to enter it. I thought that I, too, would take the extra precaution of covering the murder car before locking the garage upon the only thing which could connect me with the murder.

But could I resist the powerful impulse to return; to make certain I had overlooked no detail in the hiding of the car?

Then I saw myself in the dead of night sneaking into Mrs. Crosby's back yard. I fumbled in my pockets, one after the other. Frantically I tried again. The key was gone—lost. I dare not force the lock for fear of rousing the neighbors. What should I do....?

It occurred to me the murderer must have had some such thoughts as these. In such a position I should have had a duplicate key made, I reasoned, and kept it in a place apart from the first key. But I would have disposed of both keys the moment that it appeared that I was suspected. Obviously, then, it was too late to search the premises of Louis Lacroix. But I had another idea. I could scarcely wait until morning to carry it out.

The third locksmith I called upon was Wallace Judkins. I asked him if he could remember and identify a key he had made nearly two and one-half years ago. He shook his head slowly. "Not unless the key was an odd one or there were unusual circumstances connected with the making of it."

I asked him if he knew Louis Lacroix. He nodded.

"Ever make a key for him?"

The man nodded slowly. "I'm pretty sure I have."

I went to Mrs. Crosby's house. She had aged considerably, had difficulty in remembering who I was. I asked her if the padlock had been changed since the Lessard car was removed from the garage. She replied that it had not. I asked to borrow the padlock and the key that fitted it. She hobbled off toward the kitchen table.

In the drawer I saw a ring with many keys on it. I asked permission to take the whole business. She assented. With one of the keys I unlocked the padlock on the garage door and returned to Judkins' shop.

Judkins looked the keys over carefully, held one up. "This is the key I made for Louis Lacroix about two years ago."

"How can you possibly remember the incident?"

"It's the key to a very cheap padlock. I told Lacroix it'd cost him a quarter for me to duplicate it for him. Said he could get a new lock with two keys just as good for a dime. He told me to mind my own business, so I made the key for him."

I removed the padlock from my pocket, asked Judkins to see if the key would open it. The locksmith inserted the key and twisted.

The lock opened!

I told of my discovery to County Attorney William Neihoff, who had inherited the unsolved Lessard murder case upon the retirement of the previous prosecutor. Neihoff called in most of the others who had worked on the investigation and we agreed that at long last the time had come to arrest Louis Lacroix for murder.

Henry P. Weaver, recently appointed chief of the Maine state police, made the arrest in the dormitory of a girls' seminary near Waterville, where Lacroix was employed as a construction laborer. This was upon March 3, 1941, more than two years after the death of the Waterville taxi driver.

Lacroix refused to talk until we called his attorney and then he was no music box. Chief Weaver nonchalantly asked him to tie several knots in pieces of rope. Lacroix's were unusual knots. They matched the unusual knots which had been tied in the ropes holding the old coats to Lessard's taxi.

All during his trial Louis Lacroix retained his jauntiness, prophesying a sure acquittal. Even when Mrs. Gibson overcame her fear of heart failure and testified that he was the man who had left Lessard's taxi at Mrs. Crosby's, Lacroix was not perturbed.

Only once, after the jury had returned its verdict and his attorneys had requested a new trial, did Louis Lacroix lower his bland mask. Then indeed did he show his hidden murderous nature, when he fought against deputy sheriffs to escape.

But the motion for new trial was denied and Louis Lacroix was taken away to spend the rest of his days in state prison, which is Maine's mandatory penalty for conviction of murder.

(The names Anastasia and Marie La-Flamme and Armand Belanger are fictitious to protect innocent persons.)

THREE HUNDRED MILES OF BLOOD AND BULLETS

**A True Fact Detective Story of the Hays Gang and Their
60-Day Career of Crime and Terror.**

as Told by J. HOYT CUMMINGS

IT WAS in the heyday of the lush twenties. Tulsa, Oklahoma, center of a great oil boom, was literally rolling in newly-found wealth. Thousands of dollars, in greasy bills, nightly changed hands at a roll of the dice or single turn of a card.

Milling men, covered with dirt and grime of drills and rigging—their pockets sagging with money, fingers itching to gamble for more, filled bootleg joints and gambling dens throughout the town. Not uncommon at night, through the drone of men's voices, a pistol shot would ring out. Just a momentary lull, a dull thud, as a lifeless form hit the floor; then the monotonous drone resumed. Another poor sucker killed; on with the game.

Police had their hands full. The town was gutted with confidence men, card sharps, slick gamblers and all types of crooks, bent on extracting greenbacks from the newly rich. Men didn't think in terms of dollars—it was thousands; millions!

In the midst of this atmosphere of easy money and gold-crazed men emerged a tousle-headed, auburn-haired youth, just turned sixteen. He got the smell and feel of soft greenbacks without sweat or brawn. It was easy. Just wait for a drunken oil man, stick a gun in his face; take it away from him.

Leonard "Tex" Hays decided that men who slaved all day for a living were just suckers. There were just two classes of people—suckers, who worked for a living and smart guys, who figured out some way to take it away from the suckers. Tex made up his mind to be a smart guy.

His plan suddenly went cockeyed. Tex stuck up a sucker one night who wasn't as drunk as he looked. In fact, it is quite probable he didn't have a drink; for shortly aft-

erward, Tex found himself at the police station trying to account for a large roll of money. He couldn't.

However, it was Tex's first known offense. He was only sixteen. Give him another chance, his honest family pleaded. So the judge did, and Tex went free. That was in May, 1926.

Among his girl and boy friends, Tex was considered a handsome youth. Always neat, he walked with a swagger and affected to be a man of experience. Despite being shorter than his pals, he was their leader. Rarely smiling, his hazel eyes looked sarcastically at his less daring companions who had jobs. For awhile, he tried professional boxing, got a few bad scars and quit the ring.

"Nuts to you yokels," he sneered. "There's plenty of money around this town and I'm going to get my share. Those who want to join me can." But, mostly, Tex was a lone wolf. He liked to go into bootleg joints and order a whiskey straight, with no chaser. It was a sign of manhood.

Then suddenly, Leonard Tex Hays bobbed up in jail again. He had stolen an automobile, just seven months after promising to go straight. This time, the judge said, "five years in state prison" and Tex traded his well-creased trousers for a suit of wrinkled denim. In 1930, he was paroled. But the law just wouldn't let him alone.

Shortly after his release, he got picked up for driving while intoxicated. He didn't hurt anybody and the jails were full, anyhow, so he got off easy, with a fine. More drinking. He decided to try new fields, and went to Springfield, Missouri.

One night, in a bootleg joint he met some bigger-time crooks. He was an ex-con himself, he bragged, and they took him in. Over a few drinks, the new friends decided to test him.

"How'd you like to try a safe job?" one of them asked.

"I'm your man," Tex boasted. "I can do anything anybody else can. Let's go." Several nights later, they entered a store, cracked a safe and fled with a bag full of money.

But, somehow, Tex just wasn't lucky. Two plainclothes men took him to police headquarters and he was booked on a charge of safeblowing.

Disconsolate, he awaited trial. In the bullpen, he met Bert Oglesby, a dark-haired youth, just two years his senior. Bert already had a record, predating Tex's career of small-time crime by about a year, which included in rapid succession arrests and conviction for vagrancy, prowling, grand larceny, car theft and possession of burglar tools. In 1928, he had drawn five years in state prison for car theft, but was out on parole, when arrested at Springfield.

The two reviewed their failure at crime. Then Tex said, "Let's break this joint and pull some real jobs."

"I'm on," said Oglesby enthusiastically. "How'll we do it?"

NEXT day, on January 27, 1931, local newspapers carried big headlines: "Six Prisoners Break County Jail." Hays and Oglesby had taken four others in the plot.

Tex, the leader, snatched a gun from an unsuspecting guard, after slugging him. Thus armed, and with the guard's keys, he and Oglesby led the way through iron doors and ran. Within a short time, two of the six were recaptured. Thousands of circulars were broadcast over the country.

But Tex Hays and Bert Oglesby were nowhere to be found.

The two gunmen sat in a bootleg joint the evening of February 8 in Tulsa, drinking straight whiskey, with no chaser. Up to now they had no definite plan for the future. Hays called to the bartender.

"Give us another straight one," he said thickly.

Both downed their drink in a single gulp. Hays, by far the superior in mental processes, as well as nerve, was boss.

"Why should we hang around here, where we're plenty hot?" he said. "I'm in favor of picking up a good car and beating it south, where it's warm; where there's plenty of good-time Charlies with bank rolls. We can stick up a few gas stations



Dave McDonald, garage proprietor of Welburn, Fla., points to a bullet hole, relic of the fierce gun battle between the gunmen and the deputy sheriffs.

and punks on the way down and everything will be oke."

"It's all right by me," Oglesby said. "Only let's get some action. I want to get out of here."

The two ordered another drink, paid the check and left. Slinking into the residential section, they soon came to quiet streets, with only an occasional corner light. They spotted a black Chevrolet sedan, parked at the curb. Hays noted no one in sight. A man and a girl were in the front seat.

"You take the right side," Hays whispered. "I'll take care of the guy."

The young man under the wheel saw their approach and, fearing a holdup, hurriedly pushed his wallet, containing about twenty dollars, back of the seat cushion.

"Put 'em up, Buddy, and get out slow," Tex commanded, pushing a gun through the door window. "And don't make any fuss, if you know what's good for you."

Oglesby pointed his gun at the girl and told her to remain quiet. Seeing himself helpless to protest, the man got out of the

car. Hays went through his pockets, cursing when he found only small change. He took off the man's wrist watch.

Hays then ordered the girl out.

"You two stay right where you are and don't set up any alarm, or I'll come back and plug you both," he snarled. He and Oglesby jumped in the car and sped away.

Racing out of town, the two came to a stop at a roadside speakeasy. Parking the car out of sight, they entered and ordered straight whiskeys.

Hays spotted two young girls drinking highballs. Both looked not more than twenty. One, a red head; the other, a blonde, cast furtive glances at them.

Hays ordered the girls a drink and, without further ceremony, moved to their table.

"Much obliged for the drink, mister, have a seat," the red head smiled. Hays looked her over. Her mouth grinned welcome, but her eyes coldly appraised him. The blonde merely said, "Yeah, thanks."

The four sat drinking until well after midnight. The red head said her name was Mabel Wertz. With a show of ceremony, she introduced her companion as Fay Harris.

"How'd you girls like to take a trip with us?" Hays asked. "We're going south, where it's warm. We'll show you a good time and we'll all have a lot of fun."

Mabel looked at the blonde, who gave a slight nod.

"It's oke with us," she said. "When do we start?"

"Right now," Hays said, his eyes brightening. "Let's go."

They ordered another round of drinks and left.

Snaking the car around bends, accelerator down to the floor board, Hays wheeled the Chevrolet at top speed southwest on federal route 64. Occasionally the four took a swig of whiskey from a quart bottle. Passing through Muskogee, Oklahoma, they continued on the main highway 65 miles further until they reached VanBuren, Arkansas, famous as the home town of Bob Burns, radio comedian.

AS DAYLIGHT approached, they kept an eye out for tourist camps and finally spotted one back from the highway. Hays didn't want to drive the stolen car in daytime. Here, they took two cottages.

By this time, the four had paired off; Hays, with Fay Harris, the blonde; Oglesby,



Detective Sergeant H. V. Branch, who stood on the running board of a car and shot it out with the bandits.

with Mabel Wertz, the red head. After killing the rest of the whiskey, they retired.

That afternoon, Oglesby and Hays, rummaging through the stolen Chevrolet, found the hidden wallet in the stolen car.

"Well look at this!" Tex exclaimed. "Here's Santy Claus himself. That guy wasn't so bad after all; he wanted to see we got enough to eat on, anyhow."

Toward dusk, the four headed westward toward Little Rock, Arkansas, where they stocked up on more liquor.

Between gulps at the bottle, as the car sped on, Oglesby and Hays began to boast of their prowess as robbers and gunmen; finally they told the girls of their escape from Springfield, Missouri, jail.

"We're plenty hot," Hays said, "and this car's hot, too. But those dumb cops'll never catch us. This time, we're smarted up. If there's any shootin' to be done, we'll do it. We'll pull a few little stickups on the way down, for pin money, then get oriented in some good spot in Florida and we'll show you gals some real dough. We'll hit the high spots, plenty. Nothing'll be too good for us, once we get going."

Mabel and Fay seemed impressed. Prospects of night high life, bright lights, drinking, dancing and plenty of easy money seemed exciting. Neither gave a thought to the possibility of capture. Mabel suggested she might help in the stickups.

To this, Oglesby objected, but was overruled. As the car sped through Mississippi, Alabama and Georgia, Hays and Oglesby held up three gas stations on the fringe of as many small towns. During these frays, Mabel remained at the wheel, while Hays held the attendants at bay. Oglesby went through the tills. By confining their activities to late at night and by darting down side roads, they escaped capture.

Four days after leaving Tulsa, the four drove into Jacksonville, Florida. Cruising through the downtown district of this city of 150,000 people, Hays and Oglesby noted with satisfaction scores of restaurants, shops, banks and large buildings. This was a likely town to try for a while, at least.

Accordingly, they headed southward, out of the city, on U. S. 1, searching for a tourist camp. Examining the map of Florida, they saw that the next town southward was St. Augustine, forty miles down the Atlantic coast.

"It's a natural," Hays said. "We'll stay down at St. Augustine and slip up to Jacksonville, now and then, for a quiet little job and nobody'll be the wiser."

At the northern edge of St. Augustine, they found a camp to their liking. Parking the Chevrolet back from the road, they took two cottages and proceeded to make themselves at home by opening a fresh quart of whiskey.

Two nights later, at 11 o'clock, a Ford roadster drove up to the Stratford restaurant, 430 Forsyth Avenue, in Jacksonville. A young man, with light auburn hair, no hat and jaunty swagger climbed out. Another hatless man remained at the wheel. He nervously raced the motor.

A Jacksonville woman, Mrs. Riles, and her friend, Mrs. Wicks, sitting in another car parked behind the Ford, were puzzled by the peculiar actions of the swaggering man. They saw him reach in his hip pocket and bring out an object they couldn't distinguish. Then he seemed to hesitate briefly, threw open the door and entered.

Inside a few customers were nibbling at sandwiches, sipping coffee. The man rapidly approached the cashier, John Lonros, who

suddenly saw a shiny pistol pointed at his face.

The bandit called out, "This is a stick-up. Put your hands up quiet, everybody, and nobody'll get hurt."

Then, brushing the frightened cashier aside, Tex Hays hurriedly opened the cash drawer, scooped all the currency into a small bag he carried in his left hand. There was a total of \$125.

TURNING to Lonros, he snarled a warning not to call police for five minutes. Mrs. Riles and Mrs. Wicks saw him leap into the Ford coupe; saw the car start off with a jump. Too late to get the license number, they suddenly realized they had witnessed a daring get-away.

Hays and Oglesby rapidly drove to the edge of Jacksonville, to the hidden Chevrolet. Abandoning the Ford coupe they had stolen for the job, they sped back to St. Augustine, where Mabel Wertz and Fay Harris awaited news of the first Jacksonville venture.

"It's soft," Hays swaggered. "Just like taking milk from babies. We've got a system. All we have to do is slip into Jacksonville, borrow a car for a few minutes, pull a job, and switch back to our own car. Meantime, we'll live quiet around here and nobody'll get suspicious."

Oglesby brought out the bottle and all four drank a toast of straight whiskey to their first job in Florida.

Five nights later, A. H. Farris was preparing to close up his filling station at Sixth and Pearl Streets, when two men in a 1930 Ford coupe, with red wheels, drove in.

A dark-haired man, at the wheel said, "Fill it up."

Before Farris took down the hose, however, a red-headed man climbed out and Farris suddenly found himself facing a gray, steel pistol.

"Empty the till and be quick about it," the man snarled. Farris backed into the station and opened the cash drawer. Tex Hays, his revolver still pointed at the quaking Farris, reached for the money with his left hand.

Grabbing the complete contents, \$22.30, he leaped in the car and sped away. Farris looked after them, straining his eyes to catch the license number. He saw five numbers; the first two were 82. He phoned the police, giving a complete description

of the Ford coupe. One minute later, all Jacksonville police cruisers were on the lookout but not until next morning was it found abandoned. Meantime, the owner had reported it stolen.

Five nights later Hays decided it was time for another job.

"You guys think you're so smart," Mabel Wertz said. "Why don't you take me along. You two go in and pull the job and I'll drive the car."

Oglesby didn't like the idea. He urged it just doubled the chances of getting caught; there would be descriptions of four people, instead of two. Hays sided in with Mabel and, after an hour of wrangling, all four headed for Jacksonville.

Cruising slowly through the downtown district, Hays peered out the window looking for a likely spot for a quick job. Finally they drove past Howell's drug store, Forest Street and Riverside avenue.

"What's the matter with that joint?" Mabel asked. "Nobody in there."

Hays toured around the block and brought the car to a stop in front of the drug store. The two men got out, Mabel shifted under the steering wheel.

Suddenly, T. B. Thiot, manager of the store, found himself confronted with the business end of a .38 pistol. His hands went up automatically.

Oglesby opened the cash register and snarled. There was only \$10 in change.

"Where's the rest of the dough?" demanded Hays.

"That's all there is," Thiot stuttered tremulously.

With a curse, Hays called Oglesby to "come on," and the two walked out with a warning to Thiot not to call police, under threat of death.

"I thought you broads were going to bring us luck," Hays sneered. Thiot called police, described the two bandits minutely.

This tallied with descriptions turned in by John Lonros, of the Stratford restaurant, and A. H. Farris, of the filling station. All three said the leader was an auburn-haired man, about 21, weight about 150, height about five feet, seven or eight inches, with a slightly flattened nose, resembling that of a prize fighter. Oglesby was described as about the same age, slightly taller, with black hair. A passerby told police he saw two women in the sedan, one at the wheel, but was unable to give their description.

The following night, the four again cruised through Jacksonville, stopped at a confectionery operated by H. G. Mong, 1901 Pearl Street, and ordered Mong, who was alone, to throw up his hands.

Oglesby pulled open the cash drawer, then swore. It was empty!

Threats from Hays apparently didn't frighten Mong, who said there was no cash in the store. Finally, Oglesby grabbed three cartons of cigarettes and joined the girls in the waiting car, which left too rapidly for Mong to catch the license number.

Spirits of the four reached an all-time bottom as they raced through side streets, Mabel at the wheel. Conversation was at a very low ebb, being confined to monosyllables. It was still early in the evening and Hays, his ire mounting, decided to break rules and make another try. He ordered Mabel to circle several blocks.

As they passed the Duval Ice Company, 606 East 8th street, Hays noted a light burning in the office and ordered Mabel to slow down. Repassing the building several times, Hays ordered the car stopped and motioned Oglesby to follow him.

Several employes were at work. Guns drawn, they ordered everyone into the next room. While Hays kept his gun pointed at the frightened help, Oglesby went through the cash register.

This time, he gave a shout of glee. There were piles of soft, green money and the coin brackets were filled with cash. Scooping the entire contents into his pockets, he called to Hays and the pair ran out the door; Hays yelling his usual command not to call police for five minutes.

Back at St. Augustine, in the tourist camp, they counted the loot. It totaled \$106.93 in cash, and three cartons of cigarettes. Most of the currency were bills of small denomination. Both men cursed loudly. Such chicken feed was disgusting. So the four proceeded to drown their disgust with more bootleg rye.

"I know what's the trouble," the usually quiet Oglesby said. "We ain't casing these jobs. We been busting in small time joints, hit or miss. That ain't any way to get big dough. After this, let's look around first."

Hays had to agree they weren't working with a plan; but then, weren't they having a lot of fun? If they wanted to

go in for big dough he would look the town over more carefully. After all, the Chevrolet wasn't hot, in Florida, and a little daylight driving wouldn't do any harm.

So, for the next few days, the four made daily trips to Jacksonville. On the third day, they stopped at the Eagle Laundry, 451 Calhoun Street, leaving a bundle of shirts, having removed all marks of identification. While waiting for his call-check, Hays looked about. He noted the cash drawer was well filled.

Two nights later, a cream colored Buick sedan pulled up in front of the laundry at 8:15 o'clock. An auburn-haired girl sat under the wheel. A blonde girl was in the back seat. Two young men got out, entered the front door. F. D. Fiveash was behind the counter. Two customers were in front.

The two men sauntered up to the counter, one reaching in his pocket, ostensibly for a claim check.

"What can I do for you?" Fiveash asked pleasantly.

"Reach for the sky," the red-head demanded. A square jaw, steely eyes, lent authority to his tone. Fiveash didn't hesitate. Neither did the two customers.

The poker-faced leader wore a black rain coat. His companion was dressed in a light tannish gray, well pressed suit; a light gray hat pulled well down hid a heavy crop of black hair. He was slightly taller than the leader. Both held .45 caliber automatic pistols.

The leader-spokesman ordered Fiveash and the two customers to the rear of the establishment. Oglesby, consistently the cash drawer rifler, now proceeded with his assignment.

When the cash drawer flew open, he spied a pile of twenty dollar bills, plenty of tens. Grabbing a sack from under the counter, he quickly emptied the till and called to Hays. The whole job had consumed little more than a minute.

Spirits of the four were high. They had hit a jack pot. As the car sped around corners on two wheels, through side streets, Hays ordered Mabel to slow down.

"This is our lucky night," he exclaimed. "I'm for one more job before calling it quits."

Accordingly, the cream colored Buick sedan came to halt in front of the Florida hotel, King and Roselle streets, and the

obedient Oglesby jumped out with Hays.

Rushing into the lobby with guns drawn, they found only O. M. Pharis, night manager. While Hays covered him with the .45 automatic, Oglesby scooped up greenbacks and silver from the cash drawer and the two made a quick exit.

Again, switching to the black Chevrolet they abandoned the Buick and raced back to St. Augustine.

Oglesby dumped the proceeds on the cottage bed and both he and Hays eagerly counted. The total came to \$445.

"That's more like it," Hays exclaimed, "Now we're getting somewhere." The glowing sun smiled up over the Atlantic horizon as the four decided to call the night's celebration over.

Two days later, the four drove to Jacksonville again. Hays decided they needed more ammunition. Since he and Oglesby had escaped, their armament had increased to two heavy powered rifles, army Springfield type; two .45 Colt automatics, a .38 automatic and one or two smaller guns.

While the other three sat in the car, Mabel went in the S. B. Hubbard store and bought several rounds of shells from J. J. Christian. She told Christian she wanted the bullets for range practice. When Mabel left, Christian became suspicious and told police of the purchase.

MEANTIME, every policeman in Jacksonville carried a full description of the two bandits, as well as a sketchy description of their two girl companions. Police Chief Roberts, a veteran of more than 40 years on the force, and Inspector E. L. Acosta, chief of detectives, famed throughout Florida for his 37 years of police service, issued orders to be on constant lookout for the four. What little underworld existed in Jacksonville was at a loss to know who the strangers were.

About 8:30 p. m. on the day Mabel Wertz bought the ammunition Special Officer Wilbur L. Blizzard was sitting in his parked car on a side street, facing Main street. Standing at the side, talking to Blizzard was Officer H. V. Branch, now a detective sergeant.

Suddenly Branch, who was watching passing cars out of the corner of his eye, leaped on Blizzard's running board and pointed to a black Chevrolet sedan heading out Main Street. It had Oklahoma plates.

"Take after that car," Branch yelled to Blizzard. "That's the gang we're after."

Blizzard pushed the starter, swung his car around the corner. The Chevrolet had stopped at the next street for a stop light and Blizzard snaked through traffic, close behind. Following for another three blocks, until traffic thinned at Phelps street, Blizzard came alongside.

Branch, still standing on the running board, whipped out his police pistol. He yelled to the driver to stop.

Suddenly, Branch saw the nose of an automatic pointed at him; then a blaze of orange red flame; then came a fusillade of bullets. As he raised his pistol, a leaden pellet struck the long handle just below his clenched fist. So great was the shock, that Branch fell to the street, his gun knocked from his hand.

Meanwhile, Officer Blizzard turned his head completely around—just why, he never was able to explain, and a bullet entered his left temple, coming out through his left eyeball and just missing his brain by a hairbreadth.

As Blizzard slumped under the wheel, the bandit car took off. Branch, recovering his pistol, fired four shots, which struck the rear of the fleeing car. On it sped, out Main street, which leads a few miles north, across the Georgia border line.

Although it lasted but a few seconds, the crackling gun battle had sent passing motorists and pedestrians scampering for safety. The first to reach the police car was D. H. Avant, 218 Phelps Street, who witnessed the entire affray. He saw two men and two women in the fleeing car. Their description tallied with the four sought by police for the series of Jacksonville robberies.

Avant and Officer Branch carefully lifted the unconscious Blizzard into the former's car and rushed to St. Luke's hospital. Meantime, Branch called police headquarters.

Chief Roberts and Inspector Acosta hurriedly phoned and wired police and sheriffs within a radius of a hundred miles, concentrating first on towns north and west of Jacksonville.

"Watch for a black Chevrolet sedan, bullet holes in the rear; two men and two women; beware, they are desperate. Be ready to shoot first." Jacksonville cruisers stopped all cars leaving the City over main highways.

But apparently, the general call was

seconds too late. More than an hour went by, without results. The shooting had occurred at approximately 8:30 p. m. Meanwhile Officer Blizzard was rushed to the operating room at St. Luke's hospital, where little hope was held for his recovery.

Enraged at this unnecessary and wanton shooting of a fellow officer, the entire police force set out, grimly to search the city.

At 10 p. m., after an hour and a half, ear glued to the phone Inspector Acosta got a long distance call from Lake City, Florida, sixty miles west.

It was Chief of Police W. P. Allen.

"We've got the car here," he hurriedly told Acosta. "It's badly shot up, but there isn't anybody in it. They headed into a blind alley that ends at the railroad tracks and left the car. We searched it and found a sledge hammer, burglar tools and punch bar."

The inspector thanked him and, after Chief Allen said they would continue the hunt, hung up; then put in some more calls for towns west of Lake City. Apparently the bandits were headed west on federal route 90. All night long, the inspector remained at the phone, while deputy sheriffs and police along the highway stopped all cars and cruised over side roads. But nowhere could the elusive four be found.

About 8 o'clock the following morning, two well dressed, but haggard looking young men, and two girls approached a gasoline station at the eastern edge of Welburn—thirteen miles west of Lake City. They were on foot.

"We've had car trouble," one of the men, auburn-haired with a flattish nose, told James L. McDonald, youthful manager of the station. "We're stuck in the sand, wonder if you could pull us out?"

"Guess I can take care of you," young McDonald answered pleasantly. He hadn't heard of the shooting bandits. "But I'll have to get my dad's truck."

HE led the four to his father, Dave McDonald, who conducted a repair garage, and the latter readily agreed to go. All six climbed into a flat bottom truck. When they had driven about two miles, the auburn-haired spokesman—Tex Hays, suddenly whipped out a .45 Colt automatic.

"Stop the truck here," he snarled at Mc-

Donald, his expression hardening. "This ain't any repair job, it's a stick-up. You and the boy get back in the truck and sit down and, if anybody comes by you know, wave at 'em friendly, and don't let on there's any trouble, or its curtains for you and the boy both, understand?"

McDonald and his son quickly complied. Bert Oglesby climbed back with them. Holding a gun concealed from passing motorists, he sat on the side board, while Hays and the two girls began searching in the long weeds at the side of the road. Presently, they returned to the truck with two rifles, some pistols and two suit cases, concealed in the weeds alongside the road.

Hays jumped in the truck cab, under the wheel. The two girls climbed by his side and the truck circled, headed west at top speed. Past Welburn, Hays pushed the accelerator to the floor. Several local citizens, surprised at the speed but seeing McDonald and his son, were not alarmed until later in the morning, when the garage man didn't return.

Then Lake City police called towns ahead. But for 200 miles westward over U. S. highway 90, along the northern border of Florida, the truck sped on, at 60 miles an hour. Built for an average of 40 miles, the radiator steamed and motor roared but Tex Hays continued to give it the gun. McDonald, knowing the truck's limitations and condition of the tires, expected it to blow up or leave the road momentarily—perhaps kill all six passengers.

At Chipley, Florida—200 miles from Welburn, Sheriff H. M. Farrior received a call from Lake City just before noon, describing the four, who had kidnapped McDonald and his son.

He assigned his deputy, Dan Brock, and deputized Gillis Malloy, Chipley electrician, famed as an expert pistol and rifle shot, to watch the highway. The two started west in the county cruiser. Deputy Brock noted the oil was low and stopped in a filling station for complete change. The attendant had just started to drain it out, when Brock noted a flat-bottom truck pass by, carrying four men and two women. He ordered the oil-change stopped and, after a delay of putting in the plug, gave chase.

Two miles distant, the cruiser caught up and ran alongside the bandits. Brock blew his horn and motioned Tex Hays to pull over. Seeing that Hays had no disposi-

tion to stop, Brock began to cut in on the truck; at the same time, his partner, Malloy grabbed Brock's service pistol. It was empty! Brock had two pistols, alike; he had taken the empty one. Malloy then grabbed his rifle; pointed it out the car door, as if to add authority.

What followed for the next two moments sounded like a sector in the battle of the Marne. Oglesby, from the rear of the truck, took aim at Malloy's right hand, sent a bullet through his little finger. Another entered his right arm and continued through his right lung; two more, in rapid succession hit his right arm, another his left arm and another his left leg. Within a few seconds, Malloy was meshed with a total of thirteen bullet holes!

While Oglesby was emptying two Colt automatics, Hays, at the wheel, was having his troubles. Deputy Brock continued to pull the cruiser to the right, forcing Hays into the ditch. Suddenly, both cars came to a halt; Hays grabbed his gun and began firing at Brock. Before the latter could take to cover, he was wounded in the right hand and leg.

Hays and Oglesby leaped from the truck. At this point, T. M. Pilcher, of Chipley, driving eastward stopped his Ford coupe, to see what the excitement was. Oglesby rushed to the coupe, armed with a Winchester rifle, and ordered Pilcher to get out.

The two gunmen and their molls piled in the coupe and Hays drove off, leaving the badly wounded Malloy and helpless Brock to fend for themselves. Pilcher, in a Buick sedan to the side, and with J. O. Conyers, a local insurance agent who arrived too late for the shooting.

HAYS, now excited, didn't turn Pilcher's car around to continue westward. He raced the coupe back eastward through Chipley, then Cottdale, then turned sharp right on a narrow country road and raced south in a cloud of dust. Ten minutes later they forced a man, driving a Buick sedan to the side, and with drawn guns, commanded him to get out.

In his car, they headed westward. Meantime, Sheriff Farrior started pursuit, but soon lost the trail of the desperate bandits. Deputy Malloy, unconscious from loss of blood and the shock of thirteen wounds, was rushed to a hospital across the Florida state line to Dotham, Alabama, 35 miles

distant. This was the closest hospital available. There, he was believed dying.

In less than twenty-four hours, Tex Hays and Bert Oglesby had shot down four peace officers—two seriously wounded and believed near death, another badly wounded and a fourth, knocked down, but not injured.

Police departments, sheriffs, deputies, town marshals and constables in northwestern Florida, southern Alabama and western Mississippi now joined the chase. Main highways and side roads were literally spotted with cars, loaded with armed police deputies, on the lookout for a black Buick sedan.

Among these, was a sheriff's car from Milton, Florida, Deputy Wade Cobb driving. Beside him was Aubrey Martin, another deputy, and Mack Williams, county jailer at Milton, who was pressed into service.

Toward dusk, they were driving westward along U. S. 90, from Milton, when a black Buick sedan swung around them at top speed. Plainly, the three officers could see two men and two women. Cobb started pursuit.

Shortly, the Buick careened southward, down a narrow side road. Slowing for the turn, Cobb took after the car, which had gained a half-mile lead. Then they saw the Buick stop and the four occupants leap out. As the sheriff's car reached the spot, the four disappeared into the swamp westward of the road.

Chasing the desperadoes into the swampland would be utter folly, Cobb reasoned. Three armed men against four ambushed, desperate men and women would be suicide. So he ordered Martin and Williams to remain in the road with the Buick, both heavily armed, and hurried to the nearest phone.

Within a few minutes, additional deputies began to arrive, together with neighbors, armed with rifles, shotguns and pistols. Forming a long line, they beat their way through heavy brush and undergrowth. Soon darkness fell and the rapidly growing posse, with flash-lights, continued to weave in and out of the swamp, making a circle of several miles. Occasionally, the officers would yell to the hidden bandits to surrender, warning them they were hopelessly outnumbered. But there were no answers.

On through the night, the search continued. When day broke, the weary posse,

now dwindled from 200 to 50, refused to give up.

Enraged by what they thought were two needless murders, the grim searchers were determined to find their quarry. On through the morning, they tramped through every inch of swamp. Neighboring women served coffee and doughnuts to the sleepless bandit hunters.

Meanwhile, back at Jacksonville, Inspector Acosta and Sheriff Cahoon, hearing of the shootings at Chipley and determined to catch the men who had shot down Officer Blizzard, ordered an airplane warned up to help in the search. The plane was about to take off, when word came the chase was over.

Shortly before noon, Deputies Cobb and Martin, of Milton, beating through the thick brush, suddenly heard a woman's voice, to their left. It came from a dense part of the underbrush.

"Don't shoot, boys, we'll surrender peacefully," it said.

Alert for treachery, the officers stepped back several paces. Raising their pistols in readiness, Cobb said steadily:

"Come out with your hands up, all of you."

Almost sheepishly, the bold, bad Hays and Oglesby came slowly forward, out of the brush, their hands pushed skyward. Mabel Wertz and Fay Harris followed. Quickly searched, Hays and Oglesby were relieved of their pistols. In Mabel Wertz's purse the deputies found a small pistol. She snarled a curse at Cobb, but readily submitted to handcuffs, as did the three others. The search, which lasted all night long and half the next day, had ended.

Hays, Oglesby and the two girls were rushed back to Chipley, scene of their last gun battle, where they were locked in heavily guarded cells. In 36 hours, they had led police and deputies a chase across 300 miles of the northern fringe of Florida, shot down four peace officers, perhaps killing two, kidnaped a garage man and his son and stolen two cars and a truck.

THEIR life of "freedom and lush," gay parties and wild life, terminated abruptly, less than 45 days after the Springfield jailbreak.

All four were dead-broke when searched at the Chipley jail. Pat McEntyre, veteran photographer, assigned by the Pensacola News to get their pictures, "loaned" the

hard boiled Hays \$5 for tobacco and extra food, in return for some poses.

Hays, Oglesby and Mabel Wertz at first refused to talk. But, then, they didn't need to talk. State's Attorney L. D. McRae already had enough witnesses from Chipley, Welburn and Jacksonville. He didn't need confessions.

McRae ordered Hays brought to his office and confronted him with evidence on seven charges; theft of the Oklahoma Chevrolet, wounding of Officer Blizzard and robbery of the Duval Ice Company, at Jacksonville; wounding of Brock and Malloy at Chipley, kidnaping of McDonald and his son at Welburn, and theft of their truck, theft of three automobiles on the get-away ride, and the several other hold-ups at Jacksonville.

Hays smiled wanly. "You got the goods on us," he said shortly. "Let us take a plea of guilty to robbery and we won't fight."

All four, however, were charged with assault on murder, robbery and unlawful imprisonment (of McDonald and his son). On March 25, they were indicted on these charges. On March 30, all four faced Circuit Judge D. J. Jones.

Hays and Oglesby immediately pleaded guilty and Judge Jones sentenced them to 20 years of hard labor in the Florida state prison at Raiford for robbery, 10 years for shooting with intent to kill, both sentences to run concurrently.

The two girls then pleaded guilty.

"Ten years hard labor for robbery; five years for shooting with intent to kill, sentences to run concurrently," Judge Jones said.

Hays and Oglesby smiled broadly, as the bailiff snapped steel bracelets on the pair, a smile that soon faded. At that moment, they were rejoicing because all three wounded peace officers had not died. There was no first degree murder charge.

On July 7—a little more than a year later, Oglesby died with a raging fever, victim of pneumonia, in the Raiford prison farm hospital. He had been assigned to work in a road camp.

Hays, then but 22, decided he could teach some of the older convicts at Rai-

ford a lesson in discipline. One day in 1933, he flew into a fit of rage at a fellow prisoner, Henry Searcey—a big man weighing 215 pounds, and stabbed him sixteen times with a pen knife. Due to his fat, Searcey amazingly lived and, again, Hays dodged the electric chair by a hair-breadth.

For this playful bit of disciplining, Hays drew seventeen months in the "flat-top," a building so-called because of its flat roof, filled with solitary cells. Starting on a diet of bread and water, he spent those seventeen long months with no one to talk to, except the guard who brought his food.

Then he relented and begged for an audience with Superintendent Chapman, whose reforms in handling prisoners in the past seven years have attracted nationwide attention. A former preacher, he has won the acclaim of prisoners themselves, as well as hardened old-time veteran jailers. He is one of the few wardens in this writer's acquaintance who dares walk alone through his own prison, without fear of attack.

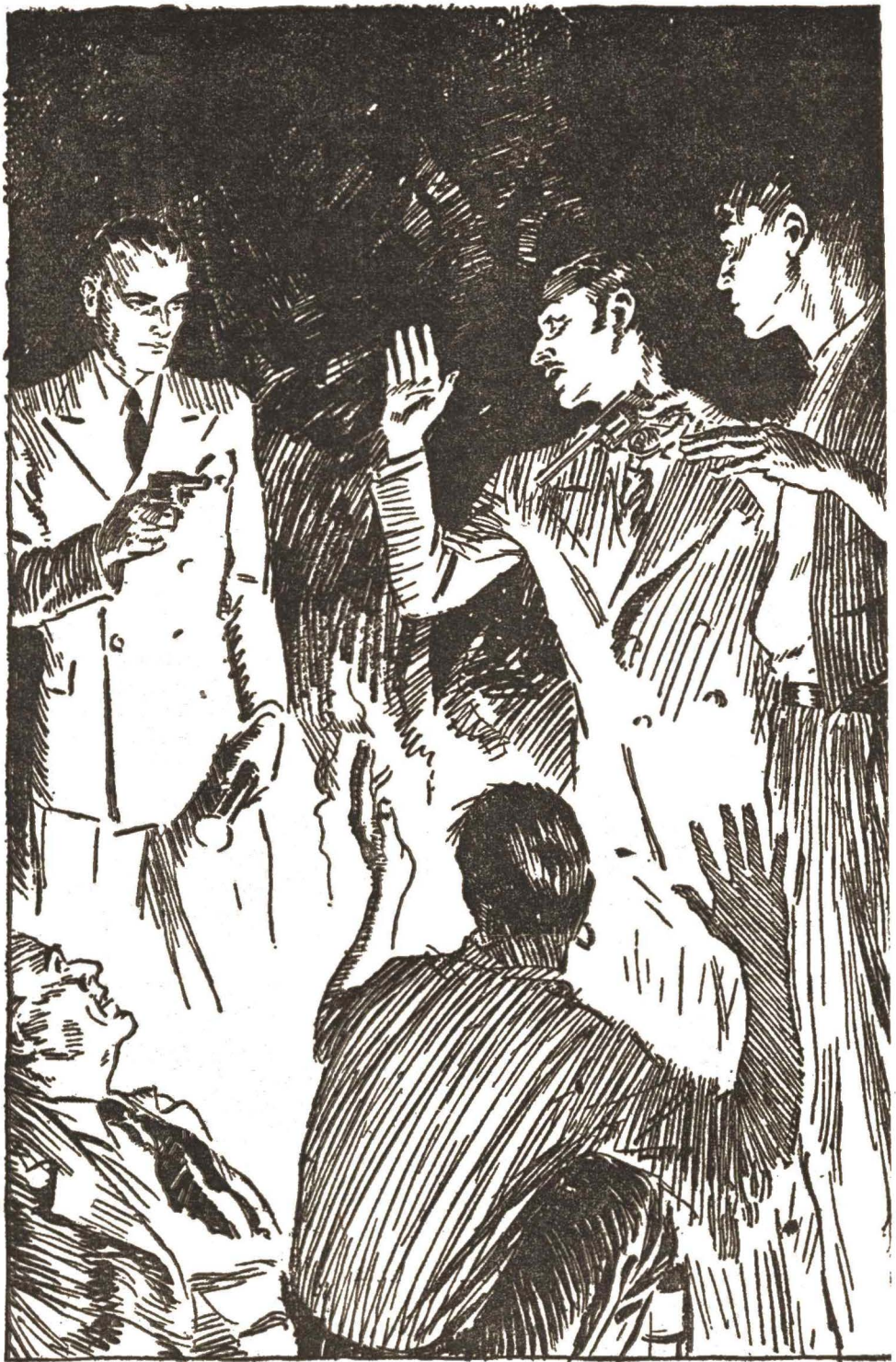
Hays begged for a chance to be good. After a half-hour conversation, Superintendent Chapman led him to a second floor stairway. Midway up the steps, another convict, descending, brushed Hays' arm. Turning with a snarl, Hays struck him under the chin with all his force, catapulting the surprised man down the stairway. Back to the "flat-top" he went, for five more months.

Then Hays decided in earnest to be good. According to Superintendent Chapman, he has been a model prisoner since. He joined the ball team, got interested in boxing, basket ball and other athletics and, at this writing, is assigned to a job in the prison's big kitchen. If this attitude continues, he has a bare chance of whittling down his sentence to eleven and a half years, "the short time," for good behavior. But to do this, for the next two and one-half years, he must be an object lesson in how to be good.

Meantime, Mabel Wertz and Fay Harris won a parole in 1935. From that day to this, they haven't been heard from.

THE END





"Drop that gun, Harry! Hands up, all you three!" Holly commanded crisply. "Drop it, I said, big boy!" he repeated, unmistakable venom in his tone.

THE CAVE OF DEATH

by JAMES DENSON SAYERS

The letter that made no sense spelled four corpses in an underground river.

“LOTSa mail t'is mo'nin',” Takeo Sezuke beamed at Jim Holly, his employer, while pouring the latter's coffee, his nearly invisible, squinted eyes curiously observing the top letter.

The little brown man of the Orient had a premonition about that letter. Usually, when letters came from far-away places their advent resulted in Sezuke's tall, quiet-spoken employer going away on a danger mission, and Sezuke didn't enjoy life so much then.

“Lotsa mail,” Sezuke repeated his formula. “Letter come flom Alizona. Maybe damn beggas want you go Alizona.”

Sezuke had learned to say “damned beggars” almost as emphatically as Jim Holly said it when the numerous crank letters came that clutter the mails of every rich man.

Sezuke was very proud of his geographical knowledge of this great country, too. He could draw a map of the United States from memory. He knew that Arizona was a long way from New York and the “damn beggas” might be asking his employer to go way out there.

Holly looked curiously at the letter he picked up. It was distinctly postmarked “Tolula, Ariz.” The address was written in pencil and merely stated: “James McLendon Holly, Mining Engineer, East 69th Street, New, York.” In spite of the pencil, the writing had marks of distinction.

“Mining Engineer? Humph!” Holly mumbled dubiously. “Wonder if I should open the mail of Mister Mining Engineer Holly? Who ever heard of a mining engineer burdened with an exact duplicate of my name? No one could ever accuse me of knowing anything about mining except the promoters who can't sell me their specious stock. Well, here goes.”

He seized the paper knife Sezuke had placed there for the purpose and ripped open the letter. If he was mystified by the address on the envelope, the contents were certainly enough for another five-minute mystery and then some. Things began to pick up at once in Jim Holly's bored life.

“Dear Jim,” the pencil-written letter began in amazingly intimate terms. He glanced ahead to the signature to see who was the close friend thus honoring him. “Arthur J. Holbrook” was the never-heard-of name appended to the bold, well-written letter.

“I'm sorry, Arthur,” Holly mumbled again, lifting his cooling cup of coffee for a drink, “but your ‘Dear Jim’ friend is going to be sore at me for reading his—”

He cut his soliloquy abruptly, reading the letter now.

Dear Jim,

The prospects are excellent here. I have closed the deal, but need fifty thousand dollars in cash.

Send me the fifty thousand in paper currency, bills of fives up to twenties, quickly by express, deliverable personally, or to written order, otherwise the whole deal may collapse and leave us in the mud altogether. Call up Mrs. Holbrook at Greenacres Inn, Southampton, and tell her that I am in excellent health. Tell her I am so crowded for time I may not be able to write for a few days, but for her not to be alarmed thereby.

Yours, etc.,

ARTHUR J. HOLBROOK.

P.S. Be sure to make the express package read: “Or to written order” for I may have to send my man down to the express office for it.—A.J.H.

This story reprinted from a book of fifty thrilling stories published by Odhams Press Ltd., London, England.

The rest of James McLendon Holly's cup of coffee became cold, unfinished. He read the letter twice more. He frowned and smiled alternately. The frown meant that he was wondering if there could be a "James McLendon Holly, Mining Engineer" in New York of whom he had never heard—and right here on East 69th Street, too. Then he would wonder if it was just a hoax, but crude and certainly doomed to failure. He smiled at that.

Holly arose, forgetful of the remaining letters lying there unopened. He walked out toward the front of the house, again and again rereading the letter as he went slowly along, pondering. In the library he sat down by his desk and lifted the telephone receiver, but quickly replaced it and pulled out the Manhattan telephone book. He soon found what he hunted: "Engineers' Society, Inc." Again he removed the telephone receiver and called the number.

"Let me speak to the secretary of the Engineers' Society," he asked, when a girl's voice answered.

"I'm sorry, sir, he's not in just now."

"Is there any one there at present who knows your full list of members, or has access to such a list?"

"Oh, you wish to speak with Mr. Aliston, our membership secretary. Just a moment, please."

The instrument clicked.

"Hello, Mr. Aliston?" Holly greeted the phone.

"At your service—Aliston speaking."

"Mr. Aliston, do you know of a mining engineer by the name of James McLendon Holly?"

"No—no." Aliston seemed to be thinking. "I've never heard of a mining engineer by that name, certainly not among our members. There's some loafing rich fellow around town by that name, but he's hardly an engineer unless you'd call Sherlock Holmes an engineer. He's sort of amateur detective, I believe—just for his own amusement, according to the newspapers."

"According to the newspapers, huh?" Holly grinned dryly at the transmitter. "Thanks for the compliment."

He hung up, ungraciously failing to thank Aliston for the vast information he had imparted.

"According to the newspapers, heh?" he talked to himself, sitting there by the desk,

fumbling the strange letter. "So I'm that notorious! The great engineer, Mr. Aliston, has heard of me! U-m-m—I wonder?" and he squinted at Arthur J. Holbrook's strange letter.

He was sorry that he had cut off before asking the complimentary Mr. Aliston about Arthur J. Holbrook, but he wouldn't call back for that unless it proved necessary. He took up the instrument again and put in a call for the Greenacres Inn, Southampton, Long Island.

"Hello—hello—Greenacres Inn? Is Mrs. Arthur J. Holbrook at Greenacres?" Holly asked.

"No," came the instant reply. "Mrs. Holbrook returned to the city a month ago."

"Have you the city address?"

"Sure. Just a minute."

It was a number on Park Avenue just a few blocks from his own home. That was more mystery than ever. A man out in Arizona asks him, a total stranger, to call up his wife at a Long Island summer resort from which the wife had departed a month ago. He was so absorbed in the strange affair that he hardly saw Sezuke slip in to place the unopened letters on his desk.

THE telephone was again called into service after a brief scanning of the Manhattan directory. Mrs. Holbrook's secretary answered. No, Mrs. Holbrook had not yet awakened. Would he leave a message?

"Yes, Miss," Holly clipped his words. "I have a very mysterious letter from Mrs. Holbrook's husband. Convey this message to her at once. I must have her assistance without delay. I shall call personally within one hour from now. Good-bye."

The Holbrook town home was one of those super-luxurious pent-houses that are parcels of the country moved to city apartment-house tops. Mrs. Arthur J. Holbrook (Miss Thelma Morley, poet, playwright, if you please) was properly incensed at this rude interruption of her repose. These common people could never understand how the artistic muse worked.

No one ever threw fits of rapture over Thelma Morley's poetry except some of her slavish intimates—and that only in her presence. Broadway never saw her plays unless they won that distinction by being read—first and last paragraphs—by bored producers' first readers.

In spite of her anger at being awakened so early, Thelma Morley's curiosity prevented her from keeping Holly waiting. She was pacing her ornately equipped "study," smoking one cigarette after another, wondering about this reported letter from her husband which had come to some man, a stranger to her secretary. That man was boldly coming in person and without telling who he was. Her flamboyant Gypsy robe fluttered about as she jerked herself around the room nervously.

Whatever dramatics she had in mind flew out of the window when she saw Holly.

He came a step forward and bowed slightly, a cold, disinterested formality in his manner as he introduced himself. Why, the man was stunningly handsome and bore himself with unaffected distinction. Why hadn't she taken time to tidy herself up? She became acutely conscious of her dishevelled hair, with its richly dyed golden beauty surely lost to this man because she had done no more than finger brush it out of her face. Then she remembered the letter and forgot about coquetry.

"I'm really sorry about this early intrusion, Mrs. Holbrook," Holly was saying, "but I hope you will forgive me when you understand the reason. I haven't the honor of knowing Mr. Holbrook, but this letter came to me from him this morning. Or is it a forgery?"

He held out to her the pencil-written letter from Arizona. There was a spasm of fright in her face that Holly didn't miss.

"Won't you please have a seat, Mr. Holly? I've heard of you, but—" she checked herself and began reading the letter.

The contents of the letter disturbed her profoundly. Her astonishment was so genuine that she forgot to pose.

"Why, of all the preposterous—why, this can't be from Arthur, but it *is* his handwriting!" she cried, her excited gaze still on the letter as she reread it. "He has funds on deposit in two or three banks—Betsy!" she called suddenly toward the door.

The young lady secretary appeared.

"Betsy, please bring me Mr. Holbrook's bank books quick," Mrs. Holbrook ordered and stood up impatiently, still regarding the letter with amazement and that hovering tinge of fright.

Jim Holly watched the woman closely. Vaguely he remembered seeing her face

somewhere in the past. He wondered who Arthur J. Holbrook was. If he was a man of wealth, where had he picked up this wife? Probably she had been a chic little chorus girl and a fast worker at getting her man. Holly knew the type well. The possibility that this was some sort of set-up still held a corner of his mind.

The girl came in and handed three little bank deposit books to Mrs. Holbrook. The latter sat down and hastily scanned them; then handed them to Holly.

"You can see for yourself, Mr. Holly," she proclaimed, a bit triumphantly, "that my husband has no need to send such a preposterous letter to you or any one else."

Holly thumbed through the three booklets. Each book had been recently balanced. The total of the three deposit accounts was impressive—over one hundred and thirty thousand dollars! Holly sat in silent thought, oblivious of some additional chatter from Arthur J. Holbrook's wife. He was beginning to expand that first faint suspicion which had come to mind when that cocky fellow, Aliston, had indicated that Holly was pretty well known to the general public as a detective.

"**M**RS. HOLBROOK," he asked, running a hand through his prematurely greying hair, "do you know if Mr. Holbrook ever heard of me—I mean, the papers seem to have made me a little notorious because of my hobby. Does your husband know of me as a detective, perhaps?"

"Certainly, Mr. Holly," Thelma Morley answered, "you are a famous man. I have read about your wonderful deeds many times and Mr. Holbrook reads more than I do."

"Why is he out there in Arizona?" was Holly's next question.

"He is vice-president of the Cananda Copper Company," she explained. "His special duties with the company are to inspect any new properties the company may be interested in buying. In this special case he heard that a great new deposit of copper had been discovered out there. Some men in Tolula persuaded him to come out prepared to close a big deal if he found their claims what they said they were. He left last week."

"Do you have any of the correspondence from the parties in Tolula?"

"No. He took all that with him, I'm

sure," she replied, a rising note of excitement in her voice. "Do you think there is something wrong about this, Mr. Holly? What can it mean?"

He looked at her quizzically. Might she, by chance, know the answer to the riddle? One of his rules, seldom broken, was to keep his own counsel in unravelling mysteries. This looked like a major mystery.

"Does Mr. Holbrook know that you have returned to the city from Southampton?" Holly asked, ignoring her last question.

"Certainly," she was emphatic. "He was here until less than a week ago and I've been back a month. There is something suspicious about this, Mr. Holly. Hadn't I better ask the bank to send the money as he directed?"

"Perhaps." He was thinking. "Yes, if the banks would do it in such an irregular way. I'll take the letter to them immediately and ask them to call you for confirmation."

"Oh, hadn't I better attend to it?" she exclaimed, uncertainty and alarm in her manner.

"I can save you that trouble. Besides, I'll have to explain the letter."

He held out his hand for the letter as he arose. She seemed hesitant about giving it up. He noticed that her dark eyes were filled with fright as she gazed at him. With obvious reluctance she gave him the letter.

"You will hear from the banks soon, Mrs. Holbrook," he told her. "I shall take the matter up with them right away."

He made a note of the three banks carrying deposits of Arthur J. Holbrook and took his leave. Thelma Morley stood in the center of the room as he left, smoking a cigarette, looking after Jim Holly with a strange expression of vexation on her face.

Holly did not go at once to the banks, but returned to his own house. He went into his library and sat down at the desk there, the letter from Holbrook spread out before him.

After spending some time in more futile study of the letter, Holly threw it upside down on his desk, to await a more thorough analysis later. For a few more minutes he sat there trying to remember where he had seen Mrs. Arthur J. Holbrook. At some time, long past, he had known her briefly, for he could distinctly remember her face

and that babyish way of staring with her brilliant dark eyes.

Her hair was now a bright golden artificial color, her eyebrows and eyelashes dark. Holly shut his eyes and drew a mental picture of the woman with black hair in place of her bright golden halo of the present. Gradually a smile crept about the corners of his thin-lipped mouth. While visiting Mrs. Holbrook he had not been informed of her artistic name of Thelma Morley. If he had been, that would have saved him time and much thought.

Holly took up the telephone and called a Longacre number, the office of a Broadway booking agent, Lewis Naylor, whom he had known for many years.

"Hello, Lew," Holly greeted, "this is Jim Holly—yeah, you guessed it, but I have called you when I *wasn't* after professional information. Say, Lew, get your memory machinery oiled up and give me a little help. Do you remember that little black-haired beauty from California that you brought to the Myhoming Club party a year ago last winter?"

"Do you mean Thelma Morley?" Lewis Naylor queried.

"No—not Thelma—nor Morley—Morley? Let's see—now I have it—it was Morelos—Angela Morelos, then, wasn't it?"

"Yep. She didn't keep her Spic name around here, though. She really came here under her present pen-name of Thelma Morley. I'd known her as Angela Morelos in Hollywood where she was an extra. She hadn't told me of her change of name when I introduced her at the Myhoming. She landed herself a rich guy over a year ago. She's the present Mrs. Arthur J. Holbrook, don'tcha know?"

In spite of his anticipation, the jocular statement of Lewis Naylor sent a little thrill of surprise through Jim Holly.

"Yes, so I've learned," he replied quickly. "Then Arthur J. Holbrook is really on the up and up, a rich man, is he?"

"Sure thing, Jim. He's about twenty-five or thirty years older than Thelma. A mining and oil millionaire. He's from California too—came here a few years ago. Don't quote me, but I guess this is something you'd like to know for your sleuth box—pardon the alliteration—she's been pulling the old man's leg for a plenty ever since she hooked him at the altar."

"And he's beginning to balk?" Jim suggested.

"That I couldn't say," Naylor replied. "I haven't seen them for months. What makes you think so?"

"Just a wide guess, Lew," Holly evaded. "I may tell you the answer soon. Thanks for a lot of help."

WHEN Holly hung up the receiver he started to make a more thorough examination of the letter from Holbrook. It lay upside down as he had tossed it upon his desk. Something in the way the pencil-written words had indented the paper became apparent to the keen, steely-grey eyes of the criminologist.

"Must have been scared and nervous when he wrote that," Holly mused, reaching for the letter. He looked more closely at the back of it where some of the letters were clearly readable, from right to left in printer style. The writer had borne down so heavily on a word or letter here and there that the indentations stood out distinctly.

Suddenly Jim Holly sat up, all attention. He reached out and pulled a green-shaded desk lamp around and pressed the light switch on it. The bright light focussed directly on the back of the letter. Clearly indented through the paper was the word "send" then a little space and "he" stood out. After that there were several words without a single indented letter, but on the next line he could make out the form of the letter "l" and a quick glance showed scattered indentations down the back of the page. The next indented letter was "p"—"send help!"

He opened a drawer of his desk and took out a little box of steel pins. One by one he stuck a pin through the paper under each indented letter, beginning with the first whole word "Send." Then he turned the letter over and read the code message revealed by the letters underscored with the pins. He could now see plainly on the front of the letter that the writer had borne down heavily on those letters under which he had stuck pins, while the rest of the message was written smoothly and lightly.

The hidden message as pieced together by Holly read cryptically:

"Send help quickly held cave under Cumbres Inn."

With his first vague surmise in the affair

confirmed, Jim Holly saw his trail ahead distinctly now. Somewhere in Arizona, not far from Tolula, there was a hotel of sorts called Cumbres Inn. Arthur J. Holbrook had been lured there and imprisoned in a cave under the Inn and forced to write an order for fifty thousand dollars in cash to be sent him, "deliverable personally, or to written order." His captors could get the money and make their getaway before Holbrook could report the affair, even if his life was spared.

Holbrook had cleverly thought of sending that marked letter to Holly, a stranger, but known by reputation as a detective in special cases, hoping that Holly would decipher the hidden message. If the appeal, or order for money had been sent direct to the bank, the money would likely have been sent as directed, without question and the code message never detected. Holly shook his head and laughed in admiration at the cleverness of the idea.

"You've shown more gumption in this, Arthur," he chuckled, "than you demonstrated in falling for a pair of bright eyes."

The next three hours were spent by Holly in visiting the banks where Holbrook had money on deposit. In each bank he had a confidential talk with the directing official. When he had finished these visits he called up Mrs. Holbrook and told her that everything had been arranged satisfactorily, and that the money was being dispatched to her husband at once and that she should not bother any more about it. In response to her anxious query he replied:

"No, Mrs. Holbrook. I don't see that there is any need for my going out there. Do you think there is?"

"Oh, no, Mr. Holly," she told him quickly. "I'm sure there's no need. I just can't imagine why—oh, well it's all right now if the bank sends it right away. Arthur does such funny things. Thank you for all your kindness, Mr. Holly."

THE next morning the first Trans-continental Air Express carried James McLendon Holly as a passenger, destination: Phoenix, Arizona. By the more leisurely American Railway Express a package was on its way to Tolula, Arizona, directed to Arthur J. Holbrook, "or to bearer of written order from addressee." In that package were some newspapers, making a bulk as large as several thousand bank notes would make.

By two o'clock of the following day Jim Holly arrived at Tolula. The town was small, surrounded in the immediate neighborhood by irrigated farms. Back of the farming lands, above the level of the irrigation laterals, were cattle ranches, and herds of sheep were ranged in the forests and ravines of the Sierra Cobre mountains.

A peaceful land, but with a lurid history. Beyond the Cobres was the hemmed-in "Valley of the Damned," a once-thriving mining center, now decrepit in near abandonment through having been mostly worked out in the heyday of mining. Few people travelled that way now.

"Valley of the Damned" had come to be the opprobrious name of the country beyond the Cobres because it was a refuge of shady characters of every variety when they had reason to take a "vacation" from their more visible haunts.

He asked discreetly about Cumbres Inn and was told that it was formerly the half-way stopping place for travellers going over Cumbres Pass to the mining country. At present it was patronized seldom by legitimate travellers. Its present proprietor, Julio Medina, was a man of unknown antecedents and dubious present occupation. Medina had come from California a year before and taken over Cumbres Inn. He seemed to be prospering in spite of scant patronage.

Arizona counties are gigantic blocks of territory. Holly found that the sheriff's office of this one was thirty miles away. He must survey the situation and be ready to act before or when the bogus package was claimed. He had intended calling upon the sheriff for a posse, but he now determined to visit Cumbres Inn first and familiarize himself with the layout before risking an open raid.

If the cave Holbrook mentioned as his prison should be a secret one—and questioning of the oldest inhabitants revealed no knowledge of its existence—then it must first be located or an open raid might fail and seal Holbrook's fate.

As soon as he saw the combination railroad-express agent, Orville Johnson, Holly knew that he could trust him. Johnson had been agent at Tolula for fifteen years, ever since the station was opened. Holly wanted to arrange for delivery of the package to be held up until he could return from his preliminary survey. With that purpose in mind he introduced himself to

Orville Johnson at the barred window in the depot.

While shaking hands rather listlessly with Holly, Johnson seemed to be studying the tall man through the bars. The agent's eyes were not as listless as his handshake.

"Holly? You say your name's Holly?" Johnson asked for confirmation and got it. "Glad to know you, Mr. Holly. I've heard of you. Jim Holly, they call you back in New York, don't they?"

"Yes, but I didn't know anyone had heard of me out here. Do you read New York newspapers?"

"Nope. Someone just telegraphed from New York this a. m. telling 'em up to Cumbres Inn that you'd be there in a day or so and to be ready for you. Said you were a famous detective."

The information so casually given about the telegram by the agent hit Jim Holly like a Big Bertha shell. In one shocking flash he saw his plan to save Holbrook go crashing.

"Who sent the telegram about me?" Holly asked with an effort to shade his fear.

"No name was signed, Mr. Holly—that is, it was just a Spanish pet name, 'Su Querida,' which means—"

"Yes, I know," Holly interrupted, "'Your Beloved,' or 'Your Sweetie.' I think I know the 'sweetie' who sent it, too. Has the telegram been delivered?"

"Sure. I got it out in the morning mail. Went up to Cumbres by today's R.F.D."

"How far is it up to Cumbres Inn?" Holly asked next.

"About fifteen or twenty miles. You going up this evening?"

"I've got to get there quick!"

HOLLY then made a full confidant of Orville Johnson. He watched the growing amazement on the agent's face as he told the story of Arthur J. Holbrook and his plan for saving him.

"Good gosh!" Johnson burst out impatiently before Holly had quite finished. "Mr. Holly, you don't dare go up there into that nest without an army backing you. Come inside," he motioned Holly around to the door of the office and continued when Holly entered, "I'm going to break regulations and show you a copy of that telegram. I just thought it was regular in every way when I received it—never suspected a thing. Just look at that!"

He opened a big ledger-sized book with tissue sheets used for taking duplicate copies of telegrams and other documents. Holly read the copy of the telegram addressed:

"Julio Medina, Mail to Cumbres Inn, Tolula, Ariz. Famous detective Jim Holly left New York by plane yesterday morning stop Should be in Tolula today looking for party named Holbrook stop If comes to Cumbres give him best of attention stop Mil besos (signed) Su Querida."

"'Mil besos'—a thousand kisses, huh!'" Holly grunted. "'Su Querida' she calls herself to Julio Medina. Looks like poor old Holbrook was played for a worse sucker than I thought at first. Did you say Medina drifted in here and took over that Inn a year ago?"

"About June or July, last year," Johnson declared.

"Fits the picture," Holly commented, thinking. "She's milked the old boy for a year, like Naylor said, and when he began to run dry on the easy pickings there, she and her sweet man, Julio, have the stage all set out here for a last haul. Have there been telegrams exchanged between Holbrook and someone out here about a big new copper strike?"

"Nothing was ever said about copper, but there have been telegrams between Medina and Holbrook that seemed to have followed up some mail correspondence. Whatever they had on the iron wasn't spilled out plain in the telegrams. Medina sent a final telegram little over a week ago and told Holbrook the lid couldn't be kept on much longer, that he'd better come at once prepared to close a big deal or others would be let in on it. Mr. Holbrook showed up in three days. One of Medina's men met him here at the depot and took him out in a car."

Holly sat down at the telegraph instrument table and wrote out a telegram directed to Blinn Investigators, Inc., Los Angeles. The message read: "Please expedite full report to me here on all available details private life of former Hollywood extra named Angela Morelos stop One Julio Medina which may be alias supposed to have been lover or husband. (Signed) James McLendon Holly."

It was nearly six o'clock when Holly left the depot. Twenty minutes later he had hired a driver in a battered car of ancient pedigree to take him over the Cumbres Pass. The driver-owner was not enthusi-

astic about taking his fare, but the pay offered was too tempting to refuse.

"Cain't you wait till mornin', Mr. Holly?" the lanky Westerner pleaded. "'Sas much fer you as fer me I'm askin'. Gittin' over into that sinkhole o' crooks at night-time ain't plumb safe."

"Isn't there a sort of hotel up at the Pass where we can stop for the night—the Cumbres Inn?"

"Gosh, man!" he who said his name was Tanner, exclaimed, "that's on the rim o' hell. There's funny stories floatin' around the last year 'bout the place. If you jest gotta go tonight, let me run over to the house an' git my ol' single-action cannon. I don't aim to git caught with my pants down."

HOLLY waited patiently a half hour for Tanner and his "single-action cannon."

"Had to grease it up some." Tanner patted a bulge under his shirt when he came back. "An' then I hadda argue some with the ol' lady. She's right 'spicious when she sees me luggin' out the ol' bellerin' ram. Let's go."

On the dusty ride out of the valley Tanner wanted to know and was assured that Holly had "shootin' irons" and knew how to use them.

"And call me Mr. Dodge at the Inn," Holly told Tanner. "I'm supposed to be Elkton Dodge from Boston, looking over possible investments here."

"Better not shake any roll o' mazuma around up there," Tanner advised. "It's bad 'nough, you jest lookin' like a bank roll."

"Have you ever heard of a secret cave under this Cumbres Inn, Mr. Tanner?" Holly asked.

"No, I ain't heard tell o' no secret cave, but in the ol' days 'fore automobiles come in, when a heap o' travellers useter put up at the Half Way House—that's what they called Cumbres Inn then—it's told around that they run off all their swill an' waste into a subtrainyan stream way down in the mountain under the house some'eres. This Little Gila river off here to our left comes pourin' outa the mountain 'bout a quarter mile from the Half Way House. We'll pass the falls where it comes out."

"There's a cave under the house." Holly watched Tanner's reactions keenly, "And a

friend of mine is held a prisoner in it. I've got to make sure about the cave—where to find it—then round up some help and raid the place. Could we get enough others like you who would help?"

"Gosh 'n Tom Thunder!" Tanner blurted, trying to look at Holly and the twisting road ahead at the same time. "Man alive! W'y you jest whisper it 'round this country that Jule Medina's gone in fer kidnappin' an's got a human in soak for ransom and you'd git a hunnerd men in no time a-tall. If you're sure, w'y ain't you to!" Sheriff Mogford?"

"Got to find that secret cave first. If we raided the place and couldn't find the cave—"

"I git you." Tanner jerked the wheel to avoid a rock in the road. They were climbing out of the valley floor now. "Your frien'd turn to buzzard meat if we busted in an' didn't find 'im. It's gonna be ticklish guyin' 'round for that cave if Jule Medina don't want it found. He's a plumb bad egg, Mr. Holly."

In a few minutes more Tanner's old car was puffing in low up the mountain road. They were in a canyon at the head of the valley now. The stream, with a heavy head of crystal-clear water, flowed swiftly over white sand and rocks at their left. Before they turned the bend which revealed the falls, Holly could hear the roar of the falling waters.

"That's where the subtraiyan stream pours out." Tanner nodded at the falls when they were passing. "Lotta rivers like that underground all over this country, only mighty few o' them ever see daylight."

Holly got a good view of the precipitous leap of the spraying waters where they poured out of the mountain's solid rock and burst into white fury on the rounded stones fifty feet below. It was just getting dusk, but Holly could see well enough to shiver a little at what might happen to Holbrook if his captors decided to pitch him into that subterranean river.

They came within view of Cumbres Inn, built of mountain logs and riven boards, a great rustic, weatherbeaten, aging affair that looked as though ready to fall to pieces at the corners. The roof swayed in the middle like an old nag and Holly saw some of the old-fashioned window panes broken in the second story.

Following Holly's instructions, Tanner

drove past the Inn for fifty yards and there made a good pretence of developing motor trouble. A dark, squat man with a square built face looked out at them from the sagging front veranda as they passed the house. When the car came to a spluttering stop, this strangely animal-like creature ambled up the road in the gathering dusk. As he approached the halted car, Holly was standing on the ground, pretending to watch Tanner lift the cover of the hood and inspect his motor.

"Gas line bolt done dropped off." Tanner shook his head, timing his remark so the curious stranger could hear. "I gotta try an' find it in the road back aways, 'cause I ain't got nothin' along to fix it with."

Tanner started back along the road and seemed suddenly aware of the approaching dark man with the bony, evil face.

"Hello, pardner," Tanner accosted him. "You ain't got a spare part for a tin-henry up here, have you?"

Another man was coming out from the house now. The first man heard crunching of gravel under the feet of the second one and looked around at him before answering Tanner.

"As' de boss. He tell," he advised, glancing back at the other man.

Tanner started back, searching the roadbed from side to side as he walked slowly along. Small objects would be hard to find in the dying twilight.

Holly bent over the uncovered motor and was surprised to see that the gas feed line was really disconnected. The square-faced, short man, who looked like a gorilla, but was unquestionably a Mexican mestizo, looked over Holly's shoulder.

"He no go, senor," he said. "You stay tonight at hotel here maybe?"

"What hotel? Where is it?" Holly asked blankly, looking around the mountain, ignoring the ramshackle house in plain sight.

"Dat beeg house," the man pointed, "she de hotel. Two odder mans come by, stop for tonight, too."

Tanner and the second stranger were coming forward.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Dodge." Tanner put heartbreak into his voice. "Mr. Medina here says he ain't got no spare parts an' ain't much chance to find that bolt along the road tonight. S'lucky it didn't happen over the mountain."

"Hell of a break for me!" Holly said

irritably and turned to Medina. "Your man here says you give hotel service in that house. Is that right?"

"Certainly, my friend. We shall be glad to accommodate you for the night. This is Cumbres Inn."

JULIO MEDINA was a striking confirmation of what Holly had suspected concerning the "querido" of flashy Angela Morelos. He was of medium height, spare, resilient build and handsome Castilian features of the best Mexican caballero type. He was dressed in a new, perfectly tailored blue serge suit with double-breasted coat, flashy red tie and on his feet were new, dark tan shoes. Clearly he was not of this rough mountain country.

Before they left Tanner's flivver beside the road Medina stooped over the motor and inspected the crippled part closely. When he straightened up Holly thought there was a hint of displeasure or suspicion in the glance he cast swiftly at Tanner and himself. It was like the flashing of a humming bird and gone instantly.

"Diego," Medina addressed the peon in Spanish, "take the gentleman's bag to the house. Come, gentlemen," he said in English, "we fortunately have superb accommodations for you."

They conversed on the way to the house and Holly made himself known as Elkton Dodge, of Boston. He gave a hint of his mission, just enough to arouse the cupidity of a man who had laid such a clever trap for Arthur J. Holbrook. If that warning telegram from New York hadn't thrown too big a scare into Medina he might try to snare another victim.

Holly and Tanner were assigned to rooms on the second floor of the antiquated structure. With some misgivings, Holly saw that they were given rooms as far apart as possible. His own was not far from the head of the rickety stairway leading up from the small lobby, while Tanner's room was on the opposite side of the wide inner balcony which surrounded a ten-foot square banistered opening. This opening gave a view from above of the lobby and fireplace.

In his room, which was scarcely furnished with the bare necessities, Holly observed that there were doors on each side, giving access to the adjoining rooms. At one time he heard a low murmur of voices in the room to his right.

He stepped cautiously across to the closed door and put his ear to the crack. The murmured tones died away as if the speakers had heard his stealthy movement. After a minute of listening, there came a slight noise as of some heavy body changing position in a chair. Immediately a warning "Sh-h!" sounded from just beyond the panel of the door.

He stepped lightly away and poured water into the old zinc wash basin on the dresser and started washing. A few minutes later the Mexican, Diego, came up to tell Holly and Tanner that their dinners were ready.

Holly finished his dinner without seeing anyone about the place now except Diego, who served them. There was a sound of someone in the kitchen, but of Medina and the two supposed guests there was no sign.

Holbrook had said the cave was "under" the Inn. That might mean that an entrance to it was to be found from inside the house, or from outside under the walls of the house, but certainly somewhere below the floor there would be a way to the underground prison. Holly believed that wherever the entrance to the cave was, it would be well hidden.

It had been Holly's original intention to gain admittance to the Cumbres Inn as an unsuspected guest and make a secret survey under cover of darkness in the dead of night. He knew now that his own, and perhaps Tanner's movements were observed by lurking, unfriendly eyes.

When the two lone diners had finished and returned to the lobby, Holly's eyes made a quick circuit of the room. A fire burned in the broad fireplace. The plank floor was bare except for a cheap six-by-four rug covering a spot directly in front of the hearth. Up to that point the details of the room seemed commonplace enough, but Holly saw a strange contraption built into the north wall.

There was a round wooden bolt about four inches in diameter to the top of which was firmly secured a two-foot handle. This handle was turned into the built-in niche of the wall. Holly was sure that the bolt and handle and the open niche of the wall had not been visible when he had surveyed this room twice before. Then he saw the reason. In the window directly over the niche lay a detachable piece to fit into the niche and hide the apparatus.

Diego came in from the dining-room and

began poking the fire. Holly stepped out on the veranda and stood there while he lighted a cigar. In the last faint radiance of the day he saw Tanner's car beside the road and a man's form stooping over the motor. He would not have seen so much if it had not been for a reflected glow from a flashlight used by the stooping figure.

WITH a few brisk steps Holly was across the yard and disappeared into a thicket of young pines which long neglect had allowed to grow up near the house. His footsteps were silenced by the pine needles as he hurried along and came near the mysterious figure by the stalled flivver. When he again looked out from across the road, opposite the car, he was surprised to see two men there, one of them Julio Medina.

Medina's companion was a bulky figure, but beyond that Holly could not distinguish details in the gathering gloom of night.

"You're right, absolutely," the big man told Medina, turning off the flashlight with which he had been examining something, "there ain't a speck o' dust on it. That tap was taken off sudden, right here."

"Listen, Harry, come on," Medina commanded, starting back toward the house, "it's plain that it's this detective, Jim Holly, that Angel wired about. The whole thing is going to flop, but these two birds who think they're so damned wise are going to pay big for their trick. I was a fool to let the old man pull that one about this Holly guy being his partner. We gotta sink 'em in the hole and vamose. Maybe Angel can break that damned will then and—"

Holly had tried to follow close but he came to a tangle of brush that forced a detour too far for further words to reach him. He quickened his pace and entered the yard. When Medina and his companion came up to the veranda, Holly was leaning against a post upright, smoking calmly. Tanner stood inside by the fireplace. Diego had disappeared again.

"Well, Mr. Dodge," Medina spoke ingratiatingly, "you've finished your dinner pretty quick. I hope you enjoyed it."

"It was all right," Holly replied without enthusiasm, wondering how soon the attack would come and what course it would take. "You have a unique establishment here. I am interested in buying properties out here which could be developed as tour-

ist resorts. I suppose you would sell for a price, Mr. Medina?"

"Might do that, Mr. Dodge." Medina looked sharply at Holly's shadowed face. The man called Harry went inside.

"I'd like to look it over before I leave and offer you a price," Holly continued.

"We'll talk it over in the morning. You can inspect the place in the daylight. Have you noticed our old Navajo fireplace? It's very interesting. Come in and let me explain it to you."

Medina led the way into the lobby. Tanner had seated himself in the shadows of the far corner; the big man, Harry, leaned against the wall, his broad back hiding that strange niche. His hands were apparently folded back of him. His face was heavy-featured and greasy in the firelight, as if he seldom washed it. His eyes bulged so that he gave the impression of staring in a startled manner. Holly could see unmistakable hostility in that bulbous stare. Harry's talents were brute force, not suave diplomacy as exhibited now by Julio Medina.

There was a tenseness about Medina as he began explaining the purposes of the different cells and compartments built in on each side and above the fireplace. Out of the corner of his eye Holly saw the giant, Harry, watching them closely, his hands still hidden at his back against the wall.

"And this is a great baking oven," Medina pulled open an iron door directly over the fire, "step right back there and you'll see the glow of heat in the back," he motioned with his hand, indicating that Holly should stand in the center of the small rug.

"Yes, I see it from here," Holly agreed without moving off the hearth.

"Very interesting," Holly added. "Will you have a cigar, Mr. Medina?" He reached under his left coat lapel and brought out a cigar case, offering it, opened, to Medina.

"No thanks." Medina couldn't hide impatience and a certain amount of nervousness in his voice. "I'll have a cigarette. Can't smoke cigars."

His hands trembled as he lighted the cigarette.

"I'm a bit fagged from a long day of travelling," Holly explained in a casual tone. "If you will excuse us, Mr. Tanner and I will hit the hay, as you Westerners say. Call us early, please, Mr. Medina.

"I'm anxious to look over the place before going on to see other properties."

"Oh, sure, Mr. Dodge, I hope you sleep well." Medina said and glanced slyly toward Harry by the wall. Holly followed that glance and saw the big man's arms tensed, his frog-like eyes gazing at that little rug.

Holly stepped toward the front door, avoiding the rug in his course, and threw the cigar butt out into the yard. Tanner was already halfway to the foot of the stairs. In following his driver, Holly could now walk from the front door toward the stairs without having the two intending killers at his back. He wheeled around the base of the stairs and started upward on Tanner's heels.

"Good night, gentlemen," he called back.

"Good night," Medina said, jerkily. Harry said nothing.

HOLLY caught up with Tanner at the head of the stairs and laid a hand over his shoulders.

"Watch everything," he whispered. "Don't go to bed. They're going to try to murder us. They know you took that tap off purposely. The rug before the fireplace hides a trap door. Keep out of danger if you can. It's my fight. If anything happens, try to get out and call the sheriff."

"I'll be with you till hell grows icicles, Mr. Holly," Tanner whispered in reply. "I ain't had a chance fer such fun since the ol' lady put ball 'n chains on me."

"Remember, I'm asking you to stay out of it unless you have to defend your own life," Holly whispered emphatically. "Good night, Tanner," he said aloud, stopping at the door of his room. "Sleep well, and don't worry about that car. I'm glad we had to stop here overnight."

In his room Holly made all the noises of a man getting ready for bed. The bare wooden floor aided him. He dropped his feet lightly on the floor like empty shoes being cast. After a reasonable time he blew out the light and lay down on the creaking bed, but immediately slipped off it.

His rubber-soled shoes made no sound as he went to the door and listened for a few seconds before he turned the bolt slowly and crept out. There were still lights below and an occasional snatch of murmuring voices came from the dining-room.

Holly went to the far side of the banis-

tered square overlooking the lobby and knelt down to wait and watch.

Fifteen minutes later four men came out of the dining-room, led by Medina. They were big Harry and squatty, long-armed Diego. A fourth man trooped along in the rear. He could have been a twin brother of the man Harry, except that he was slightly less elephantine in build. Medina turned to this last man.

"Pokey," he said, speaking so low Holly could scarcely hear, "you go up and sit on the top step. They're probably both asleep by now, but don't let 'em come out and get nose. If they do, don't say anything—just let 'em have it and save us the trouble going in after 'em. We'll be back pretty soon and then we all beat it like I promised."

"Pokey" didn't question about his duties further. He climbed the stairs and seated himself gawkily on the top step. Medina went to the niche in the wall and pulled out the handle. Holly could not see the result, but he didn't need to. He knew what was happening. He heard the three murder-bent fiends going down a ladder—could tell by the fading sound of their voices that they were descending into the cave.

Holly knew that Arthur J. Holbrook was scheduled to die very shortly, then he and Tanner. Quick action, irrespective of what followed in its wake, was urgently required. He crept around the banister until he was within ten feet of the unsuspecting "Pokey." His automatic was in his hands.

"Hands up, Pokey!" Holly commanded coolly. "Up with 'em, or I'll put a bullet through you!"

In the poor light Holly could only guess at the grimace of terror that accompanied the very audible intake of breath, but clumsy hands reached up as the fellow arose, trembling.

"Who're y-you? What's this f-f-for?" Pokey stammered.

Holly snatched the .38 from the belt of the trembling man and shoved his automatic into the quivering back.

"Get on across there." He shoved him toward Tanner's room. "And don't ask questions that you know how to answer yourself."

DRIVING Pokey before him to Tanner's door, Holly was about to call

Tanner when the latter opened a crack in his door, then threw it open wide.

"Fer Gawd's sake!" Tanner cried in a loud whisper, his own old single-action .45 half lifted. "What's happened?"

"They've gone down to murder my friend in the cave," Holly explained quickly. "There's no time to tie this fellow up. You keep him covered—don't take chances—he was told to kill us if we came out of our rooms." Holly shoved Pokey into the room. "Watch him, Tanner."

He turned then and raced light-footed down the stairs. The rug had been removed and the trap-door that Holly knew was hidden underneath the rug was now down. The top rungs of a perpendicular ladder led downward into pitchy blackness. In seconds Holly was letting himself rapidly down the ladder, encumbered by the necessity of keeping his automatic ready in right hand.

Down, down, down, he went, the silence and deepest midnight around him. Finally, at least forty feet below the lobby floor, his feet landed on hard ground. He shivered a little at the thought of the tumble into that shaft Medina had planned for him a little while before.

Standing for five seconds in silence, Holly heard what he anxiously feared. Angry voices, making no effort to stifle their tones, came from somewhere out of the inky void. Holly took out his flashlight and held it close to the ground. He took up the trail of tracks in the sand. They led in the general direction of the voice.

"For God's sake, man," a shaken voice cried, "don't do it. I'll pay you what you want. Give me another chance—don't murder me this way. I can get the money."

"Too late, Holbrook." Julio's voice was hard as flint. "No telling what that sucker Holly has told before coming here. You cooked your hash when you pulled that slick one to get him out here. I don't know how you did it, but it's not doing you any good."

Holly felt his way along the crooked path past jutting rock points until he could see the dimly limned group around a lantern. An elderly man, with disordered grey hair and a stubby growth of beard, clothes dusty and crumpled, lay half reclining against a sloping stone wall. His hands were behind him, evidently tied, for his ankles were bound. He was looking up at Medina, who stood over him, talking.

There was a distant purring as of swiftly running waters and a damp chilliness in the air. Flashing realization came to Holly. He had not seen it in his first swift survey. That blackness beyond the group was not just the shadows of the cave tunnel, but the abyss above the subterranean stream of which Tanner had told him.

The big killer, Harry, stood off to Medina's right, his jaw twitching like the slavering of a hungry wolf. Diego squatted near the lantern. Holly restrained his first impulse to act at once in a precipitate attack.

"All right, we've no time to waste," Medina snapped his hurry. "You give it to him, Harry, and tie that big rock to him before you kick 'im in. Any last word to the wife, or anyone else, Holbrook?"

"I believe you helped her trick me into that marriage, Tony Mendez." Holbrook spoke with fearless hatred. "The two of you must have planned it all beforehand. You knew her in Los Angeles better than you let me know, didn't you? Well, listen to this, Tony: I was a blind old fool, but not quite the fool you thought I was. All my money, even my checking accounts, are tied up in trust for my daughter, and when I, as sole trustee, am gone, my daughter gets it all. That false Jezebel will get nothing. Now go ahead and do your murder. I'm ready!"

A sneer of rage burst from Medina's snarling lips.

"Give it to the old fool, Harry!" he ordered.

"Drop that gun, Harry! Hands up, all you three!" Holly commanded crisply. "Drop it, I said, big boy!" he repeated, unmistakable venom in his tone.

SULLEN, pop-eyed Harry dropped the big black revolver he had held in readiness for the murder. Medina whirled his hands half lifted. Diego had stood up, hands over his head obediently as if he was doing a familiar drill.

"Up higher, Medina, or Mendez!" Holly warned him. "And now, you Harry, cut the rope binding Mr. Holbrook's hands and feet. Hurry up!"

"I ain't got no knife," Harry declared sulkily.

"All right," Holly said. "You may not have one, but I've never seen a Mex that didn't have one about him. Cut the ropes, Diego."

"No compredo ingles," Diego lied.

"Eso no importa nada," Holly quickly replied in good Spanish. "That doesn't mean anything. Cut the prisoner's bonds. Andale aprisa!"

A sly look gleamed in the dark, bony face of the Mexican as he lowered his hands.

"If you bring out anything but a knife, you'll not live to use it, Diego," Holly warned him, still using Mexican idiom.

Diego slipped his right hand under his loose blouse and brought out a short thick-bladed dirk. He stooped over the prisoner and with two slashes had freed him. Although Holly had to keep a close eye on the other two, he saw the catlike, underhanded movement the instant Diego tautened his bending stance to make the throw.

"Look out—the knife!" Holbrook cried a warning to his rescuer.

Holly dropped to one knee and fired at the Mexican in the very split second when the heavy little dirk whizzed by his head. Diego was diving toward the lantern and the bullet missed him.

Before Holly could fire again the Mexican's fist had crashed into the glass chimney of the lantern. The next instant everything was in darkness. Holly leaped quickly to his right and smashed, full body length, into a mountainous form that had also changed position on the instant of a complete darkness. It could be none other than Harry, the giant, Holly knew.

As powerful arms entwined his body like mammoth octopus tentacles, Holly tried a sudden jiu-jitsu twist and fling, being too closely embraced to use his automatic. The most the Jiu-do trick accomplished was to bring the two struggling bodies down to the sandy floor of the cave, each straining to his utmost for advantage. Holly's gun slipped out of his hand. He drove a fist blindly, with all his strength, at the giant's face. It struck the hard, mule jaw.

The blow hurt Holly's hand painfully, but Harry grunted and for a brief second relaxed. Holly started to feel for his fallen automatic. The giant's arms found him again.

"Get a squeeze on 'im and hold till we make a light, Harry!" Medina shouted from a few feet away. "Don't get any nearer the hole—you'll slip in!"

"I can't—the damned—ugh!" Harry tried to speak as Holly flung him over on a downward slant.

The two men, in deadly combat, went

over and over, down an incline, neither permitting the other to remain on top long enough to gain an advantage. Once Holly tried to slip his left hand under his shirt to get the spare gun carried there. He had to give up that move for more urgent self-defense.

"God!" the big man groaned between gasping breaths. "We're goin' into the hole—in deep water—ugh!"

Holly felt the desperate shove with which Harry tried to break him loose and push him into that yawning chasm where the underground river roared beneath them. He clung to his opponent now with redoubled frenzy.

"Stop, damn you!" Harry begged profanely. "Let's break, or we both go in—oh-h—ow-w-w-w!"

The terrific giant screeched like a lost soul cast into the abyss of hell, and with horribly good reason. They had struggled and rolled too far on that dangerous incline, even if they had broken their hold on each other. They were sliding now over bare, smooth rock. Holly held on to his enemy's shirt bosom until both of them shot over the final brink. He heard the roar of the waters below and felt the icy draught of damp air.

They fell downward through empty blackness.

THERE was no time for Jim Holly to think in that short, fearful plunge through the inky void. It was his instinctive self-reliance that caused him to release his grip on the big, clumsy man's shirt bosom. He shoved away into space, and the next second his body, warm from the heat of battle, hit the mad rush of deep, ice-cold waters.

Like a fierce ocean wave under the lash of hurricane winds, the current seized Holly and tossed him along as if he had been a tiny straw. The frigid waters seemed bottomless. Holly knew the opposite walls of rock must be close. The volume of the Little Gila, as he had seen it below, made that clear, but to seek the nearby walls meant danger of being dashed into unconsciousness against them, or crippled.

In spite of that danger, with a greater, more certain fate awaiting him in a few seconds at the waterfall below, he was in the instant of decision when the furious current decided for him. A boiling upfling lifted him with stunning force and slammed

him, half lifted out of the water, against ridged, bumpy rock above the water line. Instinct alone, unaided by process of thought in that flicking second, snapped his arms and gripping fingers around an uneven jetty of rock.

He pulled himself quickly up from the lashing water and realized that he could distinguish his surroundings. There was a strange diffusion of light, ghostly and unreal. Not until he looked around back of him did Holly see the source of light. The full moon had arisen. He was almost in the mouth of the natural tunnel. The intensified roar of the falling torrent was deafening.

Directly overhead, where the reflected light of the moon struck in greater volume, Holly saw a ledge of stratified rock with sharp edges. It was while looking up at the ledge that he felt something alive touch his foot and fingers closed around his ankle. Shocked, still confused by the terrific din of lashing waters and his recent struggle with death, he jerked his foot away before he could see what it was.

The sudden violence of movement in releasing his ankle over-balanced him and he had to double up and fall to his knees and hands to save himself. Only then he saw that he was upon a sharp pillar of rock in the middle of the stream. The water had worn away the softer sandstone and left this blunt needle of granite with its less than two feet square of sloping, insecure top scarcely thirty inches above the racing torrent.

Holly saw all that and something else of a vastly different sort in the moment of looking down. As he fell to his knees he saw the bedraggled, struggling form of a man trying desperately to hang on to the rock. Not sure who it could be, nor stopping to reason, he seized the hand which he had kicked loose from his ankle and pulled with all his might. The thought flashed through his mind then that it might be Holbrook.

Just as the current had done to him, it had thrown this half-drowned man against the rock and around it to the downstream side as his hands had clutched hold of the jutting edge. Holly slipped down astraddle of the upstream side for leverage in helping the man up. As he found time to wonder and think, it came to him that this could be the killer, Harry, whose rescue might mean his own death. At first

he had thought of Harry as undoubtedly already over the falls, but the big fellow might have delayed his own passage down the stream. He pulled the gigantic, hard-breathing killer up until their faces were just a few inches apart.

Holly saw the staring unbelief in the blinking eyes of the other as he became accustomed to the grey light. He could distinguish his rescuer now and his long bovine jaw dropped as he looked his astonishment. Holly laughed at the incongruous situation. Less than two minutes ago this brutish creature had been willing enough to kick him into this stream of death, and now he clung to this rock, his life at least temporarily saved by one he had tried to murder.

"What yuh laughin' at? Yuh gone crazy?" Harry asked harshly, his breath still coming in gasps.

"I guess it does seem to you that any man is crazy to save your life after you tried to kill him," Holly replied, "but—"

"Saved my life! *You* saved my life!" Harry yelled above the roar of the waters. "Haw! Haw! Haw! That's rich—w'y yuh damn sneaking dick, I was jest holdin' your hand to keep yuh from fallin' in till I could git up here an' shove yuh in, myself, and watch yuh kick off. Now damn yuh, I'm gonna do it."

His long, heavily underslung face came up over the top of the rock, murderous hatred glaring from it, so ferocious it was recognizable in that weird half light. Holly had no false hopes nor delusions about his predicament now.

IT WAS quick wit that would save him and the opportunity to put it to telling service came sooner than Holly anticipated. As Harry came up over the top of the rock both his big hands clutched the slippery edges of the rock on Holly's side. Holly's big hands gripped firmly in water-worn niches on the sides of the rock, the lower half of his body already below water, his legs straddling the body of the pillar, horseback fashion.

The killer's eyes and facial features were not distinct enough to give warning in advance of his intentions, but Holly saw the right hand turn loose from the rock and sweep out for the fatal blow. He ducked his head and in the same instant shot his right hand up to strike with all his strength at that clinging left hand.

The mighty sidewinder slap that had aimed at dislodging him from his precarious hold struck the top of his head a glancing blow, but its force was so terrific that his head and shoulders went under the cold, pulling current. He nearly lost his grip. Chilling fear and hot fury clashed for mastery in him. He came up with his fighting spirit thoroughly roused, but there was nothing there upon which to vent his rage.

The rock was bare. The gigantic, gawky killer had disappeared. By now the falls had claimed and at that very instant they were crushing his worthless hulk on the polished stones far below.

For a brief moment Holly felt an intense relief, as if he was already saved from death. He climbed back on top of the rock to think.

Then the keen realization of his whole situation swept over him. For the first time since plunging into the icy waters he had time to reflect and look around. The result brought despair.

He could cling to the top of this rock for hours, perhaps days, but in the end he would follow murderous Harry over those same falls on to the waiting rocks of death below. In the meantime Medina, alias Tony Mendez, would have finished with Holbrook and perhaps Tanner, also, then be far on his way to escape punishment for his crimes.

Standing up again on top of the rock's uncertain footage, he cast searching eyes upward at the ledge and followed it as far as he could into the darkness over the right hand side of the stream. It was approximately two feet above the farthest reach of his hands to that ledge. He could easily leap up that distance, but would he find that needed grasping edge? And if so, would not the spraying dampness of the stream have made the surface too slippery for his grip to hold?

The moon was higher now and shining directly into the western half of the tunnel mouth. Each minute brought a greater effulgence of silvery glow within. It was ten feet from his perch to the darker eastern wall, only five or six feet across to the western side. It might as well have been as many miles.

With little hope that it would function after the wetting it had suffered, he took out the flashlight from his water-soaked pocket and pushed the sliding switch. A flood of light beamed upward, revealing

every bend and crevice of the cavern ceiling.

He could now plainly see the ledge and judge his chances, even to the way of escape after drawing himself up. The ledge reached across to the west wall, where there was a wide break in the ceiling. Where the opening led to he could not see. It might be a blind trap and leave him no better off, but certain death faced him eventually here. He determined to try for it.

Before he turned off the flashlight and pocketed it, he had picked out the most likely spot to grasp. He waited a full minute to accustom his eyes to the lesser light, then planted his feet firmly, bent his knees and leaped upward, forcing out of his thoughts the memory of what lay below. He pretended that he was back in the gymnasium, leaping on to a window sill.

His fingers closed on the moist ledge, felt damp, fine sand or heavy dust, which helped his hold. His feet and legs swung downstream under the ledge. On the back-swing he put every atom of muscle into his arm and shoulder sinews for the upward pull, bringing up his left knee. His blood pounded in his ears above the roar of the torrent below; he held his breath in the supreme moment. There he was lying on the narrow, uneven ledge, relaxing, breathing hard, scarcely conscious of just how that last moment of struggle had been accomplished.

He wanted to lie there and enjoy the sweet sensations of triumphant life, but bitter realization told him he was not yet free, nor was his grim work of the night done.

AGAIN he took out the flashlight and pointed it ahead of him as he crawled along the ledge, westward. He went down into a smooth groove in the rock, where water trickled on the bottom, a groove that had once been part of the stream's bed in long-past ages before softer rock had worn away to make the present course.

A few steps and he was outside in the moonlight. What had appeared to him from the roadway that afternoon to be a bare, unscalable mountain side was now seen to have many footholds.

Ten minutes later he was creeping up into the shadow-casting bulk of Cumbres Inn. Long before he came near it he heard the angry barking of guns and furious cries of men.

The kitchen and dining-room were in a

one-story part of the building, set at right-angles to the main structure. While eating his dinner, Holly had noticed the door to the dining-room opening out to the south yard. The yells of challenge and answering cries of derision came from the lobby and the second floor. The voice in the lobby was that of Medina, that above was Tanner.

"You better give up while we're willing to let you go peaceably, Tanner," Medina said, as Holly crept close enough to distinguish words. "If you don't we'll get you pretty soon, anyway."

"You let Mr. Holly an' his friend come out, safe an' sound first, then you kin throw your shootin' irons out an' come hands up," Tanner called back. "I gotta see Mr. Holly 'fore you skunks come outa that hole."

Holly could already picture the situation before he got to the door. There was a light in the lobby. In some way Tanner had disposed of "Pokey" and had set himself to guard the exit from the cave. Medina and Diego had tried to come out and that had brought on the shooting, followed by the present verbal exchange.

What had become of Arthur J. Holbrook? Holly felt certain that they had murdered him, perhaps had already disposed of his body with that rock Medina had told Harry to tie him up with before throwing him "in the hole."

Creeping up to the front door, Holly looked into the lobby. The trap-door was still down. Medina was undoubtedly hanging to the top rungs of the ladder, just out of range of Tanner's gun. Expecting to get sight of the cowering kidnapper from the other side, Holly started around toward the dining-room door. A noise under the front porch halted him. He stepped behind a large tree in the yard and waited, curious.

There was a sound of splitting boards being ripped out. The exchange of threats and warnings continued inside between Medina and Tanner while Holly waited to see what the strange tearing noises would lead to. Within half a minute a pair of long arms protruded from a hole that had been torn in the rotted boards which sealed the space between the porch floor and the ground. The gorilla form of Diego followed the arms and stood up in the moonlight. He brushed dust from his clothes

with a stroke or two, then ran around the house end.

Holly thought the Mexican was heading for the dining-room door, but didn't intend to let him enter. He was just covering the broad form with his automatic, the words of challenge on his lips, when Diego seized a ladder that leaned against the eaves back of the lobby section. He brought the ladder to the center of the south end of the house, within a few feet of where Holly stood by the tree, and there slowly, cautiously leaned the top against the wall under a window.

There could be no doubt now of Medina's plan. He was holding Tanner's attention while Diego dug his way out under the house and prepared to attack the fighting driver from the rear. Holly waited until Diego was nearly up to the top of the ladder.

"Hold your horses, Diego!" Holly commanded. "Come down from there with your hands up!"

He held the automatic menacingly pointed up at Diego in the moonlight so the Mexican would see it was no idle threat. For a fleeting moment Diego stood up there on a rung of the ladder, immobile, as if transfixed, his head and face turned owlishly over his shoulders, eyeing Holly. Then without a word he started down.

"Who's that out there?" Tanner called loudly.

"It is I and I've got this—"

"Bram-m-m!" a big gun in Diego's hand bellowed, but his aim from his twisted position was poor.

HOLLY pressed the trigger on his automatic, but nothing happened. The soaking it had received made its fine mechanism useless. He dropped it to the ground and leaped to the foot of the ladder as Diego fired another slug straight down at him. It spattered dirt at Holly's feet.

Holly hit the bottom of the ladder with his shoulders, swept it off the ground. Diego yelled lustily before he hit the ground broadside with a squash and loud grunt, still holding a big, black revolver in his right hand. Holly saw the gun plainly in the bright moonlight. He kicked it out of the Mexican's hand as Diego started to lift it for another shot.

The next moment they were entangled in an elemental, hand-to-hand death struggle.

In one of the quick turns Holly saw a darkly shadowed form crawling out of that hole under the porch. He made a feint and then suddenly jerked Diego over and clamped a perfect scissor hold. Something hard under his hip on the ground hurt him painfully, but he put the fullest pressure his long, athletic legs could exert into that killing compress of his opponent's midriff and diaphragm. Another was coming to attack him. He had no choice.

Never before had he been forced to experiment with that killing scissor squeeze to the fatal limit.

Medina stood crouching over him, gun in hand, looking for a dead-sure shot at his head. A window was being lifted above. Holly could see it, but Medina was too intent to see anything but the moving head of the man he intended to shoot. That thing under his hip hurt Holly much worse now as he tautened his muscles to the limit in that last effort to stop the desperate struggles of Diego. The Mexican was gasping for breath.

He could safely turn loose the relaxing arm of the Mexican now and at once sought the hard object that dug into his flesh. His hand came out from under him holding Diego's .45. The Mexican groaned once, gasped for breath and went limp. Medina fired so close to Holly's face that the powder burned his brow, but he had bobbed his head aside at the same moment.

Lifting the .45 Holly fired upward at the overshadowing form and in the same flash he saw a form hurtling through the moonlight from that window above. Medina was already doubling over when Tanner's feet struck his shoulders and crushed him to the ground. The lanky Westerner hit the ground heavily beside Holly, then scrambled on all fours to grab Medina's fallen gun. He stood up over the inert form of Holly's kidnapper, ready for any further emergency.

"You hurt, Mr. Holly?" Tanner called over his shoulder, still watching Medina.

"No, I'm all right, Tanner," Holly finally spoke. "I guess these two are permanently out. Are there any others around?"

"Not less'n they're down that hole or was," Tanner replied, excited and nervous still. "I had to plug that skunk you lef' me to guard. He got plumb foolish an' made a dive for me. I set a light on the steps then an' stood waitin' for something to come outa that hole. After a while ol'

Jule comes stickin' his head up cautious an' I poked my gun through the banisters at him an' ast where you was. That's when he took a shot at me an' I threwed some lead back at him, but he ducked. 'Twasn't long 'fore I heerd you out here. I ain't seen no others."

Holly was examining Medina. He was dead.

"We've got to find what they did with Mr. Holbrook," Holly declared, turning to go into the house, followed by Tanner. "I'm afraid they've murdered him and made away with his body down in the cave. He was there with these two men when I fell into the underground river with the big fellow called Harry."

"My good Gawd!" Tanner gasped, incredulous. "You don't mean—" and seeing Holly's wet, crumpled clothes as they came into the lamplight, he continued, "Gosh'n Tom Thunder, how'd you ever git out?"

Holly told Tanner briefly of his experiences since they had parted. While he talked he led the way down the ladder, sure that there were no more Medina henchmen down there.

They reached the bottom of the ladder, speaking more cautiously now, their ears listening for sounds in the dark cavern. Holly raised his voice in a call with slender hope that it would be answered.

"Mr. Holbrook! Are you down here?" he cried.

"Hey, is that you, Mr. Holly?" an excited voice replied at once from the depths of the cave. "Thank God you've come out all right. Throw that light around this way a little—that's better—now I can see."

A thoroughly tattered, nondescript figure wobbled out of the darkness. His grey stubble of a beard and tousled white hair made him look like a very much older man than Holly knew him to be.

"This is a greater joy than I can tell you, Mr. Holbrook," Holly declared, going forward with outstretched hand, holding the flashlight with the other. "Are you all right?"

"Fit as a young colt in springtime," Holbrook assured, shaking Holly's hand fervently, tears glistening in his eyes. "What time of day is it? They took my watch away from me."

"It is near midnight and the moon is shining up above."

"Let me get up there quick," Holbrook

begged. "We've got a whole lot of things to talk about, Mr. Holly, but I've been in this damn chilly cave for a week, and a sight of the free, outside world is the tonic I must have before another thing. Just let me get at that ladder."

He started up and surprised the two other men with his strength and agility.

HE WAS so full of questions and enthusiasm that he might have gone on talking for the rest of the night. Holly interrupted him and told his story.

"And now, I want to know something, Mr. Holbrook." Holly finished his detail of recent events. "How was it that you, who have plenty in your own bank accounts, wrote me a letter begging fifty thousand dollars?"

Holbrook saw the amused glint in Holly's eyes and broke into a happy laugh.

"Say, do you think I would send that letter to my bankers? Those dumb business men would have hurried the fifty thousand right off without question. I'd heard a lot about you and knew that if you, a stranger to me, but the best detective in the world—oh, don't make a face over it that way—haven't you proved it in this case?—I knew if you got that fool letter you'd get suspicious and give the thing a good going over.

"And so you did, and so I'm free and alive, fifty thousand richer than I would have been."

Afternoon of the next day found Jim Holly and Arthur J. Holbrook waiting for a train in the Toluja depot. The coroner had spoken his piece; the sheriff had three corpses, the Little Gila had another.

The faithful, fighting Tanner had been given a reward sufficient to buy himself a fertile, irrigated farm. He parted with Jim Holly reluctantly and went to make peace with his better half for having broken her injunction against running the danger trail again.

Holly read a long telegram from Blinn Investigators, Inc., Los Angeles, and immediately wrote out another telegram to Mrs. Holbrook in New York. Its text read:

"Have rescued Holbrook from cave where he was held for ransom. Hurrying New York to arrest woman confederate who tipped Medina concerning my trip to Cumbres Inn. She was Medina's wife, but bigamously married to New York man."

Arthur J. Holbrook was no longer the happy man he was on the previous night. His exuberance over, regained liberty had burned out and all day he had seemed strangely depressed. When Holly returned to him after dispatching his telegram he tried to cheer him up.

"Why the gloom, Mr. Holbrook?" he asked. "You'll soon be back in the big town, hale and hearty, with all your worries left behind you."

"I wish it was so, Holly," the elderly man replied, sorrowfully. "I've been having trouble with my wife. I know now that she married me just for my money. I have some terrible suspicions that I'm afraid to admit, even to myself. I dread facing my wife. I asked you to 'phone her at Southampton, hoping that you'd decipher the message before you traced her to our town house. I wasn't sure of her then. Now I am sure she was in some way implicated in this nasty mess."

"Would it be much of a shock to you if you never saw her again, Mr. Holbrook?" Holly asked softly.

"You think that Thelma Morley is your wife. Just read that," Holly bade him, holding out the Blinn telegram.

"Angela Morelos," the telegram read, "former Hollywood extra, traced as wife of Antonio Mendez stop Married in Hermosillo later divorced but divorce voided on grounds of collusion stop Morelos woman disappeared over year ago stop Reported to be in New York stop If further investigation desired wire us."

HOLBROOK'S face paled, his hand trembled as he finished reading.

"Now that makes it all the harder," he said in a hoarse whisper. "I don't want to prosecute her for bigamy."

"You won't have to," Holly told him. "I just sent her a telegram which tells her what has happened. Without saying a word of suspicion of her. I stated that we were coming to New York at once with positive identification of the woman who sent Medina a warning telegram about me. Angela Morelos Mendez, alias Thelma Morley, won't be easily found when we get to New York."

"Thank God," Holbrook said reverently. "That's a terrible load off my mind, Holly. You're more than the best detective in the world. You're the old-time friend in time of need."

A true detective story taken from the records of the Seattle police of a girl who murdered to save her honor.

MARK TEN SUIE AND THE LOVE CRAZED MILLIONAIRE

by HOLLIS B. FULTZ



THE door of my office opened suddenly but softly; I could tell by the way Detective Don Herbert closed it that my Christmas vacation was threatened with disaster.

"Old Ferdinand Hochbrunn has been murdered," said Herbert. "Pierre Chedotal, who lives directly beneath him found him about half an hour ago in an alcove off the housekeeper's bedroom."

"Go pick up the housekeeper," I ordered. "In a woman's bedroom, eh; maybe that will simplify the case, and maybe it won't. Where's Captain Kent?"

"In his office, Chief," replied Herbert. "Shall I call him before I pick up the housekeeper?"

"No, just tell him we are going out to Hochbrunn's place," I replied growing serious. Pulling down the lid of my desk I started on what I knew was a cinch to become a sensational, headline-emblazoned case, for Ferdinand Hochbrunn was a well-known man-about-town; a millionaire Sourdough as we call those who made their riches in the Yukon. From some of the tales I had heard of him I wasn't surprised his end had come in a woman's bedroom.

When we pulled up at the curb at 2520 Fifth Avenue, Kent and I found Pierre Chedotal awaiting us in front of a long, rambling structure, one of many which Hochbrunn owned.

Hochbrunn had lived in the rear-central portion of the second floor for the last 15 of his 65 years of life. A leaking pipe had started water dripping into Chedotal's down-stairs quarters. He went above to investigate; at least that is the story he told Captain Kent and myself in a few excited words.

Up the stairway and toward the rear of

the house until we came to a room before which Chedotal paused.

"In the alcove," said the tenant.

By the half-light of the December late afternoon we could see the stiffened form of Ferdinand Hochbrunn, stretched out on the floor. Even before the blinds were raised I could tell that he had been dead for weeks.

"Call Coroner Corson," I ordered, turning to a uniformed officer. Then Kent and I busied ourselves with a search for clues.

"No evidence of a bruise on his face," said Kent as he arose from over the corpse. "Some blood on the back of the head; probably shot there. Fully dressed except for his shoes."

"This room is in perfect order," I observed. "No fight of any kind took place here unless there was a clean-up later."

"Let's look in his own room," suggested Kent; Chedotal led the way.

On the floor, beside his bed, we found Ferdinand's shoes; his hat was on the dresser. There was no blood, on the floor, furniture, hat or shoes, or in the rumpled bed, which was unmade as though someone had just arisen from it.

"Looks like he slept with his clothes on," said Kent.

"Probably just started to undress when he was interrupted," I replied. "Nothing here; let's try the housekeeper's bedroom."

The bed in that room had been carefully made; the sheets were tucked in at the end and sides; the covers were smooth and neatly pushed under the edges of the pillows.

"Some woman made that bed," Kent said, and I agreed.

While we waited for Coroner C. W. Corson, we discussed Ferdinand Hochbrunn. Both of us had known him since we were patrolmen back in the Gold Rush days. We had heard some queer stories about parties with the fair sex in that old house, and this accounted for our early interest in a sex angle.

"Turn him over, Doc," I requested when Corson arrived.

From beneath Hochbrunn's body I picked up a pair of sharp scissors. I thought at first he had been killed with these, but, noting his pants pockets had been slit, I wondered if the motive had not been robbery.

"He never got over the habit of carrying cash in his pockets," said Captain Kent. "Every card-room loafer along the waterfront knew the old man had gold on him."

CORSON had been examining the base of the skull.

"Shot," the coroner announced as he finished probing. "Just one hole. Looks like about a .32 caliber gun. The bullet is still in the head. Must have been shot from behind too. His coat is pulled up a bit as though he might have been dragged into the alcove."

"Well, Bill," I observed, turning to Kent, "it doesn't look like you and I are going to be out of the trenches by Christmas. I guess we better search the house from cellar to attic."

That search was not without results, although it failed to turn up the murder weapon. In an unlocked trunk, which obviously had been in general use by Hochbrunn, we discovered \$3,000 in gold. It appeared that whoever had killed the old man evidently did not know much about his habits, or they would not have overlooked such a prize.

Within a couple of hours Kent and I were both convinced that we would have to solve the mystery the hard way; by the long and tedious route of check and counter

check until through the process of elimination we arrived at the guilty party.

Singularly enough, we found that the last individual known to have seen Hochbrunn alive was a man named John Blood, who had mended the roof about the middle of October.

"Chedotal paid me for that work with two ten dollar gold pieces," said Blood, and that statement sent us post-haste back to Chedotal.

"Where did you get the gold pieces you gave Blood for mending the roof?" I asked.

"Hochbrunn gave them to me," answered Chedotal. "He left them with the wife, rather, he told her he was going to Portland to see his doctor. He often went down there. He said for me to pay the carpenter and that if anything else had to be mended while he was away to have Blood do it."

"Who handled Hochbrunn's business affairs?" I queried.

"Attorney Edward VonTobel," answered Chedotal. "He can tell you that Hochbrunn often entrusted repair matters to me."

If what Chedotal said was true, it seemed that Ferdinand Hochbrunn had returned from his Portland trip and had been shot and killed before he could talk with his tenant. This brought us squarely up against the question of time: When had Hochbrunn been killed? The coroner hesitated to give a definite opinion.

"But I would say, taking into consideration the coolness of the weather, that he could possibly have been killed eight or nine weeks ago," said Corson. "He was killed by one shot from a .32 revolver; here's the bullet."

"That's something to go on, at least," said Captain Kent, as he handed the bullet to Detective Herbert. "You find out what gun that was fired from and you'll get a Christmas turkey."

It was now December 23, 1921.

The phone rang; I answered the call to find Prosecutor Malcolm Douglas on the wire.

"Attorney Edward VonTobel is here in my office," said Douglas. "He read the extra about the Hochbrunn murder and he wants to tell you what he knows; better come on over. He has a letter which he received from Hochbrunn mailed in Portland, on October 28."

Now I knew this lawyer only fairly well,

but he had a reputation as a conscientious, straightforward person.

"This is very interesting, Mr. VonTobel," I said as I laid the letter aside. "The statement included here about the repairs to the house; the fact that it was mailed from Portland and the intimate knowledge of Hochbrunn's business affairs, all point to the authenticity of the letter. It also shows that Hochbrunn was alive long after Corson thinks he was killed. I notice the letter is addressed to someone named Clara: Who might that be?"

"That's a young lady named Clara Skarin," answered VonTobel. "She is the daughter of a woman who used to keep house for Hochbrunn."

"She brought you the letter?" I asked.

"Yes, about November 2, I believe," added VonTobel. "We went out to the house and looked around and I gave orders for some other repairs."

"Were you in the alcove off the house-keeper's bedroom on that visit?" I queried. "And did Clara Skarin go with you?"

"We were both in the bedroom," answered VonTobel. "I'm not sure if I went into the alcove, but Miss Skarin did. She went through it into the bathroom and said she thought the plumbing was all right in there. We were looking over the fixtures in the entire house."

"Where is this girl now?" I asked.

"That I cannot tell you," answered the lawyer. "The last time I saw her was sometime late in November. She asked me if I had heard from Hochbrunn that week and I replied that I had. She said that he had not written her recently. She said nothing at that time about leaving the city; she may still be at the home of her cousin, Mrs. Datesman, on Twentieth street, where she lived after she left Hochbrunn's place."

“YOU say you have other letters from Hochbrunn, Mr. VonTobel?" I asked.

"Yes and they are all signed on a typewriter," answered the lawyer. "I suppose you think it strange that a man trained in legal practice should pay out above \$2,000, as you will find I did, on typewritten signatures. But, Ferdinand Hochbrunn had instructed me to honor his typewritten signature. You'll find a signed affidavit to that effect in my safe."

"Some of these letters seem to be rather

recent," I remarked. "Hochbrunn has been dead for weeks, at least."

"You will find one there dated last week which asks for rent money," said VonTobel. "With a request to send a reply to the Princess Hotel in Oakland, California. The reply to that letter must have reached Oakland this afternoon, with a draft for \$275 in it. It may not have yet been called for at the hotel."

"Why didn't you call attention to that when you first came over here," I snapped.

"I'll get Captain Bodie Wallman on the telephone in Oakland," put in Captain Kent, "and have him watch the desk at the Princess."

We had high hopes that we would be out of the trenches by Christmas when Captain Wallman called us back and said that the letter for Hochbrunn was still in the box at the hotel. His name was on the register there. But, as days went by, and no one asked for that \$275, we lost hope. The letter had arrived in the Oakland hotel at about the same time that the afternoon papers had hit the street telling of the finding of the body in Seattle. Had this scared the killer away?

"You don't suppose VonTobel intended to go to Oakland and get that dough himself, do you?" put in Detective Herbert as we discussed the matter in the office one afternoon. "Maybe he wrote all the letters and sent the replies and then ducked out of town to collect the money he had himself sent."

"You do sometimes get an idea, Herbert," I said. "Get a sample of all the typewriters in VonTobel's office."

"How?" asked Herbert.

"I don't care how," I replied. "Just get them and take them to Luke May and find out if one checks with these letters. Take some samples from the typewriter we found in Hochbrunn's house also."

"No go," said Herbert the next day. "May says that these letters were all written on the same typewriter, but not the ones of which we submitted samples, so that's out."

Checkmated everywhere, I turned to Mrs. Datesman, the cousin of Clara Skarin, to find out what she knew of this girl's past and her present whereabouts.

"Mattie Skarin's husband," said Mrs. Datesman, "that would be Clara's father—was a partner with Hochbrunn in an Alaskan gold mine years ago. Skarin died

and Mattie came to Seattle. She was poverty stricken; Hochbrunn took them in and she kept house for him. As Clara grew up he seemed as fond of her as he would have been of his own daughter.

"However, something happened, a quarrel of some kind, I never knew what, and Mattie moved out. Not long after that she was shot and killed by the wife of Bob Winborn, a married man with whom Clara had become entangled. Clara was also shot, but she recovered.

"Clara wouldn't go back to live with Hochbrunn, but went to Michigan instead, where Winborn had gone. She stayed there for several months. When she returned to Seattle she said she had married Winborn on his death bed. She called herself Betty Winborn now, and she went back to Hochbrunn's to live.

"Again they quarrelled and she moved out and lived with my sister, Mrs. Clark, on 20th street; part of the time she lived with me. That is all I can tell you about her."

"Sometime about the middle of October," said Mrs. Clark, "or maybe before that, after Clara came to live with me, anyway, she told me she was afraid to go to Hochbrunn's house without a revolver. I asked her if she was afraid of him and she said she was not, but that the house was so big and that she often entered it when no one was there, and that it frightened her.

"I went with her to the police station and we got a permit to carry a revolver, so we went to a second hand store and bought one. That seemed to make her feel better, and she always took it with her when she went to call on Hochbrunn.

"Then one day in October she came in all excited. She said she had met an old friend of her mother's on the street; a Chinaman named Mark Ten Suie. He had been a partner with Hochbrunn and her father in the gold mine, she said. Ten Suie had told Clara that she was entitled to one-third of all of Hochbrunn's wealth. The Chinaman claimed that John Skarin and himself had been cheated out of their share of the mine by Hochbrunn. He said he was going to make Hochbrunn do the right thing. She told me she was afraid she had done the wrong thing, however, in lending her revolver to the Chinaman.

"A few days later she came in with considerable money and told me that she was so glad Hochbrunn had agreed to a settle-

ment after Ten Suie called on him. She said he had given her \$1000 earnest money and would draw a deed to enough of his property to take care of her end of the adjustment.

"We were over to the Hochbrunn place several times after that; right in that very bedroom where the body was found—I saw the chart of the house in the papers—and I never saw that body. I can't believe he has been dead as long as the papers say he has. Why I was in that bedroom just before Thanksgiving and he wasn't there then.

"It was just about Thanksgiving that Clara left," said Mrs. Clark. "She didn't say where she was going other than that she was tired working and she thought, now that she had some money, that she would rest for awhile."

MARK TEN SUIE! A Chinaman with an ancient grievance, coming out of the North to get his rights from tight old Ferdinand Hochbrunn. It certainly provided the proper background for murder.

"Have you any ideas about where she might have gone?" I asked.

"While she was here she got some mail from a young man named Ray E. Herron, who lived in Kalamazoo, Michigan," said Mrs. Clark. "She told me she sent him a telegram and informed him of her good luck."

It wasn't a difficult task to trace that telegram. The chief of police at Kalamazoo got it for us, from Herron. It read:

"Mark here. Everything practically settled. No more saving a half-cake of chocolate for tomorrow's lunch. This is the first of my very own money to spend. May I send Jigadere some of Ollie's clothes. Buy Maxine a new top and yourself a drink. Am going to order new car for drive away from here in spring. Know agent here and want him to get commission. Love, Betty."

"Let's take this thing apart," I said to Captain Kent, after having read the telegram aloud. "This checks in with the story the cousin told us. It would seem that Mark Ten Suie made a settlement with Hochbrunn, by way of death. The question is, how much did Clara Skarin, or Betty Winborn, whichever we want to call her, know about that settlement?"

"And who's Jigadere and who's Ollie?" asked Kent.

"The letter from the Kalamazoo's chief accompanying the telegram is rather complete," I said. "Jigadere is Ray Herron's father; Maxine is their old Maxwell car. But I don't know who Ollie is."

"I know," said Captain Kent. "It's the name by which Hochbrunn was known to his cronies. His initials are F. O.!"

"And that means that Clara was offering to ship Hochbrunn's clothes to Jigadere," I said. "Old Ferdinand wouldn't have been giving away any clothes if he was alive; Clara Skarin knew that the old man was dead when she sent that message along with \$250 to Ray Herron."

"Then Mark Ten Suie and Clara Skarin were in together on the murder," replied Kent.

"Right," I answered. "Get a check on the caliber of that revolver the girl bought; get a good description of her; we are going to send out a circular."

The police department records showed that Clara Skarin had bought a gun of the caliber with which Ferdinand Hochbrunn had been killed. All the girl's movements, in and about the apartment house, especially about the middle of October, now became important.

Pierre Chedotal recalled that he had seen an aged Chinaman watching the house from across the street and that on the night of Columbus Day, October 12, he had heard a muffled report coming from upstairs; he thought at the time that it was just a slamming door.

"I heard a shuffling sound, quick, nervous steps," said Chedotal. "They were not Hochbrunn's steps; I had become accustomed to those. Sounded like someone dragging their feet across the floor."

Chedotal was quite evidently trying to make us think he had heard a Chinaman upstairs.

One thing which had been puzzling me was why that \$3,000 in gold had happened to be overlooked; I put my wonderment into words.

"Maybe someone thought they could get that by inheritance," said VonTobel. "Hochbrunn got his will from me during the first week in October. He said he was going to change it, but he never brought it back."

"There was a will in the trunk," I said. "He left all his property to relatives in Germany; nothing to the girl. The curious thing about the gold is that according

to Hochbrunn's account book he should have had \$3,700 there. Why would someone take only a portion of the money?"

"Sounds like the Chinaman to me," said Captain Kent. "You know how scrupulously honest they are about matters of business. Even if Mark Ten Suie had had to kill to get his just share of anything he had coming he would take no more than that."

"Sounds plausible to me," I agreed with Kent. "It's time to get out a circular on Mark Ten Suie and Clara Skarin. We'll charge them with the murder of Hochbrunn."

In a day it was done. Thousands of circulars describing the petite, 28-year-old, luminous-eyed blonde, were scattered over the country. We warned authorities to be also on the lookout for an aged Chinaman who might be accompanying her.

We got our first trace of a woman resembling Clara Skarin from a hotel clerk in Portland from whom she had ordered mail forwarded to Santa Barbara. From that city we trailed her to San Francisco but there we lost the trail completely. Mark Ten Suie had vanished with the astounding ability of his race for self-effacement.

By this time I was certain that VonTobel was merely a victim of circumstances. I was sure he had never benefited in any manner by the death of Hochbrunn; that absolved him insofar as I was concerned.

A year passed, a year to a day, and though from time to time we put new pep into the search for Clara Skarin, especially in San Francisco, we had had no word about her. But, among other habits, I knew the girl was an omnivorous reader and haunted public libraries. I had asked the police in the San Francisco Bay area to inform the librarians thereabouts of this fact. And on that last day of the year there came a clue. It was a letter which read:

"I don't want to go to the local police but if you are still looking for Clara Skarin you will find her at the Doran Hotel. I followed her there from the library yesterday. I almost dropped dead when she walked in. I don't see how anyone could miss those big, luminous blue eyes in that piquant face.—Librarian."

"Romantic sort of clue, isn't it," I remarked, throwing the letter aside. "Sounds to me like Skarin might have written it herself. But wire the San Francisco police and let them work it out."

The next morning Captain Kent came into my office with a broad grin on his face.

"Who gets the trip to Frisco, chief?" he asked.

"You do Bill," I answered, and added, "when they get her."

"The boys picked her up last night at that hotel," said Kent. "How's that for a break?"

"Sometimes we get lucky," I retorted. "Take Mrs. Herbert with you and bring Skarin back on a boat. That will give you a chance to talk to her. And some afternoon when you have a few minutes to spare in Frisco go down to Chinatown and get Mark Ten Suie, too."

I didn't catch Captain Kent's answer. He was sold on the idea that Ten Suie was an accomplice, but he knew I wasn't. A girl who had been living in the house, her gun and a dead man in an alcove off her room, just about tied the murder onto Clara Skarin as far as I was concerned.

Clara Skarin didn't have much to say to Captain Kent in San Francisco. She told him she would tell her story after she got to Seattle.

"I'm charged with murder," she told the newsmen at the dock. "But I am not guilty. If I have to stand trial I'll tell the whole story from the witness stand but not until then."

Clara Skarin went on trial in January, 1923, charged with the murder of Ferdinand Hochbrunn. Prosecuting Attorney Malcolm Douglas presented the case in a masterful manner. He traced the revolver to the girl and proved it was the one with which the old man had been killed. He said that money provided the motive and positively proved that it was the accused who had written the letters to which the name of the dead man had been signed on a typewriter. He proved that she got the money sent to the various addresses in the south, after death. Witness after witness took the stand to weave a web around the blue-eyed blonde but I knew she had something up her sleeve for she was totally unconcerned about the damning evidence.

THEN the defense had its inning. Ferdinand Hochbrunn was pictured as an old roue, accustomed to insulting his housekeepers, some of whom testified to his amorous tendencies. At last Clara Skarin took the stand.

"I am going to tell you ladies and gentlemen of the jury," began the girl, "that I shot Ferdinand Hochbrunn, but it wasn't murder, as you will see. For years before this happened I had fought him in defense of my virtue.

"The first time was back in 1909, when I was a very young girl. He grabbed me in the basement but I got away and ran upstairs. Mother smoothed things over; we had no place to go to live; we were very poor."

Then the girl went on with her life's history, telling of the trip to Michigan to see Robert Winborn, and of her mother's tragic death; she wept.

"While in Michigan I kept up a correspondence with Mr. Hochbrunn because of an investment he had made for me; money which my father had left in his care. I had discovered that this investment was a very good one and that I was entitled to a return from it.

"Mr. Hochbrunn kept urging me to return to Seattle saying he would then settle with me. He sent transportation and seemed so changed and so kindly that I went to live in his home again. He had furnished the bedroom off the alcove for me.

"All went well for a short while and then one night in September, I was suddenly awakened from a deep sleep; there was only a faint light in the room from the corner streetlamp.

"Hochbrunn was standing over my bed. I grabbed a hairbrush and beat him until he ran from the room. Then I packed my clothes and went to live with my cousin.

"But I had some money coming; I determined to have it. I went back several times but he would never settle with me. I had to make these trips after working hours and a time or two men accosted me on the streets. I bought the revolver for protection. I was also afraid of Hochbrunn. I took the weapon with me on these visits.

"On the evening of October 12 I went to Hochbrunn's home. He was not there so I sat down in my old bedroom to wait for him. Finally he came in, slightly intoxicated. He made right for me; tried to shove me onto the bed and called me terrible, vile names.

"I told him I had a gun and that if he didn't stop I would shoot him. We scuffled and the gun fell to the floor as I snatched it out of my bag. We both scrambled for the gun but I got it.

"My hand was behind him. I had the gun in a peculiar grip; my thumb was on the trigger. We fell to the floor again. The gun went off and he loosened his hold; in a few minutes he was dead. It was then I noticed we were in the alcove.

"I straightened my hair and clothes and left the house. A few days later I returned and took \$700 of the \$3,700 that was in the trunk; that was the amount I had coming on the investment. I was desperate so I fled from the city. I needed money and I felt I had a right to get it from Hochbrunn; he had caused my trouble. I wrote the letters to VonTobel and I got the money in return. There never was a Mark Ten Suie—I got him out of a book like I did all my aliases while I was being sought.

"I killed Ferdinand Hochbrunn, and I have never had a moment's regret. It was not murder," finished the girl. The jury

had hung onto every word she uttered; she had held them spellbound.

There was no corroborative evidence for this weird story and Prosecutor Douglas pointed this out to the jury. Nevertheless, as I afterwards learned, the jury believed that Hochbrunn had taken advantage of the girl and felt she should not be punished. In an hour they had returned with a verdict of "Not guilty by reason of self defense."

Clara Skarin thanked them with a smile as she left the courtroom, a free citizen. Soon after the girl left Seattle and never again came back to live in the city where she stood trial for her life. Hochbrunn's money went to his relatives in Germany.

As we walked back to headquarters Captain Kent turned to me with a smile and said:

"You know chief, maybe we made a mistake. Maybe we should have tried Mark Ten Suie—the murderin' heathen."

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He was counting his chances. He could have grabbed that automatic and socked Dorio a sure sleeper, but the three others had their hands in their coat pockets.

THIS WORM HAS FANGS

by JAMES DENSON SAYERS

Blaze was marked for a one-way ride and he knew it. What he didn't know was that gangdom plotted to use the hot seat itself as their bump-off tool.

THERE WAS plenty of reason for Jimmy. "Blaze" McDuff to feel lonely when the two police bodyguards left him at his hotel. They had just come back from the Criminal Courts room in Long Island City. The judge had pronounced the awesome words which started "Gats" McGee on the journey that has no return ticket.

"Jimmy," said Hoke Meadows, the big plain-clothes bull, "if you're going right away, we'll tail along till you're well up country. If you're staying, the D. A.'s orders say we must quit you."

Blaze McDuff snuffed a cigarette butt in an ash tray on his dresser and stepped nearer the window to look out at two cars waiting ominously down there. He was a little pale as he made the momentous decision.

"I'm staying, Hoke, for a few days. Thanks, Hoke—you've been a great pal."

He meant deliberately to tempt Rex Margree and his mobsters, but no use telling the law about that. The stocky gang leader had poisoned Blaze McDuff with that virus which made a youngster love the danger of battle. Now that the old avenue to dangerous fields was cut off, nothing seemed quite so alluring as a chance to meet the mob that would come sooner or later—very likely real soon—to give him the 'ride."

"Hoppy" Gore hadn't had a chance against his killers. Blaze wanted to see how yellow killers acted when the victim wasn't so helpless.

Perhaps Blaze McDuff would have made a first-class mobster if he had ever really "belonged." Born a farmer's son, it was impossible for even wily Rex Margree to change the country lad into a tough bird

of the city streets. His father was a retired prize fighter who passed on a rich heritage of stern education.

Blaze came to Margree's lovely collection of tough ova in an interesting manner. Three of Margree's graduates fell upon the fiery-haired country youth one day near Margree's mountain hideout. After a playful scuffle, they were borne like pigs for the market in the good young Samaritan's truck and delivered to Rex's door.

The mighty Rex beheld the blackened, swollen eyes and loosened teeth of his three tamed bad boys. When he looked into the laughing blue eyes of the tousled redhead who brought them to his stronghold like so much chopped firewood he was suddenly inspired. Somewhere in the big Irish mob king's ancestry there must have been a gifted stock breeder. Anyhow, Rex saw that he could add fighting blood to his scrub stock.

After that it was a matter of deft management by the crafty Margree: He brought Blaze McDuff around the dubious passage from the humdrum country life to a craving for the utterly winsome thrills of the big town.

Gradually it dawned upon the transplanted country youth that he was a member of a tiger gang. They specialized in big-time stuff, such as the larger payrolls and branch banks. Once Blaze recognized the brand put on him it seemed too late to back out. The road was narrow, running precipitous heights, no back turns. There was one obstacle to his becoming "one of the boys." He had a sentimental streak. Hitting below the belt nauseated him.

First there was the little matter of "Hoppy" Gore. Blaze didn't like the way "Hoppy" was bumped off. Not even a

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chance to deny the charge that he had been too chummy with a plain-clothes bull. The gang just took "Hoppy" out for a ride, chatting and laughing with the poor fellow right up till the moment the hot rod was poked against his head by "Gats" McGee, Margree's official executioner.

Then came the big job at the Flushing Exchange National Bank. Rex knew how to pull the biggest job neatly, without bloodshed. When the Flushing Exchange National was ripe for the dip, Margree suddenly was needed to iron out a ticklish diplomatic tangle with Ralph Dorio's liquor syndicate. Two Margree boys had mixed in a hijacking stunt that didn't go through in the clear. Rex had to send "Gats" McGee in charge of the Flushing job. "Gats" liked blood.

An old ex-cop, who ornamented the bank in a guard's uniform, and a slow-moving assistant cashier fell before the bloodthirsty automatic of "Gats" McGee. It was cold-blooded murder, done under the appalled eyes of Blaze McDuff.

The country yokel reverted to type then and doubly earned his nickname. He went Blazing, stark mad. The sight of the old ex-cop soaking the marble floor with a gushing rivulet of blood was worse to Blaze McDuff than a world of red bunting to an infuriated bull.

When the emergency squad from Precinct 139 came hurtling into the Flushing Exchange National with drawn guns the place was a shambles. Three of Rex Margree's toughest mobsters lay helpless amidst the wreckage and Blaze McDuff sat on the edge of the bank president's broken desk, his own automatic wavering threateningly over the amazed, incredulous "Gats" McGee and the two other hors de combat gangsters.

Things aren't done just that way in Blaze McDuff's adopted world, of course. Treason is too light a word for what he did. He had made the awful turn on that precipitous high road. "Hoppy" Gore's simple punishment was sweet apple pie compared to what he would get if they "took" him.

Now "Gats" McGee was stowed away next to the little green door to wait his turn on the hot seat. The other two Margree boys were given life tickets to the big stone mansion of the damned. The swanky Lincoln limousine which had been McDuff's biggest thrill in the opulence of his new life became useless to him except as a means of escape, but he didn't mean to run for it.

BLAZE naturally expected Rex Margree and his surviving henchmen to be the dogs on his trail. He had no way of knowing the deal arranged between Rex and Dorio. He didn't know that although the D. A. withdrew visible protection from him it was merely a trap and that every Margree mobster was tailed twenty-four hours of the day.

Rex Margree knew that. To seal the compact of peace he had negotiated with Ralph Dorio after paying for the hijacked load, Rex had asked Dorio's liquor mob to get the squealer. It was a prize that would have been extremely valued by any group in the sublegal world. Dorio's mob was delighted at first by the flash of the underworld ticker, "Dorio's boys may take Squealer McDuff." Then came the details following that first bulletin. They complicated the job a little, but only proved the artistic soul of Rex Margree.

That was the Margree stamp, the mark of artistry, doing things with a flourish of imagination. Dorio's boys would do the job and get a good haul in the bargain, but the whole thing was blue-printed by the masterly, artistic mind of Rex Margree. The traitorous squealer must suffer as "Gats" McGee was suffering.

For one week Blaze waited as patiently as he could in the hotel. He didn't step outside where the yellow killers' tommy gun could squirt at him. From that window overlooking the street he could see them waiting. How long before they would come up after him?

The quiet battle of nerves and patience was unequal. Those lurking mobsters had the run of the city, while Blaze waited, fuming, in the coop. He got to thinking a lot of the green fields and cool mountains waiting for his familiar tread and loving eye. He wanted to go home; wanted with all that poignant nostalgia with which only the real country boy comes to yearn for his native pastures after a tiresome spell of watching the grey, grimy city for days and days out of a hotel window.

The break of nerves came at the beginning of the eighth day. He must see green things, the rolling, verdant mountains, running brooks—and friendly faces. Either that, or go mad and run the gantlet for a showdown, even against the tommies. He decided to go for a vacation in his beloved hills, for that recharging of his nerves which

he knew very well that he needed—then come back.

His Lincoln had bullet-proof glass. Once in it, the streets were his and the long ribbons of cement up country lay out beyond. A short confidential chat with the hotel manager fixed that. The Lincoln awaited him, motor humming, in the driveway, a short step from the side door.

Blaze shot his big blue car out into the street and wheeled north toward Central Park. He saw two cars that seemed familiar—looked like those that had been hovering around for a week. But his quick glance recognized none of the occupants as a Margree mobster. He would have felt better if they had been Margree men for after two blocks had slipped behind him those two cars were moving definitely in his wake.

He cut into Central Park and picked up to the speed limit at once. His powerful car seemed restless under restraint. He sped out the north-west corner and slipped over the hill to Riverside Drive so quickly he thought for a time he had shaken his pursuers, but on the long pull up the Drive he saw them. They drove equally powerful cars. It would take more than mere speed to drop them.

At Dyckman Street a traffic cop stood in the middle of the road. Blaze cut his speed, eased along watching the light, maneuvered for position. Just as the lights were changing he shot across, beating the red light. The traffic cop turned with up-raised hand at the herd of cars behind Blaze.

A half block and Blaze glanced through the right side windows to see both pursuing cars cutting over east. They meant to shoot North on Post Avenue and converge on him farther up. He darted around traffic, drove past a red light, whizzed along upper Broadway by Van Cortlandt Park.

Long before Blaze reached Bear Mountain Bridge he felt sure he had shaken off his pursuers. Going over the bridge to the west side of the Hudson he followed a Packard driven by a man with a woman companion. Vaguely he was aware of a pile of things filling the back seat of the big Packard, all covered by a blanket. That would be a stock of goods for a country home, not an unusual occurrence. When the woman looked back at him, as she did several times, he saw that she was a drugstore blonde.

The Packard kept ahead of him through

Highland Falls and past the Point. When he tried to pass it the other driver increased his speed and kept the road. Three miles up the Storm King beyond the northern limits of the military reservation the Packard was still a hundred yards ahead. It began to wobble precariously back and forth, then suddenly came to a halt obliquely across the middle of the road, leaving insufficient space for passing on either side.

The Packard's driver got out at once and threw up one side of the hood to look at something about the motor. Blaze McDuff could do nothing but halt. He was naturally suspicious, but when the man ahead searched for some needed tool under his front seat and took out a large wrench, his suspicions were allayed. The man tried the wrench on whatever had gone wrong, shook his head vexedly and looked back at Blaze, who had stopped twenty feet away.

"Got a small wrench, buddy?" the man called back. Blaze noted the short, dark-featured man and didn't like him.

He wanted to get going. He glanced back over the road to see that his pursuers hadn't guessed his route and caught up. They might do that yet.

"Yes," he answered the squat man's question, "I guess I've got what you need. Let's see."

HE GOT out and lifted his front seat to get at his tools. He finally found the one he thought was needed.

"Lo, Blaze."

McDuff snapped up and around. It wasn't the short man who had asked his help. It was the big, hard-faced Ralph Dorio, grinning mirthlessly. An automatic was in Dorio's hand pointing very close to Blaze's side. Blaze had seen Dorio many times. He knew now what was up—or thought he knew. It was his "bump off."

Two other Dorio men came from under the blanket in the back of the Packard. The woman took the wheel of the Packard and drove away. Ralph Dorio and three of his men surrounded McDuff. Nothing much was said.

"Some car you got here, Blaze," Dorio said admiringly, but his dark, gimlet eyes did not waver away from Blaze. "You help us out with it and we let you lam. It is a go?"

"What's the spread?" Blaze asked. He was counting his chances. He could have grabbed that automatic and socked Dorio

a sure sleeper, but the three others had their hands in their coat pockets. Unlike Margree's Irish mobsters, these olive-skinned Mulberry Street toughs never accepted a challenge of fists. Snake-like, they relied on their fangs and those fangs were automatics.

"Just get in an' drive," Dorio advised softly. "We got a little job up country. All you gotta do is drive, Blaze. I'll be right by your side. Let's get going before someone comes along."

Nothing to do but obey for the time being and await any slim chance. There was certainly no chance for an out here.

On through Newburgh they went; past Kingston; a left turn towards Blaze McDuff's native bailiwick in the lower reaches of the Catskills. The curious youth got pretty dizzy trying to figure the thing out as he came nearer and nearer to Frosty Springs, that menacing automatic always a few inches from his side. Frosty Springs, a prosperous little town of two thousand, nestling under the mountains, was his home. Everyone there would know him. His blood ran hot with hope.

"Listen now, Blaze," Dorio said, "you stop in front of the Frosty Springs National Bank. I keep my seat right here, see, an' you don't move an' you don't shut off the motor. We just sit tight for a quick jump. The boys back there," he nodded toward the back seat, "go in the bank. If anyone comes by an' spots you, you ain't answerin' nothin', you ain't sayin' nothin' to nobody, but all the time you're talkin' to me an' lookin' me right in the eyes so I see that you ain't givin' nobody the wink, see? When the boys come out the bank we hit it in high. Get it, Blaze?"

"Okay," the tight-lipped redhead admitted. He saw it now and his alert mind leaped ahead to a plan.

It would mean his almost certain death, but he had no doubt that his time was very short, whatever the outcome. These wolves meant to spot him to his own home folks as a bank hold-upper, back at the line Margree had taught him. The papers had been full of stories about him. His known break with Margree wouldn't save him. He was conditionally free from the law. One false step and the law would have him. This act today would brand him. Folks would see him who knew him and his recent record. Maybe Dorio didn't mean to bump him off, but leave him branded for the law to take.

They drove down the familiar shaded streets, into the business center of the neat little town, right up to the bank. People were passing by as they halted. There was old man Josiah Peters, the meat market man, for whom Blaze had done errands just a few years ago, going into the bank. Mrs. Sanderson and her daughter Fanny came out of the bank to nearly collide with the three Dorio mobsters as they hurried in.

"Hello, Jimmy!" Fanny Sanderson came near, peering in at the white-faced youth, her own face alight with unaffected joy.

"Not a word," Ralph Dorio gritted, the covered automatic held an inch from Blaze's side. "Keep looking me in the eye and make out you ain't hearin' 'em. Talk to me—make out you don't see her!"

Dorio's hat was pulled low, his face turned away from the curious, astonished woman. The automatic touched Blaze's side from under Dorio's coat.

"Yes, I get you Dorio," Blaze was glaring at the dark mobster's muddy eyes, "and I'm telling you—"

"Blam! Blam!" came the muffled sounds of shots from within the bank, followed by fearful screaming and yells of terrified men and women.

A woman came screaming from the bank and stumbled sprawling down the stone steps. Old man Peters staggered out and fell almost upon the woman, a bloody splotch on his white shirt front. The Dorio gangsters darted down the steps and piled into the back seat of Blaze's car.

"Step on it—hard!" Ralph Dorio jabbed the muzzle painfully into McDuff's side. Mrs. Sanderson and Fanny set up a refrain of wild screaming that seemed sure to awaken the dead in the local cemetery.

The big Lincoln sputtered like a racing python down the street. Blaze heard the same cry from three different throats as he sped by.

"Jimmy McDuff!"

They knew him. He was spotted. Dorio would have his alibi. Jimmy McDuff would take the gaff. Murder! The chair! That was it! Margree was paying him off!

The road was dividing ahead. A cement pylon, surmounted by a street light, sat straddle of the street at the fork. Blaze held the wheel for a dead center crash against the pylon and gave every bit of gas the motor would take. The mighty car almost leaped off the ground in its mad plunge at the pillar of cement. Ten feet

from the pillar Dorio saw it and the impending crash.

"Damn you!" he hissed as he seized the wheel and jerked it.

The fender scraped the cement with a terrific rasp of noise and the car staggered and careened across the road at dizzying speed. Blaze crashed a short-arm jab against the oily dark face over the wheel and the big car swerved toward the other side.

Something hard fell upon Blaze McDuff's head from behind and he went out in a blinding crash of lightning.

Whistling, cool air over his face and past his ears was the first conscious sensation Blaze recognized. Then his mind rapidly cleared of the fog and he realized he was in a speeding car. Someone was speaking just then, excitedly. The loud talk helped to clear Blaze's muddled senses.

"There she is!" the voice was saying. "There's the old girl waitin' for us."

"Say, chief," another voice asked, "ain't it better to leave these two grands on him too? They'll have the numbers—we can't ever pass 'em."

"Naw," Ralph Dorio's thick voice commanded from up in front where he was evidently doing the driving, "just the two Cs is 'nough to waste on 'im. We'll hold the grands an pass 'em out West when this is quieted down an' forgot."

The car was slowing to a stop, quickly. The brakes groaned and Blaze, eyes still closed, felt himself drifting forward in the seat. A rough hand jerked him back in the corner.

"All out," Dorio ordered. "Leave 'im there. They'll find 'im soon."

"An' the hot seat'll git 'im then, the damn squealer," another of the gang added with a gleeful throaty laugh.

THEY were plainly moving fast. Within short seconds all of them had piled out of the car and a near-by motor was roaring to a sudden start while doors slammed.

"Good-bye, ol' worm," Tony Quechhio called toward Blaze from the departing car, "give our regards to the hot seat."

Blaze raised his head, still dizzy, and looked at the license number of the other car as it rushed away, though it would do him mighty little good he knew. He recognized the Packard. The woman had driven it on ahead and waited for her mob to catch up and switch over.

His head throbbing painfully, his nerves shaky, Blaze crawled over and stepped on the starter. He had feared Dorio had left him stranded, but a faint gleam of hope came with the pickup of the motor. The big car moved. He was soon speeding down the road, a mile behind his recent captors. The gas gauge showed about two gallons. Thirty miles and he would be stranded, anyhow. He wouldn't dare stop for fuel. Every station would surely be warned to watch out for him.

He turned off at Three Creeks Cross Roads and took a dirt road that wound about the hills back into the fastnesses of the northern Catskills. Twenty miles up in the hills he drove in behind an old abandoned farmhouse and left his beloved car. From there he became a tramp, but with a purpose. He knew these hills and the people and he remembered what Ralph Dorio most certainly thought he wouldn't know.

Somewhere over on the Hudson side there was a little village named Biddle Creek and Biddle Creek stuck in Blaze McDuff's mind now like a great beacon light. He had heard of Dorio's hidden retreat at Biddle Creek. It was there, nearly a hundred miles from Frosty Springs, that Dorio could always fake up an alibi. It would be there that Blaze McDuff would find them.

Late that night Blaze broke into a village drugstore and searched the shelves until he found a bottle labelled "Hair Dye—Black." Three days later a black-haired tramp, with frayed clothing and badly worn shoes and a stubby growth of blackened beard wandered into Biddle Creek, calling himself "Joe Shingles."

Not one of the inhabitants of Biddle Creek, just having read the ghastly stories of the Frosty Springs bank murders, had the slightest suspicion that the black-haired tramp, with the funny name of Shingles, was the much-described redheaded fashion plate so copiously pictured as Blaze McDuff, the robber and murderer. None was ready to point out the nondescript wanderer and claim the five-thousand-dollar reward. Blaze read the papers, saw the reward offers and gritted his teeth. Those same papers carried the numbers of the two one-thousand-dollar bills and the five one-hundred-dollar bills taken from the bank. Blaze had two of the latter.

Dario and his gang were living high at their mountain retreat. Blaze set a plan of

action, desperate and absurd in its promise, but his only hope. He made friends with every local delivery boy, helped them with their tasks, gratis. He soon knew all about Dorio's hangout and what the gangsters usually bought from the village stores. Among other things they ordered a case of ginger ale frequently.

Blaze McDuff walked on needle points and dynamite. Dorio had taken his two automatics. He was unarmed against a bloodthirsty gang of heavily armed toughs who loved to kill. If he called on the local constable or the State Police he would have to identify himself. That would land him in the death house at Sing Sing for the murder of Josiah Peters. If he tried to buy weapons he would also have to submit to finger-printing and identification.

He first thought of sleeping powders to dose some of the food or drinks taken to Dorio's house in the hills. But that had to be abandoned when the chemist became too inquisitive about its intended use. Such powders would have to be ordered, anyway, and that would take time.

The local constable, Wiley Horton, was a cagey sleuth who added to the needle points and dynamite under Blaze. He cornered the black-haired ne'er-do-well one day and secured his fictitious pedigree. Blaze's car had been found by the State Police. Local peace officers in the whole section had been warned to look out for the red-headed bank robber. Biddle Creek's constable had an avid eye on the five-thousand-dollar reward.

Blaze knew it was a question of limited time before Horton would have answers that would put the lie on his fictitious past. What he would do must be done quickly. It was nearly a week after his arrival in Biddle Creek. Twice he had gone with delivery boys to Ralph Dorio's house to find that place a well-guarded citadel. He could never get into the place to search for the "hot" evidence in the form of the numbered big bills. If he asked the police to raid the stronghold and Dorio should have hidden the big money too well, Blaze's goose would be cooked.

IN SATURDAY evening he was lounging in the village drugstore, disconsolate. The man had become magnanimously kind to him because he was so anxious to run any errand or do the most menial service without seeming to care

about pay. The boy who usually delivered for the store wanted the evening off and Blaze lifted himself in the esteem of both druggist and boy by promising to hang around and serve.

The chemist was in the back of the store dispensing when Blaze's roving eye caught sight of a bottle label on a shelf. "Tartar Emetic" the label announced. One quick movement and the bottle was in Blaze's pocket. It wouldn't do to tell the chemist and buy the bottle—he still carried his reserve cash in a hidden money pouch. Wednesday night had been the last time Dorio had ordered a case of ginger ale. A new order must certainly come soon. Thirty minutes later the telephone rang and the clerk was taking an order.

"Hey, Shingles," the clerk called, "two quarts of mixed ice cream and a case of ginger ale up to Dorio's right away."

The clerk resumed his prescription filling. "What d'hell!" Tony Quechhio shouted at sight of Blaze with the boxes. Tony had led the trio that robbed the bank and murdered the two men. "'S wonder the ale ever got here!"

"Why?" Dorio called from the house, "is it t'at bum agin?"

"Yeah, it's the bum. Say, feller," he glared at Blaze as the latter deposited the boxes inside the kitchen door, "you got the hook-worm or somethin'? Don't you know how to rush our orders?"

"Yeah," Blaze simulated contriteness, "but the regular kid got sick and they didn't get me right off. Sorry. Four dollars, please."

"Here's a five spot, an' be sure to gimme the change. No tips for such rotten service."

"The ale'll make you feel better," Blaze volunteered as he turned to go.

"Oh, yeah-h!" Quechhio kicked toward Blaze without trying to make the kick land, "Get goin', you worm!" He liked to call people worms at times, it seemed. Quechhio was hard-boiled, if you asked him. He'd killed men.

"Worms sometimes have fangs," Blaze called back from the darkness.

"Oh, yeah-h? Come back 'ere, you worm, an' show us fangs!"

Blaze didn't go back, but he went only a little way back toward town. He sat on a rock by the road and waited developments.

Wiley Horton, the constable, came cau-

tiously up the winding road from the town. He seemed to be looking for someone, stealthily. He was almost upon Blaze before the latter spoke.

"Hello, Mr. Horton," Blaze said.

Horton jumped like a frightened deer, emitting a yell as if he had stepped on a rattler in the dark.

"Hey you, Shingles," he commanded, "I was lookin' for you. Stick 'em up—put up your hands!"

Taken aghast, with the shadowy menace of a revolver poking toward him, Blaze lifted his hands.

"I've got you, Shingles—or Jimmy McDuff," Horton continued, a note of enthusiasm raising his voice. "March on down the road to town. I'm goin' to see what you're gonna say to some letters I just got. No tricks, now, or I shoot. March!"

BLAZE McDUFF saw many things then in one blinding flash. Sickened, helpless gangsters recovering to wonder at their awful nausea, their alibi untouched, himself in jail, the death house, the big black chair, whirl of the juice, a convulsion of throbbing fire—oblivion—to be remembered by his home folks as a bank robber and cowardly murderer. It was too much. No time to argue. He must prove things, then argue—if necessary.

He leaped and brought his hands down with that lightning quickness which his athletic training made easy for him. Wiley Horton grunted under the impact of a hard fist and sank to the ground, his gun unfired.

With two shirts and two belts, blaze soon had the constable securely bound and gagged. By that time Horton had regained consciousness. He began kicking and mumbling against his gag.

"Listen, Horton," Blaze told him, "I'm going to give you the lowdown. It'll sound fishy, but I'm going to prove it."

He went on hurriedly to tell the whole story and when he finished the astounding tale he asked Horton if he believed it.

"N-N-gh!" Horton grunted viciously through his gag and shook his head unmistakably in the negative. He kicked and squirmed against the knotted shirts.

"No use—I'll just have to show you," Blaze pronounced, disappointed. He picked the wriggling constable up and threw him over his shoulder. "Now do me and yourself a favor, Horton," he advised, "and don't let out a sound when we come to

the house. If you do, I'll crack you on the onion with your own gun."

The party had evidently been delayed by Blaze's tardy delivery and in the thirty minutes since Blaze had left the back door, ginger ale bottles had been emptied, ice had clinked in glasses and now more ominous sounds issued forth from the gangsters' celebration. When Blaze approached the house cautiously with his human burden he heard a chorus of agonized gulping and accented groans.

Two mobsters were reeling at the back door, pointing their gagging faces at the ground, two others were hovering over the kitchen sink. Distinctly came sounds of others in as great agony further within the house. Piteous moans for help were to be heard and a woman's voice, then that of Dorio, himself, came in answer promising help. Apparently Dorio and the woman had not succumbed.

Blaze deposited Horton on the front porch, near an open window, then ran around to gather up a bunch of short ropes he had dropped in the yard on his delivery trip. Ropes in left hand, uplifted gun in right, he sailed into the two men at the back door. Their terrified outcries only sounded like part of their regular song. The first went down under a hard jolt from the gun butt, and lay motionless on the ground. The next one, still bent far over in painful contortions, lifted a hand to his left armpit. Blaze crashed the gun butt again on the very conveniently stooping head. In much less time than a minute both men were tied hand and foot.

Now the more dangerous work. Inside the light revealed his rushing attack on the two men at the kitchen sink. The first went down in a lump, but the other staggered back and fended the blow with an arm as he went for his breast gun.

"Hey, you bum, what's this?" Dorio yelled from the other end of the kitchen. A woman, the artificial blonde, standing by his side screamed as Dorio drew an automatic and leaped across the floor.

Blaze's second blow landed squarely on top of the other man's head just as Dorio lifted his automatic and fired hastily. The bullet thudded loudly in the wall near Blaze's head. Blaze dropped to one knee and fired the constable's revolver, aiming at Dorio's right shoulder. The bullet went true and knocked the big, black gang leader

half around. His automatic clattered on the floor.

The woman ran screaming into the front of the house as Blaze landed against the stooping man with both feet. The wild attack sent Dorio sprawling.

Two other mobsters, aroused now by the woman's screams, but still wavering and dazed from the tartar emetic, came bulging through the door, each with the inevitable automatic in hand. They saw the flying double kick that laid out their chief and both lifted their guns. Blaze dodged the volley of bullets and fired to kill. The .38 S. & W. was a more familiar weapon to him than the gang automatics and that fact saved his life then. It was no time to be squeamish. His life was at stake. Both men went down, crumpled in death.

RALPH DORIO was crawling across the floor back to Blaze. His left hand was just crossing over the fallen automatic as Blaze heeled around and kicked the ugly weapon from Dorio's hand. It smashed a window pane and went clattering outside on the back porch midst a rain of broken glass. Blaze grasped the back of Dorio's shirt collar and jerked him to his feet, poking the revolver in the gang leader's back.

He shoved the limp, staggering form ahead of him and came to a big front living room. Tony Quechhio lay deathly pale and helpless on a couch by one wall. Blaze guided Dorio toward the open window outside of which he had left Wiley Horton and there squashed the wilted mobster to the floor under the window.

Quechhio had obviously taken more than his share of the doped ginger ale, for he was a terribly sick man. When Blaze went to take the killer's inevitable automatic from under his arm, Quechhio was too weak to even look his hatred. His muddy, half-seeing eyes merely gazed up at the man he had so recently held in contempt, no expression in them. Blaze used four of his ropes on Dorio and Tony, then four more on the still unconscious pair by the kitchen sink. He returned to stand over Dorio.

"Now, Mr. Dorio," he said, proddingly, "I guess my dear friend, Rex Margree, planned it and you did it very slick, didn't you? Who d'you think'll burn now for them bank murders?"

"You can't hang nothin' on us, you ratty

squealer," Dorio was almost bursting with rage and pain from his broken shoulder.

"No? Well, you got them big green-backs around somewhere and I'm going to find them and then show the cops where you stoked 'em away till you could pass 'em."

He was about to turn away to begin his search when a light step sounded on his ears. He turned too late. The platinum blonde, about twenty-five or thirty years of age with a hard, mean look now hiding what beauty she might have had under pleasanter circumstances, was standing in the doorway, a small revolver levelled at Blaze.

"Stick 'em up, Squealer!" she rasped, "I mean business!"

Wiley Horton jumped through the doorway and grabbed the gun from the woman's hand. His big, rough left closed its hard claws in the woman's dyed locks of hair and jerked her toward Dorio where he slammed her down to the floor in no gentlemanly way. After his surprise, Blaze thanked his stars that he had not been expert at binding a man with shirts.

"Stay there, tough kid, till the wagon comes," Horton told the flabbergasted, furious woman. He held up a hand to show something to Blaze. "She poked these under a floor mat on the front porch just before she came poking her toy gun at you. Let's see what they are—I suspicion—"

His eyes went wide with astonishment in spite of what he "suspected," for he displayed two one-thousand dollar banknotes, and three of a hundred-dollar denomination. He held them closer and read the numbers.

"They're them, Jimmy McDuff!" Horton cried. "They're the bills the papers broadcast for. You win! Let's take 'em in!"

"Here's the other two hundred-dollar bills they planted on me like I told you," Blaze handed the two bills to Horton. "Put 'em with the others."

Dorio and the woman were speechless, but Tony Quechhio was reviving sufficiently to grasp the mournful situation.

"You lousy rat," Quechhio spewed, sitting up on the couch, his hands and feet securely bound, his smoky eyes now recognizing Blaze, "you're just making things worse and worse for you—you worm!"

"Careful, Killer Tony," Blaze grinned at him. "This worm has fangs. Don't you know it, yet?"

Another Jigger Masters Exploit



*He let him have it right
between the eyes.*

YELLOW-RED SUNRISE

as Told by ANTHONY RUD

. . . . the insignia of the Tao Tong, the Quislings of China, specialists in torture. The mere mention or sight of it sent fear coursing through the bodies of everyone . . . and I had received SIX of them. But I had no desire to let them use me as a meal for their rats.

I DIDN'T tell lovely Myra Lillis everything, and she knew it. There had been the four mid-night-to-three engagements with Ro-

sella Reese, the movie star. . . . and the platinum hairs she strewed over everything, my shoulders included. I told Myra then, when she asked some

sharp questions, that the fair Rosella was moulting. It didn't seem to satisfy Myra.

Then this matter of Evi Ranze. I needed what that international beauty and notorious divorcee could tell me. And because this time I was absolutely in the clear, I sent Myra to get her. My trouble was serious. In fact it meant life or death, I suspected. But just the same I rather hoped there'd be a green flame in Myra's violet eyes...and there was.

"May I interrupt you, Jigger?" she said with sweet venom, clicking into the office on her stilt heels. "I saw your wild woman, Evi Ranze. She'll be here in a few minutes. Insisted on coming in her own car...and let me go back in my taxi."

"Oh-h yes. Thanks, Myra," I said. "So the beautiful Evi is actually coming down here to the agency."

"Yes, she is...and jumped at the chance. Jigger, what do you want of that...creature? She's had about eight divorces, and must be almost forty now...though I'll admit she doesn't look it. Those Chinese women never do."

"Chinese? No, I don't think so, Myra, my dear."

"Your dear? Oh hell," said she, and lit a cigarette. She sat down and crossed her knees. This was new stuff for Myra, who knows her way around, but never has forgotten a Puritan upbringing.

"Our Evi had a French father and a Eurasian mother, I'm told. I'm not interested in her matrimony, past, present or future—"

"Petrimony? Or patrimony then?" asked Myra. "She's rich, and she'll sit in any man's lap on two minutes' notice. Or without notice. You're vulnerable, Jigger Masters, and I know it."

"Why don't you try some of your wiles on me then?" I asked with a chuckle. "But seriously, all I want from the fair Evi is an explanation of the lurid little water-color sunrises or sunsets, or whatever. I think she may know their meaning."

"Oh Jigger, you haven't had more than one, have you?"

"Yes. Six in all. One every morning since I was retained by the Javery family to investigate this murder-and-vandalism mystery."

"Oh-h, I don't like that, Jigger," she said, frowning. "I know these criminals who warn victims don't exist outside of lurid fiction. But after all, this is...Oriental. They don't think or act the way we do."

"They certainly don't," I admitted grimly. "They've got Lake City wild with fear. And there were bombings and raids in both New York and Chicago, before they started with us. The reason I want to talk to La Ranze is because she and old Max Minden, the retired brick manufacturer and art collector, have been associated for some years. I happen to know that Max received one of these little water-color sunrises, just the day before his mansion was bombed!"

"REALLY, Jigger? But Max Minden wasn't killed, and they didn't get his art treasures, did they?"

"No. Their one failure. The bomb killed two old servants in the back of the house. But the cops arrived, and the raid went up in smoke."

"So that was the trap you mentioned...the one...?"

"Yes. I and the cops have a trap there now. Two lookouts. I figure that whatever it is that makes these vandals bomb, murder, and then smash valuable Ming and Han porcelains instead of stealing them, will

bring them back again to Max Minden's. Unfinished business. But meanwhile I simply must find out the aims of this strange gang. So far they just don't make sense."

"Why not tackle Max himself?"

"I tried. Max has barricaded himself in the remnant of his mansion, and won't answer any door. But La Ranze probably has a good idea what all the shootin's about. She lived in China for fifteen years."

"Why do you take a case like this, Jigger? It's out of your usual line."

I grinned a little. "Would you, as my lovely and valued assistant, Myra, have me take on routine jobs, and divorce evidence? Look at the record here. Lake City is rather a center of art collecting. Beside the New York and Chicago bombings, and the death of Malcolm Javery which I am retained to solve, there have been no less than six other similar outrages. The police are helpless. There is no loot to trace, and Chinese aren't good stool pigeons."

"But why would they chance death just to smash porcelains worth thirty or forty thousand a copy?"

"Now you're asking me," I chuckled. That was when my desk buzzer sounded, and the desk announcer system said:

"Madame Evi Ranze to see Mr. Masters."

"Send Madame Ranze right in. . . . no, you stay, Myra. I'm still a bachelor and might need some moral support. I'd hate to become No. 9 for Evi, even if the old gal has a lot of money."

Myra made a face. "Sometimes I think I hate you, Jigger," she said, and got up to do the honors as the door opened and the remarkable Evi Ranze sailed into the office.

No use denying it, the old gal had it. She looked to be about twenty-

five, with her spotted gray ounce coat, slinky gray dress underneath, and little fur beret perched on lustrous black hair.

I acknowledged introductions, and seated Madame Ranze, getting her a cigarette and a light. She smiled up at me, and leaned close when she accepted the light. Her perfume was queer but heady. I was conscious of that almost uncontrollable impulse to slide an arm down along the curve of her back, and embrace her. That's just what she did to all men, of course.

"So-o, now I meet the gr-reat Jeeger Mastaires!" she breathed, starring her lashes as she crossed her beautiful legs and leaned back to look up into my face. I backed away and sat down. No use getting dizzy.

Myra sniffed. "Those aren't nylons, Jigger," she said in a perfectly audible aside. "She's painted them on. . . .and even used an eyebrow pencil for the seams!"

"Mmm. Interesting detail. I hadn't noticed. . . ."

"Oh yeah?" Myra is a skeptic about some things.

Madame's laugh was light and silvery. "Eet ees mabbe," she suggested with an amused look at Myra's long, slim legs, "that Mees Leelis need de stuffing in de stocking, for de curve?"

MYRA stood up suddenly. "I'll leave you right here, Jigger darling!" she said from between set teeth. "This woman. . . ."

"Be your age, Myra," I told her. "I wanted to ask you just one thing, Madame Ranze. You have been associated for some years with old Max Minden, the art collector—perhaps as his agent in buying and selling rare antique porcelains? I realize that some business connection is indicated.

Max is over seventy, and with your very great beauty, I wouldn't think"

She smiled. "Oh-h, bot a man ees on-lee as old as he feels! In your histor-ee, a man name' Metoos-elah"

"Yes, and Solomon with his 300 concubines and 700 wives," I nodded. "But look here, Madame Ranze. You know a lot about the Orient. I have received these six little water-color paintings, one each morning since—"

She took just one look, as I held them out fan-shaped in my hand. Her eyes snapped really wide this time, she gasped, and started to rise.

"Oh-h, bon dieu-u, those!" she cried in a stifled voice. "Oh, let me go queeck! I deed not know! Oh-h, the Tao Tong! You are on-luckee. I am sorr-ee. I mus' go! Oh-h, let me get away from here. You, Mees Leelis. . . ."

Myra had caught her by the shoulders. "No, you don't get away until you tell Jigger what those mean!" gritted Myra. "Okay, give! I'm no hubby No. 9. Speak up. . . .or else!"

"Oh-h, you bad girl! Let me out!"

"Pot calls kettle dingy. But don't try to wrestle with me, old lady. I could show you a flying mare that'd surprise Pegasus!"

"Take it easy, Myra," I said. "I just want to know what is this Tao Tong you mention. Who are they, and what does this little watercolor sunset mean?"

"Oh-h, let me go! Eet ees the rat death! I am scare'."

"The rat death! What is that?"

"Get the rest of it, Chief," said Myra grimly. "I can tell you that. It's a torture. . . .one of those lovely things like the Death of a Thousand Slices."

"Plis!" pleaded Evi, her voice going

hoarse and ugly. "Let me go. . . . queeck! They weel keel me!"

"What did this warning mean to old Max Minden?" I persisted. But I saw she was going to collapse.

Evi moaned. "Oh-h I tol' heeman' I tell you. . . .eet ees death!" she sobbed and whimpered. "An' now me. . . .I weel die. . . .the Tao Tong does not forgeev. . . .!" And down she went.

"Hell," said Myra disgustedly. "She's fainted. Do I lug her out. . . . or do you want to wield the smelling salts, and let her wake up in your strong, manly arms?"

"Call Johnson or Jones, and have her put in a cab. Those youngsters are strong, and may not object to Evi. But then, tell me about this rat death, Myra."

"It's just too awful, Jigger. I heard about it when I was working on the South Side in Chicago. . . .near 22d and Archer. A man or woman was stripped, and a live rat put on his or her abdomen. An inverted bowl was put over to hold the rat there. Then a little fire was kindled on top of the bowl. . . .and the rat burrowed down into the quivering flesh. . . ."

"Enough!" I said, and took a deep breath. "See to Evi, as I told you. I'm on my way."

"What are you thinking of doing, Jigger?"

"I'm going to meet this Tao Tong half way—and get those vandal murderers before every place in the country that has a specimen of Ming porcelain is bombed!"

"But Jigger! You can't go alone!"

"I'll get Sergeant Ryan for a body-guard. This thing has me down. . . . and more than the menace to my own life, it's got me crazy with curiosity. Why would any band of Oriental thugs bomb and raid museums and

private collections, and then destroy the valuable pieces instead of stealing them?"

OF course Myra didn't know the answer to that one, but I had a hunch I could find out. I got Sergeant Ryan from headquarters, and then with him went around to the John Chinaman who does my shirts every week. Ryan waited in the doorway, while I went in.

"Hi John," I greeted him. "You know me, Jigger Masters. You do my laundry every week."

Maybe he did recognize me, but you'd never guess it.

"No tickee, no washee," he said, and puffed his long pipe.

"Huh, such is fame," I grinned. "But I got tickets this time...six of 'em in fact." And I fanned out the lurid little watercolors, and showed him.

The result was astonishing. His eyes positively bugged. He let out one of those quavering, falsetto screams, "ai-eeeeee!" and turned and ran! He went so fast he lost one of his heelless slippers. And on the way he screeched something about the Tao Tong, and two coolies who had been ironing out in back, dropped their irons on the floor and took to their heels also!

Even more mystified, and not a little impressed, I thought it over. Then I rejoined Ryan, and walked to a corner drugstore phone booth. There was one man, Lee Wong, head of the department of Oriental languages at State University, who probably could and would tell me what this meant. I dialled the university, and after some waiting, got Wong.

"How are you, my good friend?" he said with courtesy. "This pleasure is all the more savored for being unexpected."

"Lee," I said. "How many Chinese tongs are there?"

"Why," he said in a puzzled tone. "You surely know that, Jigger. There are only two legitimate tongs, and never have been more than the two—the On Leongs and the Hip Sings. But even these are dying out. The war has taken all the young men..."

"Well then, how about a bunch who call themselves the Tao Tong? And who send around lurid little water colors like sunrises?"

"Ai-eee!" he gasped and almost squealed—for all the world like my John Chinaman. "Even the name is unlucky! My friend, do not go near them! A few years ago, perhaps you recall, the two real tongs expelled all their hatchetmen—killers. They did not use hatchets any more, of course, but bombs and tommyguns, and automatic rifles. These expelled ones took the name of Tao Tong, and for some time just hired themselves out to do murder. They were bad, but had no brains. Now they are the Quislings of my unfortunate country. The Japanese have taken them, put some members in charge of the puppet government...but that is not important. If they are after you, seek safety. They are terrible. They specialize in tortures. The name Tao Tong is a lie. It means pottery artisans...but they merely prey on pottery makers in China...they do not make anything...but my friend, seek safety! I...I have chanced terrible vengeance merely by telling you!"

AND while I was still gasping at this, I heard the crash of his cradled phone. And Lee Wong was a highly educated man!

Feeling little demons on ice skates going up and down my spine, I went out of the booth—and found Ryan

holding on to an almost hysterical Myra Lillis. Myra had been trying to get to me in a hurry, but Ryan thought I should be undisturbed.

"Something more happened, Myra?" I asked sharply.

"Yes!" she half-sobbed. "Evi Ranze and Bud Johnson are dead! Oh-h, I'm so frightened, Jigger!"

"Here, tell me quick, honey. I'm shocked. What happened, Ryan?"

"She says," began the policeman, but Myra raised her head and told the tragic, almost unbelievable story.

"I sent Bud Johnson with Evi," said Myra, her voice quivering. "They were driven back to Linden Boulevard, Evi's apartment house, by the chauffeur. The chauffeur opened the door in the back, and got a snifter of the gas...or whatever it was. He passed out too, but the pulmotor squad brought him around. The... the poor kid, Johnson, and Madame Ranze were... too far gone!"

"Hm," I said grimly. "Find something under the floor rug, maybe? They did... ampoules, eh. Probably of cyanogen or oil of mirbane, the volatile kind. The devils! Any sign of the killers?"

"One of those watercolor sketches, Jigger. It...it must have been the same Tao Tong. Jigger...if you ever cared at all...even a little bit...for me, let's take a plane to Canada...or South America, until this is over!"

"Honey," I told her gently, "they had one of those same bomb-and-smash raids in Ottawa! They're going all out to destroy Ming porcelains, and I've got to fight them on their own terms.

"Myra dear, I haven't asked you for a kiss, many times. But I want one now...a kiss of honest love and confidence. You and I, I'm afraid, are in danger right now of terrible death.

But somehow I'm going to beat those devils. May I...?"

"Oh-h yes, Jigger...why didn't you ask me...long ago?"

And Myra not only kissed me with her lips, but kissed and clung with every inch of her long, lovely body. I don't know what Sergeant Ryan thought, I'm sure. And didn't care.

There wasn't any shaking Myra after that. I wanted her to go somewhere...some place where there would be ample police protection. But she just held on to my arm and shook her head. It was the first time she'd ever been a clinging female, so I made allowances. She was frightened half to death—and this was the Myra Lillis who had stood at my back, a Smith & Wesson .32-20 in each hand, and killed three of the howling mob who called themselves the Mummy-Makers. But of course that was another job, long since closed...

It's the unknown that gets a woman.

With Ryan, and Myra still clinging, I went around to the big brick mansion on Buena Vista, where Max Minden had barricaded himself. The previous time I had come I had been polite about it. When Max refused to answer the doorbell, I just had gone away.

Now Ryan and I were ready to batter down a door, if need arose. Max Minden looked to be about the only person alive who might explain the Tao Tong's queer actions to me. And I felt we simply had to know, in order to meet them on a 50-50 basis.

WE went right to the front door. The bomb had been detonated in the rear, and none of the damage showed from here. From my past visit I knew, though, that old Max had erected a temporary barricade of heavy furniture to close that gap,

while he used bricks and built up a defensive wall inside.

As we came to the door I looked back. From an upstairs window across the wide street, I saw a man watching us interestedly from a second floor window of a house. One of the two police lookouts. Evidently the Tao Tong had not returned. . . . or so I thought. I was to change my mind suddenly and disagreeably.

First, of course, we knocked, hammering on the big bronze lion's head with the heavy copper ring he held in his mouth. And for a space of a minute it seemed that Max was not going to answer this time either.

Then there was the sound of an upstairs window thrown open.

"Jiggers! Jiggers Masters!" came a high, cracked, excited voice—that of Max Minden, I realized with a thrill.

"Let us in, Max!" I shouted back. "I—"

"They've got me, Jigger! Run for your life!" he screamed.

I swung around. "The Tong is here!" I said tensely. "Evidently got in without the cops seeing them. Ryan, you beat it on the double! Get a cordon of cops around this house! And have a squad break in!"

Ryan never wasted words. "Okay, Jigger!" he said, and swung on his heel. He strode fast toward the street—and never reached it. From above came the sharp crack of a rifle, just one shot. I stared in horror and chilly knowledge of what was coming to Myra and myself, when I saw burly Mike Ryan stop, tip up to his toes, and then fall face forward to the pavement, stone dead before he hit, with a great red gap under his cap on the back of his head!

"A sniper! No, stay here now, honey!" I yelled. For Myra was gugging at me, wanting me to run

too. But I knew it was late, far far too late. And that second the big door swung silently open, and three yellow faced men, two with levelled tommy guns, stood looking at us.

I knew the third one, the fellow with wrinkled, saturnine, smiling face. He was Charlie Mock, an old Chinese who had been accused several times of being the head of a dope ring which had flourished in Lake City until about 1932. He was a graduate, and a Ph.D. from University of Chicago. Also a shrewd, uncatchable criminal as the police well knew. Little good it ever had done them. Now Charlie Mock had thrown in with the Chinese Quislings, the terrible but supposedly ignorant Tao Tong!

"Please to enter," said Charlie ceremoniously, hands up the sleeves of his yellow tunic, a smirk on his face, and his long, waxed black mustache swinging as he bowed.

I obeyed, shrugging. With a little moan, Myra followed.

THE instant we were inside, four Chinese whom we had not seen, seized Myra and me from behind. We were still covered by the snouts of those ugly tommyguns, so there was no use trying to resist. Myra screamed, and then hissed out an epithet. I knew what was wrong. They were searching us for weapons . . . and if there's anyone less concerned about a young woman's modesty than a Chinese hatchetman, I haven't met him.

When they let us go again—taking my magnum pistol and bulldog deringer—I saw Myra's face was flaming red. I took it she had been given a complete once-over.

Then we were shoved along a hallway, and into a narrow, tall door of steel. The room we entered was

windowless. There was not one scrap of furniture. Just a big Bokhara rug on the floor, and this was all sprinkled with some sort of white powder.

Max Minden, looking shrunken, very old and helpless, stood there, leaning against the far wall, quite as if he would fall if he tried to walk. He made a futile gesture.

"I tried to warn you, Jigger," he said hopelessly, in that cracked falsetto of age. "They came through the main sewer from somewhere down the street, and tunnelled into the basement."

"Thanks for trying, Max," I said, with what cheerfulness I could muster. I knew that the police lookouts must have seen Sergeant Ryan die, and that right now an alarm would be in. Cops would come in due course . . . but not too fast, as they'd have to gather sufficient for a cordon about the grounds. From what I guessed, our time would be far too short. Charlie Mock was no man's fool.

The door clanged shut behind us, and there was sound of a lock being turned. But almost at once a slide slot opened in the side wall, and I saw the dark, slanted, sardonically amused eyes of Charlie Mock.

"Pardon if I leave you for a moment," he said to us. "There is the small matter of the policeman's body . . . I must see that it disappears before someone asks embarrassing questions. I shall be back almost at once. Take your ease, my friends."

I took a deep breath. Maybe that would give us time enough. If not, then I'd have to try to keep Mock talking. It's really strange what exhibitionists even the cleverest criminals sometimes are. I suppose they're hungry for applause from somewhere.

"What is this room, Max?" I asked the shrunken old man who lived in this brick mansion—made of bricks

he himself had manufactured.

"It is not a room, really, not a room for—people," he answered apathetically. "Here it was I kept the antiques of my collection, and those I made—for sale. These devils smashed to dust and shards every single piece!"

"Well," I said grimly, "that's what I came to see you about. Just why do these Chinese bomb museums, raid them and private homes, and then smash instead of stealing? You'd think the loot would be well worth while, with Ming burial urns selling at \$40,000 each, and—"

"But not selling now. That is the point, Jigger. I may as well explain, as I never have explained to anyone. You see, Jigger, the great secret of Ming porcelain lies in the bluish crackle glaze. Without it—well, it would not be Ming. And the secret of making that crackle glaze was lost for centuries until I—rediscovered it! So the past few years I have been making Mings which the curators of museums, and so-called experts in private life have pronounced genuine.

"I have sold over 150 such pieces for great sums . . . all the antique porcelain the market could absorb. And besides those vases and urns sold, I had here in this room over 200 more waiting for a possible market. You understand, there was nobody willing to pay the usual price in the whole of North America, who had not had a chance to buy from me a supposedly genuine Ming vase or urn!"

"Good grief!" spoke up Myra. "You mean Evi Ranze unloaded these fakes for you—and stuck the New York museums as well as those in Lake City?"

"I mean that precisely," said old Max, with the ghost of a chuckle. "I . . . thought it amusing. And it has made me rich. Not that money will

do me any good now. These terrible men came...."

RIGHT then the eyes of Charlie Mock reappeared at the slot.

"So...Mr. Minden has been explaining his duplicity," said Charlie Mock. "Well, I am glad that much of the rubbish is cleared away. I always like my victims to know why they die. And you can see now why we of the new Chinese Government are furious with this faker, this supplier of spurious goods, and why we have gone about smashing the fakes he planted in the museums and collections on this continent."

"Sorry," I broke in with a sneer. "It's not at all clear. You say you are the Chinese Quislings, eh? The traitors who are taking the orders of the enemy of China, and setting up a puppet government? Well, even then—"

"I do not care for your words, Mr. Masters," snapped Charlie Mock, his face darkening. "Your ability to judge Oriental politics unfortunately is not on a par with your other mental endowments. We feel ourselves patriots, not traitors!"

"Japanese patriots, of course," I nodded, as though that had been what he intended.

"No! Chinese patriots of the new co-prosperity order!" he denied sharply. "We despised the old, effete, languid arts of ancient China. So we were willing to take \$20,000,000 worth of Ming porcelains from Peiping, Shanghai and elsewhere, for sale in America—the proceeds to help finance our new government."

"Then you found the market satiated with fakes!" I chuckled. "So then you set about it to smash all those fakes which Mr. Minden had made and sold. Lastly you were go-

ing to smash all those he had here ready to sell."

"Yes," snarled Charlie Mock, his mask of suavity slipping, "and you may as well know it all—since you will know nothing so soon now. We had to kill this old faker, Minden, lest he make more Mings! He is the only man in six hundred years who knows or knew the secret of making that china. Until now that we have broken into his laboratory in the basement here, and learned it!"

"The spores!" whispered old Max.

"Yes, the spores of yellow algae!" chuckled Charlie Mock. "We learned how you blew those spores from a bellows, all over the porcelain. The porcelain had been prepared with a coating of agar-agar. The spores immediately started to develop. Then you put on the glaze coat, and fired the porcelain in your kiln—and the result was the famous Ming crackle glaze!"

"Be careful with the spores," cackled old Max warningly. I stared . . . and realized that his mind was slipping.

"Oh yes, we'll use them with care," agreed Charlie Mock with a sort of repressed ferocity. "I may tell you, Mr. Masters and Miss Lillis, that the Tao Tong long has specialized in death entertainment for its enemies. Years ago this was crude torture. . . . such as the rat death signature suggests. We still keep the signature, but we have progressed far from those barbaric days and customs."

"Ah, quite so," he chuckled with ferocious geniality. "I am a research chemist, though my doctor's degree is in philosophy. I have with me Feng Sooy, the renowned botanist. Between us we have managed to concoct many entertainments for our guests.

"Do you see this?"

AND suddenly he poked both arms through the slot. In his hands was a smallish leather bellows, about twelve inches long by six inches wide.

"Oh-h!" suddenly screamed Max in hair-raising fashion. "The death spores! Look out!"

"He means," chuckled the Chinese Quisling chief, "that if these spores which made the crackle glaze, are breathed into the human lungs, they start to grow immediately—the warm medium of human blood being better even than agar-agar!"

"Oh, that would mean—" faltered Myra with horror.

"It would mean that quickly the lungs would fill. . . .and you can guess the rest. In time, of course, the algae would develop and fill all the veins and arteries. The patient then would bloat tremendously, and look as though he or she was stuffed. But of course death will supervene long before that. So don't worry."

Just as I opened my mouth to say something more, to try desperately to keep the yellow devil talking, there came the first awful chuff-chuff of the bellows! The snout had been drawn back, so it just showed there in the 9x12-inch wall slot. But out of it now were spilling breaths of impalpable yellow vapor—the death spores!

"Quick!" I yelled to Myra. "Throw your skirt over your face. Press the cloth to your nose and mouth."

I also yelled the same sort of instruction to old Max, who had fallen to his knees and was praying, I think. And I yanked out two handkerchiefs and pressed them to my own nose and mouth, holding them tightly with my left hand.

That instant there came the flat sound of shots somewhere in the building, and heavy thumpings. A

dull crash. The police were breaking in—but would they be in time to save us from breaths of those deadly spores?

At the slot the snout of the bellows was momentarily lifted away—

I saw my chance. I leapt for the slot, still holding the cotton hankies to my mouth and nose, but with my right hand and arm free. I saw Charlie there, gibbering Chinese to another of the tongmen. I thrust my arm through suddenly, and grabbed Charlie Mock by his long, black hair.

He yelled and screamed and kicked then, but too late. I threw my whole weight backward—and though it probably took off an ear, and a lot of scalp, his head came through that wall slot!

There I had him, his eyes boggling, his head and neck filling the entire slot so no more spores could come through. And he was unable to get his hands in to break my hold on his hair.

I took real, honest satisfaction in breaking his neck.

There is little more to tell. Six minutes later the police came in. Myra still had her head covered. Max Minden had slumped against the wall, still on his knees. He was dead when they carried him out—but from heart failure, not from the spores of the death algae.

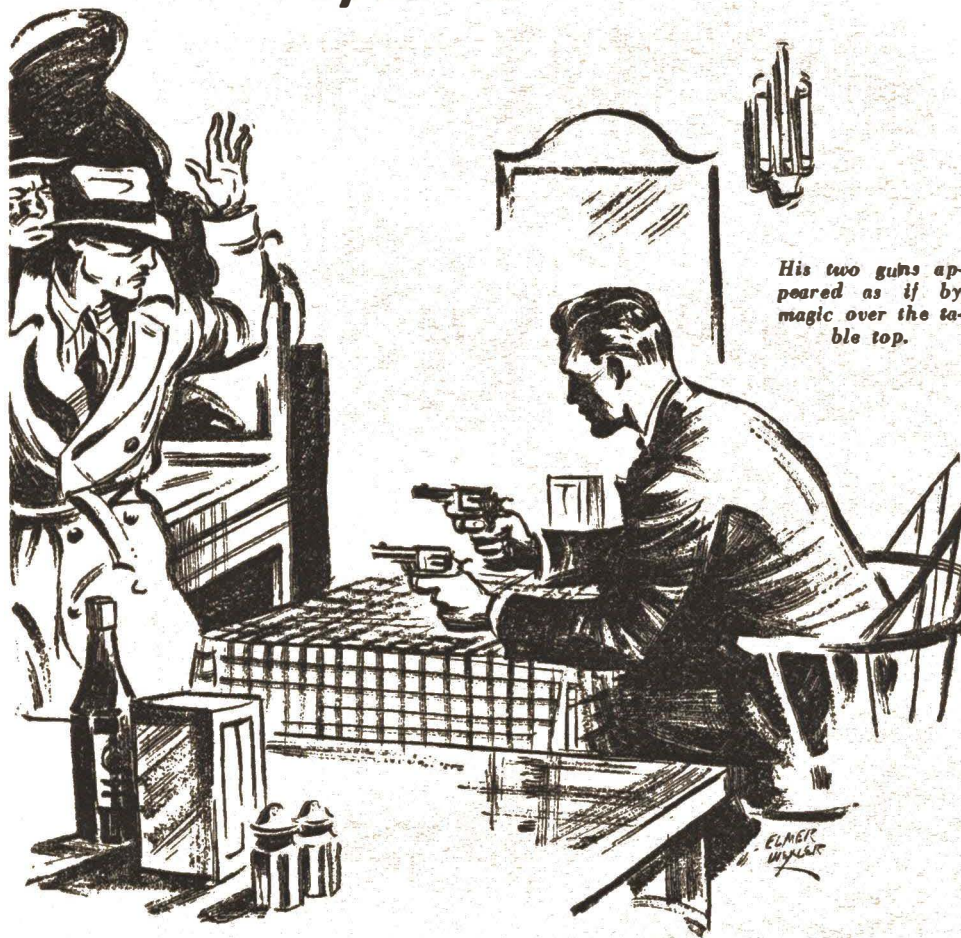
Neither Myra nor I suffered any real ill effects. The only thing I noted was a tendency to sneeze—and I used antiseptic plentifully on my long nose. The sneezing ceased.

Myra said little. But she clung close to my arm when we left. In fact, she has scarcely left my side since. A detective should not marry. But. . . .I'm going to have to do something about lovely Myra Lillis. I can see that plainly.

THE END

BIRTH OF A CRIMINAL

by LEO HOBAN



You would never think that a China pig bank, given as a birthday gift, could start a seven year old boy in a life of crime.

THE young man trudged up the four flights of stairs to the two-room tenement, high above the raucous street in Hell's Kitchen. The toes of his shoes were as broad as his semi-bowler hat was high. And his black eyes were as dark with unavailing worry as his

uniform was dark against the shiny newness of his police star.

He was Matt Grady, rookie cop, bent on being the sort of uncle eight-year-old Hervey could be proud of, an uncle whose only objective was to instill into the sick and impressionistic frame of Hervey a few impor-

tant precepts by which this world of law-abiding men is governed. He carried in his huge and red hands a gift—a gift, small and inconsequential as it was, that meant denial for himself of many workaday luxuries, such as cigars, so that Hervey might have something to cling to that went up and beyond the sordid conditions under which he was living.

It was a China pig with a hole in its back—an old-fashioned kid's bank.

It looked innocent enough, not like something that made a piker of dynamite.

That China pig had in its bulging belly a sardonic cargo of larceny, deceit and mayhem—aye, a veritable madhouse in its poke of murder.

But how could an Irish rookie cop, bent only on being a Good Samaritan, know that? Certainly nobody would believe an innocent kid's bank could be so involuntarily brutal. Yet facts are irrefutable. . . .

Hervey was a sensitive kid whose entire world was encompassed by the two rooms of his tenement home. Horror and terror and undiluted pain were the playmates he knew from his wheelchair. Paralysis of the legs had been his bosom companion ever since he could remember. He couldn't remember much—not even his father who mother said was a swell egg and a swell beer wagon driver until he fell asleep and tumbled under the wheels one night.

It was Hervey's birthday when Patrolman Grady came into the room, his young face wearing a broad grin for Hervey under his walrus mustache. He looked at Hervey's mother, nodded coolly, then pushed the China pig into Hervey's blanket-covered lap.

What he said didn't amount to much, but little things make big impressions on sick people, especially to a dumbly grateful and panicky kid.

"You're getting older now," Uncle Matt said seriously. "So understand—this isn't a toy—it's independence, being a bank. Inside it is money, and when you have money fear is only a word. Get enough dough in the poke of this little pig—keep adding to it and soon you can tell the world to go to Hell."

As Hervey's frail hands closed about the sleek sides of the China pig he knew immediately and instinctively that what Uncle Matt said was right. For somehow—with amazing suddenness—there didn't seem to be anything to be afraid of anymore.

Uncle Matt was showing Hervey how to put the key under the pig's tail when the door opened and Henry walked in without knocking. He was thin and angular and hatchet-faced and his eyes had a habit of creeping around behind the lids.

Uncle Matt stood up straight and his face mottled.

"You!" he spat, and began to cuss. "God-willin' that I had some money of my own and somethin' more than a rookie's pay to support a family of my own on. . . . You wouldn't be coming around here to my brother's widow . . . nor would any other tin-horn gambler. How my brother could have been so dumb as to marry a no-good trollop like—" He broke off, sputtering in helpless and frustrated fury, and his heavy leather heels made ominous banging noises as he hurriedly crossed the room.

He turned, hand on the doorknob, managed a smile for Hervey and said lightly, "I'll see you soon."

"Sure—and thanks," Hervey piped, hugging the pig to his frail breast. "I guess you're a swell egg, too, like my pop was."

Uncle Matt stood, big and powerful in the doorway, studying Her-

vey musingly. Then he banged the door viciously behind him.

ONLY Fate, in its most sardonic mood, knew that it would be twenty years before Uncle Matt, the detective sergeant, again would meet Hervey, the gunman, and Uncle Matt would come bearing bullets—bullets that were nothing like the affectionate offering of the little China pig bank.

What a hog for trouble that pig bank turned out to be in the succeeding years! Nobody who had a direct connection with it—Uncle Matt, Hervey, Hervey's mother—Henry—not one of the four—cared to look at themselves in a mirror for fear of what they might see in their own eyes. The little pig bank fixed up the troubles of all of them—fixed them in Hell as the Devil laughed.

Henry, hands on hips, frowned at the door. "Someday I'll show that fathead cop," he said. "Someday when I catch myself a sucker."

Hervey's mother, young and tight-lipped, came from the other room. Her hair was bobbed, rather a daring thing to do at the time, and she'd even dabbed a bit of rouge on her cheeks. She always disappeared into the other room of the tenement when Uncle Matt came around, like maybe she was ashamed of something. This trait bothered Hervey.

"Hush, honey," she said, pointing to Hervey. "He's so young. Early impressions bite deeply."

Henry mumbled something and went into the other room and sprawled on the bed.

Hervey worked the key under the pig's tail and when the lid flew open a penny, a nickel, a dime, a quarter, a half dollar, a silver dollar, a dollar bill, a patched-up two-dollar bill and a five fell out.

He'd never handled anything larger than a quarter before and the very feel of the heavy silver and the bills gave him a sense of power and assurance he'd never previously experienced. Even his pains seemed to ease somewhat.

It just proved that what Uncle Matt had said was right. When you have money—a lot of it—everything is all right, fear is just a word, and you can tell the world to go to Hell.

The pig became part of Hervey, in his blanketed lap always. Mother and Henry added a few small coins to its poke occasionally.

And he used to wheel his chair across the room and press the pig into mother's hands when she started crying over what then Hervey thought was nothing at all.

His belief in the power of the little pig grew steadily. He had mother convinced in its salvation too. She told Hervey once that with such a fine pig everything would turn out right and that even Henry would catch himself a sucker.

WHAT catching a sucker had to do with everything puzzled Hervey until mother explained that for Hervey to go to a clinic and get fixed up—and for her and Henry to get fixed up right, also—depended entirely on Henry catching himself a sucker.

So Hervey said that he hoped Henry would catch himself a big one, like the kind of good wishes you give to a kid fisherman with two legs who could make it down to the docks and back.

A wild-eyed Henry came slamming through the door one night. "Two years I wait," he fumed at mother, "for this cluck to come to the big city. And what—guess what?—I got only a lousy eight bucks!"

Mother said that sure was Hell because she only had a buck-six-bits herself. She looked all broken up about it, and she started crying when she was putting Hervey to bed.

Under the bed coverings in the darkness Hervey pressed the pig against his stomach as if it was a protecting wall against a harsh world. . . . A strange peace crept into his puny heart, and he fell softly into deep sleep.

When he awoke it was with an agonizing start. The pig was gone. So was Henry. And in the dimness of early dawn he could hear mother tossing fitfully in bed in the other room. He closed his eyes and wept silently.

The early sun was trying to work its way through ominous clouds when Henry silently entered Hervey's room.

Hervey kept his eyes closed and breathed deeply as in sleep. He felt Henry's hands push the pig under the covers and tip-toe quietly from the room.

As Henry and mother kept whispering excitedly beyond the closed door, Hervey worked the key under the pig's tail and spilled the money on the bed sheet. The pig's poke was all wrong. All the money was there and there had been a twenty, a fifty and a hundred dollar bill added. Only the two dollar bill wasn't the same. This one hadn't been torn and patched.

Hervey lay back against the pillow, staring at the ceiling and thinking . . . thinking. Only one thing seemed important. Henry had taken Hervey's protection against the world. And he hadn't had a right to. That he had added to the poke seemed inconsequential. The fact remained that during the night Henry

had stolen Hervey's pig. And for why? . . .

The rest of the morning was one of hazy confusion for Hervey. All was bustle and din and confusion. And by noon Henry and mother and Hervey were on a train westward-bound.

Mother tried to look happy but she seemed awfully worried.

In Michigan, Henry carried Hervey into a big hospital, gave a doctor what he said was two G's to make Hervey well. He told the doctor he was Hervey's dad.

Mother whispered to Hervey that Henry hadn't been lying; that Henry would be his father after she and Henry got to someplace called Chicago.

Hervey found himself curiously detached. It didn't seem to matter. Only one thing seemed important. The pig had fixed everything up for everybody. Henry, it seemed sure, had caught himself a sucker . . . caught him with the help of the pig . . . even if the pig didn't belong to Henry.

POSSIBLY had Henry or mother returned to visit the bed-ridden Hervey at any time during the next year Hervey's outlook on life might have been changed. But they didn't.

And Hervey, feeling strength returning to helpless legs, held his pig tightly and studied it. It became a lone symbol of loyalty and independence. He wasn't bitter, just puzzled and stubbornly silent to the questions of doctors and nurses.

He had been walking, rather shakily for sure, for more than two months when the hospital men one day told him his bag was packed and that a man and woman from an orphanage were waiting for him.

Like any kid of ten he resisted this. He knew what an orphanage was. He cried for mother . . . but she didn't come. The orphanage people told Hervey that no trace of her or his step-father could be found. Hervey entered the orphanage bearing Henry's name.

And there, during entry inspection, authorities discovered what Hervey's China pig contained. And out of the protecting kindness of their social working hearts they returned the pig to Hervey—empty.

They told Hervey they were doing this for his own good, that other boys in the orphanage would steal his pig, that the money would be held for him until he would re-enter the world, a man.

The words didn't make sense to Hervey. All he realized was that his only defense against the world had been taken from him and that everybody, whether an official or an inmate, whether inside the walls or outside, everybody wanted to take from him that which he held dear.

Embittered, he learned to be tough. Weak, he had to become strong to become tough. Grimly he went to work to become both tough and strong—and succeeded, much to the dismay of the orphanage officials.

Two days after he became listed among the incorrigibles he went over the back wall, carrying with him only his empty China pig. He still regarded it as a charm, an omen. He was bent on filling its bulging sides again; and when he did he could tell the world to go to Hell.

He started by snatching pocket-books, then petty thievery graduated into penny-pinching sluggery. He made the boys' reformatory for that.

During his pen jolt for burglary he met Mosco, who knew his way in and around and out of banks. Im-

mediately on his release he saw to it that guns were smuggled into the penitentiary for Mosco to use, which he did on four guards.

And from the Hervey-Mosco combine grew a gluttonous thing that left a trail of blood and death and plunder from Georgia to Iowa and all important points East.

Little Hervey was filling his pig's poke to a fare-thee-well.

An officer dropped Mosco in the Peoria job, and Hervey dropped two cops in retaliation.

In hiding in Flint, Mich., he heard of Henry in a sordid dive near the railroad tracks. Hervey tossed caution to the winds and strode boldly into the street.

HE CAME out of the dive, staggering blindly. His mother had worked in that dive until her death four years previous. She and Henry had never married, Henry having been caught and broken for a sucker himself when the couple had arrived in Chicago.

Panicky, then, he'd wanted to return to the hospital where Hervey lay, demand the return of his two G's, and to Hell with Hervey. Mother had kept him from doing that by threatening to go to the cops with the story of how Henry had caught himself a sucker with Hervey's China pig.

It had been a two-handed game, almost twenty years back, when the sucker had discovered he was being played for a chump. In the scuffle that followed the chump fell out the window five stories above the street. Henry had scooped up all available cash, including the little amount from Hervey's pig that had made his entrance in the game possible.

One bill, a patched two, he'd overlooked.

The story Hervey had forced from Henry had been concise, ugly. Henry's staring eyes and gaping mouth were ugly in death when Hervey departed, trailing gunsmoke.

In New York two months later police trapped Hervey and two of his men in an abandoned loft.

Detective Sergeant Grady, directing operations, found his lips moving in involuntary prayer that Hervey would be taken alive.

He wanted to ask Hervey something, something that had brought succeeding nightmares for twenty years.

When tear gas fumes sent Hervey stumbling blindly down the loft stairs his automatics continued to lance out licking flames. A short machine gun burst from the hands of a young cop on Sergeant Grady's right made Hervey bend double, then plunge headlong.

So died Hervey's belief that when you have enough in your poke you can tell the world to go to Hell . . . his belief that if you had enough pokes you were okay—even if they were other people's pokes.

Sergeant Grady, breathing deeply, turned over Hervey's body with the broad toe of his left foot. The thumb and forefinger of his right hand were pinched against the watch pocket of his trousers.

In that pocket, neatly folded, was

a patched two-dollar bill that Rookie Grady had found under the poker table in a room from which a man had fallen and died two decades before, a two-dollar bill that at that time might have led indirectly to a sick and helpless kid in a wheelchair.

He'd wanted Hervey alive so he could ask him about that bill. Sergeant Grady wanted to satisfy his own conscience that he wasn't too sentimental to be a good cop. Now his chance for satisfaction was gone.

THE coroner in his examination minutes later snorted and said: "Thought you said this guy was a big-timer. Hell, he's just got through robbing some kid of his toy bank—the punk!"

Sergeant Grady grabbed avidly at the China pig bank.

They opened the bank at headquarters and found inside a penny, a nickel, a dime, a quarter, a half dollar, a silver dollar, a dollar bill, a five—and a patched-up two. . . . A queer assortment, like someone had been creating a talisman.

Hervey had had a helluva time getting hold of those big old-fashioned bills, especially a patched two—until he'd caught himself a sucker in the form of an old hoarder that treasury officials had overlooked. Yep, Hervey had been right good at finding pokes that fixed up everything for everybody.

**FOR REAL INSIDE FACTS FROM POLICE RECORDS READ
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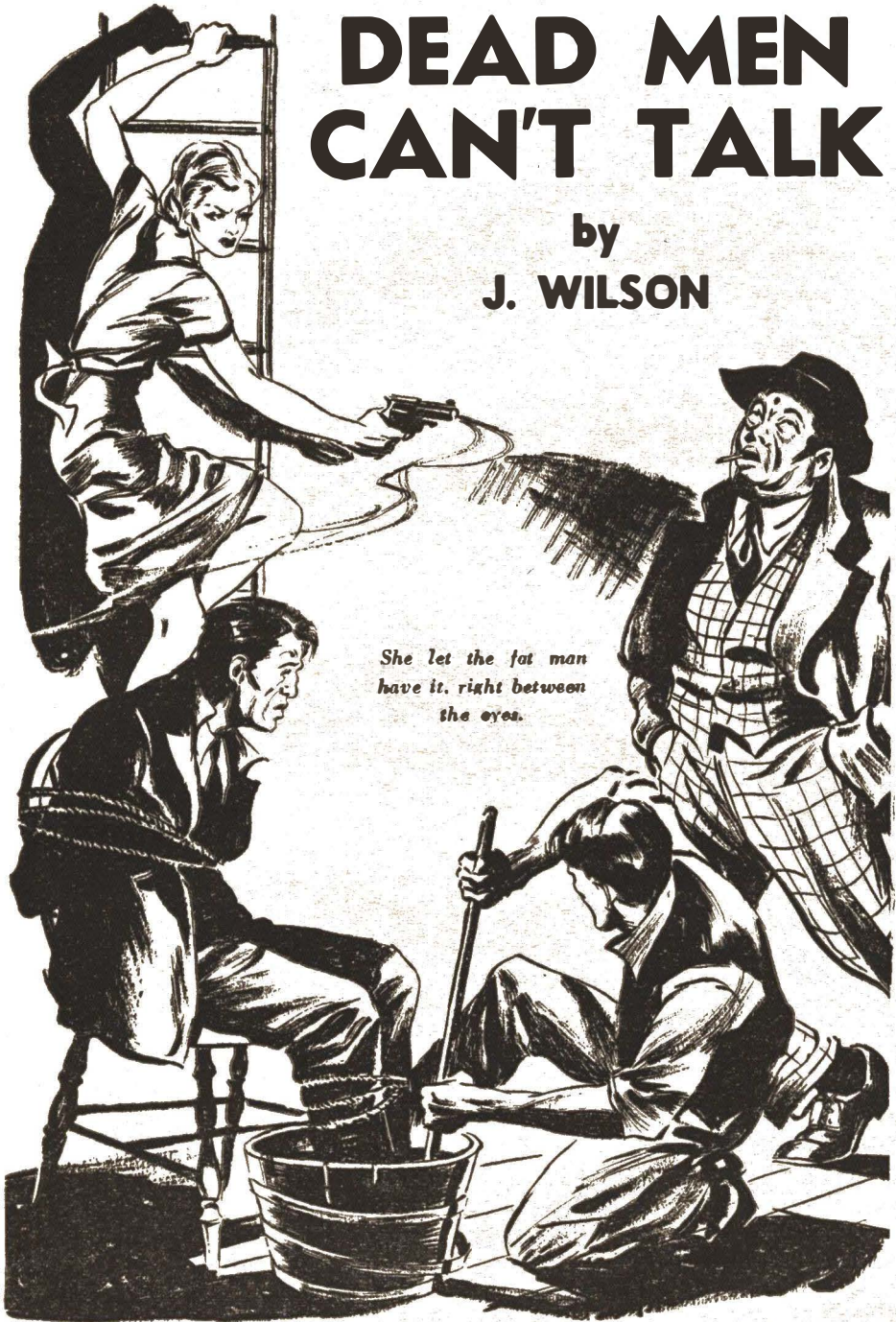
YOU WILL WANT TO READ

CONFIDENTIAL DETECTIVE CASES

"REMEMBER PEARL HARBOR"

DEAD MEN CAN'T TALK

by
J. WILSON



*She let the fat man
have it, right between
the eyes.*

When Detective Trent Baron triggered through that midnight murder maze, he parlayed corpses against the toughest gang in town . . . with Baron himself as the payoff cadaver!

TRENT BARON halted in a thick pool of shadow and stared at the tan coupe. The rain, driven by a chill, searching wind, skittered in between his up-turned collar and dripping hatbrim and coldly assailed the thin masklike set to his face. But he kept hard, watchful eyes focused on the car and, by turning a little, presented a glistering back to the driving wet.

A minute passed. Slowly, Baron moved out of the shadows. He glanced up and down the deserted side street, then carefully skirted the circle of light drawn on the wet pavement by a street lamp and walked up to the car. He peered in, tried the handle. The handle wouldn't yield to a twist of his strong hand, and he turned away.

Another figure, hunched against the rain, stepped up onto the curb behind the car. Baron tensed, kept his head turned. As the man passed, Baron let a sliding, oblique glance lance at him. Thick-lensed glasses gleamed against a round, bland face, and a soft rotund body swelled a form-fitting black overcoat. A pleasant scent, emanating from the man as he passed, cut through the smells intensified by the water that was streaming off the dingy sides of the buildings in miniature cascades on its way to the swollen gutters.

Baron watched the man's back for a few seconds, then began to follow. The man walked up along the side of the sprawling brick building that fronted on the wider, better lighted thoroughfare fed by the side street and turned into a doorway. Baron flitted silently along the wet wall, heard a door open. He moved out toward the street so that he could see

into the small, boxlike vestibule. He saw the man punch a buzzer button twice. Then another door opened, closed.

Baron waited for a moment, then walked past the doorway and around to the front of the brick building. A jitterbug palace occupied the corner, hemming in, together with a fifteen cent movie house, the narrow, ill-lit front of a cigar store. Baron cut in before he came within the scope of the wimpling, vari-colored lights of the movie, shoving open the door of the cigar store.

He walked along a smudged glass counter, ignoring the pimply-faced clerk who had looked up from his newspaper. He went to the rear of the store and opened another door, very conscious of the pimply-faced man's stare. He closed the door behind him as he stepped into a short, bare passageway. A glaring, unshaded electric light bulb, jutting downward out of a fly-specked ceiling, furnished the only illumination.

Baron came to the end of the little hall, tried the door that barred further progress. It was locked and he rattled the knob. There was a click, and Baron felt pressure being exerted on the knob. He let go of the knob, and the door was opened a crack. Baron slid his foot into the crack, gave a powerful shove. He moved into a big, overheated room. A bluish smoke haze blurred the figures of men grouped about tables, half in and half out of the white glare thrown down at them by shaded drop-lights. There was little talking, and the rattle of dice being flung up against the sideboards and made to bounce back on the green baize was plainly audible.

Baron looked at the man who had unlocked the door. The man, a big, thick-bodied specimen with parted blond hair, regarded him with eyes that were sunken in a bloated, doughy face, that glinted like buried bits of green ice.

"Hello, Plummer," Baron said easily.

Plummer's eyes flicked up and down. "What do you want?" he demanded.

"I just dropped in for a little fun," Baron said.

Plummer's face remained smooth, hostile. "All the tables are bein' used," he said shortly.

"I'll wait around, then," Baron said, and turned away.

He wandered slowly amongst the tables, peering at the tense faces intent on the verdict of the tumbling dice. Now and then a frozen-faced, white-fingered man would jerk his head up and glance sharply from under a green eyeshade. Baron ignored their hard questioning eyes, kept flicking his own about. He worked his way to the rear of the room and, looking back, saw that Plummer was watching him intently through the smoke.

Baron unbuttoned his still dripping reversible topcoat and sauntered up to a table. He edged in and watched the play, occasionally letting his eyes swivel up and move from side to side to sweep even the dark corners of the big room.

SUDDENLY he tensed, and his slitted gaze focused on a tall, white-faced youth being escorted toward a dark-stained door at one corner of the room. The youth was being escorted by a short, powerfully built man, whose dark, pitted face showed nothing of emotion. But the short man had a grip clamped on the

youth's arm, and his other hand made a big lump in the pocket of his tailored sack coat. . . .

Baron watched the pair move as far as the stained door and stop. The youth twisted around, said something; his face was scared, and his wavy chestnut hair tumbled in tousled profusion upon his high forehead. The short man gave his arm a wrench, and pain rippled across the youth's white face. He twisted the knob, pulled the door open, and the pair went into another room. The short man, reaching behind him, pulled the door shut.

Baron edged away from the table, began to drift toward the door. Plummer was watching him. He moved slowly, carelessly, trying to keep Plummer in the tail of his eye. He got to within ten feet of the stained door. Plummer's eyes hadn't left him. The blond man stood there tense and watchful as a boxer waiting for an opening. Two men stepped up to him. Plummer flicked his eyes at them, nodded, immediately sought Baron again. One of them said something, and Plummer again took his eyes off Baron. The other man drifted in between Plummer and the tables, cutting, for the moment, Plummer's view.

Baron moved swiftly. He flung himself at the stained door, wrenched it open and piled into the room. He shoved the door shut behind him, his right hand resting between the lapels of his coat. He remained tense, drawn up, for the space of several seconds. Then, slowly, he let his hand drop and made a more leisurely survey of the room than his abrupt entrance had permitted him. The room was furnished with a desk, two chairs, a big safe. There was an unused watercooler. Cigaret butts littered the floor, and the odor of stale

smoke was strong. The room was empty.

Baron scowled. He went swiftly across the room, jerked open the door to the left of the big safe and found himself at the bottom of a musty, unlighted stairwell. Traveling on the balls of his feet, he began to sneak up the stairs. As he neared the top, he could hear voices. One, harsh, growling, threatening; the other raised in frightened, desperate pleading.

Baron reached in under his armpit and brought his hand out balled around the stock of a short-barreled .38 automatic. He arrived at the head of the stairs, took a few steps down a dim hallway and stood outside a door listening. He reached out and tried the door; it was locked.

The frightened voice, laced with terror, became squeaky and fluted and fluttered in the higher octaves. The harsh voice became harder, more menacing. Another voice, cold as the drip of chilled acid, sliced in now and then. Suddenly the harsh voice ripped out in profane rage. There was the sound of a blow, a sharp cry. The sound of another blow, heavier, more lethal. Then the sound of something sliding, a tumbling thud.

Baron swore through his teeth. Holding the .38 in his right hand, he drove his heel forcefully against the door, alongside the lock, causing it to burst open. He leaped through the doorway. A diminutive man, with a pale, chinless face and a small, fish-like mouth, jerked up and away from the slumped figure of the youth, a crumpled heap on the rugless floor. The small man's hand darted for his armpit, but halted when Baron shoved the .38 at him. Baron then swung the automatic to cover the short, squat man. His eyes were flaming like burning gems, his face

was like something pressed out of rolled steel. The squat man slowly brought his balled up hand out of his pocket—empty.

"That's a hell of a way to collect a bill, Bonini!" Baron said harshly. "How much did the kid owe you?" he added contemptuously. "Five hundred?"

BONINI hunched his powerful shoulders nervously, scowled. "He owed plenty," he growled. "Thousands."

Baron, keeping the .38 level, edged around the pair, threaded amongst a scattering of wooden chairs, the room's only furnishings. He moved all the way over to the crumpled youth. He took one look at the dead-white skin contrasting so strangely with the slow trickly ooze of dark red that seeped out from under the cap of wavy chestnut hair, then bent swiftly. He lifted a limp, blue-veined wrist, felt for a pulse. When he rose, his eyes were hard, unwinking, his face, if possible, bleaker, more flinty than before.

"Young Dudley's dead," he said flatly. He looked intently at the two faces. "I guess you know that, though, don't you?"

Bonini's eyes wavered and he jerked his head at the dead youth, looked quickly away again. "We was just tryin' to get the dough the kid owed us!" he bleated.

"I know what you were doing," Baron said. "I was listening." Baron edged back toward the door. "The kid's old man is the city's leading citizen," he said, his voice taking on the qualities of a surgeon's knife. "Old man Dudley is a real power in politics and one of the best known figures in finance in the country. I guess you know what that means,

don't you? The seat of your pants is beginning to scorch already!"

He saw the chinless man's neck bob as he swallowed.

"Who are you?" Bonini demanded, his tone implying that he had recovered some measure of composure. "How do you cut in on this?"

"He's a private dick," the little chinless man jerked out. "His name is Baron. He is probably workin' for old man Dudley."

"That's right," Baron said calmly. "Dudley's such a nice old guy himself he can't see anything wrong unless it's shoved under his nose, but he knew the kid was in trouble of some kind and I was commissioned to get him out of it. Well, Bond of Homicide is a pal of mine—he's related to the Dudley family by marriage, too, come to think of it! I think he'll really appreciate the favor I'm going to do him—you get what I mean, I guess!"

The two stared at him, tense, frozen. Baron let a bleak grin split his lips. "I guess you do, all right!"

"Sure they do!" the voice of Plummer grated, and something hard was jammed into Baron's kidneys. Baron cursed, opened his hand and dropped the .38. "Get it, Al," Plummer ordered.

The little man scooped up the gun, and Plummer said: "What happened?"

"The Dudley squirt," Bonini said. "I was tryin' to convince him he should pay an honest debt and I hit him too hard."

Plummer stared at the crumpled youth, licked his thick, moist lips.

But Bonini was grinning. He rubbed thick, hairy hands together. "I got me an idea," he said, looking at Baron. "This guy was workin' for old man Dudley, see? If he was found with a bullet hole in his skull, why

the homicide boys can't do nothing but talk about it, can they?"

Plummer and Al watched Bonini.

"See," the pock-faced man said, "he's found near Dudley . . . in a nice smashup along some lonely road."

Al's pale, thin lips moved in a quick smile. "Yeah," he said. "Sure! Baron was shakin' the kid down, usin' something he had found out. The kid shot him and was takin' him out in the country to give him the dump. Then his tan coupe skids on the wet road and he smashes up and kills himself."

"Damn!" Plummer said, grinning now. "That's perfect!"

"It's good enough," Bonini conceded.

PLUMMER went over Baron, searching for another gun, and Bonini gave a couple of orders.

Baron and Al went down the stairs first. Al had his gun jammed against Baron's ribs. Plummer carried Dudley limply slung over his shoulder. When they reached the bottom of the stairwell, Bonini grunted something, and they halted. The pock-marked man moved around them, opened the door of the office and looked in; then he jerked his sleek, black head. "C'mon," he clipped.

In the office, Bonini locked the door opening on the gambling room, then went back to the desk, pulled out a drawer and lifted a pint bottle. He unscrewed the top and, holding his finger over the opening, sprinkled the dead youth's chest liberally with the amber-colored liquid.

"It all helps," Bonini explained. "The kid was a little drunk when it happened."

"You're smart as hell!" Plummer exclaimed admiringly.

Bonini spoke to Plummer and Al. The pair left. Bonini had his gun out. His dark eyes dared Baron. Baron leaned against the desk, pulled out a cigaret and lit it. He forced himself to smoke it leisurely. He was grinding the red end of the stump against the scratched surface of the desk when Plummer returned. Plummer picked up Dudley again, and Bonini shoved his gun in his pocket and stepped up behind Baron. He made Baron walk ahead of him, and Plummer trailed after them.

They went out a door, the one just to the right of the one opening on the stairway, and stepped into an alley. The alley was dark and narrow and rain-water wimpled on the paving, running toward the street. They emerged from the alley, coming out on the deserted, wind-swept street that paralleled the one that the gambling house fronted on. Three cars, glistening with the rain, waited at the curb. One was Dudley's tan coupe, the one Baron had seen on the side street, one an old black Buick, the third a new car. A spotlight was clamped on the old Buick.

Plummer ran heavily from the mouth of the alley and shoved Dudley into the tan coupe. Baron could see Al behind the wheel of the black Buick. Bonini waited until Plummer had returned and stepped behind Baron, then he went down to the new car at the end of the line.

Plummer made Baron go quickly across the glistening sidewalk and slide in behind the wheel of the tan coupe.

"Where's Bonini going?" Baron said.

"He's got some business to attend to," Plummer said.

The lights of the city were a whitish blur in the rainy night behind them. The headlights of the tan

coupe picked out mirrors on the tortuous macadam road, gave momentary brilliant, flashing life to the raindrops as they splattered and danced prior to blending with the sheeting runoff. The old Buick was staying behind, its headlights about as big as dimes in the mirror.

"It would be a damn good joke on you if this wasn't Dudley's car," Baron said, his face tight, grim despite the apparent levity of his statement; he gave his right shoulder a little hunch, shoving the dead man over against Plummer.

Plummer looked across the sagging corpse. "It is, all right," he said. He kept on looking and a loose grin pulled at his thick lips. "Whatsa matter, you nervous?" he asked.

Baron looked at the pale blob that was Plummer's face. "Mind if I smoke?" he said.

Plummer watched with eyes that were mere dots deep in the bloated flesh of his face. Baron held the end of the flaming match to the tip of his cigaret. Neither quivered. He sucked the flame, dropped the match in the tray in the dash.

The road curved suddenly, sharply. Baron touched the brake, and the dead man was thrown heavily against him. As the road straightened, the corpse continued to bump. Baron shoved against it. Plummer chuckled harshly. He moved his right hand, and his gun glinted.

THE COUNTRYSIDE became wilder; even the lights of the strung out farmhouses dwindled and dropped behind. A scrubby waste began to slide into the tunnels of light made by the headlights. Water, running off the high-crowned road, purred sullenly in the ditches on either side of the lonely highway. The trees moaned a little in the wind and

drooped under the continuous down-pour.

Baron could feel a tenseness beginning to eat into his muscles. Plummer was flicking squinty glances through the rain-smearred windshield. The road was beginning to climb slowly, steadily. The coupe pointed its nose up, bucking the thin, sheeting series of miniature rapids that rushed down into the headlights.

"Slow down a little," Plummer directed.

Baron let up a little on the gas. His teeth were clamped together and his nostrils pinched. Muscles on the backs of his hands were white ridges. His mouth was tight, flat. The dead man had sagged against him again, but he ignored that, kept staring at the wet road ahead.

"Slower!" Plummer snarled.

Baron shifted into second. The pitch of the motor changed as the coupe slowed in its upward climb. Plummer had his gun shoved across the dead man's stomach and directed at Baron's side. He searched the wild area that just barely managed to edge into the headlight beams. He twisted around, peered out the back window at the headlights of the Buick crawling up the slope after them.

"When you get to the top of the grade, stop," he ordered.

Baron swept the area swiftly. There was a white guardrail paralleling them now on the right. It bent almost at right angles up ahead, advertising a sharp curve. Two red reflectors leaped up out of the wet night and glowed brilliantly through the rain. To the left was the ragged fringe of the brushy wasteland; to the right, beyond the top of the white guardrail, an empty blackness. . . .

Baron let his eyes swing over to meet those of Plummer.

"Tough luck, Buddy," Plummer said softly.

Baron left the coupe in second. Beginning to whine a little, it made the top of the grade. The red reflectors were about a hundred feet ahead. Baron shoved the clutch in, let the coupe drift. Suddenly he tramped on the gas pedal, let the clutch out. In second, the car accelerated rapidly. Plummer screamed a curse. Baron twisted the wheel. There was a shot. The window at Baron's left exploded glassily. The nose of the coupe rocketed at the white guardrail. There was a rending crash, a vicious, twisting lurch. Baron thumbed the ignition switch as the car went over into nothing.

The car turned once, hit the slope crookedly. It wrenched out of that, balanced for a moment, then plunged again. Baron kept hold of the wheel. Plummer had stopped yelling. The dead youth was sprawled all over Baron.

The car twisted, hit on its nose. It crashed over, then began to roll. It rolled over clumps of bushes, slid tinnily off the boles of small trees. It went all the way to the bottom of the drop and came to a sliding halt on its side.

Shaken, tasting blood, Baron shoved at the heavy body slumped over him. He could feel blood, not his own, thick and warm on his face. He heaved again, saw that the weight on top of him was Plummer. He held the heavy, sprawling man up, wriggled out from under. He felt around, found the gun still clutched in Plummer's hand.

BARON reached up, shoved a door open and climbed out. The smell of scorched oil was strong. The beat of the cold, sweeping rain helped clear his head and stop the

wobbly spin that had scrambled his senses. He hunched his shoulders, stamped his feet, then put the gun in his pocket and dragged Plummer out of the wreck.

The blond man was badly broken up; one arm hung like a limb that clings to a tree by a strip of bark. Baron laid him down, went back to the smashed car and thrust his head and shoulders through the twisted door frame. He fished a packet of matches out of his pocket; they were dry and the first one yielded a yellow flare of light. He stared at the battered features of young Dudley until the match melted down and burned his fingers.

Then he backed out, turned to Plummer. He tore four matches from the pack and struck them under the protection of his cupped hand. Plummer, on his back, was trying to say something, but pink bubbles kept forming on his lips. Baron touched him with his foot, and the blond man opened his eyes. Baron squatted.

"Where did Bonini go?" Baron said.

Plummer's blood-streaked face was a horrible sheet of adamancy. The matches went out. Baron's teeth showed whitely as he reached out and grasped Plummer's shattered arm. Slowly, his strong fingers biting into the already rain-soaked cloth, digging at shrinking flesh, the pressure flowed.

"Where?" he repeated.

Plummer screamed. "Osborne!" he shrieked. Then a violent shudder went through him. He coughed once. Something dark gushed from his mouth, and the tautness flowed out of his arm. Baron dropped it, stared for a moment, then jerked his head up as the traveling beam of a powerful spotlight swept above his head.

Baron's eyes bored through the

rain. He could make out Al, up on the road, frantically manipulating the spotlight, sweeping from side to side, swinging the beam up and down. The little chinless man, a sharp silhouette, was standing on the running board of the black Buick. Baron slid Plummer's gun from his pocket as the beam suddenly wavered, swept down to bathe him in a white gloss of light. He rose, shoved the safety catch of the gun. An orange flash darted at him from above; a bullet whined viciously off a tree near his head.

Baron darted for the protection of the car. The light followed him, and two more shots roared out above. Baron crouched behind the wrecked coupe, pulled his limp hatbrim low to shield his eyes from the barrage of raindrops. He laid the barrel of the gun on the upturned edge of the running board, steadied. Al made a perfect target, limned up there in the light. Baron sighted through the rain, squeezed the trigger. Al jerked, seemed to stiffen. Baron sent two more shots up the slope, and the chinless man toppled off the running board onto the road.

Baron waited a moment, then shoved the gun back in his pocket, picked up the heavy, sagging form of Plummer and began to toil up the slope.

Baron braked the Buick to a halt. He hauled the limp form of Plummer out, dragged him into the brushy scrub along the side of the road. Then he returned for Al; he carried the bullet-riddled little man in his arms and laid him down alongside Plummer. Then he returned to the Buick.

Back in town, he found a dark mass of shadow in the back of the brick building that housed Bonini's gambling house. He parked the

Buick there and stepped out into the rain-lashed night. He walked around to the side of the building, stepped into the doorway he had watched the man with the thick glasses and the bland, round face use earlier in the evening.

BARON paused in the vestibule. There were two mail boxes. He looked at the neatly lettered Rita Fulton above one, then gave the button two short jabs. He waited a moment. There was a click and he opened the door and went up the stairs. A door with a big 2 on it loomed ahead as he came up off the stairs. He walked up to it, knocked. There was the sound of high heels; then the door opened.

A voluptuous blonde, the outline and curving symmetry of her figure merely blurred by the flowing negligee she clutched, looked out at Baron and her mascaraed eyes went suddenly wide with suspicion.

"Who— What do you want?" she floundered.

"Has Osborne been here?" Baron clipped.

The blonde caught herself then. "Never heard of him!" she retorted defiantly.

Baron lunged forward, pushing the door back. The blonde gave a little scream, struggled for a moment, then gave way, and Baron walked into the apartment. He glanced about the expensively over-furnished room, went into the next. The blonde followed.

"I'll call the cops," she threatened. "You can't bust in on a lady like this!"

"I wouldn't," Baron advised. "A nice dive you've got here," he remarked.

He completed the swing of the

apartment, "How long since he's left?" he demanded.

The blonde's flaming lips twisted at him. "I don't know what you're talkin' about," she said.

Baron shrugged. "You may be a sorry girl you didn't, come tomorrow," he said grimly.

He left the apartment, heard the blonde follow him out into the hall. He stopped.

"Sure you don't want to tell me anything about Osborne?" he called back from the head of the stairs.

The blonde merely stared at him, and Baron returned to the Buick, slipped it in gear and rolled away.

Traffic was light now. Baron made good time and finally pulled up to the curb and stopped in the middle of a block of old, respectable three-story houses. He sat in the seat for a moment, studying the car parked across the street. It was Bonini's big new car. It was empty. Baron turned from the car, let his eyes sweep the row of houses at his left.

Baron got out of the old Buick, walked along reading the house numbers. Suddenly he turned and climbed the high, iron-railed steps of one of the houses. He found both the outside and inside doors unlocked. He had paused long enough to read the apartment number under the name of James Osborne. . . .

He walked along a hallway on the second floor, reading the numbers on the doors with the aid of old-fashioned bell-shaped lights set on brackets at spaced intervals. He found the number he wanted and stopped. He slid the gun he had taken from Plummer out from under his arm, reached down and twisted the knob. The door wasn't locked, but the chain was on. The chain scraped ever so slightly.

Suddenly there was a muffled sound—like a blurred shot. Baron drew back, drove his heel against the door. The third try tore the bracket out of the door frame, and the door flew back. The apartment had been darkened, and Baron ducked down and slipped through the doorway, sliding to his right to get out of the weak wash of light that followed him in from the hall. He froze in a semi-crouch, his eyes frantically probing the thick darkness. He could hear someone moving stealthily. There was a sudden flash, a tongue of flame. Baron snapped a shot, heard Bonini curse and something clatter on the floor.

Baron whirled, his fingers avidly seeking the light switch near the door. He found it and flooded the room with light as Bonini, on one knee, scooped up his gun and shot wildly again. Baron slid to one side. Bonini scrambled to his feet, dove out of the room. Baron plunged after him. He tripped over something, sprawled. Looking back, he saw it was an outflung arm and hand. The hand clutched a gun. He followed the outflung arm to the body sprawled behind a long divan. It was the bland-looking round-faced man, and a bullet hole was neatly centered in his forehead. A piece of paper, hastily scrawled, lay on his chest.

Bonini slid his arm around the doorjamb. Baron caught the movement, jerked away just as Bonini's hand belched flame. The arm disappeared. Baron waited a moment. Then he went to the wall, slid along it, came to the doorway. Nothing happened. He took an ashtray off the arm of a nearby chair, tossed it into the room. Again nothing happened.

His gun jutting from a rock-steady fist, his face a tense, smooth mask, Baron slipped through the doorway.

He darted, then jerked to a halt, his eyes swiveling, his gun swinging in a hungry arc. The room seemed to be empty. A corner, blocked out by a huge overstuffed chair, caught his eye. He advanced slowly upon it, his gun pointing at the spot just above the back of the chair. He was two steps away when he heard a sound out in the kitchen.

He spun, flung back the kitchen door and snapped a shot at Bonini climbing through the window. Bonini arched his back, slid back into the room. He rolled over like a wounded bear, snarling, got onto one knee in the long rectangle of light admitted by the open door. Baron shot deliberately. Bonini jerked; his face drained. He tried to steady his gun, bring it up. Baron shot again, and Bonini dropped his gun, stayed poised on one knee, then slid forward on his face.

THE Homicide Squad was scattered throughout Osborne's apartment. Bond, Captain in Homicide, his china-blue eyes intent on Baron, listened.

"Look, pal," Baron said. "This is off the record."

Bond nodded. "All right, then. Off the record."

"If we didn't work together, there's lots of things you'd never find out—"

"Let's have it," Bond cut in crisply.

Baron said: "Osborne worked for young Dudley's old man—at the old man's bank. He had been doing some fancy juggling with the figures there and when old man Dudley, a kindly old guy, found out that somebody was taking the bank home in his pocket, he engaged me to find the guilty party. He wanted to handle it privately because that is his way of doing things."

"Well, I found the guilty party, all right. Two of them, in fact. Osborne and young Dudley. See, Dudley was working at the bank and was on a salary. That was an idea of his father's, and the salary was his only income. But young Dudley had a weakness for gambling and began to sneak a little extra coin now and then. Osborne caught him at it. But Osborne, instead of turning the kid in, taught him the real tricks of the trade.

"For a while the kid went wild, visiting Bonini's place every night and tossing away heavy dough. Then he began to run into debt there. See, Osborne had begun to shake him down. That was safer than lifting the dough himself and Osborne needed money for something he kept in an apartment near Bonini's place.

"But Bonini got impatient and demanded his money. In trying to collect, he killed Dudley. I had followed Dudley—I was trying to get the real lowdown on the case, clear up a couple of angles; that's why I was so close to everything that happened—and Bonini and a couple of his hoodlums caught me and tried to fix up a nice little frame to put them in the clear. Only it didn't work. You'll find young Dudley in his wrecked car, and two punks, a chinless wonder and a big guy named Plummer, a few miles nearer town.

"Now I'll go back a bit. Bonini hadn't come with us and I found out from Plummer where he had gone. I wanted him to check a couple of angles. But when I learned he had gone after Osborne, I changed my plans. See, Bonini knew that Osborne might guess the truth about young Dudley, and went to fix him. But he couldn't find him right away, not being quite so well informed on Osborne's movements for the evening as I was, so he came here and waited.

I came here, too—about two steps too late."

Baron lifted the note that had been lying on Osborne's chest. "Bonini made Osborne write this," he said. "It's a confession to the embezzling of all the missing funds at the bank. That was to make this look like a suicide."

"There isn't anything, aside from the regular routine, we'll have to do to you," Bond said after Baron had explained more fully about Al and Plummer. "Bonini admitted the killing of Osborne and young Dudley before he died and we found the handkerchief he had used to muffle the shot. It was all powder-stained and showed the marks of a bullet and he had stuffed it back in his pocket." He showed Baron a bullet-pierced handkerchief.

Baron rattled the note Osborne had been forced to write. "I came here to maybe save Osborne and get him to take it easy when he talked about the kid. I wanted to soften the blow that was going to fall on the old man. But maybe it is better this way," he added reflectively.

"What do you mean?" Bond said.

BARON rattled the paper again. "This absolves the kid. Why not let it go the way everything's headed? The kid died in a crackup. The two punks got too smart and were bumped off by their underworld friends. Osborne committed suicide because he was in so deep at the bank. It will make it a lot easier for the old man—he'll never know his son was a crook. He deserves some kind of a break on this."

"Yeah!" Bond howled. "Turn the Department upside down just so you can smooth out a case!"

"But Dudley is a name in this town! He's big politically, too. He'll

throw his weight around a little and have the whole mess hushed up—only thing is, I want to give him a break.”

Bond scowled.

“And just remember, you’ll have a hell of a time clearing up the bloody mess by yourself,” Baron needled. “What I’ve been saying is off the record—and dead men can’t talk, you know!”

Bond still scowled.

“What have you got to lose?” Baron said. “Justice has been done! Bonini murdered young Dudley and Osborne, but he’s dead. What more do you want? You can’t burn a corpse, can you? As for Al and Plummer, nobody cares! The only thing you’re doing is letting Osborne take the rap for young Dudley—but it’s a deserved rap and comes under the heading of your good deed for the day.”

“At least the truth would be known,” Bond muttered.

“Oh, no!” Baron corrected. “If

you’re going to play the game close to your chest, I’ll get hold of old man Dudley and give him the works. He’ll have your case smashed before it gets to first base—and my version will be the accepted one, anyway. . . . And the old man will want to know why in hell you didn’t think of something like that yourself, inasmuch as you’re one of the family—”

“How will you explain Bonini?” Bond demanded.

“Easy. He was shaking Osborne down. He came here and found Osborne dead, got excited and tried to leave in a hurry. I ran into him and he lost his head and started shooting. So did I—in self defense.”

Baron reached out and took the bullet-pierced handkerchief Bond had stuffed carelessly into his pocket. “You won’t be needing this,” he said.

“I’ll have to think it over,” Bond growled; but he didn’t grab at the handkerchief.

Baron grinned. “Thanks, pal,” he said.

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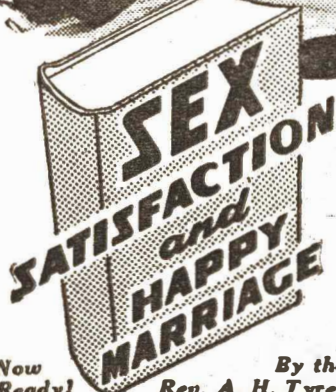
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She sneaked up behind him and smashed the bottle over his head.



DEATH DURING BIRD SONG

by EARL W. SCOTT

Deadly fifth columnists thrust insidious fingers into the very vitals of America's war program . . . and clutch the Army's No. 1 test pilot in a death grip.

AS OUR cab slowed for the curb fronting the Hotel Bendemere, Major Crawford sighed, keen eyes on the palm-lined street, the calm Pacific beyond.

"People!" he breathed, spreading bronzed hands.

I grunted, glance sweeping the loafers. My hand hovered by my shoulder holster as I stepped out. I

wasn't forgetting Kansas City. Some nut had taken a pot shot at the Major there as we left our plane. Not surprising. He'd drawn world attention skipping the great bomber V 19 in successful flight some weeks since. He was pulling a repeater in tomorrow's trial flight of the Super-Manifest No. 1. It was a good guess the subversive crowd definitely had a finger on the army's number one pilot.

I'd looked for trouble at the L. A. air port but there were a lot of handy guards spotted around, and our principal grief had been autograph hunters. Now as we made up the steps, I got a grim chuckle out of the fact that the saps had mistaken me for the crack ace. It was one of those things that can make or break the fortunes of men. I thought about it later.

But chucking autograph hounds can prove a nightmare. As we broke through the hotel doors, an apologetic, guttural voice addressed us—

"So sorry to intrude—too many at the port—perhaps now you would be pleased to sign the autograph—"

I swung scowling on the large, broad-faced man in wrinkled shiny serge, extending grimy book, and pen. He'd been in the front line at the field, and must have done a sixty getting here ahead of us.

"It said 'no' at the port. It's no again. No signature for various reasons. Is that clear?"

"But—it is so small a favor—yes?" He shrugged thick shoulders, swabbing at his sweaty face with a wrinkled handkerchief.

"Damn it! No!" I waved him away, striding toward the desk. Such perseverance was worthy of a better cause.

The Bendemere was an official hostelry for Vulcan flyers in Santa Monica. I'd billeted there before.

Kuttner, the manager, came forward smiling. He was a big man, bronzed from the links. I remembered we'd talked golf my last visit. His office was plastered with trophy cups.

"Honor to have you here, Major," he boomed. "Mr. Drake, welcome back. Make it your home, gentlemen, your home." He thumbed over a bell boy. "And the flight out? Pleasant, I hope." He had the faculty of all good hosts. Personal interest. His bland face sobered as he suggested to Crawford that one of the test pilots who had cracked up the previous week, was convalescing on the second floor. He'd asked to say hello.

"Murchison?" frowned Crawford, turning from the register. "The poor kid! I hadn't heard. Sure, what's his room?"

I tailed up to 216, Crawford's shadow. That was my job. F. B. I. Unit Five. Washington thought a lot of the major. Obvious, by their entrusting to him of such a mission.

Once more the eyes of the world were on the west coast, and this erect, keen-eyed man, the Major. Once more within but a few short weeks a super plane was to take to the air lanes in maiden flight. Douglas had built the V 19. Vulcan had sprung a mystery ship, a leviathan carrier—the Manifest No. 1.

A President, and a Prime Minister had met in mid-ocean. Out of that historical conference great things were expected. Not the least of these was the immediate establishment of a freight and transport route to the near east via the west African coast. It was proposed that fighter planes, equipment, materials of war, would be flown directly to the sectors where most needed. In such service the great carrier with a reputed cruising radius of Bagdad and return would prove a bonanza. Parts for a score

of unassembled planes, tanks, oil, even gas—dropped directly behind the lines, flown by this freighter of the air.

YEARS of patient effort, endless expense and heart breaking delays had produced a Queen to the bomber King. A hundred tons of metalized motion. If something should happen to her now! Well, that was the Vulcan worry. Theirs and the U. S. Air Corps. Mine was the man who drove her—the Major.

A perspiring bell hop charged past us burdened down with our bags, as we turned into room 216. Murchison lay on the bed, a neat bandage around his curly head. Just a kid, I thought, as much a hero as any member of the Eagle Squadron flying with the R.A.F., cracking up testing a Britain-slated bomber. Worship glowed in his dark eyes as he greeted the Major.

“Just wishing good luck tomorrow, sir, to a great flyer, if you don’t mind my saying so.”

The Major smiled grimly. “Thanks, son. I need it. There’s been a number of you Vulcan lads taking it on the chin this way lately. Hope it isn’t catching.” He gestured at the bandage.

“Screwy air sickness, sir,” frowned Murchison. “Can you imagine it. After a thousand air hours! My buddy, Donnelly, got it that way too. Kohler and Franks, across the hall there—they claimed the same thing—before—before they checked out Sunday.” He swallowed, hands trembling.

The house physician, Dr. Berg, turned at the window, frowned, approaching to lift the lax wrist on the spread. “Sorry, Murchison,” he murmured, “but you’ve talked enough.” His glance dismissed us.

He showed a large man in well tailored gray with blue, clean shaven jaws and pale perfunctory eyes. Gold rimmed nose glasses dangled on a black cord. He groped for them with thick, splay-tipped fingers.

“Of course, doctor.” Crawford turned. “Buck up, lad. We’ll be going now.”

Glancing back I saw rebellion in the young flyer’s eyes. The doctor was drawing the spread higher.

It’s a strange thing how so small a thing as a bell boy’s error may twist the course of fate. The kid had dumped my bags in 341 and left the Major’s in 339. It was no never mind, there was still the communicating bath between. We weren’t registered that way, but it was merely an error for the book. We took it as it lay.

The Major showered first, and turned in. I penned a routine report, making a note in passing of the three crack-ups in the past ten days, of the Vulcan Hawks. “All men from the Bendemere,” I wrote, and sat scowling at the words, then I stripped and made for the shower. The Major’s quiet snore droned through the closed door. What a man! With a nation waiting—he could snore!

I WOKE when the door swung. I get it that way about doors. Life, death—everything between—comes or leaves that way. This time was death on the make. Guess I got it—a subconscious warning.

Sort of a hellish dream. A quiet figure padding in through the dark clutching a gleaming hypo! Still that was screwy. Too dark to see anything, and I seldom dream. Stretched there under the cool sheet, I lifted slow lids. Fresh draft was fanning my cheek, and there was that feel about unoccupied dark being peopled.

The room wasn't right. Gray light where there shouldn't be. Two windows on the east.

Then I got it. The bell hop's error. I was in the Major's room and not the one I usually occupied when I stopped at the Bendemere. It was the bath door that was swinging. I was about to breathe—"Major! Major Crawford!" Something stopped me. A man walking in his sleep didn't catch breath that way, didn't figure his footfalls.

That damned habit I had of sleeping with hands folded behind my head. My automatic was on the lamp stand at the head. The bed was between the door and the east window. I was in silhouette to that creeping figure just forming in the gloom. A quick snatch would catapult him on me. Still I must chance it.

I unlaced my fingers and with a grunt, pounded for the gun. There came a startled curse then the guy was on me. For the instant, he pinned me under linen, but two can play at that game and I whipped up the sheet and around his flailing arms. He drove a knee in my stomach, socking me back on the mattress, breath whooshing.

His face was a hovering gray mask in the gloom. Breath jumped hissing through white teeth as I levered him over. Not so easy. He was plenty big, and his muscles felt hard through the linen. His head burrowed in my bare chest, and he butted it up trapping my jaws shut, sending hot stars rocketing through my brain.

Swathed in that sheet, socking four-inch blows in my stomach, he fought viciously as we toppled on the rail, then crashed to the floor. My jack-knifed knee was in his middle as he struck and that slowed him

some. He wrenched an arm free, and fearing a gat or knife, my fingers slid up a shirt-sleeved arm, vising a hairy wrist. He grunted as I put on pressure, something dropped with a thud to the carpet. I was conscious of a strange odor that I recalled later. Just then I was too busy to bother.

His weight was a little more than mine, 180 stripped, but his condition was not so good. He was breathing hard as he threshed over, upsetting the bed stand. It made small noise on the thick carpet but the cord of the stand lamp started tangling up. I sensed him tugging on it—too late. He snatched it up and socked the heavy copper lamp base into my bare shoulder.

I choked, going weak as water and rolling me free, he rocked to his feet, sending a swift kick to my ribs that flattened me for the count. Gasping, I tried to rise. He padded to the hall door, paused there a moment listening, then thumbing the night catch, slid through closing it softly behind him. Groaning, I lifted to an elbow. Saying it myself, a few men ever had given Stanley Drake, Unit 5, of the F. B. I., such a drubbing.

A mocking bird started making noises in the palm outside the open window. Daylight had come. Groggily I got to a light switch. The place was a mess. The wrinkled, wadded sheet tangled the rug. My zipper bag had spewed spare shirts and socks under the bed. Free of the corded lamp stand, the crushed shade tilted crazily over a spreading stain on the polished floor. The stain wasn't red! It was blue. Blue smeared the right sleeve of my sleeping jacket. I was making indigo tracks with my bare feet, about the

room. The offending ink well had been kicked into a corner.

MY bare foot nosed something else on the rug. Something smooth and round, gleaming in the light. A shiny hypo syringe! A soggy gauze pad lay just beyond—chloroform!

My eyes jerked to the open bath room door. The intruder had come that way, and beyond lay the Major. I plunged through, twisting the knob of the communicating door.

"Major!" I called. "Major Crawford!"

At first in the gloom, I could not see. Then vision grew. Tunic, trousers, of a neatly pressed uniform racking a chair, a dressed top arrayed with toilet articles—two open bags—a checked bath robe draping the bed-foot, and on the bed, the Major.

"Okay, Major?" I said again, ears strained for his quiet breathing, his snore.

There was neither—no sound at all. Only that damned mocking bird running scales outside the window. I stepped across, gently shaking Crawford's shoulder. It was lax, bare, and felt chill. I caught breath as something wet and sticky smeared my fingers. Then I jerked the bed lamp chain, but I didn't need more light to tell the tragedy. Major Crawford had been murdered!

Striped sleeping jacket thrown wide, he lay on his side in a welter of blood, a two-inch knife slit above his heart. His graying hair was unruffled, the lean, square-jawed face composed. He'd died quickly, probably in his sleep. I swallowed bitterly. Washington had entrusted the safety of their finest flyer to my keeping. Whatever the reason I'd failed to deliver my charge to Vulcan air port. The Major had been a great

soldier and a swell guy. Killed twenty feet away with me sleeping in the next room—his room, really.

That thought brought another. The killer, sneaking through the bath with blood on his hands—and this time—a hypo for weapon. Thanks to the bell boy's error, I was alive this moment. The knife had been meant to block interference of the body-guard. A half-finished letter on the writing desk confirmed it. Scrawled on hotel stationery it ran:

"Dear Major: If anything happens to me, you continue details of your flight as planned. Personalities must be forgotten. Too much depends on your success. I have a strange premonition that my number's up. Probably a throwback to some two bit punk I've sent over the hurdles and forgotten. So carry on. I've enjoyed—"

That was all. The damnable ingenuity of the thing! Not a bad duplicate of my writing, either. Likely picked up from the register. Nothing had been left to chance. Finding my murdered body, the Major would carry on. Well, so could I!

As I moved about, a swift plan formed. Still in death, Crawford would carry on as silent partner. He'd want it that way. Opportunist that he was, I could even imagine the grim lips of the flyer twist in a faint smile of approval. 'Great stuff!' they seemed to say, 'anything I can do—' He could do a lot, at least by proxy.

There'd been that reception at the air port the night previous. "So glad to meet you, Major—" the glad handers had crowded round. Three years service sticks starch in your spine. Same build, height and general coloring, I could even talk like Crawford, those clipped, short sen-

tences. But that would probably not be necessary.

CRAWFORD had been in island service for years. Scarcely known on the west coast. He'd ducked the news hawks on the bomber's flight till he'd drawn the moniker—"The Phantom Flyer." He'd been in civvies the night before. His uniform would complete the disguise.

Half an hour later, shaved, showered, fully dressed as an officer in U. S. aviation, I telephoned the desk. "Major Crawford speaking," I barked at the clerk.

"Oh, good morning, Major," he caroled. "I was about to call you, and Mr. Drake, also."

"Just skip Drake's call in 339, will you? Don't let him be disturbed. Tough day yesterday—no need of him getting out to the plant yet."

"Certainly, sir. And the flight? So many have asked at the desk—it will be at nine?"

"That's the time. Never can tell." I smiled grimly. Was that the truth? "Have a cab run up to the patio door in ten minutes."

"Yes, sir."

It wasn't six-thirty when I went down the hall past that silent door of 339. Nothing would be thought of the Major going early to the scene of his flight. Already wise, as was his co-pilot, a Vulcan man, to every rivet and strip of welding, the carrier's gleaming body, every test made, they'd mother her moves and hover the ground force till the last instant before the take-off. I wasn't making it too soon for the watchful eyes of the killer. I'd strung out the talk with the desk clerk to give him a break. He'd scarcely rest, his mission uncompleted with the Major. Just what that was, wasn't shrouded in so much mystery.

There'd been growing sabotage in the plants all over the country, and the public didn't know half of it. Deadly fifth column activities thrusting insidious fingers into the very vitals of the defense industry. Topping fire, strikes, the jimming of machinery, printed and vocal propaganda, now it was tampering with and crippling the personnel.

Murchison and his buddies at the Bendemere. The hotel was certainly one focal point of the column activities. No coincidence, the growing number of crack-ups of those boys. Lastly, this attack on the Major. Small wonder with the eyes of the world on the test flight of the giant Manifest, that drastic effort would be made to guarantee it a flop.

Striding down the carpeted hall, my narrowed eyes queried the closed doors. Any one of them might shelter my frustrated attacker. It seemed clear that he didn't know he'd killed the wrong man. His attempt to needle me, as Crawford, proved that. I had a hunch about that hypo and stopped to poke a head in Murchison's door as I reached the second floor. His bed light was on, but his sleeping face looked so drawn and pale under the head bandage I didn't have the heart to waken him.

I could check with him later—when and if I returned. That 'if' was big. I had no illusions about that. I reached the stair-head and in the corridor's gloom practically collided with the manager, Kuttner. He was rounding the elevator shaft.

"Whoosh!" he boomed, chuckling, exuding fragrance of shaving soap and Turkish cigarettes. His body bulged the free-tailed polo shirt and flannel slacks. He was toting sacked golf clubs. At the sand jar he paused to grind out butts.

"Out early this morning, Major,"

he called. "So today's the day—good luck!"

"Thanks," I clipped, stepping down the softly carpeted stairs. Passing muster with Kuttner's eyes, said my disguise was good.

As I paced the lower corridor, a door opened abruptly—so fast my hand slid toward my hip, then I grunted, brushing past the tousled figure of the autograph hunter. He broke off a yawn, tugging at gallus-draped pants.

"Good morning, Major," he gulped. "This is luck! One moment while I get my book." He hustled inside, hauling at his suspenders.

On the point of refusal I thought—why not? A good stall. A moment later I'd scrawled the Major's signature under that of Jack Benny and Dick Powell. I waved away his thanks, making down the hall.

MY cab panted at the alley entrance of the hotel patio. Behind it, an ambulance had curbed. The house physician, Dr. Berg, stood at the rear step talking to the white clad attendant. His index finger lifted to his hat brim in brusque salute, as he nodded. He stepped in, followed by the interne, and the door slammed as I entered my cab.

"Vulcan plant," I ordered, and we whirled away. The ambulance followed us out of the alley, turning east, mounting siren screaming.

There was little traffic that early. To the right, the blue Pacific was calm as a lake, gilded by the first fingers of the rising sun. Swell flying weather, I think grimly, only the Manifest wouldn't lift wings that day. And the sky looked suddenly lonesome. Crawford would never feel its clean washed freshness on his face again. He'd been a real man—a swell friend!

I glanced back. Not a soul in sight. Reaching forward, I tapped on the glass. The driver lowered it. "Cigarettes," I said. "Stop at the corner." He ran on a half block, curbed. Inside the hash joint, I worked the machine that sided the phone booth. The street was clear—still no shadow.

In the cab again, I passed smokes to the driver, a nice kid with a grin, and leaned back lighting up. Certainly few known eyes had viewed my departure from the hotel. It was perfectly possible I might wheel the four miles to the plant, and enter unnoticed. Well, no harm done. I would gamble my last dollar though, that my attacker of the night would try to reach me before scheduled flight time, maybe within the plant itself. His game was no outright kill. There were other men who could be groomed to take up the ship. No, the pilot was merely the pawn. The aim, if I guessed right, was the destruction of the plane itself.

We got the bell, turning left on Pico. The blocks east the driver slowed swiftly. There was construction work ahead. A traffic arrow indicated a side street. We ducked south half a mile, headed east again. It was a rolling country road, sided by hot houses, stretching bean fields. There was a wooded strip—tall eucalyptus trees waving shadowy branches.

A deep cut intersected from the left and as we swooped down to meet it, an old sedan broke out across our path. My driver cursed, slamming on brakes—there was a blinding crash as the two cars met. I caught the wide, startled face of the autograph crank sinking from sight behind the shattered sedan window—then I'd pitch forward, arm thrown protect-

ingly in front of my eyes, as I smacked the partition glass.

It was a sweet jolt but I was only out for a minute, dimly conscious during that time of a third car's arrival—of moving figures—voices. Swift hands reached inside, lifting me from the overturned car. I was hurt alright. There was a nasty gouge in my left arm, and blood dripped from a slashed cheek.

I GROANED, struggling to an elbow on the bank where they laid me. The autograph hunter stood nursing a limp arm, eyeing his smashed car woefully.

"Sorry," he gibbered—"Good God! Who'd a' thought—"

My glance dropped to the cab driver. He lay prone and quiet beside his upset machine. He wasn't grinning now. My eyes lifted. Kuttner, the hotel manager, knelt above me, concern mirroring his usually bland face.

"Country Club," he offered. "I was headed there—saw it happen—" He started fanning me with his cap, looking helplessly round. I caught the murmur of his still running roadster just beyond his shoulder. "Lord, Major, this is awful," he muttered. "How you feeling? That damned sedan!" He scowled at the fat man, sudden recognition in his eyes. "You're Beemer, from the hotel, ain't you? What the hell you think you're doing—?"

"I didn't see him comin'," Beemer wailed. "It was a short cut to the Field. Think I'd smash my own bus?"

"All right, all right, but do something. There's a bottle in the glove compartment of my car. Bring it here."

Beemer hurried off and I fought faintness grimly. If the thing was

a plant, it was a pretty cheap affair with a third-rate tool in that sedan driver. As the Major, I'd been crippled up some but they were far from smearing the big ship.

"Come on, come on," snapped Kuttner, seizing the bottle of Haig & Haig from Beemer's trembling fingers. "About one snort, Major. Sorry there's not more." He set it to my lips and I drained it at a gulp, then he tossed it away.

"My driver," I offered, "give him a hand, will you, Kuttner?"

He shook his head. "Sorry. He's washed up, I guess."

Kuttner had straightened. Scratching his bristly head, he scowled. "Looks like no flying for you today, Major. You'd know best about that. Be glad to give you a lift to the airport, but the cops might squawk. I'd better drive back to Pico and notify them. Think you can carry on?"

"Sure," I said. "Let's get it over with, Kuttner. Spite of hell and high water, I've got to fly that ship today. Ring Vulcan, will you? Tell 'em I'm delayed but will be there."

"Right." He strode to his car, backed to the hilltop in the churning dust, and turned around.

Head still ringing, I managed to rise and take the few steps to where my driver lay. "Neck broken," I muttered, stooping down. The lad lay on his back, arms wide, head twisted at a curious angle into a road rut. New weakness swept over me and I sagged down, closing my eyes.

Somewhere an ambulance wailed, and I thought—"Kuttner's a magician." It nosed down over the east rise to pause abruptly beyond the smashed sedan. Everything was looking hazy and I shook my head to clear my vision. Two men got out, spoke to Beemer, rounded the wreck

and came hurrying up. Doc Berg from the hotel, and his attendant.

"What's this? What's happened?" he clucked. "Wainwright, look after that man—" he thumbed my driver.

"Quiet, Major." He flipped out his stethoscope, listening at my chest, ran swift, sure hands over my body. "Shock, mostly. Scratches, arm's a little nasty. Heart erratic. Wainwright!"

"Yes, sir. This man's dead, sir."

"Thought so. Too bad. Load the needle."

"Yes, sir."

NEEDLE! I caught quick breath. That word sent sluggish blood burning through my veins, my muscles tensed, but I lay quiet, watching under half-closed lids. Berg accepted the proffered hypo, stooping closer to press a knee against my chest. He slid back my sleeve. The definite odor of antiseptics filled my nostrils. It carried memory of a dim room, a pungent breath of chloroform, a mocking bird singing! So it had been a frame, that smash-up. My net had caught its fish just when I thought it a flop. Sheer elation gave me strength. Berg's lips parted over white teeth.

"Not this time, Doc!" I grated, seizing the hypo and twisting free. Surprise flooded his face, as he straightened, arms dangling. "Hold it!" I ordered, whipping my service revolver from its holster. "You, too, Wainwright!" The young attendant stood stiffly, staring. There was swift movement beyond his shoulder. "Wait, Beemer!" I yelled as the autograph king went lunging past the wreck. He choked something, increasing speed, and I fired. Yelling, he grabbed for his leg, tumbling into the ditch.

A siren sounded, wailing to cre-

scendo as it topped the rise. Two cycle cops swooped down, skidding to a halt in enveloping dust. As they kicked down their wheel props, an ambulance, and Kuttner's roadster rocked up.

My eyes were on Berg as the men hurried up. The wiry form of Lieutenant Myers from H.Q. stiffened as he sensed my gat. Kuttner was saying—"Looks like Doc Berg beat us to it—" Then—"Why, what's the gun for, Major?" His narrowed glance whipped from me to Berg, to Beemer, wailing in the ditch.

I said to Myers, "I'm holding Dr. Berg here, his assistant, Wainwright, and Beemer—" I thumbed the ditch.

"Holding—for what?" snapped the officer.

"Suspicion of murder—and other things. That'll come later."

Berg's face whitened, his big hands clenched at his sides, but he remained silent as I continued.

"I'm Drake, FBI Unit Five, Myers—not Major Crawford as it seems. Simply posing as Crawford to snare his killers."

"Killers!" barked Myers. "You mean—?"

"The Major was murdered last night—in my room! A little error in room arrangement. He was sleeping in my bed. Tough break that, eh, Berg, for him and for you. You thought in quieting the bodyguard you were also striking at the FBI—in the person of yours truly."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Berg was pale as he mopped a damp forehead. "Likely concussion. That's it! You've suffered a slight concussion. I was simply offering first aid here—"

"Forget it," I snapped. "This needle carries knock-out drops in slow motion. Retarded emetic, likely. Slated for Crawford it was carefully

Death During Bird Song

timed to render him helpless in the air. Sabotage de luxe. It's a swell gamble the Vulcan co-pilot got the same dose. Unmanned, the Manifest would have crashed as lesser ones have been doing for several weeks."

KUTTNER spoke, "Good God, Lieutenant—murder in my hotel! Sabotage—" he spread big palms—"and of all men, Berg!" Wind tugged at the free tail of his polo shirt, exposing the bare, muscled flesh beneath. You notice queer things at such times—little things.

Berg spoke through white lips. "Crawford killed! That's terrible, but there's a ghastly mistake somewhere. Sabotage? Knockout drops? I emphatically deny such a thing. Defy any analyst to name anything but a harmless stimulant in my needle."


Myers said, "You've guessed wrong somewhere, Drake. I happen to know Berg was on an emergency all night in Long Beach. My own nephew, a Vulcan flyer—"

"Returning only an hour ago," broke in Berg. "Drake saw me in the hotel alley—on a rush call to the airport. This is a damned serious charge you're making, Mr. Drake."

I swabbed sweat from my eyes, an enormous wall of futility and failure rising before me. I was wrong—but I was right! I knew it! My eyes swept the group—their faces began wavering, dimming. I reeled, fighting nausea, a terrible sickness at the pit of my stomach. Fresh wind gusted down the cut. Myers mopped his wet face, and Kuttner pawed for his fluttering shirt tail, mechanically stuffing it into his belt.

Then my vision cleared. There was that terrible gnawing at my vitals, but turning I tramped doggedly across. Rounding the manager I snaked out a hand.

(Continued On Page 104)



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True Gangster

(Continued From Page 103)

"What the hell?" snapped Kuttner, as I lifted the fluttering shirt tail and exposed the bronzed muscle roll above the belt line. There was something else there—a smear of deeper coloring. Blue!

"Stick 'em high, Kuttner!" I ordered. "Lieutenant, cuff this man!" Kuttner's teeth bared in a harsh laugh. "Another fairy tale—" he began.

"Hardly," I said. "That stain's ink, and it tells plenty—about an upset ink bottle in my room last night, when you tried needling me, Kuttner. My own feet show blue—I guessed wrong on Berg's hypo, that's patent, but right on the knock-out drops." I reeled, straightening with difficulty. "There's a whisky bottle over on that bank. That held the dope. Kuttner, tailing me from the hotel, was damned handy to administer it. Berg, get that bottle, a few drops should be enough—to—tell the —tale—"

Wainwright leaped across the drainage ditch, retrieving the gleaming bottle.

"Quick, Myers," I choked. The emetic was working fast due to my weakened condition.

With a curse Kuttner whirled, seizing my gun. The watching officers leaped in, guns drawn, but unmindful Kuttner's big body stiffened, his eyes went opaque, his face a deadly white. An arm swept up as the others closed in.

"Heil, Hitler!" he said clearly, and flipping the gun muzzle to his temple, fired.

The echo was faint in my ears as I sagged to my knees. Violently I retched, then Berg was at my side.

"Plenty of proof here, Lieutenant," he was saying.

That was the last I heard.

CRYPT OF HORROR

by
WILBUR S. PEACOCK

**In which a killer learns that a scream
can be more deadly than a gun!**

PROFESSOR VARDON made the discovery late in the afternoon, and, because of the nature of the great find, signed his own death warrant.

He stumbled out of the narrow entrance of the outer cave, his keen eyes flashing with inner excitement, his light clothes torn and dirty from ten hours underground, went at a stumbling run toward the adobe hut that was his headquarters.

"Baxter!" he cried as he shoved open the rude door, "Baxter, I found it; I found the burial room!"

Karl Baxter shoved the empty glass further back on the table, a faint glow of interest in his narrow eyes. And then his thoughts came flooding back to him, and he scowled darkly at the slight figure of the excited scientist.

"Okay, okay, so you found it!" he said insolently. "Now what the hell do we do?"

A tiny frown tightened Professor Vardon's eyebrows, then his excitement erased the momentary irritation. "Look!" he said, extending his hand. "It's a statue of Thoth, the Egyptian God!" His voice broke a bit. "Think of that," he finished, "and Egypt is thousands of miles away!"

Karl Baxter fumbled a cigarette from a battered pack, leaned indo-

lently back in the chair. "So what!" he said. "Those guys must have had boats," he spread his hands in a gesture of explanation, "so they probably landed on this continent, set up a colony."

The professor shook his head. "No," he said, "that couldn't be a logical explanation. You see, the Egyptians—"

Karl Baxter sighed disgustedly, groped for the tequila bottle. And then, as he caught a direct look at the small idol for the first time, his body went stiff with greedy excitement.

"That's gold, isn't it?" he snapped.

"I suppose so," the scientist said. "But the value lies in its scientific—"

Cupidity tightened Baxter's mouth, brought tiny beads of perspiration to his low forehead. He reached out, caught up the tiny, ugly idol, turned it in his fingers.

"Was this the only one in there?" he asked quickly.

"No, and that's the great thing!" Vardon said. "There must be fifty mummies, and of course each was buried with his jewels and weapons. Why," his voice sank from incredulity, "there is actually a golden statue of Anubis fully four feet in height."

"Four feet—!" The cigarette burned unnoticed in Karl Baxter's mouth.

HE KNEW then as surely as if some voice had told him that he was going to murder the excited man before him. It was not a particularly horrifying thought, for he had been thinking over that idea for more than a week, expecting to get no more than the few hundreds of dollars the professor carried in his money belt.

"Where is the cave?" he asked sud-

(Continued On Page 106)

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True Gangster

(Continued From Page 105)

denly, rocking forward a bit in his intensity.

The scientist stopped for a moment his searching through the pile of equipment in one corner. "As near as I can estimate," he said, "it's about two miles back from the main cavern to the North. My compass wouldn't work because of the iron deposits." He nodded toward the equipment. "Help me get a small pack together; I've got to get back there."

Karl Baxter came to his feet, an odd timbre in his voice. "I'll go along," he said.

"You'll go along?" There was quick puzzlement in the older man's voice. "But, Baxter, you've never been down; you haven't the slightest experience in cave exploring."

Baxter ground out his cigarette. "If you can get through," he said confidently, "I guess I can make it. Anyway, the way you talk, there'll be plenty I can do to help."

Professor Vardon smiled. "Surely, lad," he agreed, "I'd like to have your help. You get enough food for twenty-four hours, while I get the cameras and equipment together."

Karl Baxter nodded, turned to the supply shelves. He laughed to himself as he packed supplies, cynically amused at the eagerness of the archeologist.

He shivered suddenly at the thought of going deep into the blackness of the earth, something which he had refused to do since camp had been established more than a month before. He was not a scientist like Vardon; he knew absolutely nothing of archeology. He had been hired to tend camp and drive the car for the other, and this was the first time he had known any other life than that of the city.

"We'd better eat before we go

Crypt of Horror

down," he said suddenly, "then we won't have to pack so much food."

"I suppose so," Professor Vardon agreed absently.

Baxter was utterly silent as they ate a quick meal. His eyes glistened brightly as he thought of the wealth that lay hidden beneath hundreds of feet of rock, riches that would mean that he should never have to work again.

"Let's go," he said suddenly. "I want to see what you've found."

Catching up a compact knapsack, he led the way from the hut, paced steadily toward the black slit in the mountainside that marked the entrance to the main cavern. He heard the excited voice of the archeologist discussing something about pyramids in Egypt and here in Mexico, but the words made no impression.

His footsteps lagged a trifle as he approached the entrance, and a very real fear filled his mind.

"You're sure," he asked, "that we won't get lost down there?"

Vardon nodded encouragingly. "Of course," he said reassuringly, "We'll mark our way with red chalk."

Karl Baxter breathed easier at that, and his mind came automatically back to the best way of committing the murder. He wanted it to appear as an accident, so that he would not be suspected of the crime, which, of course, meant that a gun could not be used. He fingered the tiny statue in his pocket as he walked.

And then they were within the cavern, and the outer world was gone as though it had never been.

THEY WALKED for minutes into the darkness, skirting rock rubble and stalagmites, lighting their way with flashlights equipped with tiny spring-generators.

(Continued On Page 108)

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True Gangster

(Continued From Page 107)

Baxter's breath was tight in his throat as he followed the scientist, and superstitious fear brought a cold perspiration to his forehead. His eyes gazed into the inky darkness, trying to make out objects.

"We turn here," Vardon said, swinging left around a stumpy stalagmite.

They clambered through a rift in the rock, and when their flashlights lighted the next chamber, Baxter choked back an involuntary cry of amazement.

Great opalescent stalactites hung from the ceiling high overhead, reflecting the light like monstrous gems. Lacy curtains of crystallized motion hung from the ceiling, also, curtains of rock that seemed to sway in the silent air. It was an unearthly beauty such as Baxter had never seen.

"It is beautiful, isn't it?" Vardon said understandingly.

Karl Baxter nodded wordlessly, swinging his flashlight around the room, finding new wonders with each twitch of his light.

"Look!" Vardon said.

He reached up, tapped lightly with his knuckles on several stalactites that hung in a row. Notes like those of an xylophone hung in muted beauty in the still air.

And then Vardon was leading the way skillfully toward a far wall. He fumbled with the wall a moment, and then a rock moved silently outward, revealing a narrow passage behind.

"Counterweighted stone door," Vardon explained. "I found it by accident. It was so cleverly concealed that every other person has missed it."

Karl Baxter was silent, but a great exultation filled his heart, replacing the awe that sight of the cave had

Crypt of Horror

given him. He knew now the manner in which Vardon would die, and, yet, the treasure be safe for him to come back to later.

"It's a tough road from here on," Vardon said. "Sure you want to try it?"

"Go ahead," Baxter answered quietly, "I'll be right behind."

Never in even his wildest dreams had Karl Baxter thought that cave exploring could be so arduous a task. He followed the slighter man ahead of him, inching his way through narrow passages, climbing rocky chimneys of rock, his soft body bruised and aching before a thousand yards had been gained.

He swore silently, as he squeezed through a fissure of rock, his narrow eyes blazing with hate at the back of Vardon.

"How much farther?" he asked for the hundredth time. "Hell, if you're lost, say so, and let's get back to camp!"

He wriggled from the fissure, came erect, dull anger staining his face because the other did not speak. He caught angrily at Vardon's shoulder, then his hand dropped to his side, as Vardon's flashlight roamed the huge cave.

Great gleaming stalactites grew from the vaulted roof high overhead, and stalagmites reached up toward the hanging tons of rocky excrescence. The room stretched beyond the range of the flashlight, the darkness a tangible thing that absorbed the feeble rays. There was no sound but the frightened squeaks and rustlings of frightened bats.

And then Karl Baxter was stumbling over the uneven floor toward the crude, pyramid-shaped altar on which squatted the golden statue of Anubis.

(Continued On Page 110)

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True Gangster

(Continued From Page 109)

"My God!" he said incredulously, "it is gold!"

HE HEARD the quiet laughter of Vardon, as he tried to lift the statue. Sweat stood out in high relief on his forehead, when he found that he could not even tip the statue.

He didn't remember very clearly the next few moments, he was so busy racing from place to place, his hands fondling the wealth that was scattered around the room.

"The mummies are here," Vardon called finally, led him to a smaller chamber at one side of the altar room.

The dead lay row on row on narrow platforms of stone, the once-white wrappings now sere and brown from incalculable age. Only three caskets were in the room, ornamented with glistening paint still so bright it might have been painted the day before.

Karl Baxter swallowed convulsively, his nerves shaken by the air of death and solemnity that made the room seem even smaller. He switched his gaze from the mummies, swung his light over the tool-smoothed walls, seeing painted men and women and animals such as had never been found before in North America.

"It is the greatest discovery science has ever seen!" Vardon said softly, the echoes of his voice rustling and titillating through the cave, stirring tiny echoes that seemed to whisper back in tiny voices.

"There's a fortune here!" Baxter said slowly.

"I suppose so," Vardon answered, "but that is of no moment now." He nodded toward the altar room. "Better get the flash-cameras out of the packs; we've got to take pictures before we begin classifying."

Crypt of Horror

Karl Baxter nodded automatically, started toward the altar room. Then his shoulders straightened, as he made his final decision. He turned slowly, walked heavily toward Vardon. And even as the archeologist looked up in surprise from his calm scrutiny of a wall design, he struck him squarely in the jaw with a brutal efficiency that dropped him limply against the wall.

For a moment, Baxter leaned over the unconscious man, his mind terrified at the speed with which he had acted. His breath was hard in his throat, and his hands clenched hard at his sides. Then he leaned over, picked up the flashlight that had fallen, went into the altar room.

He fumbled through the packsack, found the coil of light rope used in chimney climbing. He was still bending over the pack when Vardon's light limned him in its glow.

"You can't get away with it, Baxter," Vardon said slowly, leaning weakly against the wall.

Karl Baxter straightened slowly, and suddenly there was only an atavistic animalism in his heavy features. He half-crouched, his hands tightening on the rope and flashlight.

"I'm gonna try!" he said hoarsely.

"I'm warning you," Vardon said quietly. "Forget your plans, and we'll go along just as we did before."

Karl Baxter laughed, and there was a note in his tone that had never been there before.

Vardon watched his slow advance for a second, and regret flooded his face. Then he screamed—not in deadly fear, but with a calculated intensity that brought Baxter to a dead stop.

AND STILL Vardon screamed, the labored notes rising higher and

(Continued On Page 113)



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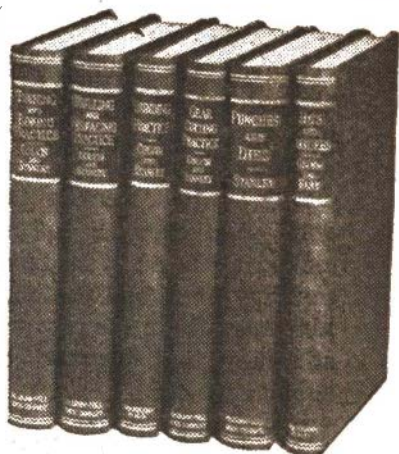
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Crypt of Horror

(Continued From Page 111)

higher, echoes doubling and redoubling the volume of sound until the cave was filled with a roaring wave of sonorous notes that pressed with tangible strength against the two men so deep within the earth.

"That won't do you any—" Baxter began, and heard the sounds over his head.

He glanced up, saw the ponderous shifting overhead of the great masses of stalactites on the ceiling. He screamed then in pure terror, and his cry finished what Vardon had started.

Rock crashed and roared in a rumbling avalanche from the ceiling, torn loose by the vibrations in the air. For one second before that weight of age-old rock struck his terror-filled body, Karl Baxter saw the pity in Vardon's eyes.

And then he was dead, not knowing that as the sound diminished the stalactites still hanging ceased their vibrations and hung motionless as they had done for centuries.

Vardon leaned silently against the wall of the mummy room, shaken with the horror of the last few moments. For minutes he stood there, his chest heaving in agitated breathing.

And then, using his flashlight to pick his way through the tons of shattered stone, he went toward the fissure that led outside. He had reports to make and aid to requisition.

He halted for a moment at the fissure's mouth.

"Poor devil," he said, and there was a great weariness in his voice.

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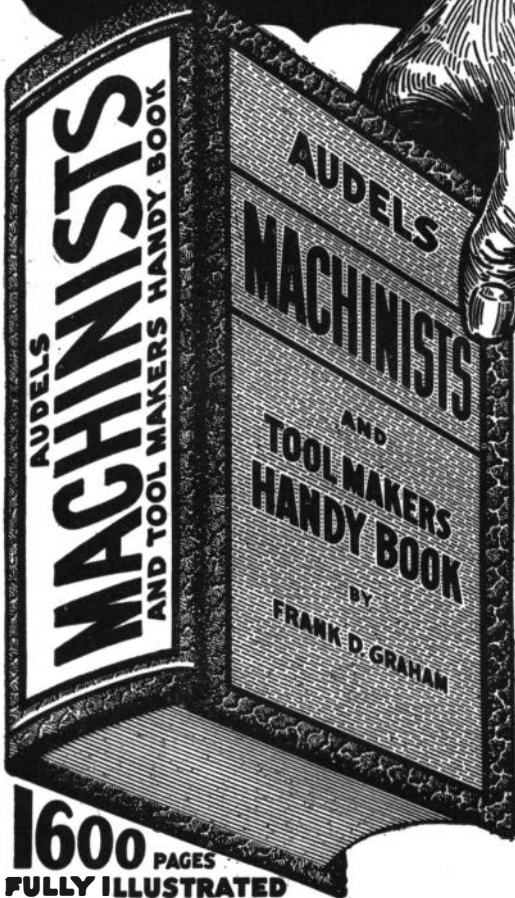
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