

5 DETECTIVE NOVELS

A THRILLING
PUBLICATION

NOV. 25¢

MAGAZINE



**DEATH ON AN
OCEAN LINER**
By RICHARD SALE

THE MURDER BRIDGE
By GEORGE HARMON COXE

TOO TOUGH TO DIE
By GEORGE BRUCE

THE HOODED KILLER
By PAUL ERNST

MURDER IN MEXICO
By STEVE FISHER

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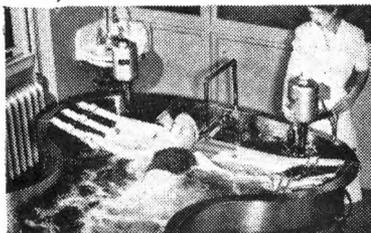
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5 DETECTIVE NOVELS MAGAZINE

Vol. 1, No. 1

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

November, 1949

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John McCann adds up a slain man, an escaped killer, and one-fifth of a million—and gets an odd total when a shadow of the past brings doom!

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Fighting sleuth Red Lacey had his own standards—and wouldn't let even a mobster like "Mushky" Jenks get the chair for a killing he didn't do!

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THE HOODED KILLER

Retirement was cold comfort to sleuth Anthony Lance—but the mystery murder of Nicholas James proved too hot for him when menace stalked!

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DEATH ON AN OCEAN LINER

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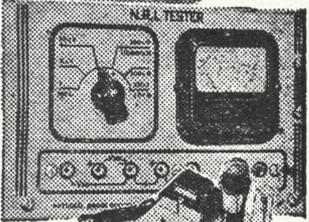
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On the DOCKET



A PREVIEW OF CASES TO COME

IF THE year 1949 is remembered for any particularly outstanding event in the publishing field it will be the advent of a remarkable new magazine entitled **FIVE DETECTIVE NOVELS**. You are now holding in your hands a copy of the inaugural issue which contains five dramatic, thrill-packed novels by the world's top-ranking mystery writers all for the amazing low price of 25c. Just think of it! Five complete novels in one issue, together with a fine assortment of short stories and features!

All of these outstanding novels are classics of detective fiction stories of exceptional merit which first appeared in print a number of years ago. They are so distinguished in plot, treatment, drama and suspense that we consider it a privilege to be able to publish them in the pages of **FIVE DETECTIVE NOVELS**. It would be distinctly unfair to these great stories and authors to let them lie buried in magazine files. By bringing them to the fore again, we are in effect creating an anthology—and every issue of this magazine will be a carefully selected anthology of the best that has been written in the detective field.

This—our first number—will probably become a collector's item, so we advise you to hold onto it. Don't give it away. If your friends want to read it, lend it to them but be sure to get it back.

A Galaxy of Novels

To prove our claim that **FIVE DETECTIVE NOVELS** is destined to create a stir heard 'round the mystery world, just take a look at the glittering galaxy of novels featured in this issue: **THE MURDER BRIDGE**, By George Harmon Coxe—**DEATH ON AN OCEAN LINER**, By Richard Sale—**MURDER IN MEXICO**, By Steve Fisher—**TOO TOUGH TO DIE**,

By George Bruce, and **THE HOODED KILLER**, By Paul Ernst.

Where in this world will you find such a distinguished array of detective authors as Coxe, Sale, Fisher, Bruce and Ernst, all in one issue of a magazine? The answer is nowhere—except in **FIVE DETECTIVE NOVELS**!

George Harmon Coxe is one of the leading mystery writers of today and author of such famous successes as "Venturous Lady," "Hollow Needle," "The Fifth Key," "Fashioned for Murder," "The Groom Lay Dead" and "Dangerous Legacy"—all published in book form by Alfred A. Knopf.

In "The Murder Bridge," the lead novel in this issue, George Harmon Coxe tells a gripping story of murder and vengeance that rose out of the sinister shadows of the past to pin down a man who acted too late to save himself from a killer—a killer who left a note that read: "The judge is dead. So is Stacey. You're next. Get your house in order."

The second featured novel is "Death on an Ocean Liner" by Richard Sale, another top-ranking author who not only is responsible for such whodunits as "Benefit Performance," "Passing Strange" and "Lazarus No. 7." but is also one of the leading screen writers and producers in the Hollywood movie colony.

"Death on an Ocean Liner," takes you out on the open sea with Craig Mitchell, a courageous newspaperman who gets tangled in a bizarre cycle of mystery and intrigue. It's an exciting story all the way.

A Murder Scramble

"Murder in Mexico," our third featured novel, is by Steve Fisher, noted for such great books as "I Wake Up Screaming" (which became a successful movie,) and

(Continued on page 8)

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ON THE DOCKET

(Continued from page 6)

"Winter Kill." In "Murder in Mexico" Fisher spins a first-rate yarn full of surprise and excitement. It begins with Paul Orr stealing some money from the gambling room of the Foreign Club in a Mexican border town in order to marry a Hollywood movie star. Almost immediately he regrets his action. But before he can undo the theft a wild scramble for the money ensues and mayhem results.

George Bruce, another crackerjack writer, comes up with a hard-boiled novel in "Too Tough to Die"—the story of a two-fisted sleuth who tackled crime without kid gloves. The name of the sleuth is Red Lacey. You'll be amazed the way he goes into action—action that begins the moment Big Shot Mushky Jackson crashes his powerful sedan into Lacey's car with results that are not at all what Jackson expected.

The fifth and last of our five complete novels is "The Hooded Killer" by Paul Ernst, a thrill-packed yarn of death and destruction revolving around a fiendish masked criminal. The killer signed himself **THE EXECUTIONER** and his warning message to Nicholas James which read "You shall die at midnight . . ." proved to be a harbinger of murder. For, as James sat alone in his house, frantically trying to summon aid from Detective Anthony Lance, the mysterious hooded killer was entering the room by a window at his back, stalking toward his victim, a long-bladed knife upraised in his hand.

Next Issue's Headliners

For action, thrills and breath-taking suspense **FIVE DETECTIVE NOVELS** is your best answer for an evening's lasting entertainment. But before you go on to that pleasant interlude of reading, we

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suggest that you linger just a little longer while we regale you with a bit of information about the five novels which will highlight the second issue of FIVE DETECTIVE NOVELS. Here is the way they line up:

CLAIM OF THE FLESHLESS CORPSE

By George Bruce

MURDER SUSPECT

By Frederick C. Painton

MURDER UNDER WRAPS

By Norman A. Daniels

THE HOUSE OF FROGS

By Westmoreland Gray

THE CASE OF THE ASTRAL ASSASSIN

By G. T. Fleming-Roberts

"Claim of the Fleshless Corpse" by George Bruce is a bizarre story of violence and intrigue involving the death by fire of wealthy Albert Browning in the steel fire-proof furnace room of his own cellar.

It was a case that the police were ready to call an accident due to a short circuit in the wiring system which somehow set off a fuel oil tank in the cellar. But when John (Toughy) Nichols, ace investigator of the Continental Insurance Company, which had insured Browning's life for a half million, arrived on the scene he immediately suspected that something was wrong.

Browning had had a dinner date with his family at a friend's home but had begged off at the last moment because of illness. Later, when the family returned they smelled burning flesh and rushed to the basement to find Browning's blackened corpse in the furnace room.

To Nichols there were numerous suspicious circumstances. First, the furnace had not been used since May and Browning had no occasion to go into the fire-proof room—especially since he was known to be a little chary of oil burners anyway.

Second, though a short circuit caused the fire, the police had been able to get light in the room by merely putting a light bulb in the empty ceiling socket. So what happened to the original bulb? Browning certainly wouldn't have gone into the room without flipping the light switch.

The case looked like a phony and Nichols
(Continued on page 139)

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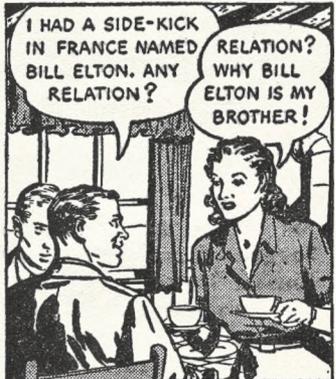
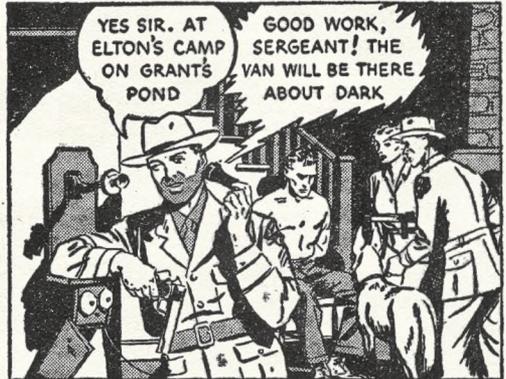
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*...and then
things happened
fast!!*



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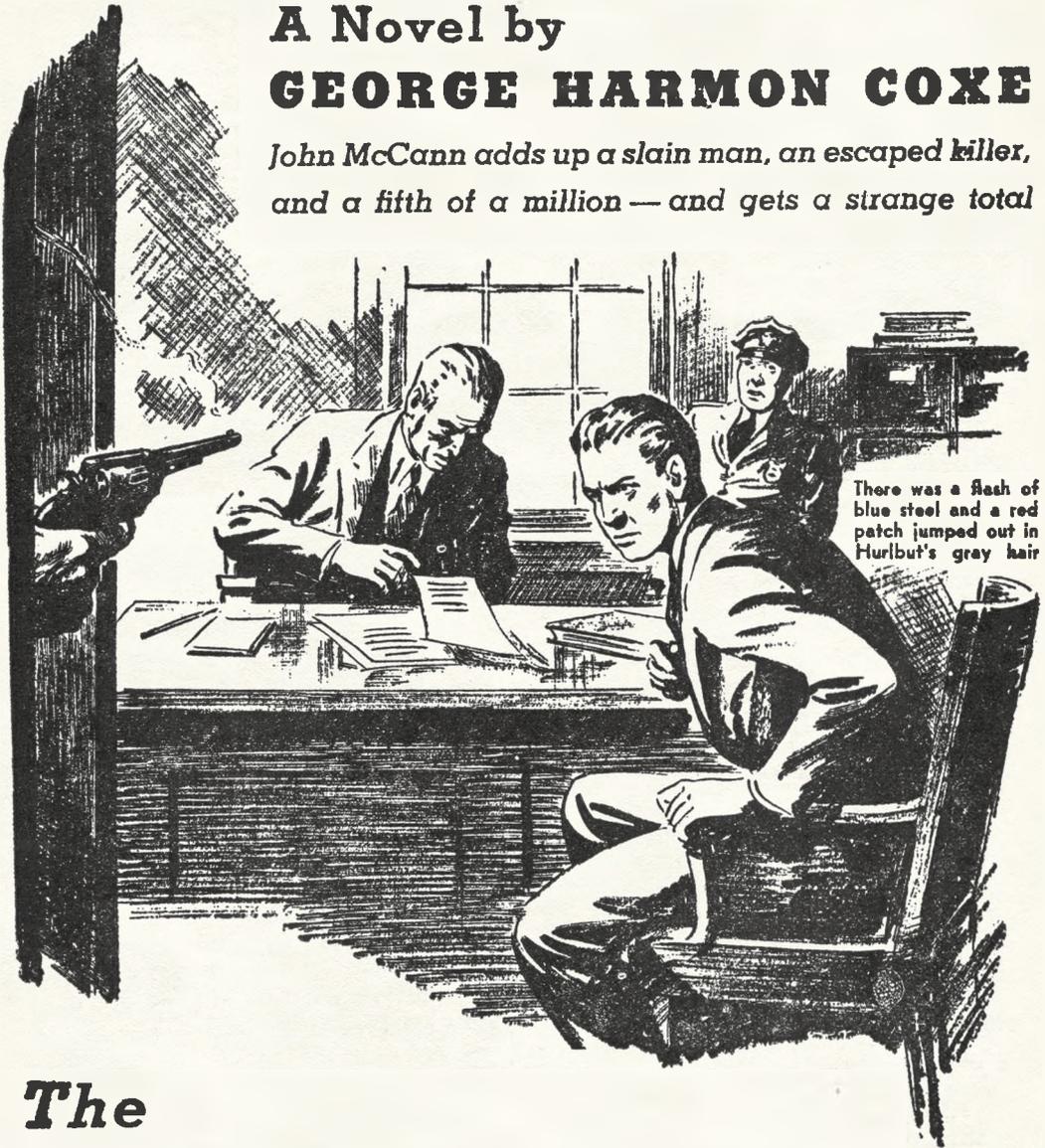
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There was a flash of blue steel and a red patch jumped out in Hurlbut's gray hair

The
MURDER BRIDGE

I

JOHN McCANN straightened out his legs, hooked his elbows on the chair arm and surveyed his polished black oxfords with thoughtful dark eyes. He spoke without looking up.

"You want a bodyguard, huh?"

"Why should I take chances?" Benjamin Hurlbut said and slid his forearms across the desk top and fastened greenish eyes on McCann's dark somber face. Hurlbut was a tall man—tall and thin with stooped shoulders and a sharp bony

What Threatening Shadow of the Past Rose from

face. "Tom Quillen got out of Charles-town a week ago," he added shakily. "Three days ago, the day I got this first letter, Stacey was found murdered. Then I remembered Quillen's old threat."

Hurlbut slid his palms together, rubbed them nervously. He opened the center drawer of his desk, took out two sheets of cheap paper, passed them to McCann one at a time.

The scrawled, penciled message on the first sheet read:

The judge is dead. So is Stacey.

The second letter said:

You're next. Get your house in order.

Both notes were signed with a Q.

Hurlbut hurried on in a quick rasping voice as McCann studied the two notes. "When I got the first note I called the chief of police at Bayport and he sent Lafferty over."

Hurlbut jerked his head at the thick-set blond young man in blue uniform and a Sam Browne belt, who was perched in a tipped-back chair against the opposite wall of the sparsely furnished office.

"I also called my lawyer in Boston," Hurlbut went on. "He thought I ought to get a private detective on the job." Hurlbut shrugged. "I got this second letter this morning."

McCann passed back the letters. "I don't know," he said flatly. "I don't go in for this bodyguard stuff. You could hire plenty of private dicks to do the job for you—and a lot cheaper."

"I want the best. I can pay."

"And," McCann asked, "you think there'll be trouble?"

"I hope not." Hurlbut's thin lips tightened. "But my lawyer's down here to take some notes for my will. I attach that much importance to the matter."

"Anybody seen Quillen since he got out?"

"Nobody has—"

The sentence died unuttered—choked off by the roar of a gun that reverberated through the room.

Before McCann's startled gaze Hurlbut's head jerked as though he had been slugged. A red patch jumped out in the gray hair above his ear, widened quickly as the blood splashed out. Then Hurlbut sagged forward on the desk top, the sentence he had started ending in a

throaty, gasping cough of death.

For a fraction of a second surprise left McCann rigid. Before the second elapsed he was in action.

HIS hand whipped to his shoulder holster as he jerked around in his chair to face the door, several feet away. A faint bluish haze fogged a two-inch crack. Behind it there was a flash of blue steel as the gun was jerked back. The door was slammed quickly shut. Then McCann's gun was out.

Twice, in quick succession, he squeezed the trigger of his automatic. Flame belched from the snouty muzzle and the two reports crashed out as one. Chest-high in the green panel of the door, paint flicked away from a metal base, left two shining dents. A key clicked in the lock.

Lafferty, dazed and uncomprehending, struggled to stand up, finally half fell from the chair and leaped toward the door.

McCann was already at the window. He paid no attention to Hurlbut, and as he threw up the sash he yelled over his shoulder to Lafferty, "This way! That door's steel."

Built over an uneven sandy terrain, the office was supported on piles. It was a ten-foot drop to the sloping ground but McCann, gun in hand, went through the window in a half leap, half vault.

He struck on his feet, was slapped forward to his knees as his shoes buried themselves in the sand. His jaws tightened and his lips drew back in a quick grimace of pain. He staggered erect and started up the sandy slope in a crouch.

Twice he slipped and went to his knees. Then he was on level ground. He jerked erect and three strides took him to the front door of the long low shed, adjoining the office. As he gained the doorway he glanced back over his shoulder at the wild-eyed figure of Lafferty.

"Watch the front. Don't let anybody out," McCann shouted.

McCann ran into the dim half-light of the long low boatshed. His heels thundered briefly on the rough planking and he slid to a quick stop outside the office door on the right. Then, because he wanted to make sure the murderer had not gone into the room after he and Lafferty went out the window, he wasted precious seconds in unlocking the door

Its Grave to Wreak Vengeance on Ben Hurlbut?

and throwing it wide open.

The body of Hurlbut was slumped forward on the desk. Otherwise the office was empty.

McCann cursed once, slammed the door and glanced down the length of the boatshed. Hurlbut was a retired boat builder. This had been his factory—a barnlike structure, full of dust and cobwebs now, with grimy windows that fought against the sunlight outside.

Square rough-hewn pillars supported the roof. There were benches along both

out over a deep-water cover. On the right, the shoreline cut back toward the bay, past Hurlbut's office. It continued bare and deserted for as far as he could see.

To the left the shoreline curved slowly outward and fifty feet away a thick stand of pines jutted out to the water's edge. McCann looked down at his feet. The boardwalk was supported about three feet above the sand. At his immediate left, two hollows, three or four inches deep, showed in the otherwise smooth surface of the sandy stretch.

McCann's eyes moved ahead of the two hollows. Shallower indentations made a track to the pines. The detective grunted in grim satisfaction and started out beside the tracks. When he jumped down on the sand he left two hollows of his own, similar to those that had caught his glance.

McCann's eyes were on the ground as he ran but when he came to the stand of pine trees he slowed down. The soil here was sandy but it was well covered with pine needles. He lost the track but moved on into the cool shade of the towering trees. He jogged on for twenty feet or so, looked up.



DETECTIVE McCANN

walls, wood-working machinery scattered here and there, a pile or two of lumber, sawhorses everywhere. At the far end of the gloomy structure, a hundred and fifty feet away, a white rectangle of light showed the rear door. Beyond this was the blue of the water and a white triangle of sail on a small boat.

McCann started to run. His gun was up. His eyes, sharp and alert, swept the width of the shed as he raced on. He grabbed the door jamb as he gained the rear entrance and the bright light of the mid-afternoon made him blink as he hesitated there, trying to get his bearings.

From the door a three-foot boardwalk led to a small landing stage extending

COMING toward him, walking rapidly, was a man. He was about average height, was well set up. He wore white ducks and a sweater, was bare-headed.

McCann stopped. Hurlbut had taken him to his house for lunch and there he had met the members of the household. This man was George Baker, Hurlbut's stepson. He appeared to be about thirty and his thick-lensed glasses made his blue eyes enormous but did not disguise the shifty frightened expression. His face was white and his breathing was labored.

McCann's dark eyes narrowed. "Where have you been?" he snapped.

"Painting" Baker turned and waved a hand toward the upward-rising stretch of sand extending beyond the stand of pines toward the house. "Up there." He swallowed thickly. "Thought I heard a shot."

"How long have you been there?"

"Since lunch."

"See anybody down here—in the trees—over by the boatshed?"

"Why, no." Baker's voice grew irritated. "How could I when I was painting?"

"I'm asking the questions. Somebody just murdered your stepfather."

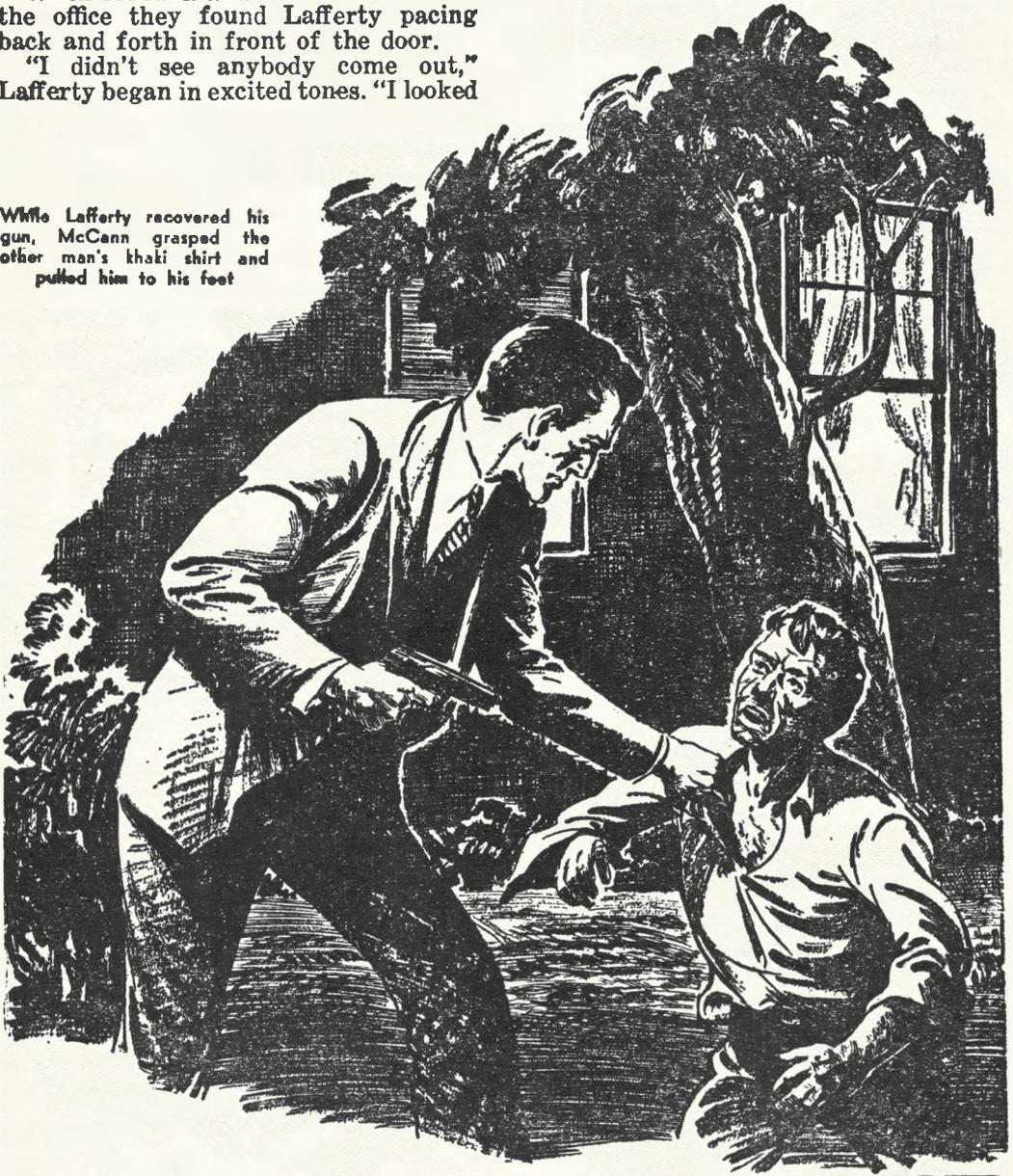
When McCann and Baker returned to the office they found Lafferty pacing back and forth in front of the door.

"I didn't see anybody come out," Lafferty began in excited tones. "I looked

slid his automatic back to his shoulder holster his dark, piercing eyes fixed on Lafferty.

"He didn't go out the front door"—he turned to study the sullen face of

While Lafferty recovered his gun, McCann grasped the other man's khaki shirt and pulled him to his feet



around the front—out on the road. I—” He broke off and watched the detective.

McCann was breathing hard. He was a lean broad-shouldered man with a somber, dark-skinned face and a squarish, clean-cut jaw. His gray, double-breasted suit was immaculate and as he

George Baker—“and he didn't go out the back, huh?”

He glanced about the murky interior of the boatshed as though trying to discover some nook or cranny where the murderer could hide. He muttered a throaty curse, turned back to Lafferty

and his voice was flat, emotionless.

"Anywhere around here a guy could hide out?"

"No." Lafferty took off his cap and scratched his blond thatch. "No—only that old cottage of Hurlbut's. It's way down on that point—beyond the house that—"

McCann opened the office door. "Call your chief and tell him to get the corner," he said to Lafferty. "Then get out to that cottage and see what you can find. You and I"—he nodded to Baker—"will have a look at Hurlbut."

II

BENJAMIN HURLBUT had slumped over on his battered oak desk with his forearm pushed forward and his neck



twisted so that his head lay on its side.

It was not a pretty sight. The bullet had gone clear through his brain and the side of the head which was upturned was the side from which the slug had emerged. It had left a hole the size of a walnut and blood had oozed out to

make an irregular foot-wide puddle on the desk top.

McCann took one good look at Hurlbut, then turned to study Baker, who, when Lafferty had left to search the cottage, had dropped wearily into a chair at the far side of the room near the window.

McCann searched one wall, found the bullet imbedded in the planking. But he did not take it out. Instead he walked over to the door and examined the dents in the steel panel. The flattened slugs from his gun were on the floor nearby and he picked them up, weighed them in his palm.

He glared over at Baker and his lips took on a taut expression. Then he went to the window, braced his feet wide apart and jammed balled fists on his hips. He was still standing there, staring out the window, when Lafferty returned.

McCann pivoted when he heard the footsteps in the shed because there were two sets of them. Lafferty came in first. Crowding at his heels was a small well-dressed man of about forty. His tiny mustache looked jet black against the pallor of his skin and his eyes swept the room, fell on Hurlbut, widened, stayed riveted there.

McCann did not speak. He had met

Edward Sisson, Hurlbut's lawyer, at lunch.

"The cottage is clean," Lafferty said. "I picked up Sisson at the house. We went out and looked it over together."

Sisson, his eyes still fastened on Hurlbut, walked up to look at the gaping

wound. Then his face became dead white and he turned away. His voice when he spoke was weak, jerky.

"Then—those threats—then Quillen got him after all," he quaked.

McCann did not answer. He wanted to ask Sisson some questions but he knew it would be better to wait until the effect of the shock wore off, until the man got a better grip on himself. After a minute Sisson went over to a chair beside Baker and sat down. Gradually the color came back to his face.

"What was the idea of Hurlbut wanting a will?" McCann asked. "He was scared he'd get knocked off, yeah. But didn't he have a will already?"

"Yes." Sisson took out a silk handkerchief, mopped his forehead. "But he—" He broke off, glanced at Baker and shrugged. "Well, I guess it's all right to tell you about it.

"Hurlbut was something of an eccentric, you know. He used to do quite a business building boats. But when he couldn't get his price, when deflation came along, he just quit. He was the secretary of some yacht association with clubs all over the country and, as a hobby, he designed boats. Somehow he got the idea that everyone was against him—thought that all the family hung around for was for what they could get out of him. So he was going to change his will and reduce his bequests."

Sisson managed a smile. "Of course that was only an idea. He might never have gone as far as he did—calling me down here to make notes for a new will—if it hadn't been for those threats. But they scared him all right and—"

Sisson stopped then, as the stamp of feet sounded in the shed outside the office. The door opened and Chief Mike Flynn of the Bayport police swung into the room, followed by two of his men.

Flynn took off his cap and mopped his pink bald head. His blue uniform, resplendent in gold braid and brass buttons, bulged over the shoulders and stomach. His thick neck was sunburned and his red face was scowling as he replaced the cap. Making angry noises in his throat he glared down at the murder gun McCann had found in a pile of sawdust, and which now lay on the desk beside Hurlbut's bloody hand.

The chief heard McCann's story, looked up from the gun, pulled angrily at his walrus mustache,

"I know about Thomas Quillen," he said. "Just went wild in the courtroom. Before they could drag him out he swore he'd get the three men who convicted him. The judge—the district attorney—and Hurlbut, the foreman of the jury."

Flynn's voice became hard and raspy. "Why the devil didn't I know about this second note?" he growled. "I'd put another man up here. We got a circular on Quillen this morning. There's a thousand reward out for him. Why didn't you tell me about this second letter?" he demanded of Lafferty.

"I didn't know about it myself until Hurlbut told McCann."

"Well then, what've you been doin'?" Lafferty explained about searching the cottage. "McCann told me to go out there and—"

"He did, huh?"

MCCANN faced the chief with sultry eyes and his face was set and unsmiling.

"The two of you," Flynn grunted, "right here in the office with him when he gets knocked off." He glared at McCann. "I've heard of you. A big shot up in Boston, huh? Well, I've seen your kind before and you can't come down in my town and—"

"Come out in the shed," McCann said grimly and started through the door.

Flynn followed, still scowling. When they were alone McCann turned to face the chief.

"Listen, copper. I don't want to put on an act in front of an audience, but get this through your thick head. I'm a private dick, yeah. And Hurlbut called me down here. Sisson can check that. And right here I stay until this thing is cleared up.

"I've got a license to do business in this state and I've got a mighty good reputation. No one can knock off a client of mine and get away with it. I either work with you or I work alone. But I work, get it?"

Flynn's voice was laced with contempt and he took special pains to make every word clear and emphatic.

"You're not talking to a hick cop, McCann. I used to be chief in Springfield and the only reason I'm down here is because I like the climate. You can work here all you want to—but don't start clowning around and getting in my way."

"Okay." McCann smiled grimly and

took equal pains with his words. "But get a load of this. The newspapers may make a howl. Unless I figure in the pay-off I'll get razzed plenty. If we work together and I get something you make the pinch, you get credit. If I work alone and crash through, you're out. I'll call the sheriff in if I have to—but you won't make the pinch. So make up your mind."

Flynn chewed on his mustache. The scowl disappeared but his gray eyes were steady. "Well," he grudgingly admitted, "maybe we'd better play along together. It's no setup no matter how you look at it."

* * * * *

"This guy Quillen was a crackpot." Back in the office, Chief Flynn paced across the floor. The coroner had made his examination and the body had been removed. "He's crazy and from what I get he come near to beating the rap twelve years ago on an insanity plea."

Flynn surveyed Sisson, who was nervously fingering a vest button.

"He threatened to get the three guys that sent him up—and their families. Judge Billings died while Quillen was in Charlestown. Quillen murdered Stacey, the old D.A.—because I know that Headquarters in Boston got a screwy letter from Quillen that they didn't let the press in on."

McCann whispered softly.

"But," Flynn stopped his pacing, "the judge was a childless widower and Stacey was a bachelor. And now Hurlbut is gone. What does Quillen think a family is? Hurlbut had no children. But he's got a second wife"—he pointed at Baker—"your mother. And there's you. And young Hurlbut, his nephew, and—"

Baker sniffed contemptuously. "He won't bother with us. And besides"—he added sardonically—"you ought to pick him up sometime, oughtn't you?"

"We'll pick him up," said Flynn. "He'll never get off Cape Cod unless he swims." He glared at Baker. "But if I was you, wise guy, I'd stick close to home. A guy like Quillen, who'd knock off Stacey and then come down to get Hurlbut—and do it like he did and get clear, is no bargain. That's the trouble with these screwy guys—you can't figure 'em."

Flynn started for the door, stopped to look at McCann. "Stick around the house, see what you can dig up. And you"—he pointed a stubby finger at

Lafferty—"you make sure that nobody gets in that house. Stay right out here till we get this Quillen in a cell."

Flynn slammed the door after him and McCann looked at Lafferty and grinned. "Looks like he don't like us much."

"Aw—" Lafferty stood up and took off his cap. He was very young, hardly out of his teens. He scratched behind his ear and his thick stolid face was sullen. "He comes from the city and he thinks he's the business."

Half an hour later McCann was in the kitchen of the bleak weather-scarred Hurlbut house, talking with Lucy, the cook, a plump middle-aged woman with a reddish face and pale blue eyes that were now bloodshot.

"You liked Mr. Hurlbut, huh?" said McCann as he sat down at the kitchen table and watched Lucy beat up a cake.

"Sure, I liked him," Lucy replied. "For twenty years now I've been cooking and keeping house for him. Some there was that said he was queer. He was not. He was just a lonely old man. No children—and his wife died ten years back." Lucy sniffed. "Then he married this new Mrs. Hurlbut two years ago. Humph!"

"You don't like her?" asked McCann.

"I do not," said Lucy indignantly. "His money was all she wanted. Going around here with never a friendly word for anyone but that no-good son of hers."

McCann's lids drew down and his dark eyes became sharp and narrow.

"He never," went on Lucy, "did a day's work in his life. An artist! And trying to act up to Miss Allison."

"Ray Hurlbut"—McCann eyed the cook speculatively—"didn't know anything about his uncle's death until about a half hour ago. I met him just as we were coming in. He seemed pretty much upset. He said he'd been fishing, that he—"

Lucy flounced to the icebox and brought out a platter with three large perch and a black bass. "Certainly he was fishing."

"You like him, huh?"

"He's a fine lad," said Lucy, closing the icebox. "They had their arguments—Mr. Hurlbut was a strong-minded man—but he loved the boy."

McCann stood up. "How about this gardener, Duarte? A Portuguese, huh?"

"Yes."

"How long's he been here?"

"Oh, four-five years."

"What'll happen to you now?" McCann ventured.

"Me?" Lucy was silent for a moment and somewhere in the upper reaches of the bleak old house a shutter flapped weirdly in a wind that had sprung up since noon. The hollow ominous slapping sound seemed to grip and unnerve the cook. Her face paled and her voice was unsteady.

"I don't like to think about it."

III

DINNER that night was a strained, almost silent ordeal. The chair at the head of the table was vacant. At the foot sat a gaunt-faced woman with thin bloodless lips, cold gray eyes and a firm, almost jutting chin. She spoke but seldom—when she did it was in a dry, static voice.

McCann excused himself as soon as he could and went into the living room, a high-ceilinged, musty-smelling room, filled with ancient furniture and draped with somber hangings. He called his partner in Boston, talked with him for five minutes. Then he called Chief Flynn, learned that although all roads were patrolled, Quillen had thus far escaped capture.

McCann lit a cigarette and forced a thin blue cone of smoke through pursed lips. He ran lean, strong-looking fingers through his thick dark hair and his eyes were smoldering and restless. Twice he paced the length of the living room floor. Then he stopped by the wide doorway leading to the front hall and took his automatic from his shoulder holster.

For some minutes he stood there, balancing the blue steel gun in his right palm, and through his mind the events of the day rushed in a tumbled mass. He tried to straighten them into an orderly sequence.

Flynn had said there was a letter written by Quillen to the Boston police, stating that he had killed Stacey, the former district attorney. McCann's partner was checking that—and other things.

Young Baker—was he lying? Did he leave those tracks in the sand leading from the landing stage of the boatshed to that stand of pines or did the killer make them?

And the will—the notes for the will

Hurlbut was considering? Flynn's arrival at the office had interrupted Sisson's statement. McCann cursed softly and inspected his automatic. He would check with Sisson later. Right now he had something else he wanted to do.

He slipped the automatic into his coat pocket and went out into the evening air that, windswept as it was, seemed warm in comparison with the stiff coolness of the ancient house. It was about eight o'clock and just turning dusk, so that far out across the water he could see the shimmering, never-constant lights of Vineyard Haven extend in a low line like the horizon.

He found Lafferty slowly patrolling the outside of the house and stopped to talk with him.

"Eaten yet?"

"Yeah." Lafferty grinned. "That cook. She's all right."

"I want to take a look at that shack—or cottage you searched this afternoon."

"There wasn't a thing there."

"Yeah," grunted McCann. "But that was then. It may be different now. Quillen is hiding out some place. I'll take a look. Where is it?"

Lafferty shrugged indifferently. "Out there."

He pointed toward a sandy arm that extended straight out from the front of the house. For perhaps a hundred feet pines and oaks made a wooded plot that furnished a venerable setting for the old building but beyond this a reach of irregular dunes jutted out into the sound.

"You can just see—or maybe you can't. It's gettin' pretty dark. Anyway"—Lafferty dropped his arm—"it's on the right shore. Just follow that line of telephone poles. It's got electric lights. The door's unlocked. Want me to go with you?"

"You stay here. Somebody's got to check on the house. I'll be back in a few minutes."

McCann turned and started through the trees. It was lighter away from the leafy canopy and he could make out the outline of the spit, could vaguely see the roof of the cottage.

The detective found the footing uncertain. This and the gusts of wind that buffeted him made the walking difficult. After a hundred yards or so, the dunes which at first were but anthills, reared up into mounds and valleys.

ABOUT three hundred yards from the trees he came to the bridge. A small tidewater creek snaked it from the east side of the spit and the bridge, six feet or more above the trickle of water at low tide, was a rough planked affair about three feet wide.

McCann stopped a moment to get his breath and surveyed the surrounding terrain. Behind him he could make out the lights of the house, winking through the barricade of trees. In front and to the right, perhaps another two hundred yards from the bridge, was the deserted cottage. Beyond this the spit curved slightly to the left and ended in a point an eighth of a mile farther on.

Darkness was closing in rapidly now but McCann knew the direction of his destination, could make out the spindly line of light poles. In another five minutes he was moving up a gentle slope to the gray shingled structure.

Slowly and with silent tread he started to circle the building. Then he saw that it was built on a foundation of concrete blocks and that the back of the cottage touched a localized rock formation that slid steeply down to the water's edge. Approach from this side was impossible.

McCann retraced his steps, noted two windows on the near side and the front. He continued on to the far side of the cottage. Here also there were two windows. But the only door opened from the front.

There was no porch—just one wooden step to the door and this had been nearly covered with the shifting sand. He slid his right hand into his coat pocket as he opened the door. A gust of wind swirled in behind him.

Inside the room the blackness was profound and he slid one hand along the right wall to see if there was a light switch. Then it hapened.

As McCann stepped forward a human form, vague and indistinct in the shadowy interior, hurtled out from its hiding place behind the door. McCann sensed, rather than heard the movement. His hand came away from the light switch and he spun about.

The advantages of surprise and attack were with the man who waited. Before McCann could get set the fellow piled on him, fists swinging.

The detective was slapped against the wall before the savage onslaught. For an instant he tried to pull his gun but

he suddenly realized a gun was useless at close quarters except as a club. When a hand clamped on his wrist he dropped the gun back into his pocket and set to work with his fists.

For a moment the unseen opponent held his own. Then he began to fall back under the detective's short churning body punches. Unable to stand up before them he shifted his attack and dove at McCann's knees.

They hit the floor in a tangle of arms and legs, rolled up against a table, upset it. McCann got his right hand on a muscular throat and, cursing softly, applied pressure as he pumped his left fist into a firm stomach.

He heard his man gasp as his breath was shut off and, still holding to the fellow's throat, he got his knees under him, started to yank the struggling man erect. Then something hard smashed down on his head and a vague noise like a distant sound of breaking glass buzzed in his ears as blackness swept over him.

When McCann opened his eyes the room was in pitch darkness. Finally he distinguished a dark blue rectangle of sky framed in one window and his senses returned with a rush.

He pushed himself to a sitting position, groaned once and felt gingerly of his scalp. There was a lump high over his right ear and his thick hair was wet and sticky for a space of two inches or so. He began to swear in a low, vicious monotone that helped him fight the nausea which gnawed at his stomach as he got stubbornly to his feet.

He had not been unconscious long. Of this he was sure. But it had been long enough. He fumbled for a match and cursed himself for not bringing a flashlight.

With a lighted match he found the electric switch near the door, turned it on. As he turned to survey the room a buzzing so faint that he was not sure whether it was real or a figment of imagination sounded briefly in his ears. He shook his head, reached for a cigarette, lighted it.

The cottage was a one-room affair, long, spacious, with a low beamed ceiling. On the sea side of the building two wide windows and a comfortable-looking leather windowseat looked out over the Bayport harbor three miles away. In each of the adjoining corners was an easy chair and also a floor lamp.

ON the right wall were a sink, a hand pump, a kitchen cabinet and a three-burner oil stove. On the left wall, between the two windows, was a double bed. It was not made. The mattress and pillows were bare. At McCann's immediate right was the small table which had been upset in the struggle.

He stooped to pick it up when his eyes caught the fractured bottle which had knocked him out. He stared down at the bottle with eyes that were hot, angry.

The bottle was of white glass, looked like a quart whiskey bottle. It had been broken in two near the bottom. McCann's fingers strayed unconsciously to the lump on his head.

"Now I know I stay," he said grimly and took out his handkerchief and a pencil from his vest pocket.

He slipped the pencil through the bottle neck and, with the handkerchief in his left hand, rotated the bottle experimentally around the axis of the pencil.

"I wonder," he said softly.

Then he stiffened, glanced quickly over his shoulder toward the windows at the front of the cottage. He placed the bottle on the table, took one long step to the wall near the door and snapped off the light.

He knew now that his ears had not deceived him and this time his gun was in his hand. Footsteps crunched lightly in the sand outside the house. They grew slower and more deliberate as they neared the door. Then the latch clicked faintly. McCann held his breath and waited.

The one outside had seen the light go out, must have seen it. So he must know that someone was inside. But who was it? And how would he play his hand?

The door creaked open, swung slowly back on McCann. A gust of wind brushed across the floor, tugged at his ankles. Then a vague blotch inched into view and sand scratched between the floor and leather soles.

McCann acted the moment he saw this blotch. He took one long step forward and jammed his automatic hard against a thick back.

"Drop it!" he snapped. He hesitated an instant as the man went rigid. Then, "Drop it, guy. This thing tears a nice big hole."

Something thudded to the floor and McCann, still keeping the gun in the

man's back, stepped around behind him and reached for the light button. The switch clicked and McCann stepped back, his gun held ready.

Slowly the man turned about. It was Duarte, the gardener—a squat swarthy fellow with thick shoulders and jet black hair. He wore khaki trousers and a shirt that was open at the throat.

His black eyes glared their unspeakable fury.

McCann lowered his automatic slightly and stepped forward to pick up the heavy revolver. "What do you want here?" he asked flatly.

Duarte shrugged and remained sullenly silent.

"Just out for the walk, maybe."

"I saw a light here," the Portuguese said finally in a thick low voice. "I saw a light and I thought I'd better take a look."

"And you were walking around with a cannon?" McCann's eyebrows cocked.

"I'm gonna keep right on walking around with it from now on. I'd like to get the guy that shot old Hurlbut."

"Yeah," McCann grunted. "You and me." His brows dropped and his eyes narrowed again as he asked, "Where were you when you saw the light?"

"Out on the dunes—other side of the bridge."

"You weren't out here before tonight?"

Duarte shook his head and wet his thick lips. "Not for a long time."

"And you didn't see anybody else out getting the air either, I suppose?"

Duarte hesitated, avoided McCann's eyes. "No, I didn't see anybody," he said then.

McCann lifted the muzzle of Duarte's gun, smelled it.

"You think I killed Hurlbut, maybe." Duarte's voice hardened.

"I'm not sure," said McCann deliberately. "In a job like this I suspect everybody—that's my business."

He broke Duarte's gun, emptied out the shells, handed them and the gun to the Portuguese.

"Watch yourself," he said. "Somebody put the slug on me tonight." He turned toward the door, opened it. "Let's go," he grunted, and snapped off the lights.

As Duarte left the room McCann whipped out his handkerchief and picked up the upper half of the bottle.

IV

McCANN left Duarte at the garage and went around the house to the front porch. Sisson and Lafferty were near the doorway, talking in low tones.

"Did you get anything?" Lafferty asked him.

"Did I?" McCann grunted bitterly. He told what had happened at the cottage but he did not speak of the bottle.

"I don't understand it," Sisson protested. "Why, if he knows the police are after him, does Quillen hang around here like this? Do you believe he really means to try and get at Hurlbut's family like he threatened?"

"I don't believe anything," growled McCann, "except what I see. And only about half of that."

Lafferty whistled softly and jammed his thumbs in his Sam Browne belt. "I wish I'd gone with you," he grunted. "We would've taken that guy."

"Yeah," said McCann, "maybe we would." He hesitated, then added crisply, "How long have you been here?"

"We've been talking right here for a half hour," Lafferty answered. "We both saw the light go on in the cottage, saw 'em go off and on again."

"Sure," said McCann. "But where's young Hurlbut?"

"He's in the drawing room with Miss Allison now," said Sisson. "He went out for the mail about an hour ago—just got back."

"Yeah?" said McCann thoughtfully. "And where's Baker?"

"I don't know," Sisson said.

"He took the car and went out right after Hurlbut," Lafferty added. "He ain't back yet."

"Well," McCann's voice carried a threat, "I'll have a talk with Hurlbut—and I especially want to see Baker. There's something screwy about that guy and I've got lots of questions. Maybe he knows some answers. But right now"—he took Sisson by the arm—"I want to talk to you. Let's hear the rest of the story about that will." Then to Lafferty, "Let me know when Baker comes in." They went into the living room together.

There Joyce Allison, a tall blue-eyed girl with a clear tanned skin and ash-blond hair in a long bob, was sitting on an old-fashioned davenport. Beside her was a good-looking young man in his

middle twenties, a red-haired youth whose bronzed face was somber.

McCann, seeing the two in there together, checked Sisson while he stepped into the well-lighted room. For the first time Sisson saw the bottle the detective carried. "What's that?" he asked.

McCann held up the bottle, looked at it for a moment and then glanced over at Hurlbut, one eyebrow cocking. "Just a souvenir I picked up," he said meaningly.

He stepped nearer the davenport, smiled at Joyce Allison. Then his eyes began a search of Hurlbut's face. Under this careful scrutiny the younger man's features paled slightly and his mouth tightened so that the muscles rippled at the corners of his jaw. There was a small bluish welt on one cheek bone and McCann's lips compressed.

"Run into a door?" he asked evenly.

"A door?" Hurlbut's eyes widened and his face flushed. "What do you—oh, this?"

He put a forefinger on the cheek bone and laughed. The laugh sounded forced, brittle—but it was a laugh nevertheless.

"I slipped when I was getting into the car," he said. "Just nicked myself a bit on the windshield."

"Oh, yeah?" McCann's eyes narrowed and he smiled grimly. "Well, I'd like to talk to you some time—you and Miss Allison."

"Now if you like," said Hurlbut stiffly. "I've got some letters to write. Was just going upstairs."

"No hurry," McCann said.

Hurlbut stood up immediately and started for the door. McCann watched him for a moment.

"I'll be up to see you a little later," he said and turned to Sisson. "Wait in the library."

McCann sat down on the arm of the davenport as the two men left the room. When he studied the girl's young face she met his gaze with eyes that were troubled but steady.

"How come," said McCann, "Hurlbut needed a secretary?"

"He was secretary of a yacht association," the girl answered. "It has fleets all over the country. He had a tremendous amount of correspondence."

"You like it here?" asked McCann.

"Well—"

"You liked Hurlbut?"

"Yes."

"But not his wife?" The girl hesitated. "Or his stepson?" No answer. "How about young Hurlbut?"

The girl flushed and remained silent.

"We'll skip it then," McCann said slowly. "But here's something else. Hurlbut—Benjamin Hurlbut—called me down here to act as his bodyguard. I very nearly passed it up—in fact we were talking it over when he was killed.

"So I'm really not working for anybody." McCann hesitated and his fingers strayed to the lump on his head. "But I've got a bit of a reputation—and there are a couple things I want to even up for. The point is this—did you think enough of Mr Hurlbut to want to help get this killer?"

"Oh—" Joyce Allison's eyes filled. "Of course—I—"

"That's all I want to know. From now on I'm working for you."

"But I couldn't—"

"Never mind the fee. You've hired yourself a private dick. If anyone asks you, tell him. The fee is nobody's business—and there won't be any. I've got plenty at stake here. I don't need the money. All I want is a legitimate reason for sticking around until somebody scores a payoff."

SISSON was smoking a cigar and reading the evening paper when McCann came into the library. The detective had taken the broken bottle to his room and locked the door and now he immediately pulled a chair close to the lawyer and dropped into it.

"Let's have it," he suggested. "What was the idea of Hurlbut having a new will—and what were the changes?"

"Hurlbut's estate," began Sisson, "as I was about to tell you, consists of this house and land, a business block in Bayport and two hundred thousand dollars in cash—five and ten dollar bills. The present will gives Mrs. Hurlbut a flat bequest of fifty thousand dollars and a life income of half the income of the business block."

"How much is that block worth—what's the income?"

"About one hundred thousand dollars to one hundred and fifty thousand dollars," said Sisson thoughtfully. "Although at a forced sale it probably would not bring more than seventy-five thousand dollars. The income at present is around five thousand dollars a year."

"All right," grunted McCann. "Go on."

"The balance of the cash—in fact all the rest of the estate with the exception of a few small bequests to the servants—goes to Ray Hurlbut."

"And what did Hurlbut want to change it for?"

Sisson puffed thoughtfully for a few seconds while the ancient timbers of the sagging house moaned protestingly against the wind that whined in the trees outside.

"I think it was a threat." Sisson shivered slightly, seemed to shake off the spell of the house. "Mrs. Hurlbut has been getting rather dictatorial lately. And Ray and Mr. Hurlbut had reached an impasse on the matter of building more boats. Ray threatened to leave—he only came three months ago. Mr. Hurlbut wanted him to stay and start up the business again. So he threatened to cut Ray and Mrs. Hurlbut off with ten thousand."

"There's plenty of motive there," said McCann evenly.

"But"—Sisson's jaw dropped—"you don't think the family is in any way connected with his death? Why, Quillen—"

"I don't think anything yet," cut in McCann. "But I like to know the facts. Are you sure about that two hundred thousand dollars in cash?"

"Absolutely—that is, I was a month or so ago. He was in my office with it. He had one of those overnight cases jammed full of fives and tens."

"Two hundred thousand dollars in fives and tens?"

"Yes. Hurlbut dropped over one hundred thousand dollars in a bank failure. That soured him. I believe the money is right here in the house some place."

"Two hundred thousand dollars in cash? In this house?" McCann jerked upright in his chair and his dark eyes sharpened with interest. "Who knows about it?"

"I don't know."

McCann stood up and rubbed the firm line of his chin with the side of his right forefinger.

"That," he said finally, "would be a nice haul. You couldn't trace those bills—and if anyone got away with 'em—" He hesitated, cocked one eyebrow. "A nice bit of loot, huh? You're his lawyer. Are you the executor too?"

Sisson nodded slowly.

"Looked for the money yet?"

"I've been too upset about this other thing. But I guess I'd better start looking around tomorrow."

"Yeah," said McCann. "A good idea."

At nine-thirty McCann got a telephone call from his partner in Boston. As he hung up Lafferty came in and announced that George Baker had just driven in.

"Okay," grunted McCann, "go in and search Baker's room. I'll stall him on the porch for a few minutes. Come out in the hall when you finish." As Lafferty started to turn away McCann took his arm. "How about this guy Sisson," he asked slowly. "He knows plenty. Do you think he could be the—"

"Him?" Lafferty grunted disdainfully. "How the heck could he? He was at the house when I went up this afternoon—and he was with me when you got socked."

"Yeah," said McCann thoughtfully and Lafferty went into the hall chuckling.

When George Baker came up the front steps three minutes later he didn't see the detective leaning in the shadows of the doorway. When McCann spoke, Baker jumped as though he had been shot.

"What's the idea?" he snapped when he had recovered his composure.

"What idea?" said McCann easily.

"Hiding there—"

"Hiding?" McCann snorted impatiently. "I was waiting for you, sweetheart. Where have you been?"

"Bayport."

"Just Bayport? Doing what?"

"What's it to you?" Baker's voice was angry, stubborn. "I don't have to account to you. You came down here to

be a *bodyguard* for my stepfather." Baker laughed sardonically.

McCANN remained silent but his eyes were black slits in the shadows and a sliver of light from the inside hall danced on the bulging muscles of his jaw.

"He's dead. So who are you working for now? What right have you to hang around here?"

McCann kept his temper with an obvious effort that made his voice cold and bitter. "You weren't out on the dunes tonight?"

"No, I wasn't out on the dunes."

"Well—" McCann broke off as Lafferty's footsteps clicked in the hall. He waited a moment, then continued to Baker, "I want a talk with you. Let's go inside."

The two men joined Lafferty near the staircase and McCann said, "We can go to your room."

Baker gave the detective a disdainful glance, then led the way down a narrow corridor which gave on the main hall halfway between the front and back stairs. They passed the library and study opposite, continued on to the two rooms at the end of the small wing—Baker's bedroom and sitting room.

Baker turned on the light and sat down near the doorway connecting the bedroom. McCann glanced around, noting the comfortable furnishings. Lafferty stood by the doorway to the hall. Baker lit a cigarette.

"Well, get on with it," he said as he inhaled. "I'm tired and I want to go to bed."

[Turn page]

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"That's too bad," McCann sat down. "Because there are a couple of questions you're going to answer if I have to stay here all night. You know your father—stepfather—had two hundred thousand dollars in cash around the house?"

"Yes."

"Know where he kept it?"

"No."

"Ever see it?"

"No."

McCann checked his next question as Lafferty stepped forward and held out a ten-dollar bill.

"Don't know if this is anything but I found it in the flap of that suitcase over there." The policeman pointed to a tan cowhide bag that stood near the window.

Baker's face blanched and he stared wide-eyed for a moment before he spoke. "That's a plant," he said hoarsely. "I never put it there."

"So you say," grunted McCann. "And you also gave me the runaround this afternoon. Now get this, Baker. I want the truth. I got a call this afternoon from a fellow who was out in a boat about the time Hurlbut was murdered. He was sailing out there in the bay and he saw somebody running away from that boatshed. It could have been you."

Baker's face was a tallow mask and his tongue licked out to wet his leaden lips. Slowly, with an obvious effort, he got control of his voice. When he spoke his tone was frightened but defiant.

"I don't have to talk to you. You're only a private dick and you don't pull any weight with me."

"Okay." McCann spread his hands in a gesture of resignation but anger flared behind his narrowed lids. "But you'll go down to the chief's office and talk then." He turned to Lafferty. "How about it?"

"All right," Baker said before Lafferty could speak. "I'll go down to the station. Maybe I'll talk to the chief but I won't talk to you." He moved over to the bedroom door, opened it, said, "I'll get a hat." He gave McCann a quick contemptuous glance and stepped across the threshold.

The door started to swing shut. It moved slowly at first. Then it slammed forcefully and a light snapped on. In the next instant Baker screamed. McCann was half out of the chair when the shot rang out and beat its echoes against the door panels.

"He's done it again!" gasped Lafferty, paralyzed with surprise.

McCann's gun was in his hand as he leaped forward. He hit the door with his shoulder.

From some point in that locked room a window rasped in its casement. There was the sound of a body thudding to the floor. Then a low choking cough began to drift through the panels as McCann and Lafferty slammed their weight against the door.

Their third charge broke the lock. The two men stumbled into the lighted bedroom and Lafferty's awkward onrush sprawled him over the crumpled body of George Baker.

The coughing had stopped. There was no sign of life or movement in the man on the floor. He lay spreadeagled on his back, his arms outflung. His eyes were open and staring and blood had begun to well up out of a small bluish hole in his forehead.

McCann turned to the opened window. Beyond, from the reflected glow of the room's lights, he could see the ground and the black pillar-like trunks of the pines. He spun on Lafferty, whirled him toward the door.

"Out the front way," he rapped. "I'll take the window."

V

THROUGH the window McCann vaulted. He quickly recovered his balance as he hit the lawn. For a second he hesitated, his eyes trying to pierce the inky shadows at the side of the house, trying to focus on the tree-studded blackness of the lawn.

Then he wheeled quickly and ran toward the rear of the house. Lafferty, coming out the front door, would naturally run toward the window—and the other side of the building would be unguarded.

McCann kept close to the walls of the rambling structure. Twice he fell over unseen shrubbery but by the time he had reached the rear of the house and circled around the darkened kitchen his eyes had become accustomed to the night. He had nearly reached the front porch when he heard the shot. It came from a point near Baker's bedroom. McCann spurted past the front door and along the wing, waiting for another shot.

Who had fired—Lafferty or the murderer? Lights were beginning to flash on in the second floor of the house now and strips of yellow slid out over the lawn. McCann sprinted on, spasmodic, half-breathless curses ripping from his lips at every second step.

He swung around the corner of the wing with his gun up and his eyes sweeping the checkerboard of lawn. Then he saw them on the ground. Light from the bedroom caught the blue of Lafferty's uniform and, as he rolled over losing his cap, his blond hair was like a yellow helmet.

McCann could not make out the other man. So furious was the struggle, so quickly moving the writhing bodies, he could not identify Lafferty's assailant. He slid to a stop beside the two men, reached down quickly and slapped the snouty barrel of his automatic on a thatch of black hair, yanked Lafferty by the shoulder.

The black-haired man ceased struggling for a moment and Lafferty got to his knees, felt around on the ground until he recovered his gun. The other man arched his back, pushed himself up to his hands and knees and shook his head.

McCann reached down, fastened his left hand in a khaki shirt and pulled the man to his feet. The fellow raised his head and McCann stared into the scowling pain-ridden face of Duarte.

"Why, you rat!" the detective spat. He holstered his gun, reached out with his right hand and slapped Duarte back against the wall of the building so hard that he bounced.

"I got a good notion—"

He stopped then as hysterical voices whipped out of the opened bedroom window and the low moaning scream of a horrified woman slapped against his ears. He looked over Duarte's shoulder.

Outlined there in the light of the room a chalky faced trio stared wide-eyed at the sprawling body of Baker. Then Mrs. Hurlbut stopped screaming and sagged against Sisson, who grabbed her before she fell.

Ray Hurlbut, clad in a green dressing-gown, looked up, rushed to the window. He rattled incoherent questions but McCann did not hear them. He had already turned back to Duarte.

"Speak your piece," he rapped. But the Portuguese was sullenly silent.

"I ran past this window and the mug

let me have it," Lafferty said. "So close I could feel the powder blast. He was behind a tree. I didn't stop to find out who he was—I just piled on him."

Duarte tried to pull away from McCann but the detective jerked him close. "Twice on the same night, huh?" he muttered. "I should have busted that thick skull of yours."

He pushed the sullen Portuguese away and looked around at Lafferty, who had picked up Duarte's gun. Then Duarte spoke.

"My room's over the garage. I hear the shot, shouts. I grab my gun and run out. I see him," pointing to Lafferty, "run around the corner of the house. It was dark, couldn't see the uniform. I take no chance—duck behind a tree and—"

"You take no chance," snorted McCann, and looked at Lafferty. "Can you imagine—a guy like that?" He turned back to Duarte. "Well, stick around. The chief'll be out later and he'll be raisin' plenty of trouble. He'll want to talk to you maybe."

McCann climbed back through the bedroom window, followed by Lafferty. He leaned against the closet door and surveyed the room with humid threatening eyes.

"Get on the phone," he snapped at Lafferty.

MRS. HURLBUT, still in her faint, her angular face the color of putty and her lean frame clothed in a gray flannel dressing gown, lay on the bed. Sisson's fingers were flexing nervously. Ray Hurlbut was in the sitting room, standing beside Joyce Allison with his arm around her shoulder.

McCann called them to the bedroom door. "Where were you two when this happened?" he demanded.

"I was reading—in the drawing room," Joyce Allison said. "I didn't come at first. I heard the shot but"—her lower lip trembled—"I was too frightened."

"I was in my room," said Hurlbut. "I thought I heard a shot but I didn't go into the hall until I heard you shouting. Mrs. Hurlbut was already at the stairs and Sisson had got down ahead of her. I caught up with them outside the door here—we all came in together."

McCann stared down at Baker's body for a moment with eyes that were hot and disgusted. "What a mess this'll

make," he said bitterly. "And what a spot for a private dick!"

* * * * *

A half hour later Chief Flynn let his eyes drift slowly about the room, fastened them on Lafferty, then on McCann.

"You two guys are certainly good," he said scornfully. "Quillen bumps off Hurlbut right before your eyes this afternoon. And you sit right here while Baker steps into the other room and gets his. There's no doubt it was the same guy. Same method. He came in the window and if Baker hadn't walked in on him so he could get a good crack at him he'd have let him have it through the door again like he did before."

Flynn clasped his hands behind his back, regarded McCann, who stood near the hall door, his dark face hard, tight-lipped. "I think," he said finally, "that you and me and the D. A.'ll have a little talk tomorrow."

He turned to survey Sisson and Hurlbut. "So that's the story, eh? This Alison girl was in the living room. You two and Mrs. Hurlbut were upstairs?" He cocked his head and glared at Duarte. "And you—you're a public menace. We'll want to talk to you too."

He reached into a uniform pocket and took out the ten-dollar bill Lafferty had found in Baker's suitcase. He looked at it for a moment, then raised his eyes and stared disdainfully at McCann.

"Now what's this screwy idea of yours about the will and this money?"

McCann deliberately took out a cigarette, lighted it. After he had inhaled he spoke in a level voice. "I already told you. You know what the new will would've called for. And two hundred thousand dollars is a nice piece of change."

"You ain't tryin' to tell me that Quillen knew all this?"

"I'm not tryin' to tell you anything. But I could get a whole flock of guys bumped off for that dough."

"Maybe you think Baker lifted the two hundred thousand dollars and killed Hurlbut—and then committed suicide."

McCann ignored the chief's sarcasm. "What good does it do me to tell you what I think?" he fired back.

"Who knew about this money? Sisson. Who else. You?" Flynn pointed to Hurlbut.

"No," Hurlbut denied. "I knew he had considerable cash but I didn't know how much or what he had done with it."

"How about Mrs. Hurlbut—and that girl?" Flynn scowled. "Where is she, anyway?"

"She felt faint," Hurlbut answered coldly. "I took her out on the front porch. She wanted to walk around a bit and get control of herself. Anyway, she's in no shape to be questioned tonight."

"I'll be the judge of that," snapped Flynn. He turned and spoke to McCann. "So you got it all figured out, eh? Well give me Quillen and you can keep your ideas. I ain't even sure there is any two hundred thousand dollars. Nobody's seen it around here, have they? Sisson, here, says he saw it in Boston a month ago. But that ain't here—and it ain't now."

"There's nothing to it." The chief snorted disdainfully. "Quillen's trying to keep his word and rub out the family. We'll go over this house tomorrow—see if that dough is around."

MCCANN had told Flynn about the assault in the cottage but he had not mentioned the bottle he had brought back and he did not intend to mention it now.

"You could be right," McCann said sardonically, "but it's funny—we ain't even seen Quillen."

"What?" Flynn's brows drew down.

"I said," McCann went on, "we—"

The detective's next word died on his lips as his body stiffened.

From out of the night, somewhere in the direction of the dunes, a woman's scream rose and was swept along on the wind—an hysterical, chilling cry of terror that slid up in a shrill crescendo.

Hurlbut was on his feet in a flash, his face a ghastly white. "Joyce!" he breathed, fearfully.

The scream shrilled forth again. This time it seemed more piercing than before. And this time it died, choked off suddenly, ominously, at the highest note. It left an eerie silence in its wake, unbroken save for the low whine of the wind.

McCann, nearest the door, wheeled and sprang into the narrow corridor. He swung out into the main hall, past the staircase—and as he leaped from the porch the pounding of running heels

thundered behind him in the vestibule.

He ran straight ahead, dodging the black tree trunks that loomed up before him. By the time he reached the edge of the sand his eyes had become accustomed to the darkness.

The wind was howling now. Away from the shelter of the trees its full force slapped against his body and flying sand slanted in from the east and stung his face.

Slowed down by the treacherous footing, McCann got a mental picture of the immediate area. The scream had not come from far off but its exact direction he did not know. He stopped for a moment, turned his face into the wind. Then he saw a dark blotch fifty feet away, a shapeless huddle against the background of the sand.

Seconds later he was at the girl's side on his knees. She lay on her face and he turned her over and lifted her head. Then Flynn and the others pulled to a stop beside him. They carried her back to the house and laid her on the davenport. There was a moment of awed, silent inspection.

"She's only fainted," McCann announced. "Somebody get some water."

When Joyce Allison opened her eyes she drew back in instinctive fright. Horror masked her features for a moment. Then, recognizing the men who looked down at her, she forced a wan smile.

"What was it?" Flynn asked.

"Oh!" the girl closed her eyes a moment. "I don't know whatever possessed me—to walk out there like that. But I was half-sick with the frightful things that have happened—to Mr. Hurlbut and George. I didn't know where I was until he was standing right there in front of me."

"Who?" barked Flynn.

"I don't know. I mean—he was tall and very thin. I saw bulging pale eyes and hollow cheeks."

"What'd he do?"

"I screamed first. I was sick with fear. Then he grabbed me and I screamed again and I don't remember anything more."

Flynn made noises in his throat and unbuttoned his uniform coat. He thrust a hand deep into an inside pocket, drew out a police circular with a small photographic reproduction at the top. He bent down beside the girl, showed her the picture.

"That the guy?"

"Yes. Yes, I'm sure of it."

Flynn gave McCann a look of scorn, folded the sheet of paper and replaced it in his pocket. "So," he drawled, "nobody's seen Quillen, eh?"

VI

EARLY the following morning McCann arose. He had one idea in mind that needed the cooperation of Lucy, the cook. It was the same idea that had flashed into his mind before in the cottage on the dunes—when he had so carefully retrieved the broken bottle which had knocked him unconscious.

He went down to the kitchen at seven o'clock. Lucy was just fixing the coffee and McCann lit a cigarette and sat down at the kitchen table.

"Lucy," he said slowly, "I need some help. Somebody slugged me last night out at Mr. Hurlbut's cottage. If you'll work with me I think I can find the guy that did it."

Lucy turned on him, her eyes clear and hard and her chin outthrust. "The dirty, sneakin'—" She broke off, continued shortly, "What can I do?"

"I've got the fingerprints of the man that slugged me," McCann said. "I want every water glass at the breakfast table. Wipe them perfectly clean before you put them on—then see that no one touches them until I get a chance to get them." McCann fixed his eyes on the ceiling. "And Duarte—where does he eat?"

"Here in the kitchen."

"Well, fix a glass for him too."

After breakfast McCann and Lafferty went into the dining room. The detective called Lucy in, asked for some clean napkins. Then he wrapped each glass carefully and penciled an identification mark on each piece of linen.

After that they went out to the garage and took Hurlbut's ancient sedan. When McCann braked the car in the courtyard behind the new-looking two-story brick structure that housed the Bayport police department he turned and spoke to Lafferty.

"You'll have to drive this back to the house—and stay there."

"You're tellin' me," growled Lafferty. "If the chief finds I left that joint, he'll have my badge."

McCann grinned at Lafferty's worried manner. "He won't find out—and here's something I've got to know first. Last night you told me you had a pretty good fingerprint man down here. What's his name—and what kind of a guy is he?"

"Jim Worrell," Lafferty said. "A good egg—and he knows his stuff."

"Okay." McCann got out of the car and removed the suitcase which held the glasses and the broken bottle. "I'll be out later on."

He found Worrell, a sandy-haired fellow with glasses, in an office on the second floor and told the fingerprint man what he wanted.

"If you use the same system as the Bureau of Identification in Boston you can get on the wire and check those prints in a couple hours or so," McCann suggested.

"Sure." Worrell surveyed the glasses and the bottle. "Less'n that, I'll have to photograph 'em first. But things are quiet here—I got plenty of time."

"I won't forget it either," said McCann. "I'm going to tell the chief that I got the glass prints to check up with Boston. But that bottle is my own private property. That part is a personal favor to me—so keep it under your hat."

* * * * *

District Attorney Nealy, a florid-faced, well-dressed man of forty-five or so, came into Chief Flynn's office at three that afternoon. He brought his stenographer along with him.

He knew McCann slightly and nodded to him. Then he went around behind Flynn's desk and put on his glasses. The stenographer, a pimply faced youth, sat down in the corner by the door.

"Now, McCann," Nealy began, "let's have your story."

"What story?" McCann's face was somber but his eyes were amused.

"Why"—Nealy's eyes widened—"the whole story. What you know about this?"

"Haven't you got that from Flynn?"

"Well," Nealy admitted, "in a way. But Flynn says you've got some idea about Quillen being hooked up with this will—or this cash that Hurlbut is supposed to have."

"Flynn," said McCann dryly, "wasn't interested in my theories. I've changed my mind about spilling them. As long as it's gone so far I'll play it out."

"Yeah?" Nealy's jaw firmed. "Well, you'll give us the facts, McCann, or—"

"You know just as many facts as I do."

"But you've got some hunches."

"All right." McCann's voice hardened. "But I'm not quite crazy enough to tell them in front of a district attorney, a police chief and a stenographer."

"You've got something to protect, eh?" growled Flynn.

"I've got hunches to protect." McCann stood up. "I've played along with you so far but it looks like we split here. You've got Quillen hooked for the murders, so why worry about anything else? But me"—McCann tapped his thumb against his chest—"I'm not satisfied. Quillen's in it. Okay, I won't argue that. But there's another little personal matter I want to straighten out before I'm washed up."

"You can be made to talk," growled Flynn.

"Yeah?" McCann moved to the door. "But get this. I didn't have to come here today. I did it as a favor. If you want me again pinch me or subpoena me and I'll be down with my lawyer." He opened the door and a mirthless smile cracked his dark face. "But here's one hunch you can work on."

He explained his taking the fingerprints on the glasses and the classification Jim Worrell had made.

"Why did you do that?" snapped Nealy.

"Like I said—just a hunch. And Worrell tells me that this guy Duarte has a record—under the name of Frazier. He did two years for assault with a dangerous weapon—knifed a guy. And he was in Charlestown when Quillen was there. I don't know if that's going to ball up your theory—but that's one of the facts you wanted." He glanced down at the stenographer. "Got that, son?"

"Yes, sir."

AS McCann went out he caught sight of Flynn reaching for the telephone. McCann ran quickly upstairs. He found Worrell and told him what he had told Flynn.

"You're sure about the prints on that bottle?" he asked. And, when Worrell nodded, "Okay. Hang onto it for me."

When McCann arrived at Hurlbut's house fifteen minutes later he found Lafferty on the front porch, arguing

vociferously with another local policeman who had been assigned to the place since the second murder.

"What did you do to Flynn?" Lafferty asked when McCann hurried up the steps. "He called up here and—"

"Yeah," interrupted McCann. "He called you up to have you round up Duarte. Did you?"

"No," snorted Lafferty. "He's gone."

"Take his clothes?"

"Yeah. He's gone, bag and baggage. He's taken everything he ever owned with him."

"Where's young Hurlbut?" McCann snapped.

"He's gone too."

"He's *what*?" McCann's eyes flared.

"He's gone—or anyway he ain't here."

"Where'd he go?"

"We don't know. He didn't take anything out of his room. But we ain't been able to find him."

McCann spun on the other policeman, a burly, freckle-faced fellow. "Listen," he ordered. "Go through this house again. Start in the cellar and go clear through to the roof. Don't miss a thing. And if you don't find Hurlbut call Flynn."

He grabbed Lafferty by the arm and pulled him down the steps.

"But what *is* this, anyway?" gasped Lafferty.

"We'll take a look—a good look this time—at that shack out on the dunes. I didn't get much chance last night."

"Yeah, but why all the sweat about young Hurlbut?" Lafferty was nearly trotting to keep up with McCann's long, bent-kneed strides. "What do you figure?"

"I don't know—yet," McCann grunted. "But Ray Hurlbut is the guy who slugged me out in the shack last night." He recounted the struggle in detail, explained about the bottle. "And," he finished, "your man Worrell says the prints on that bottle are identical with those on Hurlbut's glass. Laugh that off."

"He slugged you!" wheezed Lafferty. "But you don't believe—"

"I told you before I don't believe anything."

The two men moved across the bridge, their heels pounding on the rough planking, and turned right, heading for the gray bleak-looking cottage.

It was nearly five o'clock. The afternoon was hot, humid, without a breath of air. Miniature heat waves pushed up from the burning sands.

The two men, puffing, fighting their hurried way over the unstable sand, were within fifty yards of the cottage when they heard the first shot. McCann did not even look up. He threw himself flat on the sand.

"Get down!" he yelled. "*Down!*"

Lafferty tumbled into the sand behind him. "Jeeze," he wheezed. "That was close." Then, "What do we do now?"

McCann took out his automatic, inspected it, slipped off the safety.

"We see how this mug is fixed," he said grimly. "If he's got plenty of shots we'll have to wait for the chief. But if he hasn't, if he's only got one load, we'll take him. There's a thousand reward out for Quillen—if this is him. We could split it two ways."

"Let's get started then," said Lafferty and started to get up. McCann yanked him down just as the second shot ripped across the dunes.

"Boy, are you dumb!" McCann shook his head. "Listen. That's two shots. Count 'em and watch me. He may have six—or if it's an automatic, seven or eight. I'm going straight ahead. You shove off to the right. Pick out the biggest sand dune between you and the windows on that side and keep it in front of you." McCann started to crawl forward. "And remember, if you forget to duck the first time you don't always get another chance."

IT took McCann nearly half an hour to reach the comparative security of the last high dune at the front of the house. There were times, when he had the protection of a little valley, that he moved speedily. But his route was circuitous and there were other times when he had to drive the killer away from the window before he could move forward.

The dune that now shielded him was but forty feet from the door. Lafferty, over on the right, was about fifty from the wall. McCann, carrying an extra clip for his gun, had used up the first one and two shots of the second when another cracking report ripped out from inside the cottage.

"Six," Lafferty called.

McCann waved an arm and drew down behind the protecting dune. For nearly five minutes the silence on the dunes was absolute. Then another shot crashed out from the cottage.

This time McCann raised himself on one elbow, aimed deliberately and put a slug through the window to the right of the door. There was no answering report.

"I'm going in. Cover me!" he shouted across to Lafferty after a minute or two.

McCann got his knees under him, rose slowly to his feet and scrambled down the side of the dune in a low crouch. His eyes, his gun, were on the windows of the cottage. His muscles were tensed for action, ready to throw him flat at the first sign of danger.

Behind and to the right Lafferty was shooting with an even regularity. When he was within ten feet of the door McCann threw another slug through the window. Seconds later he was on the wooden step.

He hesitated here, turned the door-knob. But he did not enter. Instead he shifted his automatic to his left hand, drew over to the protection of the wall at the right of the door. Then he pushed the heavy panel with the muzzle of the gun, watched it swing wide.

This time he pushed the door clear back to the wall. When he was sure no one was behind it he took a step into the room; just one step. His eyes widened, then went narrow as he sucked in his breath. Then he stepped outside and called to Lafferty.

The table, the one which had been upset the night before, had been moved away from the window to the center of the room. There was a ladder-back chair drawn up on the far side and on it sat a man.

He was poorly dressed and his head and shoulders had slumped over on the table, as though he were asleep. Two inches from a skinny blue-veined hand was a .38 automatic. In the right side of his head, at the temple beside shaggy mouse-colored hair, was a hole from which blood oozed and trickled slowly over a bony brow. Around the bullet hole powder burns told of a contact wound.

Lafferty came puffing through the doorway as McCann stepped around the table and looked at the dead man's face. Lafferty's cheeks took on a whiteness

that speeded up into the yellow of his hair.

"Is it—"

"It's Quillen, all right," said McCann slowly.

"Bumped himself when we closed in on him," breathed Lafferty.

McCann put his gun away. "Take a look," he said flatly. "Flynn ought to be out here pretty soon."

He checked himself as a faint, instantaneous buzz sounded in the room. He looked at Lafferty, who had apparently not noticed the sound and was stepping to the door. McCann glanced suspiciously around the room.

"They're already across the bridge—Flynn, the D.A. and a couple others."

"Yeah," said Lafferty, looking out the doorway.

VII

FLYNN, his hands clasped behind his back, teetered on heels and toes and surveyed McCann, who was going about the room, picking up the ejected empty cartridge shells of Quillen's automatic. There was a smug, complacent expression on the chief's thick red face, but for the moment he did not have anything to say.

District Attorney Nealy sat in one of the easy chairs by the front windows, a thick cigar clamped between his teeth. He watched McCann stoop and pick up a copper shell rear the bed. Then he looked impatiently at Flynn.

"How long does it take the coroner to get out here?"

"Oh," Flynn said easily, "he'll be here in a few minutes now."

"Well, I guess I can wait." Nealy puffed on his cigar. "It's worth waiting to get this thing cleaned up. It's a break, all right." He watched McCann again.

"We'll forget about our little argument this afternoon," he added with a smile. "You did a good job at that, McCann. If it hadn't been for you Quillen might've got clear. He saw the jig was up when you closed in on him, decided to go out his own way. No hard feelings."

McCann looked up and his brow lifted. "Hard feelings? Why should there be?" He glanced at Flynn and grinned deliberately. "After all, Lafferty and I'll split that reward."

"Yeah," assented Nealy thoughtfully.

Flynn stopped teetering and scowled at McCann. The thought of the reward apparently got under his skin. When he spoke again his voice was faintly taunting. "Those hunches of yours," he said. "You know, McCann, the ones you were protecting?"

"Sure, I know," said McCann easily. He had moved clear around the room to the oil stove, which rested on a slightly raised platform covered with linoleum.

"Still worrying about that two hundred thousand dollars that's supposed to be around?" asked Nealy with faint sarcasm.

"Not worrying," said McCann, straightening up and walking back to the table. "Just wondering." He glanced down at Quillen, then back at Flynn. "Pick up Duarte yet?"

"No."

"Locate young Hurlbut?"

"Not yet. What about it?"

"I was just wondering," said McCann easily and jingled the cartridge shells in the palm of his hand. . . .

It was dusk before the coroner had finished his examination and ordered Quillen's body removed. The district attorney left as soon as he heard the doctor's pronouncement of the suicide verdict.

Now the procession of death moved out from the cottage into the hushed quiet of the sandy waste. The coroner led the way. Behind him two white-coated internes carried the body of Quillen on a blanket-covered stretcher. Following closely came Flynn and two of his men. McCann and Lafferty were the last to leave.

McCann was strangely silent as he walked slowly along beside Lafferty and he still held the empty cartridges from Quillen's automatic in his hand. Lafferty too was silent. But for another reason. Until thirty hours previously violent death had never crossed his path. He was thrice familiar with it now and reaction had set in.

At the house Quillen's body was loaded into the ambulance and Flynn and his two men got into the police car. McCann went directly to his room on the third floor of the ancient house, unlocked his Gladstone bag and took out a small flashlight. Then, from a box of shells, he loaded both clips for his automatic. When he went back downstairs he spoke to Lafferty, who had remained

behind to watch for Duarte in case he came back.

"There's something I forgot out there in the cottage," McCann said as he took the young policeman by the arm and led him out of the house. "I'm going back."

Lafferty had apparently learned a lot about the private detective in the hours he had known him. Respect had replaced his first doubts and now he seemed to sense that McCann was holding something back.

"What for?" he asked suspiciously. "You didn't forget anything."

McCann took the empty cartridge shells from his coat pocket. "How many shots did we count from Quillen's gun?" he asked.

"Seven," said Lafferty after a moment's hesitation.

"I only found six shells."

"Six?" Lafferty's eyes went wide.

"I'm a curious mug," said McCann, grinning slowly. "So I'm going back. You stay right here—right under these trees where you can watch the dunes. If anybody but me comes back from that direction nab him—but have your gun out!"

"But—"

"Don't argue. Do as I say." McCann replaced the shells. "If I'm not back in an hour you'd better call Flynn and tell him about it."

WHEN McCann reached the bridge that crossed the little tidewater creek he did a curious thing. Instead of crossing it he scrambled down the steep, sandy bank to the water's edge.

It was quite dark now and the hot humid afternoon had given way to a low rolling fog that came in gray opaque waves. McCann took out his flashlight, dimmed its rays with a handkerchief and took a quick look at the height of the water. Like the night before the tide was nearly at ebb, so that as he approached the bridge he found he could walk under it without crouching.

He sat down, took off his shoes and socks, left them on the bank. He rolled his trousers up to the knees and stepped into the cool foot of water that covered the soft muddy sand.

When he was under the bridge he snapped on his flashlight again, played it back and forth across the underside of the rough planking. Then he found

what he was looking for, a double line of fine insulated wire, neatly tacked across the boards—and a copper strip that made a contact switch beneath two of the planks.

McCann snapped off his flashlight and climbed the opposite bank. The fog was tricky. On the dunes it crowded down on him, blotting out everything. In the little valleys the air was cool and clear but McCann followed the light poles.

His brain summoned every single incident that had occurred since he had seen Benjamin Hurlbut murdered before his very eyes. He paraded these incidents through his mind in single file, weighing, analyzing each one, then passing on to the next.

He was certain now that he was right. Yet it was a thing to play alone so that, if he made a mistake, he alone would be to blame.

His thoughts were checked suddenly when the cottage—barren, deserted-looking now—loomed up out of the gray waste like a black warning sentinel in the night. For a moment doubt assailed him.

But, no—he was right. He *had* to be right.

That buzzing he had heard the night before—he had heard this afternoon as Flynn and his men had crossed the bridge. It was a signal—there was no other explanation. And that signal was there for a purpose.

He was at the door and he took out his automatic, slipped off the safety. He had purposely left the latch unfastened so that his entrance could be silent. Now he pushed on the rough panels and stepped quietly into the room.

For one brief moment, as McCann stood on the threshold, holding his breath, his eyes squinting to penetrate the gloom, the blackness of the room seemed more profound than it had the night before. Then he caught sight of a sliver of light, a narrow angle, over by the stove. On tiptoe, his bare feet treading silently across the flooring, he moved slowly toward it.

His search of the room in the afternoon had given him a perfect mental picture of the layout and he reached the stove without making a sound. Then he gently lowered himself to his knees, bent close to the angle of light to study it.

He saw why it was there. The raised platform, linoleum covered, that supported the stove, was movable. Slid back into the room on an axis of the far right-hand corner it would reveal a rectangular opening to a cellar below.

The man in hiding, unwarned by the buzzer at the bridge, had taken his safety for granted and been careless about moving the stove platform over the hole.

McCann did not wait long. He shifted his automatic to his left hand, slid the finger of his right hand along the smooth surface of the platform until he got a firm hold on one corner. Then, bracing himself as best he could, he took a deep breath and yanked the platform toward him.

It moved more easily than he expected. A yellow, light-filled hole opened before his eyes as if by magic. His one tug had been sufficient to move the platform nearly back to the wall, so that when he threw himself flat on his stomach his head and shoulders hung into the opening.

Almost directly below him, at a rectangular pine table, was a man.

It was a mere fraction of a second before the man looked up but that was long enough for McCann to get a flashing, bird's-eye view of the room.

The sides were neatly finished off in wallboard. There were a cot and two cabinets along the walls, a large drawing board and a T-square at the far side of the room under an enameled hanging light reflector. There was a similar lamp above the table and its brilliant glow threw a white cone down on the man—and upon stacks of crisp new currency, piled neatly between the killer's outspread hands.

All this McCann saw in a fraction of a second. Then the man's fingers snaked toward a heavy revolver a foot away and he looked up.

"Don't reach for it!" rapped McCann, as he stared down into the wide startled eyes of Edward Sisson.

VIII

SISSON'S hand stopped inches from the gun as his eyes fastened on the leveled muzzle of McCann's automatic. For seconds he stared, uncomprehend-

ing. Then his hand inched forward.

McCann's voice was flat and menacing. "Do you pull back that hand, or do I shoot it off the table?"

Sisson drew back his hand and his face became a mask of blazing fury.

"Stand up," McCann commanded—and, when Sisson had sullenly obeyed, "Now over by that drawing board—with your face toward the wall."

McCann pulled the stove platform back to the wall so that he could use the short wooden ladder that led to the floor below. Then, his gun held ready, still facing Sisson, he climbed warily down.

When he got his bare feet firmly on the concrete floor he looked around. This time his keen dark eyes took in every detail of the room.

It was larger than he had thought—about ten by twelve. And he saw now where the money had come from. Beside the ladder a panel of the wallboard had been raised so that a space three feet square and a foot or so deep was exposed. In this remained ten or twelve bundles of bills.

McCann moved over to the table, picked up Sisson's revolver. He smelled of the muzzle before he pocketed it and said, "I thought so."

Then he let his eyes slip around the room once more.

In front of the tilted drawing board with its T-square was an adjustable stool. Along the right wall was a cot and above this was a whirring electric fan that sucked air into a square flue.

"Where do you get the air?" he asked slowly. "This thing comes out in those rocks some place?"

Sisson did not answer and McCann took a quick glance at the tall wardrobe cabinet on the left wall, then turned back to the lawyer.

Sisson's face was set, resigned. But his eyes still blazed and McCann read in them a fanatical message. He had the murderer—but he was still in a spot. Sisson, thrice a killer, would be like a madman to handle.

For McCann to try to get him out of this cellar, through the cottage and across the darkness of the dunes alone would be absurd. He did not want to kill Sisson, so he decided to wait. One hour, he had told Lafferty, but the young policeman would probably notify Flynn before that.

"How long," McCann said, making his voice nonchalant, deliberate, "did Quillen live here? Two days—three?"

Sisson's eyes narrowed but he never answered. He maintained a strict silence.

"I began to wonder about Quillen," McCann went on, "when I found young Baker out back of the boatshed. I see it now. He saw you come tearing out of the back door but he wouldn't talk—and that started me. If Quillen had made the kill why should Baker hold back? The answer was—it wasn't Quillen."

McCann grunted softly, sucked his lips a moment, continued to stall.

"Baker saw you but he wouldn't talk until he propositioned you. He wanted money. He probably knew about the two hundred grand—and he saw a chance of getting some, huh?"

Sisson's brows knotted, but he did not speak.

"Then, when you knew I was leary of the kid, when you thought he might squawk, you figured to rub him out," McCann continued slowly. "You must have come down the back stairs that night, gone around the house and climbed in the window—either while Lafferty and I were in the sitting room or just before. When Baker came in to get his hat, you let him have it and rattled the window."

McCann inhaled and there was a certain grim and grudging respect in his manner.

"You were clever then and I was dumb. You didn't go out the window—and you knew I would. You hid in that bedroom closet. The minute I got outside you ran back to the hall, waited for Mrs. Hurlbut and made it look as if you had just come down ahead of her. I wouldn't have been so dumb but for one thing. You were airtight at the time I got slugged here in the shack last night. If I'd known then it was young Hurlbut things woulda been different."

Sisson continued to watch the detective with eyes that were gleaming slits. McCann stood up and moved idly around the room.

"You had two breaks, one good, one bad. The bad one was when Baker saw you come out of the boatshed. But for that you'd have framed Quillen for a suicide, the way you did this afternoon, and everything would have been fake. The good one was when Quillen went

for a walk last night and Allison saw him. That sewed it up as far as the police were concerned."

IT WAS some minutes before Sisson spoke. When he did there was a shrewd calculating undertone to his voice.

"Listen," he muttered, "we've got two hundred thousand dollars here. I know your kind. We can make a deal. I'll split even and all you've got to do is walk out of here, go back to Boston and forget about tonight."

"You know my kind, huh?" McCann's voice was hard. "Well, even if you were right there's another thing I'm not set on. Where's Ray Hurlbut?"

"Ray—" Sisson's eyes widened. "Why, I don't know. At the house, I suppose."

"He might be," said McCann, and continued on around the room. "But I'd like to know. He's the guy that slugged me the other night and that sort of messed me up. I'd like to talk to him. But you"—McCann stopped opposite the wardrobe cabinet—"it's the payoff for you. There are a few things I don't know. You can tell them or not, as you please. I can't figure young Hurlbut—what was he nosing around up here for unless—"

McCann pulled open the door of the wardrobe cabinet then and the sentence died in his throat.

Crammed back in that cabinet and standing on the raised inside platform in an upright position, was the corpse-like body of Ray Hurlbut. His ankles were bound. His arms were tightly tied to his sides. There was a taut gag across his open mouth and his curly head hung down on his chest so that the bloody gash over one ear was plainly visible.

Surprise left McCann a momentary statue. And the moment he lost was costly.

Hurlbut's body, released by the door of the cabinet, swayed quickly forward on his bound feet and hurtled toward the detective. McCann's move was instinctive. He tried to hold Hurlbut upright with one hand as he turned to cover Sisson.

But Hurlbut was solidly built. His body struck against McCann's palms, rolled off before the detective could stop it and fell over on him. McCann braced

himself, tried to support his burden and twist about to keep Sisson covered. But the lawyer saw his chance and seized it with savage fury. As McCann's gun came around Sisson's fist smashed behind the detective's ear.

McCann and Hurlbut crashed to the floor and the dead weight of the unconscious youth's body pinioned the detective's legs just long enough to give Sisson his chance. The lawyer's heel stamped down on McCann's gun wrist, and he stooped quickly, snatched the automatic from the weakened fingers.

McCann came to his feet with a sharp springing movement and swung to meet Sisson. But the ruthless lawyer had drawn far out of reach, back against the opposite wall. The automatic in his hand was steady, the trigger finger tensed and white-knuckled.

"Hold it!"

McCann stiffened, stopped in front of the drawing board. He did not watch the gun. He watched Sisson's eyes. In their angry depths death stared back at him.

"Put up your hands!" Sisson said hoarsely. And when McCann reluctantly obeyed, "Now turn around. I'll want that other gun."

Sisson came warily forward, circled behind McCann's back and lifted the revolver from the detective's coat pocket. Then he retreated to his position at the other side of the table. McCann slowly lowered his hands and turned around.

"It's your move," he said bitterly. "That's twice this guy Hurlbut has messed things up for me."

IX

WITH blazing eyes and a sneer on his lips Sisson began to laugh and the laugh, strained and high-pitched, threw a chill over the room.

"You stuck your nose in it, McCann," he said. "Now I'll play out the string. Untie him!" he snapped with a gesture toward Hurlbut.

McCann hesitated, trying to figure the plan that was warping Sisson's half-crazed brain.

"I said, untie him!"

McCann backed up two steps and knelt beside Hurlbut's trussed figure. The youth's eyes were open now. He

was just regaining consciousness. McCann began to pick at the knots that bound the ankles.

"I made a couple of mistakes, McCann," Sisson said. "Just as you did. But if it hadn't been for you—and this punk here—I'd have pulled it, anyway. If that fool Baker hadn't seen me come out of the boatshed—" He broke off, chuckled hoarsely. "But Baker knew of the money, although he did not know where it was. He had to go an—"

McCann removed the gag and surveyed Sisson with a sharp scrutinizing gaze. Then he interrupted the lawyer. "And for what, Sisson? For what? You've murdered three men and now—"

"You think I can't get away with it?" Sisson chuckled briefly. "I was in a jam until you came. And you"—he jerked the gun at Hurlbut, who was now sitting up while McCann untied his arms—"you had an idea there was something fishy about this place, didn't you?" He looked back at McCann. "That's why he was prowling around here last night and—"

Hurlbut spoke for the first time. "It's my fault," he said thickly, addressing McCann. "I was looking around here last night when I heard you coming. I thought it was Quillen. When you came in I didn't recognize you in the darkness. I did the only thing I could. Then, after I'd knocked you out, I struck a match. When I saw who it was I got panicky. I didn't think you'd ever know who hit you. I ran back to the house."

McCann grunted bitterly and made noises in his throat but did not speak.

"I came back here this afternoon," Hurlbut continued. "Quillen and Sisson were waiting for me with guns. They

brought me down here. I could hear the shooting upstairs. Then Sisson rushed down alone and slugged me—to keep me quiet, I guess."

McCann finally released Hurlbut's arms, helped rub the circulation back into them. "So that was the set-up, huh?" the detective stalled. "What did it get you, Sisson? Nothing. You'll blister anyway and—"

"That's what you think." Sisson's lids drew down. "Without you I'd have had more trouble. I would have had to kill Hurlbut, leave his body here in hope that it would remain undiscovered a few days, then return and try to dispose of it. But"—he paused, as though to give emphasis to his words—"then you came along and fixed things up."

Hurlbut stood up. McCann did likewise and started to move forward slowly.

"Stop!" Sisson jerked up the muzzle of the gun. "Right by that drawing table is far enough."

McCann sat down on the adjustable stool with his back resting against the tilted board, his arms hooked back over the edge.

"Well," he said, "get on with the story."

"The cops think Quillen was the murderer," Sisson said slowly. "I hate to disillusion them but it's got to be done. Figure out how this will look. Hurlbut is missing. You are looking for the two hundred thousand dollars. The police find you down here dead—both of you—Hurlbut killed with a slug from your automatic, you dead from a bullet from this gun. What will they think? Of course, I'll have to leave quite a bit of

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this money around to make it look right but it's probably worth it."

"And," grunted McCann, "you think you can get away with it?"

"Why not? No one suspects me. No one will suspect me."

McCann fell silent for a moment. He gazed into Sisson's eyes and in spite of himself he felt the cold sweat break out on his forehead. It was that crazy look—cruel and vindictive—in Sisson's eyes that did it.

McCann knew instinctively that there was little time left. Whether Sisson could ever get away with his mad scheme was beside the point. The real point was that he intended to try.

A MAN who has killed once has nothing further to lose. He can kill twice, three times, indefinitely if he has the opportunity—and there is only one penalty to be paid. That had been one of Quillen's basic ideas and Sisson was adopting it.

McCann jerked his thoughts back to the present, saw that Sisson was slowly taking his own revolver from his pocket.

Hurlbut had become a statue in chalk. The color that had flushed his cheeks with returning consciousness had vanished. His eyes were feverish, glowing. His tongue slipped out to wet his dry lips.

"I didn't hear all the story," he said huskily. "But you're the one that killed my uncle—and George Baker?"

Sisson nodded, and a malevolent smile creased his distorted face.

"And you're going to kill us now—McCann and me?"

McCann tensed. Some undercurrent in Hurlbut's voice warned him of an impending rush of hysteria. He slid forward on the chair slightly so that his bare feet were planted firmly on the concrete floor.

"Then," Hurlbut went on, "it doesn't matter how I'm killed, does it?" His voice broke slightly, rose in pitch. "It makes no difference to me whether I'm shot standing up against a wall like a spy or whether I get it trying to get my hands around your filthy neck."

Sisson must have seen it coming but the sudden turn, the true meaning of Hurlbut's words, momentarily unnerved him.

McCann went into action. He had pre-

viously weighed his chances. Now he seized upon the only one that could have worked.

His right arm hooked on the drawing board, slid sideways. His strong fingers fastened on the end of the T-square, which was nearly four feet long. It was his only way of making up the distance that separated him from Sisson and, as Hurlbut started his desperate headlong charge, McCann whipped the T-square around and down.

Sisson did not bother with the gun in his left hand. He concentrated on the automatic in his right. Even then he had but a snap shot at a rapidly moving target.

Hurlbut was three feet from him when he squeezed the trigger of the automatic. The youth never wavered. And before Sisson could shoot again, McCann's T-square swished through the air and its thin edge smacked down viciously on Sisson's right wrist, which shattered under the impact.

The killer cursed once in pain and anger. The gun flew from his nerveless fingers as though he had thrown it. He tried to whip up the muzzle of the revolver in his left hand.

Then Hurlbut's lowered shoulder struck him in the stomach and the vicious onslaught threw him backward to the floor. McCann had followed up the T-square. He took one forward step and dived on the tangle of arms and legs, his eyes, his thoughts centered on the revolver.

He got his right hand on the gun wrist and, ignoring the squirming struggling men beneath him, brought his left hand over and twisted the revolver free. He rolled clear of Hurlbut, got to his feet, and forcibly pulled the youth away from Sisson.

"Get up," he snapped, nudging the lawyer with his foot. "This time we handle you right."

Sisson got to his knees. His face was crimson with fury and frustration and blue veins stood out at his temples. He backed up slightly until he felt the wall behind him. Then he sprang quickly to his feet and launched a wild, hopeless charge.

"You won't take me!" he screamed. "You won't get me alive!"

McCann's trigger finger had tensed but as Sisson spoke he quickly withdrew that finger and curled it around

the outside of the trigger guard.

"That's what you think," he said grimly and as Sisson dived forward the detective whipped the barrel of the revolver down on the man's head.

Sisson kept right on falling. He struck on his face, slid along for a foot or so until he brought up against the door of the wardrobe cabinet. McCann looked down at him.

"You'll live to blister," he said grimly. "From now on we—"

He broke off suddenly as the whirring sound of the buzzer vibrated through the room.

Hurlbut tensed. "What's that?" he cried.

"It's the buzzer alarm that kept Quillen safe here," McCann said and went on to tell Hurlbut how he had discovered the contact beneath the bridge planking. "That'll probably be Lafferty and Flynn," he finished.

Hurlbut felt of his side and McCann asked, "You hurt? Did he get you?"

"Not bad." The youth's face was flushed with exertion now and his breath came in spasmodic gasps.

He took off his sport coat and looked at his right side. Blood stained the shirt over three or four inches and McCann took out a handkerchief, made a pad of it and stuffed it through the front of the shirt to the wound.

"Just nicked me, I guess," Hurlbut said. "Right between my arm and side."

"That was a crazy fool thing to do," McCann said and grinned.

"I got you into this," Hurlbut sighed wearily.

"Forget it," growled McCann. He picked up the rope he had taken from Hurlbut's arms and bent down over the unconscious Sisson. He put the limp hands behind the back, began to tie the wrists.

MCCANN was replacing the shattered T-square when Flynn and Lafferty came down the little ladder. Lafferty was popeyed and Flynn did not say a word until he had gone around the room and inspected every detail.

Then he took off his cap, scratched his head and said, "Well, I'll be blowed!"

Sisson recovered consciousness and McCann lifted him to his feet, dropped him on the chair by the table. Then he surveyed Flynn with amused eyes.

"All right, you win," Flynn said.

There was no antagonism in his voice now, nothing but amazement and respect as he added, "But for Pete's sake spill it."

McCann told them what had happened in the room, told about his hunch that Baker had seen Sisson and tried to blackmail him, about how Baker was murdered.

"You mean," Flynn said, "Sisson killed 'em all?"

"All but the Stacey job in Boston," said McCann. "I called up my partner. He found out that Sisson was Quillen's lawyer twelve years ago—and that he was broke. Here's what I think happened. If I'm wrong stop me," he tossed at the glowering Sisson.

"Quillen was screwy. He killed Stacey in Boston. Then, for some reason, he looked up Sisson—maybe told him he was coming down and rub out Hurlbut. But Sisson knew about this money, must have known where it was and saw his chance. He dictated the two notes to Hurlbut but he didn't dare let Quillen do the job because Quillen was nuts and if he was caught he'd spill the works.

"So Sisson brought Quillen down here, moved in some provisions. That buzzer kept him safe. After Sisson killed Hurlbut, he intended to come back here and fake Quillen for a suicide—as he did this afternoon. Then he'd been set. But Baker saw him. Then he killed Baker the way I told you and came here and got Quillen this afternoon."

"But how the heck did you figure—how'd you connect Sisson?" asked Flynn.

"Because last night Sisson told me about the two hundred thousand dollars. He said he saw it and that Hurlbut had it all in an overnight bag."

"Well, what about it?"

"Just this," McCann said evenly. "I once worked on a kidnap case where the ransom was two hundred thousand dollars in fives and tens. You couldn't get that kind of dough in an overnight bag. It would take a good-sized suitcase to carry it."

"Oh," Flynn said. "I get it. That told you something was out of line but"—he hesitated, pulled at his mustache and scowled—"but this place here. How the—if you hadn't found it—how'd you get wise?"

McCann's eyes were amused in a

grim sort of way. "Cartridge shells," he said.

"Talk sense," growled Flynn.

"I am," rapped McCann. "Sisson was going to knock off Quillen this afternoon. But we touched off the buzzer on the bridge—Lafferty and I—before he was ready. I think he took the first shot at us with his revolver. Then he knew he'd have to go ahead with his plan and did. He shot Quillen, framed the suicide—shot him with the automatic, then shot out the clip to make it look right."

"How do you know?" muttered Flynn.

"Because Lafferty and I counted the shots. There were seven. When I searched upstairs I could find only six shells. There was only one answer. The other shell was in Sisson's revolver—

which wouldn't eject it. So all I had to do was come back after everything was quiet and find out for sure what happened to that shell."

McCann started for the ladder.

"Where are you goin'?" Flynn asked him.

"I'm all washed up. I told you no mug could shoot a client of mine and get away with it. I've taken care of my end. Lafferty and I'll split that little reward—and you've got the killer. What're you beefin' about?"

"Am I kicking?" snorted Flynn. "I just wondered why you were rushing off."

McCann started up the ladder. "All right," he said. "If you must know I'll tell you. My shoes are back there by the bridge. I'm gonna get 'em. My feet are gettin' cold."



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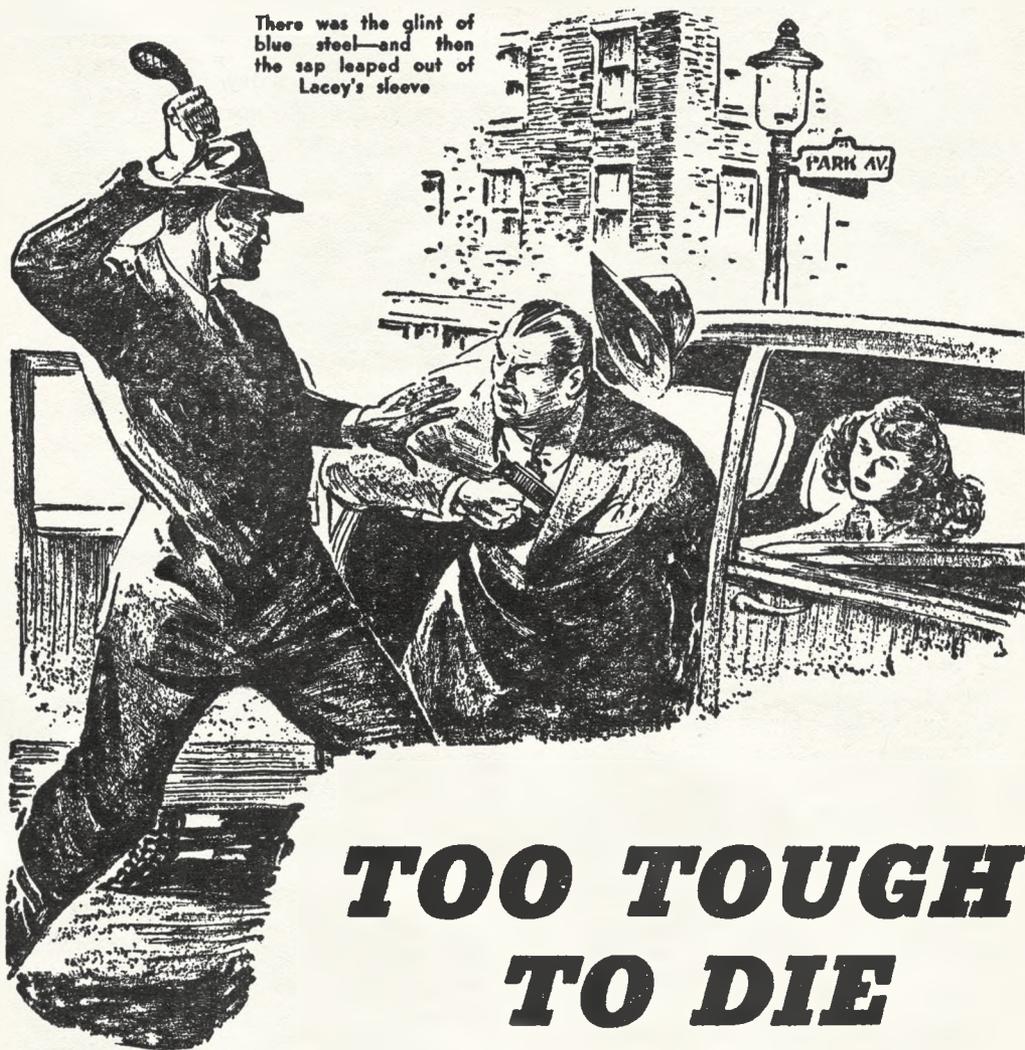
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A Novel by **GEORGE BRUCE**

There was the glint of blue steel—and then the sap leaped out of Lacey's sleeve



TOO TOUGH TO DIE

Red Lacey had his own standards, and wouldn't let even a mobster like "Mushky" Jenks burn for a killing he didn't do!

I

TOOILING his prewar Ford coupé expertly through the maze of lower Park Avenue traffic, "Red" Lacey was entirely oblivious to the elangings and hootings and screechings about him and to the breakneck tactics of taxicab drivers going nowhere in the least pos-

sible time. He weaved in and out, stepped on the brake and accelerator without thinking.

At the moment Red Lacey was satisfied with himself and with the world.

Twenty-four hours before he had broken the Roberts snatch case and

With Fifty G's on the Line, There's No Limit

thumbed his nose at the New York Commissioner of Police and at the sleuths employed by the biggest chain of newspapers in the country. He had telephoned the Forty-seventh Street Station to come and get the birds who had put the snatch on Roberts, had delivered Roberts himself to his home and had deposited in the Gotham National a check for twenty-five grand, the reward hung up by the Roberts family for the safe return of the head of the house.

Roberts had practically babbled in his gratitude and Red Lacey knew that so far as finances were concerned in the future he had an inside track. Old Man Roberts' claim to fame was his ticker tape and margin joint on the Street and his flock of banks scattered around the city.

Yeah, boy, it was a swell world.

Eighteen hours before he had taken his clothes off for the first time in days, and laved himself luxuriously in a turkish bath, had put on a dinner jacket and dined at the Waldorf. Then he had slept twelve hours.

Now his body was electric with energy. There was a ticket for Bermuda in the inside pocket of his coat, a ticket for two, first class—A-Deck with all the trimmings. A lot of people raved about Bermuda in the spring—Red Lacey was going to see what it was all about.

He was on his way uptown to pick up his partner on the voyage. He was trying to think of her name. He wasn't sure—it was Sonya or Tanya or something like that. Anyway, she was a blonde with eyes like Packard headlamps. Lacey hadn't propositioned her on the trip. In fact he had only talked to her once—on business—but whether she knew it or not she was as good as on the boat.

Lacey was like that, full of surprises, not always pleasant.

The motor in front of him purred. The black paint gleamed. The silver was polished to mirrorlike glossiness. Lacey never scratched a fender in his life. His little coupé was a fetish.

And then a discordant note squawked. A pair of air horns blared at his left ear. He turned his head. There was a car trying to pass him on his left. It was going like mad. It was a big streamlined job.

The horns blared again. There was a girl in the car. She was a Monde. The driver swung sharply to his right, cut in front of Lacey, missed the rear end of a street car by an inch, came within another inch of running down three people getting off a bus and from piling into a car in front, held up by a red light.

Lacey jammed his foot on the brake. A car behind banged into him because of the sudden stop. The driver of the streamlined job stuck his head out of the window.

"Why don't you drive that crummy sardine can into the river?" he snarled at Lacey.

LACEY'S mouth moved. He said sulphurous things under his breath. The light changed. The cars moved forward. The streamlined job got itself caught behind a double-parked truck. It blasted away with its raucous horn. The bus moved forward.

Lacey cut in behind the bus, started to pass the streamlined sedan. The latter cut sharply to its left as the driver cursed and wrenched the wheel around. It leaped forward. There was a tremendous crash and jar. The hood of the bigger car hung over the hood of the Ford. The right front fender of the Ford was a crumpled wreck.

Lacey looked at it. The blood rushed into his neck. His little blue eyes narrowed. His mouth became white.

The fat ugly snarling face of the driver of the bigger car was thrust forward. His voice had a nasty quality. "You stupid swine!" he screamed at Lacey. "Why don't you learn to drive or stay off the street? I have a notion to come over there and push your snout through your dumb looking mug!"

The blonde in the car put her hand on the driver's arm. She said something—rapidly. The driver snatched her hand away. His eyes glittered.

"Well, you red-headed, spineless, baboon-faced rat!" snarled the pasty face from the streamlind job. "Why don't you get down so I can smear your silly looking pan over the side of your tin can?"

Lacey took a deep breath. He moved with slow certainty. He opened the little compartment to his right, felt with

to the Risks this Fighting Sleuth Will Take!

his hand. The hand came out, slipping through the wrist loop of a sap. He pushed the sap up his sleeve. He opened the left-hand door very carefully and stepped out onto the cobbles.

Traffic honked and blared around him. An ambulance siren screamed for the right of way. He walked around the front of his car, his eyes fixed on the face thrust through the window of the bigger car. He walked close to the face.

"What was that remark that began with red-headed?" he asked.

The driver of the streamlined job started to open the door. At the same



RED LACEY

instant Lacey swung with his left. There was the smack of knuckles against jaw and blood spurted from the mouth of the other driver—blood and thick-throated snarls. White hands, pudgy, ringed, clawed, snatched at the inside of the driver's coat.

There was the glint of blue steel—and then the sound of the sap, leaping out of Lacey's sleeve, smacking the nasty face squarely across the nose. The nose collapsed with a sickening crunch.

Lacey drew the sap back again and took deliberate aim. He smacked the face in front of him—not too hard—over the cheek bone on one side and then over the cheek bone on the other side. He was grinning mirthlessly. Tomorrow those two last socks would be puffed up to a million and the two black eyes would last for a couple of weeks. The busted nose never would be the same again.

"The silly ape—the silly ape—" the blonde was saying over and over.

Lacey took the automatic out of the driver's hand and looked at it curiously. The driver was knocked flat against the back of his seat. Blood was bubbling and puffing from his mouth. He snatched at the gun. Lacey hit him on the wrist with the sap. The hand went limp.

"You guys certainly ask for trouble!" he said in a thin, metallic voice. "You couldn't be satisfied with a traffic rap and paying for the damage to the flivver. You had to be nasty—and you made a bad mistake when you went for the heater."

HE stopped suddenly and stared at the face. He seemed completely unhurried in spite of the screaming insanity of the backed-up traffic jammed in the street.

"It seems to me I make your mug," he said. "And it seems to me that wherever I saw it before I didn't like it. Got a permit for this rod?"

"Oh—for Pete's sake, mister, forget about it!" the blonde said. "He's drunk. He's in a terrible hurry. He just lost his mind, that's all."

"Baby," grinned Lacey through his white mouth, "you said it. I asked about a permit for this rod."

"I'll snatch the badge off your vest, you heel!" screamed the driver. "I'll show you that you can't push me around. I'll have you run out of town. I'll—"

The sap struck the puffy mouth. Blood flew again. There was a cracking and a grating sound. The sap broke off the four front teeth.

"I've been trying to tell you you were talking to the wrong guy," admonished Lacey.

A cop came up, panting, his neck bulging over the collar of his uniform shirt.

The blonde grabbed Lacey's arm. She crammed something into his hand. "Take it!" she whispered fiercely. "Take it—you fool, and forget it. There's a grand there. It'll buy you a new car—come on."

"What goes on here?" the cop demanded.

He glared at Lacey. He looked at the blood and the smashed face in the driver's seat of the big car.

"I've got a customer for you, Gus," Lacey said. "Get this mess untangled and then we're going to take the boyfriend in—for a going over. He's got a bad habit of arguing his way out of bad spots with a rod. I just lifted this little watch-charm from him. He was about to give me the works in the belly."

The cop looked puzzled. "Who are

you—telling me what to do?"

"Red Lacey," said Lacey without changing the conversational tone of his voice.

"Oh," said the cop. "Red Lacey." He stared for another minute. Traffic was backed up beyond Fourteenth Street.

"Well, let's go," suggested Lacey.

"You bet—right away." The cop smiled. "Want the wagon or shall I drive the boy-friend's car?"

"We'll all go in his car," grinned Lacey. "He'll like that. You'd better drive."

There was another wrenching and grinding as the cop backed the streamlined job away from the wrecked flivver. Lacey looked at his little black coupé for a long instant. Then he looked at the back of the fat neck in front of him—and his eyes were frosty. He thrust the automatic in his pocket.

The blonde was weeping.

II

PERPLEXEDLY the desk sergeant looked down at the battered face of the ex-driver of the bigger car and then at Lacey.

"Well, I'll be damned. Who tipped you off?" he said in a hollow voice. "Were you there when it happened?" His eyes looked back and forth between Lacey and the driver of the streamlined job.

"You're darned tootin' I was there when it happened. This mug jams into my car, driving like a maniac, trying to kill people and wreck cars. Then he invites me out and when I get out he pulls a heater on me." Lacey tossed the automatic onto the desk in front of the sergeant.

"Listen—get this—reckless driving, causing an accident, carrying a concealed deadly weapon under the provisions of the Sullivan Law, assault with intent to kill, using obscene and abusive language in a public place—and last but not least, attempting to bribe an officer of the law to prevent the proper performance of his duties."

He turned to the damaged driver. "Can you think of anything else that I missed?" he demanded politely.

The sergeant shook his head. "Listen!" he barked. "What is this—a gag? Are you trying to rib me that you don't know who the guy is? That's Mushky

Jenks you dragged in here—Mushky Jenks!"

Lacey snapped his fingers. "There you are! I made the mug as soon as I looked at him—just couldn't place him—little out of my line. Well, well, Mushky Jenks—the Big Bad Boy of the Booze, Babe and Book racket. Fancy seeing you here, Mr. Jenks!"

"About half an hour ago Mr. Jenks put the heat to a competitor," continued the sergeant. "One Pete Letts in the same business. Sure, corner of Lafayette and Houston, broad daylight—the tape just got finished telling the horrible details—shot Mr. Letts once through the head.

"Mr. Letts died very quickly—in fact he never knew what hit him. One-Shot Mushky did for him—and I'll bet dimes to dames that this heater you tossed up here on the desk did the trick. Boy, are you the white-haired boy!"

"A murder rap?" asked Lacey in deploring tones. "Surely, Sergeant, you do but jest? And to think that Mr. Mushky Jenks had to pick on me in the get-away! I see it all now—sometimes I think I'm clairvoyant. Yes, sir! That explains Mr. Jenks' unseemly haste. He was departing the scene of the 'accident.'

"What's the matter, Mr. Jenks? The heat got you? How come you have to act as your own janitor in the heating of your business rivals, Don't tell me you haven't enough dough to make a down payment on a real professional killing."

"I want my mouthpiece," the ex-driver of the streamlined job muttered flabbily through his battered mouth. "Send for Joe Dillon. He'll spring me out of here on this bum rap with a writ in ten minutes. Where do you guys get off, trying to frame me—"

"Writ?" queried Lacey. "Writ—on a murder rap? My, such ignorance!" He whirled on the blonde. "Well—what do you have to say?"

The girl merely looked at him. Her eyes were masked. She was avidly listening to the conversation. After a moment her very red mouth moved.

"Don't look at me, Big Boy," she smiled. "It's bad enough being dragged in here with a silly fathead like him I don't want to have to explain anything else. I hope you put him away in moth balls for so long he'll have a beard down

"Obay, wise guy," said
a voice. "I'll take that
rod"



to his knees when he gets out."

Jenks whirled. His fist drew back. He lunged at the girl. Lacey smacked the bloody face with his fist. Jenks' knees sagged and his eyes glazed.

"Gentlemen don't hit broads, you know!" Lacey reproved.

The sergeant was busily writing in the book. At the same time he spoke into a telephone.

"Cancel that radio call for Mushky Jenks," he told the telephone mouth-piece very confidentially. "Red Lacey just dragged him in here. Sure, we got him. I'm booking him on the murder rap now—got his rod and everything. He's going on the ice for a while."

Five minutes later Mushky Jenks was locked in a precinct cell, the first cell he had ever known intimately.

And soon after Red Lacey was walking down the steps of the precinct station, holding onto the blond girl's arm.

"Thanks," said the blonde.

"Don't mention it," said Lacey. "What do you want to spend the night in a police station for if you can get out of it? You that Jenks guy's broad?"

WHITE spots burned in the girl's cheeks. She looked at Lacey. He was eyeing her appraisingly.

"Well, you could call it that—if you didn't know better."

"I don't," assured Lacey.

"You're a queer egg. You went to bat for me. You didn't take the grand I offered you to let us go. What are you—a dick?"

"Sure, I'm queer—certainly I went to bat for you—I don't like dirty money. And if you mean, am I in the Police Department, the answer is no. I'm on my own. Red Lacey, Inc. and Unlimited, that's me." He whistled for a cab.

The blonde put on the act. Lacey looked at her and decided she rated top billing. It was no amateur performance. The girl had the looks, the scenery and the settings—and she knew the script by heart.

"You—taking me home?" she wanted to know.

"Me? I never mix business with pleasure—well, hardly ever."

"I thought maybe—you might want to talk to me—about that guy Jenks?"

"Jenks—oh, him? I should waste time around you talking about him? Say—you sounded all burned up in

there—or was that an act?"

"Act, nothing!" she snapped. "If I ever see that cheap gorilla again it'll be too soon."

The cab pulled up to the curb and Lacey opened the door. "Where do you live, Babe?" he asked matter-of-factly.

"Park Palace," she said for the hackle's benefit. Then she put her mouth close to Lacey's ear. "The suite number is one nine three oh—and I'm always at home to redheads. Why'nchcyuhcome-upandsee me? The name is Lois—Lois Bell."

Lacey closed the door of the cab. He was grinning. He jerked it open again. "Say!" he demanded. "You ever made the trip to Bermuda?"

"No—I've never been in Kansas, either," she laughed. "Why?"

"Oh, nothing. Only—I've got an idea you're going—and you'll like it."

He slammed the door and the cab jumped away. Then Lacey dived into the station and grabbed at the telephone on the desk.

"Get me the Park Palace," he snapped at the operator.

There was a little pause. Then a voice spoke in his ear. "Park Palace—good evening."

"Connect me with Miss Lois Bell," he said.

"She doesn't answer—sorry," said the hotel operator. "Will you leave a message?"

"No," said Lacey. He hung up. He raced down the precinct station steps and grabbed a cruising cab. "Park Palace—and kick the rust off this boiler."

Uptown he flung himself out of the cab and went in the Park Palace by the side entrance. He found the telephone operators' room. There were two girls on the big board. One of the girls looked up.

"Say, you!" she demanded. "Can't you read? Didn't you see that sign on the door? It says—no admittance."

Lacey grinned. He took his wallet out of his pocket. He extracted two fifty-dollar bills. He held them between his fingers for a moment, then carefully placed one bill before each of the girls.

"I'm interested in when Miss Lois Bell comes in and goes out," he said, with the same grin. "I'm more interested in what she says over the telephone—what she says—and to whom she says it—numbers, names and dates.

"This fifty bucks is only a down payment—in case you could forget to close the key while she's talking and kind of accidentally hear what she has to say."

"I couldn't do that, mister," said the first girl. "It would cost me my job."

Lacey reached for the fifty bucks from each desk. "Well, I'm sorry," he said, with the same grin. "You can't blame a guy for trying."

"Of course, if I could be sure you wouldn't give us away—"

"Don't be silly," laughed Lacey. "Remember—names, numbers, what she says, what is said back to her—and here's my telephone number. Somebody is there all the time. I want action for my dough and nothing else. And don't make up any fairy stories. 'By, now!'"

III

DOWNTOWN an inspector and half a dozen plainclothes men lounged in the lieutenant's office.

"He wants a lawyer," said one of the detectives.

There was a belly laugh from the gang. The inspector laughed loudest.

"Well?" inquired Lacey. "What are we waiting for?"

"Ah," growled the same detective, "let him think it over a couple of hours. It'll soften him up. Let's deal a couple hands of stud. We've got all night."

"Have you looked at the rod?" asked Lacey.

"Rod? Why look at it? You took it off him, didn't you? It had just been fired. We found the empty shell in his car. The magazine was full, all but one slug—that's in Pete Letts. What do we want to monkey around with the rod for? We'll just give Mushky a going over—and that's that."

"Whose deal?" asked Lacey. "If it was me I'd send that rod to the Bureau and have it checked."

They played until midnight.

"Come on, we'll be up all night," the inspector yawned. "Let's get it over with. This guy is a tough mug. He may not crack."

They trooped down the corridor and into a little soundproof windowless room. There was a single chair in the center of the room. Over the chair was a big light shade. They ranged themselves around the wall.

"Bring him in!" snarled the inspector.

A turnkey brought in Mushky Jenks, turned him loose in the room, went out, closed the door.

"Sit down, Mushky," the inspector said. "Some of the boys dropped around to have a little chat with you—kind of like old times, eh?"

The corners of Jenks' mouth drew up in a snarl. "You can't do this to me!" he yelled at them. "I want my mouth-piece. I want Joe. He'll snake me out of this joint in ten minutes."

The inspector flung out the back of a heavy hand. It struck Jenks across the mouth, the knuckles made white marks on the purplish bruise of the flesh.

"Sit down, you rat," said the inspector pleasantly, "before I kick you where it hurts."

"You can't push me around," blurted Jenks. "I know every one of you—I'll see you get it—"

The inspector's foot heaved upward. It kicked Jenks in the abdomen. Jenks' face went green. He stumbled a step and collapsed in the chair. He sat there, trying to breath.

"Now this is just a pleasant little informal chat," said the inspector. "All we want to know is how you came to bump off Pete Letts. What made you do a foolish thing like that, Mushky—and in broad daylight? It ain't like you."

"You go to hell!" said Jenks sullenly. "This is a frame. I got it when that redhead went to work on me with the sap. I'll tell you one thing. I didn't bump off that tramp—even if I wish I did. I was passing the corner. Got a telephone call to meet a certain guy down there at Lafayette and Houston. I drive down with Lois. I have to wait. There's nobody there. Then Letts' car pulls up behind me.

"I think there's going to be trouble. I go for the rod—but I never have a chance to use it. I hear a shot. I figure he's opened up—I'm just about to give it to him when I see that he's falling down over the wheel of his car—and his face is streamin' blood. Listen—I just go way from there. I can't afford to be in no jam like that. I don't know who shot the skunk. I didn't."

The detectives in the room leaned back against the wall and laughed until tears ran down their faces.

"You're a sketch, Mushky," they told

him. "You're wasting your time trying to give the dope habit to high school kids. You ought to be in pictures."

Jenks' pulpy lips drew back over the teeth Red Lacey had broken with the sap. His bloody face twisted in a snarl. His expensive clothes were sodden and stiff with blood. His lavender silk shirt was ripped open at the neck, exposing the upper part of his hairy chest. His long, black, oily hair was matted with blood.

"That's my story," he said sullenly. "You all can go to—"

"Ah, Mushky," chortled a dick, "you wouldn't clam up on us now! We're just beginnin' to appreciate you. We never knew what a funny sketch you were—ain't he a riot!"

HANDS from behind Jenks snatched his head backward, clamped it right in a harness fixed to the back of the chair. The harness held his face turned up to the light shade. Hands snatched his wrists into leather cuffs which bound him to the seat of the chair. Still other hands slipped leather cuffs, attached to the legs of the chair, around his ankles.

When the hands were finished Mushky Jenks was held immovable in the chair except for his bottom, which could slide around on the seat.

"Feel good?" asked the inspector. "Make you think of something—another chair for instance—up the river—a lot hotter than this? Lot of guys have fried in that chair because they wouldn't crash through and cooperate with us boys.

"What do we care about that rat Pete Letts? But we got to make a front. Now you come through with the low-down to save us a little trouble and the State a lot of money and we'll let that mouthpiece of yours cop a manslaughter plea—and you won't have to sit in that fireless cooker."

"I said what I had to say. You can go—"

The inspector's hand knocked the words down Jenk's throat.

There was a sudden flare of light in the room. A terrible, searing light from the green shade. It lit up the prisoner's face with terrific intensity. The bulb was not more than two feet above Jenks' upturned face. He closed his eyes. Sweat broke out on his forehead.

After a moment the upper part of his body was soaked with sweat. In that great light the rest of the room seemed to be in pitch blackness.

"Just to give us a better look at you," said the inspector softly. "The last guy we had in here under that light thought he was tough. He lasted fifteen minutes and then he started to bite his fingers off. What happened to him, Marty?"

"They got him down at Bellevue in the psychopathic ward," a voice answered over the blackness. "He's nuts—and he's stone blind. That light just about ate the eyeballs out of his head. I never saw such a light."

The sweat streamed down over Jenks' face. There was a red smear in his brain from the light. It gnawed at his eyeballs like a cancer. He could hear every little sound in the room—the detectives breathing—what they said. The silence was worse than the talking.

After another minute the light was excruciating. Waves of pain from outraged nerves pulsed through his brain, through his body. His white hands clenched into hard fists. He grated his teeth and braced himself in the chair.

"You can't do this to me!" he shrieked in terror. "You can't, I tell you—"

"Did you hear something?" asked the inspector.

"Yeah—funny little sound like a rat squeaking," a voice answered.

The detectives told dirty stories aloud among themselves and roared with laughter. Jenks writhed in the chair. His face became a fiery red and then a pasty white. A pool of sweat formed on the floor where it ran down his legs under his pants and dripped over his shoes.

"I suppose Pete Letts committed suicide?" insinuated a voice.

"I don't know what he did!" moaned Jenks. "I'm tellin' the truth. You can't break me into no lies."

"Who ya callin' a liar?" a voice snarled. A fist hit Jenks in the center of the face.

"Ah, let up on the slob," said a kindlier voice. "He's too dumb to know nothin'. I'm going to get him a drink of ice water."

There was a tinkle of a glass and the sound of trickling water—cold—ice cold. Mushky Jenks' swollen tongue licked his heat-spit lips. Footsteps returned to the chair.

"Want a drink, Mushky?" asked the voice.

Jenks' mouth opened—like the mouth of a gasping fish. He felt the cold rim of the glass against his tongue. His larynx moved spasmodically as he tried to wolf the water.

"What you tryin' to do—baby a dirty murderer?" a hard voice demanded.

Something smashed against the glass—half drove it down Jenks' throat. The ice water spilled over his face and chest. It was like an electric shock. He licked at the wetness with his tongue.

THE terrible light, burning two feet above his face, was boiling the blood under his flesh. Even closed eyes were no barrier to its glare.

"How come you killed Pete Letts?" asked a monotonous voice.

"I didn't—I didn't—" moaned Mushky. "You won't burn me on a bum rap."

"Tough guy," commented a voice cheerfully in the darkness. "Well—let's go to work on him."

Red Lacey watched the work for perhaps ten minutes. The room smelled of the sweat of half a dozen men and was horrible with the heat of the lamp. The detectives stripped down to shorts and their bodies dripped sweat.

After a while Mushky went inert in the chair. Someone threw a pail full of water over him.

"Well, have a good time, you guys," Lacey waved his hand nonchalantly. "I'll be seeing you around. Boy—can he take it!"

No one paid any attention to him. He sauntered out into the squad room. The men out there were listening to the muffled sounds coming out of the little soundproof room. They grinned and waved good night to Lacey.

When he looked at his watch it was two A.M. In a telephone booth he dialed a number.

"Park Palace—good evening," the answering voice said.

"This is the guy who passes out fifty-buck notes to good little girls," Lacey said.

There was a brief pause. "She had a call from a Wickersham number—unlisted—at ten-thirty," the voice said, almost in a whisper. "Man on the wire, young voice. She called him Joe. He called her Lois. He said he had to see her and asked about a party by the

name of Mushky. She said Mushky was where the dogs wouldn't bite him.

"He said he was coming over—over here to the Palace. She tried to talk him out of it. After a while she gave in and told him to come—but to come in the side door and take the private elevator. 'Scuse, got a call—"

He hung onto the receiver. After a moment the girl's voice came back. "She sent down for a bottle of Scotch and a siphon. S'far as I know the guy is still up there."

"Get the telephone number when he called in?"

"Sure—I told you, private wire, big-time stuff—Wickersham zero, zero, zero, five."

"Get the name it was listed under?"

"That was a lot tougher—the company doesn't give out those Number-two listings but I've got a girl friend in the main office. I gave her a buzz. The phone—Wickersham zero, zero, zero, five—is listed under the name of Honorable James J. Manning."

Red Lacey's eyes were suddenly bright and the whiteness came around his mouth.

"Anything else?" asked the girl. "By the way, I'm splitting with my relief. I thought you'd want this board covered all twenty-four hours."

"You take care of things, sister," said Lacey. "I'm a free spender, and there's an extra sawbuck when I see you for getting me the name of that fancy number."

"I figured you'd want to know. That all?"

Lacey grinned. "I want to ask you just one question, sister."

"Shoot?" said the voice.

"Have you been to Bermuda?"

He hung up the receiver very carefully.

IV

HANDSOME gold and black letters on the little office door revealed the mysterious business that went on within. The letters spelled *Richard Lacey, Special Investigator*.

The special investigator in person sat in his chair with his well-shod feet thrust up high on top of his desk. A cigarete hung from the corner of his mouth and his eyes were closed. There was a frown of concentration on his

forehead. It was ten o'clock in the morning.

The telephone bell suddenly rang. Lacey did not open his eyes. He fumbled for the handset at his elbow, tucked the receiving end of the instrument against his ear and held it in place by shrugging up the shoulder under it.

"Yeah?" he inquired of the phone.

"Doc Libermann, Red," said a deep voice. "I thought you'd be interested to know the results in the Pete Letts affair. Autopsy last night—all negative for anything but the one bullet that scrambled his brains. That Jenks guy must be a dead shot—drilled him right through the center of the forehead. No other wounds—nothing."

"That's great, Doc," said Lacey. "You're sure?"

"Not a chance for anything screwy on this end."

"I owe you a drink when I see you. S'long."

He waited a minute and dialed a number. "Red Lacey, Professor," he said to the phone. "Did you give that slug Doc Libermann dug out of Pete Letts the once-over? You did? Swell—what did you find?"

The voice on the other end of the wire was very exact and very slow. "I found," it said tonelessly, "that the markings on the bullet do not match the markings in that gun you took from Mushky Jenks. You sure you didn't switch guns, or something?"

"Mind saying that over?" asked Lacey tensely.

"From the evidence I can gather—the examination of the bullet and of the gun taken from Mushky Jenks—Jenks' gun did not kill Letts. But another automatic of the same caliber did—a forty-five Colt. Unless Jenks ditched his own rod and had another in reserve, expecting to be dropped with it and to use the difference in markings on the bullet as an alibi—then Jenks did not murder Letts. That's all."

Lacey's feet slid down off the desk and banged against the floor. He was half lying in his chair. "Thanks a lot, Professor," he said queerly. "I had a hunch about that gun. It was a bit too open."

He put down the receiver and moved toward the door of his office with a little smile playing about his mouth and a soundless whistle coming from between

his puckered up lips. He looked at the magazine of his own twenty-five automatic and put it in his vest pocket.

He went down in the elevator and called a cab. He gave the hackie the Park Palace as a destination. The blonde opened the door of 1930 and then stood there, her hand on the knob, looking at Lacey. She looked as if she was interrupted in the middle of something important.

"Hi, Babe!" grinned Lacey. "I figured I'd come on up without announcing the presence. Couldn't get you off my mind."

He walked past her and into the room. She closed the door slowly and walked after him. She was wearing a robin's-egg blue negligée of thin silk and lace. The lace did very little to conceal various and sundry points of her anatomy and the gown itself was a silk sheath to set off the curves of her body. It was split perilously near to the danger point in the front, so that each time she took a step one of her white legs slipped out of the thing. She was wearing blue mules and no stockings.

SHE lit herself a cigarette with great calmness and blew out the match. Her eyes watched Lacey's face as he took in the suite.

His admiration was open.

"What a joint!" he complimented.

"This costs a fortune—and you furnished it yourself." He threw himself down in an easy chair and his body sank as the cushions sighed.

The blonde gave him the routine. She sat opposite, crossed her legs. The robin's-egg blue sheath fell away.

"Now that's what I call a pair of legs," said Lacey enthusiastically. "I've paid six-sixty to see less. In fact I'd stack your frame against any of those broads in the song and dance shows. Baby—you got it!"

She smiled at him. "Want a drink?" she suggested.

"Don't touch the stuff," he grinned. His eyes were looking covertly around the room. "I just thought I'd take you up on that Mushky Jenks business." He said conversationally, "I can't figure how a swell looker like you gets herself mixed up with a gorilla like Mushky. A mug like him hasn't any appreciation of the finer things of life." His eyes were looking at her legs.

SHE flicked the ashes off her cigarette languorously and put the eyes on him. "Oh, he was all right—for awhile. But he got awfully tiresome—and I got sick of the cheap gang he had chasing around with him. They got in my hair."

Lacey clucked his tongue sympathetically. "I was just wondering if you could satisfy my curiosity a little," he said softly, his eyes fixed on her face. "I don't like to talk business at a time like this but that Jenks mug got under my hide when he smashed my car and gave me that line of talk."

"I'm just wondering if you couldn't give me a little line—on the side, of course—just between the two of us, on what happened down there at Lafayette and Houston when Pete Letts got himself bumped off."

Her eyes were veiled behind her smile. "Look, Red," she said, "don't ask me questions. I'd like to forget that. I'm not a good witness. All I know is that Mushky pulled his rod—I heard a shot—and I saw Letts sprawled over the wheel of his wagon—and we went away from there—and Mushky had the heebies, plenty."

"You didn't see Mushky shoot, did you?"

There was a long silence, and her eyes were fixed on Lacey's face. "Is this strictly between the two of us?" she demanded.

"I never ratted in my life. I've got my own troubles. I let the police groan over theirs."

"Yeah," she said after a minute. "He shot him all right. I felt the heat of the shot on my face and the shell flew out and hit me on the cheek and the flame nearly singed my ear. What the crazy ape wanted to pull a stunt like that for, in broad daylight—with me in the car—beats me."

"I'll stand for a lot of things but no guy is going to take me out to cover up for him while he puts the heat on another guy. Little Lois is not going to get herself jammed up with the cops for anybody."

"So—he actually shot the guy, did he?" Lacey's voice was soft.

"Sure. I wouldn't squeal to the police. I'm no stool-pigeon. But I don't mind telling you. You went to bat for me, or I might have been in that lousy police station till now. You ain't going, are you?"

Lacey climbed slowly to his feet. The little white grin was around his mouth. "Got a date," he told her. "Say—would I like to stay!" He stopped. He shook his head in a puzzled manner. "It beats me!" he said after a moment.

"What beats you?" she asked.

She had crossed the room and she was standing very close to him, her hand resting on his arm, her face very close to his face.

"Why—that shooting. You telling me that Mushky Jenks bumped off that rat Pete Letts. You see, I'm about the one guy in the world who thinks Jenks didn't do it. Why do I think so? Because I had the best man on guns and bullets in the world make a comparison of the bullet that killed Letts and the gun that was supposed to have done the job—and they don't match."

Her breath seemed to stop for a minute, and her eyes were very bright as they stared at Lacey's blank face.

"Aw, maybe the guy made a mistake," she said. "Anybody could make a mistake."

"Yeah—only I don't make mistakes."

Her hand squeezed his arm. Little thrills went through him. Her eyes were bedroomy. "You sure you won't stay?" she half whispered. "I like red-heads."

"Don't coax me—I'm like putty in the hands of a blonde," grinned Lacey. "But I got to go—for now. I'll be back."

"I'll keep a lamp burning in the window," she promised.

She looked after him as he went to the door. She was still looking after him when the door closed behind him.

V

JOE DILLON turned his head from a newspaper as Lacey entered the office. Dillon had high cheekbones, bushy black eyebrows, deep set black eyes, jet black hair combed straight back and oiled. He had big ears, pointed on the top, a long thin nose, a little mouth, short sharp white teeth. Dillon looked exactly what he was—a fox.

"Hello, Red," he said. "I've been here an hour. I figured the best way to catch you was to come over here to your office and wait until you showed up."

"Lo, Joe," greeted Lacey. "What's bothering you?"

"We understand each other," said Dillon. "I'm representing Mushky Jenks. He's in the can on a sour rap. I know when a man's lying. Listen, Mushky wouldn't have taken that pushing around for a mere manslaughter rap. I saw him this morning—Lordy, did they give him the works! He could just about talk."

"Yeah, I was over there last night. The boys seemed to be enjoying themselves right smart. I left after a while. I knew they wouldn't break Mushky."

"The reason why they won't break Mushky is because he's sore at being dropped on a phony rap," nodded Dillon. "He knows that if they had him right I could get him off. But it's a bum rap. He didn't kill Letts. He didn't have to kill Letts. He had plenty of guys to handle details like that for him. He's no sucker."

"I kind of figured that way myself."

"You took him in on a gun charge and a lot of other bunk."

"Listen, nobody can talk to me the way he did and nobody can go 'round busting up my automobile!"

"That's all in a lifetime." Dillon took a deep breath. He reached a hand into his inside coat pocket and pulled out a thick wallet. He extracted a thick sheaf of banknotes from the wallet.

He counted the bills onto the top of the desk. "Twenty-five one-thousand-dollar bills," he said, with a glance at Lacey. "That's just a little peace offering from Mushky—to forget the car and the other things."

"And what else?" asked Lacey quietly.

"There's another twenty-five grand from the same place, when you want it, as soon as you turn up proof that Mushky didn't kill Letts."

"I ought to let the rat burn on this bum rap, just to teach him a lesson," growled Lacey. "But if he wants to apologize to the extent of twenty-five grand—why I'll accept that kind of an apology."

"Get this straight. I don't give a hoot what happens to Mushky Jenks or Pete Letts or any gorilla like them. As far as I'm concerned nobody could put in a bum rap against that punk. He's got a burning coming—if not for this, then for plenty of other things."

"I'm not asking you to change your opinion concerning Mr. Jenks," smiled

Dillon thinly. "I'm retaining you professionally."

"Half of the second twenty-five grand—right now—cash in the mitt," said Lacey.

Dillon sighed. "Boy, are you tough to do business with!" He counted out thirteen one-thousand-dollar bills from the wallet and placed them on top of the first twenty-five. "There you are—anything your little heart desires. Now—how are you going to find out—"

"I don't have to find out," grinned Lacey. "I know Mushky didn't kill Letts. All I have to do to win your cash from you is to put the finger on whoever did the shooting. I'll let you know when things break."

Dillon's eyes mirrored his admiration. He took up his fedora.

"If I had a guy like you for a partner," he told Lacey as he went out, "I'd be Governor of the State in three years."

For a long moment Lacey sat in front of his desk, fingering the thirty-eight one-thousand-dollar bills. Then he picked up the telephone and called the Park Palace.

"Miss Lois Bell, please," he requested.

When she answered he talked to her in a jubilant voice. "Listen, Babe!" he announced. "How's about you and the redhead stepping places? Joe Dillon was just in here and paid me thirty-eight thousand dollars as a retainer in the case of the People of the State of New York versus Mushky Jenks. I figure that rates a little celebration."

"Gee, Red," said the blonde. "I'd love to—but I made a date. Can't you postpone it?"

"Sure, I'll give you a call tomorrow."

Red went over to the Gotham and deposited the money. When he came back to the office he sagged down in his chair and put his feet up on the desk.

HE pulled his soft hat down over his eyes. He seemed to be sleeping after five minutes but there was a little frown of concentration on his forehead.

The telephone bell rang. He seemed expecting the call. "'Lo?" he answered.

"If this is the red-headed guy who goes around giving fifty-dollar bills away to poor telephone operators," the voice said, "I thought you'd like to know that as soon as you hung up after talking to Lois Bell, she called that Wicker-

sham number and talked to a guy named Joe. The same bird I told you about before."

Lacey's eyes were suddenly very bright and his face seemed to become alive. "Yeah?" he said, matter-of-factly. "So you knew it was me talking to her?"

"Sure, in this racket we can recognize a voice quicker than a face, Mr. Lacey."

"What the heck?" The words jounced out of Lacey's mouth. "Say—how did you get hold of my name?"

"A fast-working detective like you ought to be able to detect that," laughed the voice. "All I need is the number."

"Okay, sister." Lacey grinned. "You've unmasked me."

"Am I getting a kick out of this? I read all about that Roberts case and how you got him and made the pinch on the mob that had him. I've been all swelled up ever since I found out who you were."

"Well, go on with the detecting, sister. What's the conversation?"

"She said, 'Red Lacey just called me. He took thirty-eight grand away from Joe Dillon to spring Mushky.' And she was plenty excited."

"What'd he say?"

"He said, 'My word—what'll we do?'"

"She said, 'Sit tight, honey, and leave everything to me.' He said, 'Lois, I can't stand it—not knowing.' She said, 'Don't worry, honey—I'll find it. Everything will be okay.' He said, 'I don't see how it could have disappeared. You knew it was so important. You sure the police didn't find it?'"

"She said, 'No! I had it with me all the time those dumb clucks were holding Mushky in the station. Boy—it was burning a hole in my bag. Suppose they had opened that bag. That Lacey may be plenty smart but he's a sucker for blondes."

"He was so busy giving me the eye and trying to rush me out of there, that they didn't even give me a frisk. I just mislaid my bag somewhere in the excitement. He smells a rat all right. He was up here trying to put the pump on me. I gave out—but nothing."

"But he knows Mushky didn't kill Letts. He told me he had the bullet in Letts checked against Mushky's gun.' He said, 'Lois, be careful what you're saying over the phone!' But Lois only laughed."

"You've got a whale of a memory, sister," complimented Lacey.

"I'll tell you something else, Mr. Lacey. The Bell girl was lying. I don't know about what. But she was lying. I've heard too many women putting over a phony story on the phone not to know how it sounds. She was telling the Joe fellow a lie."

There was a silence from Lacey's end. "Sister," he said in admiration, "you are in the wrong job. Just for that last observation you get a bonus."

"I don't want a bonus. I'm gettin' a big kick out of this."

"I'm just betting good dough that you're right about the lying." Lacey grinned. "Well, keep your ear glued to the keyhole. I'll be seeing you."

After he hung up he sat back again, closed his eyes and pulled his hat down over his face. "Bell—Manning—Letts—Jenks," he muttered. "There's a pretty combination for you. And what do you suppose was burning a hole in her handbag? Well, well and well."

VI

THE Honorable James J. Manning had a fifty-inch chest, a seventeen-inch neck, a triple chin which rippled down over his wing collar and a bulbous, crimson-veined nose. He also had stiff iron-gray hair, a big mouth, a nasty chin and hard eyes. He was wearing a morning coat with striped trousers and a white carnation in his button-hole. He looked like a prosperous undertaker and talked like a Park Avenue clergyman.

Red Lacey sat in a chair in Manning's office in his Park Avenue penthouse and watched Manning's face. His own face was a perfect zero. He knew Manning's reputation. Manning made and broke the politicians who were elected to office.

Until two years ago the Honorable James J. Manning had bossed the Police and Fire Departments, the mayor, the street cleaners and even the garbage collectors. He was a deacon in good standing and had one son. The son's name was Joseph James Manning.

"I called you over here, Mr. Lacey," Manning was saying as if announcing the text of the sermon, "as a gesture in the public interest. It is with great satisfaction that I learn from the pa-

pers that Mushky Jenks has at last stepped over the line and is now in the hands of the authorities, charged with a homicide—and with his guilt plainly in evidence.

"Gee, Mr. Manning!" said Lacey. "I had no idea you'd be interested in a guy like Mushky."

"Every citizen should be interested in the suppression of crime and in the bringing of criminals to justice," boomed Manning. "The criminal, Jenks, has run a long and bloody course and so far has been able to evade the law. Now we have him and he must not escape. No legal technicality can protect him—no dodge, no subterfuge can permit him to escape just punishment and return to his criminal practises."

The little white grin crept about the corners of Lacey's mouth.

"I sent for you, Mr. Lacey, because I know the limitations of police intelligence. When they think they have a man as good as convicted they are apt to be slipshod in preparing the evidence against him and thus smart criminal lawyers outmaneuver them and secure acquittals. In the public interest this must not be allowed to happen in the case of Mushky Jenks."

"I see," mused Lacey.

"Now I know your fine reputation, Mr. Lacey. Hence, as a private citizen, I wish to enroll you on the side of law and order in this Jenks case. I am quite sure that if you were to aid in the prosecution and preparation of the evidence against Jenks the community would be rid of this outlaw."

"That's a police affair, isn't it?" asked Lacey.

"True—true. But the police have not been averse to accepting your assistance in the past. I know your services come high—and probably the State could not afford to retain you—but James J. Manning, as a private citizen interested in good government, can and will see that you are well paid. So I have prepared a check in the sum of twenty-five thousand dollars as a retainer."

He handed the check to Lacey. Lacey studied the signature with interest. "Nice looking check," he nodded. "Good bank, too. Bet I could walk right in and get twenty-five grand for this without a question asked."

"Without doubt, Mr. Lacey." The Honorable Manning was beaming.

Lacey handed the check back. "It's tough," he mourned. "I've been wallowing in money for the past two days. Yesterday, Joe Dillon, who is going to defend Jenks—you know Joe, Mr. Manning?—dropped around to the office and gave me thirty-eight thousand dollars in cash to scout around for Mushky. I took the dough."

"Thirty-eight thousand?" In spite of the shock in his voice, the Honorable Manning did not seem surprised. "Thirty-eight thousand!" he repeated. "Why should they pay you that enormous amount?"

"Maybe it's because Joe figures I don't think Mushky killed Letts and that I can find out who did."

"But you can't ally yourself with a criminal!" protested Manning. "Even for thirty-eight thousand dollars or thirty-eight hundred dollars, you can't betray the people."

LACEY looked bored. "Look, Mr. Manning," he said. "I would like nothing better than a chance to be among the witnesses when Mushky Jenks burns. But I'm one of those queer ducks who really believes in the majesty of the Law and all that sort of rot. I'm not willing to see the Law of the State of New York stoop to the dirty business of framing Mushky Jenks for something he didn't do. The Law had plenty of chances in the past to drop Mushky right—and somehow the Law fozzled every chance. Now the Law has Mushky Jenks for the killing of another rat, Pete Letts.

"I know Jenks didn't kill Letts. Therefore it is perfectly ethical for me to accept a retainer in his defense. And by heaven, I'll find out who did kill Letts. I have to do that, cold turkey, to win Joe Dillon's case. That's how it stands with me."

"But, Mr. Lacey," argued Manning, "the Law is at a disadvantage in handling these criminals—the time has come to take the cuffs off the Law and permit the Law to fight fire with fire. I don't ask you to abandon Dillon or Jenks in order to accept my retainer. I will be satisfied if you just—shall we say—let the Law take its course."

"In other words, you're offering me a bribe of twenty-five grand to let Mushky burn and no questions asked?" Lacey said coldly.

MANNING'S eyes narrowed and his face turned a deeper red. "My dear Mr. Lacey," he implored unctuously. "Bribe? I never gave a bribe in my life. I'm interested in justice."

Lacey got to his feet. "You have the wrong man, Mr. Manning," he said quietly. "I don't sell out—at least I never have—for that kind of money."

"You may reconsider, Mr. Lacey," said Manning. There was a little chill note in his voice and his eyes were suddenly hard.

"I doubt it. If I do I'll give you a ring—but don't sit up waiting for me."

All the way down to his office Lacey had a picture in his mind of the check Manning had drawn for twenty-five thousand dollars and of the heavy, ruthless signature on the bottom—and Manning's voice purred in his ears.

The telephone bell was ringing as Lacey walked into the office. He grabbed at the receiver.

"Why don't you stay home?" asked the voice of the operator at the Park Palace. "I've been ringing you every five minutes for half an hour."

"What's on your mind, sister?"

"I thought you'd be interested in knowing that the girl friend took herself shopping this morning. Among the items purchased was a mink coat—and if I have half an eye it set her back just about fifteen thousand dollars. Then I noticed when I walked out of the room here, quite by chance, that she was wearing a couple of new rings, diamonds and emeralds. They didn't come from Woolworth's.

"The boys here in the hotel have worked themselves humpbacked carrying parcels upstairs. They all came C.O.D. and the clerk paid for them in cash—her cash. She deposited twenty thousand dollars in the hotel safe yesterday and told the management that she would do a little shopping and they were to pay the C.O.D. charges out of that money. She sure is the Big Shot around this hostelry at the minute."

"Yeah?" encouraged Lacey softly.

"Yeah," repeated the voice. "It's funny—she's been here a couple of months and she never broke out into a rash of heavy spending like this before."

"Who'd she talk to yesterday?"

"She talked to that Wickersham number twice. Once to the young kid, once to an older man with a soft voice."

"What did she say to the squirt?" Lacey pressed.

"Funny conversation. She said that maybe her memory would improve if she could forget the whole mess for a little while—she mentioned a little shopping expedition to buy a few things she needed."

"What did the young squirt say?"

"He didn't seem to understand at first. He kept asking her to explain. He was pretty thick. Even I got her line right away. She was shaking him down for something."

"And then?"

"Oh, the boy, Joe Manning, seemed all broken up. He mumbled a few things and hung up. He seems a nice enough kid, a little wild, a good spender, nuts on this dame. I asked a few questions about him around here. He's aces with the staff. He's been running around with the Bell girl for three-four months. Didn't seem to give a hoot that the whole town knew that she was Mushky Jenks' girl friend."

"Mm," mused Lacey. "And then?"

"Oh, about an hour later the Wickersham number called back and this time it was the older and softer voice. Very polite but kind of icy. Would Miss Bell permit the Wickersham number the honor of financing a shopping tour which might improve her memory. Well, Miss Bell would be delighted.

"I got a rush of calls and I couldn't listen to what followed, but when it calmed down again I heard the Wickersham number say, 'Very well, Miss Bell, I'll send a messenger over to the hotel in about an hour. I do hope, that when you finish with your little distractions you will find a decided improvement in your mental processes. In fact, you can expect me to assist you in remembering.'

"Then the Wickersham number hangs up. About an hour and a half later the Bell girl puts twenty thousand dollars in the hotel safe and does herself some shopping."

Lacey whistled softly. "So that's how it goes, eh?" he said, half to himself. "Well, thanks. When we get finished with this business you've got pleasant surprises coming. You better be thinking about Bermuda. They tell me it's a swell joint this time of year."

There was a little laugh from the other end of the wire.

VII

INDEED the detective inspector was very gruff. "Well, what do you want?" he demanded of Lacey.

"I want to see Mushky Jenks," informed Lacey sweetly, flipping a pass under his nose.

"He ain't receiving."

"He'll see me."

"Good Lord, Red, what are you butting in on this business for? Haven't we got enough grief?" The inspector's voice was peevish. He seemed a little nervous.

"I am to understand that the police have gone through the routine and that Mr. Jenks, very ungraciously, refuses to sign a confession that he put the bump on Mr. Pete Letts?"

"The dirty rat must be made out of tool steel," complained the inspector. "We've given him everything in the book and a few things the boys thought up on the spur of the moment but he won't talk."

Lacey clucked his tongue sympathetically. "Too bad," he said. "You boys must be plumb worn out with all that exercise."

"You go to the devil!" growled the inspector.

"I could have saved you all that trouble," stated Lacey matter-of-factly. "I knew before you started that Mushky would stand pat. You'll never break him because it's a bum rap. If he had shot Letts he'd be bragging about it—but he's innocent, so he's sore as hell."

"That's what you think."

"That's what I know."

Lacey sauntered into the corridor. He halted in front of Jenks' cell. He stared at Mushky. He laughed aloud. Mushky's face was a purple blotch of bruises—his eyes were black and swollen shut except for a tiny slit through which his eyes glared. The clothes were half ripped off his body. His broken nose was smashed against the curve of his cheeks. He was covered with dried blood.

"'Lo, Mushky," Lacey greeted him.

Mushky seemed to have forgotten how much of the damage had been inflicted by Red Lacey. He gripped the bars with eager fingers.

"You talk with Joe?" he asked.

"Sure. Thanks for the dough."

"You dig anything up?"

"Plenty," admitted Lacey.

"Get me out of here—just get me out!" Jenks' hands clawed convulsively at the bars. What was left of his face twisted itself in savage hatred.

"I came down to ask you a few questions," said Lacey. "If you want me to help you, you've got to come clean with me."

Mushky stared at him through the slits of his swollen eyes. "You sure you won't doublecross me, fella?" he gurgled out of his throat.

Lacey moved toward the door. "Well, so long, Mushky," he said pleasantly. "It was nice, seeing you."

"Hey," growled Mushky, "don't be so touchy. I got to be careful, ain't I?"

"What happened downtown?" asked Lacey.

Mushky Jenks seemed to be thinking. "I don't know rightly," he said in a puzzled manner. "I told the cops the truth. I got a phone call with the right words. I had to see a guy right away at Houston and Lafayette. I got the car. I took Lois along. I figured it would just be talk for a couple of minutes. I drive up. I look around for my man. Nobody there. I figure he's held up somewhere. I cut the engine and wait."

"I'm sitting there, talking to Lois. Then in the mirror I see a car pull in behind me. The car looks familiar. In a minute I make it—Pete Letts. I figure in a second that the call must be a phony and that Letts decides to settle our argument right there and then. I go for my rod. I hear a shot. I see Letts fall over the wheel, blood running from his head. That puts me in a panic for a minute. Somebody runs close to the car, kind of looks in the window for a second. People start to yell. I step on the starter and get away from there. Then I run into you."

"Then you run into me," said Lacey softly. "Now come clean. Did you fire your own gat?"

"I never had a chance. It happened so quick."

"You're sure?"

"Cripes! If I shot don't you think I'd know it?"

"Did you let your gat out of your possession for even a minute?"

"No—I had it in my hand when I drove away, and I put it in my shoulder holster as soon as I had the car started. That's where it was when you busted me with that sap."

"Never out of your hand for a second—and you didn't shoot it?"

"No."

LACEY'S eyes were staring at Jenks' face. "How do you explain that one shot was fired from your gun? The shell was still in the barrel, and there was the ejected cartridge case on the floor of the car."

"Why, you lyin' doublecrosser!" snarled Mushky. "You're giving me a line."

Lacey shook his head. "I've got thirty-eight thousand bucks of your money," he reminded. "I've got to get the truth before I can do anything for you. The gun had been fired, the case was on the floor and there was one shot missing from the magazine. That is an exact statement of fact. Got an explanation for it?"

Jenks clung to the bars. His hands were sweating. Moisture oozed out of the purple mass of his face. The purple turned to a gray-green. His slits of eyes were fixed on Lacey's face. His bloated tongue licked over his dry and shapeless mouth.

"Lord!" he whispered hoarsely. "If that's true, I'm framed. It's a plant. Some son—"

"Who?" demanded Lacey.

Jenks shook his head. "I don't know—somebody."

Lacey let him suffer for a moment. "You know young Joe Manning?" he asked suddenly.

Jenks' head snapped up. "I told that little punk I'd break his dirty neck if I heard about him snoopin' around the Park Palace," he said thickly. "The silly little brat got himself a case on Lois."

"Oh," said Lacey quietly. "It was like that, I thought so. How about Lois?"

"Oh, her?" Mushky's face became bland, if blandness was possible with the bruises. "She had a good laugh about it."

"How come she's so anxious to see you tried for the Letts business?" asked Lacey.

"You're crazy!" scoffed the gangster. "She's a swell broad. Why should she want to see me tried? Ain't I been good to her?"

"Ask her that. I'm only interested in how come she broke loose like that in the station when you were brought in

—gave out that line that she hoped they'd put you in moth balls until you had whiskers down to your knees."

"That was an act."

"Maybe it was an act too that when she found I was working for you she told me that she knew you fired the shot that killed Letts. Told me that she felt the heat and flame of the explosion right under her ear and that the shell hit her in the face when it jumped out of your rod?" Lacey's eyes were watching Mushky narrowly.

"Why, that lying—" Jenks choked. His throat seemed filled. He shook as if with a spasm and his neck grew big.

"I'll take care of her," he said ominously when he could speak.

"You'd better," advised Lacey. "She'd make a rotten witness for you—if you come to trial."

"I told you what I know—and I told you the truth," Jenks insisted doggedly.

Lacey nodded. "That's right," he said. "If it makes you rest easier I'll tell you right now I know you didn't shoot Letts and I have a good idea who did."

For a minute it seemed that Mushky Jenks made an effort to kiss Lacey through the bars. "*Cripes!*" he choked with a tremble in his voice. "Thanks—I mean you'll never regret this, Lacey. You get me out of here and the sky is the limit."

"I'm getting paid—that's all I want," said Lacey. "I'll be seein' you around."

He went away, leaving Jenks still clutching at the bars.

"Well?" demanded the detective inspector as Lacey came into the squad room. "I suppose the guy broke down and put his head in your lap and cried."

"Almost," grinned Lacey.

"I suppose you solved the whole case?"

"Just about. I discovered one thing. Don't you boys go prowling around dark alleys after I get Mushky on the street. You see, he didn't croak Letts and I'm going to prove it."

"Yeah, you're going on the professor's report that Mushky's gun didn't fire the bullet that was found in Letts. Don't worry, Mushky has plenty of savvy. He switched the rods. He knows his stuff. But he can't get over fleeing the scene of the crime, having a gun on him with one exploded shell and a lot of other stuff. He went down there to lay for Letts and he got him."

"Okay," said Lacey. "Only—just remember I warned you."

VIII

TWIRLING a key in his hand, Lacey whistled to himself as he walked down the corridor of the nineteenth floor of the Park Palace. The key had a tag attached to it. It looked very much like a Park Palace key but it wasn't. It was a pass key.

Half an hour before, he had trailed Miss Lois Bell out of the hotel, had seen her get into a taxicab, had followed her to the Morosco Theater, had seen her give up a ticket and enter. He had inquired of the doorman about the closing time of the show, found out he had better than two hours, had made tracks uptown. At the door of the telephone operator's room he winked at the girl on duty, went out and called her on a house phone from the desk.

"Just in case Miss Bell gets any calls tell the caller that Miss Bell is out," he directed. "Don't connect them with her suite but after they hang up you ring me in one nine three oh and let me know who wanted her."

"You mean—" began the operator.

"Sure—I'll be upstairs, in her room but you never heard about it."

"That Wickersham number called a minute or so after she went out," informed the operator. "Seemed disappointed."

"Okay," grunted Lacey.

He went up in the elevator, swinging the key in his hand.

At the door to 1930 he stuck the key in the lock as if the suite belonged to him, opened the door, closed it behind him, put the key in the lock and turned it, then looked around him. The room was in darkness.

He pushed the light switch by the door and stood still. His eyes were looking across the room. There was a little desk against the wall between the windows. The drawers were pulled open and the contents were pushed around as if a searching, impatient hand had created confusion in them.

The little white grin moved around Lacey's mouth. "Manning, eh?" he muttered. "He's a fast worker."

His body seemed to grow taut. He went through the rooms cautiously, without a sound. He opened the bath-

room door, looked inside. It was empty. A puzzled frown creased his forehead. He searched the apartment, looked under the beds. There was no one. He sat on the edge of the bed for a moment and studied the layout of the suite. He heard not a sound. He went to work.

He opened drawers as if he knew in advance that he would find nothing and was merely carrying out a routine. He examined everything carefully, replaced it exactly as it was, rubbed the surfaces of the places he touched with an oil-wet chamois from his pocket.

He missed nothing. He even probed the insides of the mattresses and the soft eiderdown over both beds. He looked behind the pictures and in the umbrella rack. He stepped on each board of the waxed and polished floor. He sat down on a divan in the living room. He went to work on the pillows of the divan, then on the cushions, bending them, flexing them over each inch.

He found what he was looking for inside the spring covering of the divan. It had been very carefully concealed. The stitches had been cut, then sewed back into place to conceal the fact that an opening had ever been made.

He held the object of his search in his hand for a long minute, careful not to spoil any fingerprints it might hold.

The object was a blue-black .45 Colt automatic. He sniffed at the barrel and nodded his head. He touched the magazine release button, and the smooth magazine slipped out into his hand. He counted the shells in it.

There was one missing.

The little white grin moved the corners of his mouth.

"Mink coat—cracked ice," he murmured to himself. "This is going to be tough on the little lady. She'll have to go back to work."

There was a little creaking sound. His head snapped up. He saw a closet door in the living room closing slowly. There was someone standing in front of the door. There was a .38 Police Positive equipped with a silencer in the someone's hand.

"Okay, wise guy," said a cold voice. "I'll take that rod."

Lacey saw a young face, white and thin, set with shining glassy eyes, a thin almost-white mouth, a gray suit, a gray shirt with a blue tie, carefully

pressed pants and spats over cordovan shoes. Blond hair showed under a gray soft hat. The muzzle of the gun in the man's hand was pointing at Lacey's middle.

"I've been kind of expecting somebody to turn up," Lacey said. "I walked in on you. But you'd never have found this little memento—not in a thousand years. You don't have that kind of brains."

"What's the use of having brains?" asked the cold voice. "All I have to do is to wait for a wise mug like you to come along, find what I'm looking for and take it away from him. It's perfect. Come on—give!"

"Manning send you?" asked Lacey pleasantly.

"None of your business." There was menace in the voice and the eyes glinted evilly. The white face moved forward a pace. It was working nervously. The muscles in the cheeks fluttered. "I'm through talking. You toss that rod on the floor, over by me, right now, or—"

"What you need is another jab," said Lacey. "You're a little on edge."

"Why, you tramp!" said the thin mouth. "I'm going to give it to you."

The gun tensed in the thin fingers.

LACEY tossed the .45 into the center of the floor. At the same instant he rolled off the divan. He hit the floor with the thud of the gun. His fingers slipped into his right vest pocket. There was a quick succession of little cracks—dry sounds like the breaking of sticks.

For a single instant the eyes in the white face had glanced at the arc of the tossed automatic. In that instant Lacey had acted.

The knees inside the carefully pressed pants were buckling. The white mouth was open, the glassy eyes glaring. "You—you—" came through the white lips with a bubble of blood.

The Police Positive coughed once. A spurt of blood flew from the side of Lacey's head. A slug thudded into the divan behind him.

The little .25 automatic cracked once more. The man in front of him plowed up the rug with his face as he sprawled to the floor. The gun was thrust out stiffly in front of him. The mouth was drawn back over the teeth in a snarl.

Lacey got to his feet. His knees were shaking a little. He looked at the man

on the floor. He picked up the gun he had found in the divan and pushed it into his hip pocket. Then he went through the man's pockets and found nothing but money and a watch. He felt of the side of his own head, went into the bathroom, washed away the blood, stopped the bleeding.

Then he went to the telephone and called the detective inspector.

"I'm in suite one nine three oh, Park Palace Hotel," Lacey told him. "There's a mug on the floor, an out-of-town torpedo. He was here when I let myself in to frisk this Bell dame's joint. He was hiding in a closet. When I found what I was looking for he decided to take it away from me.

"You'll find six slugs out of a twenty-five automatic in him—in various places. I did that. He was here for one or two or three things—to give Miss Lois Bell the works, to find what I found and deliver it to certain parties, to get one Red Lacey, who was expected to frisk the joint. Maybe I know who he was working for, maybe I don't."

"Well, for Pete's sake!" said the inspector.

"I want you to come up here—on any pretext. Find him and get him out with no questions asked. Get it?"

"You bury your own stiffs. Who's running errands for you?"

"Now—is that cooperation?" reproved Lacey. "Is that a brotherly spirit? And besides, if you don't come through for me I won't even tell you what I was looking for up here and what I found."

"What'd you find, Big Shot?"

Lacey paused a moment to give better effect to the words. "I'm betting the thirty-eight grand I got from Mushky Jenks that I found the rod that bumped off Pete Letts—and I found it very nicely concealed in the spring section of a divan right smack in Miss Lois Bell's living room."

There was silence from the other end of the wire.

"Okay. I'll handle the stuff for you," said the inspector. "But you get downtown here and give me the lowdown."

"Be patient, Sweetheart," chided Lacey. "I'll be seeing you."

He let himself out of the apartment and went down in the elevator—from the sixteenth floor. He went downtown in a cab.

He hung over the professor in the ballistics laboratory of the Police Department. He watched slugs out of the gun he had found fired into a soft substance, taken out, examined under the microscope, compared with the slug Doc Libermann had extracted from Pete Letts' skull.

After three-quarters of an hour, the professor permitted a little enthusiasm to creep into his voice. He spoke to Lacey over his shoulder.

"No doubt about it," he confided. "This is the very gun which fired the slug that killed Letts. The markings are beautiful, clear and exact. Take a look."

Lacey squinted through the 'scope at the two slugs which were made one by the apparatus for purposes of comparison. He nodded his head.

"That's all I want to know," he told the professor, with a little note of excitement in his voice. "Now we're getting places."

IX

HAGGERTY swelled his chest, thrust his thumbs into the armholes of his vest and spoke in a low rumble. His derby hat was pushed back off his forehead. His face was red and fat, his belly billowing, his feet big. Anywhere in the world anyone would have picked Haggerty for a detective.

"When you tell me to bring somebody in I bring 'em," he said to Lacey as he pushed the boy into the room. "Sit down, you." He pushed the boy into a chair.

Lacey pushed his hat up from over his eyes and looked at the boy's face. The face was very white and stiff. The boy was trying to be dignified, outraged, but he was scared—scared to the marrow.

"Nice going, Haggerty," Lacey said. "That's all. I'll send for you when I want you."

"What?" squawked Haggerty. "You mean you don't want me to watch this fella while you talk to him?"

There was grievance in the tone. Haggerty had been working for Lacey for two years as a legman. In two years he had learned exactly nothing about Lacey's business.

"Joe and I understand one another. We don't need company," Lacey grinned. "Scram."

Haggerty closed the door petulantly.

Lacey sat there for a long moment, his feet on the desk, looking at the boy. He wondered about this kid of the Honorable James J. Manning. The kid looked clean—and tortured. Just out of college—athlete, all that stuff. Lacey lit a cigarette.

"Blondes are sure rough, aren't they?" he inquired casually.

The whiteness in the boy's face grew more pronounced. He stared at Lacey almost defiantly.

"I'm waiting to be told why I was kidnaped and brought here and on what authority. It had better be good, for my father will want a lot of explanations," he threatened.

Lacey seemed not to have heard. His eyes were still fixed on the boy's face.

"Never know where you stand with a blonde—never know what's going on under the skull piece. They give you that baby stare and that routine—and a guy is sunk. He figures he's the top entry and then he finds out that all along he's been used for a sap. Yes, sir—blondes are rough."

There was a little silence. The boy's hands were jammed into the pockets of his coat, made into fists—holding hard. The pulse in his throat fluttered.

"A guy spends his dough like water, hears a lot of baby talk, smells perfume, gets a flash of the flesh—and that's all there is, there isn't any more." Lacey nodded his head. "Boy—I know!"

The lines around the boy's mouth grew deeper and desperate. His eyes fell away from Lacey's scrutiny.

"Now, the way I figure it," went on Lacey softly, "she used you for a sucker. She gave you a line about how mistreated she was, and how badly she wanted to get away from Mushky—but if she ever made a break to split up with him he'd kill her like a dog. She probably showed you bruises on her body. She probably called you up on the telephone and cried and cried.

"She probably gave you plenty of loving to prove she was nuts about you. She probably begged you to take her away—anywhere—just to be rid of Mushky. And then, every time you got ready to take her she broke down and ran out on you because she told you that no matter where the two of you went Mushky would track you down and give you the works.

"You went to see her once, when she told you Mushky wasn't comin'—and he did come—and he kicked heck out of you and told you that he'd murder you if he ever caught you hanging around again."

Words dribbled out of the boy's taut mouth. "Nobody can kick heck out of me," he said. "He tried it and it didn't work. He told me to get out and stay out." The boy seemed to be speaking out of another existence.

"And then she told you that Mushky was figuring how to get rid of you—that he knew everything."

The boy's head nodded, almost imperceptibly.

"So she planned everything. She told you how to call Mushky on the phone and what code words to say and to make a date with him in somebody else's name for Houston and Lafayette Streets. And then she phoned Pete Letts and made a date with him, probably told him that she was breaking up with Mushky and had an earful for him. She told you to get a rod and be on the spot—and shoot Letts—because she knew that everybody in the world knew that Letts and Mushky were on the outs, and that a bump-off would be in order, and that everybody would see Mushky's car and Letts' car on the spot—and Mushky would be tagged for the killing. So you went home and took a gun out of a drawer, and kept the date—and shot Mister Letts right in the middle of his head-head-head."

"How do you know?" the boy demanded hollowly.

"I had a dream one night," grinned Lacey. "Clear as spring water—saw the whole thing."

"You go to the devil!" said the boy stiffly. "You can't prove anything."

"Let's see," mused Lacey. "I have the gun that killed Letts—and we've proved that it is the very gun. Then when I had the numbers checked up, I found that it belonged to your old man and that he had a permit covering it. You see, I figured that any gun you would use would be on the up and up and that you'd grab the first rod in sight and blaze away. Yep—the numbers check—it came from your house."

THE boy seemed to crumble. "She sold it to you," he said dully. "You got it from her."

"Not quite," corrected Lacey. "I found it very nicely hidden in her apartment. I had a little argument with another guy about it—your old man may know something about that—and I brought the gun with me."

The boy merely stared. Once or twice his mouth moved, then it shut tightly.

"I figure she told you she would see that Mushky got the works for the bump-off. I figure she told you that Mushky would be so excited by the unexpected happenings at Lafayette and Houston that he would not remember anything very clearly and that he'd be too set on the scam to notice things.

"She told you that—when you gave the works to Letts—you were to run around the side of Mushky's car and drop the gun in through the window—that she'd take care of it and at the first chance switch guns with Mushky, so that when the police found him and questioned him they'd find the murder gun on him. He couldn't explain his way out of that. The bullet in Letts' head would match up with the markings in Mushky's gun—and there you are—up the river and the hot squat for Mushky.

"So—when you let Letts have it from behind Mushky's car you doubled over, ran around the side, dropped the rod into the Bell dame's lap while Mushky was looking out the other side of the car at Letts—and then you scrambled. Or rather, Mushky drove away from there in a hurry. Too much of a hurry. He bumped into my flivver on Park Avenue—and that's how all this began.

"She probably told you that Mushky and Letts deserved killing anyhow and it was like letting two snakes poison each other. And that after everything was over you two lovebirds would fly together to warmer climes and live happily ever after. That was the 'script, wasn't it?"

There was no sound from the boy.

"But imagine your embarrassment when you called her up and she told you sweetly that she couldn't find the rod you had dropped into her lap—even though she had it in her bag in the police station all the time. She had a lot of nerve—that dame. You've got to hand it to her."

"That was a lie!" grated the boy. "I found out it was a lie the next day. I found out a lot of things. She wanted

money for the gun. I had to have the gun. While she had it there was a murder charge hanging over my head."

"Sure—sure," soothed Lacey. "So you didn't have the kind of dough she wanted—and you had to tell your old man the truth—all about it—and he made the down payment on getting back the rod. Only he didn't get it. He merely got a horse laugh from Miss Bell, for she knew that, so long as she had the heater she had a bank account—as big as the Honorable John J. Manning's bank account, for he couldn't afford to have his one and only son go down under a murder rap.

"He paid her the twenty grand, didn't get the gun and sent a friend of his to pick it up. And I laid that friend of his flat in the Bell dame's apartment in the Park Palace." Lacey clucked his tongue sadly. "Such goings on!" He mourned. "And all over one blonde."

"Well?" asked the boy, in the same dull voice. "What are you waiting for?" A biting bitterness came into his voice. "Now that you know everything—take me in. I guess I can take it!"

"Take you in?" Lacey's eyebrows lifted in surprise. "I'm no cop. You didn't read the sign on the door when you came in the office. I can't take you in. It requires a warrant and a cop and a lot of red tape to take you in. I can't be bothered with all that stuff."

"You mean—" the boy's eyes were staring. "You mean you're not making an arrest. That you didn't bring me down here to lock me up?"

"Heck, no!" grinned Lacey. "What gave you that screwy idea? I just wanted to talk to you for a couple of minutes—kind of confidential."

"But what shall I do?" There was eagerness in the boy's face and eyes.

"You go home and tell your old man the whole story. Tell him that I had a talk with you and that I told you to get in touch with Joe Dillon and have a talk with him. And if Joe and your old man can't fix things up—well, I miss a guess for the first time in my life. You tell your old man that my end of this business is finished the minute I produce the evidence that Jenks didn't kill Pete Letts. I've produced that—I don't give a hoot what happens now. I'm going to Bermuda."

The boy stood on his feet. He wrung Lacey's hand. There were tears stand-

ing in his eyes. "I'll never forget this," he said brokenly. "I'll pay you back—somehow."

"Blondes sure are rough," said Lacey. "Forget it."

* * * * *

Joe Dillon rubbed his hands and patted Lacey on the shoulder approvingly. It was one hour later and things had been happening. The lawyer had just arrived in Lacey's office after a telephone session with the Honorable James J. Manning.

"I don't know how you do it, pal," he said admiringly, "but you sure turn up with the goods!"

"Lay off that!" growled Lacey. "Put my twelve grand on the line—right here."

"Okay, okay," grumbled Dillon. He counted out twelve one-thousand-dollar bills on the top of Lacey's desk. The money escaped reluctantly from his fingers.

"Thanks," said Lacey ungraciously as he put the money in his pants pocket.

Dillon recovered his good humor. "Say, with that evidence, I'll have Mushky out of the can in ten minutes—with an apology from the Commissioner," he chuckled. "The gun that Mushky had was the gun that didn't do the killing—and we've got the gun that did do the killing and we can prove that he never owned it."

"You'd better get in touch with the Honorable James J. Manning before you begin the celebration. He's probably already pulling the wires to clear his kid—and to help you spring Mushky."

"Well, I'm off," said Dillon. "I'll have Mushky out in time for dinner."

LACEY waved a disinterested hand. He slouched down in his chair. He seemed to be sleeping.

After a while the telephone rang. The girl at the Park Palace seemed excited.

"The Bell girl checked out—in a hurry," she reported. "They had an awful rumpus around here after you called up the police and told them about the man you shot in her suite. The management went crazy for a couple of hours. Then the Bell dame scrambled—in a hurry—trunks and all."

"Forget the Bell dame," said Lacey. "Listen—I still have those tickets for Bermuda in my pocket. They're a little

overdue but I can have 'em switched. How about it—you want to quit that bum job for a life on the ocean wave—or do I have to proposition some other blonde? I've got a yen for you, Baby. You got class—and brains—and in a blonde that's the last word."

"Well," said the voice. "I always did like excitement and travel—and red-heads."

"That's swell—I'll be seeing you. The boat sails tomorrow at three in the afternoon. I'll pick you up tonight."

There was a little squeal from the girl's end of the wire.

"But I haven't anything to wear!" she told him.

"That makes it perfect!" he grinned. He hung up.

After a minute he dialed the number again. She answered.

"Hey," he said. "I just happened to think—what the heck's your name?"

LACEY was whistling as he packed his bags.

The tickets to Bermuda were spread out on the top of his dresser. He looked at the clock. It was nearly noon. The phone rang.

"Inspector Griffin of the Detective Bureau calling, Mr. Lacey," said the operator in the lobby.

"Put him on," said Lacey.

"Hello, you rat," the inspector said. "I oughtn't to give you a break like this. I ought to make you wait for the papers—but I've got a soft heart."

"Spill it!" snapped Lacey.

"Well, your friend Mushky went out of here in a hurry last night after Joe Dillon sprang him—and where do you think he went?"

"I'll bite—where?"

"He went out to the airport and hung around. And along about six this morning, when the first plane takes off for the Coast, who should come along but his girl friend—that Bell dame—all hot and bothered and making tracks for the Coast. Somehow she gave the slip to the fatheads I had tailing her. But she didn't give Mushky the slip. He was right there waiting for her. It seems that Joe Dillon told him a few things about the Bell dame. The minute she shows Mushky goes to work on her, starts kicking her around—and right in the middle of it she ups and shoots him in the tummy with a gun she's carrying in her bag.

"That so surprises Mushky he forgets he's a gentleman and goes for his own rod and riddles her right there in front of a couple of dozen people."

"Well, well," mourned Lacey. "Isn't that just too bad?"

"And Mushky passes out in the ambulance on the way to the hospital. Now I ask you?"

"Don't ask me anything," begged Lacey. "I'm in a hurry. I'm going sailing over the bounding main—away from you uncouth people. Read tomorrow's society columns—it'll tell you all about Mr. and Mrs. Richard Lacey, of the New York Laceys, hieing themselves off to bask in the sunshine of Bermuda for an indefinite period. When interviewed by our reporter just before sailing the well-known Mr. Lacey said, 'Nuts!'"

"Mr. and Mrs.!" hooted the detective inspector. "Why, you lug—you ain't married!"

"That's the trouble with you flatfeet!" deplored Lacey. "You're so handcuffed by technicalities you haven't any imagination."

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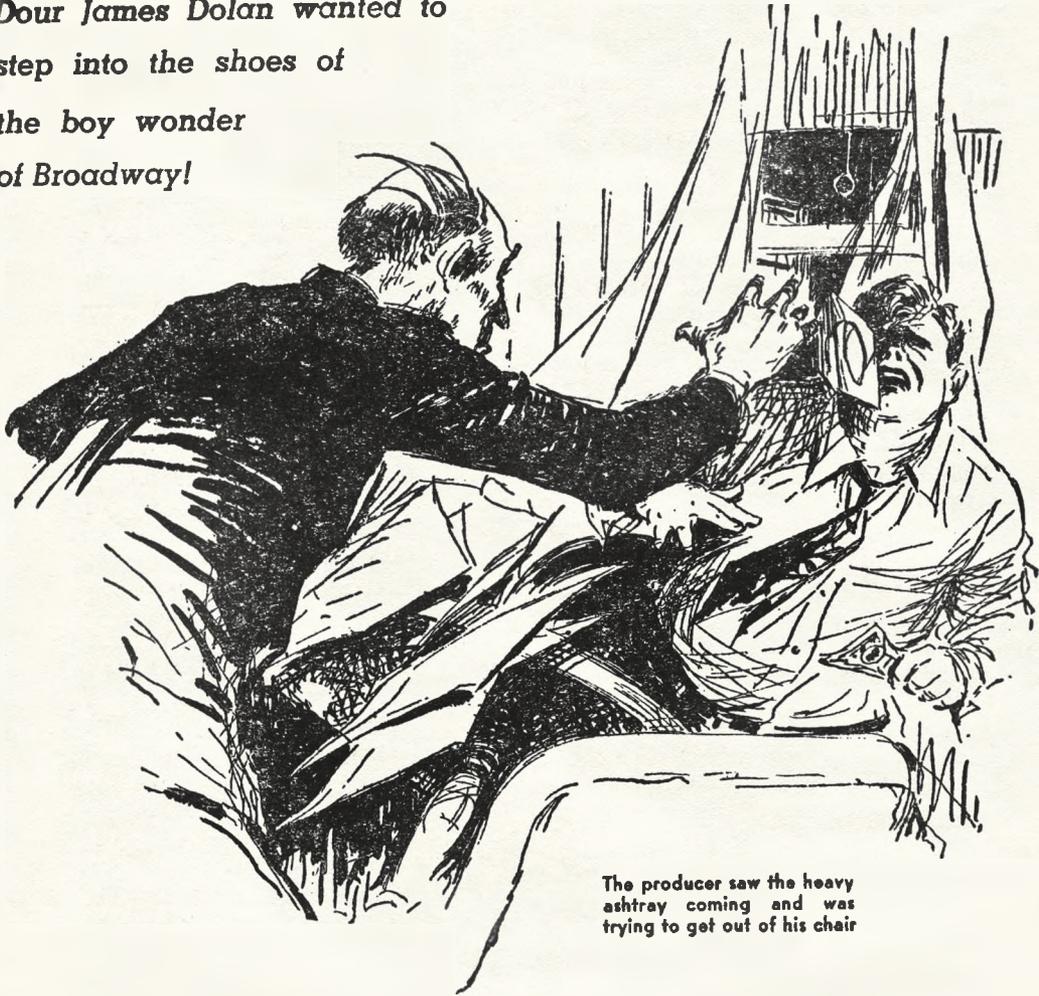
WILDROOT CREAM OIL

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**EASY TO USE
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TRAVELING**

Dour James Dolan wanted to step into the shoes of the boy wonder of Broadway!



The producer saw the heavy ashtray coming and was trying to get out of his chair

A Portrait of ALEXANDER HAMILTON

by RAY CUMMINGS

JAMES DOLAN took the nine o'clock train from New York. It was a little after midnight when he arrived at the small upstate city where "Laugh Clown" was having its tryout, preparatory to its Broadway opening.

The hotel where young Mike Trant, producer of the show, was staying, was

only a short walk from the railroad station. Dolan was Trant's assistant, his accountant, purchasing agent, and general handyman. Not that he could handle all that alone—he had many others under him.

Young Trant employed people with a lavish hand. Trant was too busy being

the "Boy Wonder of Broadway," with a meteoric rise on the theatrical scene just these last two seasons, to give much thought to financial details. The older, more plodding James Dolan took care of that.

Dolan had played his cards cleverly. He was thinking of it now, chuckling at it, as he carried his small suitcase from the station up Main Street to the hotel. He had his finger on a lot of the money that went out. Money goes out fast in show business, and, in young Trant's case, it came back fast also. Trant already had three smash hits, two of which were still running on Broadway, and the other a success in Chicago. And now "Laugh Clown" was making its bid.

As James Dolan reached the small hotel that Saturday midnight, he had no possible idea that anything momentous in his life was impending. He was too pleased with himself, too satisfied with his own cleverness even to consider that young Trant could suspect him of anything crooked.

It had all been an irresistible temptation to Dolan, these lavish thousands that were going out so recklessly. Trant would never miss a modest few of them anyway, so what was the difference? Dolan hardly looked on it as embezzlement. As a matter of legality, it was that, of course. One could go to jail for it.

Ethically—well, maybe Dolan's services were worth it. His personal salary, so far, hadn't been very large. Self justification is very easy to most people. James Dolan was very pleased with everything, especially with himself.

"Reservation for James Dolan, please." He yielded his suitcase to the bellboy, and reached for the big, old-fashioned hotel register book. "Mike Trant's associate," he added aloud to the clerk. "You'll find room and bath there, reserved for me." He felt very expansive with the consciousness of his importance. This hotel was probably a third full of the "Laugh Clown" cast, right now.

WITH a puzzled expression on his face, the young night clerk glanced up from what he was doing. Then he took another look. Dolan was a tall, cadaverous man, with his thin, graying hair plastered carefully across

his alarmingly enlarging bald spot. He always wore a black suit. His thin face, whatever his inner emotions, had a solemn and sanctimonious look. His manner was pompously solemn. One might have guessed him to be a blue-nose reformer, or perhaps a small-town undertaker, but most certainly not what he was.

"Dolan?" the night clerk said. He fumbled around his desk. "Room and bath," he said. "Front—" He handed the bellboy a big key with a metal tab. "Show Mr. Dolan to Room Fifty-nine."

"Thank you," Dolan said. He favored the clerk with a faint smile. "Oh, by the way, I find myself almost out of funds." He drew out his wallet. "Will you cash this check, please?"

The clerk inspected the hundred dollar check. "Well," he said, "for this amount—so late at night, tomorrow morning—"

"I'm quite out of cash," Dolan said. He frowned. True enough, he had arrived here with only a few dollars left. Carrying plenty of money always gave Dolan a comfortable, important feeling. An impulse now had made him want to impress this young clerk, and he certainly wasn't going to be rebuffed. "I'm sorry," he added. "I must insist. Is your manager still around?"

It was a very handsome-looking check, embossed "Mike Trant Theatrical Enterprises." There was nothing queer about the check. James Dolan had never indulged in check juggling. It was duly charged to his personal expense account.

"Well," the clerk said, "haven't got that much in the drawer." But he turned back, opened the hotel safe, took out a stack of bills that had a paper band glued around them. "Tens be okay?" he said.

"Oh quite—quite."

The clerk moistened his thumb and riffled off ten of the bills, twitching them out from the paper band. He put the check with the remainder back into the safe. He stared with a look of wonderment at the tall, black-clad figure of Dolan stalking after the bellboy to the elevator.

In his bedroom, Dolan tipped the bellboy a quarter with a lavish gesture. With his personal money, Dolan was carefully frugal. He wasted nothing. He was careful particularly of small

sums. It was part of his determined plan to get rich, now that this golden opportunity with Trant had arrived. Easy come, easy go, might be a tradition in show business, but James Dolan would have none of it. Easy come was the only part he believed in.

When the bellboy had left, Dolan unpacked his suitcase and reached for the telephone to call Trant. Then he thought better of it, deciding just to go up without bothering to phone. He knew Trant's room was number 63. He had called Trant several times, today and yesterday from down in New York, where Dolan had lingered, arranging for the theater renovation for the Broadway opening next week.

Room 63 presumably would be one flight upstairs. The fifth floor hall here, was empty as Dolan left his own room, closing his room door after him. He decided not to bother with the creaky old elevator. There was a red-glowing glass ball here over a door labeled EXIT. Dolan went up the stairs to the sixth floor, which was the top of the little building. There was no one in the sixth floor hall. He knocked on 63.

"Come in," Trant's voice said. "Oh, you, Jim. Glad to see you."

It was a shabby bedroom, with a single window that opened onto a fire escape. Dolan closed the door after him and deposited his lanky length uncomfortably in a small easy chair. Trant, as Dolan had surmised, had only returned from the theater a little while ago.

"Everything okay in the city?" Trant said. "I knew you'd phone me again, if—"

"Quite—quite," Dolan said. "How'd the show go tonight?"

"We're getting it smoothed. Still ten or fifteen minutes to cut." Trant was sitting now at a table with scripts in front of him. Evidently he was pondering the further cutting. He was a small, blond fellow, just turned thirty, slightly pudgy, with a smooth pink face that in repose seemed a little cherubic.

Mike Trant, however, was seldom in repose, except when asleep. His voice generally was crisp, with a queer commanding confidence. It wasn't a pose. It came naturally to him. His blue eyes were seldom mild and usually they were alert, restless, questing. Rather a flashy dresser, he smoked an interminable

succession of big cigars. To Dolan a big cigar looked absurd, slanting up across Trant's round, pink face.

For five minutes now, Trant fired questions about conditions in New York. "Forget about it, Mike," Dolan told him. "I've got everything well in hand. So the show looks good, does it?"

"Well, they laugh," Trant said. "But how can you tell, except use your own judgment? Up here they laugh at anything, and mostly in the wrong places."

Trant picked up his big blue pencil and went back to the script, quite as if Dolan had departed. Then abruptly he seemed to change his mind. He dropped the pencil, shoved the script away and eyed Dolan.

"I happened to be phoning a friend down in the city tonight," Trant said. "And he happened to mention you, Jim." Trant's voice was casual, a casualness that did not match his steady gaze.

"Me?" Dolan said. "Who was he?"

"Don't think you know him. He happened to mention he heard from McCaffery that you were one of the angels who got stuck with 'A Dead Duck.'" Trant laughed. "I'm ashamed of you, Jim. You should have known better."

Dolan tried also to laugh. But he had told McCaffery not to mention it. "A Dead Duck" was the current Broadway flop. Four of the seven major critics had headed their reviews with the quip that "A Dead Duck" was very aptly named.

Dolan's first flyer had turned out badly. It had come down with more than a quack. Dolan had a deep faith that now when at last he had capital, he could roll up his thousands into real money. You only had to get in on a few like "Life with Father," and "Arsenic and Old Lace" and you were all set. He knew that sooner or later, Trant would hear of it. But Trant wouldn't give it a thought.

NOW suddenly, the startled Dolan saw that he had been wrong about that. Trant was giving it plenty of thought. His gaze clung to Dolan's face, so questing a gaze that Dolan had to resist his instinct to avoid it.

"So you dropped eight thousand, eh

Jim?" Trant was saying crisply.

"Why—yes, about that, maybe."

"Lot of money, for you, Jim. It set me wondering where you got it. Matter of fact, it set me wondering about quite a few things."

Fear had begun tingling through Dolan. But with it his ready anger was rising. After all, since Trant knew nothing, what business did he have, prying like this into Dolan's personal affairs?

"Where I got it?" Dolan said. "Look here, isn't that—I mean I just don't like your tone. After all, isn't it my own personal—you never talked to me like this before, Mike."

"I never had reason to. Or at least, I didn't realize it."

"Well, don't," Dolan said. It was difficult, this parrying with young Mike Trant. Dolan had seen a hundred people try it and come off second best.

"Where *did* you get it?" Trant persisted.

"That," Dolan said, "is none of your business."

"But I think it is. I haven't paid you a princely salary, as you've reminded me. You've always seemed pretty broke. You borrow from everybody and forget it when you can. Ten dollars from me last Tuesday—"

Weird mentality, hanging onto such petty stuff, with all the big money Mike Trant handled! Dolan flung down a ten-dollar bill with a gesture of contempt. "So now we're square. I guess I don't understand you—"

"But you will," Trant said with a new grimness. "So I haven't been frank yet, well here it is, Jim. I've pretty much had the goods on you for quite a while. Just a stack of little things that fitted together, only I couldn't believe it. A guy who's my friend, I've always trusted you?"

"You're talking wild!"

"But I don't think so. Anyway, you're through—as of tonight."

Trant cocked his cigar, stared through a second of silence, then relaxed in his chair as though the argument was finished. Dolan sat numbed. The thing had taken him wholly unawares. It was like a storm coming abruptly from a sky without clouds. His instinct was to wheedle, to placate.

After all, Trant actually had no proof of anything. Just his vague suspicions

which had freshly jumped at him, sparked tonight by this "Dead Duck" business. But blurring such thoughts were Dolan's rising fear, and rising anger. He was muttering:

"What you mean, I'm through?" Then he added, "You're mighty insulting—it's a good time for you to start apologizing. Then maybe we can get down to cases and find out what's the matter with you." But Dolan knew that he was just wildly bluffing. And you couldn't bluff Mike Trant. Nobody ever had, nobody ever would. This was just leading to—what?

Dolan knew then that he was thinking something terribly frightening. He felt like a man assailed, and who desperately must fight back, with all the instinct of self-preservation.

"I don't want anybody around me I can't trust," Trant was saying quietly. "And there's nothing to discuss. When 'Laugh Clown' gets going I'll have time to check back on things. I wouldn't want to send a man to jail, but when you trust a guy like I have you—"

Jail! The word, lurking far down in Dolan's mind, suddenly had been spoken so that it had leaped alive, a living thing here, vibrating in the room. An adversary! Dolan had no conscious thought of what he was doing as he leaped and seized a big heavy glass ashtray and flung it.

Trant saw it coming. He was trying to get out of his chair, but the missile struck him in the face. He gained his feet, staggering, then he fell. The table overturned, and now Dolan had pounced, sprawled down with the ashtray on the floor so that he gripped it, striking, pounding— You have to kill him now! . . . Something like that was in Dolan's mind until presently he was back on his feet, swaying, panting.

And on the floor the thing with its weltering skull lay motionless—

Then abruptly Dolan realized that the telephone had gone down with the table. It lay on the floor with its receiver off the hook and the startled microphonic voice of the night clerk downstairs was babbling from it like a new antagonist!

Dolan turned and fled from the room. The dim halls and the exit stairs were empty, and then he was back in his bedroom underneath. For a moment he sat on the bed engulfed with terror. But then it began dropping away. No one

could know that he had been upstairs in Trant's room. He was safe enough.

A thing of horror to have done. But that was past now. The danger from Trant was gone. There was no one now, of course, except James Dolan himself who could check on Trant's past transactions—no one, of course, who could carry on with "Laugh Clown," and the show in Chicago and the two still on Broadway.

No one, except James Dolan, who could take Trant's place in the theatrical world. It was like a glittering bonanza spread suddenly before him. Trant's heirs, none of them with the least idea of the theater, would put him in command.

The sound of the hotel springing into turmoil forced itself into Dolan's triumphant thoughts. The murder had been discovered. People were out in the hall, calling questions at each other. It was too much alarm for Dolan to remain quiet here. He gazed at himself in his bureau mirror. He smoothed the lock of hair into its accustomed place across his bald spot. He was perhaps paler than usual but that was all.

He ran out into the hall. He called, "What's the matter?" He ran up the stairs with some of the other guests. . . .

FINALLY, when the police came, the guests were herded back from Trant's door. The elevator had come up and gone down several times. The young night clerk was here and the big, flabby looking hotel detective, and the bellboy. Then the manager came.

Dolan had joined them, of course. Many of the horrified members of the "Laugh Clown" cast were here in the hall. Dolan ordered them to keep away. He was Trant's associate. He was in charge here. He waited with the hotel people, to greet the police, and to help them in any way he could.

A trim looking Captain Blake was in charge of the police squad who came. "I'm James Dolan, Mr. Trant's general manager," Dolan explained. "I just arrived from New York, went to my room. Hadn't seen Mr. Trant for several days. Then all this commotion, I came running out—"

There really wasn't very much to say. He ended, "I'll do what I can—when you get around to questioning me, Captain." He drew Blake aside. He said, "I sup-

pose I know more about Mr. Trant's affairs than anyone else—his friends, his enemies." He let his glance stray out into the hall where some of the cast were grouped.

"I see," Blake said. "Okay."

Then the policemen were all in the room, looking around, examining the body. Dolan stood just outside the door, talking now with the hotel manager. "This terrible thing—he was a genius, Mr. Kinny. Nothing like him in show business, but of course you know that. And he was my best friend, quite—quite."

Just platitudes. Just what one ought to say. There was no danger here for James Dolan. Anyone in the hotel could have gotten into Trant's room and killed him. From the room, a fragment of what one of the policemen was saying, floated out—"or could have come up the fire escape, for that matter, from outside." It fitted into what Dolan was thinking. Anyone in the hotel, or anyone outside!

As he stood there by the door among the hotel people with the policemen occasionally coming out to speak to them, and the hall filled with awed guests and members of the "Laugh Clown" cast, Dolan was conscious of his own importance. Strangers always stared at him, wherever he went, and he rather enjoyed it. He had a new importance now, with Mike Trant gone. A new dignity. It was expanding within him.

Blake came out from the room to speak to him. They were expecting a physician here, a fingerprint man, a photographer.

"I see," Dolan said gravely. Then a thought occurred to him, prompted by the awareness of being Trant's most important confrere. "By the way, Captain, whatever the correct thing—I mean when the police are finished with the body—I suppose I should arrange with the local undertaker here. Any arrangements, if cash is needed—" He drew out his wallet, riffled the bills from it.

"Anything the hotel can do—" the hotel manager said.

Blake nodded. He was about to speak. He looked startled as though at some thought occurring to him. He reached for Dolan's wallet. "Let me look at that a moment, will you?" he said.

"Eh? Why—why yes, of course." Do-

lan stared blankly as the Police Captain rifled through the little sheaf of Dolan's ten-dollar bills.

Then Blake said conversationally, "Where did you get these?"

"Eh? Why—why—" For that moment Dolan couldn't remember. Then he remembered his check which he had cashed when he came in from the train. Blake was adding,

"You didn't get them from Trant, by any chance?"

"Of course I didn't," Dolan said. "You forget—I haven't seen Mr. Trant since he was in New York, several days ago. I cashed a check down at the desk, here in the hotel."

"That's right," the night clerk said. "Hundred dollar check. I gave him ten, tens, just a little while ago."

IN all his life, nothing ever had struck so unexpectedly at James Dolan, as this. The Police Captain said grimly, "Well, you're under arrest, Dolan."

"Arrest? Me—under arrest?"

"Banks get their paper currency

from the Federal Reserve Bank," Blake said. "They come in counted amounts, each amount in a bill wrapper. The bank often hands them over to depositors, untouched, if the depositor is drawing a sizable sum." He had Dolan's little sheaf of bills in his hand. "Here's one of yours. See the number off to the right of the picture of Alexander Hamilton? It's B37829721E. You've got nine bills here. The ending digits are 21, 22, 23, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30. You see, they run in rotation! You cashed a hundred dollar check only a few minutes ago. You've got 'em all but number 24! Come take a look where it is."

He shoved the stupefied, stricken Dolan into the room where the corpse of Trant still lay on the floor by the overturned table.

"There you are. Take a good look!"

Numbly Dolan stared at the ten-dollar bill clutched in Mike Trant's dead fingers. Damnable banknote. Millions all over the world, but only this one had the horrible, identifying number, B37829724E!



"When that Body Speaks, It Will Tell How, When and Where It Met Its Death!"

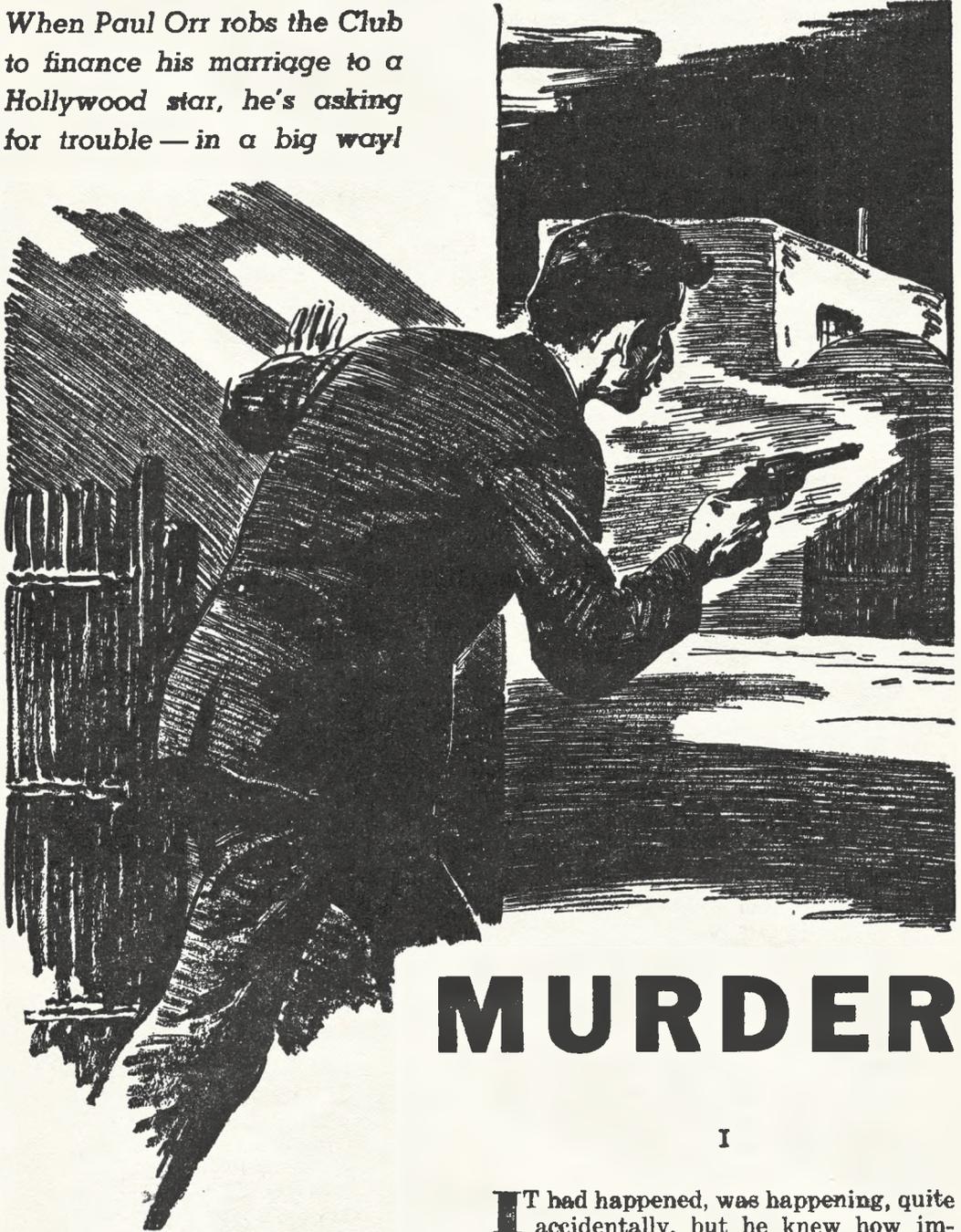
INSURANCE INVESTIGATOR "Toughy" Nichols had found a genius in the person of Dr. Sylvester Corrigan—surgeon extraordinary and creator of miracles out of dead men's bones! Although Corrigan insisted he was a surgeon and scientist—and NOT a detective—the way he managed to help solve cases was uncanny.

That's why Nichols called him in when wealthy Albert Browning was burned to death—and an accident meant double indemnity. Dr. Corrigan took one look at the corpse and the scene of the tragedy, and immediately pronounced the case a phony.

Proving it was another matter. But Corrigan was confident on that score. "I'll prove it in my laboratory," he said. "We'll take the body with us—and when that body speaks . . ."

The proper arrangements were made and the autopsy was soon under way. The body spoke—plenty—and what it said is revealed in CLAIM OF THE FLESHLESS CORPSE by George Bruce, one of the five outstanding novels coming in the next issue. You will find this novel utterly amazing in the cold, lucid logic of its deduction, in its bold, startling approach to the problem of violent crime. Remember, it's in our next issue—plus four other gripping and exciting novels!

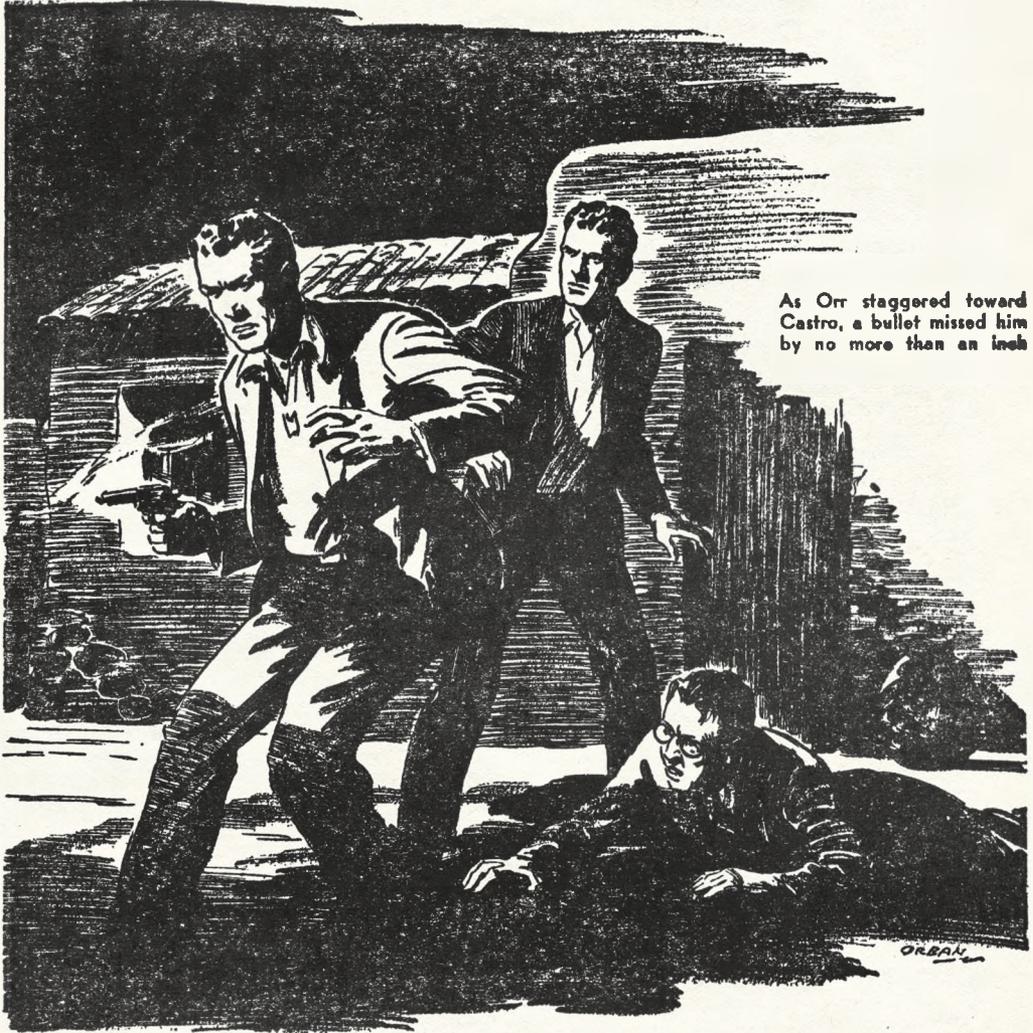
When Paul Orr robs the Club to finance his marriage to a Hollywood star, he's asking for trouble—in a big way!



MURDER

I

IT had happened, was happening, quite accidentally, but he knew how important it was. He knew that never, so long as he lived, would he have another such opportunity. He had known this, somehow, from the moment the



As Orr staggered toward Castro, a bullet missed him by no more than an inch

IN MEXICO

A Novel by **STEVE FISHER**

stout little Mexican had stepped out of the room to have a drink with one of the patrons.

The Foreign Club made money in the hundreds of thousands and it was prepared to pay out, people said, up to a

million. He had remembered that just this instant, and that was strange because he had never before thought of stealing, and robbing this place would have seemed, a moment ago, the most grotesque thing on earth.

Below the Border, Deacon Bradley Plays a

But now it was here. The Gold Room was momentarily empty and the money lay within reach in loose thick stacks.

The Mexican might be watching, but a glance in his direction told him differently. It had probably never happened before—and would probably never happen again in twenty years that the man who took care of the money was one too many on the stormy side of highballs. The club for all its reputation of being well guarded was without anyone to watch its thousands of dollars in cash.

Even so, the thought might have played in his mind for a moment and died, as so many of his thoughts did. He might merely have been amused, thinking of the possibilities for a braver soul than he. But not tonight. Tonight he was desperate. He had to have a lot of money.

He was in love with a screen star. She knew nothing about him. Their romance had been whirlwind. He, who had never had anything, was stunned. He was so flattered with her acceptance that he was drunk on flattery. He still could scarcely believe it.

Of course he had told her all the things he told ordinary girls—about his work in radio and writing comedy movie scripts when the mood struck him. But deep in his heart he had never expected anyone fully to believe these things. His radio career had been with a small station that did not pay, and had lasted exactly two months.

The movie scripts were imagination and mild gags and puns scribbled on scratch pads.

He was twenty-eight now. Just what had he done with his life, he wondered. He remembered exaggerating things even when he was a kid.

Jerking sodas in a drug store and telling girls who sat at the counter about himself.

He had sold ice cream from a truck that had a bell that jingled. He had worked as a gardener. And picked oranges. He had sold advertising. Without knowing a word of Spanish he had edited a little Mexican paper in Los Angeles for week. Each job, like each girl, had been something he had intended to keep for life, for if nothing else, he was intensely sincere,

BUT he never lasted. When he had sold candy he'd said that he had a chain of stores. Then it was a chain of newspapers. Then supervising a hundred gardeners. Then running a fleet of ice cream trucks.

Except for his exaggerations, which he eventually came to believe himself, he was both honest and serious. He would risk his life for a friend—and fight at the drop of a hat for a woman. What put him over, besides human gullibility, was the fact that he had a splendid personality and he was handsome. He wore neatly cut clothes and wore them well. He wore his brother's tuxedo well now.

How he had met Helen Bower, and how she had fallen in love with him, he still could not quite understand. He had been sitting in his car at a barbecue stand and she was in the next car alone. Of course he had heard of the vivacious red-haired star's wild inclinations for things that even in Hollywood were not quite standard, but he was sure that she was serious about marrying him and serious about settling down. He was sure that they would always love each other.

He had to make a go of things! But he had no money. His brother had loaned him seventy dollars to come to Mexico, but what was that? Helen had planned to marry him early tomorrow morning in an old Spanish mission, but he was penniless.

He went to where Helen stood. "Honey," he said in a calm voice, "something important has just come up."

She laughed, and looked at him with shining eyes that were almost liquid blue. She wore a white satin gown that hugged her shapely body; her hair contrasted it like the blood of a new dawn against the pearl of a morning sky.

"It isn't a blonde?" she asked.

"No," he said. "This is my week for red, don't you remember?"

"Oh, yes, this is our week. Will you be long?"

He could not resist begging for an assurance of her love. "Do you want me to be?" he asked.

"Darling," she said, "if you are gone more than five minutes I shall probably get the Mexican army to search for you."

Strange Role in a Drama of Love and Death!

He laughed, and told her, "It will doubtless be more than five minutes but I'll meet you in my suite at the hotel. The party begins soon and it might be a good idea for us to have a drink before people begin showing up."

"It's a date," she said and then she was gone.

He returned to the entrance of the Gold Room and looked around. He saw



DEACON BRADLEY

no one, not even the Mexican. He lit a cigarette.

Strange that the room should be so long empty.

Then he stopped thinking. He worked mechanically, without a single thought in his mind except to do what he had to do as quickly as possible. Two black satchels in which the money was to be carried to the bank stood beneath the board counter.

He opened one and swept in as many stacks of the bills as it would hold, closed the bag and locked it.

Then he saw the white tape wrappers in which they bound bills—paper with bits of glue on the ends. He wet the glue and laid one strip across the bag. A second strip he laid vertical, making a neat white cross on the side of the black bag. He lifted the bag and departed.

NOT until then did he feel the agony of suspense, and it hit him all at once. For a moment he thought he would collapse. He stopped and heaved air into his aching lungs. He might have to drop the bag and leave it standing there on the floor. He had been a fool to think he could get away with anything like this! Then he was walking again and the bag was still in his hand.

He passed the gaming tables but no one even glanced at him. He tried to prepare a speech in the event he ran into Helen or someone else he knew, but he could not. He was chilled to the bone, yet his face felt hot.

He reached the door. Detectives would be stationed here and it would be foolish to try and sneak out. He put down the bag and lit a cigarette. But his hand trembled so that he knew he must not linger. He picked the bag up and started out.

He was halfway down the steps when he heard someone call out. He must be calm—but a shiver rocketed through him. He turned and saw a smoothly groomed young Mexican who wore a tuxedo. It was a handsome brown face with a slick little mustache, but the eyes were harder than ebony. And the Mexican had his hand in his right coat pocket.

"Going somewhere, my friend?"

"Yes. I'm going to my hotel."

The Mexican came slowly down the steps. He saw the white cross on the side of the bag and looked slightly surprised. "You are a doctor?"

"Yes, my friend Hardwell was engaged, and I came. Didn't you see the lady who fainted?"

"No, I did not see her," said the Mexican. He paused.

"Well?"

"You may go, Doctor," he said at last. "A thousand pardons."

He went the rest of the way down the steps and onto the sidewalk where he moved in the direction of the hotel. It was early in the night but the street was already crowded with Americans here for the weekend.

Paul Orr was more nervous now than he had been during the questioning. Though he drank but little, he told himself what he needed now was a good glass of straight whisky.

II

HE thought he must have been insane and now he was more desperate than ever. He had been crazy to steal that money. He finished counting the money and closed the bag. Sixty thousand five hundred and seventy dollars. A fortune, but it was not his—and now that it was here in his room he could not think of touching it.

Sight of the bag and memory of his theft made him physically ill. He took the bag to a closet and threw it up on the top shelf out of sight. Then he went to the table and poured himself another drink, drank it straight.

He walked out onto the balcony and watched the people on the street one floor below.

Somehow, some way, he must return that money. The idea obsessed him more strongly than the urge that had prompted him to take it in the first place. He returned to the room with this in mind, but halfway to the closet he stopped. He had burned his bridges behind him. He thought of how close he had been to marriage with Helen Bower and was sick with hate for himself.

The bell rang. He went to the door. Helen came in gayly, reached up and kissed him. Flinging off her wrap, she went over to the divan, sat down and looked around.

"Get rid of the blonde all right?" she asked brightly.

He smiled down at her. "Without the slightest difficulty."

He moved over to the table and poured her a drink, mixed it with soda the way he knew she liked it. If only he could go back an hour and start over again!

She accepted the drink, holding it in her hand as she looked through the wide windows. She spoke slowly.

"I saw your mother, Paul."

He was startled. "You—saw Mother? When?"

"Before we left Los Angeles."

At that moment a siren wailed out into the night. The shrill, high sound froze his blood. He heard people shouting on the street and, stiffly, he got up. Helen ran to the balcony and he followed her, his knees trembling. Bells were clattering outside. Police—khaki-garbed Mexicans—came on the run from every direction.

"Sounds like the alarm when a bank is robbed," Helen said.

"Yes," he said, "but I rather think it's the Foreign Club. You can see a crowd over there on the steps."

"It's exciting!" she cried enthusiastically.

They stood there together and watched. He felt that his doom was sealed and that he was powerless to move. They could trace him easily. Then they would come over with half a hundred men and arrest him. He decided to offer no resistance.

Helen went on talking, but he did not hear what she said. The bell rang and they returned to the room. He went to the door. A stout young man with shining black eyes and crisp hair circling a naked spot on the top of his head stood there. Paul did not know who he was but Helen called out, "Marty! You old darling!"

PAUL ORR stepped back and the old darling moved into the room. Helen threw her arms about him and Paul saw the stranger kiss her on both cheeks. Suddenly she turned to him.

"This is he, Marty," she said.

"Glad to know you," the man with the bald spot boomed. "Name is Marty McGregor."

Orr shook his hand. The name was familiar but he could not remember where he had heard it. The three of them sat down.

"I'm her director, you know," Marty said.

"Yes," Orr lied pleasantly. "I've heard of you."

The siren grew noisier and he shifted uncomfortably. Marty asked if they had heard of the trouble. The Foreign Club had been robbed, he said, and added confidently that they would have the culprit quickly. Only a sap would pull anything like that here in Mexico, Marty assured.

Paul Orr scarcely heard. No matter how things came out, he had lost her. He was sorry for that—sorry for the first time in his life, because Helen was everything to him. She was more than he deserved, of course, but she represented to him everything that was love and emotion and honor.

Everything else had been drifting and playing and sham and lies. Now, she had just said, "There is something we

must tell Paul," and had quickly added, "it wouldn't be fair to marry him until I did."

And Marty McGregor replied, "You're quite right," grinning as though he were very happy.

Again the doorbell rang and Orr started forward as though he had been shot. When Helen looked up, surprised, he flushed.

"Darling," he said, "I've been expecting this call. It's rather important."

"That's all right," she said, and laughed lightly.

The bell rang again. His blood was surging. "Maybe you and Mr. McGregor would go in the other room for a minute," he suggested. "I don't mean to be rude but—"

"Sure!" Marty McGregor boomed. He pulled Helen to her feet, and when they had gone Paul moved toward the door.

He opened the door.

The smooth-faced Mexican who wore the tuxedo and the little mustache, stood there. He was alone. His hand was again in his right-hand pocket.

"I have come to pay you a visit, Doctor," he said.

III

IN seven scattered cities on the globe there are public drinking places which modestly boast—*The longest bar in the world*. They serve the same kind of drinks—no better—that the world's smallest bars serve, and except for their length they offer nothing extraordinary.

"Deacon" Bradley had known Shanghai's "longest bar," and the one in New York. He was now standing with his foot on the rail of Mexico's longest. It wasn't that he often drank. But tonight he had reason for taking a few drinks.

He was big, built like a lifeguard. His face was a nut brown from the sun and he had large blue eyes. He was not unhandsome but there were old scars that stood out faintly on his countenance and though it was plain at a glance that he might be "a swell guy," it was equally plain he was hard. He wore two-toned shoes, white flannels, and a polo shirt, open at the chest.

"Mine was the romance that the papers never even got around to rumorming," he said to the small man who stood

beside him at the world's longest bar.

"That's too bad," replied his neighbor, who was a writer and not much interested in romances.

"As a matter of fact," Deacon Bradley went on, "I never actually got around to telling her I loved her."

"What was her name?" the small man asked idly.

Deacon Bradley grunted. "There'd be no point in telling that now. She's pretty famous, and it would be unpleasant copy in the news."

"You've somewhat of a reputation yourself," said the writer, who hoped Deacon Bradley would talk about it.

Bradley shook his head.

"Just a private dick," he said off-handedly.

"But you're one of the best. Your agency is in the papers all the time."

"We do a little work," Bradley admitted. He was thinking of Helen Bower and what a fool he was to be in love with her. She was going to get married in the morning. He was down here to see it happen. After that he didn't know what he was going to do.

"Met her when I was working with Tony Key on a movie case," he went on presently as though there had been no break in his reminiscing. "After that I was around all the time." Pedro filled his glass and he looked at it sadly. "She used to laugh and say I was her watch dog. We kidded around a lot. She's a great li'l kidder."

The writer was disgusted. "I had thought," he said, "that you might be down here on a case."

"On a case I don't drink," Bradley grunted.

It was at the moment that the siren from the Foreign Club rose shrilly in the night. Bradley did not stir.

"I remember," he went on, "the time she was on location and I had to beat up some poor crank who was going to take a shot at her director. . . ."

He went on talking. He did not look at the writer often and was not much interested in whether he was there or not.

People were moving past him. He heard excited voices rising slowly, saw Mexican cops rushing by the door. He did not know how long he stood there but presently the energetic author was back and with him a husky brown-faced man who wore a khaki uniform.

"Deacon, my good frien'!" the uniformed man shouted.

Deacon Bradley blinked. It was Carlos Mendoza, chief of the government police. But it was something of a surprise to him that Mendoza should be here.

"Deacon," said Mendoza urgently, "come with me outside to talk. I need you very badly."

"Sure," replied Bradley, shaking hands with him. "Glad to see you."

"The Foreign Club has been robbed," Mendoza informed him as they headed into the street.

THE fresh air felt good to Bradley as it struck his face. "What am I supposed to do?" he growled. "Offer sympathy?"

"I want you to help me."

Bradley laughed.

"It ees a smooth job," Mendoza continued, "and our stupid police will only muddle it as they have other smooth jobs. You will help, *si*? We will work together as in the past."

"What do you mean? Think it's an inside job?"

"Definitely!" ejaculated Mendoza.

"So what? The boss was insured—so he maneuvered a robbery. Throw him into that pig-pen jail of yours and shoot all the lawyers that come around. He'll talk about it soon enough."

"But the money was *not* insured," said Mendoza. "It ees very difficult to get insurance on such places. And the Foreign Club has the reputation that no one can rob it!"

"That's one reputation shot," said the waiter pointedly, the first time he had spoken since leaving the bar.

"*Que*?" asked Mendoza.

"He's talking of reputations," Bradley grunted. "Pay no attention."

The fog induced by the few drinks he had taken was quickly dispelled by the clear air. What he needed now, he thought a little resentfully, was a pot of coffee and twelve hours sleep. Not some job thrust at him to force him into taking a postman's holiday.

Mendoza rambled on. "Of course the job may be *too* smooth. What can we do? The trouble is that the man who owns the club has such power with the government here my job will not be safe unless the loot is returned. *Dios!*"

They climbed the marble steps and

entered the casino. It was a madhouse. The tables were closed, and the croupiers stood behind them with guns in their hands. It was like a fire drill. Officials rushed back and forth with khaki-garbed police. Bradley was a little amused. Mendoza took him by the arm.

"Over here!"

They threaded their way through the crowd to the room from which the money had been stolen. A stout little Mexican with a round face and bright brown eyes stood surrounded by local police.

"*Estoy inocente, señores!*" he kept shouting.

"He was in charge of the Gold Room," explained Mendoza, "but he says he is innocent."

"Clear your army away and let's talk to him," Bradley said.

Mendoza harshly commanded his men to disperse. Bradley felt the officers push past him and then, feet set apart, hands thrust in pockets, he was facing the stout Mexican.

"What's your name?" he said shortly.

"Ruiz."

"What were you doing when the money was taken?"

"I was having some dreenk with my friends," Ruiz replied, brokenly.

Deacon Bradley's lips tightened the moment before he snapped, "How do you know that was the exact time the money was taken?"

Ruiz blinked. "No *sabe*."

"Oh!" Bradley said. "Like that. I see." He turned to Mendoza. "Have him locked up."

Ruiz knew what that meant all right. He began shouting wild protests. Bradley put a cigarette in his mouth and lit it as Ruiz was dragged away, still shouting.

"What now?" asked a voice that squeaked.

He looked around and saw the writer. "Three cups of black coffee," Bradley replied. "And have someone turn off that siren! It's driving me nuts!"

The jail was on a dirt street that was not meant for tourists and as Deacon Bradley approached it he was conscious of odors of garbage and goats and other smells that he could not put a name to.

"Many a story I've written around this old jail," said the writer, who trotted along beside the big detective.

"Is that so?" Bradley had begun to

realize what kind of job he had and he didn't like it.

He kept thinking of Helen Bower and didn't want to work.

AS they opened the door and walked in a jailer blinked at them and at that moment Bradley heard noise down the corridor of cell blocks. He saw Mendoza and several other khaki-garbed men.

"No tenemos el derecho de deteneremas!" one of the Mexicans was saying.

"He means they have nothing on him and no right to hold him any longer," the writer explained.

Mendoza turned and saw them. "Deacon, my frien'!" he greeted with enthusiasm.

Deacon Bradley drew tight his belt on his white flannels, pulled in his polo shirt. "Chase these other monkeys away," he said. "Open the door of the cell and let me in with Ruiz for awhile."

The government police chief looked sharp. "Of course you understand that violence is out of order."

Bradley shrugged. "Do you want me to work on the case?"

"Certainly!"

"Then I'll do it my own way or not at all!"

Mendoza paused a moment longer then unlocked the cell door. Ruiz saw Bradley's eyes and cowered back.

* * * * *

Ten minutes later Bradley stepped out of the cell and locked it after him. Inside it Ruiz was whimpering and gasping. The little writer with horn-rimmed glasses followed Bradley into the front office. Mendoza was waiting.

"Well?" he asked sharply.

"Inside job," Bradley said quietly, "A guy named Irving. American. Irving was supposed to walk in and cop the dough while Ruiz pretended to be drunk. But Ruiz doesn't know Irving. That was part of the plan so there would be no doublecrossing. A seedy-looking little wart named Hopkins contacted Ruiz and a croupier who often helps him—Juan Castro—and the three of them worked out the plans together."

"As simple as that!" cried Mendoza. "Bravo! We must find Irving and your wart, Hopkins. Juan Castro is probably still at the Foreign Club. I will have him arrested at once!"

"Just a minute," said Bradley. "Re-

member no one knows Irving except Hopkins, who did the contact work. And likely Hopkins didn't even come into Mexico tonight. These two Americans had everything figured out. As a matter of fact, Ruiz tells me that Irving beat it with the dough and left the Mexicans holding the sack!"

"Juan Castro will have murder in his heart," sighed Mendoza. "We must find him. *Madre de Dios!* As though I already have not enough trouble!"

"You mean something else has happened?" Bradley asked.

"Yes, more trouble—more woe," Mendoza's eyes brightened. "But this time only Americans are involved. They are famous people and we must see that justice is done. My frien', while I work on the robbery, will you do me one more favor? Will you look in on a tourist murder for me? I will give you all the authority you need!"

Deacon Bradley groaned. "Eet is the movie director, Marty McGregor," Mendoza went on. "He was with Miss Helen Bower at a party. But now he is dead. *A siesta—pero sin despertar!*"

"At a party where—" Bradley broke off sharply. "I'll go," he said. "I'm on my way right now!"

IV

PAUL ORR silently stared at the Mexican who stood in the doorway before him. He had steeled himself to being arrested but now that he faced it he was a little stunned. Why were there not more detectives?

"What is it you want?" Orr asked.

"The money, Doctor," the well-groomed young Mexican said smoothly.

"I am not a doctor," Orr said grimly.

White teeth gleamed in a slow smile. "I know." The gun came from the jacket pocket and was held even with the Mexican's hip. It was a black, snub-nosed automatic. Paul tried not to look at it.

"You are arresting me?" he asked.

The smile remained. "No, senor, I am killing you."

"I understand." Paul Orr's voice did not quaver. And strangely he felt no twinge of fear.

"I must kill you," the man in the doorway said as though he were apologizing

for stepping on Orr's toe, "so that you may not tell to whom you gave the money that I intend to keep for myself."

"Obviously. But what if I say I haven't the money?"

The smile vanished and the Mexican prodded the gun into Orr's stomach.

"Give it to me—the bag with the cash."

Paul Orr looked down at the gun. He waited for a long moment, then said quietly, "All right. You'll find it in the closet."

He walked across the room and the Mexican followed. Orr opened the closet door and turned. And as he moved his left foot slid back, bracing him. His hand, half raised, doubled to a fist.

The Mexican took the punch, but chance had favored him and he missed the full force of the pile-driver blow. For an instant before it came, he had started to move, and the aim of Orr's fist had been slightly deflected. Orr's left hand darted out and grabbed the gun wrist of the olive-skinned man. His right crashed straight through again.

This time it went home—a blow square between the eyes. The Mexican's nose spurted blood. His eyes slammed shut as though a sledgehammer had hit him. He slid silently to the floor.

Orr pushed him into the closet and rubbed the blood from his fists with his handkerchief. He glanced at the dressing gown that hung in the closet, with the swift idea of tying the Mexican up, but heard McGregor coming from the next room. He wouldn't have time! Grabbing up the Mexican's gun, he slipped it into his pocket and hurriedly shut the closet door.

McGregor's voice boomed. "Well, your visitor's gone, I see. Why didn't you call us?"

Orr whirled toward him. "I thought perhaps you and Helen might want to talk," he said. "I didn't want to interrupt."

"We do want to talk," Helen called out. She appeared at the door. "But with you, Paul."

Orr attempted an easy, apologetic smile as the three sat down again. "A little business. I'll tell you all about it before we're married, darling."

Helen smiled. "Why worry? We're more interested in talking about something else. It partly involves the rea-

son I went to see your mother before we left Los Angeles, Paul."

He had forgotten that Helen had mentioned that. Now there was reason for more nervousness. His mother was swell. She had a dry humor that would make you laugh all day long while she didn't even crack a smile. But she was prim, rather English and she had a staunch belief in truth which did not fit in with some of Paul's exaggerations.

"Yes?" he asked weakly.

"She told me all about you," Helen said briefly.

"So you know that I don't amount to much," Orr said, his voice low.

"I know you have never done anything of consequence," Helen said briskly. "But what of it? What you said about movie scripts and radio work certainly had nothing to do with my choosing you as a husband."

"Yes, but I've drifted. I've never done anything for much more than a month."

"That's only because you have never found the right vocation, Paul! Let us say that, rather than drifting, you were searching for something and never found it."

"I found *you*," he said softly.

FOR a moment she paused, looking at him, then went on:

"Yes, you found me—and I found you. I, too, drifted. Searched. Nothing could content me. Marty can tell you. The fact that I found a vocation only filled half my life. In that respect you and I are alike, Paul. And as for you—well, certain people are cut out for certain things. You couldn't be satisfied with a job that tied you down. You had energy and force and determination but you didn't know what channels to put them in.

"You are courageous and handsome and you have a certain easy manner and a vital personality. And that, Paul dear, makes a combination more rare than you think."

He blushed a little. Helen was biased, of course, because she loved him.

But she was going on: "I've spoken to Marty about you before and just now, while we were in the other room, we discussed you. He agrees with me that you are wonderful picture material. I confess now that when I met you at the barbecue stand that was all I had in

mind. I was thinking of you right away as my discovery. And then—" Her tender glance at him completed her sentence.

Paul Orr felt a little embarrassed. "I never thought about pictures," he said, "but if you think that's what I'm cut out for, I'll make a try for it. My brother has an 'in' at Paramount but if I'm going to get something I want to get it myself."

"Oh, come off your high horse," snapped McGregor. "Everyone knows that in the movie business success depends on the breaks. Pictures are not like any other business where you work your way up. It's luck, pure and simple. It was luck with Helen. Now that it's come to you don't be fool enough to turn your back!"

"You make it sound okay," Orr said. "Trying to pave the way for me—but—"

"I love you for it," Helen said promptly. "Please, Paul! Don't get it into your head that I'm going to use my prestige to force my studio to take you on. I'm only going to help you train, then help you get to know people—the right people. That's all. I'm confident your talent will do the rest."

He looked at her steadily. "What did my mother say?"

"She was for it."

He knew that if anyone raised objection it would be his mother. Orr was thinking deeply, seriously. What McGregor had said sounded logical. And speaking of luck! He was luckier tonight than he had been the evening he had met Helen! Luck had been with him from the beginning as far as she was concerned. No one knew that better than he.

Suddenly, in the midst of a glimpse at a new lease on life, he was sick. He had unconsciously been looking at the closet door. Had he seen it move? Instantly jerked back into the reality of what lay before him he knew at that moment, far more than he had before realized, what an absolute fool he had been.

That damnable money! Why in God's name had he taken it!

"Well, darling, what do you say?" Helen was saying.

"Of course you know I'll do whatever you want," he said, trying to muster calmness to his aid. He was trembling.

For the love of all that was dear in life *why* had he let himself get in such a position?

"Then we'll be married in the morning," Helen said softly.

McGregor handed them each a glass and climbed to his feet. "A drink on it," he boomed.

Orr was trembling again as he took her in his arms. He kissed her lips, her cheeks, her hair. And all the while tears were in his heart.

Orr stiffened as the bell rang again.

"I'll see who it is," McGregor said.

"Maybe I'd better," Orr said a little hastily.

His hand felt his gun in his pocket. He went to the door, hesitating a moment before opening it. And as he threw it wide someone was grinning at him saying, "Hello! Has the party started?"

V

THE air went out of Paul Orr like wheat from a sack. He did not know the man and girl who stood at the door, but smilingly he asked them in. And the next moment Helen and McGregor were shaking their hands and greeting them effusively.

As he came back into the room and got a better view of the girl, Orr recognized her as a movie actress he had often seen on the screen. She was blond and small, a type that had never appealed to Paul Orr.

She played tomboyish rôles in which she had smart things to say. He remembered her in a picture where she had been a sob sister, another in which she had been a gangster's moll. She was flip, the breezy type men liked as pals, rather than a girl to choose for romantic episodes.

"How do you do," she was saying. "I'm glad to know you Paul—you handsome, lucky young devil!"

"Thank you, Miss Barton."

"Call me Betty," she said promptly. "I'm not quite up to the 'Miss Barton' stuff."

He grinned at her, a comradely grin. "All right. Thank you, Betty!"

He shook the hand of her companion, a tall nattily dressed man in a blue suit. He had a hard face with a large nose and thick lips—looked more like a

racketeer than anything else, in Orr's opinion. He spoke in a husky voice.

"Name is Akers—Mike Akers. Glad to meet you."

Orr told Akers he was glad to meet him also, but he did not know whether he was or not. Akers and Betty Barton strolled over to where McGregor, in his wrinkled linen suit, was pouring them drinks. Talk flew thick and fast.

Orr kept watching the closet door. Sooner or later the Mexican would come to and then—

Akers abruptly startled Orr with a comment on the very thoughts that were in his mind. "What did you think of the robbery?"

McGregor shot a queer glance at the heavy-set man. "Didn't think anything of it," he said carelessly. But there was something in the director's eyes that gave Paul Orr the instant impression that McGregor was closely studying Akers.

"It was a pretty good stunt," Akers said, and laughed. "My hat's off to whoever did it."

Helen quickly objected. "I think crooks are cowards."

Paul Orr squirmed. Helen's words had brought a chill to his heart. He, like McGregor, kept watching Akers. He wanted to ask what work he did but there was something in the big man's face that forbade that question. And the fellow's eyes constantly followed Betty Barton—as if he were jealous of her.

When again the bell rang McGregor headed for the door before Orr could get up. The director returned with two men who looked as though they had recently sampled some of Mexico's wet goods. Both wore white flannels. One was dumpy, red-faced, and easily past fifty. With his bright blue eyes, Orr's instant thought was of St. Nick.

"Lo everybody!" the red-faced man said breezily. "How's it going?"

"That's Sam Rollins" Helen whispered to Paul Orr. "Just an old bum who plays the ponies. Always trying to promote something. But he's grand fun."

The other man was tall and lean. Though he could not have been more than thirty-five, his iron-grey hair gave him a distinguished air. His height might have made him awkward but, even slightly intoxicated as he was now, he was graceful and lithe.

Mike Akers glared at him. Appar-

ently he did not like Bill Mercer, as the tall man was introduced. But Mercer was unconcerned. Gracious to the ladies, he was the picture of suavity.

So the party started and Orr, trying to be pleasant, went through more agony than he had ever known in his life. He kept watching the closet. When would that indignant Mexican start banging on the door? The fact that the fellow was quiet so long worried Orr.

WHILE the radio played and more drinks were consumed by the guests who wandered back and forth between the rooms, Orr kept watching Mike Akers. McGregor, his linen suit looking worse every minute, kept busy and looked happy.

Bill Mercer hovered over the proceedings like a tall and suave orchestra leader, always pleasant, always cool. Helen sat close to Orr most of the time—and Betty Barton's laugh was gay and carefree. She was having a good time.

But red-faced little Sam Rollins was the real life of the party. He told jokes. He put on imitations. He tried to balance his gold watch on his nose and it fell into the cinders in the hearth and Mercer had to get down on his hands and knees to retrieve it.

Paul Orr made an attempt to enter into the spirit of things but he grew increasingly nervous. It would have been a relief if the Mexican had started his rumpus and got it over with. Paul was vaguely aware that the phone had rung but before he could be sure McGregor came in as though he had a great joke to tell.

"Somebody called," he said, "and told me that a fellow named Irving stole the money from the Foreign Club. He asked me to tell Irving that if he didn't pay off murder would happen. Must have had his wires crossed, eh?"

"It's a rib," Betty Barton said promptly. "Can't you see it?"

But there was sudden concern, worry, in Helen's eyes as she asked, "Why—who on earth would be ribbing us?"

McGregor laughed. "Well, anyhow this Mexican that phoned insisted Irving was here at the party." He grinned as he glanced about at the guests. "Well—who's Irving? Speak up! Don't be bashful."

"That's silly!" Mike Akers ejaculated and the cigar stub fell out of his mouth.

Sam Rollins immediately put a handkerchief over his face and announced that he was Irving. The laughter was boisterous.

Paul sat as still as carved stone with neither the energy nor inclination to move.

At last, when he could stand the strain no longer, Orr got up and walked into the other room. It was deserted for the moment and he decided to go out on the balcony and smoke a cigarette. He needed to clear his mind.

His foot kicked into something soft as he stepped outside. He lit a match and bent down. McGregor's white face stared up at him in the flickering yellow match glare—with his eyes open and staring glassily. Blood still ran from his head in a little stream. Orr saw the remains of a broken beer bottle and the puddle of beer in which the director lay. Hastily striking another match, Paul scooped up the broken neck of the bottle. There was no blood on it but it was wet and flecked with specks of grey.

VI

DEACON BRADLEY had not been a detective as long as he had without learning to be methodical. The first thing he did in Paul Orr's suit, after arranging lights so the Mexican medical examiner could look at the corpse, was to herd everyone into the living room. Then he took Helen Bower into the other room.

"I have a commission from the Mexican government to solve this murder." He broke it to her gently.

"That is somewhat of a coincidence, isn't it?" she asked, her voice low. "Your being here at the psychological moment?"

He could have told her it was not so much coincidence as she thought, that he had been down here solely to see her married and then meant to disappear until he got over it. But he didn't.

"I want you to know, Helen, that whatever I do will be in line of duty and according to my best judgment as a detective."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"I mean I may have to arrest one of your friends."

"You know I've always believed in

you, Deacon," she said through trembling lips, "and that Marty McGregor was very dear to me. Do what you see fit."

"Thanks," he murmured. "And by the way, you didn't commit the murder, did you?"

She just looked at him.

He shrugged. "Had to ask, you know," he said.

He started to move close to her. He wanted to take her in his arms and let her cry and tell her that everything would be all right. But the next minute the little writer was standing in the door, his eyes popping beneath his horn-rimmed glasses.

"Will you get out of here?" Deacon demanded.

"I was just getting local color," said the author meekly.

Bradley glanced at Helen. "That little punk has been following me around all night," he said glumly. To the little punk he said: "Wha's your name? Or do they call you 'it'?"

"My name is Hester Magee."

"Hester's a girl's name!" snapped Bradley.

The writer flushed. "It's my name and I am not a girl."

Bradley snorted, then went out on the balcony for the medical examiner's report.

McGregor, he learned, must have been half facing the killer when the blow was struck. The base of the bottle had landed on his temple and had broken a blood vessel. Death had been instantaneous.

Paul Orr had disliked Deacon Bradley from the moment he first set eyes on him but in the hour that passed while Bradley continued his questions, sensing Bradley's love for Helen, Orr's dislike was gradually growing into something near hatred.

Bradley, he thought, was a stupid ass, to be posing as a first-class detective—not learning about that phone call as soon as he should have. He never would have known of it if Sam Rollins hadn't volunteered the information.

The chubby red-faced elderly chap had sobered quite suddenly. "Some Mex phoned McGregor," he told Bradley, "and declared a fellow named Irving robbed the Foreign Club and was supposed to split with him."

"Yeah, the Mex is Juan Castro,"

Bradley said. "We've been looking for him."

BUT suddenly his mouth snapped tight. This must be the first time that Bradley had realized the connection between the two cases—the robbery and the murder—Paul thought quickly. But the detective made up for it. He peppered everybody in the room with questions about the phone call.

"He insisted somebody named Irving was here at this party," Betty Barton said impulsively. "I thought right away it was a rib of some kind and I still do."

"Maybe Irving *is* here," Bradley said slowly. "It is possible that Juan Castro got in touch with Hopkins by phone and Hopkins told him where to find Irving."

"Who in the world is Hopkins?" Helen asked, bewildered.

Bradley explained to her as much as he could. "Two men got the idea for this robbery," he said. "One, a man named Hopkins, arranged it with two Mexicans—Ruiz and Castro. But Irving, the other American, made the actual haul."

"Then you mean the man who robbed the Foreign Club is *here*?" Helen's eyes were wide, frightened.

"That's my idea," said Bradley. "And what's more, Juan Castro, who would gladly murder Irving, still does not know him by sight. He phoned here to try to throw a threat into him."

"Where is the other Mexican—Ruiz?" Mike Akers asked. The heavy-set man had lighted another cigar and his small piggish eyes were intent on the detective.

"In jail, badly beaten up," Hester Magee explained before Bradley could speak.

Bill Mercer lighted a cigarette. "Then Juan Castro is after Irving," he said flatly. "And Irving is here—in this room. That's your idea?"

"That's it," Bradley said quickly. "And it's my business to have ideas."

"Naturally," Mercer smiled. "But what has any of that to do with the murder of McGregor?"

"Surely," Helen said quickly, "you don't think Marty McGregor was that Irving, do you, Deacon?"

Bradley shook his head. "No," he said. "And Juan Castro didn't murder McGregor. It was somebody in this room. McGregor was killed because he had *recognized Irving!*"

Mike Akers puffed on his cigar. "So what are you going to do?"

"Question you until I find out who you people—you men, of course—really are." He turned suddenly and looked Paul Orr up and down with cold eyes. "As a special favor I'll come to you last."

But Hester Magee spoke up breathlessly. "Mr. Bradley! Look at his hands! Look at the handkerchief sticking out of his pocket!" He was pointing at Orr. "And—look out! I can see a gun bulging in his pocket!"

The accusation came so unexpectedly that it caught Orr totally unprepared. That handkerchief with which he had wiped his hands after clipping the Mexican—and in his pocket the Mexican's gun!

Deacon Bradley's huge form lunged toward him, swinging out with a haymaker meant to catch him on the side of the jaw. Orr ducked but the next instant Bradley came over with his left, catching Paul below the heart.

Helen screamed. Orr staggered, then braced his feet and drove a neat right across Bradley's face. The detective shook his head as his nose spurted blood. Orr started forward but a gun had suddenly appeared in Bradley's hand.

"Take the gun out of his pocket, Magee!" he ordered grimly, covering Orr.

HESTER MAGEE lifted the snub-nosed automatic from Orr's pocket and handed it to Bradley. Bradley's lips curled back as he glared at Paul. He had taken a violent dislike to Paul Orr the moment he had first seen him but had put a curb on himself.

"So you're Irving!" he snapped.

"I'm not!" Orr flared. "And I didn't murder McGregor!"

Bradley's face was hard, inscrutable. He flashed a glance at the others. "Anyone remember seeing him in *this* room about the time McGregor was murdered?"

"I do," said the round-faced Rollins.

"You're drunk," growled Bradley.

"I think I remember that he was here," Helen said. "Surely, Deacon, you're wrong!"

"Sorry," he said briefly. "But I've enough against this man right now to hang him. Just who and what is he?"

Does anyone here know?"

"I can vouch for him," Helen said.

Her voice had a thin edge. Her face was scarlet, flushed to the soft beauty of her hair. She gave Paul Orr one look that was full of meaning and shook her head as though to tell him that she didn't believe him guilty.

"When I read you were going to marry this fellow," Bradley said curtly, "I checked his past history, Helen. He's never amounted to anything. You should have been wised up to him long ago."

"I knew about *that*!" Helen flared. "That doesn't make him a murderer!"

"Yes, but don't you see? He wanted to marry you and he thought he would need plenty of cash. So with Ruiz, Castro and Hopkins he planned this robbery. It's all simple. The case is ended."

Orr's voice was hoarse. "You're accusing me of something that isn't true!"

"You trying to deny you aren't Irving?"

"I am!"

Bradley's almost overpowering impulse was to plant his fist in Paul Orr's handsome face, but instead he asked with disdainful sarcasm, "Then how do you account for the blood on your hands and on your handkerchief? And for the gun in your pocket?"

For a long moment Orr did not answer.

When he did speak it was in scarcely more than a hoarse whisper.

"Earlier in the evening I had trouble with a young Mexican from the Foreign Club," he explained. "He came here with a gun and was going to kill me. McGregor and Helen were in the other room at the time I knocked the Mexican out with my fist and cut his mouth. That accounts for both the blood on my hands and handkerchief."

Bradley laughed harshly. "Of all the screwy stories I've ever heard that's the worst! Where is the Mexican now?"

Paul Orr decided to make a clean breast of the matter, once and for all. Might as well have it all over with. At least he would have that money off his conscience and the Mexican in the closet wouldn't get away with it, either.

"I can produce that Mexican for you," he said softly. "He did not leave after our—er—argument. On the contrary, I locked him in the closet. You

are standing in front of it now, Bradley. Here is the key."

His eyes and gun not wavering from Orr for a moment, Bradley motioned for McGee to take the key and unlock the closet door.

Paul Orr had told the truth. A Mexican was there all right—leaning against the inside of the door. His chest was bloody, and there was no need for the cry that he was dead, as he tumbled on the floor of the room, straight at Deacon Bradley's feet.

VII

ALTHOUGH Orr had been sure that by now he was prepared for anything, the sight of the young Mexican lying with his arms outstretched on the floor, his tuxedo vest drenched in the blood that had dripped down from his punctured throat, froze him numb with horror.

How had this happened! The door had been locked and he, Paul Orr, had the only key! He looked up from the body and around the room. No one spoke. Not even Deacon Bradley. Orr searched Helen's face but she was looking at the floor, not at him.

His eyes returned to the body. He saw the open pocket knife lying in the closet, its steel blade wet with bright blood. But he did not look at it for long, because he was seeing something else now—something that made his heart thump and his mouth go dry. Crisp green bills, hundreds of them—they were scattered from the open mouth of the black bag that had fallen from the shelf to the floor.

Bradley was first to come to his senses. "Yeah," he said acidly, "I see your Mexican is here all right."

"I didn't do it!" Orr repeated bluntly.

Helen moved forward, small and frightened. "Paul didn't do that, Deacon!" she whispered. "He can explain somehow! He—couldn't have done—that!"

Bradley took her by the shoulders. "Sit down, Helen," he said softly.

"Take your hands off her!" Paul Orr snapped.

Bradley whirled. His hand slapped across Orr's face.

"That's not official! That's personal. From me to you. *She* believes in you.

She was going to marry you. Shut up, or I'll give you some more!"

"Deacon!" Helen cried.

"I'm sorry," Bradley said. His face was flushed.

"Deacon, please!"

"It's all right, Helen," said Orr.

"You didn't do it, did you?" she pleaded eagerly.

"No," he said dully.

"We'll get married!" she assured him hastily. "Don't worry. I'll get the best lawyer there is to get you out of this. Don't mind Deacon Bradley. He's only a cheap detective, jealous because I love you!"

"Cheap?" Bradley echoed.

She whirled on him. "I didn't used to think that! I thought you were fine. But you allow your emotions to sway you in something as serious as murder! How you ever conceived the wild idea that I cared anything about you—"

"I didn't," Bradley said, his tone flat. "I only thought I was—well, your watch dog."

A tear rolled across her cheek and she brushed it away. She moved forward to face Deacon Bradley defiantly.

"You can't do this! Don't you see how unfair it is? I appeal to the others."

"Let me take care of her," Betty Barton offered quickly.

The flush on Bradley's face had heightened. "Listen, Helen," he pleaded. "Paul is Irving—the Irving. Don't you see how simple it is? This guy in the closet is Juan Castro and—"

"But that Mexican was in the closet when Castro phoned!" Orr cried angrily.

"Did you kill him?" Bradley's eyes bored in.

"No!" Orr flared. "I told you the truth! I only hit him with my fist."

DEACON BRADLEY was silent a long minute, battling with himself. when he did speak, his voice was dull.

"If that's the case Juan Castro is still looking for you," he said grimly. "This dead man must have been some other Mex who saw you get away with the dough and followed you."

"But McGregor?" Orr began wildly.

"You killed him because he recognized you as Irving."

"But you big fool," Orr blurted, "I never saw McGregor until tonight!"

"That's what you say!"

"If McGregor had even seen him anywhere before he would have told me!" Helen cried resentfully.

"Maybe he didn't want to upset you," Bradley said tightly.

"Deacon"—her voice was a stricken whisper—"you're unreasonable. I'd never have believed it."

He shrugged. "I'm not forgetting my job," he said, then glanced across the room. "Magee," he ordered, "get on the phone and tell the Foreign Club to send some of the boys over for their dough. And tell the coroner's office we've got a couple of corpses for them now. Then get in touch with Carlos Mendoza and tell him I'm bringing in a prisoner."

* * * * *

Paul Orr had been in jail an hour. It was crumbling with decay, it had bugs and its odor rose to high heaven. There was no light in the cell except that reflected from the dim globe in the corridor.

The Mexican named Ruiz who was in the next cell kept wailing, "*Estoy inocente! Estoy inocente!*"

It was quiet for a moment and Paul was trying to gather his thoughts when suddenly he heard a woman's footsteps in the corridor. Dashing to the cell door, he saw Helen's smoothly fitting soft white gown, then he saw her red hair, her red lips, and the light that was in her eyes. She came quickly to the bars and stood there for a moment, half in the shadow.

"They weren't going to let me see you, Paul," she whispered.

He closed his fingers about her hand. "I don't know how to thank you for coming."

"I will always be near you," she said.

He was looking at her steadily. "No one's ever believed in me like that before," he said huskily.

"Those who love you will always believe in you!"

He shook his head. "I don't deserve it. I'm a thief."

For a solid minute she did not speak. "You *did* steal the money?" she finally managed, her voice thick with pain.

"Yes."

"You—you killed the—Mexican?"

"No. Nor did I kill McGregor."

"But you stole?"

"Yes. The Gold Room was empty. I was obsessed with some wild notion that I had to have money and a lot of it."

It was like putting bread on the table to tempt a starving man. The room was empty because someone else—this Irving—was supposed to rob it. I was first and I've dragged us all into an arena of murders."

"Why did you think you had to have money?" she whispered.

"Because I wanted to marry you and that seemed the only way. It looked so easy—and it was! I didn't know what you would do if you discovered I was broke. That money seemed to be the difference between having you or not having you.

"I'm not looking for an excuse, Helen. I didn't expect you to forgive me. I just—had to tell you."

"I understand." She nodded faintly.

HE waited for another moment but she did not speak. She was looking past him and he could not read the expression on her face.

"Well?"

Still she did not speak.

"Can't you say something?" he burst out. "Tell me what you think of me and go! Say what you have to say and end it. I've been a mistake in your life. I'm what your friends tried to tell you I was. I'm not worth your time. Our love was only an infatuation which—" His voice broke, lowered to a whisper. "I'm sorry, Helen. I should get down on my knees and tell you that. Go back to Hollywood and forget that you ever knew me. No one can blame you now. Certainly I don't."

When she did speak then it was so softly that he could scarcely hear.

"A thief is one who indulges in thievery. You are a boy and you obeyed a boyish impulse."

"Whatever you say, it was rotten!"

"No! It was a foolish daredevil stunt that emotion drove you to. Men have murdered for love. Since the world began love has motivated both good and evil. Can you call the feeling that unbalanced you enough to steal, infatuation?"

"You are trying to excuse me but it's no good."

"A moment ago I was trying to excuse myself for loving you," she said, "but I can't and I can't ever stop. The very fact that you dared to do such a thing for me is flattering. The fact that you told me about it at your first op-

portunity, though you knew I was going to get a lawyer to fight for you—"

"Then you forgive me?"

"How can I possibly do anything else?"

She put her lips through the space between the bars and he pressed his as close as he could—and they kissed. Then she was gone. He watched her disappear.

The Mexican in the next cell sobbed, "*Estoy inocente! Estoy inocente!*"

VIII

NOW was the first time Orr had been really alone since he had counted the money after his escape from the club. More important, it was the first time since he had found McGregor dead that something in his subconscious mind was bothering him about that crime.

He racked his brain but it did not come. And that or something else must come to him, for now that he could think clearly and coldly he knew well enough that if he was going to escape paying the penalty for murder he must discover and denounce the real killer somehow.

He knew nothing about detective work. But he did know that deductive work was essentially a matter of clear thinking.

It was like a puzzle in which every piece must fit.

Bradley believed that every piece did fit, from his own viewpoint and Orr could not blame him much. It *did* seem logical that he was Irving. But in looking at the crimes with the cold eyes of an investigator.

Orr had one advantage over Bradley. He'd had a ringside seat.

He himself had taken the loot meant for "Irving" before Irving arrived in the Gold Room and the first question that hit Orr was the apparent coincidence that this same Irving should have come to Paul Orr's party where the money really was.

But he remembered now that the Mexican who had later been murdered had seen Orr leaving the club with the bag and had suspected him even then. The moment he heard of the robbery he had put two and two together and, working for his own interests, had identi-

fied Orr through the hotel room clerk.

That particular Mexican had had nothing whatsoever to do with the planned robbery. He had thought himself the sole possessor of the identity of the thief and in his own crude way had intended to take the money by force. He had meant to kill Orr and flee with the money into the interior of Mexico.

That much was obvious, Paul Orr decided. Therefore, since Paul's picture had been in the papers in Los Angeles and San Diego along with Helen's in the announcement of their marriage, it was not too much to believe that "Irving," too, had seen him leaving the Foreign Club, had noticed the black bag with the white cross and had recognized him.

When he discovered the robbery, the mysterious Irving, like the greedy Mexican, had put two and two together. His first move, in all probability, had been immediately to look up someone in town who would have a practical "in" with all the celebrities. Discovering that Paul was giving a party he had persuaded this person to take him along to it.

What method of persuasion he used Orr could not guess. What he was certain about was that Irving must have arrived early, with pass keys and other instruments, set on finding the money. The moment he found it he had intended to take it and get out.

Deep in his problem, Orr lighted a cigarette—and suddenly he was eager. He sat on the iron cot and puffed out smoke in the dark.

"I'm getting places," he whispered.

Who had been the uninvited guest who had come early to what was going to be—if the plans had been carried out—a large party? Who had been the guest who had come with a person who in all probability had a standing invitation to any function at which Helen was the hostess?

With so few to take into consideration, however, the answer did not come as quickly as he thought it would. That description seemed to fit at least three invited guests equally well.

IRVING had been looking around for the money. Either he had used his pass key to look in the closet where he saw the Mexican or the Mexican had turned the knob of the door and Irving had seen him and opened it. More than

that, the Mexican had pulled the bag of money off the shelf and Irving had seen that.

He was desperate. A phone call had already come, accusing a man named Irving of the theft and threatening death. If he let the Mexican out the others would see him and the money would be found and returned to the Foreign Club.

Irving wanted to get that money and get away. The surprise appearance of the Mexican had apparently ruined his chance, so he had done the first thing that came to his mind—drawn his pocket knife, stabbed the Mexican in the neck, closed and locked the closet door again.

Obviously he could not grab the money and beat it while so many people were around. But he knew where it was and had probably thought he could see to it that no one else took it. However, it was inevitable that no matter if the closet door had been open only six inches when he murdered the Mexican that someone would at least see some of his movements. Bradley believed that McGregor had recognized Irving.

It seemed entirely logical, especially since Irving probably did not know how much McGregor had seen, that Irving should invite McGregor into the other room and out on the balcony to explain what he had seen in the closet. A man to man talk—no use upsetting the women unless it was necessary—that kind of thing.

But on his way out, Irving had picked up the first thing handy that could be used as a weapon. That, of course, had been the bottle of beer. On the balcony, McGregor must have accused Irving outright and Irving let him have it.

Probably the last thing Irving had expected was the arrival of an American detective on the scene, all set to make an inquiry. That, of course, gave him no chance to escape with the loot he thought he would get his hands on.

But Orr was not thinking of that so much as he was of what on earth it was that still remained—vaguely—in his subconscious mind. And then suddenly, because he had built up to it in proper sequence, it came to him! The greyish marks on the neck of the beer bottle with which McGregor had been murdered! When he knew the answer to those specks of grey on the broken glass

he would have the solution.

The answers to both of his main clues were still elusive and because they were he thought back to the party and tried to remember in detail as much of it as he could. He set himself to recall what had been his impression of each person. He totted the guests over in his mind.

Mike Akers, thick-set, smoking a cigar, watching Betty Barton jealously and mentioning that he thought the robbery was pretty clever. "My hat's off to whoever did it," he had said.

Then the tall, suave, iron-grey-haired Bill Mercer and his impressive politeness. He remembered the booming voice of McGregor—and jovial Sam Rollins, who had been the hit of the party and who, after the phone call had come, had pulled a handkerchief over his face and said, "I am Irving." That and blond Betty's laughter, telling him, "You must call me Betty."

Things like these came back to Orr one by one—and as they did the answer to both his clues quietly unfolded! He lighted another cigarette and stood up, drawing a deep breath. Now he knew who had killed McGregor and the Mexican. . . .

DEACON BRADLEY had talked to Helen for a long time, then had gone back to "the longest bar in the world" and let Hester Magee buy him a drink. After that he went with Hester Magee to the jail and visited Paul Orr. Doing such a thing meant fighting a battle with himself—and winning—but once in the jail, keeping a promise to Helen, he sat and talked with the man he had accused and arrested for twenty minutes. At the end of that time Orr had told all his intensive thinking had evolved.

"I would like to help you get him," Orr said quietly. "It's all I can do to clear myself."

"*Estoy inocente!*" wailed the Mexican next door.

"Like to help, eh?" grunted Bradley.

"I suppose it's asking too much," Orr said, hesitantly.

"Since I don't happen to believe your theory," Bradley said gruffly, "and am unconvinced of your innocence of murders, it is asking a lot."

This Paul had a nerve, Bradley thought and for a moment was tempted

to go off and leave him to stew in his own juice. But that wouldn't be giving him a chance and he had promised. Since when had detectives taken to giving killers a chance?

"I thought you would see it clearly," Orr told him quietly. "I admitted the robbery but—"

"Yeah, I know."

"Personally," Hester Magee remarked sageily, "I am inclined to believe he is telling the truth, Bradley." He was sitting in the dark on the iron cot, polishing his horn-rimmed glasses.

"Did anyone ask you?" Bradley snapped.

"No, but I dislike seeing an innocent man prosecuted." But what really interested the little writer was seeing something else happen and Bradley knew it.

"*Estoy inocente!*" came the monotonous chant of the Mexican in the adjoining cell.

"Listen, Magee," said Bradley, "go over there and tell Ruiz to shut up."

Magee obeyed. Bradley stood near the cell door, his large frame half in the shadow, half reflected in the glow of the dim corridor light. He was not more than a foot away from Orr.

"I don't believe you, Orr," he growled.

"Then there isn't anything else I can say."

"But Helen does," Bradley said tightly, "and somehow I've always had a sneaking hunch that she was smarter than me. Did you ever feel that way about anyone?"

"I never felt that way about her," said Orr.

"Maybe that's why you won," Bradley said briefly. "But—well, I'm going to give your theory a chance, Orr. I'm going to let you come along with me. I can fix it all right." He laughed shortly, without humor. "You might even get a chance to shoot me in the back."

Bradley motioned him out and watched Paul Orr as he stepped into the corridor. Orr was good-looking.

Hester Magee fell in and they walked out past the front desk. "I'm taking my prisoner for air," Bradley said.

Mendoza was absent and the Mexican in charge, a little bewildered, asked, "Ees thees the proper theeng, *senor?*"

"Proper enough," Bradley said shortly. "Did Mendoza get a lead on Juan Castro yet?"

"Unfortunately, no, *senor*."

"Swell police force," Bradley commented and they left the prison.

Bradley walked abreast of Orr and Magee along the little dirt road toward the lights of the main street. Bradley was wondering at himself—he scarcely knew himself what he was up to. They walked for some time without conversation and suddenly Bradley sensed that they were being followed.

He gave a quick glance rearward, but saw nothing in the gloom. The sides of the road were lined with small dove houses but their windows had long ago been darkened.

They continued walking but Bradley felt uneasy. Too often he had gone through experiences like this not to recognize the warning of his own sixth sense. He drew his .45 and turned in the road. A figure appeared from the side of the houses. And the next moment a gun was blazing red fury through the still night air.

"Get down!" Bradley shouted to Orr and Magee.

He rushed forward, pumping the trigger of his gun as he ran. He felt it jerk in his hand as bullets leaped from the muzzle. He saw the figure in the dark stumble, sag against the side of the house, once again lift a weapon.

Deacon Bradley fired once more but he was a fraction of a second late. The Mexican marksman had found a target. Bradley was hurled backward by the impact of the bullet. He rocked on his heels, tried to stand erect but blood was oozing from his side and his fingers became too nerveless to hold the .45 in his hand. It dropped to the dirt of the road.

IX

WHEN guns are roaring time seems to stand still. In these moments of crossfire between Bradley and the Mexican Paul Orr himself stood still, too bewildered to move.

He had heard Bradley's cry of "Get down!" but he had not moved, though he was conscious that Hester Magee was on the ground, tugging at his trouser leg.

He saw Bradley, halfway to the house where the Mexican stood, stagger and catch his side—and drop his gun.

Then, Orr's legs were moving like racing pistons as he tore down the road to Bradley and caught the detective in his arms. Bradley was spitting blood.

"Get that guy!" Bradley cried hoarsely. "It's Juan Castro!"

Orr eased Bradley to the road, frantically fumbling in the dirt for the .45. Another bullet whined over his head. His lips thinned and grew hard and his eyes were hot. He caught up the gun, felt its steel butt against his palm. He darted forward. Castro was staggering in his direction.

Castro fired. The bullet missed Orr by no more than an inch. He heard the whine of the wind as the missile sped past his ear. His finger touched the trigger of the .45. The gun quivered in his hand—and with a curse he hurled it from him. *Jammed!*

Castro was still coming on! Orr acted instinctively. Leaning forward, he threw himself on the ground and rolled in Castro's direction. Castro had fired before Orr fell and the bullet went high above the young American's body.

Crashing against the Mexican's running feet, Paul Orr grabbed him just below the knees and threw the weight of his body against Castro's shins. The Mexican fell over him headlong. Instantly Orr was up and on him. Juan Castro was wounded. Once down, he did not try to put up a fight. Orr was breathing hard. It had been as easy as that.

Bradley was sitting in the middle of the road and Hester Magee was bending over him and babbling something.

"Fine Mexican police force," Bradley said glumly. "I told them to get that guy before he started trouble."

* * * * *

A half hour later Paul Orr watched Bradley, sitting on a little stool and getting the bullet scratch on his side washed out.

He saw the broad face with sweat rolling down it, the bright blue eyes, and the short-clipped blond hair. Bradley, he decided, was a fine-looking man and he wondered, as Bradley had wondered about him, if under ordinary circumstances he might not have liked him better.

Two Mexican officers were holding Castro, a lank man with loose black hair and glowing eyes. Carlos Mendoza was

paced back and forth, raving.

"You have done a magnificent job, Bradley. A magnificent job!"

"We," said Hester Magee soberly.

"*Que?*"

"We," Magee repeated. "We have done a magnificent job."

"*Si,*" Mendoza agreed. "The two of you."

"Look!" Bradley sat up straighter and put in his oar. "The important thing, Mendoza, is that we've got Castro, and he's the man we've needed." His glance shot to the lank Mexican prisoner. "Castro, that fellow over there—Paul Orr—he isn't Irving. Not the Irving you were looking for by a long shot. Trying to murder him was a mistake."

"To attack three men at once, that was my mistake, *senor,*" Castro replied stiffly.

"No. Irving is someone else, *sabe?* Someone we were going after because he committed a couple of murders and we don't like him for it."

Juan Castro looked at Orr with burning eyes. "He ees Irving."

"Who told you that?" Bradley asked.

The native doctor putting on Bradley's bandage snapped: "*Madre de Dios,* will you hold still!"

"Hopkins told me," Castro said sourly but firmly.

"Hopkins is here?" Bradley shot up from his stool again.

"He came down from San Diego in a plane," said Castro. "He told me Irving was in jail. He told me Irving was named Paul Orr. Said that was his real name. I was coming down here when I saw Orr and you and"—he glanced at Magee—"and *Senor Peanut,* coming out. I thought I would kill Orr. I did not mean to hurt you."

"Then Hopkins is here," Bradley repeated grimly.

"To pick up Irving," said Orr, nodding, "and get him out of the country. Even if he hasn't the cash. I imagine Irving put in a call for Hopkins to come right after you arrested me and he had a chance to do it."

"Sure," snapped Bradley. "We've got to get him." He tried to wriggle away from the man with the bandages.

"*Caramba!*" screamed the doctor. "Will you sit down!"

"Sure—sure. But snap it up."

"You cannot leave here, *senor.* Not for a long time."

"But I've got to catch a killer!" Bradley roared.

"You will break open the wound and it will bleed," the doctor insisted. "You cannot go!"

BRADLEY looked helpless for a moment. His face was flushed a deep uncomfortable red.

"Look, Paul!" he said urgently. "Hopkins and Irving are probably set to beat it in the plane. There's only one airport. Call up and find out if they are there. If they aren't send out some Mexican cops to pick them up as soon as they arrive. You go along to see the job's done right."

Paul Orr felt something surge in his chest. "You trust me that much?"

"Not by a long sight. Take a gun and do as I say, that's all. Never mind petty details like trust or sanity or reasoning. As soon as this pillbox finishes with me I have somewhere else to go and something else to do." He glanced at the doctor. "And I'm going to do it, *Salvadore,* my friend, if I have to go on crutches!"

Mendoza ordered Castro to the cell with Ruiz and immediately despatched a squad of men to the airport. Orr phoned from the office for all the information he could get. Several minutes later he turned, his face white.

"He and Hopkins are in my suite at the hotel. Helen is there."

"Irving is consoling her about you," Bradley said, his own lips grim. "Well—what are you waiting for?"

Orr found it hard to breathe. "I'm not waiting! I'm going!" he panted.

He left the prison headlong and Hester Magee, in the company of two of the Mexican officers, followed him.

Paul Orr felt strange as he rang the bell. Helen answered, and her eyes widened when she saw him. He touched her arm, whispering to her to stay at the door.

He strode into the room, Magee and the Mexicans behind him. Orr brought the gun into his hand. He saw people sitting around the room as though they were holding wake over a corpse. There were some who had arrived for the party after the arrest. These people he did not know. Others, though, he did know—Sam Rollins, Mike Akers, Betty Barton and Bill Mercer.

The low-toned conversation died.

Everyone turned toward him.

"How did you get here?" Betty Barton said jerkily.

Orr was looking at the tall suave man with the iron-grey hair. "I came for you, Mercer," he said steadily.

Mercer rose, half smiling.

"The pocket knife you used to stab the Mexican had your initials on it, Mercer," Paul accused flatly.

COLOR touched Mercer's cheeks. "It didn't," he said softly. "It didn't because I—"

"Because you had just bought it," snapped Orr. "I understand. But everyone who was here saw Sam Rollins, whom you somehow persuaded to bring you to the party because he has an 'in' everywhere, drop his gold watch into the ashes on the hearth while he was doing his tricks.

"You picked the watch up. You had to get down on your hands and knees to do it. You got the grey ashes on your fingers and your murders followed so soon afterward that you still had the ashes when you hit McGregor with the beer bottle. Beer when spilled is sticky and the ashes are still on the neck of that broken bottle."

"Which I would say will stretch your neck," said Hester Magee.

Bill Mercer shrugged. "It seems strange that one man accused of a crime should come out of jail and accuse another," he drawled.

"Bradley sent me," Paul Orr declared, his eyes hard and relentless. "These men behind me are Mexican officers. You've probably observed that."

Helen came back into the room and for a moment it was so quiet there that Orr could hear the labored breathing of Bill Mercer from whose face the color had now vanished.

The accused man fumbled with a cigarette, put it in his mouth and lit it. He shrugged.

"I suppose if I am charged I will have to come with you," he mumbled.

A squat bald man whom Orr had not seen before he had returned to that room suddenly leaped to his feet.

"You fool!" he shouted. "Are you going to let them get away with this?"

"Shut up, Hopkins!" Mercer shot the man a sour glance. "I know what I'm doing."

"No, you don't, Irving. You've bun-

gled everything. You didn't get the money. You've rung a couple of murders in on a simple job of robbery. And now you've—"

HE jerked a gun from his coat pocket before his sentence was finished.

But one of the Mexicans fired before he could bring it into line. Hopkins clutched his shoulder and sagged to the floor.

Hester Magee bent over Hopkins. Orr watched them for an instant, then his eyes lifted and he met Mercer's still cool gaze.

"Well, that settles him," Orr said. "You know, one of the mistakes you made was in telephoning him *before* you came to this party, Mercer—or Irving—or whatever your name is—to tell him you were coming. He didn't quite believe you at first and he told Castro where you were.

"Wanted to check up on you, I guess. Castro called here, as you know, saying that Irving was in our midst. When Hopkins got to town later and found out what was what he tried to steer Castro off by telling him I was Irving. I suppose you might chalk that up as mistake Number Two."

Orr looked down at Hopkins' prostrate form—looked for a long time. But his eyes lifted presently and went around the room. He saw Helen, paler than he had ever seen her before, yet somehow relieved and happy. He took in Sam Rollins and Mike Akers, still chewing on his everlasting ragged cigar butt. He saw Betty Barton and the others.

Hester Magee was getting to his feet, rubbing his hands on his trousers.

"Put the handcuffs on Mercer," Orr said softly.

The iron-grey-haired killer submitted without a struggle. Some might have imagined him to be trying to think of a quirk in the Mexican law that would save him. But Paul Orr knew in his heart that it was because Mercer saw the futility of a fight against such odds. He must have dealt in crime long enough to know that when the end finally came there was just nothing that a man could do.

"Hopkins isn't dead," said Hester Magee. "He's going to be all right. But I don't know what charge we're going

to hold him on. Is there a law about concealed weapons in Mexico?"

* * * * *

Deacon Bradley was driven to the airport. He climbed out of the car and hobbled over to the little lighted office. Immediately he was flanked by two Mexicans, who stuck guns in his ribs, and Carlos Mendoza came charging from the office.

"Oh, it is *you, senor!*"

"Don't tell me you're still waiting for Irving," laughed Bradley.

"Si. We expect him soon!"

Bradley shrugged. "Well, you needn't. He's in jail along with his pal Hopkins," he said. "But you're going to have to let Hopkins and Ruiz and Juan Castro go, Mendoza."

"*Que?*" demanded Mendoza.

"Yeah. I went up to the Foreign Club and saw the big boss. Funny thing"—there was an odd light in Bradley's blue eyes—"but he's so glad about getting the money back that he refuses to press charges on the robbery plot. You'll have to let everyone concerned in it go."

Mendoza put a brown cigarette between his lips and lit it. His eyes were alight now, too.

"I think I understand, Deacon," he said slowly. "We cannot hold the boy—

Paul Orr?"

"Hardly. Not under those circumstances."

"This is unfortunate," Mendoza said sadly. "My jail is very empty."

"Orr was the one who got Irving—Bill Mercer," Bradley explained, leaving his last bombshell to be exploded at the finish. "I could have had your boys do it but I wanted to let him, because that way it made Helen Bower happy. Sort of makes him a hero in her eyes and gives her the idea I'm somewhat of a heel who hasn't accomplished anything. That's the way I want it. If she asks about me tell her you didn't want me around any more and sent me away. By the way, what about my fee?"

"Make it as large as you want," said Mendoza.

Like most Mexicans he was very sentimental and tears had started to his eyes.

"As large as you can then," Bradley told him. "And make it out to Paul Orr. I think he's kind of broke and it'll do him good. I've got all the money I need. All right, don't stand there and blubber! You're a helluva cop. Stick me in a plane that's going to Los Angeles. If I waited up until dawn to see that wedding I'd probably be a wreck. I've got to get some sleep!"



"There's a Woman-Killer on the Loose—and Only the Screaming Mimi Can Provide a Clue!"

REPORTER Sweeney looked at the black plastic statuette of a nude woman—the statuette he had picked up at a curio shop. It was called "The Screaming Mimi" and it depicted a woman in the throes of horror, a slender woman whose mouth was open in a soundless scream. Ordinarily, Sweeney would have dismissed the whole thing as an oddity—but he knew that the strange killer known as "The Ripper" had purchased a duplicate of this statuette. And had killed the woman who had sold it to him!

Sweeney studied the sphinx-like figure hard and long, for it might hold the key to a mystery. And Sweeney was on the trail of "The Ripper" who had already claimed three victims!

Follow one of the fastest, most exciting manhunts you've ever read about—in a novel that hits a new high in suspense! A brand-new book-length novel that probes deeply into the factors behind grim and violent crime—**THE DEADLY WEEKEND** by **FREDRIC BROWN**, featured in the Fall issue of our companion publication, **MYSTERY BOOK MAGAZINE!** Now on sale, 25c at all stands!

A Novel by
PAUL ERNST

*Retirement was cold comfort to sleuth
Anthony Lance—but the murder of
Nicholas James was too hot for him!*



The **HOODED**

I

NICHOLAS James shuddered with dread premonition as he fitted the key into the lock of his door. Something deathly seemed to be hovering over his house.

He paused a moment on the doorstep. He might telephone for help. Then his shoulders, broad and square for all his white hair, went back resolutely. Never in his life had he asked for help



KILLER

from any man. He would not start now.

Besides he had nothing definite to fear. Only that note—which might have been penned by a crank or a joker. At any other time he would have paid no

attention to the note. It simply happened that tonight he was in possession of something which many a man would give his soul to have.

He opened the door. Blackness and

A Private Eye Battles Strange Menace When a

silence enveloped him as he stepped into the front hall. He wished he had not given his servants the night off. But he had done that before receiving the grim note.

He snapped on the hall light and took off his hat. A sharp sound, as a board creaked behind him, made him whirl with whitening face.

"I'm as nervous as a fool girl," he said aloud.

He whistled a little as he went toward the kitchen. But he did not go upstairs to his room till he had made sure that every door and first floor window was securely locked.

In his room he was more at ease. He took off coat, vest and tie and put on a comfortable robe. Then he sat down at the scarred flat-topped desk that had accompanied him everywhere since first he had joined the firm of the Atlantic Deep-Sea Salvage Company, later to work up to the presidency of the company and finally to retire to this suburban home.

He opened the top drawer and took out the note that had been slipped under his door an hour ago. He read it again—

YOU SHALL DIE AT MIDNIGHT—
THE EXECUTIONER.

The letters were printed in lead pencil on plain white paper. There had been no envelope—just the folded paper stuck under his door.

Nicholas James got up, went to the door of his bedroom, and locked it. He walked to the windows, and looked out. It was a dark spring night, starless, windless.

Again the shudder of dread raced through his big old body.

It was so quiet in the house. It was so quiet here in the suburb. The ticking of the brass clock on his mantelpiece was startlingly loud in the silence.

He glared suddenly at the bedroom door. Had that been a sound in the hall? Impossible!

HE GOT quickly to his feet and crossed to the door. On the way he caught up an old .44 revolver lying on the dresser. He moved soundlessly—soundlessly turned the key in the lock. He jerked the door open, gun leveled.

There was no one in the hall. He stood in the doorway, breathing heavily, gun aimlessly pointing this way and that. Then, with a sobbing sigh, he went back to the desk. And this time he picked up the telephone.

"Lance?" he said after giving a number. "Nicholas James talking. I wonder if you can come out to my house right away and stay the rest of the night with me? I—I'm a little ashamed to ask such a thing but I have reason to believe—"

He stopped suddenly and listened. Again a sound seemed to come from the hall outside the bedroom door.

"Hello," he said after a moment. "Pardon the interruption, Lance. I guess I've got the jitters tonight. You see, I received a death threat about an hour ago and I—"

Again he stopped, and stared toward the door. Toward the door! He heard nothing from the window behind him.

If he had turned in his chair and glanced at the window he would have seen a black-clad arm slowly raising above the ledge. He would have seen the window soundlessly, slowly opened.

"What's that?" James said into the phone. "Oh yes, I'm still on the phone. I was saying I got a death threat. And the reason I'm paying any attention to it at all is that this afternoon I got hold of a secret that is rather valuable."

Over the window sill behind the man at the desk slid a black shape. A black cloak veiled the shape entirely. Black gloves covered the long-fingered questing hands. Over the shape's head was a black hood.

"It's in connection with the tramp steamer, *Sylvana*, that sank off the coast of New Jersey four months ago," James went on. "You remember, Lance—I mentioned it to you last month. It was on the *Sylvana* salvage job that our boat, *Octopus*, was sunk with all hands. At least, we thought all hands had gone down."

Behind James the black shape reared to its full height. It stood within a yard of the man at the telephone with its eyes burning through the eyeholes in the black hood.

"Can't tell you more over the phone, Lance," James went on, his eyes riveted to the door. "I—"

Mysterious Masked Slayer Metes Out Death!

He stopped and gasped. Behind him the dread black figure had raised its right arm high. The light from the desk glittered on a knife.

Nicholas James whirled in his chair. Instinct, or a soft rustle of fabric, had sounded a faint warning.

"Lance!" he screamed into the telephone. "My—"

The words ended in a choking cough. Blood welled from his lips—and from his throat, where the handle of the

to the glass as he stared out and down at the dark streets from his fifteenth floor apartment.

Behind him his valet-companion, Chick Dawson, grinned a little as he brought a whisky and soda for his friend and employer.

Few men, in any profession, can retire with a modest fortune at thirty-eight. Particularly is that true when one is a private detective. But that was what Anthony Lance had done.

Five months ago he had announced his retirement and given up his offices. Since then he had acted like a fish out of water—restless, irritable, morose. Nothing would have induced Lance to admit what was wrong with him. But Chick Dawson knew. He knew because he himself was suffering the same sort of boredom.

"What's the matter with me, Dawson?" he asked. "Tell me that, you ex-ham of a boxer. I've got all the money I need—I have nothing to do but take it easy. And I feel as if I'd lost my best friend."

"You miss your work, you flatfooted ex-shamus," Dawson said.

Lance scowled. "I don't. I'm through with the game. Nothing will ever induce me— See who that is on the phone."

Dawson padded into the study, returning in a moment with expressionless face. "It's Mr. Nicholas James." Lance went to the phone in the next room.

Nicholas James—Lance called on the old man every now and then. He liked him. But this was the first time James had ever got in touch with him at this time of night. Five minutes of twelve.

In four minutes Lance came out in a tigerish leap and whirled Dawson half around.

"Hat and coat—and snap out the roadster! Work to do."

"What—" began Dawson, tearing out of his white house-coat and into a dark suit-coat.

"James! Something's happened to the old boy. He yelled into the telephone and the line went dead."

Lance leaped to the library table and took out shoulder holster and flat .45 automatic from the drawer. An instant he looked at the gun, which had not



ANTHONY LANCE

knife stuck out. James slumped forward across the desk, with the knife-handle jamming askew between his flesh and the desk-top.

The black shape went through the pockets of the corpse. Then the shape stood upright and went back to the window. It slithered across the sill and out, its black cloak seeming to melt into the blackness of the night.

Behind, on the mantel, the brass clock chimed twelve.

II

ANTHONY Lance, at a quarter of twelve on that starless, dark night, stood with his back to his comfortable living room and his face almost pressed

chafed his side for five months. He liked the feel of his gun again.

This was a new Lance. Cold fire snapped in his grey eyes. His face was like rock. He moved on the balls of his feet.

Once again he was the manhunting machine—one of the best in the country.

Dawson was already out of the apartment and in the elevator. Lance followed him. By the time he reached the street door Dawson was there in the long-hooded roadster that had carried the two through so many battles with sinister crime.

"James' house," snapped Lance. "You know where it is."

Dawson nodded and threw in the clutch.

With a spinning of wheels on dry pavement, the great car leaped away from the curb.

"Know anything?" asked Dawson, after a moment.

"Not much," said Lance. "The old man said he'd got a death threat. And he mentioned the steamer *Sylvana*, and his own company's boat, *Octopus*."

"So what?"

"So this. The *Sylvana* sank four months ago not far off the coast of lower New Jersey. The *Sylvana*, as few people know, carried pearls in the ship's strongbox—nearly a million dollars' worth."

Dawson whistled. "So the owners commissioned the Atlantic Deep-Sea Salvage Company, James' old firm, to dig up the pearls?"

"Right. James said their boat, *Octopus*, was sent out to find the *Sylvana*. But she never found it. The *Octopus* sank a month ago with all hands in that spring gale that swept the whole Atlantic seaboard."

Dawson took a corner like a swerving comet. "How does this tie in with the trouble at James' house?" he demanded.

"I don't know. There's a million in pearls in the *Sylvana*'s strong-box. But the *Sylvana* is lost in the Atlantic so they don't do anybody any good. Out this way, Chick."

Dawson veered into a curving suburban road. In twenty minutes from the time they left the apartment, seventeen miles away, they skidded into James' driveway and slammed to a stop beside his house.

THE house was in darkness save for one lighted window which Lance recognized as being the window of James' bedroom. A squat grim pile, two-storied, of heavy field stone, the building stood in almost an acre of well kept lawn dotted with trees.

"You take the back, I'll take the front," Lance said.

Dawson nodded. No more words were necessary. These two had worked together too many times.

Lance went soundlessly to the front door. It was locked but Lance had learned locks so thoroughly little time was needed to open the door with a thin key he carried on the end of his watch chain.

He opened it about eighteen inches, stepped into the front hall and instantly darted to the side on soundless rubber soles to get out of the revealing oblong of the doorway.

He closed the door, listening tensely. All he heard was the slight click of the lock going into place. Then, with gun in one hand and a flash in the other, he roamed quickly through the hall and the front rooms and finally up the stairs.

There he padded quickly to James' door. This door too was locked.

It presented less difficulty than the front door, because the key was in the lock on the other side. A slim pair of pliers was all that was necessary. But Lance frowned anxiously at what the locked door spelled.

James had called out desperately into the telephone. The old fellow must have been in real trouble, for he was a brave man. He had feared something enough to lock his bedroom door against it. And—the door was still locked—from the inside!

The door opened, and Lance stepped into the one lighted room in the house. An instant he stood in the doorway. Then he leaped toward the stark figure slumped over the desk.

"James!" he called. But he knew as he spoke that the man was dead, had died with that call for help into the telephone.

Lance stepped to the door. "Chick."

"Yeah?" came Dawson's voice from the first floor.

"They got him. It's all done and I guess the bird has flown. Turn on all the lights in the place and stay down-

stairs. I'll look around up here."

The first thing that caught his eye was the note on the desk.

YOU SHALL DIE AT MIDNIGHT.
THE EXECUTIONER

Lance left the note where it lay for the police. He bent over James and stared at the knife handle, and swore.

The knife was a cheap kitchen knife with a composition handle of a kind sold by the thousands in five and dime stores.

He noted the dead man's pockets then. They had been turned inside out and left hanging in the killer's feverish search—for what?

James had said something about a valuable secret he had got hold of. In the next breath he had mentioned the sunken ship *Sylvana*—the treasure ship. But no one knew where the *Sylvana* rested. The Octopus had been reported sunk with all hands before it had located her.

Lance strode to the window. The door had been locked from the inside. The murderer could have locked it after him but it was more logical to suppose he had used the window as entrance and exit. But the window looked straight down over twenty feet to the graveled drive.

Lance suddenly went taut as a piano wire and listened. Had that been a sound in the hall outside the bedroom door? He stole toward the door on soundless feet, gun in hand again. Chick was in the house, but Chick would stay downstairs at his post. He would not be creeping about in the hall outside.

Lance reached the door, flung it abruptly open. There was no one in the hall. Yet he had distinctly heard the sound of a step out there.

He went back to the dead body of his friend, after closing the door again. He began going through the drawers of the desk.

And he heard the sound again—at the bedroom door. He whirled and stared. And as he stared at the door a black-clad arm slowly came into sight outside the window.

Tensely Lance waited to hear again that step in a hall which seemed to be utterly empty. His back was still toward the window.

Slowly, silently, the window opened. A form in a black cloak flowed across the sill. Over the head of the figure was

a black hood like an executioner's cloak. The dark black shape straightened behind the detective. The black-clad right arm rose high, with cold steel glittering dully in the black-gloved hand.

DOWNSTAIRS Dawson took up his post in the butler's pantry. There, with all the lights on, he could see the back door and, through the dining room, the front door also. Nothing was going to get in or out of the house while he was there.

In the silent house he heard the occasional sound of Lance's footsteps upstairs. Then, in a moment, he heard a footstep downstairs!

With catlike quickness, he went to the basement stairs which led into the kitchen. He snapped off the switch, plunging the kitchen into darkness, so that his body would not be silhouetted against light when he opened the stair door. Then he started down the basement stairs.

It was dark as the tomb down there—and silent. The step did not sound out again, though he halted at the foot of the stairs and listened for a full sixty seconds. He started forward, hands outstretched, to explore the basement.

Now a hint of light came to his eyes as they accustomed themselves to the blackness. He could see the faint squares of the basement windows, and realized how the intruder had got in—if there were some down here besides himself.

But in a second he knew there was! Just under one of the windows something shadowy and huge moved a little.

Dawson crouched lower. With hands clenched he crept toward the shadow. With a rush he bridged the remaining distance and closed with the shadowy figure.

Dawson, though not large, was a powerful man and he had remained in training since leaving the ring. But he knew in a flash that he had met his match in whomever he was grappling with in the darkness under the window.

With a snarl his opponent clutched him by the throat and bore him down to the cement floor. But Dawson did not lose his head. He was a cold fighter, as Lance was.

He drove his hands up between the steely wrists at his throat and sprung his arms apart. The fingers were torn from his windpipe. He jolted up with

his right fist and felt flesh and cartilage give under his knuckles.

There was a howl, the man's weight eased off him for an instant and then he was on top. It was his turn to try for the throat grip. To try for it—and to get it.

With the next quick move he jerked sideways and felt a knife blade slice across his ribs. He smashed the man's head against the floor, felt the body under him grow limp.

The silence in the basement, after the noise of the fight, was oppressive. But it did not last long.

Suddenly ripping through the night outside sounded a wild scream. It was a woman's—the sound of a woman in mortal terror. It set Dawson's hair crawling on his scalp.

He dragged his unconscious assailant to the furnace. Whipping out his handcuffs, he locked the man solidly to the cold-water riser tapped into the side of the heater.

Then he raced through the darkness for the stairs. He took them three at a time and ran out the back door to the yard. A flutter of white caught his eye against the blackness of a boxwood clump as he came to the front of the house.

Against the white showed an arm, which was clamping the woman's arms tightly to her sides.

Again the woman screamed, wildly, desperately. Then whoever held her saw Dawson racing toward them and let her go.

Dawson had a glimpse of a figure clad solely in black.

He leveled his gun.

"Stop!" he yelled.

The figure raced on, merging instantly with the black of the starless night. Orange streaks belched from Dawson's gun. But he knew he had hit nothing. There had been nothing to see any more.

He ran a few steps, heard the roar of an automobile motor, and stopped. He turned back to the girl, who had sunk to her knees and was gasping with fright. And not till then did he realize what it was about the glimpse he had had of the girl's assailant that had seemed so odd.

The man had had no face. Dawson remembered now. There should have been a pale blotch where the white of

the fellow's face showed in the darkness. But there had been none. From head to foot the figure had been a blotch of black.

III

IN the electric silence Anthony Lance stared at the bedroom door. Behind him the grim black figure of the Executioner towered, knife held high.

There was perhaps half a second between the time when the hooded killer behind him raised the knife and the time when the blade began its downward sweep. But that half second was enough.

The light from the desk lamp glittered on the blade. And, reflected in the polished metal of the door knob Lance was watching, came a tiny answering glitter. Also a tiny stir of reflected movement—from behind him.

Lance whirled, dropped to a crouch, flung up his arms. The move was simultaneous with the thrust of the killer.

A glimpse he got of a thing in a black cloak, with head hooded in a black sack like that of the old-time executioners. Then Lance was fighting in savage silence for his life—and fighting blind. For the blade had not been entirely stopped by his upthrust arm; it had sliced a shallow gash in his forehead, and blood was streaming down into his eyes.

He grappled blindly with the silent killer, striving for a death hold on the throat. He felt the shoulder muscles under the sable cloak convulse and instinctively snifted aside—just in time to avoid a second sweep of the knife. Then his clutching right hand caught the wrist behind the knife.

Grimly his fingers bit into flesh and tendons till he heard the knife drop with a muffled thud to the carpeted floor. Then began a struggle in which Lance fought grimly to hold the sable-cloaked figure till Dawson could come to his aid. Eventually the hooded figure won.

The killer tore free, and was gone. Lance wiped at the red stream which hadn't weakened him but which had put out his sight. He blinked, still crouching warily. But the bedroom was empty. Nothing moved but the window drapes, which stirred a little, either from a night breeze or from the passage recently of a fast-moving body.

Lance leaped to the open window. As he got there something like a shadowy snake whipped down past his line of sight. He gazed down, saw nothing at first.

As his eyes accustomed themselves to the darkness outside, he gradually made out a black blotch in the shadows of the house wall. He whipped out his gun. A white-clad shape appeared and was instantly seized by the black blotch. A girl's scream sounded.

Lance snapped his gun back in its holster. He dared not shoot for fear of hitting the girl in white—whoever she was and for whatever purpose she might have come here.

A racing figure rounded the rear corner of the house—Dawson. The sinister black figure darted from the girl in white. Shots sounded.

"Dawson!" called Lance, dabbing at his eyes.

"Yeah?" came the voice of his man from the darkness below.

Lance grinned a little, but his voice was stern. "Were you asleep or are you deaf? Why didn't you come up here when you heard me rolling on the floor with our friend?"

"Because I was having a fight of my own in the basement," snapped Dawson from the darkness. "I'd just handcuffed the guy to the water pipe when I heard this girl yell."

"Invite her in, get your playmate from the basement and we'll see what this is all about."

* * * * *

In the living room of the James house the four sat in silence for a moment.

Lance, forehead taped up, stared first at the girl in white and then at the handcuffed, sullen-faced man Dawson had captured in the basement. Dawson, near the door, sat with his hands in his pockets. The man, broad, burly, tanned as a seaman is tanned, glared stonily at both.

The girl, slender and young and beautiful, an ash-blond with violet eyes, still shuddered now and then and gazed with perplexed gratitude at Lance.

Lance turned to her first. "Let's hear your story," he suggested with not unkindly bluntness. "How is it you're wandering around at one o'clock at night near a house in which murder has been done?"

The girl shrank back. "Murder?" she whispered.

"Yes, murder. Nicholas James was killed. He lies upstairs in his bedroom. You didn't know that, of course?"

"Murder," she whispered again. "Then the note he sent my uncle—"

"Note?" snapped Lance as she stopped. Then, "Look here, start at the beginning."

"My name is Anita Kyle," said the girl, in a low tone. "I am the niece of Arthur J. Kyle, who is acting president of the Atlantic Deep-Sea Salvage Company. It's a company which—"

"I know all about the company," said Lance. "Nicholas James told me. He was—my friend."

"Oh! Well, about two hours ago my uncle got a curious note from Mr. James by special messenger. A very curious note! There were no words in it—nothing but a few figures. The figures said, twelve:forty-seven. That's all."

"You have the note?"

"No," said the girl, with a shiver. "Uncle Arthur didn't know quite what to do. It was possible that Mr. James was trying to tell him to come here tonight at twelve:forty-seven. But if that were the case why hadn't he simply telephoned or written a few words of explanation?"

"Uncle Arthur phoned here and no one replied. Then he telephoned Theodore Solweg, vice-president of the company, and George Stivers, secretary-treasurer. They'd received notes, too—the same kind. Just a time mentioned, with Mr. James' signature underneath."

LANCE nodded grimly. "Dead men don't answer telephones. Go on."

"Mr. Solweg and Mr. Stivers said they were going to do nothing more about it till morning. They thought the old man was getting senile, or perhaps trying to play some kind of a joke. But my uncle felt differently. He has not been well lately. I didn't think he should go out. So I offered to come over here for him and see what Mr. James wanted. I came and—"

She bit her lip, regained her composure.

"I got out of my car at the side entrance and was going to ring the bell when a figure dressed all in black, with a black hood over its head, grabbed me. I screamed for help and tried to jerk

free, but the—the thing held me with one arm and searched all over me with the other. Then he," she nodded at Dawson, "came and the figure ran. But as it left it jerked my handbag from me and carried it away. The note was in my bag. That's why I haven't it now."

Lance nodded. "Well, that clears things up a little," he said. Then he turned toward the man.

"Your turn," he snapped. "And you'd better talk fast. You have a lot of explaining to do. Who are you?"

The man shifted in his chair. "How about taking the handcuffs off me?" he said sullenly. "This whole thing's a mistake—"

"Yeah?" said Lance. "I suppose you're the new Commissioner of Police or something?"

"No. But I'm the new houseman here. Mr. James hired me three weeks ago," said the man. "I know the sea—in fact, I worked for a while on the Octopus—and I guess that is why Mr. James hired me. He was the finest—"

"He was," growled Lance. "But cut it."

"Well, tonight he said we could all have the night off. I was glad to get away so I could see some of my old gang at Sailor's Haven. A lot of 'em can't find ships now, so they—"

"Cut it," snapped Lance again.

"I got back here a little while ago because I didn't have any other place to sleep. And I saw all the lights in the place on and a strange car in front. It looked fishy to me, so I sneaked in the basement window to find out if somebody'd broken in and was emptying the place. Then somebody jumped me in the basement and knocked me out. And that's all I know."

"So you work here and you got a job three weeks ago—and tonight James is murdered," said Lance softly.

"I was at Sailor's Haven all this evening," said the man earnestly.

The girl spoke up. "He does work here," she said. "I remember now. I came here with my uncle a few days ago and saw him working on the lawn."

Lance glanced at Dawson. "The story seems to click, all right," he said. "Unlock the handcuffs."

Dawson gazed back with entire comprehension. The story did not click. It was still full of holes. But Dawson unlocked the cuffs.

"Anything I can do to help here," he said earnestly, "will make me happy. Mr. James was a prince. I'd like to see his murderer swing by the heels."

"Commendable enthusiasm," said Lance evenly. "But there's nothing you can do now except keep your eyes and ears open. I've phoned the police. They'll be here any minute."

"I get a little of this but not very much yet. James told me over the phone that he'd got hold of a valuable secret. He also told me that he'd received a threatening note from some one who called himself the Executioner. The Executioner said James was to die at midnight."

"The Executioner killed for the secret James had. He searched James' person and went away, probably with papers of some sort. Then, when he looked over the loot, he found that it did not contain the secret after all, so he came back to search again. There was nothing from James in your bag but that note, Miss Kyle?"

The girl nodded. "That's all."

Lance chewed at his lip. "I don't think the note was what the Executioner was after. So he'll try again. How, we can't guess."

The sound of a police siren came through the quiet suburb.

IV

FOUR men sat around the big table in the library of Arthur Kyle's home, two miles from the home of Nicholas James, next evening. The four were Arthur Kyle, Theodore Solweg, George Stivers and Lance.

Kyle was a thin austere man with iron-grey hair and deep-set grey eyes. He sat at the head of the table, as the president of the Salvage Company should.

To his right sat Solweg, a short, stout man with a florid face which was continually shining with perspiration. Solweg was quiet and self-composed but he seemed scared.

At the foot of the long table was George Stivers, a tall, powerful man still in his thirties, with masterful chin and blustering manner.

Across the table from Solweg, Lance was seated.

Lance spoke. "The mystery, gentlemen, is clearing up a little. I have traced most of James' movements yesterday, up to within a few hours of the time he was murdered."

Stivers thrust out his belligerent chin. "I say again," he grated, "that this is a matter solely for the police. We know nothing about this gentleman except that he says he was once a private detective. He was not retained in this case by any of us, and yet he takes charge."

"I'm sure we're glad to have Mr. Lance's help," Kyle said smoothly. "The police are working on the case too, naturally. But if Lance can help in any way he shall get a suitable fee."

Lance took a cigarette from his case and thrust it between his lips. Solweg smiled, whipped out a lighter from his pocket. It didn't work. Kyle offered the detective a match instead.

"Gentlemen," he said, exhaling smoke, "I am not in this for a fee. I am in it because James was my friend, and I do not see my friends killed and then do nothing about it. Whoever the Executioner is, I am out to get him. So I'll continue to meddle in this case, whether I'm welcome or not."

He smiled levelly at Stivers, who frowned back at him.

"As I was saying," Lance went on, "James' movements yesterday center mainly around the Grace Hospital.

"A while ago, as you three know very well indeed"—a hard tone crept into his voice—"the steamer *Sylvana* sank off the coast of New Jersey. As you also know, it carried a million dollars' worth of pearls. Your boat, *Octopus*, was sent to find the *Sylvana* and your divers were to get the pearls if the depth wasn't too great. The *Octopus* sank in the seaboard storm.

"Two reports were made. One was that the *Sylvana* had not been found before the *Octopus* went down. The other was that the *Octopus* sank with all hands. Both those reports, gentlemen, seem to have been wrong."

He scrutinized the faces of the three. Nothing but astonishment was expressed in their countenances.

"At the Grace Hospital yesterday, James talked with a man who had been picked up on the shore shortly after the *Octopus* sank. The man was almost dead with exposure and was uncon-

scious from concussion of the brain. That man was your boss diver from the *Octopus*. Only yesterday did he recover consciousness. He sent for Nicholas James.

"The nurse in attendance was sent to the door of the room while the two men talked. She says, however, that she saw the sick man draw something that looked like a crude map and give it to James just before he died.

"The *Sylvana* was found before the *Octopus* sank. Probably it lies in shallow water, easy to reach. Your boss diver gave the exact location to James. That's why James was killed—to get hold of that map."

Babel broke out around the table. Then Stivers spoke up.

"That shows how poorly informed you are, Lance. The *Salvage Company* doesn't own the *Sylvana*. We are only working for the real owners. So if the pearls were retrieved they would simply be turned over to other hands."

Lance smiled. "If the retriever were honest they would be. If not—what's to prevent his keeping them himself?"

Kyle, at the head of the table, faced the detective. "But I think we can agree that every one here, each a responsible officer in the company, is honest."

"Not at all!" snapped Lance.

"Are you insinuating that one of us is a crook?" Stivers barked.

"Gentlemen," replied Lance silkily, "I am not insinuating. I am stating what I think is a proven fact—proven by James."

Kyle's eyes narrowed. "That's strong stuff, Lance. Explain."

"I will, James, the retired president of your firm, has a map locating the *Sylvana*. His first act should have been to turn that map over to one of you or to the three of you together. But he didn't. Why? Because he suspected that some one of you was crooked."

Stivers leaped to his feet. "I won't stand for this. This man is practically saying that one of here us is a murderer."

"Right again," said Lance, grinding out his cigarette butt. "Sit down, Stivers."

Angrily, Stivers sank into his chair.

"Somebody here," said Lance, "found out that James got the map yesterday. Somebody here is the Executioner. One of the three of you. The other two

aren't safe as long as he's at large."

There was silence at this. The three looked at each other, a dread question in their eyes.

KYLE shook his head at last. "I can't believe it," he muttered. "Where do you suppose the map is? James hardly had time to hide it."

"I think he took time," said Lance. "I think he sent the servants out so that he would have the opportunity. Furthermore, I think he sent those notes to the three of you, not to make appointments with you but to leave some sort of clue to the hiding place of the map in case anything happened to him overnight. In that way no one of the three of you would have sole access to the fortune in the Sylvana's strong-box. Let's see the notes again."

Stivers and Solweg drew out the notes James had sent them just before the knife had been driven into his throat.

On the sheet of paper handed across by Solweg were the figures, 1:19. On Stivers' was 1:13. That, save for James' signature in each case, was all.

"And your note said 12:47," Lance mused, gazing at Kyle, who nodded. Lance's lips tightened. "Certainly those aren't appointment-times. No. In those figures, somehow, lies the key to the present hiding place of the map.

"Gentlemen, some one of the three of you, I think, has withheld something. And I'm warning whoever it is that his life may be given for his stubbornness. Now, has any one of the three of you anything to say?"

Silence held them all.

"Remember," said Lance slowly, "that James certainly suspected one among you. Nothing else explains why he wouldn't turn the map over in the first place. Now James, out of active service as he was, could hardly have learned of a suspicious act by one of you—without some one of the others learning it too."

Stivers drummed on the table with his fingers. Then he faced the detective.

"This is a dirty thing to do," he said, in a low tone, "but after all a man has been murdered. I know something about one of us. It's in connection with an entirely different matter and may have nothing to do with James or the Sylvana. But it does place suspicion on one of us. Last year—"

The lights went out. Lance jumped to his feet, overturning his chair in his hurry to get to the switch near the door of the library. He heard a scream of terror that he thought came from Solweg. He heard Kyle yell for lights.

He heard a choking, ghastly cough that ended abruptly in strangled silence.

Lance found the switch. Snapped it on, off, on again. There were no lights.

"The fuse!" he said, his cold calm voice cutting across the pandemonium. "Somebody's blown it. Where's the fuse-box, Kyle?"

"In the basement," came Kyle's tremulous voice in the dark.

Lance opened the door of the library. Down the front hall a light leaped into being as someone lit a candle. It was Kyle's butler.

"Go down to the basement," he ordered the man, "and see if you find a blown fuse. Put a new one in. Hurry!"

In a moment the lights were on. He closed the library door again and stood with his back to it as he faced them.

By the fireplace, Solweg cowered, mopping at his forehead. The stubby little man was glassy-eyed with fright. Kyle was standing near the chair he had occupied, at the head of the table. He was very pale.

Lance stared at the foot of the table, finding there what he had been only too sure that he would see. George Stivers lay back in his chair, head supported by the leather back. In his throat was a knife.

"Dead," breathed Kyle. "Dead."

Lance walked to the rigid corpse. "Yes," he said. "Dead. Stivers was about to name—one of you two!"

Almost as though hypnotized, the two stared at him. Then Kyle's austere face assumed a sterner look.

"This is becoming ridiculous," he grated coldly. "There may have been some shadow of reason for your talking as you did when Stivers was alive. For Stivers himself has done some shady things in the company's name recently. I can prove that."

"Hey, boss," came a voice from the library window, which was up about six inches, "I saw the lights go out. Did anything happen in here?"

It was Dawson and Dawson was not alone. Struggling to free himself from the vise-like right hand of Dawson that was holding his arm doubled up behind

his back was another man. It was the houseman from James' place.

"I caught this guy just leaving in a hurry," said Dawson.

V

ONCE again Lance was a little slower in calling the police than he might have been. It was not that he underestimated the ability of the police. It was just that he preferred to look over a place himself before photographers, fingerprint men and detectives had gone over it and messed it up.

He checked methodically but swiftly over every clue presenting itself on this second murder, which had been committed within five feet of him. The body of Stivers came first.

Stivers had fallen straight back in his chair, which indicated that he had not moved much after being stabbed. He had coughed his life out instantly.

The knife handle protruded from the right side of his throat, almost under his ear from the right side—the side Lance himself had been sitting on.

The knife itself, which Lance was careful not to touch, told nothing. It was a cheap, composition-handled thing like the one that had been driven into James' throat.

"You see," babbled Solweg, "it couldn't have been me. I was on Stivers' left."

Kyle spoke up, his voice cold and incisive. "I was ten feet from him with the table between us. I couldn't possibly—"

"The knife could have been thrown," said Lance bluntly.

"Then someone can see in the dark like a cat," retorted Kyle.

"That," said Lance, "raises an interesting point. You watch Stivers' throat while I turn the lights out again." He stepped to the switch and snapped the lights out again. Darkness reigned as it had before.

But in the darkness a faint patch of greenish light could be discerned if you knew where to look for it. The patch was on Stivers' dead throat and the knife handle stuck up in the middle of it.

Lance snapped on the lights again. "The blood hides most of it," he said.

"But there's enough left to tell how the killer knew where to strike. The Executioner managed to mark Stivers' throat with phosphorus. From a match, probably. I should say it was done when Stivers was helped off with his coat when he entered this house. I'll have to ask your butler about that, Kyle."

"Still," said Kyle, "you prove nothing against either Solweg or myself. I could not have thrown the knife from where I sat and have hit the right side of Stivers' throat. Solweg could not because he was at Stivers' left. The direction of the knife would indicate that you yourself killed Stivers."

"The direction means nothing," said Lance. "Stivers was not killed till a second or two after the lights went off. There could have been a lot of movement in that time. The knife might even have been thrown from the window."

He whirled on the houseman from James' place and stared at the man's tanned face.

"You seem to have a queer knack of turning up at places just after something's been done," he commented. "How do you explain this visit?"

"I know it looks bad for me," he said, "but I can explain, all right. At Mr. James' house a few minutes ago I found something I thought you'd like to know about. Something that has to do with Mr. James' bedroom window. I knew you were here and I piled into the station wagon and came right over."

"And ran right away again?" said Lance. "What about that?"

"I saw the lights flash out in this room as I was coming up toward the door," replied the man sullenly. "I figured something was wrong, and I didn't want to get caught anywhere near here."

Lance strode to the phone. "I'm calling the police," he said to Kyle. "Then I'm going over to James' place to see what there is about the bedroom window that struck this man's bump of suspicion."

He turned to James' man. "Come on. Show me what you found out about the bedroom window that I missed. And it had better be good."

The houseman drove in the station wagon and Lance and Dawson followed in Lance's big roadster with Dawson at the wheel.

"And you were going to retire," drawled Dawson with a side glance at his boss.

LANCE laughed bleakly. "Not till I nail this murdering maniac who calls himself the Executioner, anyway."

"I heard you giving 'em the old Harry in the library just before I chased after the houseman," said Dawson. "Are you really sure one of those two guys is the Executioner?"

"Of course I'm not," said Lance. "I'm only putting the fear of God in them. But I'm pretty sure, at that, Chick. Things point that way."

"Solweg and Kyle were the only ones in the room besides you when it happened," mused Dawson.

"That doesn't mean a lot. Anything could have happened in that dark room. The knife could have been thrown from the door."

"Or the window."

"I'm not forgetting our friend up ahead in the station wagon," said Lance grimly. "In fact, I'm about ready to put the clamps on him."

The tail-light ahead disappeared as the station wagon turned into the driveway of James' house. The big roadster followed.

They went upstairs to the deathroom. The houseman walked importantly to the window. He raised it.

"See how easy it goes up?" he said. "And it doesn't make a sound either."

"So?" said Lance.

"Somebody got it ready ahead of time, so it could be opened last night without any noise," said the houseman. "Look."

Lance went closer. There were traces of oil on the window pulleys. Also a thin film of soap appeared along the grooves in which the sash moved.

"That is interesting," said Lance evenly. "You go downstairs now while I look around some more."

The man left the room. Lance whirled to Dawson. "Now I know he's in it," he said in a low tone. "I spotted the oil and soap first thing last night. The cops caught it too."

"Shall I put the cuffs on him?" asked Dawson.

"No. I'll give him a little more rope. But you hop in the car and go back to Kyle's. He got me over here for some

definite reason. And I think—"

He chewed at his lip. "I think he got me over here to keep me from finding something at Kyle's that would have told too much. Your job will be to hang around there and see if somebody tries to hide or change something."

"Okay," said Dawson.

He left. Lance went to the bedroom door. In Lance's mind one small thing had stood out all through his investigations—the sound he had heard at the bedroom door just before the window behind him had opened to admit the Executioner.

That sound, like a footstep, had been deliberately contrived in the first place, no doubt, to keep James watching the door while death crept upon him unobserved from behind. It had been used again, almost as fatally, on Lance himself.

What had made a noise like a footstep in an empty hall? Lance turned up the edge of the hall carpet and looked at the floor. There seemed to be a slight scratch in the varnish near the head of a nail holding down an end of a floor-board.

Lance got out his knife and pried at the board. It loosened with suspicious ease, and revealed a small cavity beneath it.

In the cavity was the device that had made the decoying sound.

It was—incongruous thing in this affair of grisly murder—a child's toy. It was a little metal duck which moved on webbed feet when a spring was wound—a silly thing with a grinning bill.

The weight of a body on the board would spring it.

"Brains behind this," whispered Lance to himself. "Brains! The only weak spot seems to be in the 'Executioner' stuff. Why send a warning note to a man you're going to kill and sign it with theatrical stuff like that? Why not just kill him?"

He started to get to his feet with the little duck in his hand—kicking feebly again now that it had been released from the board—when it seemed as though the whole ceiling of the hall fell on his head.

He thought he felt hands tearing at him, thought he heard a jeering laugh. The blackness of unconsciousness claimed him.

VI

WHILE it was not exactly a habit with him Lance had been knocked out before. And several times before now he had shammed continued unconsciousness to his advantage.

He did so now. His senses came back slowly, sluggishly.

His head was splitting—but he could feel and hear again.

He felt motion—the rapid, free motion of a swiftly-driven car. It was a small car, and new, he guessed. It took the bumps easily and comfortably but it took them with a certain light resilience peculiar to new small cars.

Was the Executioner in this car with him? Lance very nearly opened his eyes.

He forced himself to keep them closed. He felt a knee smash into the small of his back, and realized that he was lying on the floor of the car out of sight of others on the road.

"Has he snapped out of it yet?" growled a voice.

The exploring knee ground into Lance again.

"Naw," came another voice. "Still out."

"Take the next road to the right," sounded a third voice.

At the sound of that voice Lance felt the hair crawl on the back of his neck. It was thick and guttural but undeniably the voice of an educated man. The Executioner was in the car with him.

He cautiously flexed the muscles of his arms and legs. He was tied, of course. He had expected it. And the hard feel of his gun under his left arm was missing.

Where were they taking him?

He did not bother to ask himself why. He knew. But why hadn't the Executioner struck in James' house?

Lance thought he had been knocked out, back in the upstairs hall, by a missile thrown from the hall window. But a knife could have been thrown at him as easily as a missile.

"Up this lane to the left," commanded the guttural voice from in front. The car swerved again. It stopped.

Lance felt the car sag four times as four men got out. Then he felt hands catch him roughly under the armpits

and drag him from the rear of the car. He was dumped like a sack of potatoes on a surface that felt like cinders.

"Basement, or upstairs?" one of the voices asked.

"Upstairs. There'll be less chance of identification when we're through if he falls with the flooring."

Luckily it was dark or Lance would have given himself away at the dawning significance of that command. He kept his body limp—but ridges of muscle jumped in his cheek.

"Come on, come on, snap out of it," complained the voice Lance had first heard in the car. The voice was accompanied by a kick that made Lance grit his teeth to keep back a yell.

He was roughly picked up and carried through a doorway. He was carried over a resounding floor, indicating an empty room, and up a flight of stairs. Then he was dropped again, this time on hard wood.

Light showed dimly red against his closed eyelids. The light flickered—a candle.

"Bring the gasoline up here," commanded the guttural voice. "All but five gallons. You can sprinkle that over the first floor."

"After we've doused the joint with gasoline," said another voice, "then what, chief?"

"You three will stay here for two hours. Someone might have noticed the car coming up this back road. The two hours will give me plenty of time to leave."

"Yeah," complained the voice. "You beat it—and we stay and take the rap if anything goes wrong."

"Nothing will go wrong," came the cold answer. "You're being well paid, aren't you?"

"Okay," snarled the other. "But I'd sure like to know who you are. I don't like to deal with guys that won't show their faces."

Again steps sounded out, harsh and loud. Lance thought swiftly. It might be wise to keep feigning unconsciousness—but he did want to see the Executioner again. A good look at the sable figure might tell him something. He groaned weakly, and opened his eyes.

"Hey, Chief, he's coming to," said the complaining voice. "Got any last words to give him?"

Lance stared through half-opened eyelids at a black-cloaked figure that was walking toward the door of the room. The figure halted an instant as if in indecision, then turned and walked slowly up to where Lance lay.

The figure was taller than average, and seemed heavy—but the enshrouding cloak made it impossible to tell much about his physical build. The eyes, seen through the holes in the black sack over its head, were coldly venomous—but they could not be seen clearly enough to make out their color.

"Well," said the harsh, guttural voice, "do you think you will recognize me when you meet me—in hell?"

Lance said nothing. He continued to gaze at the Executioner and continued to find nothing identifying about the sable shape. The figure was taller than Solweg and shorter than Kyle.

"You seem to be in bad shape, Detective." The Executioner seemed coldly amused.

LANCE glanced down at himself. The shallow wound in his forehead had burst open and bled again. The wound in the back of his head had also bled some. He was a pretty ghastly spectacle, he realized suddenly.

"Why didn't you finish me off back at James' house?" demanded Lance.

"Curious to the last, eh?" jeered the Executioner. "There were two reasons. One was that, this way, you'll never be identified. You'll simply disappear, which will be slightly safer for me. The other is the more important."

The eyes glared murderously through the shadowed eyeholes. "Swift death is too easy for you, Mr. Lance. You're going to pay for sticking your nose in where it had no business to be. This is an abandoned farmhouse, old, of half rotten wood. It will burn like tinder."

Lance stirred, and groaned. "Who are you?" he gasped, finally.

"Now your curiosity goes too far," came the guttural voice. The sable shape turned. Through the eyeholes in the Executioner's hood, the eyes burned into the faces of the other men in the room. "Remember, give me two hours. Then fire the house."

The Executioner left. Lance heard his loud steps descending the stairs. Then he turned his attention to his jailers.

The three men who had come here with the Executioner were ordinary thugs, Lance saw. They wore cheap flashy clothes, had the rat-eyed expression and the slack lips of small-time gunmen, and were grinning at their prisoner as though the thought of his imminent fate was something enormously funny.

Lance shifted on the floor to test his bonds. They held tightly. Ankles and wrists were roped so viciously that the strands cut deeply into his flesh. In addition, his arms were bound to his sides. There wasn't a chance on earth of slipping those bonds.

* * * * *

The raw smell of gasoline bit into Lance's nostrils as the three splashed the contents of the five-gallon cans around the room and over the floor. One of the three thugs dashed a quart or so over Lance for good measure.

The largest of the three looked at his watch. "Okay," he said. "It's been two hours."

The one who had thrown the gasoline over Lance drew out a box of matches. He lit one and started to apply it to Lance's clothing. Lance's face didn't move a muscle but the pit of his stomach crawled.

"Hold it," snapped the big fellow. "This stuff burns like straw, once it gets started. Let's two of us get out of here and the third toss a match into this room from the doorway and drop another light on the way out."

"Yeah? Who's the goat?" sneered the one with the matches.

"You can—"

"Baloney!"

The big man sneered. "Afraid somebody'll get ahead of you. Give me them matches. I'll do it. You and Pete get in the car and get it started. I'll be right with you and we'll lam."

He stood in the doorway of the upstairs room. Lance watched him. He held a match in one hand and the box in the other.

From the night outside sounded the whir of a starter. The man at the door leered at Lance.

"Enjoy yourself, buddy," he called.

He lit the match and threw it toward a little puddle of gasoline on the wooden floor. Lance's eyes followed the bright arc of the flaming match stick.

VII

CHICK DAWSON, at Kyle's house, stayed close to the library in which the corpse of Stivers still sat in the chair at the foot of the table and stared sightlessly at the ceiling.

The police, in the person of Detective Sergeant Milligan, had already questioned Kyle and Solweg before Dawson got back. The two, he heard, were upstairs.

Solweg had accepted Kyle's invitation to stay the rest of the night.

Milligan approached Dawson, who was standing in the library doorway.

"Blamed funny," frowned Milligan. "You say this guy was killed while Lance was right in the room?"

"Lance was right beside him," said Dawson.

"The Executioner guy has gall," said Milligan. "Or else he don't know Lance very well. We found out how the lights were doused when Stivers was murdered. There's a notch burned out of the edge of the knife that was in his neck. The murderer cut into the light cord running to the lamp on the library table and made a short."

"What chair did the light cord pass?" said Dawson.

"It's closest to the chair Solweg was sitting in," said Milligan. "If that means anything."

"Could Kyle have reached the cord?"

"Not the way we found it," said Milligan. "But the cord was trailing loose over the carpet. Somebody'd carried the lamp from its regular place and set it on the table just for the meeting. So the cord might have been curled around to be near Kyle, too, when the short circuit was made."

"Did you spot the phosphorus on Stivers' neck?"

Milligan nodded. "Kyle told me about that. And he told me about Lance's saying he'd have to ask the butler who helped Stivers off with his coat when he came here. The butler don't know who helped Stivers off with his coat. He says *he* didn't."

"I thought that was part of a butler's job—helping guests off with their coats."

"Yeah. But the butler says he was in the little cloak-room by the stairs when Stivers came. He was hanging up

Solweg's coat and hat. He was handed Stivers' coat and hat when he came back."

"Who was with Stivers?"

"Kyle and Solweg—both of 'em," sighed Milligan.

Milligan moved on. Dawson stood where he was and presently felt a soft hand on his arm. He turned and looked down into the violet eyes of Anita Kyle.

"Have they found out anything?" she asked.

Dawson shook his head. "Not yet. But Lance will. Give him time and he'll get this killer."

The girl sobbed. "But in the meantime—what?"

"Don't worry," said Dawson. He echoed Milligan's words. "Lance is a good man."

"But Uncle Arthur is ill," quavered the girl. "Really ill. He can't protect himself against this monster."

Anita reached into the handbag she had carried downstairs with her. "I found this a few minutes ago in front of my bedroom door," she said. "I can't explain it. It might belong to one of the maids but if so it had no business being in the hall."

It was small scrap of dull cotton cloth—black cloth.

"It's sort of almond-shaped," said Anita.

"Or eye-shaped," said Dawson.

STEPS on the stairs made both turn. Solweg was coming down.

"I had to come down and see if anything's turned up," he said. His voice was still shrill and fearful. "I couldn't rest upstairs, let alone sleep. I keep seeing Stivers. Wonder what he was going to say when he was killed?"

Dawson eyed the man expressionlessly. "Guess we'll never know," he said. He stopped. Solweg was gazing past him into the library.

"What's the matter?" said Dawson.

"The library window. Look through the window."

Dawson looked. Far off the black of the night sky was broken by a red glow. He shrugged. "Farmhouse or barn on fire," he said. "I guess—"

He stopped, and glanced quickly at Solweg. He didn't think Solweg had seen what he had seen, outlined for an instant by the dying red glow. A face

had showed dimly, close to the glass, then had been withdrawn.

"Excuse me," said Dawson carelessly to Solweg. "Guess I'll stretch my legs outside for a minute."

* * * * *

"What," said Dawson to the figure under the library window, "happened to you?"

Lance had wiped his face clear of soot and blood as well as he could, which was not very well. He had torn his handkerchief in two and bound half around each of his wrists, which were bleeding. He was drenched from head to foot.

"You look awful," observed Dawson candidly. "What you been doing?"

"Hop in the roadster with me and I'll tell you on the way to James' house," snapped Lance.

Hatless, Dawson hurried with him to the big roadster.

Lance told in a few swift words what had happened to him.

"How'd you get loose?" demanded Dawson.

Lance's lips thinned bleakly. "I looked so weak and banged up that they didn't take the proper precautions before they ran out on me," he said. "Either that or they were naturally dumb. There was broken glass still sticking in the frame of one of the windows."

Dawson grunted. The explanation, from one old campaigner to another, was ample. He could reconstruct the whole thing. Lance getting to his feet by sliding till his back touched the wall and inching up to an upright position. Lance hopping to the window and sawing at the broken glass till the ropes parted.

"It wasn't the easiest thing I've ever done," confessed Lance. "One of them poured gasoline on me along with the rest of the room. I was flaming when I dropped from the window, but the horse trough was full. Chick, I saw the Executioner."

"So?" said Dawson.

"So nothing, the black hood hid everything."

Dawson reached into his pocket and pulled out the scrap of black cotton cloth that looked as though it might have been cut out of a larger piece to make an eyehole.

"Where did you get this?"

"The girl, Kyle's niece, found it in the upstairs hall of the Kyle house."

"Near whose door?" snapped Lance.

"In front of her own. An equal distance between the door of the room Solweg's in."

"Solweg?"

"Yeah. Kyle asked him to stay the rest of the night there and Solweg thought he would."

Lance's eyes almost closed in thought. "This is the worst mess we've ever been in," he said. "Were Kyle and Solweg both in the house all the time?"

Dawson nodded. "As far as I know they were both upstairs. Solweg was talking to me just before you got back. What's the agenda at the James' place this time?"

"We grab the houseman," Lance rapped out. "He's got to be in on this, Chick. It's the only thing that makes sense."

Dawson stepped a little harder on the accelerator. "We'll get the guy—and we'll make him talk."

But they found, a few minutes after sweeping up the drive to James' house, that they would never make the houseman talk. He lay in the front hall, so that the door touched him as they forced it open. And in his throat was a composition-handled kitchen knife.

VIII

LANCE, in James' bedroom, sat at the desk in the chair in which the old man had met his death. He put himself in Nicholas James' shoes.

He half closed his keen eyes. The key to the whereabouts of the treasure map, he thought, might provide a key to the identity of the Executioner.

"I hide the map," said Lance to himself, tackling the problem from another angle, "and I send notes to Solweg and Kyle and Stivers. In each note is part of the directions for finding the map."

He gazed absent-mindedly around the bedroom.

In the silence the brass clock ticked loudly on the mantelpiece.

With an exclamation, Lance got to his feet. "Got it!" he breathed. "Got it!"

His hand shot out for the telephone on the desk before him.

"Milligan?" he said, after a few

minutes. "I think I've got something on the James' murder. You know there was a map mixed up in this?"

"Yeah, Solweg told me about that," said Milligan.

"Well, I think I've figured out how to find this map—right here in James' bedroom. But I want witnesses. Can you come over here with Kyle and Solweg?"

Lance glanced with hard exultation at the brass clock on the mantelpiece. Milligan's voice sounded.

"You think—" rumbled Milligan uncertainly.

"I think I might land the Executioner through the map," Lance snapped. "He's killed for that map—and hasn't yet got it. If I turn it up here he might try to take it away from me and tip off his hand to us."

"Okay," said Milligan. "Want me to bring a couple of men?"

"Not as long as Dawson and I can stagger," said Lance stonily. "I'd have kept a couple of the boys who came out to look at the murdered houseman if I'd need help.

"And, say, Milligan—rush them over here, will you? And you needn't say anything about my being over here. I want to have a look at them when they first see me among those present. Tell 'em this is Dawson's play."

It was three in the morning when Lance and Dawson heard the police car, with Milligan at the wheel, stop in front of the door. Lance glanced with a frown at his watch.

"I don't like this," he said to Dawson. "I told Milligan to rush them here. An hour has passed. That's enough time for somebody to cook up quite a lot of monkey business."

Lance let Dawson open the door for them. He himself stood so that he would not be revealed till the door swung wide.

Steps sounded on the porch. Dawson opened the door. The first two inside were Kyle and Solweg. They stared at Lance—and Lance stared back, tensely, quick to catch a betraying flicker of an eyelid from either man.

But there was no flicker. Both men looked a little surprised, that was all. Again the detective had drawn a blank.

On the heels of the two officials of the company came Milligan—and Anita Kyle. "Oh," the girl gasped, looking at Lance. "You've been hurt."

"A little scratched up," admitted Lance, who had forgotten his still damp clothes and battered appearance. He stared at her. She was terribly pale, terribly agitated. Lance wondered. "I didn't expect to see you here."

"I came with Uncle Arthur, to help him. None of you seem to realize that he's really not a well man."

The detective expected action and plenty of it in the bedroom upstairs where he thought the treasure map was hidden. He did not want the girl there when it happened.

"I think you'd better stay downstairs," he told her. "Dawson, you stay with her."

Anita looked rebellious. Her uncle added his voice. "Lance is right."

ANITA sighed and went into the living room to the right of the hall. Dawson, looking a little sulky, went with her. Lance and Kyle and Solweg and Milligan started up the stairs.

Lance hung back with Milligan a minute. "What took you so long?" he asked in a low tone.

Milligan shrugged. "I couldn't bring 'em any sooner. I couldn't go upstairs in Kyle's house and dress 'em, could I?"

"It looks as if somebody stalled for time. Who was the last to get ready after you'd called them?"

"They all came downstairs together," said Milligan.

Lance grunted, and caught up with the two company officials. "Into James' bedroom, gentlemen," he said, opening the door for them.

The four men went into the death-room. Lance closed the door and faced them. Then he said, "As Sergeant Milligan has told you I think the way has been found to locate the treasure map."

They all looked hard at him, at this. A huge fortune in jewels would be revealed where the bit of paper James had got from a dying man was turned up.

"The key to the hiding place of the map," Lance went on slowly, "is to be found in the notes James sent out just before he died. In the figures in those notes."

"But," protested Kyle, "all those figures gave was an odd appointment-time."

"They related to time," replied Lance, "but not to appointments. I'll show you."

He turned to Solweg. "Your note read one nineteen?"

The chubby man nodded. All watched with deep interest while Lance walked to the brass clock on the mantelpiece. He stopped it. Then he turned the hands to 1:19.

"Now what?" rumbled Milligan, who stood near the door.

"Now," said Lance, "we'll see where the minute hand points when it says nineteen minutes after one."

He sighted along the minute hand. His gaze rested on a section of wall just under one of the bedroom windows. He walked to that spot and carefully cut the wallpaper loose from a six-inch circle. He held out the disc of wallpaper, back up, so that all could see. Glued lightly to the back of the paper was a bit of tissue paper.

"What's written on it?" snapped Kyle.

Lance read it. Then, without comment he handed it to Kyle. It said only, R 5.

Kyle's breath hissed out. "R five! What does that mean?"

Lance shook his head. "Let's see if we can find out."

He went to the clock, set it to 1:13. The minute hand pointed to a section of wall just over the window, in a straight line above the spot where the first bit of wallpaper had been cut away. In this spot, behind a section of paper that came loose as Lance touched it, was another bit of tissue paper. R 5, it said. That was all.

At 12:47 the minute hand pointed to a spot correspondingly high up on the opposite side of the room. A third paper was retrieved. Once again the symbols, R 5, were revealed.

"It means nothing," moaned Solweg, dabbing at his forehead. "The old man was crazy."

"James," said Lance, "was far from crazy." He looked at the three scraps of paper. "It must be that James kept a fourth bit of paper himself and that the fourth bit contains the final key to the hiding place of the map. If that is the case, the Executioner has attained his ends! For the Executioner must have taken that fourth scrap of paper from James' pocket after he had murdered him."

The room continued silent while the three men looked at him expectantly.

"I'm afraid the Executioner has won," Lance went on, slowly. "We are helpless without that fourth bit of paper."

Downstairs a shot roared out, followed closely by another. A scream pierced the air.

"Anita!" gasped Kyle, turning to Lance. "Help her! She's—"

Milligan, with a bellow, had already plunged from the room and was thudding down the stairs. Lance turned for the door too, hesitated for a fraction of a second, then sprang for it.

Behind him, as he reached the door, he heard the thunk of steel on bone, followed by a thud of a falling body.

"Stay where you are—and don't turn around!" a cold, inhuman voice grated out.

Lance stayed motionless, eyes narrowed to slits. The Executioner! He would know that voice in hell.

"Keep your hands up," the cold voice commanded.

He heard a step behind him. Instinctively he ducked his head and hunched up his shoulders, but the move did no good. Something slammed down on the back of his head and neck and he sagged to the floor.

IX

BEFORE the bedroom fireplace stood The Executioner. In his black-gloved hand was a bit of paper. The fourth bit—the piece Nicholas James had kept himself in this somber game of hare and hounds.

"Three ahead," The Executioner read aloud, his burning eyes glaring through the eyeholes of his hood at the paper. "Three ahead."

Two men crowded to look over the sable-clad shoulder of the Executioner. They were two of the three thugs who had carried Lance to the abandoned farmhouse.

"Three ahead?"

"It's about a treasure map," said the Executioner. His voice was muffled behind the sinister black hood.

"Three ahead. Then R five, repeated three times. It must mean—steps."

The Executioner glanced up at the stopped clock. "The clock must be the starting point. Blast James and his caution! I'd have had the map long ago if—"

The black figure stood, back to the clock. Three paces the Executioner took forward. Then three to the right, and three to the right, and again three to the right.

He was back where he had started from.

"Something's loony here!" grated one of the two men. But the Executioner's hooded head shook slowly.

"No! James must have hidden the map somewhere in this fireplace. Hunt for a loose brick."

The thug snarled rebelliously. "It'll take time. And there's these people in the house."

"You tied up the two men and the girl downstairs and left one of your number to guard them, didn't you?"

"Yeah. We got one of the guys and the girl a minute after we'd come up from climbing in a basement window. We knocked out the other guy as he ran downstairs after the girl yelled. But how about the dick—that guy, Lance?"

The Executioner jerked his head toward a door behind them. "He's in there—the bathroom—handcuffed with his arms around the base of the washstand and knocked out besides."

The two men squatted before the fireplace, while the sable figure of the Executioner bent low to watch their labors. They examined the bed of the fireplace first and the bricks extending out into the room to catch flying sparks.

None of the bricks was loose.

"You gonna croak this gang before we leave?" asked the larger of the two thugs.

The Executioner did not speak for a moment or two. Then his inhuman voice was icily thoughtful.

"I don't think it's necessary. None of them has seen me or knows who I am. The detective will die, of course. He's too smart to live. And this time there will be no bungling. When I think how you let him get away from that farmhouse—"

"He must be a wizard or something," rasped the larger of the two men. "You saw how we left 'im. He couldn't have had more than three minutes before the room was a furnace. He must be Houdini."

"I'll take care of him myself, this time," grated the sable figure. "There will be a knife in his throat when we leave this house—work faster there! I'd

like to get through in here before daylight. Why you took so long getting here is more than I can figure out! I stalled for an hour after I telephoned, to give you time."

"Sure. You buzz me at two in the morning and expect me to get the other two guys together and drop past your joint to pick up your disguise and get out here in the sticks—all in about ten minutes."

Silence held the three while they tested the walls of the fireplace for a loose brick behind which might be the treasure map.

"Blast it, Chief, there ain't any loose brick!" exploded the bigger of the two thugs.

"There's got to be!" the Executioner rapped out. "We'll look again and scrape along the mortar in the cracks to see if any of it chips away too easily. Then if we can't find one we'll get that smart detective in here to do some more deducting for us! That's the only reason he's alive now—I figured we might have to use him some more."

The three worked intently at the fireplace, only the sound of their breathing and the grating of steel along mortar disturbing the silence of the room.

Behind their tense backs a door opened slowly, soundlessly. The door to the bathroom, into which Lance had been dragged unconscious and handcuffed to the washstand.

It is possible for a man, if he is adept at combat, to take some of the force out of a blow on the head by ducking his head with the blow.

LANCE had done that when he sensed the blow coming as he stood at the bedroom door with the Executioner behind him.

He had not been completely out at any time. Through a haze dimly he had felt himself dragged across the room and onto the tile floor of the bathroom. Through a haze he had felt his handcuffs snapped over his outstretched wrists.

He was surprised that he was not knifed at once. He would have made some sort of feeble fight against that. As it was, he made no move to prevent the Executioner from handcuffing him to the washstand. There was a trick about those handcuffs, a certain matter of pressure on the right spot in the right

way, that no one but Lance knew about.

Now he crouched in the bathroom doorway, free though unarmed, and watched the intent three at the fireplace.

The body of neither Kyle nor Solweg was in evidence anywhere in the bedroom, he saw. There were just the three men, working in the blaze from the overhead lights and with the shade on the desk-lamp also tilted to illuminate their labor.

"For the last time," growled the bigger of the two thugs, "I'm telling you there ain't any loose brick! We'll get that dick and sweat the secret out of 'im—"

He turned as he spoke, and saw the man crouched in the bathroom doorway.

"Get him!" he yelled, his hand darting for his gun. "Get him!"

Even as Lance darted sideways the gun roared out. He felt the wind of the bullet past his ear but he only moved the faster. Like an uncoiling spring he leaped toward the desk.

He reached it in two quick strides. His feet left the floor in a flashing hurdle, clearing the desk as a high jumper clears a bar. On the way over his feet kicked the desk-lamp and smashed it to darkness on the floor.

He lit running—running toward the door. Two guns were belching flame and lead now and the Executioner was crouching with the blade of death in his hand.

Lance zigzagged on his way. Red seeped from his side as a bullet grooved his ribs. His coat peaked up at the shoulder as a slug tore through the fabric.

He slammed against the door and his hand shot out to punch at the light switch which was beside it. With the overhead lights joining the desk-lamp in oblivion the room was plunged into darkness—a darkness streaked with livid flame and crackling with curses.

Lance dropped to the floor beneath the switch and felt plaster from the wall sift down on him as lead bored the space he had occupied an instant before.

His hand went up and jumbled for the door-knob.

In the lock was still the same key James had turned last night to lock himself in from threatened death. Lance turned the key. The Executioner had got away from him once in this room. He wouldn't again. One of them would find death this time—either Lance at

once or the Executioner later in the electric chair.

Lance slipped the key far under the edge of the rug near the door, and moved toward the fireplace.

"Where is he?" snarled one of the men.

The white ray of a flashlight suddenly cut the darkness. Lance exploded into movement. That light meant death.

He jumped to the desk, picked up the heavy swivel chair in front of it and hurled it toward the light.

The beam played on him for a second before he dropped to the floor again—and before the chair drew a howl of pain from the holder of the flash and sent the light smashing to destruction against the brick of the fireplace. Lance followed the chair, leaping like a tiger toward the place where the light had been. His hands clutched flesh. A gun cracked out so close that his cheek suddenly stung from powder burns.

He caught the arm behind the gun and wrenched. There was a moan, then a scream of pain. After that arms went around Lance from behind and he lost his hold.

The hands gripping Lance from behind tightened. A blade sought his throat in the darkness. Lance swung the man behind him off his feet. He whirled, with the man still on his back. Somebody grunted with pain as flying heels raked into him. The arms relaxed their grip and Lance was free again.

There was a banging at the door, a hoarse voice demanding: "Open up! What's happening?"

NEITHER Milligan nor Dawson owned the voice. It was the voice of the man who had been left downstairs to guard them and the girl.

Lance tore into the three with redoubled savagery, finding a body with a groping left hand and following the discovery with a smashing right swing.

"Hey, you guys!" the man outside the door bellowed.

"Smash the door in," came a grating inhuman voice from Lance's left.

And with that to guide him, Lance found at last the thing he had been specially seeking—a long, flowing cloak.

He gripped the cloak and lashed out with his right fist. The Executioner! If he could get him he didn't much care

what happened afterward.

But he missed his blind swing. An instant afterward a knife blade sliced across his left hand, forcing him, with dripping knuckles, to let go his hold.

Lance's hand, ever searching in the dark, found a throat. Instantly his other hand flashed to join it.

Abruptly the banging and yelling outside the bedroom door stopped. There was a scrape at the lock. Evidently the man in the hall had decided it was quicker to pick the lock than batter down the massive panels.

Something glanced stunningly off Lance's head. He gritted his teeth and hung onto the throat of whoever it was he had caught, his hands biting deep. A gun spoke out recklessly.

Lance swung till he felt the wall at his back. He held the body of his opponent before him as a shield. The man's struggles were weakening.

The bedroom door opened and as swiftly closed, shutting off the light from the hall.

"Chief!" a voice cracked out.

It was not the voice of the man who had yelled before. One of the Executioner's men had barged at the door. But it was not that man who had entered. This was Dawson's voice. "Shut up!" barked Lance. "Move—quick!"

He moved himself as he spoke. He fell sideways, dragging his man with him. Just before he hit the floor he heard a knife whistle over his head, heard a murderous thud as it struck deep into the wall above him.

At almost the same instant a streak of flame rayed toward the spot where Dawson's voice had sounded, and a shot echoed once more in the room.

The bullet hit empty floor. And the next instant the man who had fired exclaimed aloud as he was tripped to the floor and pinned down.

Lance's man was a limp weight. Lance loosed his iron grip and the weight sagged to the floor.

He heard the struggle of the other two a few feet away, knew that Dawson had got his man and started to find the Executioner.

In a narrowing circle he stole around the room, arms outstretched to grope for a flowing cloak, keeping his eye on the door to make sure it was not opened by a fleeing figure. But the Executioner eluded him.

He stole to the door. His hand sought the electric light switch. He snapped the overhead lights on and dropped instantly to avoid a possible bullet. But no bullets came. Nor, in the wreck of a room, was there to be seen any sable-garbed figure.

In the center of the room, aided by the light, Dawson ended his particular battle by smashing his gnarled left into the face of the man beneath him. He got shakily to his feet, dragged his man to the side of the unconscious man Lance had throttled, handcuffed the two together.

But he and Lance were the only two moving beings in the room. The real criminal, the Executioner, had vanished!

X

MILLIGAN came into the room, his beefy face white, blood trickling down his cheek from a wound on his temple. He was dragging, handcuffed, the man Dawson had knocked out at the bedroom door just before picking the lock and entering to help Lance.

"A couple of guys sapped me as I went downstairs," Milligan said shamefacedly. "Sapped me, and tied me up, I guess. I saw cut rope around my arms and legs when I came to."

"I cut your ropes on the way up to see what the shooting was about," Dawson said. "They sapped me too. But as soon as that guy you're dragging came upstairs I didn't stay sapped and I didn't stay tied. Did you take care of the girl?"

"I'm—here," faltered Anita, entering the room as Milligan stepped aside. Her white face got whiter yet as she stared around the room. "Oh! Where is my uncie? And where is Mr. Solweg?"

Lance, lips thinned to a cold line, paid no attention to any of them. The Executioner, where in the name of heaven had he disappeared to?

The detective jumped to the bathroom in which he had been confined. The little room was empty.

The window, through which the Executioner had made his escape once before, was open a foot or so, but there was no rope there to escape on this time. Nor had there been earlier. Lance had noted that particularly when he

crouched in the bathroom door just before his leap for the light switch.

There was a closet next to the bathroom. Lance sprang to that; opened it with a jerk—

His eyes narrowed. Inside the closet lay Kyle and Solweg—both of them. The girl and Milligan and Dawson crowded near at the look on Lance's face.

"Oh," cried Anita, starting forward.

"Wait!" Lance cracked out.

He looked at the two men. Solweg lay crumpled in a near corner. He was breathing stertorously. A blue lump on his forehead stood out lividly. Kyle was sprawled next to him, face down. He was breathing jerkily with returning consciousness. Blood welled slowly from a swollen contusion on the back of his head. Lance started toward the two. At the same moment Milligan glimpsed what the detective saw and swore aloud.

Half-hidden under Kyle's lank body was a long, black cloak. And near his head, clenched in his lean fingers, was a black sack with eyeholes in it, like the hoods once worn by old-time executioners.

"So that's why he didn't turn on the lights during the fight," mused Lance aloud. "It might have been sure curtains for me. But he preferred the dark. If things did go wrong he'd have a chance of hiding the cloak and hood and keeping his identity a secret."

Milligan nodded. "And while he was hiding them he passed out from a crack on the head. But we've got him now."

Kyle stirred and opened his eyes—to gaze into the horrified eyes of Anita. "So—it was—you," the girl whispered. "It was *you!*"

Lance stared at her quickly, remembering her dreadful pallor and agitation earlier in the evening. "You suspected him before?" he asked.

Anita bit her lip. Then her shoulders drooped and she nodded miserably. "Yes. I—I can't hide him anymore. I found that scrap of black cloth in front of his door in our hall."

"Well," said Lance harshly, "it's all cleared up now." He went on, his voice metallic, "The biggest puzzle to be cleared up is the 'Executioner' angle itself. From the first I couldn't get that. Now I do! the whole business was just so much stage-setting—with the scenery to be shoved off onto an innocent man at the end!"

Solweg's stertorous breathing changed its key a little. He opened his eyes, blinked dazedly, then sat up on the closet floor. He saw the cloak and hood beside Kyle and shrank back.

"No, no!" he mumbled. "Not Kyle! It isn't true!"

"You're right!" Lance cracked out. "Milligan and I haven't been talking about the same men. The man I've been talking about is you."

"You discovered that James had a map showing the location of the Sylvana. You planned to kill James and Stivers and then frame Kyle with the Executioner scenery so he'd join them in death by way of the electric chair."

SOLWEG blinked at the detective with eyes that looked pathetically bewildered.

"You came here last night immediately after Kyle had phoned and asked you if you'd received an odd note from James. You killed the old man and fled, thinking you had the map. But you found the old man too smart for you."

"You came back to search the dead man again and bumped into me. On your way out that time you grabbed Miss Kyle and took her bag, thinking she might have the map. Blank again."

"You went to the meeting in Kyle's house earlier this evening, fearing that Stivers might spill some dirt about you and force your hand. Because you feared that you prepared him by helping him off with his coat—and marking a sort of bull's-eye on his neck with phosphorus. Later he did force your hand, so you knifed him."

"James' houseman, bribed by you, got me into a trap over here, while you were supposed to be in your room at Kyle's house, actually you came here, went to the farmhouse with me and later came back and killed the houseman to keep his mouth shut. I suppose you sneaked out of Kyle's on a rope, just as you sneaked in here when you killed James."

"Milligan said the map was about to be found. You phoned your thugs, stalled as long as you could to give them time to get here. You had them bring the Executioner disguise to plant on Kyle. It was a break for you when the girl screamed and Milligan started downstairs with me after him."

"It gave you a chance to knock Kyle out, and then me, and still keep your

identity secret. I suppose you put on the Executioner disguise during the search so your own men would tarry in the dark about you. Easy way to avoid blackmail when you got the pearls."

"You—must be crazy," faltered Solweg. He got up weakly, stepped over Kyle, who had closed his eyes in a relapse and stood swaying in the closet doorway.

"Crazy?" snapped Lance. "I suspected you when Stivers died. The phosphorus on his neck! You were too anxious, earlier, to let me see that you carried a lighter while Kyle had phosphorous matches.

"And the scrap of black cloth Miss Kyle found. That was a blunder, Solweg. Would the real Executioner have been so careless as to drop a scrap cut from his black hood to be found in his own home? Even before Miss Kyle admitted that she had found it in front of her uncle's door, that smelled to me like a plant against Kyle:

"Again, back in the farmhouse the case was strengthened against you because of the shoes the Executioner wore. I couldn't see anything wrong with them—but I could hear. They sounded as if the soles were made of wood. And that was because they were so thick. They'd been built up, Solweg. And I'll gamble we'll find those built-up shoes outside in the shrubbery, lying where you tossed them out the window before crawling into the closet to bump your head against the wall and play unconscious."

"This is madness!" gasped Solweg. "You can't prove a thing!"

He mopped his perspiring forehead and cheeks in his habitual gesture. And Lance grinned.

"Can't prove anything?" he said softly. "Listen, Solweg, did you know that various things can be identified as positively under a microscope as fingerprints? Perspiration, for instance?"

Solweg's bewildered look left him. His eyes became icily murderous.

"Your habit of sweating, like the swine you are, is the last strand that straps you into the electric chair," Lance snapped. "Back in the farmhouse and again a few minutes ago I noticed how the black hood stuck to the face of the Executioner. It was because the Executioner's cheeks and forehead were sticky with perspiration. Now, when the

dried perspiration on the black hood is compared under a microscope with yours—"

With an agility unbelievable in one of his build Solweg sprang from the closet door. "You'll never get me alive," he snarled and leaped suicidally for the window. Lance sprang after him, just missing him as he flung open the window and hurled himself out.

Milligan barked out an oath and ran to the window too. For a moment it seemed the bulky detective would jump after Solweg in his rage at the cheating of the electric chair. Then he stared down in the grey of beginning dawn.

"Luck!" he grunted. "Luck! He's still alive. Only broke both legs and maybe an arm. Lemme out of here!"

Kyle had finally regained control of himself. He could stand now, somewhat shakily. And he could think. "Did he—get the map?" he asked weakly.

Lance blinked. "I'd forgotten the map! No, he came close, but he didn't appreciate the true simplicity of James' hiding place."

He walked to the fireplace, took down the brass clock, and turned it upside down. The base was hollow. He reached into it, explored with his fingers and drew out a piece of notepaper. It was the missing map.

"And they thought James was senile," said Lance. "He picks one of the most obvious places in the room to hide something, throws searchers off the track by using it as a starting point for the search, then leads 'em right back to it again. I'd like to be senile like that."

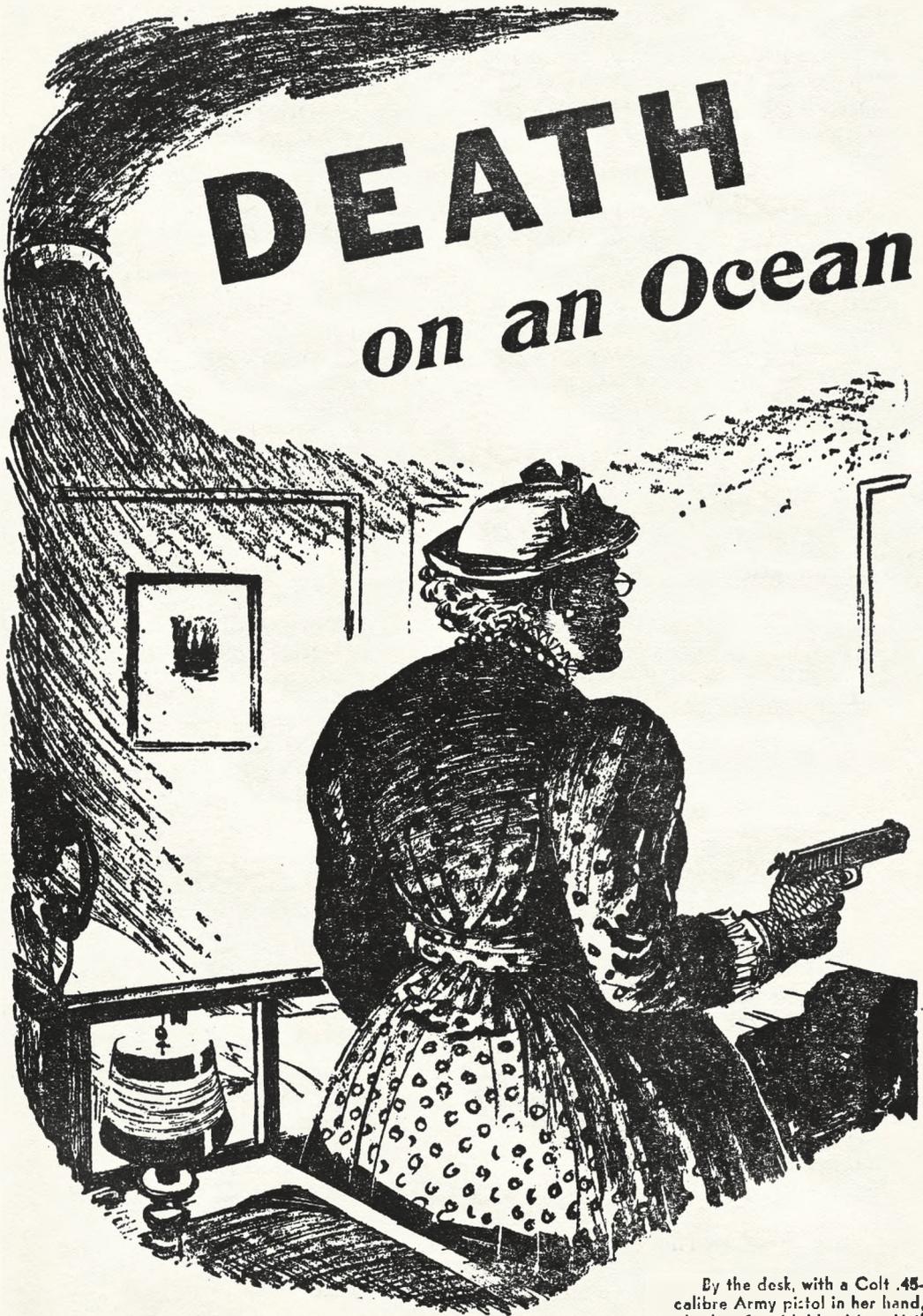
He and Dawson left Anita and her uncle in the room and, herding the three thugs before them, went downstairs to join Milligan and the unmasked Executioner.

"That stuff of examining the dried perspiration on the black hood and then comparing it under a microscope with some of Solweg's perspiration," Dawson said in an undertone that the three could not overhear. "Is that straight dope? Can they make that stick in court?"

Lance smiled, and for the first time in thirty hours his smile had in it something human. "If they can," he replied, "it'll be the first time I've ever heard of it. But there's no use letting Solweg know that till he's signed a formal confession."

DEATH

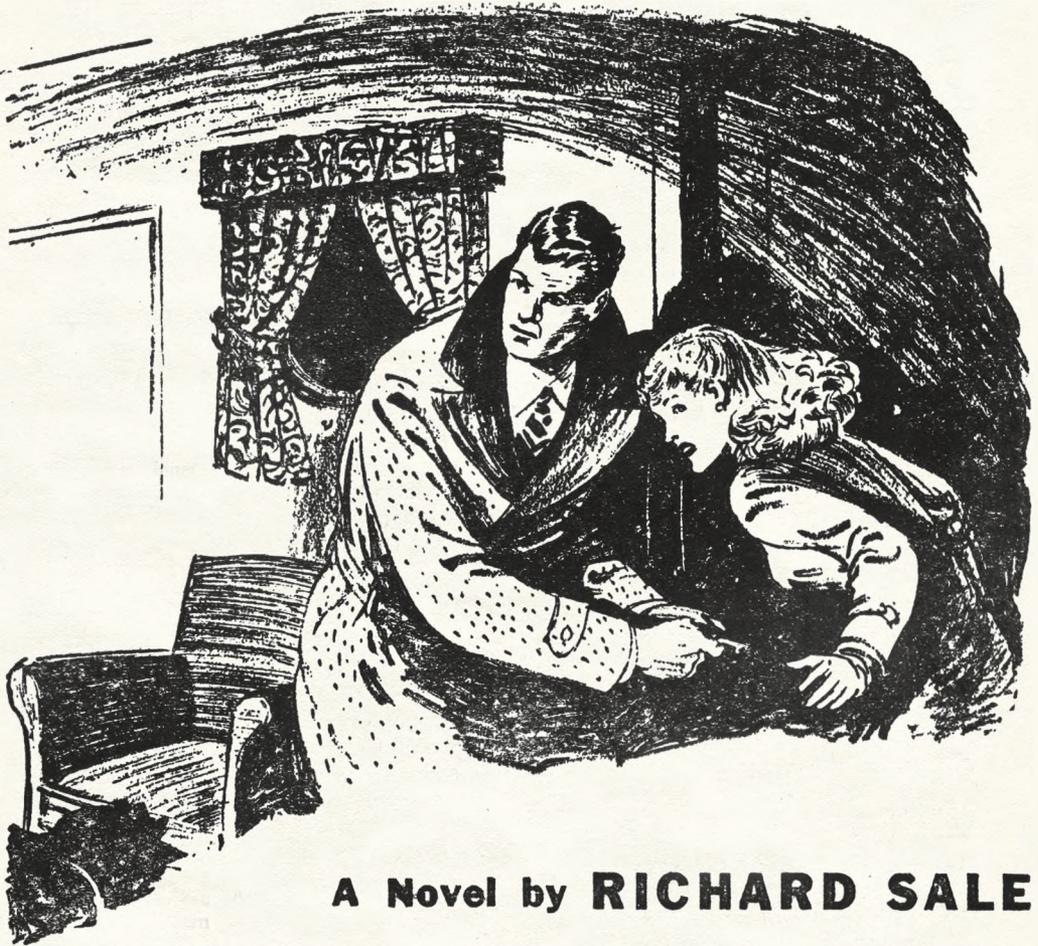
on an Ocean



By the desk, with a Colt .45-calibre Army pistol in her hand, stood the formidable Mrs. Vail

Homeward bound, foreign correspondent Craig Mitchell is suddenly swept into a swirl of mystery as he finds himself the focal point in a murderous smuggling conspiracy aboard a behemoth of the seas!

Liner



A Novel by RICHARD SALE

I

CRAIG MITCHELL did not go to dinner. His stomach was still jumpy, and while the other passengers of the *S.S. Baltic Star* were eating their supper he took a stool at the cocktail bar on A Deck. The ship medico had told

him that champagne was good for what ailed him.

A sandy-haired man was sitting at the bar near Mitchell. He was around fifty-five years old and he had a strong jaw, which rippled as he drank his Mar-

tini. His hands were hairy and lined with veins. After awhile they looked at each other and smiled.

"Your name ought to be Craig Mitchell," the sandy-haired man said presently.

"It is," Craig said quietly. "But I don't place you, sir."

"I'm not surprised at that," the sandy-haired man declared with a dry chuckle. "My name is Harrigan. Does that bring back anything?"

"No, I'm afraid it doesn't."

"You used to be a police reporter on the old New York *Blade*. Centre Street Headquarters was your beat. My name is Harrigan, John Peter Harrigan, Inspector of Police, New York Homicide Bureau. Is that any better?"

Craig Mitchell stared at him. "Good Lord!" he exclaimed. "Of course it is! Inspector John Harrigan—'Old Iron Head'!"

Harrigan chuckled again. "I'll let that pass," he said, "because you're not a police reporter any more. That must have been three years ago. Whatever happened to you?" He stared at Mitchell. "Somebody leave you a million dollars?"

Young Mitchell shook his head, grinning wryly. "Not by a long shot," he declared. "As a matter of fact, I've been with the Paris office of the *Tribune*."

"I see." The inspector nodded. "Just going home for a vacation, then?"

"Going home for good," Craig Mitchell said. "I've been made Washington correspondent for the *Chronicle* in New York, you know. Glad to be going home. But I've dreaded this trip for three years."

Harrigan laughed. "You do look a little weak around the gills," he admitted. "Is that where you've been for these last two days—nursing your *mal de mer*? Never bothers me. Guess I've drunk too much beer in my time."

"If that were any criterion," Mitchell said, "I should be immune for life. But I've got my sea legs and I don't think it will bother me again unless we run into some heavy weather."

He ordered a drink for Harrigan.

"I've got a perfectly good reason to be going to New York," he observed, as they waited to be served. "But how about you? Sort of a long way from home for a police inspector to be, isn't it?"

"Yeah." Harrigan nodded thoughtfully. "I had to go over and bring back a guy."

"Did you get him?" Mitchell asked curiously.

"Wouldn't be going home if I hadn't."

"I see," Craig Mitchell said. "Must have been a homicide case."

"Sorry, kid, but business is business, and I ain't got the right to make it public until my department says so. But it was murder, all right. You keep it under your hat like a good guy. You really don't remember me, do you?"

"Oh, I remember who you are," Mitchell said hastily. "But it's been so long I never would have recognized you. You've changed a lot. Your face used to be thinner."

HARRIGAN nodded and looked mildly annoyed.

"I've been at a desk these last two years and you don't take weight off sitting. Look, kid, we're old friends and I want to see more of you. Maybe you could come down to my cabin sometime and we could play some two-handed poker. We might as well make it three-handed, I can bring in my prisoner. But I don't want you to say anything to anybody about me being aboard. Let's call all this off the record."

"My lips are sealed," Craig Mitchell promised.

"Good!" Harrigan said. "Now have a drink on me."

The bartender rustled up another Martini and another champagne cocktail.

"This is the first touch of home I've had in a long time, Harrigan," Craig Mitchell said ruminatively. "Seems like old times. Say, by the way, how's your leg?"

Harrigan frowned at him. "What do you mean, my leg?"

"Your wound," Mitchell said. "Well, if you don't remember it, it must be okay now. I haven't forgotten, though—that time you took Jimmy Ferris on the roof of the Plaza Hotel. I saw that leg, Inspector. It looked as though it would never come together, but I guess it did, eh?"

"Yeah," said Harrigan slowly. "It's okay. It gave me a lot of trouble for awhile. But it's okay now."

There was a movement on Craig Mitchell's right, as someone climbed

onto a stool in front of the bar. He turned, to see a girl with yellow hair, who had come in from the deck. She was so pretty, she was startling.

"Clover Club," she told the barkeep. Presently she turned and looked at the young man beside her. "Hello, Mr. Mitchell," she said suddenly.

Craig looked flabbergasted. "Do I know you?"

"No," she said quietly. "I know *you*. Oh, we've met, but I wouldn't expect you to remember it. It was in Paris, at the Black Cat. You were blotto. And very, very romantic."

"I wish I could remember more of it," Mitchell said ruefully.

"Think nothing of it," she drawled. She drank her cocktail quickly, said good-by and went out as quietly as she came in.

Craig turned back to resume his conversation with Harrigan but was surprised to find that Harrigan had also vanished.

"He left," the bartender said, "while you was talking to the lady." He polished a glass lustily. "Anything else, sir?"

Mitchell shook his head, paid his tab and went along the corridor of A Deck toward his cabin. He felt much better. His stomach had settled itself under the influence of the champagne cocktails.

"Of course," he told himself, "there never was such a character as Jim Ferris. And I never did see Inspector John Peter Harrigan get shot in the leg. Which makes it all very odd. On second thought, I might conceivably be mistaken."

Instead of going immediately to his small cabin, he went up to the boat deck, where the radio shack was located, and entered.

Sparks, the operator, smiled politely at him.

"You wish to send a message, sir?"

"Yes, I do." Mitchell scribbled something rapidly on a blank radiogram and handed the message to the operator.

Sparks took the paper and glanced at it. It read:

CITY EDITOR NEW YORK CHRONICLE NEW YORK NEW YORK PLEASE RADIO VERIFIED WHEREABOUTS OF ONE JOHN PETER HARRIGAN INSPECTOR NEW YORK HOMICIDE BUREAU

SIGNED CRAIG MITCHELL

"How much?" asked Mitchell, as Sparks looked up.

Sparks told him and he paid. Mitchell noticed that the operator was staring at him but, caught in the act, Sparks lowered his eyes.

"Craig Mitchell," he said slowly. "You're Craig Mitchell?"

"Yes, I am." The young newspaperman looked hard into the operator's gray eyes. "Why?"

"Nothing," Sparks said, plainly bothered. "Nothing at all, sir."

II

THERE were footsteps in the hall outside Craig Mitchell's cabin shortly after he entered it—the scampering pitter-pat of a man running lightly on his toes. Almost instantly, there was a knock on the door. Mitchell, who had been writing a letter at the desk, rose to his feet but the door opened before he reached it.

The newspaper man stood stockstill, frowning at his guest.

"Jules!" was all he said, gaping at the intruder.

"*Sapristi!*" Jules panted. "That was a close one!"

He was a short man, thin, swarthy, Gallic. His eyes were bright and excitable as any good Frenchman's should be. On his right cheek was a long, raked gutter which a woman's fingernails had cut there. The Frenchman pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed at the wound.

"Is this not a fine thing?" he grunted bitterly. "Me, Jules Gerard, a prefect of police, a man of high dignity, scurrying around a ship in the manner of a rat or a footpad like a common thief. Jules Gerard, the most audacious detective of the Sûreté, compelled to slink and hide in closets."

"The door is locked now," Mitchell said, a faint smile on his lips. "Come on over and sit down. Your hands are shaking like a leaf."

Gerard looked at his hands. "*Mon Dieu!*" he moaned. "They are the hands of a corpse. But they should shake. I have been through—how you say?—a tight fit?"

"Squeeze," Craig Mitchell said dryly. "*Oui.*" The agitated Frenchman

strode across the room and plumped into a chair. He mopped at the wound again with his handkerchief.

"That girl—she is like a rattlesnake! So quick. Ah, it is a miserable business."

Craig Mitchell gave him a cigarette.

"Miserable is the name for it," he agreed morosely. "I wish I had some idea of what's going on. I was accosted by strangers twice today and only, I am positive, because I have been openly seen with you several times since we left Cherbourg and before *mal de mer* caught up with me."

Mitchell had opened his mouth to elaborate on his complaint when he was interrupted by a knock on the door. It was not a brusque knock, but rather a timid one. The Frenchman jumped to his feet. Craig Mitchell motioned him into the bathroom adjoining.

A woman stood outside—a good-looking woman in a hard capable sort of way. Her eyes were steely and sharp, her mouth tight.

"Oh!" she said, abashed. "You're not—I'm afraid I've made a mistake."

Craig Mitchell nodded. "Have you?" he asked coolly.

Her eyes searched his face. They took in every detail of his features and of his apparel.

"Oh, yes, I have made a mistake, but I know who you are. You're Mr. Craig Mitchell, the foreign correspondent."

"Amazing!" Mitchell murmured with heavy sarcasm. He looked a trifle annoyed. "How did you know that?"

"Oh, everybody's talking about you," she told him airily. "My name is Mildred Smith. I'm traveling with my uncle. He said he was going to have a cocktail with a friend and I wanted to find him. But I guess I must have got the cabins mixed up."

She fumbled with her bag, as if she were ashamed or embarrassed by the mistake, but it was hard for her to simulate either emotion.

"I'm sorry to have bothered you," she murmured, with downcast eyes. "Awfully sorry. Good day."

Craig Mitchell shut the door and Jules Gerard came out of the bathroom. The prefect nodded toward the door.

"Lock it, my friend," he said tersely.

"I'm getting a little tired of this," Craig Mitchell declared, frowning. "What does it all mean, Jules?"

"It means only," Gerard replied, "that

the lady was checking to see who had been in her room. She will look for the man whose face she scratched."

"She looked at my right cheek hard enough," Mitchell said grumpily. "But why did she come here? She knew?"

"Non." The Frenchman shook his head. "She did not see me. The fact of the matter is, Craig, that you are suspected. It is as you say—because we two are friends, she thinks that we are in league. It is regrettable but it is not of my making. Do you have a gun?"

For answer, Craig Mitchell strode to a piece of luggage, opened the bag and took out a pistol.

"This is a Webley," he said, "and I can shoot it."

"Bien," Jules Gerard said. "You've only to sleep with it."

"I don't like to sleep with a gun," Mitchell said evenly. "And I don't like mysteries, Jules, not when they concern me." He raised his hand and pointed to the long, ragged scratch. "How did you get that?"

JULES GERARD shrugged. "I will tell you," he said. "You are my friend. It is—how you say?—not for publication. I am interested in a lady—this Miss Smith who just make the call—and I am interested in her husband. While they are at dinner I go to their room. I use a key and let myself in. I am looking for something, something very important. But I am trapped. I grab a coverlet and hide quick behind the door.

"When she opens the door and comes in I throw the coverlet over her head so that she cannot see me. But she is a tiger, that one, and she scratches my face. But while she is struggling under the coverlet, I make my getaway. And I come right here. It is the closest place I think—"

He could not finish, because of another knock on the door. Mitchell looked thoroughly annoyed but the Frenchman instantly arose and returned to the bathroom.

Craig Mitchell dropped the Webley pistol on the desk where it was in plain sight from the door. Then he walked to the door and opened it.

"Radiogram, sir," a steward said, and handed the message over.

Mitchell relaxed. "All right, Jules, you can come out," he called. He returned to

the desk and ripped open the message. It said:

HAVE YOU GONE CRAZY? WHERE ELSE WOULD IRON HEAD HARRIGAN BE BUT AT CENTRE STREET POLICE HEADQUARTERS? AS FOR VERIFICATION I JUST SPOKE WITH HIM ON THE TELEPHONE TO MAKE SURE WILL BE GLAD TO SEE YOU BACK SIGNED
THE OLD MAN

It was no surprise to the puzzled newspaperman. But at least the message made him more sure of his ground. He turned to explain it to Jules Gerard but the Frenchman was not there. Mitchell glanced at the bathroom door. It was still closed.

"Hey!" he called. "Come on out, Jules!"

There was no reply. The bathroom door remained shut. Mitchell stared at it for a moment and for some reason he suddenly shivered.

"Jules!" he snapped but only the sound of his own voice filled the room.

Then he heard a whisper. It was a faint ghastly whisper, more like a dying breath, but unmistakably it formed the name, "Craig."

Pistol in hand he stepped to the bathroom door and opened it. His face went white as all the blood drained from it.

Jules Gerard was there and alive—just alive. He was lying on his side in the bathtub and the glistening white porcelain was stained crimson. There was a gash in the middle of his back, slightly to the left of the spine. There was no doubt of it—Gerard was dying. But he could still speak.

"Craig, quick—you must listen to me. Do what I say—every word counts."

"Yes?" Mitchell asked, his voice quivering.

"Quick—plug the wound! Take me out of here. I will try and walk to my cabin." Gerard's white hand moved feebly in the bottom of the tub.

Craig did not understand but he got a towel, nevertheless. It was too large, so he exchanged it for a new face cloth. This he stuffed beneath the rent in the coat. Instantly it soaked up the blood. While he worked the thought was beating at his brain—how? How could this have been done?

"The Giant Killer," Gerard rasped with superhuman effort. "The—Giant—Killer!" They were his last words.

His eyes were glazed when Craig Mitchell raised him from the tub. But he still breathed, raucously, noisily. Mitchell passed the Frenchman's arm around his own neck and in this way they walked.

Craig Mitchell was lucky. There were no passersby. When they reached Gerard's cabin he found the door locked. He fumbled in the Frenchman's pocket, found a ring of keys which he appropriated.

Thrusting the room key in the lock he got the door open. They stumbled in together. The Frenchman did not weigh much, so Mitchell easily lifted him in his arms and placed him gently in the center of the bed. He left him an instant to go to the door, remove the key from the lock, shut the door firmly. When he returned to the bed, there was a deathly silence in the cabin.

Jules Gerard was dead.

III

As Craig Mitchell stood there, all alone in the Frenchman's cabin with a corpse, the realization of what Jules Gerard, dying, had done for him and what he had meant by his dying words suddenly came to Mitchell with the force of a physical blow.

He remembered his own unspoken question in the bathroom—how had Jules been killed? But Gerard had been way ahead of him. Poor Gerard had realized that others too would ask, "How?"

That was why Gerard, with his lungs drowning in his own blood, had begged to be taken away from Mitchell's cabin. For now when they found him he would be dead in his own cabin, alone.

In that moment determination came to Mitchell.

He would find the devil who had done this thing and avenge Jules Gerard if it took a lifetime!

In the meantime, he must force himself to be practical. The least slip now and he would still be accused of Gerard's murder, with no chance to avenge his friend.

Carefully, Craig Mitchell wiped the knob of the door, the only thing he had touched with his bare hand. From Gerard's key ring, he took the cabin key,

wiped it off also and laid it on the desk. He kept the rest of the keys, slipping them into his own pocket.

Listening with his ear at the door until there was no sound in the corridor, he finally stepped out and made his way hastily back to his own cabin, where he locked the door and sank into the chair beside the desk. He was trembling violently and feeling suddenly sick again. But this was not seasickness.

"How?" he repeated dully. "How?"

He rose and went to the bathroom, and stood at the threshold, staring into the bloodstains with repugnance. He did not want to go in there but he had to. He crossed the threshold to the bathtub, where he turned on the water. In a few moments, the blood had washed down.

He took a facecloth, soaked it and washed the porcelain thoroughly. It picked up a remarkable lot of stains. When he had finished he flushed it away in the drainage and it was gone forever.

There was one porthole in that bathroom, which opened onto an alley in the deck, and Mitchell suddenly became aware that it was open. Usually it was screened by a curtain. The curtain was pushed aside now and the porthole was open, inward—a small porthole, far too small for a man to force his body through it.

He stared at the porthole, then at the tub. He was trying to measure the distance, decide if it were possible for a weapon to be thrown from the porthole to the tub. But it was a difficult thing to do—and besides, there was no weapon! Outside, in the hall, he suddenly heard many footsteps. Then, knocking.

No timid knocking this—the knuckles of a man's hand upon the wood. He glanced hastily around the bathroom to make sure everything was all right, then went to the door and opened it. Johnson, the purser of the *Baltic Star*, stood outside. At his left was a seaman, at his right an elderly woman.

"Hello," Craig Mitchell said politely. "Something wrong?"

"I heard it here!" the elderly woman said, her lips tight and accusatory. "I distinctly heard a man here. He screamed as if he had been hurt."

Craig Mitchell stared at her. She was a woman of tremendous bulk. She must have weighed at least two hundred and fifty pounds. She was a trifle shorter

than Mitchell himself but she was still tall.

She looked old-fashioned with her gray hair and shiny spectacles. The spectacles looked silly on her face because her skin was rough and filled with large pores, like a man's. Her mouth was surly.

HER hands were hard, and calloused. Half of them was covered by lace mitts, with open fingers, like grandma used to wear. But she could not conceal those hands. They were the hands of a pioneer or a garroter. She thrust out her long pointed jaw and stared coldly and accusingly at Craig Mitchell, as if already knowing him to be guilty of the most damnable crime on the calendar—killing his own friend. Knowing, in fact, much too much, Mitchell thought suddenly.

Johnson, the purser, was almost apologetic. "Mrs. Vail is sure she heard some strange sound, Mr. Mitchell," he murmured. "She believes it came from here and insists there's been foul play. Would you mind if we took a look around?"

Craig Mitchell smiled indulgently at the purser.

"Of course you may look around, sir," he said pleasantly. "Come right in, and look to your heart's content. Although frankly, I heard nothing at all." He glanced at the large, stern-faced woman. "A scream, did you say?" he asked innocently.

"A scream," Mrs. Vail said adamantly. "As if a man's breath had been cut in half by a knife."

Mitchell jerked around to her, startled. She was smiling coldly at him. She knew. He felt his flesh crawling as he stared at her—an elderly woman and yet, in her cold eyes and cruel face, Craig Mitchell saw the strength for murder.

But if she had been in the bathroom she could not have hidden that two hundred and fifty pounds of hers. Nor could she have vanished in thin air.

The purser made a search of the cabin. He made it brief, plainly showing that he distrusted Mrs. Vail, resented her implications, liked Mitchell. As soon as it was finished, he apologized heartily to the newspaperman and they all took their leave.

Craig Mitchell watched the woman's face. She was remarkably good at hid-

ing her emotions. But she did turn and stare at Mitchell and he had the distinct impression that she thought him very clever indeed.

He locked the door carefully when they had all gone. And even as he slid the key into his pocket, he felt that the entire action had been useless. He had locked the door before or rather Jules Gerard had. And the Frenchman had died, nonetheless.

Craig Mitchell went to his bunk and sank down upon it.

"There was no one here," he said to himself, slowly. "I came in, I hung my coat in the closet. There was no sign that anyone was here or had been here. Then I went to the bathroom and washed my hands and if there had been a soul in there I should certainly have seen him. There was no place to hide in the bathroom. Only Jules came in. How—"

He jumped hastily to his feet and went into the bathroom again. He closed the door with the idea of trying to reenact what possibly had been Gerard's last movements. He stood there a moment, facing the door as he imagined Gerard must have waited for the call to come out. He dropped his eyes to the floor.

There was a drop of blood on the floor— One drop of blood, about the size of a quarter. He shivered. What if the purser had also seen that drop of blood! How that old crone would have loved it! Only the fact that the door had been open, the breadth of its sill hiding the spot, had prevented its detection.

Using his handkerchief, Craig quickly wiped it up and when it was gone he marked its former location with a pencil. He went over the tiled floor scrupulously, but could locate no more such incriminating evidence.

Satisfied, he returned to the mark he had made with the pencil and stood in the same position in which Gerard had stood. He knew he had the right idea now of Gerard's movements, for it was plain enough that the drop of blood had fallen from the wound.

FROM this position he measured the room. It was eight feet from where he stood to the porthole. There was no doubt that the act had been committed by way of that porthole but how was still a mystery. Where was the knife if one had been thrown?

Since it was impossible that a knife had been thrown, or else it would have been found, there seemed only one alternative. But that, too, was an impossible feat. Even the longest-armed human freak could not have had that long a reach. The arms of a gorilla were not that long.

It was conceivable, of course, that someone might have thrown a knife through the porthole and then pulled it out by cord or wire or something attached to it. But that would have left a ragged trail of blood.

It was impossible—it could not have happened! But it had been done.

With tight lips Craig Mitchell strode back to the closet, put on a topcoat and went out, locking his door behind him.

The night was chilly as Mitchell climbed to the boat deck. A raw wind beat the topcoat between his legs, and overhead the moon-struck clouds tumbled in hasty flight across the sky.

Mitchell had a vague feeling that someone had followed him but shook it off as he reached the radio shack, entered and closed the door. The operator looked up at him, smiling widely.

"Back again, Mr. Mitchell?" he said.

"Yes," the newspaper man said quietly. "I have a message I'd like you to get off to New York for me. It's rather urgent and I'd appreciate it if you'd send the reply down to me as soon as it arrives."

"Certainly. Let's have it."

INSPECTOR JOHN PETER HARRIGAN NEW YORK POLICE HEADQUARTERS CENTRE STREET NEW YORK HELLO IRON HEAD PRODIGAL SON RETURNING HOME AFTER LONG TIME NO SEE STOP BUT NEEDS INFORMATION URGENTLY AND REQUESTS THAT YOU SEND REPLY TO FOLLOWING STOP WERE YOU EVER TROUBLED WITH AN IMPOSTOR WHO DOUBLES FOR YOU LOOKS A LOT LIKE YOU BUT IS OBVIOUSLY FRAUD ALSO CAN YOU GIVE ME ANY INFORMATION CONCERNING SOMEONE KNOWN AS THE GIANT KILLER SOMETHING ROTTEN IN DENMARK WOULD ADVISE YOU TO MEET SHIP

SIGNED CRAIG MITCHELL

He handed the message to the radio operator, who took it and read it through slowly. When he had finished, Sparks stared at Craig Mitchell.

"What's wrong?" Mitchell asked.

"You say in this radiogram that some-

thing is rotten in Denmark." Sparks shook his head and grinned wryly. "That's what I call an understatement."

Sparks rose to his feet, went to the door and locked it. He came back and sat down easily, looked at the radiogram again.

"You don't have to send this," he said.

"What do you mean?" Mitchell demanded.

"You're a right guy, Mr. Mitchell," Sparks said abruptly. "I know that. A friend of yours made the crossing on this boat about a month ago—Don Lightbody, the AP correspondent in Paris. I knew Don before he ever got his first newspaper job, and before I ever went to sea. Back in college together. He used to come up here and we'd have long talks. He told me all about you."

IV

CRAIG MITCHELL offered Sparks a cigarette, lighted one himself. "What's your name?" Mitchell asked.

"Bannion," Sparks replied. "John Bannion. But of course everybody calls me Sparks."

"I'll call you Bannion," Mitchell said, grinning. "More of a personal touch to me than Sparks." He paused and took a drag on his cigarette. "You were saying—"

"I was saying that Don said you were one of the smartest foreign correspondents in the game and a swell guy besides."

Mitchell grinned.

"You're a right guy yourself. Thanks for the orchids."

"You don't have to send this wire on to New York," Sparks said slowly. "Well, in a way, you do, I suppose because I can't tell you a thing about this guy you call the Giant Killer. But I know the phony."

Mitchell nodded. "A gray-haired guy."

"I know the guy. He's plenty interested in you. This is all off the record. You understand that?"

"I understand," Mitchell said firmly. "You lose your job if you're caught disclosing private correspondence—something like that?"

"That's about it," Bannion said pleasantly. "Of course I am supposed to keep

confidential any messages which pass through here. But that don't cut any ice right now. At least, not with me.

"Well, the guy I'm talking about came in here early yesterday morning. His radiogram went to a guy named Dan Jordan at a Broadway address. It said something about grandma being safe and sound. And then he asked if Jordan would wire him complete information about a guy named Craig Mitchell. He wanted to know if you were connected in any way with the French Sûreté."

"He wants to know a lot of things, doesn't he?" Mitchell murmured.

Bannion nodded soberly. "Well, he got an answer to his message, and this Jordan did a pretty good job of identifying you. He said you weren't connected with the Sûreté, but that you were a foreign correspondent and maybe you were friendly with some guy in the Sûreté. Then he asked what it was all about.

"About half an hour later, this phony came back upstairs and sent a message back to Jordan. He just said, 'Mitchell is very friendly with that man I told you about over the telephone from Paris and that's it.'" Sparks rubbed his chin briskly. "By the way, his name is Holmes. Wilson Holmes. At least, that's the one he's registered aboard ship with."

Craig sighed heavily and put out his cigarette.

"Well, you never know. He told me he was a cop, going home with a prisoner. He even told me he was a cop I once knew."

"Yeah, I got an inkling of that," Bannion said, "from your radiogram and the reply to it."

"Has he really got a prisoner in his cabin?"

Bannion shrugged. "I don't know if he's a prisoner or not but he's registered aboard ship as a guy named Mal Jaxon. They've got a dame in with them, too. They've got a suite. I don't know what she calls herself but she is Holmes' wife."

"I met the lady," Mitchell said dryly.

Bannion grunted, and looked amused.

"If she's a lady, I'm the Rajah of Hel-singfors," he observed.

"That reminds me of a girl I've noticed aboard," Mitchell said. "Maybe you've met her—very pretty, with bright straw hair." He coughed a little embarrassedly. "She struck up an acquaintance at the bar and said she'd

once met me at a party at the Black Cat in Paris. She said I didn't remember it because I was tight."

"Well?" Bannion said.

Mitchell grinned. "I know what you're thinking. But that isn't it. You see, I don't drink. I had some champagne aboard this ship, but that was purely to throw my seasickness out the window. Otherwise, I never touch it. And I've never been to the Black Cat—not in my whole three years in Paris!"

BANNION'S face showed no surprise or puzzlement. "You've sure got somebody going—whoever they all are and whatever their reasons." He shook his head. "Sorry, I've never seen this girl you're talking about. She hasn't been up here."

Craig Mitchell rose and pulled his coat about him. "Well, I haven't got the remotest idea why they should be so interested in me," he sighed.

"You've been hanging around with Jules Gerard," said Sparks.

Mitchell looked at Bannion sharply. "Know him?" he asked.

"Know him?" Bannion exclaimed. "I'll say I do. It's not the first time he's been aboard this liner after somebody. Whoever he was after—and it looks as if we have a pretty fair idea of who that is, probably thinks you're hooked up with him. I figure that Holmes is the man he is after, though there may be a whole gang, for all I know. Gerard sent a message off to New York up here, telling the people at the Customs Bureau to meet him at Quarantine."

"Bannion," Craig Mitchell said warmly, "you're a miracle man. All you have to do to make me fall over in a faint of admiration at this point is to tell me why Jules Gerard wants this man Wilson Holmes."

Bannion shook his head, smiling. "I don't know that, Mitchell. And I won't make any promises about finding out what it is. But there is a chance. I'll speak to the purser. The Sûreté often warns the pursers of outgoing ships to be on the watch for smuggled articles."

He stared down at the radiogram Mitchell had written. "You still want to send this off?"

"No, let it ride," Mitchell said. "The Giant Killer can wait for a little bit. I have a feeling I'm going to find out what it means before we get to New York

anyhow. After all, I don't want to stick my neck out so far that I won't be able to pull it in."

"That's a smart play," Sparks agreed, as he and Mitchell shook hands.

"I'd like to feel that I can count on you if I work into this thing without helping myself," Mitchell said. "Can I?"

Bannion grinned. "My watch here is from twelve noon to eight P.M. I'm free any other time, and my cabin is on the promenade deck, just below the shack here."

"Thanks," Mitchell said. "Thanks a lot." And he went out into the night.

* * * * *

Craig Mitchell had no idea how long he had been asleep when vaguely to his sleep-drugged senses there came the sound of a slight click, then a rasp of wood as if a drawer had been pulled open. In his bunk Mitchell sleepily opened his eyes.

He glanced at his wrist-watch from habit. It was three A.M. His cabin was completely black. There was a smell of fresh salt air, and through the porthole he could see the sky bright with moonlight.

The *Baltic Star* had taken up an easy roll, which did not bother him at all. She was pushing at a good speed, and sometimes as she stuck her bow in hard, the woodwork in his cabin would creak. He lay there, wide awake now, faintly wondering what had startled him out of sleep. And suddenly he heard a sharper creak—and knew that the ship's motion had not caused it!

He had locked his door upon retiring and had even placed a chair beneath the knob, so that if anyone had tried to open the door, even with a pass key, the chair would have made an awful racket falling.

Perhaps, he thought suddenly, the chair had fallen and the crash had awakened him. He quickly reached up to the shelf behind his head-board, and took down the two-cell flashlight which he kept there. He aimed it at his own door, clicked it on.

The door had not been opened. The chair was still under the knob. Mitchell frowned. Suddenly he felt his heart pounding and realized that his breath was coming fast and raspily.

He reached under his pillow and brought out the Webley pistol. "Speak up, or I'll shoot!" he shouted.

He did not expect an answer—but he got one!

There was a crash, sharp and penetrating. Something cut the flashlight from his hand and smashed it against the wall but the bulb had burst before the flashlight hit. In that flash of a second before the light faded he had seen a jagged sliver of flame. An instant later he smelled the stench of burnt gunpowder.

He dropped to his stomach in his bunk and froze there. There was another shot—and the thud of a bullet in the wall over his back, then a scampering sound as though some small animal were loose in the room.

Craig Mitchell raised his pistol and fired into the darkness. But there was no answering shot.

A small vase on the desk fell with a crash to the floor.

"The porthole!" Mitchell thought swiftly.

The porthole was directly above the desk and whoever was in the room might try any moment to wriggle through it—if he was thin enough.

Throwing back the covers Mitchell leaped to his feet. Pistol in hand he ran to the light switch and clicked it on. Light sprung up to show the whole room.

Craig gaped, open-mouthed. The room, except for himself, was completely empty.

V

MITCHELL looked at his door. It was still locked, the chair still tight beneath the knob. He had also locked the bathroom door when he had retired. He went to it now and found it still locked.

"How in the name of Heaven—?"

Cold sweat stood out upon his brow. His eyes fell to the floor beside the desk. It hadn't been a dream, for there was the little vase in remnants upon the floor, shattered from its fall from the desk. Someone had been there then—but who? How? Why? Where? The newspaperman's axiom pounded in his brain. All but "when."

He crossed the room to the desk and examined it carefully. There were a few fresh scratches on the veneered surface. Nothing more. Across the room, where

a picture of a seven-masted clipper hung upon the wall, he could see where his wild bullet had gone. The glass in the frame was cracked. It looked like the jagged corona of a sun. And his bullet had perforated the crest of a magnificent blue wave.

One foot above his bunk he saw two bullet holes. One of those bullets had knocked the flashlight from his hand, the other had buzzed alarmingly close to his back.

Not a dream, certainly—not a dream for sure. To make it more positive he found the empty shells beside the desk—center fire, .32 calibre shells. That cold fact proved that his unwelcome visitor's gun had been fired at him. And the shells proved that the gun had been a pistol which depended upon the ejection of the used cartridges for its action.

He walked to the porthole quickly and thrust his head out. He almost thrust it directly into the suspicious and frightened face of Mrs. Vail, the rotund elderly woman who knew so much. So suddenly did their faces meet that the hair rose a little on the back of Mitchell's neck. He stared at her, his face dead white.

"Shots!" Mrs. Vail cried, her voice hoarse and guttural. "I heard shots this time! You can't say I didn't!"

"What are you doing up at this time of night?" Mitchell snapped.

"I felt sick—the motion of the boat," she said, as though she had expected that question. "I took a little walk. I heard shots—I know I did! And they came from here." Her mouth worked nervously. "I'm going to get an officer."

"Did you see anyone around here?" Mitchell asked.

"No," she replied, her breath coming wheezily. "I saw nobody. But I heard shots!"

"You heard shots all right," Mitchell said stiffly. "And I don't give a hoot which officer you get. I want one myself. There was someone in my cabin. He shot at me and I fired at him, even if I didn't see him."

Mrs. Vail looked at him coldly. Plainly she did not believe him.

"Strange goings-on," she said with an emphatic sniff.

Without answering her Mitchell shut the porthole and locked it. She could call whomever she pleased, he thought savagely. But he felt his flesh creeping.

That woman was beginning to bother him. She was around too much. She was like a jinx.

How she happened to be Johnny-on-the-spot when anything was going on he could not guess—but she was. Probably her natural instinct for nosiness, for she looked like a typical fat suspicious small-town crone, who probably lived in utter seclusion and had her nose in all the neighbors' business. Probably hung on a party-line all day when she was home, listening to other people's business and trying to mind it too. But he wished most positively that she was out of his hair.

He waited half an hour for an officer to arrive. Apparently no one else had heard the shots and Mrs. Vail had failed to make good her threat, for no one came. Which, Mitchell thought, was odd in itself. Why hadn't she called someone?

About four A.M., Craig Mitchell had settled himself in his bed once more and was trying to go to sleep but it was an impossibility. He lay there, half-conscious, with the gun in his right hand. It was a cinch no one would come back that night, he thought, but still the remote possibility would not let him close his eyes.

His baggage had seemed to be untouched when he had investigated. His clothes and belongings were all in place. There was nothing anyone could steal from him anyhow. He had not even had enough valuables to put them in the purser's vault. He was no candidate for high-seas robbery.

He was drowsing when a knock on his door jerked him wide awake. It was a quiet knock, a cautious one. Mitchell rose, slipped on his robe and went to the door. He pulled the chair from beneath the knob and set it to one side. Then, boldly, for he had his gun in his hand, he opened the door wide.

"Inspector" John Peter Harrigan, otherwise Wilson Holmes, stood there with another man behind him. Both of them had guns. The other fellow was an ugly-looking customer.

Holmes did not even give Craig time to raise the Webley pistol. The two men pushed in, Holmes thrusting the muzzle of his short-barreled revolver into Mitchell's stomach as his hand swiftly reached out and twisted the pistol from Mitchell's hand.

"Get over there and sit down on the edge of that bunk," he commanded in a low, ominous voice.

"What is this?" Mitchell demanded, more annoyed than intimidated.

"Keep your trap shut!" Holmes snapped. "Lock that door, Mal, and stand there."

There was a wry expression on Mitchell's face as he looked at the man who had been called Mal.

"I suppose this is your 'prisoner'?" he asked Holmes dryly.

"Sure," Mal said. "That's me all over—the inspector's prisoner."

RARELY had the newspaperman ever seen a man more unprepossessing than this man, big, broad, with his square face and square head and little eyes that were set too close together. He held a big .45-calibre pistol in his hand and from the way he handled it it was quite plain that he was familiar with its use.

"Sit down!" Holmes repeated his order. "Cut out the malarkey, Mitchell, and let's get down to brass tacks."

"Why, Inspector," Mitchell said ingenuously, "I haven't the slightest idea what you're talking about."

Holmes pulled a radiogram from his pocket and handed it to Mitchell—the message from New York which informed that Inspector John Peter Harrigan was not aboard the *Baltic Star* at sea but was in his office in the Homicide Bureau in Centre Street, New York City.

"I'm on," Holmes said quietly.

"I see," Mitchell said and glanced at Holmes' evil-looking companion. "Who's this?"

"Snow White," the man himself answered in a simpering falsetto.

"Nix," growled Wilson Holmes. "Never mind the funny stuff, Mal." He stared hard at Craig Mitchell. "All right, you're on and I'm on. You know I'm a phony and I want to know what you are. This here is Mal Jaxon. He's a hard boy, Mitchell, and you'd better play ball, or you'll wind up over the side, floating face down in the Atlantic—with maybe three or four slugs in you."

Mitchell moved over to his bunk and sat on the edge of it, dangling his legs nonchalantly.

"Look," he said, "I don't know what your game is—I don't know what you

want of me. I don't know where I fit into any pretty little game you may have on anyhow. I'm just a tired newspaper correspondent on the way home and if anything depresses me it's an arsenal.

"I've seen enough weapons in the last day or two to feed me up for life. Now spill what you've got to spill and get out of here or I'll call up the purser and nave you two mugs slapped into the brig for illegal entry."

Mal Jaxon, at the door, laughed. "Ain't that amusin'?" he chuckled. "You're goin' to have us slapped in the brig. Ain't that just fine? Pal, you treading on thin ice and you know it. If we go in the brig you go in the brig too. You know that."

"Button it, Mal," Holmes said easily. "Mitchell knows he isn't fooling anybody."

"On the contrary," Craig Mitchell replied, "it should be evident that you know you are not fooling anybody. The radiogram which you so successfully lifted from my cabin should prove that."

"A bright boy," Mal Jaxon said.

"Never mind that," Holmes said. He stared at Mitchell and his pale eyes seemed to water. "You know why we're here. Come across."

"You've got to make better sense than that," Mitchell said easily. "Come across with what?"

"Look!" Holmes said evenly. "Look, Mitchell, I'm not fooling any more. I've spent a lot of time getting that stuff, and I'm not being taken at this stage of the game. You took it! I know the French flatfoot didn't take it because, if he had, we'd be in irons. A cop's a cop.

"I know he was snooping around in our cabin, but he didn't get anything. If he had the captain would have stuck us in the brig and held us for the authorities—like that." He snapped his fingers.

"Very interesting," Craig Mitchell drawled. "But whatever 'it' is, I still fail to see how it concerns me."

Mal Jaxon moved away from the door and approached Mitchell, where he sat on the bunk. Jaxon had reversed the gun in his hand and there was a steely glint in his eyes, as his ugly lips curled in a snarl. Mitchell tensed himself.

"You're asking for it, pal," Jaxon rumbled. "Do I work on him, Boss?"

"Not yet," Holmes said as he watched the newspaperman sharply. "Are you

going to talk, Mitchell?"

"Like an American senator," Mitchell said. "But I need prompting. Just what do you both want to know?"

"Where's the stuff?" Mal Jaxon snapped.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Then where is the Frenchie?" Holmes said suddenly. "I don't go for this innocent pan of yours. And I don't go for the innocent lingo. You know a lot more than you're saying. All right, just supposing you haven't got the stuff—which I doubt. Then where is the Frenchman? Where is that guy Jules Gerard?"

"He won't bother you any more," Craig said quietly. "Jules Gerard won't bother you any more. He's dead."

The two men gasped. Holmes wet his lips and looked shaken.

"Dead?" he repeated hoarsely. "What happened to him?"

"I thought you knew," Craig Mitchell said meaningly.

VI

JAXON walked to the side of the bed and slapped Craig Mitchell across the side of the head. It was an open blow with the heel of the hand but there was force behind it, enough to slam the newspaperman against the wall, where he hit the back of his skull with a dull thud.

He was not knocked out, for the blow was not meant to knock him out. It was meant to be painful and it was.

Mitchell came up out of the bunk, red-faced and furious, but before he could reach his feet to defend himself Jaxon hit him again in almost exactly the same place.

Mitchell's face was scarlet where the blows had struck.

"Cut it out, Mal!" Holmes commanded.

"He's been asking for it—he's asking for it all the time, talking that sort of junk!" Jaxon said savagely. "I ought to work on him with this rod."

"Listen, Mitchell," Holmes said, "and get this straight. We didn't know Gerard was dead and I'm asking you right now—how did it happen?"

"He was murdered," Craig said.

"Stabbed in the back."

Holmes and Jaxon exchanged glances. Then they stared back at Mitchell.

"Did you do it?" Holmes demanded.

"Oh, certainly," Mitchell said. "With my favorite carving knife. That's why I'm telling you."

Jaxon moved again, but this time Mitchell was on his feet before the man could reach him.

"If you come near me again," he gritted. "I'll knock your chin off, and I don't care what you do with the gun!" Jaxon stopped.

"Mal didn't kill him and I didn't kill him," Holmes said ruminatively. "What kind of a pair of fools do you think we are? Kill a French cop like that and have a horde of police at the dock when we get in? That's not what we wanted. We wanted peace and quiet. Knocking off that cop would just be sticking our heads in a noose. *Did* you do it?"

"No," Mitchell said shortly. "My name is not Judas. Jules Gerard was my friend."

"Who did?" Holmes' voice was barely a whisper.

"I don't know who did," Mitchell said slowly, his lips drawn thin and grim. "I don't even know how he was killed—I wish I did. He was in my bathroom, standing by the door, eight feet from a porthole that was open. He was stabbed in the back and there was no knife in the wound or anything around when I found him.

"And no knife had been pulled out of the wound either, for there was no blood trail on the floor. The only other way he could have been murdered would have been for somebody to thrust a spear through the open porthole and catch him in the back. But that looks far-fetched on the face of it—and there still would inevitably have been a trail of blood drops."

Holmes looked a trifle pale. Mal Jaxon tugged at his collar and stared at his companion in crime. "Did he say anything?" Holmes asked. "Did he yell?"

"No, he didn't yell," Mitchell replied.

"He did say one thing when I found him just before he died—and I don't know why I'm telling you that except that doesn't make sense to me either. All he could say was 'the Giant Killer.' I took him back to his own cabin and he died there. Anything else you gentlemen would like to know?"

"The Giant Killer!" Mal Jaxon rasped in a terrible voice, a voice so strange that Craig Mitchell jerked around to stare at the gunman.

And he saw a strange sight. For the gunman, the hard-boiled boy, the ugly man with the slapping hands, was white as a ghost and looked terrified. His eyes were wide, the whites showing prominently. His mouth worked but no words came from his thick brutish lips.

"The Giant Killer!" Holmes repeated faintly. "You're certain?"

"You look as though you'd seen a ghost," Mitchell remarked acidly.

Holmes turned and faced his man, Mal Jaxon.

"That means Manny Homburg must be aboard, too," he said.

"This is tough, this is bad," Mal Jaxon said, sweating.

Both men walked toward the door, making no bones about wanting to get out of there and swiftly. Jaxon went out without a word but Holmes paused at the door.

"All right, Mitchell," he said, "we made a mistake. I'm sorry Mal was rough with you, but you shouldn't shoot off your mouth that way. Forget what I said about the stuff. Forget what I said about anything. You show a long tongue about this deal and you'll still wind up in the Atlantic or in the morgue. Get me?"

"I get you," the newspaperman drawled. "And you frighten me as a mouse frightens a cat. Just get this, Mr. Holmes. You're none of my business and I'm none of yours. You keep out of my hair or I'm going to get into yours.

"And when you talk about me winding up in the morgue don't forget that you're only human, after all, and a bullet can do the same thing to you that it does to anybody else. I shoot pretty well."

HOLMES smiled thinly as if to dismiss Craig Mitchell's threat. He waved a hand.

"You got the right idea," he warned. "Stay out of it. None of your business. And you know what happened to your friend. I'll still tell you this—we didn't do it. And I'll tell you this too. The guy who did do it is bad—so bad that I'm afraid of him myself. So stay out of it, friend, and live to a ripe old age."

He went out, slamming the door loudly behind him. Craig Mitchell did not bother to go over and lock it. Locks had made little difference this night.

It was four o'clock the following afternoon when Mitchell left the bar on A Deck, and went down the corridor toward his own cabin to dress for dinner.

It had been a singularly mild day, the ocean flat and the *Baltic Star* had made her greatest day's run to date. Mitchell was grateful that his stomach no longer bothered him but even more so for the fact that the corpse of Jules Gerard remained undiscovered.

It had been a singularly mild day indeed—not only from the weather viewpoint but from shipboard viewpoint. Mitchell thought it rather odd that so much could happen one day and the following day—nothing.

All day long he had seen neither Mal Jaxon nor Wilson Holmes nor had he stopped by to chat with Sparks in the radio shack. Nor had the brunette who had scratched the Frenchman's face appeared again—nor, he admitted with a faint regret, had he again seen the beautiful straw-colored hair of the girl he had encountered at the cocktail bar.

Of them all she was the only one in whom Craig Mitchell was really interested. She bothered him. He had not given her too much thought since their meeting at the bar, for too many other things had occupied his exclusive attention. But he couldn't dismiss her face from his memory. She was, in the parlance, a "lulu."

One person, however, had haunted him all day long. Mrs. Vail, the elderly and corpulent bidy who had set the purser on him early the previous night, who also had bobbed up on deck before daylight, dogged his footsteps all day long. No matter where he went she was always bound to turn up.

She disgusted him with her faltering walk, as if she could not support her own weight, her crude coarse features, her utter lack of femininity. But he was relieved that her attitude toward him seemed to have changed somewhat. She no longer regarded him coldly. She actually seemed to be mothering him by remote control. It was as if she wanted to keep her eye on him so that nothing would happen to him.

And so, shortly after four P.M., Craig

Mitchell was making his way through the corridor en route to his own cabin when a door, quite some distance from his own and on the opposite side of the ship, suddenly opened.

"Mr. Mitchell!" a voice called, a pleasant and familiar voice.

He stopped, turned and stared at the door. All he could see at once was a white hand with a set of scarlet fingernails, which beckoned to him. Ordinarily he would have gone right over to see what was what but he was wary after the events of the night before.

"Who is it?" he asked, as he paused.

The door opened a trifle wider and the girl looked out—the pretty girl of the bar, the lady with the straw-colored hair!

"Me," she said. "Come in a minute, will you, please? I want to talk to you."

"Talk to me?" Mitchell repeated. He frowned and stood there without moving.

Standing in the doorway she laughed. Her laugh was very nice.

"I won't eat you," she promised. "I'll guarantee your removal, alive, from this cabin within ten minutes."

Grinning, Mitchell waited no longer but went in through the open door, then turned and watched as she closed and locked it.

"Do you have to lock it?" he asked.

"I'm not locking it for my own benefit," she said. "I'm locking it for yours." Her voice was low and serious as she added abruptly, "You, Mr. Mitchell, are living on borrowed time. I probably know more about that, though, than you do. You're all jammed up."

Craig Mitchell grinned at her again, openly admiring her. "Say," he asked dryly, "who are you, anyway?"

"Bertha Picklepuss," she said very soberly. "An operative of the N.K.V.D., the Russian Mata Hari."

Mitchell didn't smile. "No, I mean it."

"My name could be Millie Blotz but it isn't." She smiled at him reassuringly. "It's Margot Gray. I happen to know you, Mr. Mitchell, because I'm in the same racket you are. I'm not a foreign correspondent but I do belong to the Fourth Estate. I handle the angles on a woman's page for the *New York Dispatch*. But I'm not averse to picking up a good news story on the side and I'd like nothing better than to

break into the police reporters' beat. What I mean is I've got a story and I intend to plop it on the city editor's desk as soon as I land."

"What were you doing abroad?" Mitchell asked.

"I studied in Paris when I was a kid. I'm just coming back from a month's vacation there. I know that you know Jules Gerard. I know him even better than you do. He's a very old friend of my father and a very old friend of mine. So I have a pretty good idea of what he is doing on board this boat. Now look, Craig—and you can call me Margot if you wish—where is Jules?"

MITCHELL shook his head. "I really don't know," he replied warily.

"Has anything happened to him?" She stared at him, her eyes frank and disarming.

"Tell me what you know about me and about what's going on and then I'll see whether I can tell you about Jules," Mitchell suggested.

"All right," she said. "That's fair enough. There's really not much of a secret as to why Jules is aboard the boat. I have it in the *Paris Soir*, right here. You can read it for yourself."

She handed him the newspaper and he saw that the story was pencil-marked. It explained things simply enough. The newspaper recounted that an unknown thief or thieves had stolen from a Mrs. Albert Harrington a square-cut emerald valued at fifteen thousand dollars and a pearl necklace valued at twenty-five thousand. The police had a clue and Inspector Jules Gerard was in charge of the case.

Mitchell handed the newspaper back to her and met her eyes but didn't say anything.

"That explains it, doesn't it?" Margot Gray asked. "Jules had a clue. He suspected this Holmes entourage of the theft and followed them aboard ship. He has already wirelessly the Customs officials in New York to make a complete search of their baggage when we arrive.

"Meanwhile he is trying to get further evidence so that he can make an arrest, for naturally he could not make an arrest without recovering the stolen jewels. It is dangerous work, for he had to break into their cabin and try to recover the jewels."

"Where do I come in?" Mitchell demanded. He frowned heavily. "You don't mean to tell me that just because Jules Gerard is a good friend of mine these crooks have been trying to get me, too?"

Margot Gray smiled. "No, it's not as simple as all that. Did you never hear of the Giant Killer?"

Craig Mitchell looked startled. "Yes." His hands shook a little. He watched her sharply. "How did you hear? I mean—the Giant Killer—does that make sense to you?"

"Of course it makes sense to me," Margot said promptly. "Only a foreign correspondent who's been abroad for three years and failed to keep in touch with what was going on in his homeland wouldn't know about the Giant Killer." "All right," Mitchell said. "I admit being a babe in the woods on the subject but right here and now I'd like to know what it means."

"You mean you'd like me to tell you the name of the person known as the Giant Killer?" Margot asked. "I can't do that. No one seems to know what his name is. From all the *Dispatch* has been able to discover though, the Giant Killer is a first-class thief—the tops. He has a gang of course, but it's believed to be very small—it might be only one or two people.

"But the Giant Killer has certainly performed the most unusual feats. Furthermore, he is not afraid to let his name be known—I mean his 'Giant Killer' name. I can tell you about just one of his many mysterious crimes that will illustrate. In New York he stole a ten-grand diamond from a debutante who belongs to the night club society group.

"He had to kill her escort, a young bachelor who tried to stop the theft, and later made no bones about letting the news filter out that it had been the work of the Giant Killer. He seems proud of the mysterious way he can commit crimes—and he's diabolical! Interesting?"

"Very interesting," Mitchell said. "Keep talking."

"Oh, all right then, I'll go into the details. It seems that this kid and her escort were at the Club Intime on Forty-fourth Street. You may not know it but that's a gambling spot. Now and then the police get judicious about it and raid it. On this particular night

there was a raid and the girl and her escort were advised by an elderly woman nearby to seek refuge in a small room in the back of the club.

"According to the girl's testimony later, she and her boy friend went into this room and locked the door. They hoped that the raiding police would pass them by, and thus spare them some rather distasteful publicity. The elderly woman meanwhile disappeared.

"The small room in which the two hid was a card room, probably for private games. They locked the door after glancing around to see that no one else was in the room, then turned out the light, hoping the police would think no one was there and would not search the room.

"A few minutes later the diamond was snatched from the girl. She screamed, called to her escort for help. He grappled with someone and was shot dead. The girl completely hysterical, unlocked the door, turned on the light—and the room was just exactly as it had been when they had come in. Nobody there.

"There were no windows, only the one door. The only way anybody could possibly have entered the room after them was through a ventilator that was no more than a foot wide. And that's the story."

Mitchell was thoughtfully silent a long moment.

"Like a porthole," he finally whispered. "Looks as if the 'thin man' had come to life off the screen, doesn't it? If a man could come and go through a one-foot porthole, he could have entered and left that room through that one-foot ventilator. And he naturally would be a Giant Killer."

Margot Gray stared at him and frowned. "I don't understand."

"I'm beginning to," Craig said. "I'm just beginning to understand. But you haven't quite finished your story."

"No, I haven't, have I? Well, the only thing to add to it is that the Giant Killer is aboard this ship."

"How do you know that?" Craig Mitchell demanded.

"Can I trust you?" Margot Gray asked, eyeing him keenly. "I must be able to trust you in order to tell you how I know. If I can't, you'll have something on me then, and I'll have nothing on you."

"I only want one thing more from you, Margot," Craig Mitchell said firmly. "Let's see your press card."

VII

FOR the first time Craig Mitchell found somebody who was what she said she was. Margot had her card all right and she was on the level. Mitchell had no difficulty in recognizing the New York *Dispatch* card. She had an automobile license too.

"All right," he said with a sigh of relief. "You wanted something on me and I'm going to give it to you and then you can tell me what you know. Jules Gerard is dead. He was murdered in my cabin."

He hesitated, while she gasped and went white. But he went on inexorably.

"He was stabbed in the back, and the only way he could have been stabbed was through a porthole eight feet away—one like that ventilator in the club. I put Jules in his cabin and his body hasn't been found yet. I'd hoped to get to the bottom of this thing before he was found. That's all I know."

Margot, shaken, sat down in a chair, her hands trembling.

"He was such a nice little man," she whispered softly.

Her eyes were moist. She patted them with a dainty handkerchief, rose and went to the porthole in her own cabin and looked out.

Craig Mitchell strolled over to her side. He watched her face. She had the sort of face that rather left a man breathless and he wanted to tell her so but this was neither the time nor the place.

She pointed out the porthole.

"Do you see that lifeboat?"

Craig Mitchell nodded. It was just one of the lifeboats on the boat deck. From her porthole she could see the bottom of it.

"Yes," he said. "What about it?"

"Well, I want you to go up and look inside it. Don't let anyone see you. Last night I heard a scream up there—a woman—and she said one thing—'The Giant Killer!' I was certain that someone else must have heard her but apparently nobody did.

"I took a look in the lifeboat during

the night. It wasn't very pleasant. That's how I know the Giant Killer is aboard. I thought she was the only one but apparently Jules met him too."

"I'll be right back," Mitchell said as he went to the door, unlocked it and went out.

When he returned five minutes later Craig Mitchell's face was a mask—taut, drawn and bloodless. He looked shaken. He knocked on the door and went in without waiting for Margot to answer it, then closed it after him. He faced her. "I saw," he said.

Margot Gray shuddered. She said nothing.

"In the back," Mitchell said. "Just like Jules."

"Her name was Mildred Smith," Margot told him. "She was traveling with Holmes and Jaxon. I think she was Holmes' wife. What's the answer?"

"I have the answer," Mitchell said evenly. "Did Jules Gerard know that the Giant Killer was aboard?"

"I don't think so," Margot said slowly. "I talked with him during the evening but I'm sure he had no idea about the Giant Killer. He was bent only on recovering the loot from Holmes and company. He made no mention of the Giant Killer or the possibility of any rival gang attempting to hijack the Holmes gang—which might be the answer. So Holmes and Jaxon would logically have been the only ones who would have wanted to see Jules out of the way."

Mitchell nodded. "Don't you see? If Jules Gerard had been getting close to that loot and you were somebody who wanted to get it for yourself, what would you do?" He walked to the porthole and stared up at the keel of the lifeboat. "She must have recognized the Giant Killer or his cohorts. That's why she's lying up there in the bilge of that lifeboat with a dagger wound in her back."

Margot Gray rose to her feet and went over to Mitchell. "It's dangerous," she declared. "You're a nice guy, Craig, and you're in it up to your ears too. You know too much and I know too much. I'm afraid! I'm afraid someone might—"

"No!" Mitchell's voice was cold. "Nobody's going to try for us. This is the end. I'm beginning to understand."

"You know?" she asked.

HE nodded. "I know—or I think I know. Holmes came to my cabin last night, asking for the stuff. I didn't know what he meant by 'the stuff' then but I do know now. That means that the loot had already been taken from him. And he thought I had it. But I hadn't. Of course."

"The Giant Killer had then?" Margot suggested. "The Giant Killer had stolen the emerald and the necklace from Holmes then?"

"Right," Mitchell snapped. He took her by the arm. "I've got a hunch—a good hunch. Let's go to my cabin."

"Why?" Margot looked surprised and incredulous.

"Because," Mitchell said grimly, "it's there, in my room—the loot. Don't you see? The Giant Killer stole the loot from Holmes and planted it in my room, intending me to take it through the customs for him without having no slightest idea I was the fall guy."

"Isn't that the way they usually work? They wouldn't dare try to take it through themselves. They would prefer to have some innocent person take it through unknowingly, then steal it back after landing."

"That explains the visit I had late last night, too. The Giant Killer himself planted that loot in my room and we're going to find it right now and spoil the party for the whole bunch of them."

Margot's eyes were shining.

"Let's go!" she whispered eagerly.

Something made the hackles rise on the back of Craig Mitchell's neck as he fumbled with his key in the lock of his cabin door. He could not understand his premonition then—and when he did it was too late.

He opened the door and stood aside as Margot Gray went in. He followed her quickly. He closed the door and had just locked it when he heard Margot Gray gasp. He wheeled around—and went cold and numb instantly. Goose-pimples studded his flesh and chills coursed down the length of his spine.

By the desk, with a Colt .45-calibre Army pistol in her hand, stood Mrs. Vail, the elderly, coarse, omnipresent Mrs. Vail—the two-hundred-and-fifty pound Mrs. Vail, who had dogged his footsteps all day. She looked formidable with a pistol in her hand.

"What the—!" began Mitchell sharply.

"I don't want the door locked," Mrs. Vail snapped. "Unlock it—and hurry."

She made no pretense about having a feminine voice now. It was hard, brittle, and in it was the threat of violence. Hers suddenly was a man's voice.

Craig Mitchell unlocked the door and left the key in the lock. When he turned the pistol was stabbed in his stomach.

"All right, wise guy—get over there by the bed. Don't make any passes or you'll take one in the middle. Who's the dame?"

Then the pattern went crazier.

"I know the dame," came a voice from some unseen source. "She's in it. She was a friend of the French cop's!"

Margot met Craig's eyes and both stared back at Mrs. Vail. But Mrs. Vail had not spoken. Someone else had. Where the voice had come from they could not guess. It was right there with them in that very cabin, yet they could not see the man who had spoken. It was an eerie sensation and Margot was shivering. "Mrs." Vail seemed well pleased with the information.

"What do we do with these lugs?" "she" asked hoarsely.

"We bump them," the voice said.

"Craig!" Margot cried.

"Give me the rod," the voice said coolly. "I'll cover. You act big and innocent."

"Okay," was the grunted response. The man masquerading as a woman slid the hand with the gun into a pocket, and when the hand came out, the gun was no longer in it.

"Don't get any ideas, Mitchell!" came the gruff order. "You're still covered. Get over by the bunk, both of you."

"You're not a woman—you're a man!" Margot abruptly accused.

"Ain't you the smart girl?"

"You're going to kill us!" Margot cried.

Craig Mitchell and Margot had backed to the bunk. Mitchell's hand, back of him, fumbled around the pillow where he had left his Webley pistol. He was wondering if it were still there, praying that it would be.

FROM the appearance of the cabin it was plain that a search had been in progress though the cabin had not been ransacked. Evidently "Mrs." Vail had come for a purpose and had completed the purpose without upsetting

the luggage. The Webley pistol might still be there. If he could only get close enough—

"You two sit on the bunk, hands on your knees—and no monkey business!" "Mrs." Vail snapped. "The first funny move either one of you makes—*bang!*"

Craig Mitchell shrugged as if accepting defeat. "What difference does it make?" he asked dully. "You're going to shoot us anyhow."

"Sure. But you ain't kidding me. Funny thing about a man who's going to die. While there's life there's hope and while you're sitting there with a guarantee that I'm going to plug you, you're still hoping.

"You're still hoping, because you're still alive, and you still feel that there's a chance because you are alive. So no monkey business—or you'll wind up sooner than you have to. And even another minute is better than nothin' at all."

"It's a quarter to six, Manny," the mysterious voice said. "The dinner gong will ring in a couple of minutes. Hold it until then. We could do it now and lam but why take the risk?"

Margot, startled by the voice, reached out and touched Mitchell's hand. "Where—" she began.

"Quiet," Mitchell whispered.

The person he had known as Mrs. Vail watched them like a hawk.

"Well, take it easy," was her—or rather his—cool advice. "You've got a few minutes more, so make the most of them but no praying. Praying bothers me."

"You're a man!" Margot repeated. "Mrs." Vail showed yellowed teeth.

"Sure, sister, I'm a man. I don't mind letting you know it now. I've nothing to lose. My name is Homburg, Manny Homburg."

"Button your lip," the mysterious voice said.

"We can't lose nothin' now," Homburg said petulantly. "If they live we're sunk anyhow. If they die we're clear, so what's the difference?"

Craig Mitchell had slipped his hand slowly along the edge of the bunk until it was now under the edge of the pillow. He could feel the cold hard steel of his pistol there and a thrill ran through him. He raised his hand slowly until he reached the safety catch, which he slipped off.

He saw Homburg watching him sharply, so he withdrew his hand slowly, and casually lighted a cigarette. But the gun was there! At the last moment he would reach for it and start shooting blind. But it was there and that was something.

"You hid the jewels in my cabin, didn't you," he asked indifferently. "You stole them from Holmes and his friend Jaxon and you figured on me taking them through the customs for you. You were going to steal them back from me later on."

"You're a bright boy," Manny Homburg said as he moved over and sat down by the desk. "A very bright boy."

"You killed Jules Gerard because he was in the way!" Mitchell accused. "He was trying to get the same loot that you were! You were afraid he might get it first or failing that he might get wise to the fact that you were aboard ship." He narrowed his eyes. "You're wanted by the police—badly."

"Am I now, Bright Boy? Or are you just guessing?"

"I'm not just guessing!" Craig Mitchell snapped. "You're wanted in New York along with your friend the Giant Killer for plenty of things. Particularly for sticking up that girl in the Club Intime and knocking off her boy friend. You couldn't be the Giant Killer yourself—you're too big. He's got to be thin as a match stick. You've probably got him hiding in a crack right now!"

Manny Homburg sat up straight, plainly startled out of his smug calm.

"How did you know all that?" he demanded.

"I've got a little crystal ball," Mitchell said coldly. And he smiled thinly.

"Did you hear that?" Manny Homburg asked the thin air.

"I heard it," the voice said. "We haven't wasted any time."

VIII

BUT in the corridor the dinner gong sounded, reverberating through the alleys and reaching their ears plainly. Manny Homburg stood up, facing Craig Mitchell and Margot Gray. Mitchell tensed himself. Should he reach for his gun now and start shooting? He had to calculate his and Margot's chances to a

hair's breadth—for he must not fail!

Manny Homburg did not have a gun in his hand, true, but Mitchell well knew that he was covered, that every slightest move he made was watched by the hidden man whose voice he had heard.

"Well, Bright Boy, this is it," Homburg said coolly. "Just one minute more and then folks start going to the dining room. Just as soon as that corridor is cleared." He grinned wryly. "And I'm telling you it's a shame to knock off a dame as good-looking as this one. But it's got to be done."

AT that opportune instant the door suddenly opened and two men stalked in—Wilson Holmes and Mal Jaxon—both standing there with guns flung up. With a hand behind him Jaxon shut the door and locked it. His face was inscrutable, but Holmes' countenance was filled with rage.

It was dead white and the index finger on the trigger of his gun was white at the knuckle too. Apparently they had come in looking for Craig but the moment they saw Manny Homburg both stopped stockstill, breath rasping hoarsely.

"Homburg!" Holmes snapped. "You dirty rat!"

"Homburg?" Mal Jaxon growled. "That ain't Homburg. That's a dame, boss. A dame!"

"He may look like a dame," snarled Holmes, "but that's Manny Homburg. I'd know that pan anywhere. I see it now. Manny Homburg and the Giant Killer. Up with your hands, Manny or it's curtains without another word. I'm not fooling and you'll get a slug between the eyes if you don't—"

"Take it easy," Manny Homburg mumbled but slowly raised his hands over his head. "We got nothing against you, Holmes. Stop blowing your top."

"You rat!" Holmes repeated in a low even voice, vibrant with hate. "What have you done with her? What have you done with my wife? I knew Mitchell hadn't done it but I came here because I thought he might know something about it. He's a sap, he's just been jammed up in this, but I thought he might know. Now I know. What have you done with Mildred?"

"Look, Holmes," Manny Homburg half-whined, "I ain't even seen your wife. We didn't do nothing to her."

"She's up in a lifeboat on the boat deck!" Margot cried sharply. "She's dead! She was stabbed last night! I heard her cry."

Her last word was muffled by the sharp nasty crack of a gun. It was not a silenced gun but still there was no flame or smoke.

Craig Mitchell, on the edge of the bunk, his knuckles white as he clenched them, saw the black hole which was instantly painted upon Wilson Holmes' forehead. Blue-black it was and even as he watched he knew that Holmes was dead. The gun dropped from the man's lax fingers and he pitched forward on his face hard, making a heavy thump as he struck the floor. He did not move again.

In that split-second Craig Mitchell was aware of one strange thing. Wilson Holmes had been a tall man. He must have stood at least six feet and the bullet which had struck him had come from the floor upward.

Manny Homburg held no gun and his hands were still held high. Mal Jaxon had not fired. Wilson Holmes himself had not fired. Mitchell's own gun was still beneath the pillow.

Yet a bullet had come up from the floor to strike Holmes at the top of his six feet. And in that instant, all of Craig Mitchell's surmises became proven truth. He knew the answer.

Even as Holmes pitched forward Jaxon fired. The slug caught Manny Homburg in the ribs. And Craig Mitchell no longer sat there, merely watching. The time for action had come! His left hand snaked under the pillow of the bunk and came out with the Webley pistol.

Mal Jaxon fired again into Manny Homburg's body. Manny Homburg began to fold. He did not pitch forward as Holmes had because the bullets did not take effect immediately. They hit in the midriff, bending him double, but he managed to straighten for a moment before his legs gave out on him and he started to sag.

Mal Jaxon had whirled to the door, fumbling with the lock, to get out of there. Another shot from some undetermined spot caught Jaxon behind the kneecap, knocking him sideways away from the door, on his back, where he lay yelling with pain. He gripped his knee, dropping his gun.

Manny Homburg finally hit the floor and lay stretched out, still. And then an amazing thing happened.

Manny Homburg's skirts were thrown back—and Craig Mitchell came face to face with the Giant Killer. On Manny Homburg's stomach were a series of straps, much like the lacings of a parachute seat. In these straps, a man had hidden himself—a man who had been a part of Manny Homburg. As Mrs. Vail, Homburg had gone about the ship, carrying a killer in the straps beneath the skirt.

Manny Homburg had been padded to look as big and heavy as he had appeared to be. He was big, all right, but he was not heavy. He could not actually have weighed over a hundred and seventy-five pounds. But he had to give the appearance of being big so that he could handle the weight of this man beneath the skirt. The Giant Killer—the Giant Killer who weighed no more than forty pounds!

Crawling from beneath the skirts of the dead Manny Homburg was the man who had killed Holmes—the Giant Killer had fired from underneath the skirt into Holmes' head.

That was why the bullet had ranged upward.

It likewise answered several other questions. It explained how the Giant Killer could squeeze through a one-foot porthole into the bathroom to stab Jules Gerard in the back. It explained how the Giant Killer in the Club Intime had been able to gain entrance into the locked room through the ventilator, to lift the diamonds from the girl and then shoot her escort when they grappled.

It explained how he had been able to make his escape through that small ventilator, just as he had made his escape through the porthole the preceding night when Mitchell had been disturbed in his sleep and turned on the flashlight. It explained the Giant Killer as the man who had shot at Mitchell's flashlight, knocking it out of his hand. In short it explained everything.

The Giant Killer was not a midget. He was a dwarf. His head was normal, like any other man's head. But his body was stunted, his arms were short, his legs were short. He could have been taken for a three-year-old child except that forty years showed in his face. He looked weird, not like the pleasant dwarfs out

of Snow White but more like a monster—a nauseating freak.

His face was long and thin and his eyes were cold and ruthless. When he stood up, disentangling himself from the straps around Manny Homburg's belt, he could have been no more than two and a half or three feet tall. The big Colt .45 in his hand looked bigger than he did himself.

His voice was not the voice of a child—neither was it the voice of a man. It had a strange vibrancy—the voice of an adolescent whose tones are changing into a man's. Apparently it had remained undeveloped.

The Giant Killer scurried across to Mal Jaxon with the small, fleeting steps of a jackrabbit. His pistol was raised and his intention plain to deliver a *coup de grace* to the wounded man. Jaxon still lay half on his back, his knee up with both hands around it, but in pain.

"Well, you did it, Mal!" the Giant Killer snarled, his voice cracking with rage. "You messed it up nicely. I wish I had the time to put them where they hurt—a plug against the back of your spine to feel it for a day before you die—or a bullet in the stomach where you'd know you'd been hit. But I haven't got

the time to waste on you."

Mal Jaxon raised his eyes in agony. "Harry Aster!" he sneered. "The Giant Killer! That's a laugh. Giant Killer, my eye. Nothing but a freak, that's what you are! A freak! When we used to be in a show together who'd have thought *you* had such ambitions!"

The Giant Killer raised his gun, his eyes smoky. There was a shot—but not from the Giant Killer's gun. It came from the gun in Craig Mitchell's hand and the bullet clipped the dwarf's hand beautifully, crushing it and sending the Colt flying across the room.

Harry Aster, the Giant Killer, screamed and jerked at his hand, spinning around. And as he stared at Craig Mitchell and saw the gun in the newspaperman's hand his own uninjured hand dived into a coat pocket and flashed out with a snap knife.

Mal Jaxon, writhing on the floor, somehow managed to laugh jeeringly.

"Taken," he chattered hysterically, gasping at the pain in his leg. "Taken by a boob like Mitchell!"

His whole body quivering with thwarted rage the dwarf pushed the button and the blade of the knife

[Turn page]



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snapped out. Gripping the blade in his left hand and with a quick short move, even before Mitchell could fire again, he hurled the knife.

It whizzed by Craig Mitchell's head and imbedded itself in the wall behind him with a dull thud, quivering there. And Craig Mitchell was quite well aware that if that knife had been thrown with the right hand, which was accustomed to throwing it, it would have found his heart.

As it was it was too close. He went for the dwarf. But the Giant Killer, speedy as a rodent, dashed into the bathroom and locked the door.

Instantly Craig Mitchell hurled himself against the door with all his strength. The wood splintered and gave way and the door swung open. Mitchell burst in, gun up and ready.

Already the dwarf had the porthole open and was trying to wriggle through it. Mitchell reached up, grabbed the little fellow's belt and pulled him back, cursing, wriggling, trying to strike but helpless. Craig Mitchell stared at the wriggling thing in his right hand with repulsion.

Finally he slipped the gun into his pocket and slapped the Giant Killer's face to stop his wriggling. Swiftly then he looped a Turkish towel through the dwarf's belt and, raising the little man up, tied the towel about the bracket of the shower curtain, above the bathtub.

He made a tight knot and Harry Aster, once of a freak show, self-styled Giant Killer, dangled there, screaming and yelling and kicking his feet, his arms waving wildly. He could do nothing. He could only hang there like a doll, looking ludicrous.

But there was nothing ludicrous in the whole sorry business to Craig Mitchell as he went back into the room that was a shambles.

Holmes was dead and so was Manny Homburg. Mitchell searched Homburg's body with reluctance and quickly unearthed a large green emerald and a string of pearls.

Mal Jaxon watched him. "That's all," he said. "Holmes and me, we stole them. These guys just hijacked them. You've got them, you've got us, you've got everybody. You've wrapped it all up.

Now get me a doctor, will you? Before this knee kills me."

"Take it easy," Mitchell advised. "You're not going to die. And you didn't get anything you didn't ask for."

He slipped the jewels into his right-hand pocket and stood there a moment. Huddled on the bunk Margot Gray was crying. Her face was white and drawn. He started toward her and she jumped to her feet and ran to him. Mitchell opened his arms and took her in them.

"Craig!" she sobbed. "Craig, I was so afraid!"

Craig Mitchell smiled down at her gently. He put his right hand under her chin and lifted her face. It was wet with tears and white but still beautiful.

"Hello, Bertha Picklepuss," he said softly. "Or is it Milly Blotz?"

Margot looked into his eyes and shook her head. She tried to speak but could not, for her lips were trembling with emotion. She looked as if she should be kissed and Craig Mitchell had a distinct impression that Margot wanted him to kiss her.

So he kissed her. It was not hard to do.

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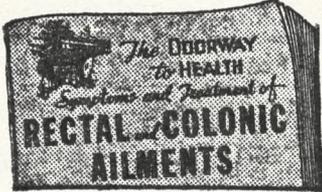


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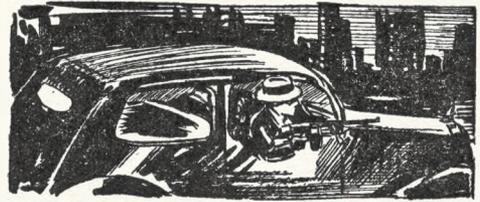
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FROM THE ANNALS OF CRIME

CHICAGO police finally got a confession out of Herbert E. Rasmussen. Yes, he had set fire to that building, destroying \$125,000 in property. But police had to coax a lot longer to get Rasmussen to reveal his motive. He had set fire to the building to cover up evidence of a \$16 burglary!

RELASING James Wheeler, who had served his time, authorities in Columbus, Indiana, were going through the necessary routine. "What's that?" asked one official, pointing to an unsightly bulge in Wheeler's pocket. Wheeler didn't answer. The official looked for himself. The bulge—sixteen of the jail's teaspoons! Wheeler was invited to stay on as a guest a little longer.

IT was the practice about thirty years ago for some small circuses and side shows to sell to the highest-bidding gang each season the right to pick the pockets of spectators. To facilitate the efforts of the pickpockets the master of ceremonies at the close of each performance would warn the audience to beware of pickpockets. A natural reaction to this remark on the part of most of the men present was to feel for their wallets. This tipped the pickpockets off to the location of the loot and made their work easier!

MORE than one bullet in the head of a corpse makes it virtually routine for coroners to preclude the possibility of suicide. Nonetheless, there are numerous cases on record where suicides did manage to shoot two or more bullets into their skulls before dying. In one instance a man shot himself thus five times before he died.

EACH year the public loses a lesser sum in counterfeit currency. In 1935 the figure still hovered around one million dollars a year. Due to the skill and diligence of treasury agents, by 1939 the figure lowered to \$222,000, and by 1940 it was only \$145,644. Since then the average has been well under that every year. In 1944 the loss was under \$50,000.

—Mark Knight.

ON THE DOCKET

(Continued from page 9)

was sure of it because Browning's policy had a double indemnity clause—which meant that the sum of one million dollars was involved.

Accordingly he called in a brilliant surgeon friend by the name of Dr. Corrigan. And Corrigan added to Nichols' suspicions by stating that fuel oil has a very low combustion point and has to be compressed into a vapor before it will burn.

Yet, that statement was nothing when compared to the discovery Corrigan made when he came to the Browning home and examined the fleshless corpse. His discovery sent Nichols on an entirely new tack in his investigations, for suddenly he knew he was coping with a fiendishly clever killer angling for a million dollars.

Look forward to "Claim of the Fleshless Corpse" by George Bruce if you want a real mystery treat with a bang-up surprise ending that will leave you more than a little startled.

A Web of Mystery

The second featured novel in our forthcoming issue is "Murder Suspect" by Frederick C. Painton. It's a fast-stepping yarn revolving around a lovely girl fugitive and a hard-boiled newshawk who found themselves enmeshed in an ugly web of mystery that augured doom for both of them.

The story begins in a locked cabin of a motor cruiser where a golden-blond girl toiled frantically with a nail file in an effort to force the lock that held her prisoner. Suddenly she halted her work when oars splashed noisily on the lee side of the *Mystic*.

A few minutes later she heard voices in the main cabin above her. The voices soon rose to an angry clamor. Then a man spoke viciously:

"All right, you doublecrosser, here's where you get off."

"No, No. Don't—" The girl recognized the second speaker as Maurice Tekele.

There was the sound of a scuffle, a muffled oath. Tekele screamed but the sound was cut off by the explosion of a gun.

[Turn page]

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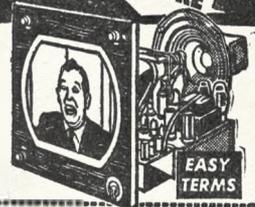
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This is the swift, dramatic opening of "Murder Suspect" and that single gunshot reverberating through the motor cruiser touched off a cycle of events that brought the lovely girl in the locked cabin under the dread suspicion of murder. And to reporter-sleuth Hugh Jeffry it brought the most amazing experience of his life as he staked his own life on the girl's innocence in a mad merry-go-round of murder.

Our action scene moves to Maine for the third forthcoming story—"Murder Under Wraps" by Norman A. Daniels, an old favorite among mystery magazine readers.

Summoned to the home of wealthy Dan Lawrence on some secret legal matter, young Leslie Kane, a lawyer with a reputation for trouble shooting, dropped what he was doing in New York and headed north. On a train out of Port Royal he saw a pretty girl stumble down the aisle, lurch against a fat man's seat and quickly steal the ticket thrust into the slot of the seat ahead of him.

The girl looked furtive and uneasy and in need of help. When the conductor appeared to collect the tickets the fat man noticed his was gone. Remembering how the girl had fallen against his seat he accused her of stealing it. Immediately Kane, spurred on by a vague chivalrous impulse, took her part. He even went so far as to drop his own ticket on the floor and pretend it was the other man's.

Later, Kane managed to have dinner with the girl. She was very grateful to him. But beyond admitting that she came from New York and was broke she revealed nothing about herself.

She got off at Rumford with Kane but vanished at once in a car. Kane wandered

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around, waiting for one of Lawrence's autos to pick him up. Then he noticed a sedan parked near the station. He looked in, found a note on the steering wheel addressed to him and directing him to drive at once to the Lawrence place.

Kane got in and hurried away. Minutes later, as he negotiated a narrow turn in the road overlooking a precipice he was caught in a landslide and barely leaped clear of the car as a boulder came crashing down. Car and boulder were carried off the road into the abyss.

Signs of Trouble

Shaken and nervous, Kane wondered if someone had tried to kill him. He quickly retrieved his briefcase from the wreck, then was picked up by a young man in a car who was headed for the Lawrence place.

Arriving there, he met with additional signs of trouble. Lawrence had been badly burned in an accident the previous day when the automobile in which he was

[Turn page]

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driving with Ted Essex, his secretary, crashed into a tree and caught fire. But what disturbed Kane more than anything else was the fact that no car or note had been left at the station for him. Essex stated that the housekeeper's son had been assigned to get him. And the boy turned out to be the fellow who appeared at the scene of the landslide.

His uneasiness growing by leaps and bounds, Kane learned that Lawrence wanted to make some changes in his will and that a step-daughter and a niece were on hand—obviously waiting for him to die.

But it was Lawrence himself—heavily swathed in bandages—who confirmed all of Kane's ugly suspicions by declaring that his own automobile crash was not an accident. Lawrence stated categorically that someone had tampered with the steering wheel—someone who was anxious to get him out of the way. And he told Kane that besides making the changes in his will he wanted him to stay around and find out who was trying to kill him.

It was a tall order. But Kane, having barely missed death in the landslide, was just mad enough to take the job. Even then he didn't realize what an ugly situation he was stepping into. It grew more complicated when he was introduced to Lawrence's niece later and saw that she was the mystery girl he had met on the train. And it grew positively deadly when he heard a wild scream from Lawrence's room and dashed up the stairs, dreading what he would find there. . . .

At a mile-a-minute pace Norman A. Daniels carries you along from one suspenseful situation to another in "Murder Under Wraps" until the smashing climax is reached. You'll find it thoroughly enjoyable.

The House of Frogs

The fourth novel in the next issue of FIVE DETECTIVE NOVELS is one of the most unusual sagas of crime ever to come our way. It is "The House of Frogs" by Westmoreland Gray.

Detective Tracy Hill had barely entered his apartment and glanced at the headlines in the evening newspaper when his trained senses warned him that he was not alone. He dashed into the bedroom,

reached for the light switch. Something hard and round gouged his side. He heard a low, animal-like grunt nearby. Still, he made a grab for his own gun and turned on the light. The gun in his side pressed harder and he dropped his own weapon as he whirled around to face a hideous creature with a moronic face, bestial eyes and a twisted, hunchbacked body. The man was tongueless and with a horrible grunt he handed Hill a note. It read:

Mr. Tracy Hill:

You are to go with this messenger. Offer no resistance, for he knows no cure for resistance but to shoot. Give no alarm and leave behind no cause to be followed. You shall be greatly repaid—The Frog

To say that Hill was astonished was to put it lightly. He had no idea who "The Frog" was. But the gun in his side told him that he would soon find out and that he had no choice in the matter. So, walking ahead of his strange messenger, he went out of the apartment and on to "The House of Frogs" where a strange, diabolical destiny awaited him.

A Green Ghost Novel

Winding up our gala forthcoming issue is a complete Green Ghost mystery novel by G. T. Fleming-Roberts entitled "The Case of the Astral Assassin." George Chance, better known as the Green Ghost, is one of the most famous characters in detective fiction and we are happy to bring our readers this great classic in which the voice of a fiendish hidden menace demands huge sums from wealthy individuals until the Green Ghost turns the tables on him.

In "The Case of the Astral Assassin" George Chance, a magician in his own right, finds himself pitting his strength and wits against an extraordinary extortionist who is ready and willing to commit murder too, if his victims do not comply with his wishes.

One of the victims, Monty Folkstone, told the grim story to New York Police Commissioner Standish and The Green Ghost. Folkstone and five associates had invested a sizable fortune in a new invention by Herman Blackfore, a scientist without conscience or scruples.

[Turn page]

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The invention was a new type of X-ray machine that could render the human body so completely transparent as to become invisible. The Green Ghost was inclined to doubt Folkstone's tale, but the latter insisted he had seen the machine render Blackfore invisible, had then heard him move about the room and talk to them.

But what had brought Folkstone to the police was the fact that Blackfore had disappeared with his investor's money. Though none of Folkstone's friends had seen Blackfore, the latter had recently been in his—Folkstone's—apartment to demand the sum of one hundred thousand dollars or his life. Blackfore had been invisible, but Folkstone had recognized his voice and it was clear to Folkstone that Blackfore planned to extort huge sums of money from all his associates. And from that point it was just another step for Blackfore to inaugurate a one-man crime wave that would bring the city of New York to its knees.

Thus begins one of the strangest mystery tales ever unfolded within the pages of a magazine—"The Case of the Astral Assassin."

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It all adds up to a banner number of **FIVE DETECTIVE NOVELS.** Be on hand to enjoy it. And when you've completed this present issue, why don't you sit down and drop us a line to let us know how you like the magazine? Kindly address all letters and postcards to The Editor, **FIVE DETECTIVE NOVELS, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.** We'll be glad to hear from you. Thanks to everybody, and so long for now.

—THE EDITOR



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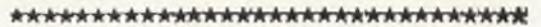


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The Path of Death

A True Story of Crime

By SIMPSON M. RITTER

UNEXPECTEDLY the horse plunged madly, sending its rider, famed polo player Pepe Montez, high into the air to fall fatally onto the bride path. Montez' companion, the beautiful Senora Maria Tomaran, screamed, then screamed again. Montez was the third man who had died so within three months while riding the bridle paths of her invalid husband's estate.

When news of Montez' death reached his best friend, Carlos Garcia, he at once visited the Captain of Detectives, Alberto Sierra, of the Barcelona Metropolitan Police. "Who killed my friend?" he demanded.

"It was an accident," said the captain. "It is all very strange coincidence but nonetheless, all three men died accidentally. We have investigated and there isn't a shred of evidence to indicate foul play. We have checked rumors and found them false."

Garcia decided to investigate. He had never met the Tomarans and in polite Spanish society a young gentleman does not thrust himself upon a couple. He bided his time. His chance came when the Perez' gave a birthday party for their daughter. Senor Perez introduced Carlos Garcia to the Senora Tomaran.

Carlos found her an enchantingly beautiful woman of thirty-five with a bright smile on her lips and mischief in her eye. She wore a daring gown that centered most of the male attention in the room on her fine figure and she flirted outrageously.

Carlos at last managed a dance with the enchantress. No, her husband wasn't here. He had remained on his estate at Sabadell as usual. Don Jose was a paralytic who could not leave his wheel chair.

"I shall be returning to the estate the day after tomorrow," said the senora. "Come visit us this week end. I will see that your stay is pleasant." Carlos accepted.

At the Tomaran estate he met old Don

(Turn page)



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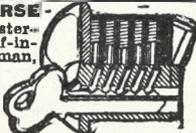
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Jose, who spent his days in his wheel chair. Don Jose had been an electrical genius. His work had earned him a fortune and fame. Garcia noted that Don Jose's servant Pedro never left his master's side.

On Monday Garcia left the Tomaran household, accepting an invitation for another visit. When he arrived for his second week end, he discovered that he was the only guest.

"I've arranged it so," whispered Senora Maria. "Now we can be alone. We will go riding where none can see us."

They went riding that afternoon and Senora Maria tried all her wiles. There was a faint sound in the forest. Garcia jumped to his feet and caught sight of a small, squat figure. Carlos started after it but Maria called him back. "You are young and inexperienced, my dear, and so you imagine things. There was nothing there. Let us not waste so much time. Soon we must return or Don Jose may worry."

When they returned, Don Jose's smile seemed a little forced to Carlos and the servant could not meet the guest's eye.

Young Garcia didn't sleep well that night. He was sure he had seen and heard something. He dressed at dawn and hastened down to the bridge path. Soon he spied Pedro. The servant carried a long coil of tightly rolled wire and a sensitive copper plate about the size of a dinner platter.

Garcia watched Pedro attach an end of the wire to the plate and plant the copper disc on the left side of one of the bridge paths. When a couple rode together the man rode on the left. Pedro placed some dirt over the plate and then started setting out the wire until he reached the porch on which his master spent the day. The other end of the wire was fixed to a switch concealed in the brickwork accessible to Don Jose.

It was obvious that Don Jose could charge the plate with electrical current from where he sat and that if even the most tame horse stepped on the charged plate with its iron shod shoe, it would rear madly.

Carlos hastened to the village of Sabadell, roused a telegraph clerk, and sent an urgent message to Captain Sierra.

A few hours later Captain Sierra arrived and the two men proceeded to the Tomaran hacienda. They were too late. Pedro had discovered the guest's absence and Don Jose had at once suspected that his scheme had been uncovered. They found him dead before his library table, the blood from his gunshot staining his confession. Pedro, as an accessory, received 20 years. Senora Maria received condolences and the estate of her late husband.

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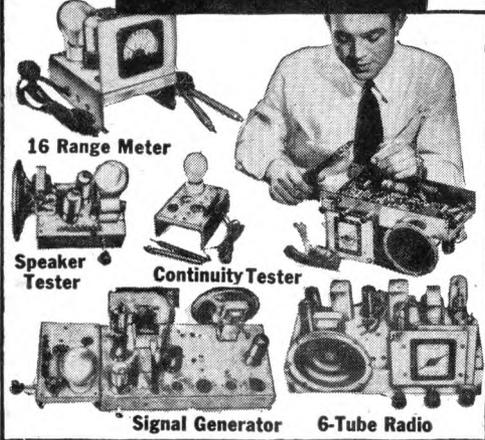


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