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Ace-High DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

A POPULAR PUBLICATION

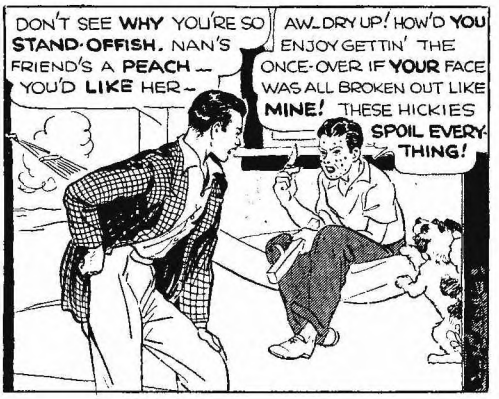
AUGUST

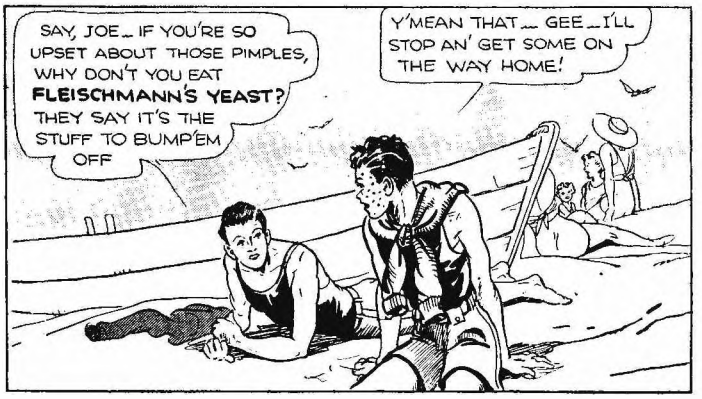
THE CORPSE GOES EAST
by FRED MacISAAC

SKELETON KEY
by WILLIAM E. BARRETT

WYATT BLASSINGAME
THOMAS WALSH

JOE'S VACATION LOOKED LIKE A WASHOUT UNTIL—





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Ace-High DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

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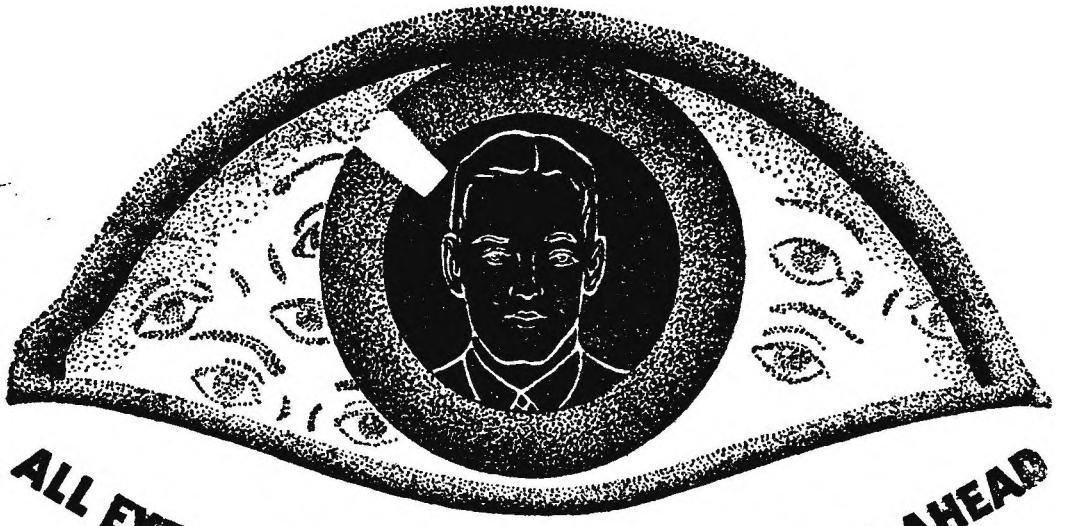

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INTRODUCING

Ace-High DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

VOLUME 1—Number 1 is far too soon in the life of a magazine—any magazine—to begin making didactic statements concerning the future. And promises and predictions always seem too vaguely intangible and dubious at a stage in the game where background is still something to be acquired.

However, if ACE-HIGH DETECTIVE MAGAZINE has yet no record of past performance of its own on which to base promises and predictions for the future, POPULAR PUBLICATIONS, the publishing house under whose well-known imprint the magazine comes to you, has a long and enviable reputation in the field of detective-fiction-magazines. And we are proud to announce that in presenting ACE-HIGH to the great army of detective-fiction fans the world over, the same careful editing, the same diligent hand-picking of the best authors and artists available, the same enthusiastic acceptance of new ideas and suggestions which have been hall-marks of the success of POPULAR'S great DIME DETECTIVE and DETECTIVE TALES have been part and parcel of this, the first issue of ACE-HIGH DETECTIVE.

With all due modesty we feel that publishers, editors, authors and artists have done a good job. We're willing to let the magazine speak for itself—for the next hundred and twenty pages. And succeeding issues will tell whether or not we've been patting ourselves on the back unwarrantably.

You're the jury—and the judge, too. What's the verdict? Thirty days—or life. We hope it's a long sentence with a renewal clause twelve times a year!

THE CORPSE GOES EAST

A Murder-Action Novelette

He snatched the black leather box and tore back along the pier.

When Mrs. de Cordova vanished from her penthouse—"Naked as the day she was born!" insisted her French maid—everyone, including the police, figured she was simply fed up with her gigolo husband and had walked out on him. It wasn't till days later that the murder angle came to light—and young Attorney Franklin was able to convince the homicide squad that they ought to get on the ball, despite the incredible story of the maid, the absence of a corpse—and the missing pearls that weren't missing after all.

CHAPTER ONE

Missing Millions

THE disappearance of Mrs. Ramon de Cordova from her Park Avenue penthouse—early New Year's morning after a gay party—was a nine-day wonder, but it hadn't interested Tom Franklin very much.

The young attorney had learned from the papers that Mrs. de Cordova was a kittenish woman of fifty who had been married for a year to a young Spaniard—a dancer and presumably a gigolo—whom

By FRED MacISAAC

she had met in Paris. Franklin assumed, from the newspaper accounts, that she had come to her senses and gone as far away from her patent-leather-haired husband as she could get. That she had taken with her a hundred thousand dollars' worth of jewels, and that no checks signed by her had come through her various banks since her disappearance, piqued Franklin's curiosity slightly. He thought it rather remarkable that a woman of her wealth and prominence could disappear so completely that the police were not able to locate her.

The tenth day after her departure there wasn't a line on Mrs. de Cordova and by that time Tom certainly wasn't thinking about what had become of the lady. He had not known her and he had infinitely more important things to consider—such as how he was going to continue to pay his office rent, and where next week's meals were coming from.

Two years ago he had graduated from a grave and reverend institution which had taught him everything about law except how to get clients. His scanty capital was almost exhausted. Lately he had been trying, as a last resort, to wangle a job as a clerk in a big law firm, but there were no such jobs available, apparently.

HE began thinking ruefully about a girl he had met at a cocktail party recently. Marion Morton was dark, vivacious, and friendly. They had talked quite a lot. Obviously she wouldn't have objected to seeing him again but Tom couldn't make dates with girls because he had no money with which to entertain them. That had never mattered much until he met this one.

He had been considering ways and means all morning and it was twelve by his desk clock when the door opened—he had no ante-room with an office-girl—and the object of his thoughts walked in. She had on a beige dress and a sort of cone-shaped black hat, and looked so swell that Tom Franklin forgot his manners and, for a second, remained glued to the seat of his chair.

"Miss M-Morton," he stammered as he got to his feet finally. "What a wonderful surprise!"

She smiled at him in a devastating fashion. "You didn't call up as you promised," she declared. "So I inquired where your office was and— May I sit down?"

"I beg your pardon. Please do."

HER countenance assumed a grave expression. "As a matter of fact, this is a business call. I need legal advice." The corners of her pretty mouth drew down. "But I have no money," she added plaintively.

"I loathe the stuff," Tom asserted mendaciously. "I'll rap up a few tons of legal advice and deliver them free of charge. He seated himself on the edge of his desk. He was a big, hearty young man, whose features were bold, prominent and rather ugly. But his was the kind of ugliness women like.

"You must have read of the disappearance of Mrs. Ramon de Cordova," Marion Morton began abruptly.

"Sure. The rich woman who married the gigolo."

"My aunt," said the girl sharply, but her eyes twinkled a bit.

"I am the world's most expert foot-putter-inner," he exclaimed dolefully.

She smiled at him. "I'm afraid it's true, though. And I'm frightfully worried."

"Pshaw. She just got fed up and ran out on him."

"Nothing in the world would have induced Aunt Sarah to leave him. She was still infatuated with him. Mr. Franklin, I am convinced that Ramon murdered my aunt." She was intensely serious and tears came into her eyes.

"You can't make charges like that lightly, you know," he said gravely. "Have you any good reason for thinking so?"

"If she isn't dead where is she? He's perfectly capable of it," she added earnestly. "The oily snake! I hate him! I've always hated him."

"If he's guilty, I hope he is punished. But why do you require a lawyer?"

"Ramon refuses to pay my allowance. I have almost no money. The least he could do is to continue my allowance. Please don't think me mercenary—I'd be just as concerned about Aunt Sarah's fate if I had no financial interest—but he knows she wants me to have my two hundred a month. Would he dare refuse to pay it if he thought she would come back?"

Tom nodded. "That's a point," he said cautiously. "He has her power-of-attorney, obviously. She's worth millions, I believe, so if there is anything wrong it was stupid of him to antagonize you in such a way."

"He hates me. I did everything possible to keep Aunt Sarah from marrying him."

"I haven't followed the case closely. Does he inherit her fortune in case of death?"

"No. He gets fifty thousand a year as long as he lives but loses it if he remarries. Her fortune is willed to a hospital. I get ten thousand a year. I am her only blood relative."

"If this is an unlimited power-of-attorney," stated Tom, "he can do what he likes with her property until her return. And a person who disappears is not legally dead for seven years. So it is infinitely more to his advantage to have her disappear than to—er—murder her."

"Yes, except that, if she is alive, she'll come back."

"True. But if he expected her back soon I doubt if he would have dared cut off your allowance."

"Well, what can we do?"

He looked perplexed. "From what I've read, this is a voluntary disappearance case. They've found a taxi-driver who picked her up near her apartment house and took her to the Waldorf. She didn't register. Probably sat in the lobby until she could get an early morning train for somewhere. But nobody saw her in the lobby, and nobody saw her on a train."

"I'm sure she is dead."

"It is almost impossible to convict of murder in a case like this. There must be the body of the person who has been murdered. If it has been disposed of, there must be direct evidence of the crime; witnesses who saw it committed. That's the law. As murderers dislike witnesses around, the body of Mrs. de Cordova must be found and medical testimony supplied that she did not die a natural death. The police may be suspicious of Cordova, but they can't do anything under the circumstances except wait and watch."

"And I suppose, meantime, I shall starve. I don't know how to do anything. I'm studying art—I've never had to work for my living."

"You've got a lawyer who is taking you to lunch. I'll take your case, Miss Morton."

She offered her hand. "I don't know why—but, somehow, I have a lot of confidence in you, Mr. Franklin."

"I hope to merit it," he said but he didn't have much confidence in himself. Without a body there didn't seem to be even a starting point. He might, however, scare de Cordova into resuming payments of Marion's allowance.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"Ritz."

"I don't think you can afford it."

"Today I can," he said expansively.

IN the Winter Garden at the Ritz, through which they passed to enter the main dining-room, a beautiful blond young woman, expensively dressed, smiled brightly at Marion Morton. Franklin's companion bowed coldly as they passed by.

"Peach," commented Tom. "Why so haughty to her?"

"She's a musical-comedy actress named Billee Burton. I've seen Ramon with her. Considering his obligations to my aunt he might at least have been loyal, don't you think?"

"I suppose so."

They were hardly seated when Marion grasped his forearm tightly. "Look," she ejaculated. "There's Ramon. Oh, the cold-blooded beast! And my poor aunt probably lying dead somewhere."

Miss Burton had entered followed by a dark handsome man wearing English tweeds.

The head-waiter conducted the actress and the Spaniard to a table a short distance from that occupied by the attorney and his client. Ramon was seated so that Tom faced him directly.

De Cordova was tall and straight as a soldier. His hair was jet black and shining. He had a small well-shaped head; fine features, save that his lower lip was a bit too full and his jaw slightly undershot. He had very large, fine, black eyes and a clear olive skin. He wore a closely clipped black mustache.

When he spied Marion, he bowed politely, sedulously ignored her presence from then on. He didn't act to Tom as if he were even faintly embarrassed for he talked and laughed gaily with the girl at his table.

"The effrontery of the snake," Marion Morton muttered angrily.

"Seems to me I've seen him before—recently. Now where the deuce was it?" Tom mused.

"Running into him this way has spoiled my lunch," she said savagely.

"I have it. . . . He was in Drake's Toy

Store a few days before New Year's. He was buying a lot of stuff for favors. Striking-looking bloke. That's why I remember him, I suppose. Well, Miss Morton, I want to ask you questions now. I'm hazy about the details of this affair."

"I'll tell you all I know."

Marion's answers to Tom's probing were rather vague—apparently she was in no mood to concentrate—and Franklin was willing to let the conversation run into pleasantly personal channels. Presently lunch was finished and the check came.

"I'm going to say *au revoir*," he told her. "I want to have a talk with the head of the Bureau of Missing Persons. I happen to know him—Captain Garvey. Dinner tonight?"

She laughed. "Of course not. But you may report. I'm at Forty-five East Eighty-fifth. Eight o'clock?"

"Swell," said Tom. "It's a date."

CHAPTER TWO

Penthouse

CAPTAIN GARVEY, round, red-faced, genial and Irish, welcomed Tom cordially. "Sure I remember you. We met at the Fights six months ago. What's on your mind, Mr. Franklin?"

"I am attorney for Miss Marion Morton, niece of Mrs. Ramon de Cordova. I've only just been retained and I'm not up on the details of the case. I wonder if you'd give them to me."

"Sure. Why not? Damned if we know what's become of the woman."

"No word of her yet?"

"Not a trace."

"Don't you suspect foul play?"

"Homicide has been looking into it, of course. This Spaniard is a rat but you can't hang him for that. It's been established that she left the building—she owned it, you know—at four fifteen A.M. and took a taxi to the Waldorf." Garvey dug through a file. "Here's the official report. Want to make notes?"

Tom already had scratch paper out.

"She lived at Number — Park Avenue in a penthouse on the roof of the apartment building. Thirty-one stories high it is.

"Question: 'When did she leave home?'

"Answer: 'I can't say exactly. We retired about three A.M. January first. When I woke up about nine and went into her room to awaken her she wasn't there. I ask the servants. They know nothing.' This is her husband talking.

"Question: 'Well, what did you do?'

"Answer: 'I am at a loss. I telephone to various of her friends. They have not seen her. I begin to be alarmed. I hope she will return by night but she does not return. She has not returned.'

"Question: 'Think she eloped?'

"Answer: 'Certainly not. My wife adored me'." Captain Garvey chuckled as he read this and went on.

"Question: 'You made other inquiries?'

"Answer: 'Certainly. The employees of the building have not seen her depart. It is most mysterious.'

"Question: 'She took a bag, of course?'

"Answer: 'No bag.'

"Question: 'What clothes was she wearing?'

"Answer: 'I don't know. Her maid says nothing was missing from her wardrobe.'

"Question: 'Did you and your wife have a row?'

"Answer: 'No, indeed. We were happy together. We had a large party of guests to celebrate New Year's Eve.'

"Question: 'Was she stewed?'

"Answer: 'No indeed. She drink very little.'

"Question: 'What are the exits from this penthouse?'

"Answer: 'A private elevator and a staircase to the thirtieth floor.'

"Question: 'People on duty below?'

"Answer: 'As it was New Year's Eve and there were parties in many apartments there were men on all the elevators, extra phone operators, and an extra clerk and doorman.'

"Question: 'Do they all know your wife by sight?'

"Answer: 'All except the extra people.'

"Question: 'Why let three days pass without reporting her disappearance?'

"Answer: 'It is most delicate. I do not wish to embarrass her and each moment I expect her return.'

"Question: 'Mr. de Cordova, you were a dancer in Paris, weren't you?'

"Answer: 'What has that to do with this?'

"Question: 'I want an answer.

"Answer: 'Yes.'

"Question: 'How much money did she settle on you?'

"Answer: (sullenly) 'A hundred thousand dollars.'

"Question: 'How much have you got left?'

"Answer: 'I refuse to reply. It's a personal matter.'

"Question: 'Has she made a will in your favor?'

"Answer: 'I don't know. I wouldn't answer if I did. I am reporting my wife's disappearance. I resent your insinuations.'

"Question: 'We'll skip it. I want the latest photographs of your wife and a complete description—moles, scars, bodily idiosyncracies, bridge-work.

"Answer: 'I shall supply them. She has no moles or scars or disfigurations. Some bridge-work. Her dentist will supply details.'

"Question: 'That's all for now. We'll get busy right away.'"

"Thanks," said Tom as Garvey folded and laid away the report. "Why did you ask those embarrassing questions?"

THE captain grinned. "This dame was the widow of William P. Hopkins, a swell guy. Bill must have turned over in his grave when his nit-witted widow married the gigolo. I figured maybe he had made away with the woman, but it looks like he didn't."

"His story is confirmed, then."

"Everything checked. The taxi man who picked her up reported voluntarily to the department. Probably de Cordova was carrying on with a dame at the party and she decided she'd had enough of that. Hiding out now for fear he'll locate her and vamp her into coming back. Leaves the scut sitting pretty. He has full power-of-attorney over three or four million bucks. If he killed her, he'd only get fifty thousand a year. If he remarries, he loses that. She didn't trust him much."

"It's strange a woman whose picture and descriptions have been broadcasted hasn't been spotted yet."

"You'd be surprised how often it happens. Of course we've had reports on fifty phony Mrs. de Cordovas. That always happens. Anything else I can do?"

"No thanks," said Tom ruefully. "Much obliged."

"Wait a minute. De Cordova forgot to report the first time he came in that she carried off a hundred grand in jewels that she wore at the party. We have a description of them. As she hasn't cashed a check—at least, none has come into her bank—she may be hocking the gems and we may get a line on her that way."

"A hundred thousand in jewels," said Tom thoughtfully. "And he forgot to mention that!"

Garvey laughed. "It don't show on the written report but I got the guy's goat. I certainly hate gigolos."

TOM rode uptown in a dismal frame of mind. His first big case and it didn't look hopeful. The police were apparently content to let it ride. If nobody had seen the woman leaving the building that would have indicated other possibilities, but the taxi-driver had proved that she did leave—alive and of her own free will—and that was their out.

What could Tom do about it? He was a lawyer, not a detective, and neither he nor Marion had money to hire investigators. And tonight at eight, he had to report to Marion. Report what?

He told the taxi to take him to the Park Avenue apartment-building. He could try to get into the penthouse. Even if he had to impersonate an officer. True the police had been all over the place and his prospects of learning anything worth while were nil. But at least he could report that he had been busy. He stepped into one of the elevators in the Estancia Apartment Building.

"Where to?" asked the elaborately uniformed operator.

"The penthouse."

"You got to be announced."

"Not me. I'm from headquarters."

"Oh, excuse me, captain."

When Tom rang the bell on the penthouse door it was opened by a very dark, very pretty young woman.

"Mr. de Cordova at home?" he inquired.

"Monsieur was not announced," said the girl reproachfully.

"Police," declared Tom and thrust his foot over the threshold.

Prettily arched eyebrows lifted. "More police?" she asked with a scornful smile.

"More and better."

The girl laughed. "At least younger. Monsieur de Cordova is not at home. Nobody is at home but me. I am Madame's personal maid."

"But Madame isn't here."

"Monsieur desires that I be on hand to attend her when she returns."

"A pretty thought," Tom said with a grin. "Do you like that guy? I don't."

The girl beamed. "Come in, Monsieur. Just between us two, I don't like Monsieur de Cordova either." She stepped back to permit him to enter.

It was a break that de Cordova was not at home. If confronted by him Tom wasn't certain what he would have done. This maid, however, seemed more than friendly. If he exerted his Irish charm and she proved susceptible he might learn plenty.

"What's your name?" he inquired with a smile.

"Annette Peletier."

"Show me around, beautiful."

"You are what they call fresh," she said with a dazzling smile. "But you have a certain appeal. It has been very dull here. Monsieur dines and lunches out; the cook has gone and so has the butler. And the other gendarmes were stupid. One was a *cochon*."

"What's that?"

"What you call the 'pig'," she said with a laugh. "I have to slap his face. Now here is the *salon*."

The penthouse was an imitation marble palace and the *salon* was a huge gold-and-white room with a carved and ornamented ceiling. Opening from it was the beautiful refectory where forty guests had dined on New Year's Eve. There were two sumptuous bed-chambers, a large serving-pantry and a storeroom, but no kitchen. Annette informed him that a caterer had prepared and served the dinner which began at ten P.M. A famous dance orchestra had furnished the music.

French windows opened from the *salon* upon a broad terrace dotted with potted plants and extending to the parapet of the roof. Its floor was of marble slabs.

Annette was evidently much attracted by this particular policeman for she took

his arm as she conducted him on his tour of the apartment and seemed loath to have him go.

"It is so absurd to have me wait for Madame," she declared. "He knows well she will not come back."

"How do you figure that?"

She eyed him dubiously. "I just think so."

"Why do you think so, beautiful?" Tom asked with an ingratiating grin.

"You are the flirt," she said, much pleased. "You are married, yes?"

"I should say not!"

"You like to dance?"

"You bet."

"We shall be friends, eh?"

"The first evening you get out, let me know. But why do you think she won't come back?"

"Because," said the girl, "if she left here, she went naked as the day she was born—except for her jewels!"

"How do you make that out?"

"Because all her clothes are here. Everything!"

"You can't be sure of that."

"I know. I know every garment Madame owned."

"Did you tell that to the police?"

"Those pigs? Oh, pardon! Well, I answer their questions. I tell them I find nothing missing from Madame's wardrobe. They think I am mistaken. What do I care? You—what do you call yourself—your name?"

"Tom."

"Well, Tom, I am not mistaken. She left nude—if she left."

"If she didn't, she'd be here, wouldn't she?"

The girl spread her hands, shrugged. "She is not here but I know what I know. She took nothing—not even a chemise."

"But she was fully dressed when a taxi picked her up on the sidewalk. How do you account for that?"

She gave another shrug. "It is a miracle perhaps, like Saint Anthony's hat."

"What's that?"

She laughed merrily. "I do not know you well enough—yet—to tell you."

She darted to the radio and turned it on. "Come, let us dance," she commanded. And Tom Franklin, attorney for Miss Marion Morton danced a fox trot in the living-room of the penthouse with the missing Mrs. de Cordova's maid and enjoyed it. The girl was a marvelous dancer.

"A glass of wine," she suggested when they had finished. She left the room and returned with two glasses of sherry. It was evident that from her point of view an interesting intrigue was on its way.

TOM asked questions which she answered freely, among others, whether or not her mistress had had a lover.

"Oh, no. She adored her husband."

"And did he adore her?"

She giggled. "At least he pretended to."

"She was very jealous, I hear."

"Like a tiger, Tommie. She accused him of flirting with other women every time they had a *soirée*."

"I suppose there was a row on New Year's Eve?"

"Ye-es. About Miss Billee Burton. Madame was angry because Monsieur insisted on inviting her for New Year's Eve. When the guests were gone she said to him. 'This is the last time I tolerate that creature in my house'."

"What did he say?"

"Nothing. She send me away then to the servants' quarters downstairs on the thirtieth floor."

"Then he was alone in the penthouse with his wife?"

"That is right—Ah!"

She leaped to her feet. The door had opened and Ramon de Cordova came into the room. His dark face grew darker.

"Annette! What is the meaning of this?"

"It is a *monsieur* from the police."

De Cordova turned hard eyes on Tom Franklin. "The police?"

"*Oui*, Monsieur. What can I do? He insist upon coming in."

"Leave the room, Annette!"

The girl fled.

The Spaniard looked Tom over from head to foot. "You lunched today at the Ritz with the niece of my wife," he accused. "Who are you and how dare you intrude here?"

"I am Miss Morton's attorney. My name is Thomas Franklin. She has engaged me to locate her aunt. Have you any objections?"

"You have entered here under false pretenses. I object to that. If you are her lawyer let me tell you that I shall take measures against Miss Morton. She has told several people I have murdered my wife."

"Well," said Tom insolently. "Didn't you?"

De Cordova's mouth dropped open. His eyes narrowed to gleaming black slits. "How dare you—I shall have you arrested. I have nothing to fear. As for the niece—I'll stop her lying—"

"Be careful, de Cordova," warned Franklin. "You are on very thin ice."

"I'll fix you—"

"I wouldn't, if I were you," Tom said.

He turned away contemptuously, crossed the *salon*, opened the front door and rang for the elevator.

CHAPTER THREE

Two Tanks of H

AS IT was unlikely that he could impersonate an officer for a second time in this apartment building, Tom decided on the way down to secure as much information as possible before de Cordova could issue orders regarding him. As a police detective he questioned the people in the lobby, learned that there was a service elevator which was always locked at midnight, so Mrs. de Cordova must have used either the stairs or the passenger elevators.

In the small hours of New Year's morning there had been many parties in the building, so it was quite possible that Mrs. de Cordova, muffled in furs or wearing a veil, had got into an elevator in the midst of a group without being recognized or attracting attention. But not a naked woman! Obviously Annette was mistaken. Perhaps Mrs. de Cordova had planned her departure beforehand, purchased a costume about which the maid knew nothing.

Or else—

Had she ever left the penthouse at all? Or if she had, was it in a box or a trunk, if Marion's notion that Ramon had killed his wife were correct? Marion's earnestness had inclined Tom to accept her theory; his interview with Captain Garvey had caused him to doubt it; the encounter with de Cordova had convinced him all over again. The man seemed obviously capable of murder. If he had found a way to kill his wife and make the police believe she had voluntarily disappeared, he would not hesitate—especially when it was so greatly to his advantage to have her absent instead of dead.

Tom took a taxi—he was using cabs recklessly that day—back to police headquarters, and there he requested Captain Garvey to introduce him to the homicide official who had investigated de Cordova's report.

"That was Lieutenant Sommers," said Garvey. "Wait till I see if he's in." He phoned. "He's in his office," he told Tom. "I'll tell him you're friend of mine." He talked a moment with Sommers and hung

up. "Go see him," he said. "Any friend of mine is a friend of his. We're pals."

The lieutenant was a thin, baldish, stern-visaged man of forty-five with hard gray eyes and a brown brush mustache. He shook hands cordially with Tom and asked: "What's on your mind?"

"You investigated the disappearance of Mrs. de Cordova from the homicide angle. I am attorney for Miss Marion Morton who is her niece. To put it bluntly, Miss Morton thinks the woman was murdered by her husband."

"Well, if that's so, this bird beats them all. I've been all over that place up there—"

"Let me tell you what the woman's maid told me," Tom cut in. He repeated Annette's story.

"Bosh!" said Sommers. "She overlooked something. Walking out naked. Huh! I have a description from the taxi-driver of what she was wearing. A small black hat and a black dress. Probably she had ten black dresses and the maid didn't count right."

"It occurred to me that she might have been killed in the penthouse and the body shipped away by de Cordova in a box or a trunk. Did you look into that angle?"

"You bet we did. As a matter of fact de Cordova did ship a packing-case the day after New Year's."

"He did?" cried Tom excitedly.

"Yep. Sent it to the Acme Chemical Company. It contained some laboratory equipment ordered by a chemist in the building who happened to be away. As the de Cordovas own the building he sent the stuff back to the company. That's the only box or case that left the penthouse. It occurred to us that the Spaniard might have killed his wife for her dough and we went right at it. The only way to get a body out of the penthouse would be to throw it into the street, send it away as freight, or carry it down in the passenger

elevators. None of those things happened. We checked with the Acme Company on the box and there wasn't any body."

"Suppose this taxi man were a confederate of de Cordova's."

"That means she stayed in the penthouse. She's not there. There is no hiding-place. We went through the joint with a fine-tooth comb. Maybe, after he killed her, she went straight up to heaven." Sommers chuckled. "That's the only direction she could go from where she was. Now, as it's getting on to six o'clock—"

"Much obliged," said Tom. "Sorry to take up your time."

After all the police were thorough, he thought as he went uptown—on the subway—this time. What chance had he? But he had seen the murderous rage in de Cordova's eyes. And he had admired the beauty of the blond actress with whom the Spaniard had lunched that day. For a beautiful, fascinating woman like Billee Burton, a man like de Cordova might very easily decide to rid himself of an elderly wife if by doing so he could secure possession of her fortune. And he certainly had possession of it! Poor Marion!

TOM dined frugally as was his wont and at eight o'clock presented himself at the apartment house where Marion lived. The doorman phoned up. "She's not at home," he reported. The elevator arrived in the lobby as he spoke. "See Miss Morton go out?" he asked the operator.

"She left half an hour ago," the man reported.

Tom Franklin, much disappointed, left the place. Even if he had nothing encouraging to report, he had looked forward all day to their meeting. No word—she had simply broken the engagement. He went to his own walk-up, one-room apartment and then phoned Marion's apartment house. She had not returned. He phoned again, an hour later, and received the same answer. It was funny. No, it wasn't funny—it was infuriating.

He went to a motion picture, but his own thoughts prevented him from following the story of the film.

Whether Mrs. de Cordova were dead or not, within a few months the courts would take cognizance of her inexplicable disappearance and listen to a plea from Marion's attorney to terminate her husband's virtual possession of a vast estate. It would then be placed in the hands of trustees who would administer it, impartially and with due regard for the interests of her niece and the hospital to which her will bequeathed the bulk of it, until such time as proof of death was presented, or mental incapacity, should she return not in complete possession of her faculties.

De Cordova must be aware of these eventualities, and if he were wise he would sequester as much of her property as possible, do a disappearance act himself.

As a lawyer, Tom could do nothing but wait until enough time had elapsed so that his plea would have a chance of success. But as an individual he could continue to try to find Mrs. de Cordova—dead or alive.

It was exceedingly exasperating, after his efforts all afternoon, that Miss Morton had forgotten or deliberately broken the appointment. He wanted to ask a lot of questions about her aunt's husband and something might have occurred to her which would be helpful. Now he couldn't figure out what his next move should be.

THE sun was pouring brightly into Tom's bedroom when he awoke at the blast of his alarm clock at eight thirty next morning. It was his habit to arrive at the office promptly at nine each day, just as though business were piled up on his desk and a score of clients waiting for

him. He rolled out of bed, showered and dressed in haste, and after a quick breakfast was delivered by subway at his office building on Fifth Avenue in the Forties in three or four minutes. At precisely one minute to nine he unlocked his door and picked up his mail from the floor under the letter-slot.

There were four letters, three of them bills—the last on good stationery in a feminine hand unknown to him. He tore open the envelope and with growing dismay read the enclosed note.

My dear Mr. Franklin:

You will be pleased to know that Mr. de Cordova has had a change of heart and has not only paid me my allowance to date but has advanced it for several months. I have decided to take a trip to California and am leaving tonight. As there are many things to do I have not been able to keep our appointment and hope I have not inconvenienced you. I appreciate your consideration but see no further reason for your interesting yourself in my affairs.

Marion Morton.

Tom dropped heavily into his swivel chair.

He was horribly let down, though his distress was more at Marion's hasty departure than over losing a client and a possible, if improbable, hefty fee.

How this had happened was clear to him. De Cordova had become frightened at finding Marion's lawyer in his penthouse on friendly terms with his wife's maid. No doubt he regretted immediately having uttered threats and, after thinking things over, had decided that he had made an error in refusing to pay Marion's allowance and hastened to rectify it. Probably he had called on her while Tom was at police headquarters. Several months advance on a $200.00 allowance was a goodly sum, so the girl had evidently decided that her suspicions were groundless, and had hopped a train for California after curtly dismissing her attorney.

So that was the kind of girl she was!

It was difficult for Tom to accept that. He had looked into her candid eyes, realized her charm and her strength of character, and sensed that she liked him. It just wasn't possible that she would treat him like that. And finally, Marion had firmly believed that de Cordova had made away with her poor silly aunt and she wanted him punished. There had been no mercenary motive behind her desire to see justice done. Such a girl wouldn't sell out for a few months' advance allowance, even if she were starving.

That meant that this letter must be a forgery. Tom called up her apartment house and asked to be connected with her, was told that she was out of town. Tom wondered if her aunt's lawyers were familiar with her signature and phoned them to inquire. After a moment a Mr. Holt, of Brown and Holt, Attorneys, was on the line.

"I'm Thomas Franklin, attorney, of Five Twenty-one Fifth Avenue," Tom said. "I was retained yesterday on a legal matter by Miss Marion Morton. I have a letter withdrawing the matter from my charge this morning. Miss Morton is not in town. Do you know her signature?"

"Yes, we have communications from her in this office. Can you let me see this letter?"

"I'll bring it right down. Thank you."

Brown and Holt were located on Cedar Street, but in less than twenty-five minutes Tom was ushered into Mr. Holt's private office. He was a man in his fifties, urbane, polished, shrewd-looking. He greeted Tom cordially and produced a letter from a file.

"We had a note from her inquiring about her allowance a week ago," he said. "Mr. de Cordova took his wife's affairs out of her hands a few days after she disappeared. You see he has power-of-attorney. I'm surprised Miss Morton didn't

come to us in her difficulty. We would have tried to reason with Cordova. We had to write her that she would have to deal with him direct under the circumstances."

Tom handed him his letter and Holt laid the two missives side by side. The handwriting seemed identical.

"And there you are, Mr. Franklin," said the older attorney. "Miss Morton is the only person who has a right to interfere in this matter, and she seems to be satisfied. It's a very queer business."

"When did Mrs. de Cordova give him this power-of-attorney?"

"A couple of months ago when she was ill and there were some important changes in investments to be made. He consulted with us and accepted our suggestions."

"No time limit?"

"It runs until revoked."

"May I ask your opinion of Mr. de Cordova?"

"I wouldn't care to give it, sir. Besides, according to this letter, you have no further concern in Miss Morton's affairs."

"Well, I'm very much obliged to you, sir."

IF TOM had been a lawyer with briefs to make out and court cases demanding his attention it is likely he would have thought no more of the de Cordova case. But he had no pressing affairs and while the girl had apparently treated him very cavalierly, Tom Franklin had to admit that he still admired her tremendously; in fact, he was crazy about her.

And it seemed to him queerly coincidental that on the day when it might have been necessary for de Cordova to get rid of a body, he should have sent a packing-case to the Acme Chemical Company. Though Lieutenant Sommers said that angle had been checked and had revealed nothing out of the way it wouldn't hurt to verify the findings of the police. He looked up the concern in the telephone book and, finding it located on the lower East Side not far from the offices of Brown and Holt, Tom walked over there.

Again impersonating a police detective, he obtained access to the manager.

"I'm inquiring about a packing-case returned to you by Ramon de Cordova from the Estancia Apartment Building on Park Avenue on January second."

"But you already know about that at headquarters. It was sent back by Mr. de Cordova, the owner of the building, on behalf of Doctor Thomas Hines, the research chemist, who lives there. Doctor Hines was away and could not receive the consignment."

"I'm checking another angle," Tom said. A fantastic idea had come to him. "A body is missing and I wondered if Doctor Hines' shipment might have contained chemicals which could be used to destroy a cadaver. What was in the case?"

An expression of blank astonishment came over the face of the Acme manager at Tom's suggestion. Then he laughed uproariously. "Two tanks of hydrogen gas was what we sent Doctor Hines," he said when he could control his mirth finally. "And that's what came back to us from Mr. de Cordova."

Tom's face fell. "You actually received the case with the gas tanks in it?"

"Of course."

"Oh! What is hydrogen gas used for?"

"For many scientific purposes."

"When did this Doctor Hines order the stuff?"

The manager looked in his files. "We received his order accompanied by a post-office money-order on December Twenty-sixth. The tanks were delivered two days later."

"I see." Tom rose, thanked the still amused manager, and left the place. He stood for a moment on the sidewalk.

What would a detective do now? Well, he might go up and ask Doctor Hines about this packing-case which Mr. de Cordova had so kindly stored for him, only to return it to the sender after a few days.

His notion that the packing-case had not returned to the chemical company had blown up and, if a dead body had been substituted for the gas tanks, the officials down there would have found it out quickly enough. It was funny though, that this chemist had ordered stuff, then gone away and it had had to be returned to the people from whom he had bought and paid for it.

CHAPTER FOUR

Pearls—and a Stiletto

HALF an hour later Tom rang the bell of Doctor Hines' apartment on the twenty-ninth floor of the Estancia Apartment Building. The doctor, in his shirt sleeves, personally admitted him. He was a stocky red-faced man with pleasant blue eyes and an agreeable smile.

"What can I do for you?" he asked his visitor.

"I'm from police headquarters," lied Tom. "I'd like to get some information."

"Glad to be of service," said the doctor. "Come in. I've been on a trip. Only returned a couple of days ago so things here are not in order. Come into the sitting-room. It's the only place that's clean."

The doctor sat down and lighted a cigarette. "Ask your questions," he said genially.

"It's about the tanks of hydrogen you bought from the Acme Chemical Company."

"Eh? When? I've not used hydrogen in my experiments for months."

Franklin stared at him. "But I've just come from there. You bought and paid for two tanks on December twenty-sixth."

The doctor jumped to his feet. "I did nothing of the sort. What is this?" he demanded angrily.

"Your order was accompanied by a post-office money-order, sir."

"A post-office money-order! I always pay for things by check. My dear Sherlock Holmes, I was on the high seas December twenty-sixth, on a liner bound for Havana. I've only been back a few days."

"That's queer. The tanks were delivered in a packing-case. As your apartment was locked—"

"And sealed. I always have seals put on the apartment when I go away."

"—Mr. de Cordova stored it in his penthouse. And the day after New Year's he sent the case back to the chemical company."

"You must be mistaken."

"No. We have the report of the superintendent of the building, and the case was received by the Acme Company. I've just come from the manager."

The doctor shook his head. "It's all news to me. I have no use whatever for hydrogen gas and I certainly never bought two tanks of the stuff."

He reached for the telephone book, looked up a number and picking up his phone called the Acme Company. "Give me Mr. MacGrudor," he demanded. "Hello, MacGrudor, if I bought some tanks of hydrogen gas from you, send 'em back to me. You seem to have my money . . . . What's that? . . . . Well, in that case, all right."

He hung up and grinned at Tom Franklin. "They won't send them back because the tanks were returned empty," he said. "And as I didn't order them, pay for them or use them, I don't give a damn. But it's a very peculiar transaction."

Tom's brow was furrowed. "What does one do with hydrogen gas?" he asked. "I ought to know, of course."

The doctor laughed heartily. "Well, it's principal use is to inflate Zeppelins. In

this country we use helium which is non-inflammable. But, as our dirigibles all blow up and the Germans' don't, perhaps we should continue to use it. I'm damned if I know who ordered the stuff in my name and what the devil he did with it. There isn't enough in two tanks to inflate a county-fair balloon."

"Couldn't it have leaked out?"

"Out of the tanks? Not a chance. Any more questions?"

"Why—er—"

"Because I'm pretty busy. How does the matter happen to interest the police anyway?"

"You'll pardon me if I don't tell you that, sir."

"Then good-day, sir," said the chemist irascibly.

Tom found himself ushered out.

TOM had lunch in a cafeteria and returned to his office, buying an afternoon paper on the way. He didn't know what to make of the packing-case business. Doctor Hines didn't have any reason for lying. Somebody had ordered the gas tanks in his name, used them, and returned the empty tanks to the Acme Chemical Company. And it must be Ramon de Cordova.

Now if the tanks had contained ether—

No, that wouldn't help. It didn't matter how Mrs. de Cordova had died—it was what had become of her body that mattered. And come to think of it, that didn't matter either now. Marion had checked him out. Though his heart told him that she couldn't be like that, common sense contradicted it completely. Hadn't her handwriting been identified by her aunt's lawyer? Well, to hell with it! Let the police handle the mystery of Mrs. de Cordova, he was through.

He had no more than picked up a book on torts, begun to concentrate on it, when his phone rang. He closed his book, picked up the receiver. "Hello," he said.

"Tom," came a familiar voice. "I didn't want to write that letter. I had—" There was a click. Marion's receiver had been slammed back on the hook, or the connection had been broken off. Tom jiggled his receiver excitedly.

"Operator," said a languid voice.

"Somebody was talking to me and was cut off."

"Hang up. Your party will call back."

He hung up but Marion did not call back. At the end of two minutes he called the operator. Marion, of course, would have been calling from some distant point.

"That was a long-distance call. Please trace it," he pleaded. He gave his name and number, was asked to hang up and wait a minute.

In a short while the phone rang again.

"No long-distance call has been made to your number today," said the operator indifferently.

"Then it was a local call. I want it traced."

"Name and address of party who called you?"

He gave Marion's name and apartment number and had another wait.

"That party did not call you from that address. It was probably a pay station or dial phone. It can't be traced," the operator finally reported.

Tom walked the floor in a state bordering on frenzy. He was worried and yet his heart was singing. Of course Marion wouldn't have written him such a letter. She hadn't wished to break their engagement last night. It was de Cordova's work.

He phoned police headquarters and asked for Lieutenant Sommers.

"Lieutenant Sommers is not in. If it's important leave your name and number and he will call you," said the headquarters operator.

Tom swore luridly, finally sat down

again. After all, what had he to say that would interest Sommers? That de Cordova had used duress upon Mrs. de Cordova's niece? He couldn't prove that. He couldn't even prove that Marion had called him.

Sommers might be interested in the business of the tanks of hydrogen. When the police had inquired into that matter, Doctor Hines was still away and they had no reason to be suspicious.

Where was Marion? She had called him, she was going to tell him something and had been prevented. Obviously she had not hung up voluntarily. She might be in danger! As the only blood relative of Mrs. de Cordova, she was a monkey-wrench in the plans of the Spaniard. With Marion out of the way, there was nobody who had any legal right to interfere with his management of the fortune of his missing or murdered wife.

Cold sweat broke out on Tom's forehead. But what could he do? He could go to de Cordova and take him by the throat. But that would only land him in jail.

He sat in a brown study for ten minutes, then suddenly he grabbed the telephone book, looked up a number and called the Estancia Apartments. "Connect me with Miss Peletier in the de Cordova penthouse," he requested.

In a moment the fluted voice of Annette came on the phone. "This is Tom Franklin, the detective," he said. "Would you like to go to a show tonight? That is, if you can get out?"

"I shall go out," declared Annette. "I have had enough of this. But I must wait until Monsieur leaves. I meet you at eight thirty—where?"

"Where would you like to go?"

"The revue of Miss Billee Burton—*Stepping Sisters*. I have not seen it."

"Meet you at the theater," said Tom. "Thanks."

"I hoped you would want to see me again."

"I do, indeed," he assured her, and hung up.

It was a break, Tom told himself, that the French girl liked him. She knew more than she had told, without doubt. Perhaps even something about the packing-case stored for Doctor Hines by de Cordova. Maybe she'd drop something that would turn into a real clue.

TOM gasped when Annette Peletier presented herself in the lobby of the theater. She was a vision in a sable evening wrap and a gown that advertised one of Paris' best dressmakers, both selected from her mistress' wardrobe. She was really beautiful.

Tom hadn't dressed and her disappointment at that was obvious. But she was appeased when she found their seats were in the front row. Tom had been forced to buy them from a speculator and it left him with little cash.

The curtain went up on a conventional musical revue. Billee Burton didn't come on until the act was half over—she was not the star but was playing second lead. When she appeared it was as a model displaying an exceedingly daring evening gown and wearing a long string of pearls. He heard a gasp from the French girl. She suddenly applied a pair of opera glasses to her eyes. She muttered something in French and then grasped Tom's wrist.

"*Mon Dieu,*" she whispered. "The pearls of Madame!"

"What do you mean?"

"So Madame did not even take her jewels. She left naked as Mother Eve."

"You're crazy!" Tom exclaimed.

"No, no! Have I not handled them? And, when she turned just now, I saw the clasp through the glasses. The coiled serpent on the arrow. Ah, the fool! She

thinks it's safe. Because the pearls are so big and the string is so long people believe it an imitation. She'd never guess I would be here."

"Be quiet. People will hear you."

Annette subsided but continued to study Miss Burton through her opera glasses. And the glasses pressed to the eyes of a woman in the first row, caught the attention of the actress. Tom saw her eyes widen as she stared at the French maid and he fancied she grew pale beneath her rouge.

He was excited himself. Here was something tangible. De Cordova had reported that his wife had gone off with her jewels. Annette insisted that Ramon's sweetie was wearing the wife's pearls. Lieutenant Sommers would have to take an active interest in the case now.

Tom was so busy with his thoughts that he couldn't concentrate on the show. Songs were sung; he didn't hear them. People came on, spoke lines that made no sense to him, and went off. Finally the curtain fell.

"*Mon cher,*" said Annette. "Now, I must go home. Monsieur always comes in soon after midnight. It is a well paying job."

"Another evening, soon?" he inquired.

"You give me your phone number. I telephone you."

"Miss Burton recognized you, I'm sure. Won't she tell him?"

"If she does, I tell the police about the pearls. *Mon Dieu!* I have told you. Well, I am mistaken. It is not so."

"I felt you were mistaken all the time," he assured her. Annette was not to be depended on, it appeared.

AT ONE A. M. Tom Franklin pushed open the downstairs door of the old residence, converted into walk-up apartments, in which he occupied a large square room on the third-floor back. It was located in the East Sixties beyond Lexington Avenue, inconvenient but cheap.

He walked briskly up the three flights of stairs, inserted his key in the lock, opened the door, closed it behind him and reached for the light-switch. He turned it but nothing happened; the room remained in total darkness. He sniffed—tobacco smoke. Queer. He hadn't even smoked a cigarette that morning before he left for the office, and he always left a window open a few inches.

He grew tense, listened, and fancied he heard breathing, followed by a faint shuffling sound. He was not alone. Somebody was in his room. Warned by the tobacco smoke, he was on guard, and he struck out in the dark as something brushed his shoulder. He hit solid bone, presumably somebody's chest, and there was a grunt and a lunge as a faint spark of light gleamed from a knife-blade. Tom sidestepped deftly like the ex-college boxer he was and, as the knife swept through empty air, darted into the middle of the room.

The unseen antagonist brought up against the wall with a bump and an oath in some foreign tongue. Then he began stalking his prey in the dark. It was like two blind men pitted against each other, except for a very slight difference. What faint light there was in the room concentrated upon the polished steel of the knife blade. Tom knew where his enemy was—his enemy could not see him. He crouched, slipped off his shoes. The telephone was on the other side of the bed. No chance to get at it and aid would probably come too late, anyhow. It was all going to be up to him if he came out unscathed.

What had possessed this robber to enter the apartment of a poor man—a shoddy apartment in a shoddy section of the town—with obvious intent to kill?

Tom could hear the fellow bring up

against the bed and he began to edge toward the bathroom. If he could once get inside, close and lock the door, he would be safe. There was a window close to the bathroom door. Backing in that direction Tom's shoulder struck it and the curtain flew up. Through the window streamed enough light to enable the intruder to see him, and the fellow charged, knife raised. There wasn't time to make the bathroom and Tom did the only thing which occurred to him. He dived at the man's ankles, struck them with his shoulder, and wrapped his arms around the fellow's legs. The man with the knife went to the floor.

Tom was up and on him like a flash. Grasping the right forearm of the would-be killer, he pinioned it to the floor and drove savage rights against the stranger's face. The man swore, twisted and wriggled to no avail, finally ceased to struggle. A heavy smash against his jaw had knocked him unconscious. Franklin possessed himself of the knife, rolled the man over and searched him for a revolver, found none.

He jumped to his feet and ran into the bathroom. The light-switch there worked and the electric bulb threw sufficient light into the larger room to reveal all that was necessary. Tom found himself looking down upon a low-browed, swarthy, Latin-looking man spread-eagled upon the floor.

He walked to his telephone and called, "Police. Emergency. Caught a burglar in my room," he reported. "I'll hold him until you get here."

He hung up as the man who had attempted to assassinate him sat up. "What made you think this was a good place to rob?" asked Tom satirically. "I bet you have more money in your pockets than I have."

The fellow scowled and made no reply.

"The cops will be here in a minute," stated Tom. "Take it easy, fellow. You're sitting pretty."

"I—I got into the wrong dump," muttered the prisoner.

"Well you were going to rob somebody, so the cooler is the place for you. Is this what you call a stiletto?"

"Aw, go to hell," growled its owner. "I ain't saying nothin', see?"

In a couple of minutes, footsteps were heard outside. Tom opened the door and admitted two uniformed officers. Without asking questions, they pounced upon the man and handcuffed him.

"You got to come with us to make the charge," said the one in command.

At the station the prisoner was booked as Joe Monteverdi and placed in a cell. Tom filed the charge of burglary and attempted murder and arrived home at two A. M. He was so exhausted when he got into bed that he fell asleep immediately.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Flying Venus

AT EIGHT-THIRTY the alarm clock banged as usual and Tom rolled out of bed, staggered under a cold shower. Shocked to wide awakeness, the first thing he remembered was Marion's effort to communicate with him; the next thing was that Miss Billee Burton was wearing Mrs. de Cordova's pearls; and finally that he had to appear in court at ten o'clock against one Joe Monteverdi for burglary and attempted murder.

He dressed hastily and was just ready to start for the office when the bell rang sharply. He opened up and found Lieutenant Sommers of Homicide on the threshold.

"You wanted me to get in touch with you," said the police official with a grin. "Well, take a look at me."

"Come in. I was just going to the office."

"I'll ride you down if you like."

Tom laughed. "Come to think of it, I don't particularly have to hurry. Have a cigarette, Lieutenant. Sit down."

"What did you want to see me about? You still calculating on frying that Spaniard for killing his wife?"

"I think he killed her," declared Tom. "Whether we can prove it is another matter."

"It'll be tough going unless you have a corpse, young fellow."

Tom nodded. "I've been poking around," he said, "and I learned something that I thought you ought to know if you haven't abandoned the investigation."

Sommers had a twinkle in his eye. "We sort of suspended it but it can be reopened. Spill your stuff."

"Doctor Hines doesn't know anything about those tanks of hydrogen that de Cordova was storing for him in his penthouse. He didn't order them, didn't pay for them, and wasn't aware they had been sent to him until I told him yesterday."

"There wasn't any dead body in that packing-case. So what?"

"Don't you think it was a peculiar transaction."

"Yeah. Might be worth looking into except for one thing," said the lieutenant in a curious tone. "This Doctor Hines sort of blew himself up last night. They only found a few pieces of him."

Tom stared at him eyes popping, mouth open.

"Them chemists are always monkeying round with dangerous stuff," stated the detective. "They mix one kind of fluid with another kind and *whoosh!* It'll cost about five grand to repair the apartment he lived in."

"He's dead?"

Sommers nodded. "I'll say! And any statements he made to anybody ain't worth a damn. You had a burglar last night?"

"Yes." Tom wiped his forehead which was suddenly wet.

"He tried to stick a knife in you?"

Tom nodded.

"I been down and had a look at him. Funny thing but this wop happens to be the taxi-driver that picked up Mrs. de Cordova outside the apartment house on New Year's Morning."

Tom was so astonished that he couldn't articulate.

Sommers nodded. "So it kind of struck me that maybe he didn't pick the dame up at all. Maybe he was lying. You see he only got a job as a taxi-driver the day before, and he chucked up his job a week later. Kind of peculiar, eh?"

"De Cordova murdered his wife," exclaimed Tom. "I know it."

"Where's the body?"

"How do I know?"

"Looks like this Monteverdi might be working for de Cordova," remarked the lieutenant. "Maybe the wife didn't leave the penthouse at all? Only where is she?"

"We've got to find out."

"Maybe de Cordova killed her. Maybe he sent this wop to kill you. Maybe it was a bomb that went off in this Doctor Hines' apartment," said the lieutenant. "If I didn't think it was all very funny I wouldn't have called on you."

"Let me tell you something else," said Tom excitedly. And he told Sommers about the broken engagement with Marion, the letter, and the interrupted phone call.

Sommers pursed his lips. "Might mean a lot or nothing," he commented.

"Then what do you think of this?" demanded Franklin. "I took the French maid of Mrs. de Cordova to the play in which Billee Burton is appearing last night. And she insisted that Miss Burton was wearing a string of pearls belonging to Mrs. de Cordova, part of the jewelry which the missing woman is supposed to have carried away from the penthouse."

Sommers jumped up. "Why didn't you tell me that in the first place?" he demanded. "That's something! Now Franklin, de Cordova is vulnerable. It looked, a couple of days ago, as if we couldn't touch him. No body, no witnesses. But when he finds you, the niece's lawyer, in his penthouse with the French maid he gets scared. He buys the niece off or carries her off—that remains to be found out—and you lose your job. But you don't quit. Yesterday afternoon you call on this chemist about the hydrogen tanks and find out he didn't buy them. I'm darned if I know what de Cordova wanted it for, but it's dollars to doughnuts the doctor went after him to find out, told him you'd been to see him, and it was a bomb that went off last night in the doc's apartment. Does Billee Burton know you?"

"She saw me lunching at the Ritz with Miss Morton."

"Maybe de Cordova got it out of the maid that you took her to see Burton's show. An amateur criminal scares easy. All he had to do was to sit tight and we had no chance. But now he's starting out to eliminate people he thinks are a menace. First the girl, then Doctor Hines, and then you. If you'd been found dead, why it was just a burglar caught by you in your room, you tried to nab him and he knifed you.

"I'm going up and pinch the Frenchwoman—something's liable to happen to her—she seems to know too much. And then I'll swoop down on this Billee Burton. If she has those pearls it'll be easy to identify them. I'll run the show from now on but I'll keep you informed."

TOM went to his office in good spirits. Sommers was a shrewd, experienced detective and converted now to the theory of murder. De Cordova would probably be arrested before the day was over, and that meant that Marion would be in no further danger if indeed she was in any now.

At ten Tom went to court and saw the prisoner committed for trial, then he returned to the office. In half a hour his door was flung open and Sommers came briskly in. He flung his hat on the desk, pulled off his overcoat and flopped in a chair.

"No luck," he said in an angry tone. "De Cordova fired the French girl last night because she went out without permission. Packed her off bag and baggage. I bounced in on Billee Burton with another officer. She was in bed. She raised hell but we searched the place just the same—tore apart the mattress, took a

chance and had a matron up to search her person. No pearls. The string she wore are worth twenty-five dollars, she claims, and she leaves them in her dressing-room. She's likely to have my job if I don't pin a murder on de Cordova. I picked up a jeweler, went to the dressing-room and found the pearls. Cheap imitations."

"I only know what the French girl said. She was very sure. We sat in the front row and she inspected them through opera glasses. There was a clasp in the form of a serpent coiled around an arrow."

"She was right, of course. And of course Burton saw her looking through the opera glasses and recognized her if you were in the front row. That's why they got rid of the French maid and why the pearls have vanished. It means de Cordova has confederates working with him—people who are holding Miss Morton. We know the taxi-driver was his man—and you can bet that this French girl is locked up somewhere. Trouble is we know all this and have no evidence worth a hoot. I'll have the department hunt the town for the maid and the Morton girl, but it's a big town. De Cordova's game is to cash in as many of his wife's millions as he can in jig time and take a boat to Europe with the Burton woman. We can't extradite him for murder unless we find a body, and we can't do anything about the money because he has a legal right to handle it. Yet this thing can be cleared up and he knows it—that's why he's scared. Watch yourself, Franklin; he may try to eliminate you again. Keep in touch with me."

AS SOON as Sommers had gone Tom picked up the morning paper. He wanted to read the account of the death of Doctor Hines, that friendly and able, if irascible scientist. He found it, now, on the front page—a short article. He read it, listlessly turned the pages until a headline caught his eye—A MODERN ST. ANTHONY.

Where had he heard Saint Anthony mentioned lately. . . ? Oh, yes! The maid, Annette, that day in the penthouse. She'd been very coy about explaining her allusion, he remembered. He read on, let his eyes wander down the column.

Portuguese Fisherman Spurns Embraces of Venus Aphrodite

Emanuel da Sousa, mate of the fishing schooner *Rosita*, and a devoted husband and the father of seven children, has demonstrated, according to his own account, a finer moral fiber than Richard Wagner's famous Tannhauser. Tannhauser fell for Venus but Emanuel exorcised the witch by making the Sign of the Cross. The tale came to the ears of the *Courier* reporter from his shipmates, some of whom were frankly credulous, and some of whom were scoffers. Emanuel offers to swear to the truth of his story on the Bible and furthermore he has tangible proof. But everything in its place. Here is the statement of Mr. da Sousa, father of eight.

"On New Year's Morning I go on watch at eight bells and take the wheel. There is a thick fog. Joe Silva is on lookout at the bow and I cannot see him from the wheel. I know he is there because he keep the fog whistle blowing.

"The skipper tell me the wind died out and the fog come up suddenly, then go to his berth. He say he has sighted Highland Light just before the fog shut in.

"By and by it begin to be daylight and the fog lighten a little bit. I do not get sleepy as some of the crew say. I am wide awake. And I am looking forward and suddenly I see her. She comes down from the sky, oh so gently, and she float before me, her little white feet resting on air only a few inches above the cabin roof, not six feet away. She is beautiful, I tell you, and naked as a statue of a pagan goddess. But she is alive. Her golden hair falls over her shoulders and breasts, her arms are outstretched. She has wings like an angel but I know she is a fiend of hell. I am a married man and a good Catholic. She wants me to release the wheel, to rush into her arms and be carried off to perdition. She float a little nearer

and then what do I do? I make the Sign of the Cross with thumb and forefinger and she fade away, her beautiful face so stricken I almost lose my determination. Once more I make the Sign of the Cross and she lifts into the air and is gone. And I, I faint at the wheel and the ship fall off, but fortunately there is no sea and no wind and I recover quickly. You do not believe me, eh? Well, I shall show you."

He thrust his hand into the breast pocket of his sea jacket and produced something.

"A piece of one of her wings," he said proudly. "I find it on the cabin hatchway when the fog clear a little while later. Look, Mr. Reporter."

Whether the creature who appeared to Emanuel da Sousa was angel or devil, your reporter is not prepared to say but Emanuel has added to the store of human knowledge for he has captured a fragment of the substance of which the wings of supernatural creatures are made. And it appears that they are not made of feathers, or spun gold, or silver—but rubber. Emanuel's prize is a triangular piece of very thin, cream-colored rubber about three inches in length and an inch and a half in width, apparently similar to that used in the manufacture of toy balloons.

Tom laid the paper down. He smiled at the whimsical story. Then, suddenly he frowned. He leaped from his chair, picked up his hat and coat and rushed from his office without even troubling to lock his door.

WHEN Tom burst into the homicide bureau at police headquarters and demanded to see Lieutenant Sommers he was breathless with excitement.

The moment he was admitted to the official's little office Tom laid his newspaper on the desk. "First read that item," he demanded.

"Sit down, boy. Cool off. What's this? Why should I bother about Portuguese fishermen?"

"Read it—all the way through," commanded Tom.

Sommers perused the story slowly and carefully. He laid down the paper. "So what?" he asked contemptuously.

"That fisherman didn't see Venus Aphrodite," declared Tom Franklin. "He saw Mrs. Ramon de Cordova."

"Get out of my office," growled Sommers. "You're nuts."

"Am I? Listen. A couple of days before New Year's I was in Drake's Toy Store buying some favors for a friend of mine who was giving a New Year's Eve party. A customer was having an argument with a salesman. He wanted to buy his whole stock of toy balloons and the salesman protested he couldn't lay in another stock before New Year's. That attracted my attention to the fellow. Yesterday at lunch Miss Morton pointed out de Cordova at another table. I recognized him as the man at the toy store.

"I get you. But, young fellow, you're wild."

"Annette Peletier insisted that if Mrs. de Cordova left the penthouse, she left it nude except for her jewels. It's your idea that the taxi man who claimed to pick her up outside is a confederate of the husband. We saw Mrs. de Cordova's pearls on Billee Burton's neck so we know she didn't take them with her."

"So de Cordova murdered her in the penthouse and sent her out to sea fastened to toy balloons," sneered Sommers. "All built up on this bit of rubber the reporter speaks of in the paper, and the fact that a man who gave a large New Year's party bought a stock of toy balloons."

"That's what happened," asserted Tom.

"You sap, a million of them wouldn't lift anything. You blow them up with the same kind of hot air from your lungs you've just been feeding me, and when it cools they don't even float."

"But suppose they were filled with hydrogen which is fourteen times lighter than air if I recall my chemistry correctly?" demanded the lawyer. "If you

used enough of them they would lift Grant's tomb."

"The rubber is too thin," said Sommers less firmly.

"Lieutenant, at a football game in New Haven last fall, I saw a huge advertising sign, which must have weighed a hundred pounds or more, floated over the Yale Bowl by a great bunch of toy balloons. I've just checked by phone with the Acme Chemical Company, and they tell me hydrogen is used for such a purpose."

"If that's right," exclaimed the detective, "and as you say you've checked up—it must be right, why the thing's possible. We know he had those tanks of hydrogen in the penthouse New Year's Eve. Let me call the weather bureau." He picked up the phone, got his connection.

"Police department," he said. "I have to know in what direction the wind was blowing New Year's Morning."

He waited a moment and hung up. "It was blowing out to sea," he said in a wondering tone. "I'm hanged if I don't believe you've solved the mystery, young fellow. He killed the poor woman and flew her out to sea. And that means that she sank into the ocean. The gas was escaping from the toy balloons. Some of them were torn—the bit of rubber the fisherman found proves that. It's the strangest case ever. De Cordova knew the doctor was away. He figured that he would never learn that the hydrogen gas was bought in his name. It explains why Hines was blown up—why they tried to kill you last night. You were getting too close."

"But we can't convict without witnesses."

"We have a chain of circumstances which would convict—if we had the body. Without that, plus witnesses to the murder, his lawyer could have our evidence thrown out of court. But maybe we can pin the killing of Doctor Hines on him, or the attempt to kill you, or the kidnaping of the niece. Maybe I can break down this Joe Monteverdi. And that Burton dame knows a lot. She's a gold-digger of the most obvious type. Franklin, if we can't convict him, we can have his control over his wife's fortune taken away from him. Shake, kid. You go back and practise law. I'll get busy."

"I'm worried about Miss Morton. This fellow obviously is desperate."

"From now on he'll be shadowed everywhere he goes. We'll jug him the first chance we get. Your girl'll be all right."

"Just the same I'm worried."

"Sent the corpse flying through the air," mumbled Sommers. "Try to stuff that down a jury's throat. On your way, kid, I'm leaving."

CHAPTER SIX

Corpus Delicti

SOMMERS and Franklin left headquarters together. As the former hailed a taxi and drove off leaving Tom standing at the curb, fingers plucked at Tom's sleeve.

"I find you," said Annette Peletier gleefully.

"Hello, Annette," Tom exclaimed. "You were looking for me?"

"I have inquired for Officer Thomas Franklin in there, and there is no such one. I leave and *voici!* I should like a Vermouth."

"There's a café up ahead. Come on."

So Sommers was wrong. They had not sequestered this girl as they had Marion. Maybe Tom's whole theory was wrong—the more he considered it the more fantastic it was.

"Well," she said as they seated themselves at a table in the corner of an Italian

bar, "I am sacked. What you call fired."

"I'm sorry."

"Zut! It is no matter since today they sail on the yacht."

"Yacht. What yacht? Who sails?"

"Ramon and Billee, the love birds," she said with a laugh. "So if I do not go out with you last night I lose the job just the same. I come to look for you because I have things to tell. That Billee Burton, I hate her."

"Tell me."

She sipped her vermouth. "When I get home last night, he is there and he is furious because I have stepped out. I am saucy because I am fed up with that job and while we talk Billee Burton comes in."

"Why do you come here?" he asks. "You should not—"

"She points the finger at me. 'Tonight, in the front row, that servant was sitting with the man we saw lunching with the Morton girl.'"

"'So that's where you were,' he shouts at me. 'You're discharged! Pack your things. I'll give you two weeks' wages. Go!'

"I walk to Madame's room to put back my costume in her wardrobe—he was furious because I wore her clothes, and I hear Billee say, 'I can't stand this. I'm frightened!'

"'We'll get out tomorrow on the yacht,' he said. 'I don't like the way things are going.'

"I change my clothes and go back and ask for my money. He gives it to me and I go out. But I put the door on the latch and slip back to listen. She is in his arms.

"'Of course she thought they were imitations,' he was telling her. 'But you had no right to wear them. Well, I'm cleaning things up tonight, nothing left to involve us and tomorrow we leave this filthy country forever.'

"'This maid, does she suspect anything?'

"'She knows nothing, she could tell Franklin nothing. The niece is safe aboard—the cash and securities are there. I'll pick you up at your apartment house at four o'clock.'

"'Won't it be strange if we leave the country?'

"'It will look only like an elopement. Nobody can stop us. Nobody has anything on us. I'll see you to your apartment. Tonight I cannot remain. There are matters to be attended to. Come along.'

"I slip out of the door and run to the staircase and go down to my room on the floor below. You know what I think. I think they killed Madame. Nothing threatens them but they are frightened at shadows."

"If you only knew the name of the yacht—"

"It wasn't spoken."

He glanced at his watch. It was three o'clock. "Where does the Burton woman live, Annette?"

"Where does she live? I know—let me see. Ah, it is in the Cranmoor Apartments at Madison and Eighty-fourth. I have delivered her invitation for New Year's Eve there. It was too late to mail it. Madame did not want her invited."

"The check, waiter," Tom called.

"But I am not in a hurry," the girl protested.

"I am. You sit here and finish your drink. I have to go back to headquarters."

LEAVING the disappointed young Frenchwoman alone in the bar, Tom ran at top speed back to police headquarters. He knew that Sommers wasn't there but Captain Garvey could get action. Garvey was out, too. He was expected back in a few minutes. Tom, stewing and sweating, wasted twenty precious minutes.

He had no other acquaintances at police headquarters and time was flying. Once out of American jurisdiction, on the ocean with Marion on board the yacht—probably they'd throw her overboard.

Tom rushed out of headquarters, took a taxi to the subway station and rode uptown on a Lexington Avenue express. He took a taxi to Madison Avenue, halted it at the corner upon which Billee Burton's huge apartment hotel was located.

"Wait here," he told the driver. He looked at his watch. It was two minutes of four. He hastened to the entrance of the building.

He was about to ask the doorman if Miss Burton had gone out when he caught a glimpse of the blond woman, a peke dog in her arms, coming across the lobby; Ramon de Cordova was by her side. At the curb a glittering limousine was drawn up, two trunks lashed to its baggage rack.

That would be de Cordova's car. He could not stop them. They would have a right to call a policeman and give him in charge if he attempted to interfere. Where was Sommers? He'd said he'd have the fellow watched. But nobody suggesting a shadow was in the vicinity.

TOM backed away from the entrance to the building. They were coming out. Porters were carrying boxes and bags and placing them in the interior of the big car. Miss Burton carried a small leather box under her left arm. She stepped in.

Tom rushed back to where his taxi was waiting.

"Follow that big car," he commanded. "Don't lose sight of it. Don't stop for traffic signals. I'm from headquarters."

"O. K., chief," said the taxi-driver.

The pair hadn't seen him, had not even looked in his direction. His only chance of locating the yacht was to follow them. If he could stop and phone downtown —Sommers might have returned. But the limousine started off and the taxi had to follow it.

Tom slid down low in the seat in case de Cordova was watchful of trailers, though Tom knew the Spaniard had no reason to suppose he was likely to be followed. Tom had no plan of action after the limousine had led him to the wharf where the yacht was moored, or where it might be necessary to take a tender.

At least he would learn its name. Perhaps the police could get the Coast Guard to pursue it. Surely Sommers would take action when he learned that the pair were escaping.

The big car turned west and the taxi followed, not far behind. It turned north on Columbus Avenue for a few blocks, then west again to Broadway.

There was not much traffic on upper Broadway at that hour and both cars made good time. Twice his taxi-driver took a chance and crossed an intersection against the lights but nothing happened. Tom was hysterical with apprehension lest the cab be stopped but luck was with him. He had supposed that people boarded yachts away downtown or in Brooklyn, but the de Cordova car continued uptown, past One Hundred and Tenth Street.

That was a ray of hope. If they went on board up the Hudson River, it might be possible to have the yacht stopped before she was out of New York Harbor. Provided he could reach Lieutenant Sommers.

At One Hundred Twenty-fifth Street the big car turned west again and in a few minutes it was on the river-front. Suddenly it turned in through a gateway.

"Will I go in?" asked the driver.

"No. Stop at the gate."

He thrust a five-dollar bill into the man's hand—his last—as the cab drew up. The limousine was moving slowly down a pier off which, out in the river floated a neat white motor yacht, big

enough to go round the world. Tom started to go through the gate but the gateman stopped him. "Private landing," he said sharply.

"That Mr. de Cordova's yacht?"

"Yes, I heard he'd chartered it. That's him in the car going down to the tender."

"I've a message for him. When does the yacht sail?"

"Just as soon as he gets aboard. Well, go ahead if you have a message. Hurry if you want to catch him."

TOM started at a run down the pier. He didn't know what he was going to do but somehow, in some way, he had to prevent the guilty pair from getting aboard. The car had stopped. De Cordova had his head out of the window shouting at two uniformed men in a trim motor launch tied up to a landing four or five feet below the level of the pier.

Now de Cordova was getting out. He was helping Billee Burton and the peke to alight. They were walking toward the steps leading down to the landing. Tom, by instinct rather than reason, swerved in his race to keep the limousine between him and his quarry, in case de Cordova might glance back.

One of the uniformed seamen was helping the chauffeur unload the baggage. From the gateway to where the car had stopped was fifty or sixty yards.

Tom slowed up. What was he going to do?

The second boatman was bowing to de Cordova. He offered to take from Miss Burton the small leather box she held under her right arm.

"No, no," she said laughing. "I'll take care of this myself, thank you."

Then Tom was upon them. De Cordova turned, saw him, recognized him. He opened his mouth to shout something, and Tom Franklin rushed forward, snatched the black leather box from under the arm of the resplendent Billie Burton, swung about and tore back along the pier.

De Cordova uttered a shrill shout. "Stop him, stop thief!" he cried. He started in pursuit. Billee Burton emitted a piercing scream. The two seamen joined the pursuit bellowing, "Stop thief!"

A man rushed out of a small building on the pier and stood with open arms in front of Franklin. Tom gave him the straight arm and he went down like a log. He was gaining on his pursuers. De Cordova, realizing it, pulled a revolver from his pocket as he ran. Six shots in succession tore out of the muzzle of the weapon, and bullets whined past the head of the fugitive. Tom increased his pace.

He was nearing the gate now. Half a dozen people were now giving chase. Another revolver came into action. Tom felt a sharp pain in his right shoulder.

The gateman was trying to close the gate but Tom was too near it. He gave up the effort, whirled about and aimed a revolver at the young lawyer. "Stick 'em up!" he roared, the muzzle of the gun pointed straight at Tom's chest.

With a roar, Tom rushed right at him. The man fired one shot which went wide, and the right hand of the fugitive tore the weapon from his grasp. He was outside in the street now and people were converging on him from all directions. His capture was inevitable.

It had been an utterly insane impulse, snatching the jewel-case, but, as the woman had refused to permit the seaman from the yacht to take it, it had flashed through Tom's brain that it must contain the missing necklace. It had seemed the only possible chance of preventing them from going out to the yacht where he was certain now that Marion Morton was a prisoner on board.

Tom was running along the sidewalk now, the hue and cry behind him louder, the din becoming more dreadful at each step. Men attempted to head him off but the gun in his hand deterred them. He had run a full block when around a corner came the most welcome spectacle in his life—a policeman. The officer took in the situation at a glance. He drew his gun, fired one shot and Tom felt a burning sensation in his side. He threw away his revolver.

"Don't shoot. I surrender," he cried hoarsely. The officer, holding the gun steady in his right hand, reached out to collar the prisoner. Tom thrust the box at him.

"Tell Lieutenant Sommers, homicide squad," he gasped. "This box contains a hundred thousand in stolen jewels. The thieves, a man and woman, were escaping in a yacht. Arrest them. Don't let them have the box under any circumstances. My name's Franklin. Call headquarters. If Sommers isn't there get hold of Captain Garvey."

And then Tom Franklin pitched forward on his face at the feet of the astounded policeman. The second wound had been serious.

Bluecoats were now coming from all directions and de Cordova, his face livid from rage and unaccustomed exercise, arrived upon the scene.

"Splendid work, officer," he said, breathing heavily. "I'm Mr. de Cordova. I was going aboard my yacht at the landing back there, when this scoundrel snatched the jewel-case from my guest, Miss Billee Burton, the musical-comedy star." He made to take the box from the policeman, which was a mistake.

"None of that, now," the officer growled. "I'm taking case of this myself."

"But, officer! My yacht is sailing."

"If it's your yacht, it'll wait for you. You're coming to the station. One of you boys call an ambulance. And one of you bring this guy along and another get this person who claims it's his box."

"It's a lady, Miss Billee Burton," pleaded de Cordova who was shaking with fury and apprehension. "Arrest the thief. You can't detain me. I have influence."

"And have you now?" sneered the policeman. "This lad here claims this box contains a hundred thousand in stolen jewels so we'll all take a little ride in the patrol wagon."

"You can't do this, you fool!" screamed de Cordova.

"And come along quietly or I'll put the bracelets on you. Is there a doctor in the crowd?"

There was no doctor but in less than five minutes the siren of an ambulance was heard.

"Take good care of the lad," said the policeman to the interne and the stretcher-bearers. He's a friend of Captain Garvey and Bill Sommers down at headquarters."

THOMAS Franklin woke up on a cot in a flower-filled private room in a hospital. His side hurt a little and his shoulder felt as if pins were sticking in it but, aside from that, he was all right, though a little weak. A nurse who had been seated beside the window rose and stuck a thermometer in his mouth. Tom remembered everything. What had happened? How long had he been here? Suppose that box hadn't contained Mrs. de Cordova's jewels?

Jail for him!

"No temperature," said the nurse. "Police Lieutenant Sommers is waiting to see you. You've been here two days. You had two bullet wounds—flesh wounds."

"I certainly want to see the lieutenant."

Sommers entered jauntily. He was grinning from ear to ear. "Look at you," he exclaimed. "Fit as a fiddle, almost. Well, son, everything is all right."

"Did you arrest de Cordova?"

"Arrest him? I'm going to electrocute the spalpeen."

"Miss Morton?"

"She sent most of these flowers. The homicide squad sent the rest. Young fellow it was an awful smart thing you did but what a chance you took. Officer Gilligan is the best marksman in the department and it's a wonder he didn't put a bullet in your heart instead of your right side."

"How can you electrocute de Cordova? Even if his wife's jewels were in the box, you can only hold him on suspicion."

Sommers pulled up a chair beside the bed. He chuckled. "Corpus delicti," he stated. "Mrs. de Cordova sank into the Atlantic. A chain is as strong as its weakest link. But if they'd got out of the harbor with those jewels, nothing could ever be done to them. Tom, my boy, nobody saw Mrs. de Cordova leave that penthouse New Year's Morning because she went up in a balloon so to speak. But four people saw Billee Burton leave at seven New Year's Morning. And Billee Burton was carrying the jewels the dead woman was supposed to have taken with her."

"Yes, but—"

"A murder conviction can be secured when there is a witness who saw the crime committed, and there are powerful circumstances supporting that solitary witness. Inflating several hundred toy balloons with hydrogen gas and fastening them to a dead body is no one-man job. Let me give you a piece of advice. Don't ever take a woman as a partner in a murder."

"You mean—"

"De Cordova killed his wife. Strangled her so if the body were found there would be no wounds on it. They stripped her so if it landed somewhere and was found in a state of decomposition it couldn't be identified by clothing. They fastened the balloons to her shoulders by piano wire. The wind was blowing thirty miles an hour and she sailed into the heavens like a blond angel. So Billee says."

"She has confessed?"

"She has turned State's evidence. You see, she was accessory after the fact by carrying the jewels—by wearing those pearls. And she didn't know the theory of corpus delicti—and we told her that de Cordova had accused her. Anyway she agreed to be a witness for the State against her lover."

"Her confession won't hold."

"It's not a confession. It's testimony by

a witness for the prosecution. She's as guilty as he is but we have to make use of her." He laughed. "The woman's insane about jewels—that's what ruined both of them."

"But if they had been left behind by Mrs. de Cordova, the husband could have given them to her."

"Not without payment to the estate. That's why they decided to make it appear as if the poor woman had taken her jewels with her. It was a very cold-blooded, carefully planned crime. For example, he called the weather bureau daily to find out the direction of the wind. If it hadn't been right New Year's Eve, they would have postponed the murder. Billee hid in the penthouse after the other guests left—in the storeroom. She helped inflate the balloons. I wish I could send her to the hot seat but we'll have to jail her as a receiver of stolen goods. That's the agreement on which she will testify for the State. Oh, we've got him.

"Now the funny thing is, that he made use of this Joe Monteverdi whom he knew in Europe, to claim he drove Mrs. de Cordova away from the penthouse. Monteverdi is tied up with a gangster named Scarpi, and Scarpi, smelling something funny, muscled in on de Cordova. Billee says it was chiefly to get away from Scarpi, after de Cordova had put a bomb in Doctor Hines' apartment, kidnaped Miss Morton and sent Monteverdi after you, that the pair decided to go on the yacht. We probably can't pin a thing on Scarpi, worse luck. But on the yacht they found eight hundred grand in cash and negotiable securities in the safe, and your girl friend locked in a stateroom."

"Miss Morton is calling," said the nurse after answering the phone.

"Get the dickens out of here, will you Sommers?" requested Tom Franklin.

"That's appreciation," grinned the lieutenant. "I'll be seeing you."

Marion entered as Sommers departed. She ran to the bed, fell on her knees beside it, buried her face in her arms and burst into sobs. Despite his wounds Tom gathered her close. Their lips met.

"I won't have a cent, dear," he said softly.

She smiled. "I have ten thousand from my aunt's estate and the hospital people notify me they will consent to my receiving the fifty thousand a year Aunt Sarah willed to Ramon de Cordova. And as I never would have had any of my aunt's money if you hadn't done that stupendous thing, I won't let you say another word—about money."

"Let's talk about us," said the invalid. "Keep on talking about us, and thinking about us, for the rest of our lives."

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No Bite!

Still no Bite!

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HALF AND HALF

The Safe Pipe-Tobacco

FOR PIPE OR CIGARETTE

SKELETON KEY

It was a weird game of chance which had been played across that table-top by the corpse and the skeleton. And even now—though one was newly dead, the other very old—the end was not in sight. For on the heels of the storm-night a new set of gamblers arrived to sit in the game—pit their luck against the devil's croupier who held the table-stakes of horror in that lonely lodge.

A Novelette

By William E. Barrett

CHAPTER ONE

Bones and a Body

THERE in the big room, the corpse sat staring at the skeleton. They sat facing each other across a scar-laced table and across a great many years. The corpse was newly dead—the skeleton was old.

The corpse sat staring at the skeleton — between them a pair of dice.

On the table between them was a pair of dice.

Jeff Madison swallowed hard. He was thinking of the brown bag out in his car more than he was thinking of the death that was in the room. It was consistent with his luck that he should stumble into a police affair this night, of all nights.

The old man who stood in the doorway behind him was cracking his knuckles nervously.

"He sort of loved that skeleton, he did. Talked to it like a child, he did. Cursed at it, too, more often than not."

The old man's voice was shrill, quavering. Madison found that it rasped his nerves raw. He broke in sharply. "What about the dice? He didn't shoot craps with it, too, did he?"

"Heaven only knows! Kind of a companion that skeleton was to him."

Madison shivered again. The idea of a skeleton lover was not exactly wholesome. He crossed the room gingerly. It was a bare kind of room that might have been cheerful with a log fire going in the big open fireplace but that was macabre enough now with cold ashes piled on the hearth and only the light of a ship's-lantern to war with the shadows. The floor was bare and echoed hollowly under his feet. The eyes of the leopard-skin rug glittered. He stopped a foot away.

There were three knives in a neat row across the man's chest, the hilts protruding, blades deeply buried.

THE dead man did not look like a recluse or a lunatic. Even in brutal death there was a certain air of benevolence about him. He had gray hair that curled loosely above his ears in the William Jennings Bryan fashion. The top of his head was stark bald with a sort of gloss to it that caught the light and looked pink. His chin had fallen forward against his chest above the row of knives but the peculiar position of his elbows against the table-edge had kept his body partly erect. He was wearing an old-fashioned gray Norfolk jacket and a blue shirt that was open at the neck. His fingers were interlaced. Madison looked at the skeleton.

No medical museum had ever done a more careful job of wiring bones together. They were yellow bones with a high polish to them, and the joints were ingeniously made. The skeleton's pose at the table was a grotesque mockery of the corpse. It, too, had interlaced fingers and the head drooped forward. Madison turned to the old man—a bent, gnome-like figure in the doorway.

"You don't know how long he's been dead?"

Madison's voice echoed in the room, and the echoes lingered—running whispers that touched the corners. The old man cracked his fingers again.

"Some time today, it was. I was over this morning and he was hale and hearty. Told me to come tonight, he did. Was having friends in, he was."

Madison didn't touch the corpse but he didn't have to. There was a certain rigidity to it that did not belong to the first hours of death and it was not quite eight o'clock yet. Some of the "friends" must have come early, in mid-afternoon perhaps.

"How long ago since you found him?"

"About an hour, maybe it was. Maybe, longer—"

"And you didn't call the sheriff's office or a doctor—or anybody?"

There was a sharpness to Madison's voice that was traceable to nerves rather than to suspicion. The old man seemed to ascribe it to suspicion only. He stopped cracking his knuckles.

"I told you that the phone wires were cut. I'm an old man. The weather—."

He made a gesture to the out-of-doors, a bleak hillside whipped by a rain-laden wind. Some of the servility seemed to ooze out of him with the gesture. He had thin lips, the shadow of the bottle on his puffy features and eyes definitely hard. When his voice steadied, he dropped twenty years. He might have been seventy before; he seemed no more than fifty now.

MADISON'S eyebrows drew down as he stared at him. He was pretty hard himself. The depression had pitched him into a variety of jobs where he had had little use for his engineering knowledge but where he had picked up knowledge of a more usable kind. Still in his twenties, he had the physique of a football player and the straight, level stare of a man who has been tested by adversity. He had driven into the clearing beside the big hunting-lodge because the storm had been steadily growing worse, and the mountain roads ahead were sure to be dangerous. When the old man had run out to him with an appeal for help, it had seemed perfectly natural. Now he had a definite feeling that the old man was not as simple as he seemed, that he was playing a part.

"You're holding something back," he said curtly. "You don't act like a man shocked by a murder."

The man's eyes were beadily steady, like the glass eyes of the leopard. "You don't act so natural yourself," he said.

The bars were down, and they stared at each other like enemies. Madison was conscious once more of the bag in his car, and the chill sweat trickled on his spine. The guilt of a lonely murder in an out-of-the-way spot was liable to belong to anyone found with sufficiently damning evidence connecting him to it. He felt the eyes of the old man fixed unblinkingly upon his face. The man's voice softened.

"I know what it is, son," he said, "to be afraid of cops. If that's your fix, too, we're in a hell of a spot."

"Let's get away from this and talk it over. I'll have to drive down after a sheriff or somebody."

Madison moved toward the door. He was in command of himself again after an unsteady minute. He didn't feel any responsibility for solving mysteries or finding out who murdered the man in the room. He had a job of his own in a little survey-station high in the hills. Once he escaped from under the keen scrutiny of the old man, he could come to some decision about the brown bag and turn this murder case over to someone capable of coping with it.

He stepped into another room as big as the one in which the corpse and the skeleton sat. Behind him the old man closed the connecting door. A lock clicked. The old man was shaking his head. "The creek was fixing to flood this morning," he said. "With this storm and all, there won't be a bridge left across it, nor a road that comes nigh it fit to drive on."

Madison threw himself down in a big chair hewn out of logs. He was remembering the creek. He had driven across a frail bridge that had been trembling then under the kiss of the flood. And he had been mighty glad when his wheels left it. It wasn't reasonable to suppose that he could cross it twice more—and the odds were that he wouldn't cross it once. He raised his eyes to the old man—and for the first time he noticed the court-plaster on the man's left eye, the bandages on his hand, the stiffness with which he held himself—a stiffness indicating other bandages beneath his stained and shabby clothing. The man seemed to read his thoughts.

"If you think I got scraped up in a killing," he said, "you're wrong."

Madison's eyes were noncommittal. "How did it happen?"

"Never mind. I didn't kill Larry Horner, I didn't. Me, I'm Jack Bransfield, and the only neighbor he's got. Came up here about the same time a couple of years ago. Always got along, we did."

"You and Horner and the skeleton?"

The old man's mouth set like a steel trap. "The skeleton was Larry Horner's business," he said. "It didn't kill him no more nor I did."

Madison watched him warily. "No," he said. "It probably didn't kill him. Who did?"

"Somebody that wanted money. He had about ten thousand in a drawer o' the table he was dead on."

Madison was alert now. "It's gone?"

Bransfield shrugged. "I don't know. I'd have to move his body to get the drawer open. Nobody'd be fool enough to do that before the law came."

"Then you don't know that he was killed for money?"

The twist of Bransfield's lips was expressive. "There was a car came through," he said. "It went over the mountain."

Madison stood up. "I'm not going to fool around. That corpse, like the skeleton, is none of my business. If the telephone lines are cut, I'm going down the mountain and report—"

HIS heels hit hard against the floor and he threw the big door open. A blast of wind met him that almost tore him in two. The heavy door slammed back against him, and the chill rain slapped him in the face. The old man grinned sardonically.

"It isn't that bad outside," he said. "It's the draught that does it."

Madison swore. It didn't have to be that bad outside, and the old man knew it. With a wind like that driving rain in the mountains at this season of the year, a man didn't voluntarily undertake long drives. If he did make it to Kaylor, the county seat, he would probably find some chair-warming politician-sheriff who'd refuse to come back with him till the storm was over and who would hold him for questioning in the meantime.

"Better bring your things in out of the car, son, and spend the night. You're stuck."

Old Bransfield made the statement in the manner of one who has been sure of his facts all along. Madison found his complete calm an unsettling, disturbing thing. It could be the calm of a deadly killer who has found a fall guy upon whom to pin the murder. It might be the icy resignation of a man who has lived hard, and accepted what that living entailed, or it might be the self-control of a physically weak man who believes himself confronted with a murderer.

After all, it was humanly possible for the man to suspect Madison of being the murderer, forced by the storm to return to the scene of his crime. Madison pushed the door open once more, forced himself into the icy current of the wet wind and made for his car.

He shivered as he hauled the brown bag out of the front seat. He'd been excited about it just a short while ago, but it was bad medicine now. There was another bag in the rumble, and he took that, too. Jack Bransfield was waiting for him inside the door. The old man eyed the bags.

"There's several rooms upstairs," he said. "All ready for the guests that Larry Horner never had. I'll give you a lift with the luggage."

"Never mind, thanks."

Madison held onto the bags. The brown one was the smaller of the two and the logical one to give to the smaller man. He didn't want to let it out of his hand. Jack Bransfield twitched his shoulders indifferently and led the way up the stairs. The lodge had been built entirely of logs, and there was a fresh odor of the forest in the upper rooms, a drum of driven rain echoing from the walls. They passed an open doorway through which a well-made bed could be seen. Bransfield closed the door.

"That's Larry Horner's," he said, "or it was."

Madison felt an uncomfortable chill that might have been the draught from

the closing door and that might have been the power of suggestion. Bransfield waved him to another room—a room bare save for a plain bed, a single chair, a small rustic table with a pitcher on it and a picture of the *Lone Wolf* on the wall.

From the road outside, there came the sound of a hard-driven motor.

Jack Bransfield stiffened. "I'm goin' down," he said. "Lay your bags away and come down after me. I'll maybe need you. If you've got a gun in your bag, bring it along."

"How do you know that it would be in my bag? Maybe I'm carrying one."

Madison's eyes were wary again. The old man smiled thinly. "I know the body motions of a man that's got a gun on him, son," he said. "You ain't wearing one."

He turned and went stiffly down the stairs. Madison wet his lips. He'd stepped into something here. If he'd nothing but old man Bransfield to worry about, he'd have his hands full. He heard the man's footsteps crossing the bare floor downstairs before he opened the brown bag. His heart beat fast as it had beat when first he opened it.

The bag was crammed with currency—and he had found it at the side of the road.

CHAPTER TWO

On the Heels of the Storm

MADISON had a gun in his hip pocket when he went down the stairs. He had taken it from the black Gladstone that contained his clothes. He didn't usually carry a gun and he felt a bit uncomfortable with one, but the lonely job that he was on his way to take over had seemed to call for armament. He wasn't sure that the present situation did, but with a murderer on the loose a gun might come in handy.

Downstairs, a shaggy man with well-packed shoulders was shaking himself before the fire. He gave Madison a long, measuring glance and then seemed to lose interest in him. Jack Bransfield was setting a quart bottle of Scotch and some jigger-glasses on the table.

"Nip?" he said.

"Don't mind a bit. You own this place?"

The stranger ignored the glasses and tipped the bottle. He swallowed deeply and set the bottle back on the table-top with a thud. Bransfield wiped the lip of the bottle and poured brimming drinks into two of the glasses.

"Nope," he said. "Another feller owns it. He ain't here right now."

Madison accepted one of the glasses. He was thinking deeply. At times Jack Bransfield forgot to be the countryman with a dialect; at other times he carried it perfectly. There was no consistency, for instance, in his use of "ain't." One thing, however, he did not fake. He was a whisky drinker from away back of beyond. He tossed the raw liquor against the back of his throat, downed it neat and smacked his lips without blinking. The color deepened in his cheeks.

"You rode a bad night into this country, stranger," he said. "You ain't no tourist."

"No. The name's Nixon. I got business up this way." Nixon's small eyes flicked briefly to Madison. "I noticed a car outside. Yours?"

Madison was wiping his lips. "Yes," he said. "The name's Madison. I've got business up here, too."

It was a noncommittal dead-lock, and the three men sat down as if by mutual consent. Nixon crossed his legs. He was wearing a brown suit that was spattered with mud. He fished a cigar out of a case and lighted it without offering a smoke to the others.

"It looks like I'm hung up here for the night," he said. "That wet stuff was turning to sleet when I came up the road."

He had his eyes fixed on the door to the other big room, but he asked no questions. He was throwing off the impression of taking things as they come and people as he found them. He was good at it, but Madison didn't believe in him. A man, unless he was a down-on-his-luck engineer, would have a hard time finding business to attend to in this country at this season of the year—and, now that Bransfield had called attention to it, Madison was aware that men who carried guns instinctively adopted habits of posture that eased the weight of the gun and made it easily available for use.

Nixon, he was sure, had a gun in a shoulder holster.

Bransfield was pouring himself another drink from the bottle and he was watching Nixon. "So you're going to stay the night?" he said.

"What else is there for me to do?" Nixon was suddenly belligerent, his big hands gripping hard on the arms of his chair, his body balanced forward. Bransfield flipped the whisky against the back of his throat and spoke, without a catch in his voice, before the drink hit bottom.

"You didn't have much choice once you got this far," he said, "but if you came out of Kaylor, it must have been pretty bad when you started."

"I came out of Kaylor."

Nixon's jaw was hard, his small eyes all but hidden under the lids. Madison, who had come out of Kaylor himself, figured that he must not have had much of a start on this man—and the weather hadn't been too bad. He had figured at the time that he had a good chance of making it through. But Bransfield hadn't put him to any searching cross-examination as this. For some reason, he had an idea that Bransfield suspected Nixon of something where he hadn't suspected Madison. It could, of course, be the man's age. Nixon was somewhere between forty-five and fifty, about the age of the man who had died in the other room and a little younger than Bransfield himself. If Horner had been murdered as a result of a deal that Bransfield knew about, the people involved might all have been of about the same age. Jeff Madison was not yet thirty.

NIXON heaved himself out of his chair, took another drink out of the bottle without permission, and stared challengingly at Bransfield. "If the fellow that owns the place shows up," he said, "I'll make arrangements to stay."

Bransfield shrugged. "You're staying without the arrangements," he said. "There's a room upstairs you can have. Even if he was here, he ain't running a hotel."

Nixon took that shot with his shoulders bunched and his brows pulled down but he was not thin-skinned. He had made up his mind to stay in the face of all the hostility in the world and he did not make even a normal effort to justify his staying where he hadn't been invited. Madison wondered if that were not exactly what Bransfield was attempting to discover.

He didn't have time to wonder long. There was a deeper note in the sound of the storm, and the three men in the room strained to listen. Another car was fighting toward the clearing. They could hear the laboring of the engine as the wheels fought for traction on the slick road. Bransfield chuckled dryly.

"He won't get no further than here neither," he said.

The man didn't. His car thudded into the clearing beside the lodge and a door slammed. The man who got out hesitated before he entered but he did not knock

at the door. He shoved in and brought an icy draught with him. He stood blinking in the light, his eyes registering the room and its occupants with slow, rolling appraisal.

He was a tall man, a trifle under six feet perhaps, as were Nixon and Madison himself. This man, however, was more loosely made. There was both physical power and personal untidiness in him. He hadn't shaved for days and the beard was greasy black against his sun-blistered skin. His mouth was definitely hard—small, with crooked lips. His nose had been broken at sometime and had set in spread deformity rather than in a bend or a hump. He, too, might have been fifty or more.

"Good evenin'," he said. "How's to put a man up for the night? I've been driving all over these hills and I'm dead spent. It's no driving weather at all. A man can stand just so much of it."

Bransfield was smiling thinly. He looked dwarfed by his company and frail. "It's quite a club," he said, "but we're running out of rooms. The next man, if there are any more, will have to bunk with you, stranger. You're the last man and you'll have to stand for it."

"Thanks." The stranger didn't sound thankful; he sounded sullen. He was squeezing water out of the left sleeve of his mackinaw—the sleeve evidently, which had caught the full force of the weather as he drove with the car window open. His eyes, like Nixon's, seemed drawn by the locked door behind which the corpse, and the skeleton sat in lonely isolation. Bransfield poured a drink.

"Most of us have names," he said. He pointed around the semicircle, ending with himself. "Madison, Nixon, Bransfield," he said.

The stranger shook himself. "Sure," he said. "Smithson. That's mine."

He hesitated over the second syllable just long enough to give Madison the idea that he had started to say "Smith" and had rejected it as sounding phony. The whisky, however, warmed him and he wanted to talk.

He talked at great length about his drive over the wrong roads and threw in long, windy details.

MADISON was bored with him and Nixon seemed asleep, his cigar hanging cold in the corner of his mouth. Only Bransfield seemed interested and kept his keen eyes fixed on the man's face. From time to time, Smithson slowed down and looked around the group as if puzzled about them and trying to place their reasons for being here. Nixon, in less obvious fashion, had been doing the same thing from under drooping eyelids.

Presumably only Bransfield and Madison knew about the murdered man in the locked room—but Madison didn't go for that presumption. That either Nixon or Smithson knew something—or a lot—about the murder or the circumstances leading up to it was a cinch. There was too much traffic in this lonely spot for a stormy spring night. It was a game, and a grim game, that was being played in this warm room while the storm raged outside. Ultimately, too, they would all go to bed. . . .

Nixon started it. He got up, stretched and yawned. "Where's that room you said I could have?" he said.

He cut right through the middle of Smithson's narrative without an apology. Bransfield got up, and Smithson leaned back in his chair, his prominent, bloodshot eyes fixed in sullen anger upon the burly Nixon. Nixon ignored him and ignored Madison. His heels hit hard as he made for the stairs. Smithson cursed under his breath.

"I've got to be getting my bag out of the car," he said. "There's things in there I'll need, and it would be getting wet, anyway."

The man had the habit of supplying too many reasons for everything that he did. Madison got up. "I'll help you in with it," he said.

Smithson shook his head surlily. "I don't need any help."

Madison sat back and watched the man bring that bag in. There was something in the way that Smithson held it! He recalled his own feelings about the bag that he had in his car. Smithson was holding his bag about the same way that Madison had held his. He wondered what was in this one.

Then he recalled the fact that there were two men upstairs who were practically strangers to him, and that the bag was in his room. He got up swiftly and went up the stairs. Bransfield met him at the top, a startled expression on his face. Madison nodded.

"I'm going to bed, too," he said.

"And leave me with that big tramp downstairs?"

Madison shrugged. "Chase him up to bed and come up yourself."

"Maybe I'll do that." The old man's voice was speculative. Madison hesitated, his voice pitched low.

"What are you going to do about the two in—"

He didn't finish the sentence and he didn't have to. Bransfield smiled wryly. "Any suggestions?"

"No?" Madison's brow was furrowed.

The old man spread his hands out from his body. "That's just what I'll do then," he said. "Leave the key turned the way it is and wait for a suggestion to turn up. Good-night to you."

CHAPTER THREE

The Man Downstairs

IT WAS not until he was alone in the room assigned to him—and with the door closed—that Jeff Madison realized how neatly he had been maneuvered into a position that would be indefensible before the law. He had known of a murder without reporting it and he had conspired at the concealing of the body from two men who visited the scene of the crime after the murder.

If Jack Bransfield had set that up deliberately, he did a neat job. Madison sat on the bed. He reached out with the toe of one shoe and kicked the brown bag. He was afraid to count the money in there. He'd still have been afraid to count it if he'd had absolute privacy. It looked like more money than he had ever seen before and he was only human. He'd had a rocky ride ever since he left college, and there had been times when he reached the point of actual hunger. When he found an untagged fortune like this beside a muddy road, he did not have to be crooked to play with the thought of keeping it.

He still toyed with the idea. Money made so many things possible that were not possible without it. But, somehow, he felt, this money was tied to the dead man who sat facing a skeleton across a table above a pair of dice. He had found it less than two miles down the mountain from the hunting-lodge.

He still had to figure out why anyone should throw such a wad of money away. It wasn't the murder loot unless Bransfield was away off on his count. By any method of calculating, there was more than ten thousand dollars in the brown bag—much more.

In the meantime, there was the night before him and after that the morning.

Tonight, if this murder was committed for money and if the murderer was in the lodge, there would be a hunt conducted for money. The man who had killed Larry Horner would not hesitate to kill again if he had to do it to cover his tracks or to insure his gain. Jeff Madison was going to bed above a fortune that might well be the price of many murders.

Tomorrow, if he survived the night, the law would enter the picture. There were ties enough to establish him as a suspect already, and once his bags were searched there would be no chance of explaining himself out of the fix that he was in. Nobody would take into consideration the fact that he had had no chance to report the finding of the bag or the facts of the murder to the proper authorities. He didn't even have a background that would help him. He was downright poor and had taken the job upon which he was going only after trying to get out of taking it. He had a trail of pawn tickets behind him and a girl that he hadn't wanted to leave. All of those things added up to—motive.

He had needed money desperately and he had a suit-case full of it when he was found at the scene of the crime.

He could imagine a prosecutor throwing a juicy bit like that to a jury and also could imagine any jury giving him a break after they got it. It just wasn't human nature for a jury to figure past such damning array of facts—the average man didn't have sufficient imagination.

He rolled a cigarette and lighted it while he searched for alternatives. There wasn't anything on earth that he could do with the brown bag that would divorce him from connection with it. And if he reported it the minute that he saw an officer of the law, it would appear merely that he was trying to unload evidence against himself.

He could slip out of here tonight and hit the highway, but what good would that do him? Even if he made it through the storm, his description would follow him and he had given his right name. Even his tire tracks in the muddy morass of the roads would lead directly to him. And the old rule would hold, the man who runs away is guilty.

He kicked his shoes off, took the revolver out of his hip pocket and lay across the bed with it. Somebody would make a move before morning, and that was his big chance.

Bransfield had lighted the lamp for him when they first came into the room. Now, Madison extinguished it and lay in the dark, smoking. He could hear the walk of the wind down the canyon and the far-off cracking of tree branches like the reports of small firearms, picked up by the echoes and carried to where he lay. Presently, he heard Bransfield showing Smithson to a room, and Smithson talking too much as usual. Then Bransfield made a trip downstairs, puttered around for a while and came back. He entered another room down the hall, and after that there was silence except for the battering blows of the wind against the lodge and the creaking protest of punished wood.

The liquor had made Madison physically sleepy, but danger had made him mentally alert. The result was a nervous tension that made the skin of his entire body feel like sandpapered fingertips. The darkness and the silence pressed down on him and it was hours before he heard the first creeping footfall in the hall.

Somebody was on the prowl.

THERE were no locks on the bedroom doors, and he heard his knob turned gently. The door opened a few inches and he had the sense of feeling, rather than sight or sound, of someone crouched outside the aperture like a hunting animal.

By an effort of will, Madison made his breathing heavy and regular in the simula-

tion of sleep. His hand closed tight on the butt of the revolver, and he waited. The man outside the door waited, too—waited with a patient, deadly quiet. Madison knew that he was waiting only because of that mysterious sense of presence that flows from a living person.

Then slowly the door closed.

For a moment there was a paralyzing sense of reaction, and Madison lay where he was. The man was going away from the door, and Madison roused himself out of it. He slid, fractional inches at a time, over the side of the bed and got his stockinged feet firmly under him. The crossing of the room seemed to take ages of time, and sweat rolled on his body like lubricant by the time that he reached the door.

The hall was empty.

Madison waited there with his gun in his hand, and the beating of his heart seemed to wake the echoes. Outside, the wind still wailed like a love-sick coyote—the sound dropping to the lower registers and climbing slowly with unbelievable mournfulness to spill off a high note, at length, in accents of utter woe. The lodge groaned along its every board in sympathy—but out of the medley of wild sound, Madison picked up a single squeak that was not chargeable to the elements.

Someone had reached the foot of the stairs.

Some weak, indecisive thing within Madison told him that it was none of his business, that so long as his own room was not molested, he was not responsible for the lodge. But he was moving forward, even as he thought it. He was in this thing to his neck and he wouldn't get out by lying in a bed and trying to drift out. He'd have to get out under his own power.

At the foot of the stairs, he took a deep breath. There was a key grating in a lock. He gripped his gun hard and stepped into the big room. By the faint glow of the logs, he could see the shadowy figure of a man against the door of the room that held the corpse and the skeleton. He brought his gun up steady.

"Put your hands up!" he said.

The man gave a startled jerk and turned around. His eyes were momentarily big and they had a red gleam in them from the reflection of the fire. Madison swore under his breath.

He had not expected to crack down on Jack Bransfield.

The old man had his hands up but when he stared past the gun and found Jeff Madison's face, something very like relief lighted in his eyes.

"You!" he said hoarsely. "I thought—"

"Never mind what you thought. You're trying to put something over."

"Please! Not here. Come in the room. Our voices won't carry through the door."

The old man had the door to the murder room unlocked. Madison's eyes narrowed. The man was tricky and clever and Madison felt his own inability to match wits with him—especially in a darkened room. But there was a lot in what the man said. Either, or both, of the two men upstairs were dangerous. He shrugged.

"If you can give me one good reason why you were sneaking into that room," he whispered, "I'll go in with you."

Jack Bransfield looked at him grimly. "I was going to wait in that room," he said. "And I was going to shoot the next man who came in there, without waiting to see who he was."

CHAPTER FOUR

Guns in the Dark

JEFF MADISON stepped into the black darkness of the murder room behind the old man. He was still distrustful and held the muzzle of his gun against the man's body. Jack Bransfield closed the door gently.

"Maybe if you take my gun away, you'll feel safe enough to take that rod of yours out of my ribs," he said dryly.

"It's an idea."

Madison felt the man's body gingerly in the dark, without relaxing the pressure of his own gun. Bransfield's gun was easy to find. It was a big single-action Colt's, and he had it tucked away inside his belt band. Madison transferred it to his own belt.

"Spill the story," he said. "If I'd been a little slower, I'd have been the buck through the door. Then what?"

"I might have recognized you, son. I hope so."

Jack Bransfield seemed shaken by the surprise of his capture at gun point and the shock of the near tragedy. Madison pressed while he had him off balance.

"Why shoot somebody?" he said.

He felt the man shrug in the darkness. "A feller that just came in because the storm was bad would be damned glad to get a dry room, son. He'd stay there. A feller with a crooked streak might prowl the rooms some. But a feller that came straight to this room and tried to get in would be a feller that knew what was in here. And he'd know because he was the feller that killed Larry Horner."

Madison was very conscious of the body that he couldn't see. There was a heavy, earthy odor of death in the room and a damp chill like the chill of a tomb. It was not imagination. The room actually was a tomb, of course. It had been shut off from the warmth of the other room, and the wet cold from the stormy out-of-doors had been soaking steadily in through the logs.

"A fellow that knew what was in here wouldn't have to break in," he said.

Bransfield grunted. "You don't know human nature, son. Imagine coming back after murdering somebody and finding no excitement. You'd sit around and look at the door of the room where the body was and you'd wonder why nobody was making a fuss about it—and you'd damned near go nuts."

Madison nodded. "Maybe."

"Sure. And if you killed a man for money and got less than you thought you ought to get, you'd worry about maybe overlooking some the first time."

MADISON frowned. "I might. But you haven't satisfied me. I've got your gun and I'm not in favor of shooting the first guy into a room because there's a story rigged up that might fit him. I'm keeping the gun and we'll let the law handle the whole thing in the morning."

There was silence for a moment, and Jack Bransfield sighed. "If you think that this set-up will wait for morning, you're dead wrong. One of those two fellers is Moose Carrol. The hell of it is, I can't tell which."

"Moose Carrol? That doesn't mean a thing to me." Madison was tense. He had gradually been feeling his man out, leading up to facts that he wanted. He had the sense of expectancy, now, that a man has when he weighs an important letter in his hand before opening it. His eyes had become sufficiently accustomed to the darkness for him to make out the outline of the man beside him. Jack Bransfield was staring toward the blur in the blackness that was the murder table. Madison's imagination almost persuaded him that he could see the white grin of the skeleton, the tired droop of the corpse. Bransfield's voice cut the silence, a husky whisper.

"Moose Carrol, son," he said, "was one of four men that stuck up banks across the whole state of Colorado in 'Nineteen. They were young men, just out of the army and wild. And they got a poke of nearly two hundred thousand bucks. Two o' those fellers were twins."

HIS voice trailed off for a moment, then picked up. "Not very far out o' Kaylor, they shot it out with a car load o' deputies, and one of the fellers got killed. One o' the others got a pretty desperate wound. The feller that got wounded was one o' the twins, and his brother was desperate. They got away from the deputies and there was a country doctor with a place beside the road. They stopped there."

Bransfield paused again. "Not all the loot of all their robberies could buy life for that boy, son. He was dying. The doctor eased him up and told his brother it was hopeless—and the brother figured that his own fix was hopeless, too. The deputies o' the whole state were looking for the two men who were left and figured to catch them, eventually. So in that doctor's little office, they divided nearly two hundred thousand dollars loot four ways—one share for the man who was dead and one for the man who was dying. The twin willed his share to his brother right there, and this Moose Carrol wanted the other man's share to balance up. He didn't get it."

The room was very still when the old man's voice trailed off, and Madison found himself straining forward to catch the tale when it picked up again. Drama was being relived in the room, with the darkness blanketing down and the storm howling out of the high passes. Jack Bransfield's voice tightened up.

"Right there in that doctor's office those three men shot dice for the dead man's money—high throw to win. And the man who was dying got it. Moose Carrol was too low-down mean to be a sport about that. He went out, cursing, and took the car, leaving the twin stranded with his dying brother."

"Then what?"

"Well, one twin knew he was going to die, and the other knew that he was going to prison. So the one signed a will that left his body to a medical college and his skeleton to the doctor that tended him. And the other left his share of the loot for the doctor to take care of till he got out. He trusted the doctor, gave him twenty thousand for himself and said that he could always identify himself no matter what changes came up."

"How?"

"Well, a man can change a lot, son, but once he's got his growth, his skeleton doesn't change. The boys were identical twins. They had an idea the skeleton that the dying twin was leaving to the doc could always be matched by X-ray with the skeleton of the other twin. The doctor wasn't so sure about that, but he was pretty frightened and there wasn't anything much else to do. The twin that was making a run of it didn't dare leave his fingerprints behind. There was a chance that he'd get away, you see. . . ."

"Moose Carrol got caught. So did the twin. They got hit on the nose with twenty years apiece in Canyon City, and Moose Carrol had another grouch to take into prison with him. They found his share of the money on him and they didn't find any on the twin. He didn't squeal, though. He just waited to get out. He knew that the money was ditched somewhere. He just didn't know that the doctor had it."

"All right. They got out. Then what?" Madison was impatient.

"The doctor wasn't as square as the twins figured, son. He didn't stay long with medicine after he got a wad of money like that to play with. He hit the booze pretty hard and the gambling-houses and the women. He did Denver up pretty brown and only came back to the country he belonged in when his money was away down."

"His money or the twins'?"

"Both."

Bransfield's voice broke off short, and

Madison stiffened. From above the room of death there sounded one abrupt, incautious sound—as if someone were walking gently and had made a misstep. Neither Bransfield nor Madison spoke. They sat there listening, as motionless as the two that sat across the table just a few feet away. The sound from above was not repeated. Jack Bransfield rose carefully.

"Somebody's getting kind of restless, son," he said softly.

Madison's jaw was suddenly hard. He was not sure that the interest of the men above-stairs would be confined to the murder room. He was remembering the bag that he had left unguarded in his room, and his nerves crawled under his skin again. His old distrust of Jack Bransfield returned.

The man had volunteered to help him in with his bag, and the old man was observant. He must have drawn conclusions from the fact that Madison had held onto that bag jealously. It was possible that one of the two supposed strangers tonight was a friend and an accomplice of the old man. After all, what did Jack Bransfield have to recommend him except a pat story and a certain hard experience that took him through tight holes?

Madison rose abruptly. He hesitated a moment and then passed the old man's gun back to him. He didn't know quite why he did it except that he did not want the gun. He was already tied too tightly to the props of the case.

"I'd do my investigating before I did my shooting, if I were you," he said gruffly. "I'm going upstairs."

He passed through the door of the death room and made his way swiftly up the stairs, balancing his weight lightly and moving like a fast shadow. He rested his weight forward on his fingertips like a sprinter when he reached the top step, and literally sniffed the darkness. There was not a sound nor a movement. He straightened and moved toward his own room.

The storm was dying down, and the wind was less noisy. Fury no longer shook the lodge. Madison's hand seemed to stick to the knob as he turned it slowly. The door swung inward, and he shoved it closed behind him. He could make out the murky grayness of the window, and then a shadow came out of the very floor.

Something rammed with almost breaking force against his lower ribs, and a harsh voice whispered: "One wrong move, guy, and you get it!"

Shoved almost into his own face was the iron-jawed countenance of Nixon.

CHAPTER FIVE

Skeleton Twin

THERE was a tight five seconds while the two men stared into one another's eyes over the gun that Nixon was holding under Madison's heart. Madison had his voice under control before he spoke.

"Just what," he said grimly, "is the idea?"

"This!" Nixon lashed with the speed of a rattlesnake. The heavy barrel of his weapon thudded against Madison's skull above his ear, and something seemed to explode in his brain. As his knees turned to rubber, Madison felt the big arms of Nixon enfolding him. He was going down and out, and Nixon had waited to strike until he had been sure that he could ease his victim to the ground. He took no chances on a crash or loud thump.

There was a black void, and then Madison was coming back. He felt his way through a mist of agony, and something told him that he had not been out for long. His arms were drawn together behind his back and lashed at the wrists. His ankles were bound.

Nixon was down on his knees beside

the opened brown bag and he had a flashlight in his hand, a miniature flashlight that threw a beam no thicker than a match-stick. The stick of light moved slowly over the stacked currency, and Madison watched it with a feeling of annoyance. He was just a little bit sick and his head ached, but mostly he was sore.

He hadn't figured this Nixon's exact place in the picture, and still didn't get it.

If Jack Bransfield were the twin who had done time, and the murdered man was the doctor who had betrayed his trust, then Nixon could be Moose Carrol. But it would still leave Smithson to be accounted for, and Smithson had been a shifty character. Moreover, if Nixon were Carrol, why would he be interested in Madison at all and what would make him suspicious of the brown bag?

Bransfield and Carrol could be in cahoots, one man taking the upstairs and one taking the down.

The thought was like a splash of icy water on Madison's brain. If the two ex-partners in crime had become reunited because of the doctor's perfidy, they could have plotted his murder together—and carried it out. Nixon's coming out of the night and the storm could have been an act, and all of the rest of it arranged to gain time for a necessary extended search after hidden money.

But who had lost the suit-case full of currency beside the road? And where did the currency come from? Why had anyone taken it down to the cross-roads where Madison found it, and what had happened to that someone?

The questions whirled around and chased one another through Madison's aching head without solution. Nixon was as silent as a shadow, and the tiny beam moved slowly while the man did what Madison himself had not taken time to do, counted the money.

"Fifty thousand."

Nixon's lips formed the words, but no sound came through. Madison moved his head slightly. "Why pick on me?" he whispered huskily.

Nixon jerked his head up. "You want another bat on the skull?"

"No." Madison had held his voice to a whisper to avoid just that. Nixon was perfectly capable of crashing him again, and he knew it. "But maybe if we knew where we stood," he said, "we wouldn't have any argument."

"Guess again. I'd argue with anyone over this dough."

Nixon stood up, and his open coat fell away from his body. His vest flipped inside out. For just a fractional second before the light beam died there was a flashing glint of reflected light on the inner side of that vest. Madison stiffened against his bonds.

"A cop! You?"

Nixon bent over him. "You ain't trying to tell me you thought I was a hijacker?"

Madison stared up at him through the gray darkness. "Sure. Cops use handcuffs instead of rope."

"You know that, do you? Well, they don't carry a noisy bunch o' metal to a quiet job."

NIXON was making a roughly twined rope gag out of two handkerchiefs. "You got a chance to chirp soft and low—and quick," he said, "before I shut your mouth for a while. Who's who on this racket, where did you get the dough and how were you supposed to deliver it?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"Maybe not. But I know most of the answers. You were the bright messenger-boy who was delivering that swag to Moose Carrol. Now, where was it for twenty years, and who gave it to you?

You're cold, guy, and you better shoot square with me for a break."

Madison's brain raced. He didn't know much about detective work, nor about the underworld, but he knew that when a cop talked like this there was something that the cop had to know. Nixon had a few threads and was trying to weave them together. If it weren't for that the man wouldn't be wasting time in conversation —nor taking chances. Madison shook his head.

"I know less about that money than you do," he said.

Nixon cursed. "You—" He whipped the gag across Madison's mouth with a savage gesture and straightened as he rammed it into place.

Downstairs a heavy-calibered gun roared.

For a deafening second the echoes chased one another through every corner of the lodge. Nixon stood like a statue with one hand buried beneath his armpit, then cursed heavily and glided toward the door, his gun in his hand. As the hall shadows swallowed him, one thought was uppermost in Madison's mind.

Jack Bransfield had made good his boast. He had shot the first man to enter the murder room. And that man had to be the hulking Smithson.

He was straining against his bonds as the thought passed through his mind. He had been tied in the dark by a man who was trying to avoid making noise—and if he couldn't loosen such bonds as that, he deserved to remain tied. He relaxed his muscles and felt the bonds slide. He worked with them patiently and swiftly and they turned so that he could bend one hand back and worry at the knot with his fingertips.

He forced himself to count in perfect rhythmic time and found that he could control his fingers to the tune of his own counting. It put a check on nervous fumbling and kept him from a fruitless race against the minutes.

He was breathing deeply when he rolled free and spat the gag out with relief. Nixon had taken his gun, and he had only his muscles to rely upon. He flexed them and found them good. As silently as Nixon had done, he stole into the hall.

He had not been conscious of a sound from downstairs since Nixon left the room, but he would probably have missed everything except the more pronounced sounds of scuffle because of his concentration upon escape. He took the stairs, carefully. Three quarters of the way down, he spotted Nixon.

The man was lying on the floor just under the stairs in a position that gave him command over the biggest area of the big room. He was holding his gun before him in readiness to fire. As Madison froze to immobility above him, the man's hoarse voice broke the tense silence.

"This don't buy you anything, you murdering old devil! I can wait here till morning, if I have to, and you can't get past me—nor get a shot at me, neither."

There was no answer from the other room, and Nixon grunted. "O.K.," he said, "but if you want me to take you alive, you'll skid that gun out here along the floor and you'll come damned quietly."

THERE was no answer to that challenge. The man inside probably recognized the fact that Nixon's position was impregnable against either a snap-shot or a charge. In the face of that fact, he did not risk giving his own position away by pointless argument.

Madison balanced on the stair above Nixon and warred with himself. Nixon was the law and Madison, as a citizen, probably owed him support. But as this case shaped up, Madison was no longer an ordinary citizen. He was a man definitely tied up with a crime about which he under-

stood little. If he were to throw in his lot with Nixon now, Nixon would arrest him when the case was shaped up to his satisfaction—and Nixon would shoot callously and selfishly for personal glory, no matter if he had to twist and bend the evidence to fit the men he dragged into the case. His every action, since he entered the lodge, had branded him as that kind of a man.

On the other hand, Bransfield's story had had a human quality that carried appeal. Nixon's story had partly confirmed it, and Madison had a sudden surge of faith in the old man that balanced his past doubts. He was ready to accept the unproved parts of the story on the strength of the part that had been proved. With Bransfield, he had a chance of getting at the truth of the murder and of the fifty thousand dollars in the road. With Nixon, he had no chance of getting anything except trouble. Nixon, he was convinced, was dumb.

He made his decision between two ticks of the clock in the hall.

His body took off in a lithe spring from the stair step and, as Nixon turned in sudden alarm, one hundred and seventy pounds of work-hardened muscle hit him like a shot from a catapult.

The detective gave one grunt and went out like a light. Madison wasted no worry over him. The man was big and chunky and built like a brick wall. He could take it, and this was one time when he had had to take it. There was still no sound from the other room, and Madison made no attempt to tie Nixon up. He picked up the man's gun and stepped to the door leading off the hall.

"O.K., Bransfield," he said. "Hold it. This is Madison."

"Thanks, pal. But just drop that roscoe and come in easy."

The hoarse voice stopped Madison in his tracks. He turned slowly and released his hold on the gun. He was beautifully flanked by a man who had crept up along the inside wall while he was untangling himself from the fallen detective.

He had leaped from only a moderately hot frying-pan into a very nasty fire. The survivor of the struggle was not Jack Bransfield, but the man who had called himself Smithson.

CHAPTER SIX

Murder Money

THERE was still a dim red glow from the dying fire in the big room, and the crimson light played across the unshaved, vicious face of Smithson like the glow of hell in the face of a minor devil. Madison got his hands up and backed away from the gun that he had dropped.

He wasn't arguing with the thing that he saw in the face of the man before him. The man was snarling with triumph. "I don't owe you a thing for ploughing that cop," he said. "You didn't intend no favor for me."

"I'm still the guy that took him out of the picture."

"O.K. Don't argue. Bring him in here and let me take a look at him."

Smithson was enjoying a big moment. By one lucky stroke he had become absolute master of a mad situation. The lodge was cut off from communication with the world outside, and no one else could reach the place tonight. The two men who stood in his way were helplessly in his power. Madison wondered about Bransfield and was conscious of a definite feeling of regret. There had been only one report, and there would have been more than one if Smithson had not done a thorough job with the one shot. Bransfield had been primed to shoot, himself, and mixed with Madison's regret was the thought that Bransfield might have been prevented

from shooting first by his, Madison's, warning.

He was dragging the limp Nixon into the room, and Smithson was hovering close to him. The man had both of the guns, now. Nixon stirred a little and grunted. He was coming out of it. Madison let him lie in the center of the big room. Smithson was right behind him, barking his orders.

"O.K. Get the lamp, and let's have a little light. We're going to have a little talk, them that's left of us."

The man laughed grimly. Madison shrugged and fumbled for the lamp on the table. For a moment he contemplated taking a chance on throwing it into Smithson's face, but the risk was too long. The man was very close to him, and it took less muscular action to pull a trigger than to throw a lamp.

Light flowed from the lamp-chimney in a soft glow. The lamp was an old-fashioned oil-lamp, but any other kind would have seemed out of place in the big log-hewn room. Nixon lay within the semicircle of its radiance, blinking at it dazedly. Madison looked beyond him toward the murder room. The connecting door was open, and there was a faint filtering of light between the rooms—enough to show the hazy white outline of a human skeleton sitting at a table. The corpse was a dark blob of shadow.

The body of Jack Bransfield was sprawled in the open doorway, face downward and very still.

Madison's lips tightened as he crossed the room without looking at the man with the guns. He dropped down on one knee beside the old man, and Smithson's hoarse voice barked after him.

"Hey! Leave him alone. If he ain't dead, he ought to be—the—"

Madison's flesh shrank from nervous anticipation of a bullet, but he did not look back nor hesitate. He'd made a rapid mental calculation of his chances before he did what he knew that he would have to do, anyway. He couldn't let a man die like a dog, if the man had a spark of life left in him.

Against his chances, he had remembered the way that Smithson had talked in a constant stream once he had started talking. The man had been literally starved for free speech. The man was going wild with authority now because he felt a surge of power, and he had been starved for authority. Madison no longer had any doubt of who Smithson was; he was too perfectly the man from the pen. He was Moose Carrol and he was so hungry for the chance to exert authority that he would hesitate to put an end to that authority by shooting a man for defying it.

It was a subtle thought but Madison felt it as a poker player feels his hunches. There are rules for a poker player's hunches, but a poker player rarely figures them out. He rolled Jack Bransfield over gently, and there was no shot from the man with the guns.

Bransfield was breathing gently, but there was a spreading stain on his chest. His eyes opened slowly, fixed for a moment in a dazed stare and gradually lighted to recognition. His lips moved stiffly but no words came.

"Hey, you!"

Smithson was coming personally across the room, in place of the shot that he didn't fire. And Nixon sat up. "What the living hell!" he said.

SMITHSON wheeled like a great ungainly cat. He snarled viciously, spat, and kicked the still dazed detective off balance. The kick shook Nixon out of the effects of the knockout, and he came groggily to his feet. Smithson backed away from him and covered him with a gun.

Under cover of the excitement, Madi-

son crossed the room to the tall black whisky bottle that stood on the table. He nearly got shot then, but Smithson could not shoot two men at once and Smithson was definitely afraid of Nixon. Madison had another mad moment when he was tempted to throw the bottle or the lamp, but it wasn't the play to make. He took the whisky and went back to Bransfield with it.

He tore his shirt and made a pad, holding the whisky in reserve as a stimulant when it was needed. Smithson had shifted his position so that he covered the entire room with one gun. He had the other gun rammed into a side pocket of his coat.

"Cop," he said, "I'm going to shoot your liver out if you take another step."

Nixon stood where he was. Smithson licked his lips. "There's a wad of bucks someplace around here. I killed a double-crosser today because he wouldn't tell me where. I killed him too soon. I got mad. I'm going to find them. I'm going to make you guys find them. I'm going to offer a reward. The guy that finds them saves himself from getting a good killing."

MADISON looked up sharply and he saw fear creeping into the broad, brutal face of Nixon, saw wild lights in Smithson's large, rolling eyes. Something inside of himself shivered, and he did not blame Nixon for losing his bluster.

Smithson was a stir-bug, an obsessed lunatic who had brooded too long on a single subject. The man had shot high dice in the long ago and lost a fortune. He had lost another when he was arrested. He had tortured himself with the thought of his companion-in-crime coming out to riches, and he had had years more to brood after that companion got out with a good-behavior allowance.

Something had snapped, and the man no longer thought in terms of consequences. He wanted money and was going to slaughter for it. He was going to keep on slaughtering and he wouldn't know that he was through until the finger of Death stopped him.

Madison had a pad against Bransfield's side. He raised his eyes to Smithson. "Money is a cinch," he said. "I've got a suit-case full of it upstairs."

The man with the gun stiffened, then his lips curled in a snarl. He swept the gun swiftly toward Madison; his finger was white on the trigger. Nixon took a half-step.

"Shoot him if he's kidding you," he said. "He's got it."

Smithson's eyes rolled wildly from one man to the other. His moment of power was definitely over. He no longer trusted his own authority or the power of the gun. He feared trickery, feared to trust his own wits in a clash with wits that might be keener. The red urge was on him to kill at once, and put danger behind him. The mad desire showed in every warped line of his face—but he did want money if there were money.

A slight, scraping sound along the rough floor made him jump as though a rattler had struck him. Jack Bransfield had one elbow under him. He was holding the pad against his side. His face was drained, waxen, his voice a rustling whisper of sound.

"He has fifty grand," he said. "You could have had it. I went down to meet you . . . cross-roads . . . tried to stop you . . . you thought I wanted a ride . . . mean devil . . . hit me with your fender and knocked me out . . . couldn't carry bag . . . couldn't get back in time to stop murder—"

His voice was going entirely, and he was sinking back. Madison got an arm under him. "I found that bag," he said. "It's upstairs."

He held the whisky to Bransfield's lips,

and the old man swallowed carefully. "Fine," he said. "Get money . . . want another drink 'fore I die. I'll wait for it—"

A look of cunning had come into Smithson's face. "I'm Moose Carrol," he said. "I own that money. I was gypped out of it. You guys won't fool me on the stairs."

He laughed harshly. "You fellers pick up that table and carry it upstairs. I'll carry the lamp and the gun."

MADISON'S jaw hardened. He had hoped for a break on the trip upstairs but he'd figured without a lunatic's cunning. Two men, wrestling a big heavy table up the stairs, were not going to be able to make any fast motions under the drop.

They didn't either. Wordlessly, save for occasional curses, Nixon and Madison hauled the table to the floor above. A safe distance behind them, Moose Carrol held the lamp high and the gun low.

"The money!" he said.

He herded them into the room that Madison had occupied, and Madison slid out the brown bag. He was worried about Bransfield dying downstairs in the dark, and he wanted no delays.

"I'll open this bag right up here and show you," he said.

It was a stroke. Carrol's eyes narrowed suspiciously. He suspected a trick in any suggestion made to him. "You two guys will carry it down like it's a trunk," he said. "First guy that lets go is plugged. And there better be money in it."

The air of authority was coming back to him. Neither Madison nor Nixon felt like testing his humor. They carried the bag downstairs. Carrol set the lamp on a chair and gestured with the gun.

"Open it!" he said.

There was death in his voice. Madison threw one look at Jack Bransfield. The man's eyes were patiently, wearily open. He smiled faintly, and Madison threw the bag open. He spilled the money on the floor in heaps, and Moose Carrol's breath whistled thinly from his lungs.

Madison sidestepped the money and put everything that he had into a short, murderous swing. His fist took Carrol under the heart, and the gun thundered. He felt the breath of the bullet past his ear and then he was closing in behind his punch, locked with the man from the pen.

The strength of madness was in Carrol, and he hurled Madison off like a mastiff tossing a terrior. The gun swung up again, and Nixon threw himself forward. Carrol slashed at him with the gun-barrel, and Nixon coughed like a consumptive. He was folding forward, when Madison closed to the attack again. He landed with his right and make a grab for the gun with his left. He missed, and cold fear swept him.

The momentum of his charge had carried him into Carrol, and they were going down. Carrol's gun hand was free and he could feel it swinging up. His flesh shrank, and then the gun roared.

There was no impact.

For a moment he doubted. Memory flashes of tales he had heard about shot men who didn't feel the bullet, were moving through his brain. Then he was conscious of the limpness of Moose Carrol, and the gun thudded against the floor. Madison shook himself free and crouched off on one knee dazedly.

Moose Carrol was lying flat on his back with his head thrown back, and his arms outstretched. The gun was lying on the floor, halfway between Carrol and Jack Bransfield. Jack Bransfield was up on one elbow again.

"My gun," he whispered. "My gun shot him—"

Madison felt a superstitious quiver run through him. Bransfield was moistening his lips. "My drink, son—"

"Sure."

Madison lifted the black bottle off the floor. Bransfield's eyes lighted. "Hold it, son . . . talk first . . . that money . . . counterfeit. Bought a lot cheap. Wanted Carrol to take it and get pinched with it—"

Madison's eyes shaded with disappointment. Bransfield was going out, after all, at the end of a cheap ex-con double-cross. The old man was looking at the bottle.

"That twin, son. A good man. Served his time decent. Studied. Model convict. Got time off. Carrol always a heel. Dirty. Dirty record as con. Did it all—"

He sighed deeply, his eyes still on the bottle. "He didn't believe doctor spent money. He wanted to make trouble for twin. Twin trying to be decent, son. Living quiet . . . good man—"

"Sure. I know." Madison swallowed his disappointment. After all, the man was dying. Bransfield looked at him and smiled faintly, ironically. His voice was suddenly strong.

"You thing I'm talking about me, don't you? You're wrong. I was the doctor. I wasn't worth a damn."

He sighed again. "The drink . . . quick—"

He held the bottle himself, and the whisky hit the back of his throat. He swallowed it without blinking, held the bottle away from him, smiled at it and died.

Madison eased him down and got stiffly to his feet. It was a solemn moment, and he realized that, in his effort to trap Moose Carrol, the old doc had made a desperate gesture toward restitution. He had tried to save the peace of the man whose trust he had betrayed.

Nixon stirred a little and tried to get up. Madison looked at him indifferently. The big dick was still a dumb detective but he could take it. He'd be around in time and he could have this case—all of it.

In the next room a skeleton sat staring across the table at a corpse that had three knife-hilts protruding from its chest. He was sorry that he'd never know precisely the why of those three knives, but the three stick-up men of long ago had probably each carried one—and Moose Carrol's ghastly humor had led him to use all three.

It was a ghastly thought that the corpse and the skeleton were twins.

Nixon groaned, and Madison crossed the room to him. He was thinking of the job that he would go to when the storm was over. He was no longer interested in satchels full of money. Spread over two rooms, were four men who had traded four lives and four careers for money that none of them enjoyed. He shook Nixon impatiently.

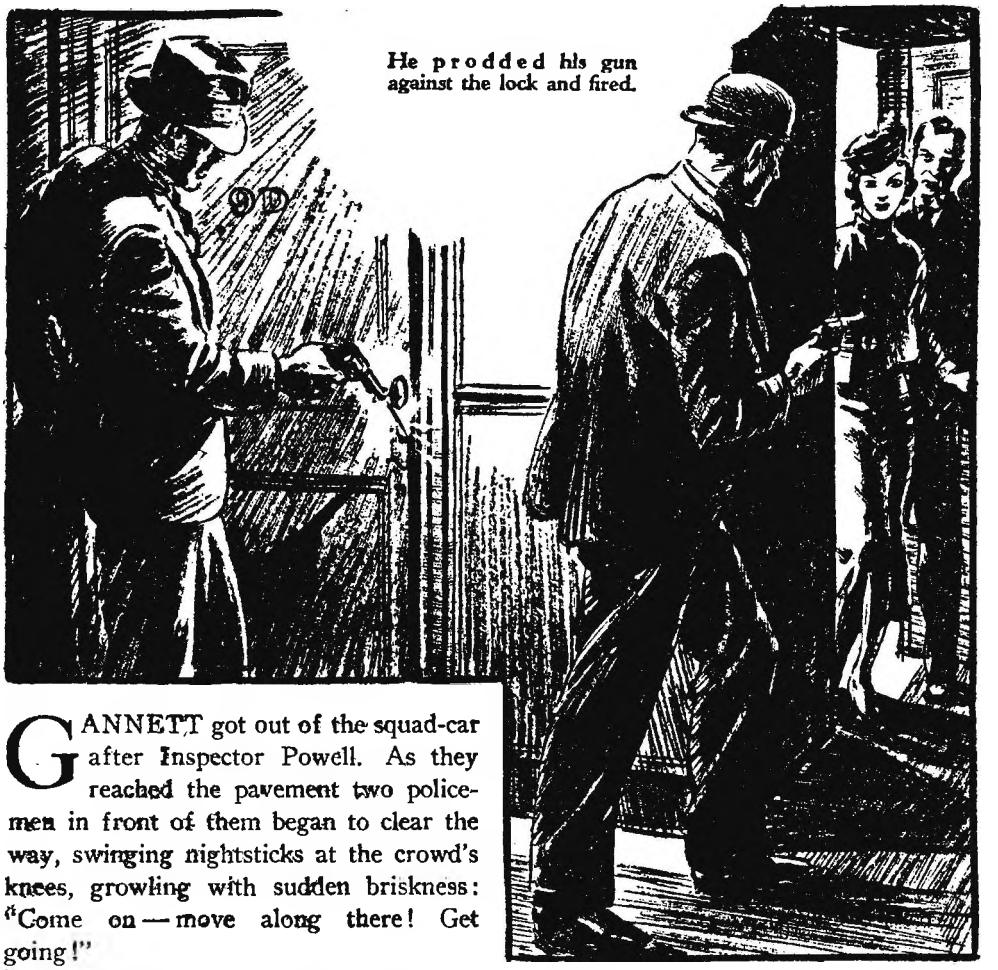
"Snap out of it, dick," he said. "This mess is your job. I've got one of my own."

That lonely job at the survey-station sounded suddenly swell.

It was only a hunch, at first, that made Gannet wonder why Mrs. Holtorf had picked that particular afternoon to plummet twenty stories to her death. Not till he began to play with those carefully sharpened pencils did he discard the accident theory — decide to give the good lady's demise a—

MURDER TWIST

By THOMAS WALSH



He prodded his gun against the lock and fired.

GANNETT got out of the squad-car after Inspector Powell. As they reached the pavement two policemen in front of them began to clear the way, swinging nightsticks at the crowd's knees, growling with sudden briskness: "Come on — move along there! Get going!"

The fringe of people fell back in a ragged wave, watching with curious faces Powell's lean body, Gannett's middle-aged slouch. A murmuring hum of voices rose from them—a rumble that died instantly, stifled, as Inspector Powell lifted the canvas cloth from the sidewalk.

When he saw what was under it Charley Gannett's stomach turned over, and his toes squirmed jerkily inside his big shoes. He faced away quickly, took off his hat, gulped in air.

One of the policemen grinned at him

slightly, without pleasantness. He said: "Not nice, hah? I had to put the cloth over her."

Gannett shuddered, closing his eyes. After a moment he put his hat back on and asked the patrolman: "You find out where it came from, Higgins?"

"Yeah," Higgins said. His glance slid up along the side of the gray-stone apartment house that towered above them into the deep glowing blueness of a mild May night. "The guy was just down here. That's his wife—was his wife. He's takin' it hard."

Gannett licked dry lips. "Pretty smashed," he said.

"Twenty stories," Higgins grunted, "is a drop." He straightened a little, saluting as Powell rose from the canvas cloth and dropped it back over the thing it concealed.

The inspector's lean face was grave, composed. He let cold light eyes drift over the crowd without any expression. He asked: "What's her name?"

"Mrs. Holtorf," Higgins said. "It happened fifteen minutes ago, about. I was a couple of blocks away when I heard the commotion. Then I ran here and found her like that. Just jelly, chief. I—"

Toneless, Powell pointed out: "I saw her too. You weren't in time to see her fall?"

Higgins shook his head. "I wasn't. When I got here it was all over. The husband was just runnin' out of the doorway there, actin' crazy. He bawled something that it was all his fault, and I don't know what. Then the doorman gave me this thing to put over her."

Turning, Powell grunted. "Get the crowd moving. You come with me, Gannett."

AS they crossed the walk Charley Gannett kept his eyes carefully away from the square of canvas, the daub of red that stained its dirty surface. A man in livery, with a face as pale as his white mustache, swung the door back for them, peering over their shoulders at the crowd. Gannett noticed his fingers trembling on the knob. Inside, a boy in uniform detached himself reluctantly from a group talking in low tones near the entrance and followed them across to the elevator.

When they were in the cage Gannett settled his shoulders against green-and-gold walls. "I'll be dreaming about that for a week," he told Powell gloomily.

"She looked bad," Powell agreed. "What do you expect? Drop twenty stories, and the pavement comes up and hits you plenty. Mr. Holtorf's apartment, son."

The elevator boy watched them with curious, scared eyes. Metal doors slid smoothly together, and they began to rise, with the faint, uneasy sensation troubling Gannett's stomach once more. A small bulb winked in and out across a row of numbers to stop finally at *20*. They stepped out to a landing and the elevator boy pointed to the door on the left.

It was half ajar. Powell pushed it back and walked into a short corridor that was hotly ablaze with light. The corridor was empty, curtained at the end by portières, with faint sounds coming from somewhere behind them. They went past the portières and down two steps into a large room.

There were wide French windows at the far end, both thrown back, and a man was walking back and forth between them. When he looked up Gannett noticed that his eyes were wide and blank, as if he couldn't focus them.

Inspector Powell said: "We're sorry to trouble you now, Mr. Holtorf. But it's police routine and something that has to be done sooner or later. We'll be as brief as possible."

"Police?" Holtorf nodded dully. He dropped into a chair and rubbed the side

of his face slowly with one hand. Softly, in an unsteady voice, he whispered, "My God!"

HIS tone made Gannett uncomfortable. He lit a cigarette, crushed it out quickly at Powell's glare, slid his lusterless brown eyes over the room. Furnished quietly and comfortably, there seemed to be nothing out of place. Near the open fireplace there was a table with pads and pencils spread over an unsoiled gray blotter; and a few feet away, in a position that suggested it had been hastily pushed back, Gannett saw a chair. A pencil, newly sharpened, lay on the floor under that.

Powell sat down, looking serious and grave. Across the room Holtorf stared at the floor, his head propped in his hands. Presently, not looking up, he muttered: "It's true, isn't it? Alma's gone. She—" He turned, facing the French windows, and Gannett shivered slightly as he followed his gaze. Out there she'd gone, twenty stories down. A tough way to pull the Dutch act!

Holtorf took a breath, very deeply, and turned back to them. "You'll want to know what happened," he said.

For an instant his voice broke, his features twisted up. He turned away from them and covered his eyes. Gannett saw that he was a man in his early forties, slender, small, with dark hair combed precisely back and the marks of high living, good care, in his ruddy, clean-shaven cheeks. He was handsome in the weak delicacy of feature that appealed to women more than men—a small mouth, very white teeth, eyes that could laugh easily, Gannett thought, despite their present anguish.

"I don't know what it was," Holtorf said. The moment had appeared to gain him control, for his voice was steady, his eyes somberly level. "Alma—my wife—" He stopped again and stared at his hands. "She'd been in a highly nervous condition for some time. I've had her under Doctor Elliott Norton's care since March. As a result, we hadn't been getting on at all well for some time. But I never thought—"

It was slightly incoherent to Gannett. But Powell nodded seriously, said with an apologetic note: "Just for the records, Mr. Holtorf. Tell us what happened tonight."

"I understand," Holtorf muttered. "You've been very considerate. Thank you. It's only that Alma—" After another pause he went on quietly, rapidly: "We had a quarrel this evening—we'd been having them for months. Tonight, an hour ago, she said something—I can't remember the words—to the effect that I'd never be bothered with her again. Her face frightened me, but I had no idea what she intended to do. Then before I could move—" Slowly, blankly, his eyes moved again to the open windows.

From his chair Gannett considered them. There was a stone rail guarding the outside, not very high. A woman could step to the top of it easily enough. Puffing slightly, Gannett heaved his squat bulk out of the chair and crossed to it, looked down. Far below he could see the canvas splotch, the crowd of people. But the sheer drop made him slightly dizzy, and after a moment he pulled his head quickly back.

Powell was saying: "You couldn't tell us what the quarrel was about, Mr. Holtorf? You needn't be afraid of publicity. We keep these things to ourselves."

Holtorf stared at him haggardly. "I'm afraid when I went down to poor Alma I was insane. I blurted things I shouldn't. But they were true enough. I killed my wife as surely as though I had pushed her from that window."

Gannett looked at him sidewise, then picked up the pencil from beneath the chair and put it on the table with the others. There were perhaps a dozen, all

told. Seven or eight had their points worn down, but the others were sharpened to a microscopic point.

Holtorf wasn't looking at him. He was still regarding Powell with that rapt, haggard gaze. As he spoke he put one finger to his chest. "I'm her murderer. I murdered her with disloyalty and unfaithfulness. I murdered her with the cruelest weapons a man could use. I tormented her every moment with thoughts of other women—thoughts that were mainly true."

Powell murmured "Well," in a troubled tone, his cold-blue eyes moving away.

IN the same tone Holtorf continued: "My wife was spending a few weeks in the mountains at Norton's orders. There was a stenographer in my office and I—well—" He made a vague gesture with his hand. "My wife returned this evening, unexpectedly. She found the girl with me here. I tried to tell her that it meant nothing. I sent the girl away before her, gave her a check for a thousand dollars, told her to leave the city at once. I wanted Alma to realize that these other affairs did not matter, that it was only she—" Staring at Powell, he dropped his hands tiredly.

"Finally, I thought I had succeeded in quieting her. We had supper and talked a while. There were no servants—I had dismissed them when Alma left for the mountains—so we were quite alone. Alma sat there, where you are sitting, quietly. I thought it was all over, and we could begin again. I had resolved never to cause her another instant's uneasiness. She seemed to believe me. While I worked on some accounts at that table, she sat in the chair, with her eyes closed. I thought she was tired, and devoted myself to getting my work out. Then it happened before I could stir. Before I could—"

Gannett said: "Were you working long when she jumped?"

Startled, the little man looked up. "Five minutes perhaps, not longer. There wasn't—"

"Uh-huh," Gannett said. He ran a hand back through his untidy brown hair. "Your wife was insured?"

Holtorf's faced paled. He half rose from the chair. In a choked voice he answered: "Yes. For twenty-five thousand dollars. If you—"

"O. K." Gannett nodded mildly. "This all goes in the report, mister. It's stuff that has to be asked."

Powell appeared surprised, a little angry. Looking coldly at Gannett he got up from his chair and said: "I guess that's all. Sorry to have troubled you, Mr. Holtorf."

Anger left the little man swifter than it had come. He looked crushed, forlorn. "I realize that you have to do your job. If you wish to question me again I'll be here."

Gannett picked up his hat. Halfway to the door he turned.

"You wouldn't know the name of the girl who was here—where she lived?"

Holtorf said slowly: "Her name is Doris Arlen. She lives in the Mayflower Apartments on Burns Avenue."

"Thanks." Gannett nodded, put on his hat, followed Powell to the landing.

While they waited for the elevator, Powell stared at him with icy-blue eyes. He said: "You don't treat men like Holtorf the way you handle thugs. He's somebody in this town. He's got plenty of politieal influence. His brokerage office is the biggest—"

Gannett looked back at him. "You ever heard of a thing called the depression? It got a lot of these brokers down to peddling books."

With his hands on his hips, the inspector shook his head slowly. "So you figured out that Holtorf killed his wife

for insurance. Nothing to it. Like that"—he snapped his fingers—"hey?"

Gannett said stolidly: "I don't know if he killed his wife. I do know he's lying."

Starting to argue, Powell checked himself, calmer. "How do you know that?"

The elevator doors slid back, and Gannett went in without answering. All the way down he whistled the *Blue Danube* between his teeth, enjoying Powell's narrowed stare boring into him. Outside, on the street, he said: "There's some stuff I'd like to find out about this Arlen girl. I'll see you at headquarters."

Powell grabbed his arm. "Wait a minute. There's no rush. How do you know Holtorf's lying?"

"Nothin' to it," Gannett said. He snapped his fingers. "Just like that. Seein' as how I didn't handle Holtorf right, I guess you wouldn't want to find out."

Watching his retreating back, Inspector Powell said something short and profane. If Charley Gannett wasn't a damn good man. . . .

"Someday," Powell muttered, "I'll put that lug back pounding pavements. By the seven fallen angels, I will!"

THE superintendent stepped aside, stuffing the key-ring inside his belt. He said, doubtfully: "This is Miss Arlen's apartment. But she didn't say anything about moving. Maybe she's just out. I—"

"All right," Gannett growled. "You go down and worry about it." He closed the door and lit a cigarette, looking around.

The room was fairly large, well filled with furniture. Across from him a Murphy bed was fitted into the wall, flanked by twin lamps and a small table. Gannett frowned thoughtfully at that a moment, then crossed and opened a closet door. It was empty. Gannett nodded to himself, heavy face sober. He looked in the dresser drawers and found them empty, too. There was a small bathroom at one end, a smaller kitchenette at the other. That was all.

Gannett prowled around, whistling moodily. He found a bottle of milk in the refrigerator, some cold ham, butter, rolls. Off these he made a meal. Then he went back to the big room, with the last slice of ham wrapped around a pickle, and two olives. Biting on that, he considered everything thoughtfully. The girl's clothes were gone, there weren't any letters; the one thing he found in the room that might be considered personal was a snapshot he unearthed under the paper lining in one of the dresser drawers.

It showed a dark girl in a bathing-suit, with her hands wrapped around her knees. She was nice looking in a young, flapperish way—wouldn't be more than twenty, Gannett decided. Silly maybe, but not hard-boiled. After staring at it a while, Gannett put it carefully away in his inside pocket.

Then he swallowed the last of the ham and reflected. The apartments here were furnished. It wouldn't take a girl long to pack her stuff and get out. Still, there was no reason for a rush. She had Holtorf's thousand-dollar check and she'd likely want to cash it. Easier to do that here, where he was known, than in another city. The banks had been closed since three o'clock, so she couldn't have cashed it today—and she wouldn't know about the wife, either, so that part wouldn't worry her. Gannett whistled *Lazybones* twice, thoughtfully. It was damn queer.

He looked in the waste-paper basket, and in the bag of rubbish in the kitchen. Then he pulled down the bed, searched that. When he was through there he said, "Damn it!" violently and lit another cigarette.

Standing in the center of the room, he cataloged the furniture, item by item. There must be something somewhere—

bookcase, drawer chest, table, chair, lamp. Now Gannett crossed to the bureau again. Sometimes stuff fell behind the drawers.

He pulled out the top one, ran his hand around the edge, dropped it suddenly, cursing. A sliver of wood had pierced the tip of his middle finger and drawn blood. Gannett sucked the wound, watched blood well out again, then crossed, muttering, to the tiled bathroom. In the cabinet behind the mirror he found iodine and applied it, then started to swing the mirror back. But before it clicked shut he pulled it out again and stared, squinting, at the bottom shelf.

He saw a colored perfume bottle, a cold-cream tube, powder, vanishing cream, small cotton squares for applying make-up. Gannett examined some of the stuff. The perfume was an expensive make, imported. He wasn't sure about the rest. He growled thoughtfully deep in his throat, closed the mirror, and went back to the outer room. There he put on his coat and hat, and ten minutes later left a taxi in front of police headquarters.

IN HIS office Powell meditated over a black cigar, teeth deeply bitten into it. He gazed absently at Gannett, saying nothing. While Gannett spoke he stared with an air of blank remoteness over his head.

"Listen," Gannett said, leaning over the desk. "I know Holtorf's lying because he said he was working only five minutes when his wife jumped. You saw all the pencils on that table? Well, only three or four of them had the points sharpened—the others were all worn down. A guy don't wear down eight pencils in five minutes, Powell, and a guy like Holtorf brings his pencils home from the office. Down there the kid would keep the points like needles. They do it every morning. So when Holtorf says he was only working five minutes he's lying. I don't know why, but he is."

Powell flicked the ash from his cigar with an elaborate gesture. After a while he said: "I don't hear you. I don't see you. You're going back on the pavements, Gannett. When I ask questions I like to get them answered."

Gannett leaned forward eagerly, disregarding him. "So then I go to the girl's apartment. What do I find?" He paused, staring at the inspector. "What do I find?"

Humming slightly, Powell affected unconcern. But when Gannett stared at him without going on he grunted irritably: "What the hell did you find?"

"In the girl's place," Gannett said, tapping a forefinger heavily against the edge of the desk, "I find everything gone. No clothes, no letters, no nothing. But in the bathroom I find her make-up stuff. Get that—make-up."

The inspector's cynical face remained puzzled. "I get it. So what?"

"I figured it meant something," Gannett said. "Maybe I'm wrong. You get a chance to check Holtorf's yarn?"

Powell nodded. "The elevator boy took him and the girl up, around five. Then the old lady comes in a couple of hours after, and in five minutes the girl comes out crying. That part is O. K."

"That part would be," Gannett said. He pulled thoughtfully at his lower lip. "But Holtorf's lyin'. He's lyin' about the work he done, so maybe he's given us a song-and-dance about the whole thing. If he wanted to get rid of his wife it wouldn't be hard to edge her through the window. And—"

Powell began to laugh. He put his cigar down on the desk edge and looked amused, chuckling deep. Puzzled, Gannett stared at him, and after a moment Powell took up his cigar again, still laughing, shaking his head.

He said: "Damned if it isn't the best thing I've ever heard! They don't beat you, Gannett, in the state asylum. You get a man like Holtorf—a big man, important, prominent—and you notice some of his pencils aren't sharpened. Then you notice a girl left some ten-cent make-up stuff after her. So you decide that Holtorf bumped his wife off. Cripes!"

Laughter convulsed him. He roared, pounded his desk, grew breathless. Watching him, Gannett's face molded to hard lines, his eyes smoldered and became small. He got up without saying anything and went out, closing the door very quietly behind him.

When he had gone Powell stopped laughing and regarded his cigar thoughtfully. In a moment he reached for the phone and asked: "'Conny? I got Gannett mad again. He'll work all night on that Holtorf case. If I asked him to do it he'd have told me to go to hell. When he rings you, let me know. Pronto."

Putting down the phone he shook his head. He said, "The big lug," fondly.

GANNETT'S face, his stride, were sulphurous as he went down the hall. On the street he turned left, walked three blocks, entered a dark area under a high brown-stone stoop. Inside, a stout man came forward and said: "Mr. Gannett," with welcome in his voice. Gannett didn't answer him.

Around the long bar broiled steak smelled enticing, and the cool malt aroma of beer freshened the air. Gannett crossed to the bar and ordered two ryes, tossed them off one after another. Then he lit a cigarette and stared down at his right forefinger, tracing aimless designs on the damp surface of the mahogany. In five minutes he ordered another rye, paid his bill, and left.

Back at headquarters he tramped down the corridor past Powell's office and entered a large room at the end. To a man in uniform sitting at the desk he growled: "You get Powell after a couple of minutes, Conny. Ask him to call Holtorf and get him down here. Tell him I want that bird kept around a half hour, anyway."

Conny looked cheerful. "O. K. Why don't you see Powell yourself? You know where his office is."

"I'm through with him," Gannett glowered. "That's why. I'm through with his lousy homicide squad. In the morning I'm asking for a transfer."

Conny put one hand around his mouth and made a noise.

"All right," Gannett said, nodding heavily. "You, too. You're all a dumb bunch of heels."

He stamped out, got a trolley at the corner, and left it when it reached Montague Avenue. A half block in on the side street Holtorf's apartment shot skyward like a gigantic gray monolith of stone, and Gannett walked toward it slowly, on the opposite side of the road. In the shadow of some trees he stationed himself and lit a cigarette, muttering sullenly at intervals. Presently across from him he saw the doorman come out and whistle for a cab. In a moment little Holtorf came out and clambered in. When the cab swung right at the corner, Gannet crossed the road and entered the dim lobby. The canvas splotch was gone.

"Mr. Holtorf's just gone out," the elevator boy told him. "I can't—"

Beetle-browed, Gannett looked down at him. He said: "Don't get wise, kid. I'm not in the mood for it. I told you Holtorf's apartment."

The boy licked his lips. "It's against the rules, mister. I got to call the superintendent. He might—"

Gannett closed the elevator doors, glared down again. The boy pushed the lever around, and they rose. When they reached the twentieth floor the boy was

sniffling quietly. "I'll lose my job. We're not supposed to—"

Gannett gave him fifty cents. "You won't," he said. "Maybe you'll get your picture in the papers—all of them. I'll make the reporters mention you sure." He patted his shoulder and stepped out.

IN a moment he was swearing at the locked door. Somehow he had thought Holtorf would not remember to lock it. After trying the door again to make sure, he turned back to the cage, biting on his thumb-nail. The boy was still watching him. He seemed excited now, eager.

"Mister," he said. "There's a board downstairs in the porter's room. It's got duplicate keys to all the apartments. Maybe I could get this one for you. If you really could put my picture in the papers and—"

Gannett said: "I'll do it, myself. You get that key quick, and I'll tell the reporters you helped break the case. Scram, son!"

He lit a cigarette and tramped restlessly around, whistled the *Carioca* through before the elevator came up again and the boy popped out, shiny-eyed.

"No one around," he told Gannett breathlessly. "I just snitched it off the hook and come up without stopping."

"Good lad," Gannett growled, taking it from him. He clicked the lock back, opened the door and returned the key. "Now, shoot down with it, sonny, and there won't anyone know. Holtorf will think he left it open."

He left the lock off as he went in, then crossed the entrance hall to the living-room. Nothing had been changed.

The French windows at the end were still open, the table with the pencils undisturbed. Gannett regarded them frowningly, picked one up and squinted at it. Then he pulled out the drawers underneath and looked through those.

They contained nothing but the usual odds and ends—paper, blotters, carbon sheets, a stenographer's note-book, with all the pages blank. After making sure of that Gannett crossed to the open window and examined the sides and top of the stone barrier carefully. He could find no marks. In the kitchen the light was on, and a small cold chicken, half eaten, sprawled on its side in a platter. Besides this there was an empty bottle of beer, with foam still clinging to the inside of a tall glass on the left. Gannett grunted. It hadn't seemed to spoil his appetite much.

He looked over the kitchen, peered through the one window by the sink. Then he carved off a slice of the white meat and munched it meditatively while wrapping another around a chunk of dressing. From the window his gaze dropped to the sink, then to the empty space under it. There was a faint, ringed impression on the oilcloth under the pipes, and as Gannett wiped his lips he pondered. What could have made it?

The garbage pail, probably. But why wasn't it there now? Why— He made a pettish sound with his lips. Why should Holtorf remember garbage now? That was queer. Unless, of course, there was something in the bucket that Holtorf did not want discovered. Then, his eyes glittering with sudden excitement, Gannett crossed the kitchen to a small door at the back. It led him out to a landing with a single elevator shaft before him and the stairs in back. He saw the pail set before the door and lifted the lid swiftly, then swore. The pail was empty.

Somewhere, very close, a door slammed after he prodded the elevator button, and machinery creaked. Light floated down slowly across the frosted-glass panel and stopped level with the floor.

The overalled operator looked tired and dirty. There was a large metal barrel behind him, half filled with refuse, and the

air that swept out to meet Gannett was tainted mustily.

"You take Holtorf's garbage down?" Gannett barked.

The man nodded. "Yeah. I just emptied it."

Gannett dove for the barrel. "Here?"

The overalled man, looking surprised, said: "No. It's in the cans downstairs."

"O. K.," Gannett said. "You take me down. Quick, Joe!"

At the basement level he stepped out into a corridor of dark stone, where the air was close, steamy, swimming with fine particles of coal dust. The operator led him along the corridor, past the boiler-room stairway from which hot air blasted up and engulfed them, to the gratefully cool freshness of an areaway. By the stairs leading up to the street a line of the tall metal barrels was arranged, and seeing them Gannett clipped, "Which?"

The man pointed to the one on the end. "I guess his stuff would be in the bottom of that. It's the last one I filled."

Yanking off the top, Gannett dropped it with an echoing clang to the stone walk. His hands pulled fast at the heap of refuse like the paws of a dog digging for a bone, while behind him the operator, dismayed and angry, stuttered: "Hey! What you doin'? What you— Dump that stuff and you clean up after you. I'm no horse."

Gritting his teeth, Gannett set the barrel upside down and emptied it. Among the grisly remnants of food, tin cans, old magazines, he saw suddenly the four quarters of a stenographer's note-book, with the edges ripped jaggedly across. Very still, for a moment he stared at it.

HALF an hour later Holtorf came back. Sitting in a low chair in the living-room, Gannett didn't move when he heard the door open. He had his head thrown back, and he continued blowing lazy smoke rings at the ceiling, his lips pursed out, his eyes narrowed.

The little man started when he saw him. "Evenin'," Gannett said. "I hope you don't mind me sitting here. I came up to ask you something about the Arlen girl and found your door open."

"Not at all," Holtorf said gravely. "Anything I can do—" He put his hat on the table and looked at Gannett, his features composed and serious.

"That's fine," Gannett said. "I won't keep you long. This Doris Arlen must have skipped out of town. Her clothes are gone, and she ain't at her apartment. I thought you might have some idea of where she went to."

Holtorf shook his head. "A vague idea, nothing more. She had one married sister in Chicago — perhaps she went there. Walker, Wilson—some such name. I knew very little about her."

"I guess that's all." Gannett stood up. "Thanks. I had an idea she might still be in the city, somewhere. There was a woman called while I was waiting for you. She sounded nervous, kind of hysterical. As if she was afraid of something. I thought it might be this Arlen girl, havin' just found out about your wife. She said she had to see you, but when I told her you wasn't here she hung up before I could find out who she was."

Holtorf's eyes became very wide, very candid. He said: "Perhaps it was Doris. I'm rather glad you took it. I could never see her again. Poor, dead Alma—" He stared before him, his eyes fixed, haggard.

Gannett nodded. "Well, good-night. We won't have to bother you again, mister. I guess it's all we want."

He went down in the elevator to the street, drawing the boy aside into a corner of the entrance hall. "Did you see that girl go in with Holtorf, son?"

The boy had. They had gone upstairs about five, and shortly after seven Mrs.

Holtorf had arrived. Listening to him, Gannett frowned. That was one part that checked too well.

"This girl was nice?" he asked.

"She looked all right," the boy said. "Mr. Holtorf seemed to like brunettes, like Mrs. Holtorf. She was pretty swell herself—tall and slender like this other dame. Just as nice, too."

"Uh-huh," Gannett nodded slowly. "And you saw this other girl come out?"

"Yeah. She was crying—I guess Mrs. Holtorf laid into her up there. Anyway, she kept a handkerchief over her face all the way down, but I knew it was the girl on account of the dress. One of those white ones with little dots in it. She—"

"That," Gannett growled, "is all I want to know. Be looking your prettiest when I get back, son."

Outside he walked in the middle of the pavement, where the lighting was brightest, to the corner. A trolley car was just rolling off, and he ran for it, swung aboard and stayed an instant on the outer step. At the block up from Montague Avenue Gannett dropped off, his short legs churning with the speed of the car. The conductor bellowed something at him. Gannett waved briskly back, stepped fast down the street, turned right on the next avenue, and so came back again to the farther corner of Holtorf's apartment house. In a darkened store entrance he waited, watching the building.

Five minutes later Holtorf came out. Gannett followed him four blocks west, keeping well behind him, in the shadows of the trees. On an avenue more brightly lit, Holtorf paused, inspected a window casually, then turned as casually and looked back the way he had come. From behind the shelter of a stone stoop, Gannett grinned at him. Now, he'd think everything was fine.

The little man crossed the pavement, peered to his left. A taxi slowed before him, and the driver put out one hand questioningly, but Holtorf waved him on. The ferocious grin twisted Gannett's heavy lips again. Holtorf was being careful, afraid that a taxi might be traced. He'd probably wait for the trolley now.

Gannett took the chance. He trotted down the block behind Holtorf, turned at the next corner and circled back to the avenue. But when he reached it again the little man was gone from the corner, and a trolley was half a block off, gathering speed. Gannett cursed. He ran out into the road, flagged a taxi going the other way, said, "Don't mind the rules," as he shoved his shield at him. "I'm catching that trolley back there."

The driver swung around, bumping across the safety-stand for pedestrians, and slid into a narrow alley between two other cars.

"Pull up even with the trolley," Gannett said. "When I give you the word, jump ahead of it fast."

IT took them three blocks to catch the car, an instant for Gannett to see Holtorf seated in the front, just back of the motorman. He grunted at the driver, and they swung past the car to the next corner. There was a group of people waiting in the road for the trolley, and Gannett got out of the taxi and mixed with them, keeping his head slightly lowered so he could not be seen from within the car.

He was the last man aboard and he sat in the last seat, picking up a discarded paper that lay beside him and holding it level with his eyes, so that above it he could barely see the crown of Holtorf's pearl-gray fedora. That fedora turned once or twice and looked back. When it did, Gannett merely raised the paper a trifle. Ten minutes later Holtorf's head pushed the fedora up, and he marched under it to the front of the car.

Gannett didn't rise until the car swept

past the intersection at which Holtorf had left it. Then he raced through the aisle, slued open the front door and swung himself off. The green light was on for through traffic, and on the stand by the tracks Holtorf was waiting for it to change. Sliding in between two taxis, Gannett reached the protection of the sidewalk and waited for him there.

This time the little man did not go far. He continued on down the intersection—a thoroughfare dimly lighted, with tall apartments on either side, a little dingy, drably worn, with faded marks of prosperity about them. The third one on the left swallowed his dapper little figure with dim discretion, silently.

Gannett went back to the corner drug store and called headquarters. "Conny?" he said, when the connection was made. "Gannett speakin'. Tell Powell to get some men to the corner of Redwood and Fourth. I'll be waitin' there."

"Ain't you the one?" Conny said. "You don't think they made you commissioner or something? What's the dope?"

"Redwood and Fourth," Gannett repeated. "Get it right."

"O. K.," Conny said. "But—"

Gannett hung up. Five minutes after a squad-car rolled up to him on the corner outside, and Inspector Powell, lean, sardonic, advanced through the shadows. Behind him were three other men. He said to Gannett: "The boys are wondering about you. They think you're getting delusions."

"Sure," Gannett growled. "I used to have them. I thought you fellas were coppers once."

Powell grunted, took the cigar out of his mouth, started to speak. Turning, Gannett cut him off. At the door of the third apartment house he stopped and turned seriously to Powell.

He said: "Holtorf's up there. A woman, too. They might try to duck when we ring, so you could send someone around the back to watch."

Powell gave the order and they went in. A blond girl seated at a switchboard looked up at them as they crossed. Gannett put one finger to the rim of his hat, asked, "You see a little fellow come in here five minutes ago—gray hat, cane, spats?"

"Yes," the girl said. She looked puzzled. "He's visiting Mrs. Adams. Shall I announce you?"

Gannett said, "Don't," showing his badge. "What apartment?"

"Nine D," the girl said, her eyes very wide.

Gannett nodded thanks. In the elevator Powell said: "I saw it myself, Gannett. He gets tired of his wife and decides to knock her off so that he can marry this Arlen girl. If we find them up there together it won't give us a thing, at that. How you going to prove it?"

"I dunno," Gannett said, a slow, crafty grin twisting his mouth. "Can't we take his word for it?"

"Wise guy," Powell said. "Cripes, yes!"

THEY stopped at the ninth. Out first, Gannett went down the hall to the door marked *D*, pressed the buzzer at one side. After a wait, footsteps pattered inside, and a voice, nervous, feminine, asked shrilly, "Who's there?"

Without answering, Gannett pressed the buzzer again. The footsteps patted back and died. It became very quiet. Gannett took his gun from its holster, prodded it against the lock, fired. Behind him Powell wiped his face. He said: "I hope to God you're not crazy."

The lock cracked, split. Gannett thrust his shoulder against the wood and as he did so he heard Powell yelp, "Hey, you!"

The little man, the dark-haired woman by his side, was slipping through the side door around the corner of the corridor.

"Don't go out, Holtorf," Gannett said. At his words, his tone, they stopped, two pale faces turned to them in the motion.

His cold-blue eyes narrowed, slightly puzzled, Powell asked: "This the Arlen woman?"

Holtorf's eyes held no laughter now, no hint of it. They were insane, terrified. He gasped: "This woman—this woman— I don't— I never—"

"Meet Mrs. Holtorf," Gannett said.

THE silence was broken finally. "I see the pencils," Gannett said. "Like I told you, they showed someone was working there a couple of hours. When Holtorf said he was only workin' five minutes, I knew he was tryin' to cover something up. Then, at the girl's apartment, I find her make-up is the only stuff left behind. Hell, if a girl ain't crazy the very first thing she packs is her make-up! Any girl, whoever she is, will put that in first. When I see that it's still there, the only answer seemed to be that someone else packed her things—someone that didn't think to look behind the mirror.

"So I got to thinkin' that maybe she didn't run away, like Holtorf wanted us to believe. And if she didn't run away, something happened to her. Holtorf says she went maybe to a married sister in Chicago, whose name he don't know—so what chance we got of tracing her? Anyway, I went back to his place and looked it over, when you got him down here, and in his rubbish I find a stenographer's note-book with lots of writing in it. I put the pencils and the note-book together and figured they meant he wasn't making love to the girl—that he brought her up here to take dictation. Doris Arlen was a good kid."

Behind his desk, Powell bit off the end of a fresh cigar. "Go on."

"But the other stuff wouldn't give me a lead until I found out from the elevator boy that Mrs. Holtorf and Doris Arlen were both dark, both the same build, and that the girl—who we *thought* was the girl—had left cryin', with a handkerchief over her face. So I figured Holtorf could have stunned Doris Arlen, taken off her dress and put it on his wife and had her go downstairs with the handkerchief over her face. There would only be two or three people to see her, and they wouldn't look at her so close. Like the elevator kid, they'd identify her by the dress she had on. Then Holtorf gives his wife ten minutes, probably batters up that poor kid's face a little to make sure she won't be recognized, and tips her out the window in his wife's clothes. Remember they're both dark, the same build, and not many people have stomachs strong enough to examine anyone that had a fall like it. While he's doing that, his wife is over at Doris Arlen's apartment, with the key she got out of her pocket-book, ready to make it look like the kid has scrammed."

"Still, I don't get it," Powell complained. "If it was insurance, they'd have to identify the body."

"You remember how it looked?" Gannett asked. "Holtorf worked it smart. His wife has perfect teeth, and he picked out this Arlen girl and gave her a job because she had them, too. Her face can't be recognized—the job Holtorf did on that everyone would think came about when she landed. And the insurance men might figure like you—Holtorf was a big man and O. K. Only he was broke and desperate, and fifty thousand might have pulled him through. Her policy was double-idemnity in case of accident, like most policies. And in court he could claim she was a little touched—that's why he'd planted her under a nerve specialist's care, see—and so it was an accident.

"Mrs. Holtorf could get her face done over by a plastic surgeon, and after Holtorf had pulled out of here with enough dough for them to be comfortable on,

they'd meet in some other town and shake hands with themselves. All they had to do was to avoid old friends and this town, and probably Mrs. Holtorf would dye her hair to help her changed face along. When I got that idea, I told Holtorf some dame called him, soundin' excited. I knew he'd figure it was his wife, and something had gone wrong. So he'd hustle right over there, being cautious enough to figure his wire might be tapped. He did, and I followed him." He stopped, wiping his face.

"Not bad," Powell said. "You got the makings of a good dick, Gannett. Come on, and I'll buy you a drink."

"Blow yourself," Gannett grunted. "Ten-cent whisky makes me sick. Besides I got a date with the cameramen, outside. There's a kid I know wants to get his picture in the papers."

He went out whistling *The Continental*, feeling fine.

The Upside-Down Man

By NORBERT DAVIS

"He was hanging upside down outside the window again."

Matt Flint's way of breaking up framed murder trials was to do a little framing of his own. But when he undertook to defend the thin, little man, Schrader, he had to go one step farther. And that step brought him face to face with a killer who struck—upside down.

HOWARD LEE ELLIOTT pushed the swinging-door open, and sunlight splashed hotly yellow on the damp coolness of the floor, climbed the bar in a yellow streak, reflected itself from the bar mirror in a thousand bright little glitters. Howard Lee Elliott let the door flap shut behind him and came across the room with his quick, firmly confident stride.

"Scotch and soda, please," he said in his flatly cultured, English voice.

"Yes, sir," Mike said, and ice rattled in his little tin scoop, tinkled coolly, pleasantly in a glass.

Elliott was a tall, blond young man with handsomely regular features. His teeth were a white, even streak against the deep tan of his face, when he smiled. He smiled now, watching his own reflection in the bar mirror, until he saw Flint watching the reflection, too. He stopped smiling, then, and turned his head with a little startled jerk.

Flint was standing about ten feet away, leaning against the bar and sipping thoughtfully at a big mug of beer.

Elliott stared very coldly at him for a space of ten dragging seconds, and then deliberately turned his back and moved farther away along the bar.

Mike saw him do it and stopped making the drink. "Come to think of it," he said, "I ain't got no Scotch."

"Rye will do," Elliott said absently.

"I ain't got no rye, neither," Mike said. "In fact, I ain't got anything you'd like to drink."

"What?" Elliott asked in a blankly amazed tone.

"The door," said Mike. "It's right over there. It opens and shuts real easy."

Elliott's handsome face went grayish white under the tan. "I see," he said tightly. He turned sharply on his heel, strode across to the door. He stopped there, looking back over his shoulder at Flint and Mike. "Birds of a feather," he said.

Mike picked a beer mug off the back counter, swung it back up over his shoulder.

"Don't!" Flint said sharply.

Mike put the beer mug very slowly down on the counter. Elliott laughed on a forced note. The door flapped open and shut, and he was gone.

"Thanks, Mike," Flint said. "But I've seen you throw a beer mug before. You'd have cut off his head as likely as not."

"Maybe not," said Mike, "but I'd of sure put a new part in that blond pompadour. I seen him. I seen what he did. Nobody pulls that stuff around here. When Matt Flint drinks at my bar, anybody that don't want to drink with him don't drink."

FLINT said, smiling in his darkly sardonic way: "He was afraid I'd contaminate him." He was a thin man, bonily tall. His features were all thin, hard, and his face seen from the side gave the impression of blade-like sharpness. He was slouching now, lazily and carelessly, but no matter what he did he always looked the same—as if he had a tremendous driving force inside him that he was keeping carefully checked. "You forget, Mike, that I'm the black sheep of the law profession in this town. Of course, Elliott is a doctor, but the Bar Association and the Medical Association are pretty close, and I was kicked right out of the Bar Association on my ear."

"Yeah," Mike said. "And that's the damnest, screwiest thing I ever heard of, and I've heard some funny ones in my time, too. Here's the only honest lawyer they ever had in their damned Association, and they toss him out."

"I violated the ethics of my profession," Flint said, smiling and sipping at his beer. "I bribed a juryman."

"Sure," said Mike. "Sure you did. And what for? To get a kid, that didn't have a dime, out of a murder rap. But that ain't the worst of it. The worst of it was that the kid was innocent all the time. That's the part I can't figure. You bribe a juryman to decide the case the right way, and for that they kick you out."

"That didn't make any difference," Flint said. "I was still guilty of bribing the juryman. The kid was innocent. I knew it. I never defended a man that

wasn't innocent. I wouldn't take a man's case unless I knew he was innocent. But if he was innocent, and I did take his case, then I'd get him off. I'd always figure the guy was trusting me with his life, and if I wasn't smart enough to get him off, using legal means, then I'd use any that came to hand and take my chances."

"That's the kind of a lawyer I go for," Mike said.

Flint swirled the beer around in his mug. "That was a funny case, when you stop and think about it. It was right before election, and the district attorney was out to get a conviction. He jiggered the jury panel. No matter what twelve guys I picked out of the whole bunch of them, I'd have had twelve of the D.A.'s stooges on the jury. I went him one better. I fixed one of the stooges, and I picked the best one. He was smart enough to get the others to decide my way. But they nailed me on the deal. If the real murderer hadn't confessed about then, I'd be on the inside looking out. But the D.A. knew he couldn't get a conviction under the circumstances, so he just had me disbarred."

"In my opinion," Mike said, "the district attorney is a chiseling rat. I don't like him no better than that blond baby that was just in here."

"Elliott thinks pretty well of himself," Flint said.

"I don't like him," Mike said. "I don't like the way he looks. He always looks like he just bought his clothes yesterday and just had a shave and a haircut. And I don't like that way of talking he has, either."

"He can't help that. He was raised in Boston and graduated from Oxford. His folks are Society with a big S. He goes in strong for ethics and honor and breeding and family and whatnot."

Mike nodded knowingly. "Yeah. He don't mind dough, either, I bet. I bet he ain't gonna have to hold his nose when he grabs off Abe Rule's dirty millions and that niece of Abe's with the vegetable name."

"Letticia," Flint said. "Letticia Hartwell. She's a very pretty girl."

"Un-huh. The fact that old Abe just got himself murdered without no will and she's his only heir—that helps a little, too. Of course, everbody knows old Abe never seen an honest dollar in his life. Every dime he's got was picked up on graft paving and building jobs. But I bet that don't worry Society Elliott."

"I wonder," Flint said thoughtfully.

"Hah!" said Mike. "Anybody can stand a lot of stink for a million dollars. Take it from me."

FLINT saw her when he came out of Mike's place. She was standing across the street in the spindling shadow of the Criminal Courts Building. She was talking to Howard Lee Elliott. She was looking up into his tanned, handsome face and laughing at what he was saying to her.

She was very small, daintily neat. She had none of the craggy, grotesque ugliness that had made her uncle, Abe Rule, such an outstanding figure in any crowd. She had a delicate, heart-shaped face and full, soft lips. She was dressed very neatly and plainly now in tailored blue suit and a small blue turban. Flint had seen her in this neighborhood quite often. She did social-service work in the slum district, four blocks away.

As Flint watched her, she stopped looking up at Elliott's face, and the smile went away from her lips suddenly, leaving them twisted grotesquely. She was staring over Elliott's broad shoulder at something behind him.

She screamed, and the shrill sound of it cut through the street-and-traffic noise like the slice of a sharp knife. Elliott whirled around to look behind him.

Letticia Hartwell pointed her finger straight at a thin little man, twenty feet from her along the sidewalk, and screamed again.

"It's he! It's Harold Schrader! He murdered my uncle!"

The thin little man had stopped dead still at her scream. He was crouched close against the wall of the building, like some hunted animal. And now when Letticia Hartwell screamed his name, he put his hands up over his ears as if he were trying to shut out the sound. He turned and ran blindly, straight across the street toward Flint. Tires screeched, as drivers of two cars swerved both ways to avoid him.

A policeman swung around the corner at a dead run. He saw the running figure of the thin little man, saw Letticia Hartwell pointing at him and screaming. He stopped short in the middle of the sidewalk. The thin little man ran blindly, right straight toward him. The policeman waited until the thin little man started to pass him, and then put out his foot and tripped him up. The thin little man went down hard on the cement in an awkwardly tangled sprawl.

He started to scramble up, and the policeman swung his night-stick. The blow made a dull, whacking sound on the thin little man's head. He went down on his face again, and the policeman swung the night-stick up for another blow.

"That's enough," Flint said from behind him. He didn't raise his voice.

The policeman turned around and said, "Who the hell . . ." and then stopped when he saw who it was.

"Yes," said Flint softly.

"Well, he was resistin' arrest," the policeman said.

"He wasn't, and he isn't," Flint contradicted flatly.

The thin little man sat up on the sidewalk slowly. The night-stick had cut him a little over his right ear, and he put his hand up to his head and then stared dazedly down at the blood on his fingers. He looked around and saw the crowd pushing close to him, gaping curiously. Letticia Hartwell came up with Elliott close behind her.

"That's the man!" she said breathlessly. "He's Harold Schrader! The police are looking for him! He killed my uncle!"

The thin man sobbed suddenly. He put his face in his hands, and his narrow shoulders jerked spasmodically.

Elliott was pulling at Letticia Hartwell's arm nervously. "Let's get away now, dear," he said nervously. "They'll take care of everything. There's no real need . . . scene . . . all these people. . . ."

"He ain't hurt none," the policeman said to Flint. "I didn't hit him hard."

"That's a very lucky thing," said Flint, "for both you and him. You can take him to jail. See that his head gets bandaged and that he gets a drink to brace him up. Put him in one of those new cells on the north side. You can tell anybody that gets curious about it that he's a very good friend of Matt Flint's, and that I'm going to come and see him in a half hour, and that I expect to find him in pretty good shape."

"Why sure, Matt," the policeman said. "Sure thing."

THE bars bothered Schrader. He tried not to look at them, but every so often his washed-out, colorless eyes would stray toward the door or window of the cell, and then he would blink quickly and swallow hard. He couldn't have been very old, but he looked old. He had the beaten-down appearance of a meek, mild little man who has lived in constant fear of some domineering character.

"Yes," he said. "Yes, thank you. They treated me very well. They kept asking me how good a friend of yours I was,

and how I came to meet you. I—I didn't know what to say, so I didn't say anything."

"That's smart," Flint told him. He was sitting on the edge of the bunk. The shadow from one of the window-bars cut slantwise across his face and concealed some of the harshness of his mouth and jaw, emphasizing the kindness, sympathy in his eyes. "When you don't know what to say—don't."

Schrader said uncomfortably: "Who—who are you? I know your name, of course. But, I mean, the police were so respectful—"

FLINT smiled. "I'm not anybody, to tell the truth. Just a disbarred lawyer. But I've got sort of a reputation around this town. I'm supposed to be a very bad guy to cross, because something unfortunate always seems to happen to people who do it."

"I'm—I'm very, very grateful to you for helping me, but I don't have very much money saved. . . ."

"And I can't take any fees—being disbarred. So we can go right ahead with free conscience. Why don't you tell me about it?"

"I'd be glad to. I—I really didn't kill Mr. Rule. I mean, that's a foolish thing to say here, isn't it? But I really didn't do it."

"I'm sure you didn't," Flint said. Otherwise, I wouldn't be here."

Schrader stared at him incredulously. "You—you don't think I did it?"

"No."

Schrader gulped noisily. "Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Flint. I thought everybody—" He turned his head away and blinked rapidly.

"What were you doing down here this morning?" Flint asked.

"I came down to give myself up. I couldn't stand it any longer. It was foolish of me to run when Miss Letticia saw me, but I just couldn't help it. It seemed as if the whole world were screaming and pointing at me."

"Sure, I know," said Flint. "It gets you that way. Start from the first."

Schrader nodded. "I worked for Mr. Rule for the last five years. I was his secretary. He had quite extensive property holdings, houses and buildings that he rented. I took care of that and his correspondence. He could hardly read or write. I lived at his house."

"I get it," Flint said. "Go on from there."

"The night Mr. Rule was murdered, I had gone out to the motion pictures. It was the servants' night off, and Miss Letticia had gone out with Mr. Elliott. There was no one home but Mr. Rule. The house is a very large, old-fashioned one, and Mr. Rule's office is on the third floor. As I turned in the front walk when I came home from the pictures, I noticed the light was on in the office, and then I saw the crippled man, hanging upside down from the eaves right above the window."

"You saw what?" Flint asked.

"The crippled man, hanging upside down from the eaves."

Flint nodded. "Yes. I guess I heard you right the first time. Go on."

"It startled me terribly."

"I can understand that, too," Flint said.

"He was a small man, smaller than I am. He wore a steel brace that ran the whole length of his right leg. He was hanging there head down, looking in the top of the window of Mr. Rule's office. He didn't see me clear down on the ground, of course. Before I could shout or call out or do anything, he took hold of the top of the window—the windows have a broad sill both above and below them—let go of the eaves with his legs and swung himself right around in the air and in through the window. The bot-

tom half was open. He did it so quickly and easily that—that it seemed incredible."

He still looked astonished.

Flint said: "I'll agree with you there all right. Incredible is the right word for it. Go on."

"I started to run toward the house, and just as I went up on the front porch I heard the shot. I was terribly frightened. I fumbled with my keys, getting the door unlocked. Then I ran up the stairs to Mr. Rule's office. The door was open, and he was sitting in his chair behind his desk. He had been shot through the head, and there was blood all over his face. There was a gun lying on the desk in front of him."

"And the crippled man?"

"He was hanging upside down outside the window again. Then, in a second, he twisted himself and climbed, somehow, onto the roof.

"I could hear him. I could hear him walking. It was terrible. I could hear that *click-clock* sound of his brace going across the roof. I'll—I'll never forget that sound. I wake up sometimes at night, and—and I can hear that *click-clock* sound coming toward me in the dark. . . ."

"I know," said Flint. "I know. What happened then?"

Schrader shivered a little. "I—I didn't know what to do. I was so frightened I was numb and icy all over. I grabbed the revolver off the desk, and I followed that *click-clock* on the roof. I followed it clear across to the other side of the house. The rooms were all dark, and there wasn't any sound anywhere except the *click-clock, click-clock* on the roof above me. Finally, it stopped, and I just stood there below where it stopped, and I couldn't think of what to do."

"And then?" Flint asked gently.

"Then I ran. I ran out of the house and across the street, and I pounded on the door of a house and yelled that Mr. Rule had been murdered. A woman opened the door. She saw me there, and I still had the revolver in my hand, and she screamed at me: 'You killed him! You murdered him!' Then I dropped the revolver there and ran again. I could hear that voice screaming at me the whole time. I hid in an old abandoned shack Mr. Rule owned down on the edge of the marshland south of the city, until I couldn't stand being alone any longer, then I came to give myself up."

"Have you told anyone else this story?" Flint asked.

Schrader shook his head. "No."

"Don't," said Flint. "Don't say anything about it to anyone, you understand? They won't bother you much. They think they have an open-and-shut case—and maybe they do."

FLINT pushed the slatted screen door open and went inside. It was a small, square room with stained plaster-board walls. There were two small round tables on each side of the door, and directly across from it there was a short, scarred counter. A few dusty bottles sat on the shelves behind the counter.

The fat man was sitting in a specially braced and padded chair at the end of the counter. He had an abnormally big, pink face and very wide, round eyes that were a clear, bright blue. He nodded his gleaming bald head at Flint gravely and said: "Hello, Matt. If you'll reach over the counter, you'll find a glass on the shelf underneath." He indicated the jug beside his chair with a big smooth hand. "It's just old-fashioned dago red, but it's pretty good."

"No, thanks, Roxie," Flint said, pulling up a chair. "This is a business call."

"That's good," said Roxie. "I'm always open for business, even on a hot after-

noon. Matt, do you think I'm a criminal?"

"I know you are," Flint said.

Roxie nodded amiably. "That's what I always figured myself, but I find I'm wrong. You know, I'm sending my cousin Tim's kid to college, and the other day I dropped around to see how he was coming along. I was reading a book he had, and it said that people like me were merely maladjusted cogs in the whirring machinery of our modern social-and-economic system and should not be penalized for their variations from normal behavior." Roxie fished a folded scrap of paper out of his shirt pocket and looked at it. "Yeah. Got it right that time. I've been memorizing it all morning. It's about time for Craigie to come around and hit me for a pay-off on my Pond Street bookie-joint. I'm going to try it on him."

"I don't think it'll do much good," Flint said.

"No," said Roxie sadly. "Politicians are uneducated people. But it sounds nice."

"Very nice," Flint agreed. "Roxie, I want to tell you a story."

"Go right ahead," Roxie invited. "I like stories."

"Suppose I told you that I saw a crippled man—a little fellow with a brace on his leg—doing nip-ups and hand-stands on the roof of a house in the dead of night? Hanging by his heels from the eaves and flipping in and out of windows and doing all kinds of stunts like that?"

"Why," Roxie said thoughtfully, "then I'd say that Clip Hansen had probably gotten tired of the sinkers and coffee they feed him down at the mission on Front Street and had been out cutting a caper."

Flint sat very still for several seconds, and then he said, "So," very softly, and began to smile in a quietly triumphant way. "Then there actually is a man who could and does do things like that?"

"Sure," Roxie said. "Clip Hansen used to be the daring young man on the flying trapeze. Traveled with a circus. He was a damned good acrobat, but he got sniffing the little white powders. He got a load on at the wrong time once, saw four trapeze rings where there were only two—and picked the wrong ones. He missed the net coming down, and he lit with his right leg doubled back under him. They never could fix it. He wears a steel brace on it."

"But he can still climb around on rooftops?"

"You bet," Roxie said. "The guy is really good in spite of that brace. I've seen him climb right up a smooth wall where you'd swear there wasn't a finger hold for an ant. He's hot stuff on a vine trellis. He's so light it don't take much to support him."

"He's still on the habit?"

"When he can get it. That's the only reason he ever does a job. Otherwise, he'd rather be just a bum. The cops have never tumbled to him. They just don't figure a guy with a bad leg being a second-story worker."

"I'd like to talk to him," Flint said.

"No quicker said than done," Roxie answered. He reached under the braced chair and pulled out a telephone, dialed rapidly. "This is Roxie, Joe," he said into the mouthpiece after a second. "Go find Clip Hansen and tell him to come over here right away." He hung up the receiver without waiting for an answer and put the telephone back under his chair. "It might take about a half hour before Joe's boys locate him."

"In that case," Flint said, "I'll have a try at some of that dago red and tell you all about this business."

FLINT heard the *click-clocking* noise that Schrader had described to him. It was faint at first, like the ominous, muffled tick of a hidden watch, and then it

grew gradually louder. It came up to Roxie's slatted screen door and stopped on the outside.

"Come on in, Clip," Roxie said.

The door opened, and Clip Hansen came in. He walked very unevenly, bobbing—taking a long step with his good leg, a short step with the crippled leg. He made the *click* sound when he put his weight on the braced leg, the *clock* sound when he lifted his weight from it. The brace was made of brightly gleaming steel, and it ran from a specially built-up shoe all the way up to his hip.

"Hello, Roxie," he said. He smiled and blinked his eyes very rapidly. "They said you wanted to see me."

"Yeah," Roxie said. "This is a friend of mine—Matt Flint. He's a lawyer."

"Was a lawyer," Flint corrected.

Roxie nodded. "Uh-huh. Get yourself a glass under the counter, Clip, and have a drink of wine."

"Thanks," Clip Hansen said. "Don't mind if I do." He found a glass and poured some of the red wine out of the jug. He was a very small man, stunted, wirily muscular. He had a thin face that was paper-white, and brown eyes that were set very close together and that he batted nervously whenever he looked straight at anyone. He wore a coat that was several sizes too large for him and had a big patch on one elbow. His black trousers were frayed badly around the cuffs.

"Sit down," Roxie invited. "Me and Matt here was talking about a new game I just invented."

Clip Hansen made a greedy little sucking noise sipping at his wine. "Game?" he repeated.

"Yeah. Hunting rats."

Clip Hansen blinked rapidly at him. "Huh?"

"Hunting rats," Roxie said. "There's a basement under this joint—down through that trap-door." He pointed to the far corner of the room. "It ain't very big, and it ain't got any other entrance or any windows. There's a sewer main runs through this block about twenty yards from this building. There's a pipe running into the cellar that connects with the main. I dunno why it's there, but rats come through it into my cellar from the sewer main. I rigged up a wire bottle neck and fitted it over the end of the pipe. They can get through it into the cellar, but they can't get back out again. I got eight of 'em down there now. There was nine, but the ninth was a little fellow, and the other eight chewed him up."

CLIP HANSEN put his wine down and pushed it away from him. He made a little distasteful grimace and swallowed hard.

"Ever seen those sewer rats?" Roxie asked him. "They're big guys. About as big as a poodle."

"Yeah," Clip Hansen said. "Yeah. I seen 'em. The damn things give me the creeps. Them slimy tails—"

"They ain't so pleasant to look at," Roxie admitted. "But they sure make swell huntin'. I tell you how we do it. I got a night-stick here that I borrowed from Captain Regie of the racket-squad. You take the night-stick, and you go down in the cellar and close the trap-door. It's dark as the inside of a hat down there, and you can see the rats' eyes shine. You don't have to go after 'em—they'll come after you. They're hungry as hell. You watch their eyes, and when they come for you in the dark, then you swing at 'em with the night-stick."

Clip Hansen held the smile on his face, but the strained muscles jerked the corners of his mouth. "And—and if you miss?"

"That's bad," Roxie said. "The rat'll take a hunk out of you. They got teeth

like needles. And if they get a sniff of blood, the whole bunch go nuts and come for you all at once. You just don't want to figure on missin'. Like to try it, Clip?"

"No," said Clip Hansen, and his thin shoulders twitched a little. "No, thanks. Did—did you wanta see me about something?"

FLINT waited. "Oh, yeah," Roxie said. "I damn near forgot. Flint's got a job for you." Clip Hansen, blinking quickly at Flint, began to stir jerkily. "Job?" he said.

Flint nodded. "Yes. It's a tough one—probably the toughest you ever tackled. I want you to tell me the truth."

"Truth?" said Clip Hansen. "What d'you mean by that, huh?"

"I'd have a hard time explaining the idea to you," Flint said. "So we won't go into it. Just tell me why you killed Abe Rule."

The legs of Clip Hansen's chair scraped on the floor as he pushed backwards away from the table. "Huh? Say, what you tryin' to do? Say, what're you two guys pullin'—"

"Sit still, Clip," Roxie said gently. "Don't get all in an uproar, now. You're among friends. Just do like Flint says. Tell us why."

Clip Hansen's tongue flicked thinly over his lips. "You're jokin' me, huh?" he said, smiling nervously. "You're kiddin', huh? Abe Rule? I don't know nothin' about Abe Rule."

"Don't you remember swinging in his window the night he was murdered?" Flint asked softly.

"I never did! I never was there! What do you guys think—"

"The rats," said Roxie. "The rats in my cellar. They're pretty hungry, Clip. It's dark down there, and their eyes shine red."

Clip Hansen got up with a sudden click of his brace. "You—you can't—you don't dare—"

"Don't I?" Roxie asked. "You know better than that, Clip."

"Why did you kill Abe Rule?" Flint asked.

"I didn't!" Clip Hansen screamed at him. "You ain't gonna make— You ain't gonna put me down there with them—" His hand flipped under the looseness of his big coat.

Flint kicked his chair back, lunged over the table at him. He was too slow. In one incredibly quick motion Roxie came up out of his braced chair and smashed his big, smooth fist squarely into Clip Hansen's face.

The fist didn't travel more than twelve inches, but when it struck it made a sound like a sharp handclap. It knocked Clip Hansen up in the air, clear off his feet. Falling, he twisted his small body around and as he came down his head hit the edge of the counter at an angle.

There was a dull, snapping sound, and then Clip Hansen's brace made a clattering, metallic noise on the floor. A stubby little revolver slipped out of his lax fingers, skittered over toward the wall. Clip Hansen didn't move at all.

For a long moment, there was a tense, thick silence, and then Roxie's braced chair squeaked a little, protestingly, as he lowered his bulk back into it.

"Well," said Roxie. "Well, Clip sort of stepped out of his class that time. He must have been loaded up to the eyebrows, or he woulda known better. I don't let anybody pull a gun on me when they're standin' that close."

"He's dead," Flint said tightly. "That was his neck that snapped."

"He is, and it was," Roxie agreed.

"What are you going to do?"

"Nothing," said Roxie. "Just nothing at all, Matt. I figure it's up to you. I'm just a kibitzer in this game."

"I'll see that you're kept in the clear."

Roxie nodded calmly. "I know you will, Matt. That never worried me for a minute. But, come to think of it, I better do something, after all. Craigie is gonna be in here for his pay-off pretty soon, and if he sees any bodies lyin' around the premises, he'll want three times as much."

Roxie got out of his chair with that same smooth movement. He caught hold of Clip Hansen's big coat and dragged him effortlessly over to the trap-door. He opened it and pushed Clip Hansen through. There was a steely clash as the brace hit on concrete somewhere below. Roxie lowered the door again.

"Well, that makes my little story partly true," he said. "There weren't any rats in that cellar before, but there's one down there now."

THERE was a ship's model on the mantel. It was a large one, a four-master, fully rigged, and it stood almost two feet high. It seemed to fit in excellently with the rest of the gloomy, high-ceilinged room with its clumsy old-fashioned furniture and darkly figured wall-paper. It was a musty room with an uncomfortable air of deadness and disuse about it.

Flint stood close to the mantel, examining the ship's model with thoughtful inattention. He was frowning a little, and there were gravely worried lines around his mouth and eyes. He turned around when Letticia Hartwell came into the room.

She looked very small and dainty, freshly modern, in strange contrast to the antique fustiness of the room. Her black hair was drawn smoothly back from the white oval of her face, and her lips were softly red, inviting.

"Mr. Flint?" she said. "I'm sorry to have kept you waiting so long."

"She kept you waiting until I could get here," Howard Lee Elliott said, coming in the room after her. "I understand that, for some strange reason, you've taken an interest in Harold Schrader. I warn you, Flint, that I won't stand for any of your usual methods in your treatment of Miss Hartwell."

"Usual methods?" Flint repeated blandly.

"I know you won't stop at anything," Elliott said. "There's nothing you won't do to get one of your clients free, but I'm here to protect Miss Hartwell, and I will."

"Who's going to protect you?" Flint asked.

Elliott flushed darkly under his tan. "You—"

"Please, Howard," Letticia Hartwell said wearily.

"I mean it," Flint said. "You need some protection. Now, may I speak to Miss Hartwell if I promise not to raise my voice above a whisper?"

"If she wishes," Elliott said stiffly.

Letticia Hartwell said: "Howard, you're being a little ridiculous. Go ahead, Mr. Flint."

"Thank you," Flint said. "I really don't have a great deal to say, but you may find it quite interesting. You see, I had two reasons for pushing myself into this business. For one—Mr. Elliott."

"Thank you very much," Elliott said heavily. "You can be sure I appreciate it."

"I hope you do," Flint said, "but I'm afraid you won't. The other reason was Harold Schrader. I was sorry for him—really sorry. He's a meek little fellow, hardly able to hold up his own end when things are going smoothly. And here he is in a situation that would be hard on the toughest—the whole world against him. He needed a friend, if ever I've seen a man who did."

"And so you elected yourself his champion," Elliott said sarcastically.

"Yes," Flint admitted. "He could have done worse."

"I scarcely see how," Elliott said. "But please go on with your story. It's very interesting."

"Harold Schrader told me his story," Flint said slowly. "He told me that when he was coming home the night Mr. Rule was murdered, he saw a crippled man, swinging from the eaves over Mr. Rule's office window, saw him get into the office. Schrader ran in the house, and then he heard the shot. When he got up to the office Mr. Rule was dead, and the revolver was lying on the desk in front of him. Schrader grabbed it, instinctively, and started to chase the sound the crippled man was making on the roof above. Schrader was scared silly, naturally enough, and when the scare really got hold of him he quit trying to catch the crippled man and ran out of the house. Some hysterical woman scared him even more, and he hid."

"That's the most insanely fantastic story I've ever heard!" Elliott said.

Flint nodded. "Yes. It is. But it's true. There was a crippled man on the roof, and I found him."

Elliott laughed contemptously. "I don't believe—"

"You will," Flint said thinly. "Having no—ah—official standing, I have to use what methods I can find. I have arranged for some of my acquaintances to interview the crippled man. They're a little crude, but they get results with lighted matches applied judiciously."

"Torture!" Elliott exclaimed.

FLINT nodded. "Yes. It's the method for questioning suspects that has more and older legal precedent than any other. It's always been used since there was any law. The crippled man will talk. I wonder what he'll say. What will he say, Miss Hartwell?"

"You!" said Elliott, coming a step forward. "Don't you dare—"

"Wait, Howard," she said. She was staring at Flint levelly, unafraid, unexcited. But all the youth and freshness seemed to have washed out of her face and left it old suddenly, and weary. "You were playing with me, weren't you, Mr. Flint? The crippled man has already talked. You know what he said. He said that I hired him to come to the house that night."

"*You* hired—" Elliott said in a stunned voice. "You—"

"Yes," said Flint, speaking directly to Letticia Hartwell. "You hired him. You met him at one of the missions on Front Street where you do your social-service work."

"No!" Elliott said thickly. "No! Letticia—"

She raised her head a little, bravely. "Yes, I did. It's useless to explain now. It's useless to try to justify myself. I can never do that. But my uncle never loved me. He hated me. He hated my sister and my father. They were decent and clean and honest. They were both poor, but they would never touch a cent of his dirty money. They were both killed in an accident, when I was twelve. My uncle took me in, and he tried to spoil all the things they had taught me—all the decent and clean and honest things. I never got to see or know decent people. My uncle was a beast, and all his friends seemed the same — politicians, crooks, thieves, gangsters. I met Howard, and it seemed that he was everything I wanted out of life. . . ."

Elliott said: "Dear, please—"

She went on quickly. "I didn't tell my uncle about Howard, but he found out, anyway. He had friends, everywhere. He told me he was going to spoil it for Howard and me. He said, the fool, that Howard was after his dirty money. That was

too much. I struck back. I knew he had incriminating private papers in the safe in his office. I couldn't get to them. He had the door on a spring lock, and it was always locked when he wasn't in. I hired the crippled man to get in that safe—get some of those papers. I meant to threaten my uncle with them, if he interfered with Howard and me."

She looked straight at Flint. "It was an accident that night. I don't suppose the crippled man told you that, but it was. My uncle surprised him at his safe. They fought. . . . I would never have let Harold Schrader suffer for it, Mr. Flint. Do you believe that? When he appeared today, I was desperate—I screamed. But I would never have seen him punished."

"I believe that," Flint said.

Elliott came toward her. "Dear, listen to me—"

She made a tired gesture. "No, Howard. That's what Mr. Flint meant when he said you needed protection. You needed protection from me. All this would have come out sooner or later, and you would have been ruined, disgraced. Your name and pride, your social position—place in your profession, your family all smashed—gone."

Elliott shook her. "Will you listen to me? Do you think I care for that? Do you think I blame you for what happened to your uncle? I know what kind of a man he was. Listen. Flint has no proof of any of this. Just the word of a confessed murderer. You could never in the world be convicted. Profession, family name, pride, social position—what do they matter? I'll have you—you! We'll go away somewhere, where no one knows, start over together. . . ."

"Howard!" said Letticia Hartwell. "You would—do that—"

"Yes, he would," said Flint. "But would you?"

There was a thick, tense little silence while the two of them, standing close together, stared at him.

"You didn't let me finish," said Flint. "You forgot, Miss Hartwell, that Elliott often accompanied you on your slumming tours. Clip Hansen, the crippled man, had seen him, knew he was interested in you. Elliott had much more to offer Clip Hansen than you did, Miss Hartwell. Elliott is a doctor, and he could offer morphine. Clip Hansen was an addict. When you made your little proposition to him, Clip went around to see Elliott to see what he could see. Elliott approved of the plan but he introduced a little variation of his own. He offered a premium if Abe Rule didn't live through the robbery."

"That's a lie!" Elliott said savagely. "That's a dirty lie!"

"No," said Flint. "I searched Clip Hansen's room. On one of his visits he had picked up a hypodermic outfit from your office, when you weren't looking. It has your name engraved on it. You see, Miss Hartwell, your uncle wasn't much good in a lot of ways, but he'd had enough dealings with crooks to know one when he saw one, even if he did have an English accent and a degree from Oxford and a family name."

"You," Letticia Hartwell said to Elliott in a thin, soft voice. "You would have done that to me. You would have married me and let me think all my life that you had sacrificed yourself for me—spoiled your career because you loved—"

"I had to have money—I *had* to have it, I tell you!" Elliott was suddenly screaming, clawing at his collar. "I took funds at the hospital—"

"Yes," said Flint, "and all that will come out, too."

A SAGGING, lifeless kind of silence swelled out the room, as Howard Lee Elliott reached automatically for his hat

on the table. After that outburst—that single, torn-loose protest—all life seemed gone out of him. Now, he walked slowly toward the door, almost as if a command from Flint had ordered him there.

Then Flint felt the girl's presence at his side. Her eyes were slowly losing that expression of dull shock; and something more dangerous was in them, instead.

"You always get your clients off, don't you?"

He nodded. "Mostly—if they're innocent."

She said steadily: "No matter how. I've heard that about you, too."

Was she crazy enough to believe he'd try to get Elliott off?

"What I mean," the girl said measuredly, as if laying her words out, one by one, by thumb rule, "is this. I was supposed to see Clip Hansen this evening. To pay him for his work. And he told me he'd be here—if he was still alive." Her face was still drawn, but cold mischief danced in her eyes now. "That meeting was set for two hours ago. Something—must have happened to him."

"Yes," said Flint, hand on the knob. "Something did."

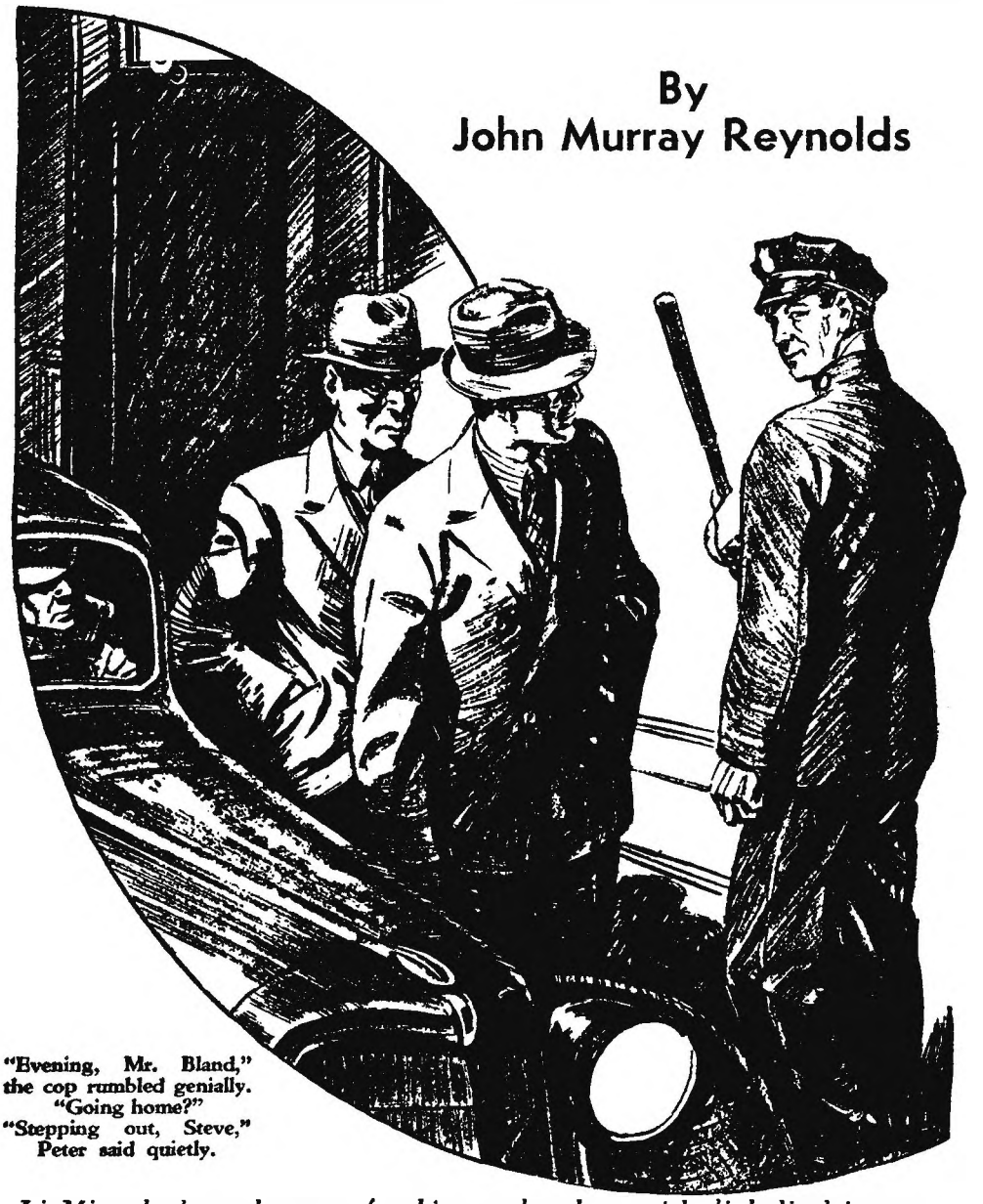
Seconds ticked off stumblingly; one, two, three—

Then her voice came closer. "I'm like you are. I believe in getting an innocent man off—no matter how. I'll keep your secret. Don't worry. I'll testify that I heard—heard *his confession,*" and she indicated Elliott's stiff, sleepwalker-like figure.

Flint knew that his own methods were undoubtedly ruthless. Yet, beside her own, they faded away into nothingness.

THE CREEPING DOOM

By
John Murray Reynolds



"Evening, Mr. Bland," the cop rumbled genially. "Going home?"
"Stepping out, Steve," Peter said quietly.

Li Ming had set the stage for his murder-show with diabolical ingenuity. For the props the saffron-skinned monster had selected for his chief player, left Peter Bland with but two alternatives—each equally ghastly—and only split seconds to choose which horror-course to take.

THE girl stood up and began to pull on her gloves. "I wish you wouldn't work down here at night any more," she said. Her face looked drawn.

Peter Bland laughed. "Nonsense, Ruth don't worry about me."

"But Li Ming—"

"Li Ming has been out of prison for a

year now. If he meant to start any trouble, he would have done so long before this."

Ruth Carson mustered a dubious smile. "I suppose you're right, dear," she admitted. "But do take care." She kissed him and went out.

When she had gone, Peter shrugged and returned to the work piled on his desk. For some reason he found it hard to keep his mind on what he was trying to do. His fiancée's warning seemed to worry him subconsciously, even though he told himself that the whole thing was foolish. There was really nothing at all to be concerned about.

Nearly six years had passed since Peter Bland had been the chief witness at the trial that sent Li Ming to prison. Peter had had no personal feelings in the matter, had simply done his duty as a citizen. But Li Ming had openly threatened revenge. And Ruth had never been able to forget the look in the eyes of the suave and sinister Chinese as he was led from the courtroom.

"Some day, Peter Bland, we will speak of this affair again!" he had promised, the complete imperturbability of his speech only adding to the fury mirrored in his almond eyes.

Well—all that was over now. It must be over! Li Ming had been out of prison for a year, and nothing had happened. While he would never admit it to Ruth, Peter had worried for the first few months. Now, he was convinced at last that there had never been any real danger.

IT seemed hard to do any work tonight! Peter leaned back in his chair, reaching for a pipe. Then, at a slight sound behind him, he glanced around—and froze into immobility. Li Ming stood in the doorway behind him, the blunt muzzle of his automatic gleaming in the glow of the electric light!

Slowly, his hands lifting in the air, Peter got up from his chair. No chance now to go for the revolver Ruth had insisted he keep in his desk drawer for the past year!

Li Ming's black and expressionless eyes followed Peter's every movement—and there was death in those slanted orbs. One of the Oriental's two companions, a lean, hawk-faced white man, stepped forward and patted Peter's clothing for a weapon. He stepped back and nodded negatively at Li Ming.

At last Peter found his voice. "What do you want?" he asked, the words rasping in his dry throat.

Li Ming smiled, and the mere grimace was a threat in itself.

"I promised you this meeting six years ago," he said. "I always keep my promises. That is a habit of mine. Now we will go downstairs and get into a car I have waiting there. If you attempt to escape or summon help you will be shot immediately."

Peter picked up his hat from the rack, clinked off the light-switch as they went out. They went down the three flights of stairs instead of using the elevator, and passed through the deserted lobby of the old-fashioned office building. Li Ming was on one side of Peter; the white man who had frisked him on the other. The third man brought up the rear. Though their guns were no longer in sight, Peter knew that he was covered.

As they came out on the sidewalk, Peter clenched his fists in sudden excitement. Usually this part of the business district was deserted at night, but now a tall man in a blue uniform was strolling toward them not ten yards away. It was Boyle, the regular patrolman on the beat!

Li Ming's words came swift and venomous, scarcely more than a whisper, yet clearly audible to Peter.

"Cry out or ask for help in any way

and we will shoot the officer down like a dog!"

He meant it literally! Peter had no doubt of that. The street was deserted, and they could easily kill the unsuspecting copper before he would have a chance to draw his gun. To start anything now would do Peter no good, and would only cause the death of an innocent man. With dragging feet, Peter walked across the sidewalk toward the waiting car.

Boyle strolled past, idly swinging his nightstick. He glanced casually at the group of men beside the car. "Evening, Mr. Bland," he rumbled genially. "Going home?"

"Stepping out, Steve," Peter said quietly, and climbed into the car.

As soon as the car had turned the corner, Peter's arms were pulled behind him while handcuffs clicked around his wrists. A bandage was bound over his eyes, tape sealed his mouth. The car increased speed and lurched around another corner. Peter tried to memorize the number of turns and the approximate distance, but after several minutes he became confused. The thing was hopeless.

At last they stopped and Peter was led from the car. His feet scraped on a cement floor and he judged from the pungent odor of gas and oil that he was in a garage. He was prodded up two flights of stairs, then bound rigidly in an arm-chair. At last the bandage was taken from his eyes—the tape from his mouth.

PETER BLAND sat in a square room that might have been a chamber in the house of some mandarin in China. Embroidered tapestries covered the walls; bowls of incense burned before a gilded joss in the corner. Two Mongols in black robes stood with folded arms before the curtained door across the room.

Peter himself was lashed, seated, in a carved arm-chair. For an instant he struggled vainly against the bonds that held him. He noticed that he was fettered by light chains, except for his right arm and wrist which were tied with a cord. He wondered why.

Low voices sounded just beyond the curtained doorway. Then Li Ming walked slowly into the room. Now he wore a peacock-green robe, and a round hat with a coral button on top. In ordinary clothes Li Ming had not looked particularly impressive, but in this costume and setting he was a true Son of the Dragon. His face was impassive as he stood before Peter, yet he seemed to radiate vindictive hatred.

"Six years ago you sent me to prison," he said slowly. "I am now about to settle that score—with interest! We of Manchu blood may not be incarcerated thus casually in Western jails. The details of the little ceremony of vengeance which is about to follow have been in my mind for the past year. I have delayed until now—only so fear of what I might do would be with you constantly during these past months. Now the time has come!"

"You must be crazy!" Peter gasped.

He had no plan, no scheme of escape, for Patrolman Boyle had apparently missed the signal he had given him. Now he was simply fighting for time.

Li Ming smiled faintly. "Crazy? It is a word you Occidentals are fond of applying to any state of mind or process of reasoning that is beyond your meager intellects. But we waste time! Have you ever heard of the Creeping Doom?"

Peter shook his head wordlessly. Li Ming evidently meant to kill him, probably to torture him first. He licked his dry lips. Then he stiffened in horror as Li Ming snapped an order and a pair of Mongols brought another captive into the room.

It was Ruth! Pale and wide-eyed, her

clothing torn to shreds, she staggered into the room in the grip of her two guards. A silken gag was stuffed in her mouth, and her crossed wrists were tied hard together in front.

Peter Bland almost went insane himself in that moment. He fought against his bonds until the heavy chair shook beneath him, and cursed Li Ming in wild fury.

The impassive Chinese, enjoying his futile struggling to the full, waited until Peter's torrent of words ceased finally. Then he gave another quiet order to his men.

They forced the girl to lie down on her back on a raised couch, directly before the chair where Peter was bound. Her hands were stretched above her head and lashed to an iron ring. Her ankles were tied to a ring which hung from a light cable running, in turn, over a pulley fastened to the ceiling. Now one of the Mongols pulled at this cable, raising her feet till they pointed straight up at the ceiling, and fastened it there. Rigid, unable to move, she stared up at Peter with horror-struck eyes.

He felt the sweat breaking out along his spine. "What—what are you going to do to her?" he gasped.

"You are about to see the Creeping Doom in operation," Li Ming explained blandly. "Something even more slow and devious is in store for you. This is merely the curtain-raiser to our little playlet."

THE Mongols approached the girl with a long coil of what looked like light gray clothes-line. They stripped away the last of her clothes, then began to coil the gray cord tightly around her. Starting at the ankles—wrapped in coils half an inch apart—they wound it tightly around her body all the way up to the throat.

"That is a powder fuse, something like the fuse on a fire-cracker," Li Ming explained, "only it is a very slow-burning variety. About two inches to the minute. The girl will faint from time to time, but the sharpness of the pain will revive her again. It will be very interesting to see how long she can live under the agony."

"Look here, Li Ming!" Peter said, leaning as far forward as his bonds would allow as he forced himself to speak calmly. "Maybe you can do what you want with me, but let the girl go. You have nothing against her!"

"No—it's true I bear the girl no personal ill will," Li Ming said slowly. "And I thought you might say something of this sort, so I am prepared. Chang—the sword!"

One of the Mongols returned with a short but heavy sword with a curiously curved, broad blade. Attached to the hilt was a six foot-chain with a snap hook in the end. He fastened the end of the chain to a ring in the floor beside Peter and laid the blade across the captive's knees. Then he loosened the cords that bound Peter's right arm and instantly stepped back.

"You now have the means to put an end to the girl's torture at any time," Ling Ming said smoothly. "We have taken the precaution of fastening the sword so you cannot throw it at us, and you will notice that your remaining bonds are chains which you cannot cut. However—you can easily reach the girl's throat. You may use the sword whenever you like. Chang, bring a taper!"

Lifting the heavy weapon from his lap, Peter found that his tormentors had set their stage with care. He could not sever his bonds with the blade, nor even hurl it at Li Ming in a desperate attempt. Yet he could, indeed, reach Ruth's throat easily where she was bound on the floor at his feet!

Peter stared at the keen weapon with a sort of horrible fascination. The full in-

genuity of the mandarin's revenge was now revealed. He, Peter Bland, was faced with a terrible dilemma. Either he must watch the girl he loved subjected to slow and horrible torture, or else he must slay her with his own hand. His palms were damp with sweat, and the blood at his temples pounded like distant drums.

Li Ming took the taper one of the Mongols handed him and lit the end of the fuse, only a few inches away from Ruth's ankles. Some sparks spluttered out, a thin trail of smoke rose in the air, and then the fuse began to glow. Slowly but inexorably the fire crept toward the helpless girl's ankles.

Raising tortured eyes to Li Ming's face, Peter saw evil triumph glowing beneath the Oriental's almond lids. No hope for mercy there! For him to plead or beg would have no effect and would only increase Li Ming's triumph. Even though he fought against the idea, Peter knew in his heart what he had to do. He must kill Ruth with the sword he held in his hand.

The slowly moving glow of fire crept closer to the girl, at last reached the first strand that encircled her ankles. She writhed convulsively, and a low moan came from behind her gag. As the smoldering fuse seared her flesh, a horrible smell of scorching began to mingle with the reek of burning powder.

FOR only an instant more did Peter Bland hesitate. He glanced around him once, then looked down at Ruth again. Her whole body was heaving convulsively now, and a circlet of fire was half around one ankle. Her eyes were closed, and she moaned steadily. This would go on for hours, until the girl died at last with her body a seared mass of pain. Peter was suddenly very thankful for the weapon in his hand.

Bending forward with his right arm swinging free, Peter measured the distance to the girl's throat.

A few seconds and the thing would have been done. Peter was hesitating with the sword poised above Ruth's bare throat, steeling his nerves for the actual stroke.

And then a pistol shot cracked out.

As it shattered the silence, Li Ming leaped back and bared his crooked teeth in a savage snarl. One hand flashed under his robe, came out with a heavy automatic. Another shot came through the curtained doorway, and the automatic dropped from Li Ming's fingers as he gasped and fell to his knees.

There were half a dozen plainclothesmen in the raiding party that came storming into the torture chamber, plus several uniformed police. Mike Boyle was among the first of these. He took in the situation at a glance, leaped to the bound girl and pulled the glowing fuse from her trussed ankles, stamped out the flame.

A little later, when the raid was over and the sprawling bodies had been carried away, the detective-sergeant in charge turned smilingly to Peter.

"We were just about in time, Mr. Bland. You can thank Boyle here for that. By the way"—he turned to the uniformed patrolman—"we were in such a rush, you never did tell me what put you on the trail."

"Sure, it was just a little deduction," Boyle said with a broad grin. "I comes along on me beat and sees Mr. Bland here, leaving his office with three men. 'Goin' home?' I says to him. 'Stepping out, Steve', he says to me. My name ain't Steve! It's Mike, and Mr. Bland knows it well! Something funny. I grabs a patrol car and starts to follow, and then I suddenly realizes what he was trying to tell me. 'Stepping out, Steve!' Take the first letters. S—O—S! If that ain't a call for help, I'm a long-eared baboon!"

BRINK OF THE GRAVE

By WILLIAM B. RAINEY

The body sat there, propped against a headstone.

Murder had struck twice that night among the gravestones of Woodsend Cemetery and the caretaker had actually seen the killer limned against the moon. If the old man had been able to run he might have nabbed the ghoul right then, but peg-legs aren't much good in such a spot, so the blood sequence went right on—until the guilty ones tried to lead the wrong man to the brink of the grave.

THE old caretaker of the Woodsend Cemetery had tucked his nightshirt around him and was pulling up the covers when he heard the shot—the thin, clear crack of a small-caliber pistol.

There was a half-second of dead stillness during which the old man lay stiffly, his mouth open. Then a thin, unearthly shriek ripped upward like a rocket, high and terrible, exploding suddenly into tense silence.

The quiet was worse than the shot and the scream. For a full ten seconds the

old man lay without moving. His heart seemed wrenched into his throat and his lungs ached. His face was turned sidewise, the eyes bulging to stare through utter darkness at the gray patch that marked the room's single window.

His hand shook as he threw back the covers. Without switching on the light, he groped along the side of the bed until he found his peg-leg. The nightshirt got in his way when he went to strap it on. Then, still without turning on the light, he found the heavy, long-barreled revolver that always lay on the table. He made an odd sound, moving on one bare foot and a peg-leg, as he crossed to the open window.

It was dark outside. Tombstones showed as gray and uncertain as ghosts. A bit to the left, the cemetery slanted upward to a small knoll, and, beyond this knoll, the sky had a savage orange color from the warped moon that would not be visible for several minutes yet. The old man strained his eyes against the darkness, breathing heavily.

There was a tiny spurt of flame atop the knoll, again the clear crack of a pistol. Something black and wavering moved across the yellow patch of sky, crouched and vanished. The old man almost screamed but the sound stuck in his throat. Then the black thing showed again, joining earth and sky for a long instant. With a flapping like the wings of a great bat, it went over the hill out of sight.

It required several minutes for the old man to get out of the house and start up the knoll. A wind was blowing, and his nightgown flapped about him. He held the pistol awkwardly at his side, gripping his gown and a flashlight with the other hand. It had rained recently and his peg-leg sank into the soft earth.

At the top of the knoll the old man stopped. "Who's there?" he called nervously. The moon had come up now, making the earth an unpolished silver and black. The old man was about to cut on his flashlight when he saw the body, gulped, and for a second was unable even to move his thumb on the flash.

The body sat on a stone slab, legs outstretched, arms at its sides, back propped against the headstone. The face was tilted slightly to the left and back so that the eyes stared up into those of the old man. The coat was open, and even in the dim moonlight he could see the dark stain over the heart.

The old man said, "Damn it!" and moved with surprising rapidity down the hill and inside his cottage to the telephone.

LIEUTENANT John Murdock, chief of detectives, bent over the body for a moment, then straightened. The long scar which ran from his hair down across his left eye to the point of his nose showed dully in the moonlight. It gave a distinctly satanic leer to his face. He said: "It's Barry Jamison."

Behind him Detective Pete Reynolds whistled through his big, wide-spaced teeth. "You mean—the lawyer?"

Murdock seemed to regard the body placidly, his narrowed brown eyes photographing every detail of what he saw. "The lawyer," he said.

Reynolds whistled again. "There's gonna be hell to pay. The mayor is Jamison's uncle."

The lieutenant didn't answer. He had taken a flashlight from his pocket and in its white glow was studying the corpse and the tomb on which it lay. The bullet had formed a very small hole directly above the heart. The man looked as if he had been sitting in this position when shot, had half risen and fallen back again against the headstone. The coat was pulled down on the left side, and when

Murdock felt in the pocket he found a .38 automatic.

"Whoever got him with that B. B. gun did some swell shooting," Reynolds said. "A couple of inches one way or the other and that pin prick wouldn't have stopped him before he used the thirty-eight."

Murdock said: "The murderer probably took that into consideration." He rested the flashlight on the grave's edge and began wrapping the automatic in his handkerchief. The gun in his pocket, he picked up the flash again. The stone slab on which the body lay was rough and weather-beaten. Grass grew close around the grave and, even though still damp from the rain, would show no tracks. He turned to the caretaker who stood a few yards away, watching. "Have any idea what the thing you saw up here was?"

The old man had pulled trousers over his nightshirt, but his false teeth were still in the cottage and his lips caved in over toothless gums. "I don't know, sir. It looked like a—a bat. But it was too big. It was big as a horse."

"And the scream?"

The old man's face was gray in the moonlight. "It warn't nothin' human, sir. It was like a spirit screamin' or a cat or—"

"Or a woman?" Murdock asked.

"I don't know, sir. It was—"

One of the detectives came up, holding his left hand open in front of him. A flashlight in his right hand spotted the small, triangular piece of leather and wood that rested on his palm. "It may have been a woman, Lieutenant," he said. "I found this right over here. There's a spot where there's no grass, and there's the print of a woman's shoe. She must have been turning around in a hurry and broke this piece off her heel."

Murdock dropped it in the pocket with the gun. "Show me."

The track was in front and to the left of the body. A person standing there could not have been seen from the caretaker's cottage because it was beyond the brow of the hill. The track was smeared to form a half-circle, the heelmark deep.

WHILE Murdock studied it, Reynolds called to him. "Come over here. Here's the clue you been looking for."

"The place is lousy with them," Murdock said. He crossed to where Reynolds crouched behind a clump of shrubs, his flashlight held close to the ground. On the damp, grassy earth lay a small piece of cloth that was smeared with a half dozen various-colored paints.

"A guy squatting here could have knocked Barry Jamison off that grave with no trouble," Reynolds said. "That bullet came from this direction, too. The guy must have hid here and when he pulled the gun out of his pocket he pulled this cloth with it. But a paint-smeared rag ain't much to work on."

"Maybe," Murdock said. "But it'll have to do."

Another five minutes' search failed to turn up anything of interest. The coroner had taken the body and gone. Reynolds and the other detective had stopped their search to talk with the caretaker. Murdock started on one last circle of the knoll, keeping a full thirty yards from the top.

On the side opposite the spot where Reynolds had found the cloth was a small clump of shrubs. Murdock flicked his light over them and started to push through. His left foot hit something rubbery, throwing him off balance. He went down, twisting as he fell. In the white glare of the flash he saw a low, longish mound of leaves. He brushed at it with his right hand.

The face of a man stared up at him. It was a darkly handsome, heavy-featured

face, the mouth twisted by fear and pain. Murdock knew the man. He had been answering recently to the name of Philip de Vall. What his real name was, Murdock had no idea, but he was a professional crook who lived off women. He had served few prison terms because as a rule the women would not testify against him. His usual method was to make them fall in love with him, then allow him to "invest" their money, but he had also served two terms for blackmail.

Murdock wiped away more leaves. There was a tiny bullet hole directly above the man's heart. "Very good shooting," Murdock said softly. "Very good."

LIEUTENANT John Murdock was a tall man in his early thirties. His face was lean with high cheek-bones and a long chin. From his brown hair a heavy scar ran down across his forehead and left eye to the end of his nose. The scar twisted his face slightly, and added to his high cheek-bones and the thin line of his mouth it gave him a distinctly fierce expression. He looked more like a professional adventurer than a detective. In a way, he was both.

At eight thirty on the night following that of the double murder, John Murdock walked out of police headquarters with the paint-smeared cloth and the broken heel in his pocket. It took perhaps twenty minutes for him to circle his roadster through Court Square and drive along South Court Street to the great white stone home of Raoul Beauchamp, the sculptor and painter whose work brought a series of small fortunes to add to the comfortable one he had inherited.

A butler answered Murdock's ring. "Are you expected, sir? I think Mr. Beauchamp is engaged."

"Maybe I'm expected," Murdock said. "Maybe not." He showed his badge and followed the servant along the hall, went through the door he opened without waiting to be announced.

The room was evidently Raoul Beauchamp's study. There were deep, leather-covered chairs, an open fireplace, a large walnut desk. A modernistic floor lamp in one corner spread a soft glow over the whole room. Two men and a woman twisted toward the door as Murdock entered, surprise showing on their faces.

"Oh, hello Murdock," one of the men said. He was a large, handsome fellow with black, curly hair and red cheeks. Arnold Jace was the best criminal lawyer in the city. He was known to have an excellent practise and to need it because of extremely bad luck with cards and dice.

Murdock said, "Hello." He looked at the other man. He was rather small, with sharp, eager, leashed features. Somehow, he gave the impression that he might spring straight into the air and scream at any moment. His hands, resting on the desk in front of him, were surprisingly long and slim.

Murdock introduced himself, asked: "You are Mr. Raoul Beauchamp?"

"Yes." The man's intense eyes were narrowed, questioning.

Murdock moved swiftly to look at the woman. She was staring at him, white teeth biting on her full, sensual underlip to still its trembling. Then her mouth became steady, her blue eyes looked straight into those of Murdock. She patted her blond hair into place, but he saw that her hand was trembling. The woman was afraid.

"You are Mrs. Beauchamp?"

"Yes."

Murdock said: "I'd like to talk to you and your husband, if I may. Alone."

Arnold Jace stood up. "See here, Murdock, I'm Mr. Beauchamp's lawyer. Perhaps you want to consult me."

"No," Murdock said flatly. "I don't.

I want to talk to Mr. and Mrs. Beauchamp."

"What the devil is all this?" Beauchamp's lean hands jerked upward in a gesture of annoyance. "What are you talking about? Why have you come here?"

"Shall I explain?" Murdock's level gaze moved from Beauchamp to his wife.

She said: "Perhaps you had best go, Arnold. We'll telephone you after Mr. Murdock has left."

Jace hesitated, looking tall and pompous, but uncertain. Finally, he said: "If you prefer. I don't know what this is about, but you don't have to tell the police anything without consulting me." He went out of the room, closing the door behind him.

"And now," Raoul Beauchamp asked, "what is the meaning of all this?" Again he made that quick upward gesture with his lean hands.

Murdock lowered himself into the chair which Jace had occupied. His level eyes moved from the artist to his wife. "You both know the meaning. Which one wants to explain?"

The artist's temper was getting the better of him. "Damn it!" he shouted. "What are you talking about?"

Murdock said: "Murder, Mr. Beauchamp. The murder of Barry Jamison and of Philip de Vall in the Woodsend Cemetery last night. We know that you were present."

THERE was one taut, shivering moment of silence. Then Mrs. Beauchamp whimpered and swayed forward. She would have fallen from the chair if Murdock, without seeming to move rapidly, had not reached and steadied her.

The artist's breath had gone out of him like air from a punctured balloon. He collapsed into his chair and sat for a moment, looking dazed. Then suddenly he was on his feet again, tense and quivering.

"You're mad," he snapped. "I was here in my own home last night, working. I didn't go out. Moreover, I never heard of Philip de Vall until I read about him in the paper this morning. I did know Jamison rather well. My wife and I both knew him, but most of Montgomery did."

"Can you prove you were here at approximately eleven thirty last night?"

The artist waved both hands, leaning forward as if about to shout. Then his mouth closed, his hands fell at his sides. He swallowed. "I—I don't know. The servants were all gone last night. My wife was out, also. I telephoned the drug store for cigarettes, but I don't remember the time. Around ten o'clock, probably." His voice went angry and high again: "But I was here, I tell you!"

"Perhaps," Murdock said softly, "you can explain how this happened to be in the cemetery—at the spot from which one of the bullets was fired?" He took the paint-smeared square of cloth from his pocket and put it on Beauchamp's desk.

The artist slumped into his chair, staring at it. Mrs. Beauchamp was leaning forward, her face a gruesome white, her teeth biting the rouge from her lower lip. Her eyes were too wide and singularly listless.

"Well," Beauchamp said at last, "what is it? I never saw it before."

"It's a square of cloth on which you have wiped your paint-brushes," Murdock said. "Both the paints and the cloth have been analyzed and traced to the store which sold them. There's very little expensive material for artists sold in this town. The merchant was certain you had bought these. Besides, we are now able to take fingerprints from cloth. And the prints on this cloth are those we found on the back of several of your canvases which the dealer had in stock."

Fear began to come into the artist's eyes. His lips twitched. "But I wasn't there," he said. "I was here all night. I was—" Suddenly his gaze shifted to his wife, his voice trailed off.

Murdock turned to the woman. She was sunk deep in her chair, hands gripping the leather arms. "Where were you last night, Mrs. Beauchamp?"

"At the theater." Her voice was barely above a whisper. "I went alone. I spoke to the manager when I went in. I can prove that. It was about nine o'clock."

"Can you prove what time you left?"

She was breathing through her mouth now and her hands were trembling. "No. I—I didn't see anyone when I left."

"What dress were you wearing?"

It was Raoul Beauchamp who said: "You wore the blue with the silver collar. I noticed because I've had an idea of painting you in that dress."

"I want to see it," Murdock said, and stood up quickly.

The woman leaped to her feet, her beautiful face ugly with terror. "No!" she said. "No. I wasn't wearing that dress. It was another. I don't remember which one."

"I want to see it," Murdock said. His voice was harsh now, his face set. He stepped toward a door that opened on the left. "Is this the way toward your bedrooms?"

The woman ran to block the doorway with her slender body.

"No!" she whispered. "You can't. You can't."

"I'm going to." Murdock's voice was almost insulting. He flung her aside with more roughness than was necessary and went past. On the wall he found the light-switch, cut it on and went through another door into what was evidently a woman's bedroom.

AS HE was turning on the light, Beauchamp caught him by the arm and swung him around. The artist was three inches shorter than the detective and thirty pounds lighter, but his temper had the best of him. He said: "Damn you, you'll keep your hands off my wife and keep out of her rooms! I'll—"

"To hell with you," Murdock said. He shook free of the smaller man easily, pushed him away and stepped toward an open closet. But from the corner of his eye he watched the artist. He was taking a long shot now and if it didn't work there'd be trouble. If it did work—there'd also be trouble. He was counting on the artist's temper to make him go completely haywire. A split second's fault then might mean Murdock's death.

The closet was crowded with women's clothes, but it didn't take Murdock long to find the blue dress with the silver collar. And of the dozen-odd pair of shoes on the floor only one perfectly matched the dress. He lifted the left shoe and looked at it.

A small part was broken from the heel. When he took the piece from his pocket it fit perfectly. He turned without speaking to show the artist and his wife. "This broken piece was found in the cemetery last night," he said flatly.

For a long moment there was no sound. Then the woman whispered. "I—I knew I had broken it." She began to sob.

Beauchamp said huskily: "Let's go back into the study." But for a minute he did not move, only stood rocking slightly, staring at his wife, his face white with emotion. "I knew you were running around with my friends, Arnold and the others. But I didn't know you had taken up with professional criminals." He turned, led the way back to the study.

Murdock dropped one leg over the edge of the desk, made his voice soft and in-

sulting. "This about settles it," he said. "The person who did the killing was seen by the caretaker. Evidently it was a woman wearing a full dress that blew with the wind. We'll probably be able to find Mrs. Beauchamp's prints on the paint-cloth, along with yours, and show that it was she who dropped it. The motive is plain. Blackmail. It'll be easy enough to find some of the"—his voice got heavy with sarcasm—"slight indiscretions of the lady."

Beauchamp surged erect. "Damn you!" he shouted. "You can't—" Somehow, he checked himself, stood panting for a moment. "It'll be the chair for her?" he asked, his voice unnatural.

"Yes."

"Would the gun help?"

"We'll find that," Murdock said. His face did not change but the muscles of his body grew suddenly taut. It was coming now. A half second would be the difference between life and death.

Mrs. Beauchamp came to the edge of the desk. "Raoul," she whispered. "Raoul, what—"

The artist pulled open a desk drawer. "Here's the gun," he said. His hand flashed inside.

On the instant John Murdock shoved his right foot hard against the floor, spun across the desk toward Beauchamp. But his foot had slipped on the polished hardwood and his movement was slow. He saw that the gun was going to clear the drawer. He lunged for it.

At the same moment Mrs. Beauchamp screamed and struck out, trying for the gun. Her hand hit Murdock's, knocking it to one side.

Then the artist leaped backward to the wall. The long-barreled .22 target-pistol in his hand centered on the detective's heart. "These are not large bullets," he said. "But they'll kill."

Murdock had one leg over the desk, one foot on the floor. His face was passive, the scar a deep seam from forehead to the point of his nose. His breathing was as quiet as ever, his dark eyes steady on those of the artist. He had tried to make Beauchamp lose his temper and produce the gun. He had succeeded in doing that, but he had failed to catch it as it cleared the desk drawer. Now, he was looking death in the face.

He said: "I know damn well they'll kill. But killing me won't help."

Beauchamp smiled thinly. "Yes, it will. You brought the evidence in this case with you. I can destroy that. And the police won't find you. There's clay enough in my studio for more than one statue. I can make you into one, cart you away tomorrow and no one will pay any attention."

His finger began to whiten around the trigger. "Here it is," he said.

MURDOCK'S face was emotionless but sweat stood on his forehead. He had lost, and there was only one logical thing for Beauchamp to do—kill him. He said: "if you know anything about that gun, you know those high-powered bullets will go straight through me. One of them knocked quite a piece out of that headstone last night. Shoot me, and the bullet's going right on to strike the wall. The police will find it tomorrow when they search here."

The man's face darkened. His finger relaxed on the trigger, tightened, relaxed again. Abruptly, the thin lips smiled. "You are very thoughtful," he said. "But I can arrange for the bullet. Let's go to my studio, through this door." He gestured with his left hand.

The woman had been standing to one side. Her hands were pressed against her breasts, her red lips parted. "Raoul," she

whispered. "Raoul, what are you going to do?"

He said: "Come along. You've got to help. We are both in this over our heads now."

THE studio was large, oval, glass-walled on three sides. The only light came through the open doorway in front of which Murdock stopped at Beauchamp's order. The artist went past him into the semidarkness where Murdock could see the vague shapes of statues. There were several of life size and larger, a number of small ones on a low table at his right.

Murdock began to twist himself nervously, shifting his weight and rubbing one foot against the other. But his face was placid as ever. From the shadows Beauchamp said: "Keep steady. There's plenty of light where you are, and I shoot straight."

Murdock continued to rub his feet against each other. He said: "I know. There was an example of your shooting in the cemetery last night. Or was it really your wife's?"

"It doesn't matter. Either of us can handle this gun." He turned to his wife. "Here, Nelda. Go up back of him and hit him on the head with this hammer, hard. If you don't kill him it will at least knock him unconscious. I can finish him with a knife. That won't leave any bullet marks on the walls."

Murdock's lips were dry. He wet them with his tongue, said: "Make me into a discus-thrower, will you? I've always admired that pose." But he was not watching the dark shadow of the artist, anymore. He was watching the woman as she came toward him, a sculptor's hammer in her right hand.

Murdock shifted his weight, rubbing his right foot against the left, keeping his eye on the woman. He had gauged the chances of reaching the shadows, of getting out his own gun before Beauchamp could cut him down. There wasn't any chance. But if the woman would come between them—

She didn't. Keeping well to one side, she came up behind him. He could hear her heavy, nervous breathing. His own body was taut, waiting for the second when that breathing stopped. That would be the instant in which she halted the upswing of the hammer and started it down. That would be the instant when Beauchamp watched her, if ever. But Murdock knew that he didn't stand one chance in fifty. He kept rubbing his feet together.

The woman was close now, panting heavily. Closer. Closer. In a second now. Murdock's muscles corded.

The woman said: "I can't do it. I can't —kill him—this way."

There was a moment of silence, uncertainty. Then Beauchamp said: "All right. You cover him with the gun. I'll hit him."

It took four seconds for the exchange to be made. Beauchamp circled toward Murdock, the hammer ready. He came swiftly, moving on the balls of his feet.

And then the right shoe which Murdock had been tugging against his left one, slid over his heel. Without a move of his upper body, he flicked the leg from the knee down. There was a crashing sound as the shoe hit one of the small statues on the table at his right and turned it over. The woman screamed and swung around.

Beauchamp cursed and lunged at Murdock, swinging the hammer. The detective spun sidewise his hands coming down. The hammer struck him on the left shoulder, numbing his arm. Beauchamp dived for him again.

"Steady," Murdock said. His right hand had whipped under his coat and come out holding the police .38. "Drop that gun, Mrs. Beauchamp, but turn the other way

and let the hammer down first. Then we'll all visit the police station."

Beauchamp stood panting, and for a second Murdock thought he was going to charge the gun. Then he cursed softly. "I still have my lawyer," he said.

Murdock said: "A good one, but he won't help."

As they were about to leave the house, Beauchamp took a great cloak from a closet and swung it over his shoulders. Murdock smiled grimly. He remembered the story now about the artist's method of dressing.

The caretaker at the cemetery had said, "A great, bat-like thing." Well, a cloak blowing in the wind would look that way.

But there were other points about which Murdock wasn't certain. There was a lot about this case not clear yet.

ARNOLD JACE put a large hand flat on the desk-top, leaned far over toward Murdock. "Which one are you going to charge with the murders?" he demanded. "You can't hold them both on the same charge. Which one?"

Murdock's face was placid but the great scar made him seem to leer. "Which would you prefer? I'm open to argument."

"Then you admit that your case—"

"Admit hell," Pete Reynolds said and spat through his front teeth so hard the cuspidor rang under the impact. "The man's guilty as hell, Lieutenant. He goes out there following his wife. She's gone to pay blackmail and taken this guy Jamison along because she's scared to go alone. She admits that. Beauchamp mistakes Jamison for the blackmail guy and shoots him. The woman runs. Then Beauchamp sees he's got the wrong one when De Vall turns up and Beauchamp knocks him off. The only prints on the gun, except those fresh ones where the lady grabbed it to shoot you, are Beauchamp's. And they've proved it's the right gun. The caretaker saw Beauchamp's cloak. There's no other prints on that paint cloth. Hell, the case is open-and-shut."

"It does look that way," Murdock said. "I believe we could make it stick against him."

Pete Reynolds spat through his teeth. "I could prosecute this case and get a conviction." He looked at Jace, spat again and said: "Against you."

Raoul Beauchamp and his wife sat in straight chairs near the right wall. For the first time after coming here the woman spoke. "You mean," she asked huskily, "you mean—" She stood up and moved slowly into the full glare of the light that hung above Murdock's desk. "You mean you—can prove my husband's guilty? He'll—go to the—the chair?"

Jace started to bluster, but Murdock cut him off. "Very probably," he said.

The woman took a long breath. The rouge was almost gone from her lips now. She was ghostly pale, yet to Murdock she seemed prettier than at any time that night.

She said huskily: "Raoul didn't kill those men. I killed them. I killed them!" Her voice rose sharply, then broke and she caught the desk edge. Arnold Jace put his arm around her.

Reynolds said, "Well I will be damned!" and spat.

Raoul Beauchamp jerked to his feet, then stood motionless, wide-eyed.

"Tell me about it," Murdock said.

The woman's voice was low now, but steady. "It's about like you said at first. I went there to pay De Vall blackmail. It doesn't matter what he knew about me. I took Barry Jamison with me because I was afraid. And I took the pistol. I was wearing gloves. This was after I slipped out of the theatre. I lost my temper, talking with De Vall and I—I killed

him. When I saw what I had done I went sort of crazy. I thought Barry would tell on me and—I shot him."

Arnold Jace tightened his arm around the woman. "You're not telling the truth, Nelda," he said fiercely. "You're lying to protect Raoul. You shouldn't!"

She moved her blond head slowly. "No. It's the truth."

Murdock stood up, the scar vivid in the light. "All right," he said. "Have her sent to jail, Reynolds. But tomorrow I'm going out to the cemetery again. There's always proof at the scene of a crime, if you read it correctly. There'll be something there I overlooked. In the daylight I'll get it." He turned to Beauchamp. "You can go home now."

IT was about an hour after midnight when John Murdock crouched in the bushes where Reynolds had found the paint-smeared cloth. The aging moon, deformed and pale, crawled painfully above the horizon. The cemetery stretched in black, rolling waves untouched by the sickly yellow of the moon. A low wind whispered through the shrubs. Only the tombstones near at hand showed at all, and they made but an uncertain grayness.

The moon rose higher, but the light of it scarcely brightened. Murdock's muscles became cramped with waiting. He shifted position now and then, silently.

The moon went up. Only an hour or so of darkness left. If his bluff was going to work, it would have to be soon. He shook himself to wakefulness.

But nothing happened. Gray light came in the east. The stars paled. The moon faded. Then the sun, round and furious, seemed to leap into the sky. And still Murdock waited.

It was nine in the morning before he went home. His lean jaw was set and the scar showed livid across his face. The plan had failed. Now, he had so much of the truth in his hands—and so little. He could almost prove that either of the two persons had committed the murders, but there were little things left that bothered him. Why had De Vall's face been covered with leaves? How had Beauchamp ordered cigarettes around ten P. M. if he had been following his wife? If she had not been followed, who dropped the paint-smeared cloth?

And then, as he was removing his clothes for a few hours' sleep, the idea came to him. It took all day for his men to run the matter down, and during that time he slept. At late twilight he called on Arnold Jace in the lawyer's office.

"I think I've about settled this matter," Murdock said. "I want your advice."

Jace smoothed his black, curly hair, puffed his cheeks. "Certainly, Murdock. Certainly. How can I help?"

"I've never been able to believe Mrs. Beauchamp killed those men," Murdock said. "She wouldn't have carried Barry Jamison to the cemetery with her, if she didn't trust him. Besides, those shots were fired too accurately to have been done by a person who was either furiously angry or afraid. They were fired carefully."

"Yes," Jace said. "I think you are right about that."

"I'm certain of it. I'm certain of the whole thing. For a time, however, I was worried about Raoul Beauchamp. He had a motive for the killings. But how did he know that his wife was going to be at the cemetery unless he followed her? That he hadn't followed her is proved by the fact that he telephoned for cigarettes from his home after ten that night. And another thing that puzzled me was De Vall's reason for meeting Mrs. Beauchamp in the cemetery. If all he had wanted was money it would have been safer to meet her on a street corner, or

have the money mailed to him. If he had amorous intentions, there would have been better places than a cemetery. In fact—it looked as if the location was chosen by the killer."

"Yes," said Arnold Jace, "it does." His voice had grown very soft.

Murdock said gently: "You killed those men, Mr. Jace. You've had some dealings lately with De Vall. They weren't hard to trace. And you've been courting Mrs. Beauchamp. Her husband accused her of that last night while I was there. And you've lost a lot of money gambling. That's pretty common knowledge, too. I went to Mrs. Beauchamp this afternoon. She admitted that De Vall had found her with you. You probably framed that. Mrs. Beauchamp is talking more freely, now that she's learned she and her husband are really in love with one another. He tried to kill me last night to save her, and she confessed, thinking he was guilty."

The lawyer had both hands on the edge of his desk now. His big body was tense, the color seeping from his cheeks. "Talk on," he said softly.

MURDOCK went on: "All right. You arranged the blackmail meeting. She was able to pay the money, and you weren't—so she was willing to pay. Of course, she didn't know you were to get a share. But you needed more than the half you'd get from cutting with De Vall. So you planned to kill him and take the whole thing. Not only that. You came and went rather freely at Beauchamp's. You planted evidence against Raoul, knowing that even if he wasn't convicted you'd make a large fee defending him. And if he was convicted, sent to the chair, his wife would be free — with his money. There was your chance. But you didn't know she was bringing somebody with her. You killed Jamison by mistake, then after Mrs. Beauchamp ran you killed De Vall. He was close by and decided to hide, see who fired. Perhaps he had more blackmail in mind. Mrs. Beauchamp didn't see you back of those bushes."

"And how did you—"

"Most of the facts I knew, but it was this morning that really put me on the right track. I hoped the killer would fall for my bluff and go to the cemetery last night. But you were too smart. I crouched there all night, and I learned one thing. There were grass-stains all over my clothes this morning—and I knew they must have been on the murderer's clothes. I had the laundries checked, found your suit."

"You hope to convict me, on that?"

"No," Murdock said. "You wore a cape so that if seen you'd be mistaken for Beauchamp. And you wore gloves to handle the gun. We found those."

The lawyer was suddenly straight in the chair, eyes blazing. "You found—"

"We found enough," Murdock said. "It doesn't take much with scientific methods."

Arnold Jace pulled a slow breath.

His hand moved almost too rapidly for sight, snapped open the desk drawer and plunged inside. But Murdock was already in the air. His left hand slapped on the revolver as it cleared the drawer, fingers closing around the cylinder.

"It's not twice in twenty-four hours I'm going to be caught that way." Then, with the cuffs on Jace, Murdock asked: "Why cover De Vall's face with leaves?"

The lawyer smiled faintly. "I thought it would puzzle you," he said. "That's why I did it. And now, how in hell did you find that cloak and gloves? After I weighted and dropped them over the River Bridge I thought I was safe."

Murdock said: "Thanks. With that information we should have no trouble dragging them up."

WARE NECK ROAD

By IRVING STEWART

It was a strange duel there in that still, dank swamp — country boy against city gunman, with the boy next victim on the killer's list. Yet, even if the yokel had no blue steel rod, the swamp itself offered a weapon whose power he understood well — one that was worth all the flaming lead at the other's command.

He watched the boy as he scooped the shallow grave.

HEAT beat down from the brassy sky, and was reflected from the unruffled mirror of the bay in shimmering waves of transparent mirage in which distant boats, and the conical piling of a red channel beacon, swam magnified and distorted by the haze.

High overhead, a mere speck of black against the blue of the sky, a buzzard, soaring in mile-wide circles, dropped a little lower. The circle of his flight changed to a long, elliptical curve, the center of which lay over a low, wooded point that extended greenly into the blue of the water.

The boy watched the smooth, effortless flight of the buzzard idly for a mo-

ment, his gaunt, undernourished face lifted to the sky, the pupils of his pale blue eyes contracted to pin-points in the glare. Then he threw over the knife switch of the make-and-break ignition on the one-cylinder engine. The noisy explosions of the exhaust ceased. The engine coughed, sighed and was still. The soft slap and hiss of water against the bows died murmurously to silence as the boat slowed down and finally came to rest on the smooth surface of the bay.

The boy left the tiller and lifted a heavy tub of crab-line to the stern-sheets. He threw overboard a marker-buoy of painted wood attached to the trot-line and lowered a small grapnel-anchor on the end of the line. Then he flipped over the ignition, rocked the heavy engine fly-wheel and threw it back against the compression. The engine fired in a series of loud, barking explosions. The boat gathered way and chugged slowly along under reduced throttle, the trot-line running smoothly out of the tub and sinking out of sight in the clear water. As the six-hundred-foot line neared the end, the boy again cut off the engine, threw over another marker-buoy and small anchor. He glanced then at the sun and at another tub of line.

"Most noon, and plenty hot," he muttered, and wiped his wet face on his shirt sleeve. "Reckon I'll go ashore on Lone Point afore I make another set, bein' it's so close by, an' eat a snack. Mayhap, I kin find me a mite o' shade."

He started his engine and turned the boat's bows toward the strip of green over which the buzzard had hovered. As he neared the land he noticed that the buzzard had been joined by other buzzards which had materialized out of the blue. There were now six or eight of them, soaring and flapping in a narrow circle over the wooded point, and perhaps a hundred yards from the shore.

The boy watched them unconcernedly, too hot and tired to give them much attention. "Reckon there must be somethin' lyin' dead in there," he mused idly, "to draw them 'ere buzzard birds. Don't rightly know what it can be, though. Ain't no farms nor sheep in there—nothin' but swamp an' piney-woods for three miles back to Ware Neck road. Funny they don't settle. Maybe it ain't dead yet, what so it be."

HE CUT the ignition as the boat neared the shore, and, as the bows grated softly on the sandy beach, took a water-jug and lunch-box from under a seat. He tucked them under one arm, lifted an anchor from the bows and stepped overboard in shallow water. The sand burned warmly on his bare, brown feet as he walked up the beach, dropped the anchor and strode on into the pine-woods.

Coarse grass rasped his legs, and then came low bushes and a carpet of pine-needles, as he entered the woods. He sighed with relief as the heat and glare of the beach gave way to the welcome shade of the trees and he pushed on deeper into their somber shadows. He moved aside the low branches of a swamp-myrtle and halted abruptly, his throat suddenly constricted. Almost at his feet lay a man, his sightless eyes staring at the sky, his limbs relaxed and sprawling, a round hole in the center of his forehead, between the eyes, and a dark blotch of dried blood staining the pine-needles beneath his head.

Sheer incredulous amazement held the boy motionless and staring. That object lying there, outlined in a shaft of sunlight through the trees, looking so strangely empty, so like a bundle of discarded clothing, couldn't be real. There was no life to it. Even the eyes were dull, lifeless. Why, it was dead! That was it. It was dead—a dead man. So that was why the buzzards had circled above the woods.

It was becoming more natural now. Buzzards did circle above dead things. The boy glanced upward. They were still circling. One or two had settled on the high branches of the pines and were waiting, peering down as if impatient for the boy to go. The boy was calmer now. It was very simple, after all. He knew for what the buzzards were waiting, and he glanced down again at the dead man.

There was no change. He looked exactly as he had looked before. A medium-sized man, in store clothes—city clothes—the boy decided; a soft, white collar and shirt, blue tie, tan socks and low-cut tan shoes, a checked gray suit and, a little distance away, where it must have fallen off, a gray felt hat that looked new. A city man, beyond all question.

But there was something about him that was not like other city men—cigar salesmen and drummers the boy had seen at the store at the cross-roads. There was about this man a sort of hard veneer. His hair, black and brushed back from his forehead, was slick and shiny; his nails were shiny; his shoes, where they were not plastered with mud, were shiny. Hair, nails, shoes—even the little wrinkles around the eyes—gave that impression of hardness. A surface hardness, that was like a protective coating. Like the shiny hardness of a crab's shell that would let nothing probe through or under it without taking the consequences.

But the bullet had probed through it. For the first time the significance of that fact struck the boy's dazed mind with a new shock. This man—this dead man here, with the round hole in his forehead—hadn't just died. He had been shot, killed. It was murder!

A chill ran through him at the thought. The somber pines took on new depths of darkness, the loneliness of the spot a sudden dread and horror. A longing came over him for the heat and open sunlight of the beach. He must get away, escape from this thing at his feet, this dreadful loneliness that seemed to menace him, close him in. Impetuously, he turned to flee, and almost at his side, a cold voice spoke. "Stand still!"

THE boy halted as if turned to stone, and a man stepped around the myrtle-bush and confronted him. He, like the dead man, was a city man. He also wore a checked suit and had that same appearance of hardness. The gun he held in his hand was hard and shiny, too. Its black muzzle stared at the boy with the same expressionless and sinister threat as the black eyes in the man's hard face.

"Oh!" the man said softly, "A kid, eh? That your boat I heard come in? Why did you land here?"

"I—I reckoned to eat my lunch in the shade," the boy answered tremulously.

"He come ashore to eat his lunch in the shade," the man said tonelessly, as if addressing a third person, present but not visible. "Funny, eh? He comes ashore to eat his lunch in the shade and finds—Jake. A smart guy. Know this neck of woods?"

"Yes, it's called Lone Point."

"That's right. That's what Jake called it, too. When the G-men put on the heat in N'York Jake says to me, 'Bill,' he says, 'Let's get out of here. I know a place down in Virginia where we can lay up for a year, if we want to, and be safe. It's called Lone Point,' he says. 'Nobody ever comes there.' Jake was a smart guy, too. Smart guys don't live long. What's the best way to get out of here? Where's the nearest railroad?"

"They ain't no railroads near here. They's one over to Lee Hall, other side of Yorktown, an' one over to Cape Charles, an' one at West Point that goes to Richmond. They ain't nary railroad in Gloucester County. You could walk back to

Ware Neck Road an' thumb a ride to the co't-house. You can git a bus there to Norfolk or Richmond." He glanced at the man's mud-splattered shoes. "That 'ere how yo' come in here, ain't it?"

The man nodded his head as if in confirmation of some inner thought. "I said he was a smart guy, and he is. He sees the mud on my shoes and he says right away I must have walked in from Ware Neck Road. Well, I did. What of it, hey? What of it?"

The boy trembled at the menace of the man's tone.

"N-nothin'." he stammered. "Only if'n yo' walked in, why can't yo' walk out ag'in?"

The man nodded again, and a mirthless grin cracked his grim mouth.

"Just like that, eh? You walked in, why can't you walk out again? Well, Jake walked in, but he ain't walkin' out again. He knew the way in through them swamps, but I don't. I ain't no Daniel Boone. I'd get lost in them swamps, an' I don't like walkin'; it's too hot. I already had all the walking I want. Use your head, smart guy. If you wanted to get to a railroad, knowin' th' cops were after you, how would you do it? How would you do it, eh? How would you do it?"

The boy thought frowningly for a moment. Then he said slowly: "I—I wouldn't go to no railroad, if the police was after me. I'd git me a boat an' run into Sarah's Creek, that's near Gloucester Point, where the boat to Baltimore comes. She's due there tonight at eight thirty. I'd anchor in Sarah's Creek till dark, then, comes night, I'd run up to Gloucester Point. I'd beach the boat there, walk out on th' dock an' git on th' steamer. She gits into Baltimore tomorrer mornin'. Then, I'd git off th' boat in Baltimore an' hide up."

The man's face contorted into a cold sneer. "So that's the way you'd do it, eh? You'd get on the boat for Baltimore, just like that, an' leave a smart guy behind you with all night to wire Baltimore, so that when you got off the boat in the morning every flat-foot in the city would be there to meet you."

An expression of stupid cupidity came over the boy's face. Somehow, he had to get away from that place alive. Somehow, he had to—

"I'd take yo' up to Sarah's Creek in my boat, and then to Gloucester Point after dark. If yo' paid me. An', if yo' paid me real good, I wouldn't never say nothin' about it. Honest I wouldn't, mister. How much would yo' pay me to do that an' not say nothin' about it?"

THE man considered silently. There was no expression in the cold, black eyes to show what he was thinking about. Then he said slowly: "What kind of a place is this Sarah's Creek?"

"It's a right good anchorage," the boy replied eagerly. "Lots of boats, comin' in an' out. A kind o' summer resort like. No one wouldn't think nothin' o' one more boat comin' in there to anchor; an' come dark, it's a right easy run to Gloucester Point. You'd be safe thataway, mister, an' I wouldn't never tell—not if'n yo' paid me not to. How much would yo' pay me?"

He had to get away from there alive. He had to get away from there alive. He knew the man would never carry out the plan—would never go away and leave him still alive, no matter what he promised. He'd probably shoot him after dark and throw his body overboard, then beach the boat himself and take the steamer to Baltimore. But that, at least, would not be until tonight. He had to get away from there alive. He was gambling that the man, being a city man, would not know the way to Sarah's Creek, or Gloucester Point. He might not know how to

run a motor-boat at all. He'd need him—till dark came, anyway. He wouldn't shoot him down and leave him there, there with that other man, his eyes staring at the sky and the buzzards waiting. . . . A chill shook him, but he fought it down. Fought to make his face look as stupid and avaricious as he could. His heart sank, as the man shook his head and said coldly: "No. Too many chances. Try again, smart guy."

"But there ain't no other way," the boy cried despairingly, "unless yo' walk. I kin guide yo' out to Ware Neck Road. I know these swamps right well. They ain't but three miles o' real bad swamp an' then yo'd be on a good road where yo' could hire some nigger to drive yo' down to Gloucester Point. There's plenty of 'em there would drive yo' down."

A kind of horrible, conciliatory smile crossed the man's face. He stepped back a little and put the gun into a holster under his left arm.

"Listen, kid," he said reassuringly, "I knew you were a smart guy. I said so, didn't I? Well, I'll tell you what I'll do. You want to make a piece of change; a little real money, eh? And you figure it's worth real money to get me out of here and keep your mouth shut afterward. You guide me out of here to that road, like you say, where I can hire some dinge to drive me to that wharf at Gloucester Point, and I'll give you twenty-five bucks. I could bump you off right here and leave you for company for Jake. I could bump you off and take your boat, but I figure it's better this way. It's better to take you along. Only listen, guy. One trick—just one false move and—But you're smart enough to know the rest. Come on. Let's go."

He mustn't show relief. He mustn't let the tingling joy of renewed hope, that was surging through him, show. He held out his hand. "Would you' pay me now?" he asked stupidly.

The man knocked his hand aside with a savage snarl.

"I'll pay you all right. Don't worry about that, but not yet. You get paid when we get in sight of that road and not before. Come on!"

The boy took a step forward and then stopped. "What about him," he asked, pointing to the dead man, "Them buzzards—"

"Jake? Ah, let him lay. Jake won't care. Jake was a smart guy, see? He figured he'd get me in here and bump me off, then he'd have it all. But Jake wasn't smart enough. I knew what he was thinkin' when we got in here and he set down his bag. But he was too slow. I bumped him first. Now, I've got it all. Let him lay. I'll get the bags." He walked swiftly to a near-by bush and pulled two heavy suit-cases from under it. "Carry them, smart guy, an' remember—I'm right behind you."

THE boy looked anxiously up at the sky. There were more buzzards now. Some had settled, but many were wheeling in narrow circles. The air was black with them.

"Mister," he said to the man, "this y'ere Lone Point ain't got no farms or live stock on it, where animals is like'n to die. If it so be as someone sees them buzzards wheeling over here, they might git curious as to what had died, here where they ain't rightly nothin' big enough to die an' gather all them buzzard birds. They might decide to come an' see. More better you would let me bury him. It won't take long in this sand. It's safer so—an' then we'll go."

The man scowled up at the wheeling birds.

"I hadn't thought of that," he said softly. "Well, go ahead and throw some

sand over him if you like, but make it quick. I want to get away from here. Someone may have seen them already."

"I'll git th' scoop out'n my boat, if'n yo'll let me. 'Twill be quicker so."

"We'll both get the scoop out of your boat," the man snarled, "but make it quick. Come on!"

The boy hurried to the shore, took a wooden scoop from the stern locker of the boat and glanced quickly around. The bay lay calm and shimmering in the heat. No boats were near. No sign of life or help. Together, they returned, and the man upended one of the suit-cases and sat on it, watching the boy as he scooped out a shallow grave.

"Mister," the boy panted, when he had it done, his face and lean, work-hardened body wet with sweat, "would yo' put him in. I'm scared to touch him."

The man sneered. "Scared of a stiff—huh! Jake won't hurt you. Not now. Here!" He grasped the dead man by the lapels of his coat and threw him roughly into the shallow grave. "Good-by, Jake," he said sneeringly, "Next time, don't be so smart or else a little smarter. Cover him up!"

The boy filled up the shallow grave and turned away. Then he picked up the heavy suit-cases and started slowly through the woods, the man close behind him, his hand beneath his coat.

For a while, nothing was said. The boy trudged slowly on over the even floor of pine-needles, bright in spots from the long rays of light that slanted down through the tree-tops, dark with somber shadows in others, where the sun did not penetrate. Silence enveloped them. There was no sound of birds in this dim cathedral of the pines, no whisper of cooling breeze. Even their footfalls were muffled in the soft earth, covered with forest mold and the brown carpet of the pine-needles. The boy's tired body rebelled at the heavy load, but he plugged doggedly on. Presently, he turned sharply to the right and plunged into a tangle of swamp-myrtle and second growth. The ground began to ooze water and squelch between his bare, brown toes.

At the change in direction, the man behind him spoke: "Where you going? How far's this Ware Neck Road, anyhow? Why don't you stay on the pine-needles, where the going's good?"

The boy set the heavy suit-cases down, his breath coming in long inhalations as he got his wind.

"Hit's a right smart piece yet, an' the goin's bad from here on. But we got to git across the swamp someplace, an' this 'ere place is the bestest. Don't follow too close behind me so them bushes won't slap yo' in th' face. We'll git to the road after a while."

"We better," growled the man. "Go on!"

The boy picked up the heavy suit-cases and went on, plunging through the heavy growth. And how, he mused, when they got to the road—what then? Something he would have to do, he knew, but what? Once they were in sight of the road, or even of a clearing, his life would be a matter of minutes only. He knew that beyond a question of a doubt. The man behind him would never go away and leave him alive to tell of what he'd seen. But how escape? A thousand plans raced through his brain, only to be rejected and then— Ah! If he could find what he wanted, what he knew existed here in this swampy woodland.

DIMLY, a plan began to form in his mind. He was almost afraid to think of it for fear the man would read his thoughts, and the danger of the plan itself turned him cold and nauseated. One little slip—one unforeseen accident—and he knew that he would die. He set the suit-

cases down again, and the man came up to him and looked keenly into his flushed wet face.

"Listen, kid," he said slowly, "Don't make no mistake about this road. This ain't the way that Jake came, coming in. You know what's going to happen to you if you do. You remember what Jake was like? Well, keep remembering it."

"I made a bargain with yo', ain't I?" the boy protested. "Yo' ain't got nought to fear, if'n yo' pay me like yo' said yo' would. I need that money more than ever you can imagine of. I wants to git me some schoolin', an' my sister, she aims to be a teacher. Last winter, her an' me an' marm, we went cold an' hongry more times than what humans had ought to have to do—ever. That money will help to take care o' we'uns this winter. Yo' won't surely fail to pay me that money when we git to th' road? Yo' surely won't fail to do that, will yo', mister?"

"I'll pay you all right," the man replied grimly. "Now, shut up and go on. I want to think."

Starkly, the boy was aware of what those thoughts must be. He knew, as if it were spread before him in letters of fire, that the man was thinking of how best to kill him without attracting too much attention, and then find someone to drive him to the steamboat dock—and so away. He must not for his life lead the man to that open road; but what to do? He knew he had only his brains and tough, boy's strength to help him. No good to drop the suit-cases and run. The man would shoot him down before he had gone twenty feet. He thought again of his plan and, oddly, his eyes were not upon the ground before him, but in the air, except for such times as it was necessary to keep his feet from stumbling.

Keenly, he watched and waited for what he hoped would save him—the only thing he knew of that could save him—and that yet might fail him, after all.

The heat, here in this close underbrush, was almost beyond bearing. The ground, too, was getting wetter and more slippery. Twice he made detours around what looked like safe, green grasses, but which he knew concealed deep quagmires of thick, black ooze out of which it would be almost impossible to struggle. Once, at a movement in the grass ahead, he stopped so abruptly that the man bumped into him and almost threw him down. He pressed the man back and pointed to a sluggish, green horror, as big around as a man's forearm, that slowly unwound itself from a spring-like coil and melted away into the black water of a slough.

THE man cursed hysterically and clawed at the gun under his coat, but the boy restrained him. "No! Don't shoot. Someone might hear it and be lookin' for us when we find the road. That 'ere were a cotton-mouth moccasin. Does he bite you', yo' turns the color of the woods an' dies. Can't nothin' save yo' then. I've hearn tell that if'n yo' kill one the mate will follow yo' until yo' die."

The man wiped his forehead with a shaking hand.

"Get me out of this swamp, boy. Get me out of it," he said quaveringly. "Fifty dollars, a hundred, if you get me out to that road in ten minutes."

The boy glanced upward at the sun and then ahead of him to where tall pines told of firm ground not far away—possibly the edge of the very road the man sought.

"It ain't so far now," he said coolly. "This way," and he turned away at right angles to the trees ahead and plunged once more into the swamp, with the man following closely on his heels.

He had to get away alive. He had to get away alive. Not to the road—the road

meant death to him. But the swamp meant death to him, too, when the man realized that he wasn't leading him to the road—that he purposely was keeping him from the road. The man would shoot him, then, and take his chances of finding his own way out of the swamp. It was incomprehensible to the boy that the man needed anyone to guide him out at all. To him there were a hundred signs to point him on the way. The position of the sun, the size and shape of the trees, the sense of direction inherent in every boy who roams the woods. But the city man could see none of these clear guides. He was as blind to their meaning as the boy would have been blind to the meaning of the city streets.

But he wasn't blind to the boy. He watched him constantly now, with dawning suspicion in his hard, cold eyes, his hand never far from the gun beneath his arm. The boy felt those eyes behind him, felt them probing into the back of his head. He hardly dared think of his plan and then—then he saw what he had been seeking, and his heart pounded with new hope . . . and new fear.

SOMETHING whizzed like a bullet through the air and settled near a heap of old leaves and trash at the foot of a dead tree. Watching keenly, the boy saw another bullet-swift form whiz down to the same spot. He angled cautiously nearer to be sure, and there came a swift something that darted at his eyes. Instantly he dropped both suit-cases full in the man's path.

"Look out!" he yelled, and ran frantically ahead. As he ran he kicked that heap of trash at the foot of the dead tree with his bare foot. He dashed on for perhaps thirty yards, his flesh crawling all down his back in expectation of the bullet that did not come to strike him down. He threw himself face downward behind a thick myrtle-bush, rolling ten feet to another before he dared lift his head and peer cautiously back.

The man had stumbled over the suit-cases, as the boy had hoped he would, and, before he could straighten up and shoot, something struck him on the cheek and drove a lance of fire into his flesh. Another something struck one eye, and, although the lid closed down, the sting drove home in the lid. In a second more, he was the center of a whirling cloud of the deadly, little yellow swamp-hornets that fight to the death and ask no quarter.

Had he been a country boy he would have run, taken to his heels and lost no time about it. Instead, he stood his ground and tried to fight them off. His body was strong with the odor of his sweat and the still more maddening acid odor of the stings. The hornets swarmed over him mercilessly, stabbing into his cheeks, his eyes, his ears, his neck, his lips and his hands. They got up his sleeves, up his trouser legs, down his back. He ran at last blindly, crashing into bushes, falling down, up again, maddened with pain, blinded, dizzy, cursing, until at length he fell headlong over a log and rolled in agony on the ground. Then the hornets went back victoriously to their ruined nest, and left him—all but those in his clothing, that kept on stinging until he crushed them one by one.

The boy, watching that mad flight through the screen of the myrtle-bushes, felt his heart grow lighter with every sting that the man received. He breathed deeply once, as if a load too heavy for his strength had been removed at last. Death, that had ridden his young shoulders like a black dog, was gone.

He moved slowly and cautiously from his position, so as not to draw the attention of the still angry hornets; and when he judged it safe, skirted widely around the nest in the direction of the man's

flight. Fifty yards ahead of him, he heard the man swearing and calling, and he angled away from the direction in which he knew the road lay.

"This way," he answered. "Come this way."

"Where are you—curse you to everlasting hell! You kicked that bee's-nest up into my face, and I'll kill you for it if it's the last thing I ever do!"

"This way," the boy answered, slipping ahead deeper into the swamp. "Come this way."

He heard the man crashing clumsily toward him through the swamp, cursing, moaning, raving, his voice one moment hysterical with fear, the next cold and merciless with threats of death. And the boy slipped silently ahead of him, leading him deep and ever deeper into the swamp and away from the road.

"This way," he called. "Come this way."

After a time, he no longer heard the man following him and he ceased to call and turned away toward his boat. Suddenly, he stopped. "Them suit-cases," he muttered wearily, "I'd best get them." He turned back toward the hornet's-nest. There, at the expense of a few stings, and the aid of a long branch, he snaked the suit-cases away from the nest and began the weary trudge to the beach, his boat and home.

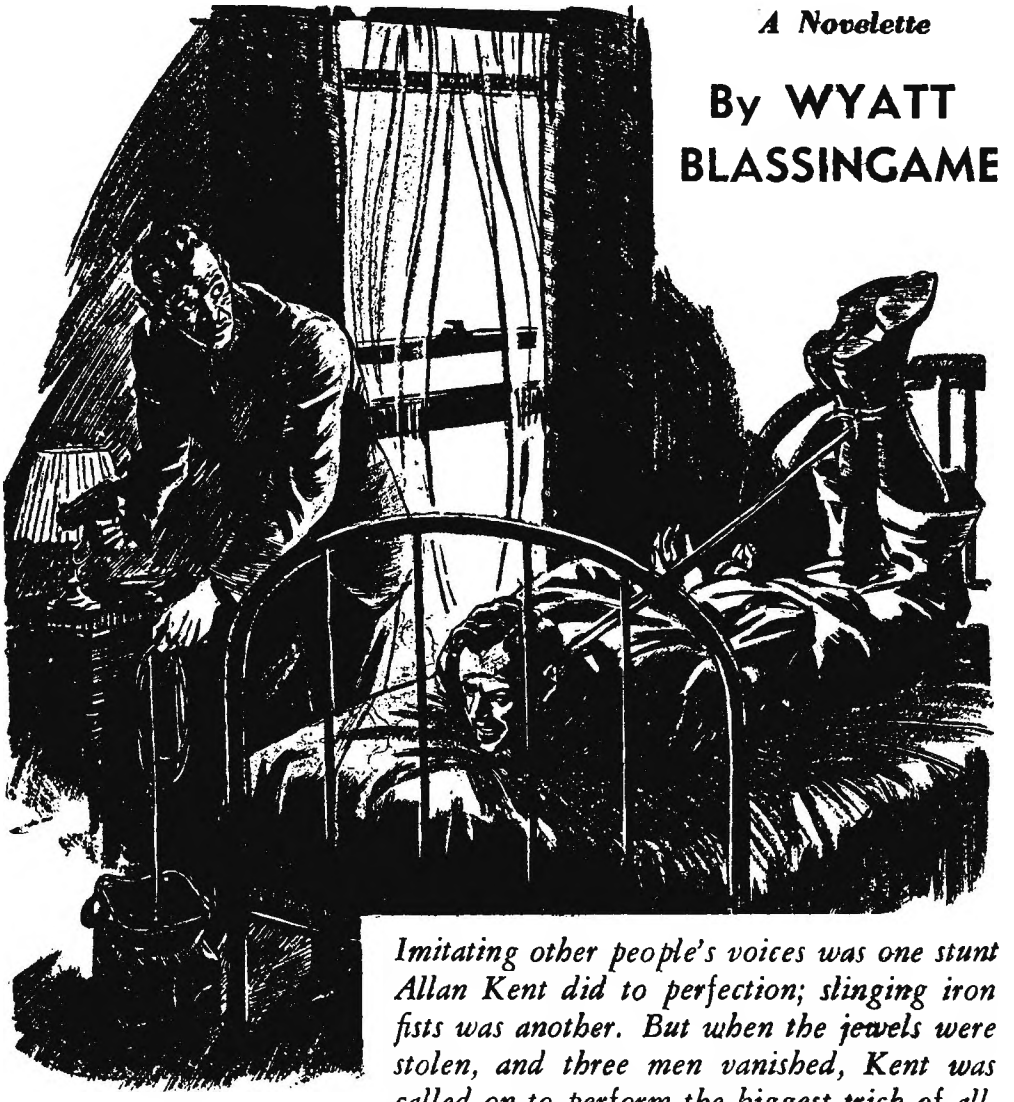
In the swamp, a thing with closed eyes and horribly swollen and distorted face, a thing that might once have been a man, struggled knee-deep in one of those green and seemingly innocent quagmires that the boy had skirted so carefully. After a little it collapsed face downward in the mud and there remained.

Presently, high overhead, a mere speck of black against the blue of the sky, a buzzard dropped like a stone and began to circle over the swamp, not half a mile from Ware Neck Road.

DEATH ON THE WIRE

A Novelette

By WYATT BLASSINGAME



The rope jerked tight around his throat, choking him.

Imitating other people's voices was one stunt Allan Kent did to perfection; slinging iron fists was another. But when the jewels were stolen, and three men vanished, Kent was called on to perform the biggest trick of all. For then he had to beat the death which came over the wire.

CHAPTER ONE

Find the Body

ROBERT ARCHCRAFT said: "There were two of the letters. They came on consecutive days about three weeks ago, unsigned. They threatened to make me and my assistants die and vanish because we had robbed the earth of her treasures. I thought they were just crank letters, although no one was supposed to know of the jewels we had just received—that is, no one except a few persons at the Rosenfeld Foundation to whom the stones belong. We were do-

ing the cutting and classifying for them."

"And the jewels now?" Allan Kent's face was like a mask behind the scar that ran from the left side of his forehead to the far corner of his right eye and down past his mouth to his chin.

"Here in my apartment. In two days they'll be ready for the Foundation. But they are secure here. There's a wall-safe in my bedroom. The doors have bolts on the inside as well as locks."

"And so?" Kent asked.

The thin, dark face of the jeweler tightened. He said: "About a week after the letters, Duncan Blood, my assistant, got a message that his father was ill and wanted him to come home at once. He left. This morning Bill Foster, my other assistant, failed to show up. I thought nothing particularly about it. But a half hour ago my phone rang. It was Foster. He was evidently terrified. I could scarcely hear him whispering, 'It's got me! I don't know where I am, but—' And then he screamed, a horrible sound. I heard a shot. I tried to trace the call, but couldn't. I telephoned the police and then I called Duncan Blood's home by long distance. His father had not sent for him and has seen nothing of him."

The jeweler leaned back in his chair and lit a cigarette with steady fingers. For twenty seconds the two men sat looking across the desk-top steadily at each other.

Each knew the other's reputation. Robert Archcraft had at one time been a South American commercial explorer. He was a small, dark, tense man with a cruel mouth. There were rumors about the methods he had used in his early days. Several years ago, however, he had accepted the position of jewelry expert for the Rosenfeld Foundation, cutting and classifying the stones purchased by the Foundation.

Allan Kent's reputation was even more widely known. He had been the intercollegiate middleweight champion for two years and had left school to go on the Broadway stage. Aided by a splendid voice he had been on his way to stardom when, accidentally witnessing a bank robbery, he had made the mistake of interfering. A bullet had grazed his forehead from the corner of his right eye to his hair on the left side. Slugged while down, the pistol sight had ripped a hideous mark from eye to mouth and from mouth to chin. His career on the stage was over. He could have gone into radio or even the ring. Instead, he had joined the New York Police Department and become in a few years a privileged person, allowed to work almost on his own. From the time of the bank robbery, he was a man of two personalities—congenial, pleasant looking when he smiled, despite the hideous scar. In dealing with criminals, he was a scar-faced, implacable monster.

NOW, he said: "All right, Mr. Archcraft, you seem to be the next in line to disappear, and probably the stones with you. I'll try to prevent that and also to find your assistants. Do you have pictures of them?"

"No. Blood was a small, sandy-haired man with droopy eyes that were almost closed. Foster was dark, medium height, rather handsome. You may be able to get photographs from their families."

Kent picked up the phone, called headquarters and began to give orders. Soon the vast machinery of the New York Police Department would be moving smoothly, swiftly. By morning, he would have photographs and a fairly accurate life history of Blood, Foster, Archcraft, and everyone with the Rosenfeld Foundation who knew about the stones.

It was at Kent's insistance that he stayed in the Archcraft apartment that night. "Hell," Archcraft said, "I've looked

after myself in South American jungles. I can take care of myself now."

"Maybe," Kent said. He looked over the apartment. It was on the sixth floor, and the building across the street was a full story lower. From its roof it was impossible to see anything except the windows and the ceiling of Archcraft's place. He made sure the bolts were fastened on the doors and kept the curtains down until Archcraft was in bed. "Hell, you mother your clients, don't you?" the explorer said. "Want to sing me a lullaby?"

Kent switched out the lights. "This fellow has evidently done away with two men. I'd advise you to take no chances or he may sing you a lullaby—permanently." He went into the next bedroom, leaving the adjoining door open, undressed and slid under the covers.

His prediction came true within three minutes after his light went out.

He was lying on his side, his eyes closed when he heard Archcraft grunt, say, "What the hell?" In the same instant there came the long, furious mutter of bullets striking, some against wood with a splintering sound, some thudding into bed covers, and some with the sickening, unmistakable noise of lead on flesh. There was no report of a gun, only the steady ripping of bullets into wood and cloth and flesh.

Allan Kent moved with the smooth speed of machinery. His left hand flipped back the covers, his right hand whipped the police positive from the holster hanging at the head of the bed, and at the same instant he was sitting up, flipping his legs to the right. He hit the floor, running. Through the open door, he saw a blaze of white light centered on the bed in the next room—and he saw the body of Robert Archcraft half out of the covers, twisted grotesquely. Then he was through the door, still running. The white shaft of light, he saw, came through the window.

The light flicked to one side and caught Kent in its blaze. The detective was moving too fast to stop. He spun on his left foot and hurled himself at the corner of wall and floor. At the same moment, bullets began to rip into the wall above him.

Kent sucked a sharp breath, went wriggling toward the window. He was five feet from it when the light went out suddenly and blackness seemed to strike the room. Kent came to his feet leaped toward the window still keeping to one side. He hesitated, face almost against the sill. One second, two, three. He was about to move.

Again bullets ripped into the room. If he had not waited, they would have caught him full in the chest.

The firing stopped, and instantly Kent was peering out into darkness. Something moved on the black roof across the way, a flicker and was gone. Kent cursed softly, whirled and with three barefooted strides was across the room. He snapped back the bolt, jerked the door open and went through, closing it behind him. The spring-lock snapped in place. He jabbed the elevator button twice and, without waiting, began to sprint down the stairs. At the third floor he met the elevator going up, banged on the door to stop it.

THE Negro operator's face went gray as the scarred man, wearing pajamas, barefooted, and carrying a revolver, leaped at him. "Going down," Kent said. "And fast."

The Negro was still trying to stutter, "Yes, sir," when the elevator reached the first floor, and Kent jerked open the door. On the sidewalk, he whistled a blast that could be heard for blocks, and before he had crossed the street a cop was running from the corner.

Kent yelled at him: "Allan Kent, homicide. Don't let anybody out of this place.

Send a cop to watch Apartment Six K across the street." Then he plunged into the building. There was no elevator, and Kent went up the stairs two at a time. He saw nobody.

A brief survey of the roof made plain what had happened. On top of a ventilator, a square box had been placed. A man, standing on that box, could shine a torchlight full into Robert Archcraft's bedroom. It would take damn good shooting from that position, but there were men who could do it.

Police whistles were still sounding in the street below. As he went down the stairs people began to pop out of apartments to gaze wildly at him. There were two cops in the downstairs hall and three other persons.

The policeman Kent had spoken to on the sidewalk said: "I sent Orson across the street, sir. And this guy here," he pointed to a small man in a brown suit, "says he saw a guy run out the back hall a couple of minutes before we came in. He says the guy was carrying a fiddle-case."

Kent spun to look at the fellow. In the light the detective's whole face seemed twisted, set with a terrible fixity of purpose. He snapped: "Did you see him plainly? What did he look like?"

The little man licked at his lips frightened. "I came outa my door, as this fellow come runnin' by. He was about my size. He had a little, puffed-up mouth and oily hair."

Two squad-cars had arrived, and the hall began to fill with policemen. Kent said: "You two, tour around looking for such a fellow. He may have the violin-case now and he may not. You two," his thumb jerked at another couple, "search the house. The killer worked with a typewriter, and it had a silencer on it. Johnson, you take this man down to headquarters and see if he can identify the person he saw." He stopped for a moment, his jaw set hard, his eyes narrow in thought. "Show him the picture of Wolf Leavitt, among others. Edwards, send the homicide men to Six K across the street." He turned and padded barefooted out of the house.

The elevator was at the first floor, and the whites of the operator's eyes were still abnormally large. "Wha—what's happenin'?" he asked. "A policeman come runnin' in here right after you went high-tailin' out. Dere's a mob 'cross de street an—"

"And you run me on up to the sixth floor."

When the lift stopped, Kent got out and shut the elevator door behind him, almost catching the Negro's nose. Then he turned toward Archcraft's apartment—and stopped.

He had shut the apartment door behind him, and it had automatically locked. But he would not need a key to get in. The door stood darkly open.

For a moment he stood there, poised on the balls of his feet. That door shouldn't be open unless Archcraft had opened it. Archcraft, he felt sure, was dead. Anyway, if he had opened the door for Orson, there should be a light inside. Instead, there was darkness, and no sound.

Kent went toward the door swiftly, silently, on bare feet. At the entrance he paused for a second, listening. Then with one movement he went over the sill, snapped on the light with his left hand and crouched.

IN THE instant that light filled the room, Kent's eyes took in the whole thing. The door of the wall-safe hung open; there was no need to investigate to know that the jewels were gone. On the bed, hidden by the covers, a figure lay curled. There was something strange about its bulk.

The gun ready, Kent stepped to the bed, caught the covers with his left hand and pulled. The figure rolled over on its back. It was Orson, the policeman.

Bloodstains were on the bed, but Robert Archcraft was gone.

Kent went through the apartment with the speed and silence of a scar-faced ghost. Except for the swinging door at the empty safe, the bullets which had come through the open window, and the figure of the policeman on the bed, the place was exactly as it had been. Archcraft had completely vanished. Yet, the elevator boy said he brought no one except the policeman to this floor, had taken no one down.

With a wet cloth, Kent slapped Orson back to consciousness. The cop sat up, rubbing a large knot on the back of his head. His eyes still dull, he looked vacantly at Kent, muttered: "Hello, Lieutenant. What's happened around here?"

"You got tired and went to sleep," Kent said. He slapped him with the wet cloth again, vigorously.

Orson's eyes began to focus. "Oh, yeah. I came up here. The door was open, so I came in. I was fumbling around for the light, when I heard somebody. I said, 'Hello, there,' and then something conked me."

"You probably hit yourself," Kent said, "but not hard enough." His mouth was pulled thin, the right corner twisted satanically by the scar. His eyes, normally so black that they glittered, were dulled over by anger. His thin nostrils flared with each breath. He had let a man be killed under his eyes, then run out of the room and let the place be robbed. Whoever had entered had used a key. There had been no time for picking locks. And whoever it was, that person had known the combination to the safe. Both the assistants who had disappeared had had keys, both had known the combination to the safe. Whoever had captured them could have forced the combination from them. The key. . . . He cursed softly. As long as the bolts were fastened the key didn't matter, but when he ran out of the place it left the door unbolted. He had expected Orson to take care of that and Orson had got himself bopped on the head and switched for the corpse.

"Three men vanished," Kent thought. "We don't even have a body as proof of murder. But those bodies are somewhere. The killer's got to get rid of them—and he's got to get rid of the jewels."

The homicide men came piling in, a minute later. Kent explained what had happened, dressing as he talked. "If somebody would knock Orson on the head a little harder," he said, "we could use him for a corpus delicti. As it stands, we don't have one." He turned on his heel and went out.

CHAPTER TWO

Bloody Tracks

HARRY KELLEY was big, red-faced, red-haired—and the department's best liar. He looked up as Kent came into the room and said: "Well, and the Lieutenant himself is annoyed tonight. That's what comes of all the criminals leaving town and no work to be done."

Kent glared at him for a moment, his twisted face hideous in the light. Then, suddenly, he grinned, and a person watching him would have forgotten the scar altogether. His black eyes glittered. "Faith," he said, "and it's this dead stillness on the city that gets me. A law against Irish liars there should be." His voice was so much like that of Kelley that it was impossible, by the mere sound, to tell them apart.

Johnson and the little brown-suited fellow came in. Kent turned to them. "Well, did you identify the man with the violin-case?"

"Yeah," Johnson said. "It was a cinch I showed him Wolf Leavitt's picture, and he says, 'That's him.' "

Kent looked at the little man. "Are you certain? You'll swear to it?"

The fellow squirmed. "Well, I just saw him that one time. It wasn't but a second. But—well—yeah, I'd swear to it."

Kent said: "O.K. You can go on home now, but don't be changing your address. We might need you."

"How'd you guess it was Wolf Leavitt?" Johnson asked. "I can think of a dozen gunmen with puffed-up mouths and oily hair. There's Moroni and—"

"But it's Leavitt gets the publicity," Kent said. "If all you knew was what you read in the papers you wouldn't be so damn smart."

"He can't read the papers," Kelley explained, his red face utterly serious, "because he can't read."

"Go to hell," Johnson said. "You're gonna get caught in a place sometime where you have to tell the truth, and you're going to choke to death." He took the little brown-suited man by the arm and went out.

Kent asked: "Where does Leavitt hang out—or is he hiding?"

"No. This is the week he's being honest. A place on First Avenue we'll find him, unless he's blown tonight."

"And maybe you best come with me," Kent said, once more mimicking Kelley's voice. "I may be needing someone to lie about why I don't catch him."

"But with me you'll get him," Kelley said. "It was the mayor told me yesterday, 'Kelley—' "

"Lie on," Kent said, "but do it on the move." He led the way out of the room.

IT was a tenement on a street of tenements, dank places rising black above a narrow street. A wind came off the river, rustling old papers and litter along the pavement, bringing the odor of rotting vegetables and filth. Kelley stopped the car a full block away, and they walked toward the house. There was no traffic along the street, and arc lights were dim and far apart.

Kent found the superintendent, without noise, and showed him Leavitt's picture. "We know he's here," Kent said. "Which room?"

The man's sleepy eyes opened wide with fear. He looked at the picture, then back to Kent's scarred face. His lips worked.

"Which room?" Kent asked again. His face was set and ugly. A person who had seen him on Centre Street, talking and laughing with Kelley, would not have recognized him now.

"Dot guy iss here." The superintendent's voice had a thick German accent. "Room Fife Twenty. But I don't know he iss a crook. I—"

Kent said: "Stay with this fellow, Harry. We don't want him announcing us." He turned and went along the first floor hall until he found Room 120, then came back. "The rooms have the same numbers all the way up?" he asked.

"Yas, but I—"

"Don't tell us," Kelly said, "let us guess."

Kent went out the front door, down to the corner and up the alley which ran back of the tenement. From here he located the room that would be 520. A light showed in the window. There was no fire-escape, no possible entrance from this side. The scar pulled Kent's mouth into a grim, savage smile. Up there was the man who had murdered Robert Archcraft. Not the jewel thief, perhaps, but the trail led on. He went back to where Kelley waited with the German.

"No fire-escape," he said. Then to the superintendent: "Come on up the first

four flights with us. You might have a phone down here."

"Nein! Nein! I—"

"Shut up," Kelley said, "and get started."

The stairs were in gray gloom. At each landing a small, dirty bulb glowed sickishly. The halls were in darkness. "And a swell place it is," Kelley said. His right hand was on his gun butt, and he was grinning.

They were at the fourth floor when it happened.

The cry was husky and barely audible. It was not a cry of pain, but of animal terror. It was a sound Kent had heard many times before and recognized—the peculiar fear of the professional killer, facing his own death. "No! Please!" the voice said. "No one recognized me. They can't—" There came the muffled sputter of a silenced machine gun. The voice broke into a thin shriek, and died.

Kent plunged up the last flight of steps with Kelley close behind. His gun was in his right hand, hard against his hip. The scar showed white and awful down his face. Moving at a dead run he hit the door of 520. It quivered but held.

A voice said: "Who's there?"

Kelley banged a massive shoulder against the door. "The law!" he shouted. "And it's the door I'll take down unless you unlock it."

"I'm unlocking it," the voice said. The sputter of the gun was lost in the sound of bullets ripping into wood. Splinters flew outward. A line of holes sawed its way along the door. Kent went backward and over, striking the floor hard.

"Damn you!" The roar of Kelley's gun filled the dim hallway. He kept firing into the door, swaying. "Damn you!" he said again. The gun slid from his hand. His knees buckled and he fell.

For one long second Kent stared at his friend. The scar grew whiter across his face, his mouth twisted. Beyond the door there was only silence now, but up and down the hall persons were shouting, doors opening.

It wasn't likely that Apartment 520 opened into another room with a different entrance to the hall, but Kent was taking no chances. The man beyond the door was, in all probability, trapped. He could hold him there as long as he wanted—unless there was another door.

Kent got on his knees, still protected by the wall. He shot once, and a hole burst under the brass plate of the doorknob. The man inside didn't fire. Kent could picture him waiting, the big silenced muzzle of the tommy-gun centered on the door. Kent rose to his feet, went backward two steps. His eyes shifted to the body of his friend. "Here's for you, Kelley." He charged.

His left shoulder hit the door at the height of the lock. It snapped and he plunged through, completely off his feet and rolling in the air. He landed on his left side, elbow bracing him, gun ready.

Wolf Leavitt, his chest full of holes, lay sprawled near the left wall. Otherwise, the room was empty.

One glimpse, while he still lay on the floor, showed Kent there were no doors except the one he had come through. A window on the far side of the room was open and under it lay a tommy-gun. With one jump Kent reached the window and leaned out. There was a sheer five-story drop to the dark alley. The nearest window was ten feet away. A human fly could not have reached it.

Persons were crowding into the doorway when Kent turned. "Get out of here! Get out of the hall! Back to your rooms!" Those who saw his face backed away, the questions they had been about to ask hushed in their mouths. Those behind heard the snap of his voice and ceased to push.

He beat them away from the sprawled body of Kelley. The superintendent was gaping at him and Kent said: "You, get down and telephone headquarters. Get an ambulance and tell 'em to hurry. Get the homicide men. And don't let anybody out of this house." Still without touching the body of his friend, he went back into the room.

HE had known from the first glance that Wolf Leavitt was dead. The man's chest was black with blood, his shirt almost blown away by the dozen slugs which had struck him. Kent turned to the walls and went over them carefully. He circled the room twice before he was content there was no secret door. The window-sill was scarred and battered, but among the other scratches he found a new dent on the inside. He looked at it, the muscles of his jaw bulging. Then he turned and went out of the room.

A woman could have been no more gentle with Kelley. There were two wounds high in the man's left shoulder and one through the ribs on the same side. Carefully, Kent cut away the coat and shirt. Taking the handkerchief from his breast pocket he ripped it into three pieces and plugged the wounds.

Two minutes later the homicide men and a doctor arrived. Standing back in the gloom, face set, Kent waited until the doctor had gone to work on Kelley. Then he went into the room with the detectives and explained what had happened. His description was brief, detailed, exact. Within one minute he was back in the hallway, watching the doctor. Not until the man straightened did Kent speak. His tone was too flat, so totally without emotion that only a man fighting for calmness could have voiced it.

"Well?" he said. His eyes blinked and he was glad of the semidarkness.

"The two in the shoulder are high, one getting the collar-bone. I can't tell about the one in the ribs. It may have missed the lung, may have touched it." The doctor gestured with both hands, palms up.

Kent watched the men unroll their stretcher and slide Kelley onto it. There was a lump in his throat that threatened to choke him. As the men started toward the stair, Kent touched the doctor's arm. "Get him the best surgeon in New York, the best nurse. He's got to get well."

The doctor hesitated, staring into the twisted mask of Kent's face. Then, because he was a doctor and understood, he put his hand on Kent's shoulder. "We'll do everything possible," he said, turned away.

The trail had led onward, all right—a trail of blood that ended abruptly. Wolf Leavitt, the one possible clue, had been wiped out. Harry Kelley had been shot down. A cop killer was loose.

CHAPTER THREE

Gun-Whipped

BY noon the next day Kent had all the reports he had asked for with pictures of Duncan Blood and Bill Foster, the two assistants of Archcraft who had disappeared. He studied them carefully. Blood, the first to vanish, was a man of about five feet seven and weighed one hundred and twenty-five pounds. His body looked lean, athletic, but his face was almost phlegmatic with droopy eyes and wide nostrils. He was a high-school graduate, had done newspaper work, farming and clerked in a drug store, among other things, while drifting about the country. Clerking in a jewelry store, he had picked up the information which helped him get a job as Archcraft's assistant two years before. Since then he had been with the jewelry expert.

Bill Foster, the man whose telephone

conversation with Archcraft had been cut short by a pistol shot, was taller than Blood and moderately stocky. His hair was straight and dark, his face square-cut but rather handsome. He had finished at the state university only two years before, after majoring in geology, and had come straight to work with Archcraft. The men at the Foundation who knew of the jewels were all elderly, highly respectable persons and easily located at any time.

A check on unidentified bodies failed to turn up either of Archcraft's assistants. No trace had been found of the expert himself, but it had been learned that of the funds allotted him and his assistants for buying, cutting, and classifying the jewels, some five thousand dollars was missing.

Kent was still studying the reports when Pete Murphy entered, said: "Well, I've found what you were looking for, Lieutenant."

"And?" said Kent.

"We checked every hangout for criminals that's ever been mentioned in the papers, especially those named during the last few weeks. Two of them said a guy had phoned, asking where he could find Wolf Leavitt. Pinky Este told him, and then the guy asked about Nick Schurman. He claimed he was a friend of both guys but had been out of the city and didn't know where they were. Neither of them is on the lam, so Pinky didn't mind telling."

The muscles began to tighten along Kent's jaw. "What have we got on Schurman?"

"I thought you'd want to know," Murphy said. "He specializes in jewels, has been sent up twice. We tried to tie the Van der Vant case on him, but he slipped."

"Everybody who reads the papers knows that," Kent snapped. "Is there anything we can hang on him now?"

Murphy shook his head. "Nope, nothing that would really frighten him."

"I'll try," Kent said. He pulled the gun out of his shoulder holster, flipped the roller and put it back. For the third time that day, he called the hospital and asked about Kelley. As he listened his face changed, the scar seemed to fade away as he smiled.

"How is he?" Murphy asked when Kent hung up.

"Faith, and he's figured up a swell lie to tell St. Peter and pass the gates—but he'd rather not be using it." It was Harry Kelley's voice he used.

Murphy said solemnly: "The world's biggest liar."

Kent stood up, still smiling, a handsome black-haired man with shining eyes. Then his right hand patted his coat above the police positive. The light went out of his eyes, leaving them as black and lusterless as charcoal. The scar came white and hellish across his face. He lifted the phone again and put through several calls. Then, with the half stiff-kneed walk of a prize-fighter, he left the office.

The address was far uptown on the East Side in a section of dingy apartment houses. Kent left his car at the curb and went in. He found Schurman's apartment number from the mail-boxes, pushed another bell until the lock on the door clicked. Schurman certainly was not hiding if he had his name on the mail-box, but Kent preferred to come on him unannounced.

THE apartment was on the third floor. Outside the door Kent stood flat-footed, listening. He could hear someone moving around inside, but there was no sound of voices. Kent palmed the knob with his left hand, twisted it and stepped over the sill. The door closed behind him.

It was a two-room apartment, and Nick

Schurman stood in the bedroom doorway. Amazement showed in his wide-open, dark eyes and in his thick lips parted as if by an exclamation that never got past them. He was a fraction over six feet, a full inch and a half taller than Kent and thicker around the waist. His nose was too large, with a decided hook. He was wearing a brown suit and a brown hat.

Kent said: "Hello, Schurman. Going out?"

"I'd thought about it." His eyes had narrowed now, his lips twisted in a slight sneer.

"Let's talk a while," Kent said. With his left hand he reached behind him, locked the door, then put the key in his pocket.

Schurman said: "I'm afraid we haven't been introduced."

"We'll skip your half of it. I'm Allan Kent, police headquarters."

The big man bowed mockingly. "I had imagined so. I've seen your picture—and your face is not one easily mistaken." The insult in his voice was plain.

There was no change in Kent's expression, but the muscles rose slightly along his jaw. "Then you won't need to see my identification papers." His voice became suddenly brittle, hard. The scar seemed to whiten and grow wider. "What the hell do you know about this Archcraft case?"

Schurman stiffened, relaxed an instant later. "What the hell should I know about it? I was here last night—all night."

"You can prove that?"

"Surely. We had a little party here. Two other men and three girls. They came over around eight and didn't leave until after three. That's before the robbery and after Leavitt was killed."

"So." Kent's shoulders bent slightly forward, his weight resting on the balls of his feet. "You know the time and you know the Leavitt killing was tied up with the robbery. How?"

Schurman gestured contemptuously. "I read the papers. They gave the time and they said you were at both places."

"Clever of you," Kent said. "And when did you get money to start throwing parties? A month ago you were pretty flat."

"Adversity comes to us all." He waved a big hand. "It was only a penny-ante game, purely for the pleasure."

"And the alibi!" Kent snapped. He took two stiff-kneed steps forward. His voice dropped almost to a whisper. "Listen, the same man who killed Wolf Leavitt put three holes in Harry Kelley. Kelley may pull through and he may not, but I'm going to get that man. Listen carefully, Nick Schurman. I'm going to get that man on a murder rap. And I know he's been in touch with you."

For an instant a shadow flicked in the crook's eyes, then was gone. He rubbed a finger along the great hooked nose, looked solemn. "And who is the gentleman?" he asked.

"That's for you to tell me."

"I'm afraid my psychic powers fail me. I can be of no assistance, much as I'd like to help."

Kent swung hard, palm open. The blow cracked like a pistol shot. It staggered Schurman, leaving a white print on his face that turned slowly red. "You'll talk," he said crisply, "or I'll beat you until you can't."

For an instant the big man paused, crouching in upon himself. And then he charged. His right fist swung from below the hip. Kent's head bobbed. A straight left caught Schurman over the heart but failed to stop his bull-like rush. His shoulder hurled Kent backward into a table that crashed, spilling telephone, books, and a couple of glasses. Kent rolled and was on his feet.

Schurman came at him again, wide open, swinging from the ankles. Kent's left on the hooked nose failed to slow him but it raised his head. The detective's right landed with the full weight of his body matched against Schurman's rush. The big man went down hard.

"All right," Kent said. His breathing was remarkably easy. "Are you going to talk?"

SCHURMAN got to his knees. For a moment he rested there, wiping away the trickle of blood from his nose. His black eyes flickered from Kent to a small desk near the right wall. "I'll talk," he said, and dove for the desk.

He got the drawer open and his right hand inside. There was the dark glint of an automatic. Then Kent hit him. He went down on his left side, arms sprawled in front, still holding the gun. Kent took one step and kicked at Schurman's wrist. There was the snap of bone, and the gun skidded out across the floor. Kent picked it up and put it in his coat pocket.

He turned then, pulling his own gun. Schurman was on his knees, gripping his right wrist with his left hand. His thick lips were working.

"All right," Kent said. "You're under arrest—Sullivan Law charge. Are you going to talk?"

"I don't know anything."

Kent struck him with the gun-barrel, the sight leaving a thin, red scar across his cheek from which blood began to seep. "Well?" Kent asked. His elbow and wrist bent as he swung the gun back for another blow.

"But I—I don't know what—" Schurman's eyes were wild now. He cringed away from the gun, still on his knees. Saliva was beginning to drool over his chin, mingling with the blood from his nose and cheek.

"Listen," Kent said. "I hate you, see? I hate you and every other crook in this city. It'll give me pleasure to stand here and beat you into a pulp. But the man I want most is the one who shot Harry Kelley. And I'm going to get him. You didn't shoot Kelley but you know who did."

"I don't know," Schurman whined. "I told you I—"

Kent swung the gun again. Schurman went over backward in an effort to keep out of the way. "Wait a minute," he whimpered. "Wait! I'll tell you all I know." He got to his feet, his eyes shifting craftily around the room. There was no witness here. What he said to this cop wouldn't matter because he could deny it later and there'd be no proof. But anything was better than having this scar-faced madman kill him.

"Talk," Kent said flatly.

Schurman wiped at the blood on his face. "I honestly don't know much. About three days ago a man telephoned me. He didn't tell me who he was, just asked if I wanted to make some money. I needed it and I said yes. He asked me a lot of questions about what kind of gloves best prevented fingerprints and how long would it take a good fence to get money for jewels and if they couldn't be hurried by warning them ahead of time. He didn't seem to know very much. So then he told me to get in touch with a fence and tell him he'd have some valuable stones within a few days and want the money quick. He said he'd telephone me after he got the jewels and for me to have everything ready. Yesterday, I got a hundred dollars through the mail and a note to be sure I had an alibi for last night ready That's all I know."

The utterly black and lusterless eyes of the detective regarded him for a moment. "All right. Pick up your hat and let's go."

"Go? Where?"

"Centre Street."

"But I've told you everything I know. There's nothing you can convict me of."

"Got a license for that gun? And I want the boys to have a record of your story." He leaned and picked up the phone, which had been knocked over in the fight, and connected it. When he straightened he said: "Besides, I want to be here alone when your call comes."

"But I don't know when he's going to call."

"O.K. I can wait." He unlocked the door, followed Schurman into the hall.

PETE MURPHY was reading a copy of *French Frolics,* when Kent and Schurman entered. He sighed regretfully and closed the magazine. Then he glanced up and suddenly began to grin so widely that the flanges of his nose twitched. "My! My! Was there an accident? You ought to get a nose-guard, Mr. Schurman. If they make 'em big enough."

Kent said: "Your jests are lacking in wit, Mr. Murphy." His voice was so much like that of Schurman that the jewel thief gulped and turned to look at him.

Murphy said: "Don't worry, Mr. Schurman. He can do that with anybody's voice."

"Get us a recorder," Kent said. "Schurman has a story he wants put on the books."

But a moment later, when Murphy had returned with a secretary and Captain Farlan, Schurman was his old self, confident, swaggering. "I told you nothing," he said to Kent. "I don't know anything about this case. You're imagining things when you say I told you I was connected."

Kent's mouth twisted upward in a smile, but the scar stayed white and ugly. "Look at this and see if you can remember." He took some papers from the secretary and handed them to Schurman.

"A brief of the case?" Schurman asked sarcastically. He glanced at the papers. Suddenly his face drained white. "Why—why—how— This is—"

"A stenographic copy of our conversation," Kent said. "Before I went to your place I had the telephone company plug in on your number but not ring. When you hit me I managed to knock over your telephone. That left headquarters listening in on our little chat." He turned to Captain Farlan, said: "There are probably some few details I didn't have time to beat out of him. If you'll get them, I'll go on back to his place. I want to be there when this cop shooter telephones. And send some men down to pick up Motsie Baymin's afternoon clients. This cop killer is likely to be one of them."

His gaze shifted to Schurman. "There's at least one murder tied to this case, maybe three or four. Think that over." He turned and went out.

Back at Schurman's, he went through the place carefully. In the bedroom he found a small bag, fully packed with a light topcoat thrown over it. He remembered the first glimpse of Schurman standing in the doorway with his hat on. If the man was waiting for a telephone call, why the hat and bag? Did he plan to leave immediately afterward? Why?

There could be several reasons, Kent thought. There might be a catch in the story Schurman had told. If so, they'd get the straight of it at headquarters. It might be that Schurman had figured he would need to skip quickly after the telephone call.

Kent was still thinking about the matter when the phone rang. The sound of the bell jangled on Kent's nerves, jerked his

muscles tight. The whole case would turn on this call. Nobody had seen the murderer. Nobody knew his identity. Kent thought of Harry Kelley in the hospital, fighting for life, of Archcraft murdered while under Kent's protection, of the newspapers playing up that point and the effect it would have on other criminals. It seemed to take him a long time to cross the room and lift the telephone. The scar was a furious white across his face, but his hand was steady. His voice was that of Nick Schurman when he said, "Hello."

THEN the voice at the other end came. "That may work on some people, but not on me. I've got Schurman here with me." For one instant Kent was frozen; then he recognized Captain Farlan's voice.

Farlan didn't wait for an answer. He spoke in clipped, rapid sentences. "Listen, we got the rest of the story from him. He was supposed to call this fellow, not be called. He was supposed to telephone him at Montgomery Two-one-six-eight-eight at exactly three twenty. Its three seventeen now, and he had to call from Philadelphia. That's where he was going when you came in. He barely had time to make it. If he's a minute late in the call, this guy's going to skip. I'm trying to locate that number now, but there's some trouble. We may be late."

"Hurry it. And get those men at Motsie Baymin's. I'll try to get this crook on the wire and hold him or send him to Baymin's."

"But the call had to be made from Philadelphia. He won't talk if—" Kent had hung up.

He whipped the dial for long distance, asked for the Philadelphia *News*. "Snap it up," he said. "Seconds count."

By three nineteen he had Don Mason, the theatrical critic whom he had known four years previously, on the wire. "You've got a P B X switchboard at that paper, haven't you?"

"I think that's what they call it. One of these where you plug in and out. Sure. And Toots, the operator, is—"

"Plug me through it," Kent cut in. "Quick! I want the long-distance operator in Philly. I'll explain later."

"Sure." A moment later he heard the operator saying, "Long distance," and at exactly three twenty he could hear her voice saying, "Philadelphia calling Montgomery Two-one-six-eight-eight."

A man answered. "Hello! Hello!" His voice was nervous, rapid. "That you, Schurman?"

"Right on the minute," Kent said. His voice, even the gesture he made with his hand, was that of the jewel thief. "I've arranged everything you asked for. Beautifully, beautifully. And I have also—"

The man cut him off. "All right. Who did you see about the jewels?"

"Motsie Baymin down on Perry Street. In the profession of fencing he is—" Kent hoped to keep the other man on the telephone until headquarters could trace his number and send men for him. That would be safer than trying to pick him up at Motsie Baymin's, but one way or the other they'd get him.

The other man interrupted. "I haven't got time to talk all afternoon. I've accidentally found another person to handle the jewels, so I won't need Baymin. But I wanted to make sure you were out of the city so there'd be no possible double-cross. You can come on back to New York now. I'll send you money for your work in the next day or two."

"Oh, yes, but—" Kent stopped and cursed. The other man had hung up. He was leaving wherever he was, and he wasn't going to Baymin's. They'd missed him again, unless— Kent whirled the dial, got Captain Farlan on the phone again.

"Trace that number?" he asked.

"Just got it. Five Eighty-nine East One Hundred Twenty-sixth Street. But

there's not a car close by, damn it. All of them pulled out of that section by a robbery fifteen minutes ago. He'll be gone before we get there."

Kent snapped: "Maybe not. That's only two blocks from where I am." Even as he dropped the phone, he was leaping for the door.

He went down the stairs like a falling comet, sitting sideways on the rail and shooting down, leaping off at the landing, hitting the next rail and down again. He burst out of the front door, leaped across the crowded sidewalk and began to sprint up the middle of the street. He ran like a track man, knees coming high, stride terrific, head up. The scar was like white lightning across his face. His nostrils dilated with his breathing.

This was the last chance, and he knew it. If the man got away before he reached the house, there'd be no way to trace him. They could try to check on every fence in the city, but that was almost impossible. He'd counted on running him to earth at Motsie Baymin's, and now— He had seconds in which to work and he didn't even know the name of the man he sought or how he looked.

CHAPTER FOUR

Two Floors to Death

THE house was an ancient, four-story building, one step above a tenement, and many steps below a decent place to live. Kent ripped through its front door, still sprinting and yet curiously silent. He beat on the first door on the left, marked *Super*. It opened and a lean, scrawny Negro looked out at him. "Who you lookin' for?" he asked. His eyes got big as he looked at Kent's face. He started to back away and shut the door.

Kent stepped over the sill, caught the Negro by the shoulder. "How many telephones in this house?" he snapped.

The Negro gulped twice and tried to take his eyes from Kent's face but kept looking like a hypnotized bird. "Two," he said at last.

"Whose? Where?" Kent's voice had the crack of a whip.

"Miz Mottole got one in Apartment Twenty-four, and Mistuh Duncan got one in Apartment Forty-two."

"How long has this Mr. Duncan been here?"

"He ain't been here long. He come 'bout two weeks ago, but he been sick ever since. His face got all cut up in a accident."

Kent whirled and went dashing up the stairs. One, two—three flights. As he raced toward the fourth floor his hand went underneath his coat for his gun.

"Hold it, Mr. Kent! Hold it!"

The man was at the head of the stair, an automatic in his right hand, a small valise in his left. The automatic was rock steady and pointed at Kent's chest. "Get your hands over your head, Mr. Kent. Now, come on up the steps slowly. Along the hall to your left. In Apartment Forty-two. I'm right behind you, so don't try anything." The door closed, there was the sound of the key turning.

Kent heeled, hands still over his head, and looked at the man. He had never seen him before. A small, wiry, dark-haired man with wide-open eyes. There were tiny new scars above the eyes and on the cheeks.

"All right," the man said. "So you found me, Mr. Kent. I recognize you from your picture, you know."

Kent bowed slightly, but didn't speak. The scar seemed to cover his whole face now. His mouth was no more than a straight wound. He was still breathing heavily from his run, and his nostrils moved with each breath. His eyes were

black and totally without light, so that peering into them was like gazing into some underground cavern. He was looking into death as he faced that automatic, and he knew it. This was the man who had shot Harry Kelley, who had murdered Wolf Leavitt in cold blood and who had probably murdered two other men. He would not hesitate to put Allan Kent out of the way. Kent measured the distance between them, and waited. It was impossible to do anything now.

Abruptly the man stiffened. "If you are here," he said, "there'll be other cops around, or coming soon. Won't there?"

The mask of Kent's face didn't change. "No."

The gunman moved swiftly to where a telephone sat on a small table. "I'm going to dial headquarters," he said. "You're going to talk, say exactly what I tell you. One word off and I'll shoot. You know that. One more murder won't hurt me."

Kent nodded. The man meant to kill him sooner or later, anyway. He wouldn't do it while Kent was of assistance to him, but he wouldn't hesitate to shoot the instant things went wrong.

"Say this, exactly. Say: 'This is Allan Kent. Don't send any men to One Hundred-Twenty-sixth Street. If you've got any coming, take them away. Send them to Motsie Baymin's on Perry Street. Get them on the radio. Quick!' You'll say that and then hang up." He twisted the dial with his left hand; his right still held the gun centered on Kent. "All right!" He snapped the word, stepped away from the phone. Kent went to it, picked it up.

"Don't forget!" the man whispered. "The first word wrong—your guts."

A voice at the other end of the wire answered, and Kent began it. "This is Allan Kent." He repeated the message, word for word. When he had finished he hung up without waiting for an answer.

"Now!" the man said, as Kent finished and turned to him. His finger began to tighten on the automatic trigger. The muzzle pointed straight for Kent's heart. The finger squeezed tighter.

Kent said: "That thing has no silencer on it. They'll hear that shot all through the building." His expression had not changed, but sweat stood high on his forehead.

THE man hesitated, his finger still tight against the trigger. Then he smiled. "You're right. And since you've telephoned, this house is probably the safest place for the next fifteen minutes. Lay down." With his left hand he gestured toward the bed. The gun in his right never wavered.

Kent hesitated. His eyes were black slits as he wondered how many bullets would strike him before he could reach the man. Then he turned, went to the bed and stretched himself on it. To attack would be certain death. If his plan worked . . . if. . . .

"On your face and put your hands and feet through the bars on the bed," the man said. "I don't want you moving swiftly when I get close to you."

Kent did as he was told. "You are very thorough, Mr. Duncan Blood. A thorough plan from first to last. I've seen pictures of you, but I'd scarcely recognize you with your face lifted and your hair dyed. You got that done during the two weeks after you first disappeared, I imagine."

"Right," Blood said. He was coming toward Kent from the rear and side. Kent wondered desperately about his plan. The gun wrapped in a sheet to silence it, and pushed against him? Would there be any chance to move? The bars of the bed were close together. He'd have trouble getting his hands and feet out. Split seconds would count.

He began to move his right hand cautiously, talking all the time. "Your whole plan was clever. Writing the notes, kidnaping yourself and Bill Foster and Archcraft to throw us off the track. But it was too clever. I knew that whoever was doing it was not a professional criminal and so would need help in getting a gunman and a fence. Naturally, you picked newspaper characters to ask for, knowing of no others, and you asked about them in places that get mentioned in the papers. That's the way I was able to trace you." His hand was almost free now, his head twisted so that through squint eyes he could watch Duncan Blood.

Blood said: "Clever of you, Mr. Kent." He lunged forward and struck.

Kent tried to roll. His hand was free, but both feet stuck. He heard distinctly the thud of the gun striking the back of his head, felt the jar of it, but no pain. And then a weird paralysis flowed out of his brain through his limbs. He could not move, could not think clearly though he was aware of what happened.

He saw Blood open the valise and take out a long, extremely light rope on one end of which was fastened an iron hook. From the other end of it, Blood cut about five feet. While his hands and ankles were being tied, Kent could feel the rope in the same way that a man under local anesthetic can feel the knife parting his flesh. But he could not move.

Then, almost suddenly, full consciousness returned to him. There was no gag slipped into his mouth, but it wasn't necessary. Another arrangement had halted all else but a choking breath, his ankles pulled up almost to the middle of his back, and the rope looped from them around his throat. As long as he could hold his legs in that terribly strained position, he could breathe. But once his muscles weakened, once he began to struggle, he would choke himself to death. Perhaps, a full minute he could hold it, and then—

He was not noticing Blood now. He was fighting to keep his legs high up his back. Already the muscles in them screamed in agony and began to twitch uncontrollably. As his ankles lowered, the rope jerked tight around his throat, choking him.

And then the door swung open and closed again. Duncan Blood was in the room, cursing softly. "They are already here, coming up the stairs, searching floor by floor. But I won't be here when they get this high—and you won't be able to tell them where I went!" He had the long, light rope and was tying one end to the valise. The iron hook he fastened under the inside of the windowsill, then lowered the bag.

"One flip from the bottom, and the hook comes loose and falls to me," he said. "But you'll stay here. Your face is already getting purple." He swung himself over the windowsill and out of sight.

And then Allan Kent did something characteristic of him and his hatred for criminals. He was choking; lips rolled back, tongue stuck out. His eyes bulged and his lungs threatened to burst. He knew that even if he kept steady he stood small chance of living until the cops reached this room. And he knew that any movement hastened his death.

He moved.

By rolling, he reached the edge of the bed. The movement dug the rope deep into his throat, so that the flesh around it stood out white and gruesome. His eyes were popping, and black spots seemed to whirl before him. Fire seared his throat. The natural reflex of a man, who is choking, is to struggle with every muscle, but somehow Kent fought his nerves and made an effort to keep his legs doubled behind him even as he rolled. Then he plunged off the bed and hit the floor.

It seemed to Allan Kent that ages lapsed as he rolled toward the window. He wanted to quit rolling and struggle against the ropes. Black and red, the room whirled insanely.

And then he reached the window. How he got his head as high as the sill he didn't know, but somehow he did it. Once, twice he butted the iron hook. The third time it whipped loose. From outside came an explosive, terrified scream that ended sharply.

Allan Kent rolled over on the floor in darkness.

"WELL," Captain Farlan said, "we found him right under the window with the jewels in a bag. He must have fallen about two stories to look at him. He lived until we got him to the hospital, but that's all."

"Did he say what had become of Bill Foster and Archcraft?" Kent rubbed lean fingers over the welt that marked his throat.

"Yes. He used the gangster method of putting the bodies in cement and dumping them in the Sound. Lowered Archcraft down on his rope. But what worried him most was why we went to that house after you called, told us to keep away."

"You explained to him?"

"I told him that Harry Kelley would be all right in a week or two, but that at the moment he wasn't able to be telephoning lies about being named Allan Kent; so when I heard Kelley's voice saying, 'Keep away,' I knew that somebody else was lying. I not only radioed the men to hurry, I went myself."

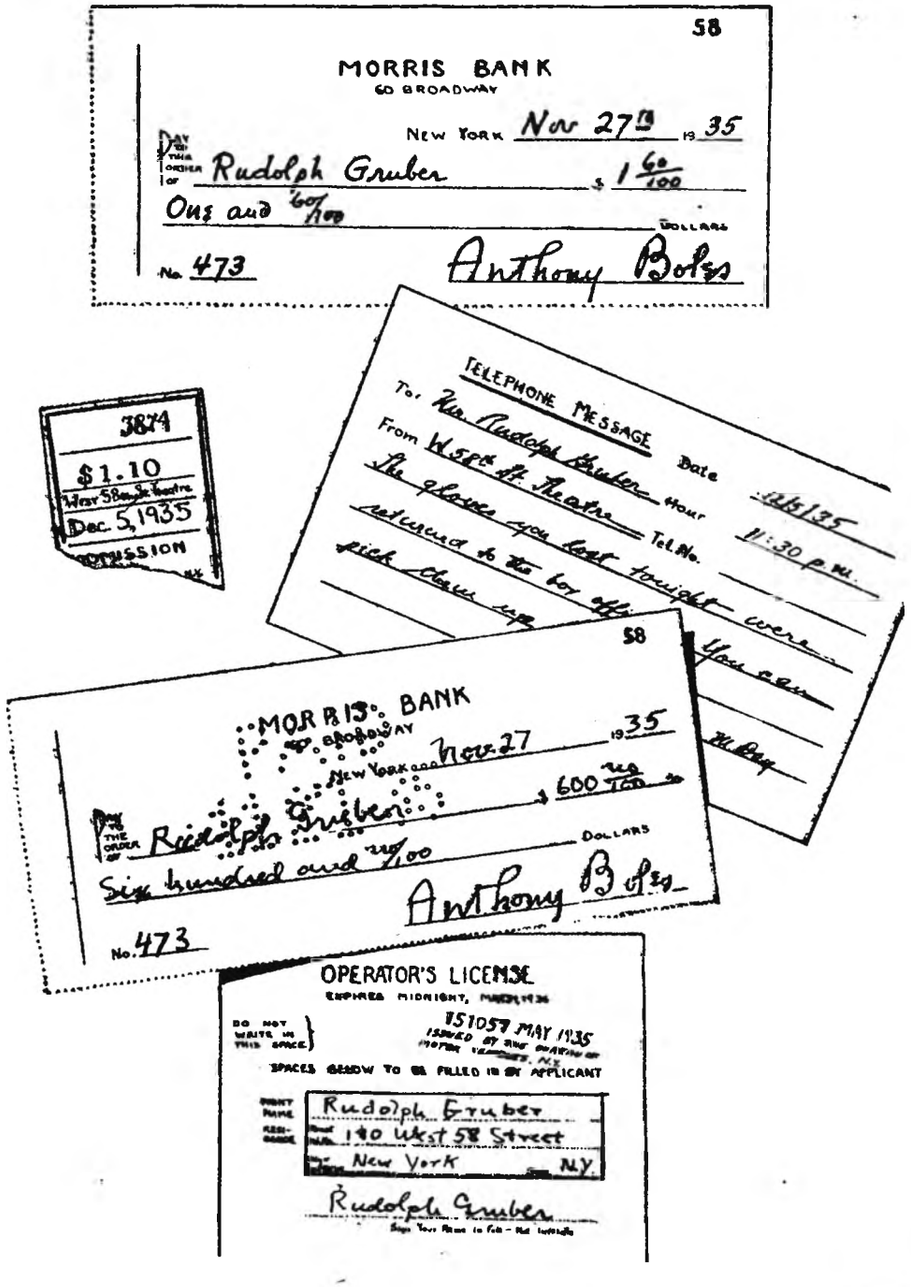
Kent said: "Thanks. It was damn hard to talk like Kelley without phrasing the words as that Irishman would do. I was afraid you'd miss it."

He grinned, his black eyes glittering and the scar seeming to fade from his face. "There's some use in having the world's biggest liar on the force after all."

DETECTOGRAMS

A PUZZLE FEATURE by LAWRENCE TREAT

1. CHECK AND DOUBLE CHECK



Directions on page 126

DIRECTIONS

Read the statement first. Next study the documents. Then answer the questions by checking the box next to the correct answer. The first question has been done and explained for you to show the type of reason you should have in mind, although you need not write it out.

DON'T GUESS. There is a definite, logical clue to every answer.

STATEMENT

Anthony Boles was murdered between 10 and 11 on the night of December 5th. The next morning Rudolph Gruber was accused of the crime. He said: "I never even heard of Boles. I went to the theater last night. I came straight home and stayed there."

The objects shown below were found in the suit that Gruber wore the night of the 5th. From an examination of them, can you either clear Gruber or implicate him in the killing?

1. Could Gruber prove his alibi by the person who sat next to him at theater.

   ☐ Yes ☒ No because he had standing room (see general admission stub, with no seat number).

2. Did Gruber go to theater on the night of the 5th? ☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Probably ☐ Possibly

3. At what time is theater usually out? ☐ About 10 ☐ About 11 ☐ About 12

4. At what time did Gruber reach home? ☐ Before 11:30 ☐ After 11:30

5. Did Gruber go straight home from theater and stay there? ☐ Yes ☐ No

6. Had Gruber ever heard of Boles? ☐ Yes ☐ No

7. Do the two check signatures resemble each other? ☐ Yes ☐ No

8. The capital *A* of the signature of the $1.60 check was made with 2 strokes (a curved one and a straight one for the crossbar). How many strokes were used in the capital *A* of the $600 check?

☐ 1 ☐ 2
☐ 3 ☐ 4

9. The *y* of the signature of the $1.60 check was made with a straight vigorous downstroke. Is the same true of the *y* in the $600 check?

☐ Yes ☐ No

10. In the signature of the $1.60 check, note the space between the *t* and *h* and again between the *B* and *o*. Are the corresponding spaces in the signature of the $600 check of similar size?

☐ Yes ☐ No, they are smaller
☐ No, they are larger

11. Do you conclude that either check was forged? ☐ No ☐ Yes, the $1.60 check ☐ Yes, the $600 check

12. Compare the signature on the operator's license with the name of the payee in the $600 check. Apart from the check signature, do you think Gruber wrote the check or any part of it? ☐ Yes ☐ No

13. On which checks had the bank made payment?

☐ Both ☐ Neither

☐ The $1.60 check ☐ The $600 check

14. Is it usual for one man to have possession of another's canceled check?

☐ Yes ☐ No

15. Do you think it was vitally important to Gruber to obtain possession of either of the checks? ☐ Yes ☐ No

16. Taking into account motive, oppor-

(Continued on page 128)

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tunity and the truth of Gruber's alibi, do you think he killed Boles? ☐ Yes ☐ No

There will be another DETECTOGRAM by Lawrence Treat in the SEPTEMBER issue of ACE-HIGH DETECTIVE MAGAZINE plus the answer to this puzzle—Editor

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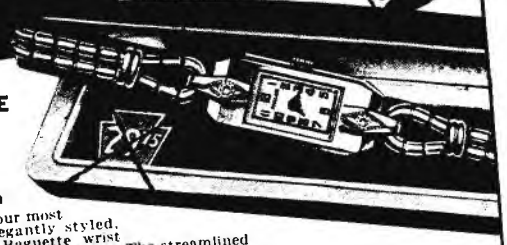

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