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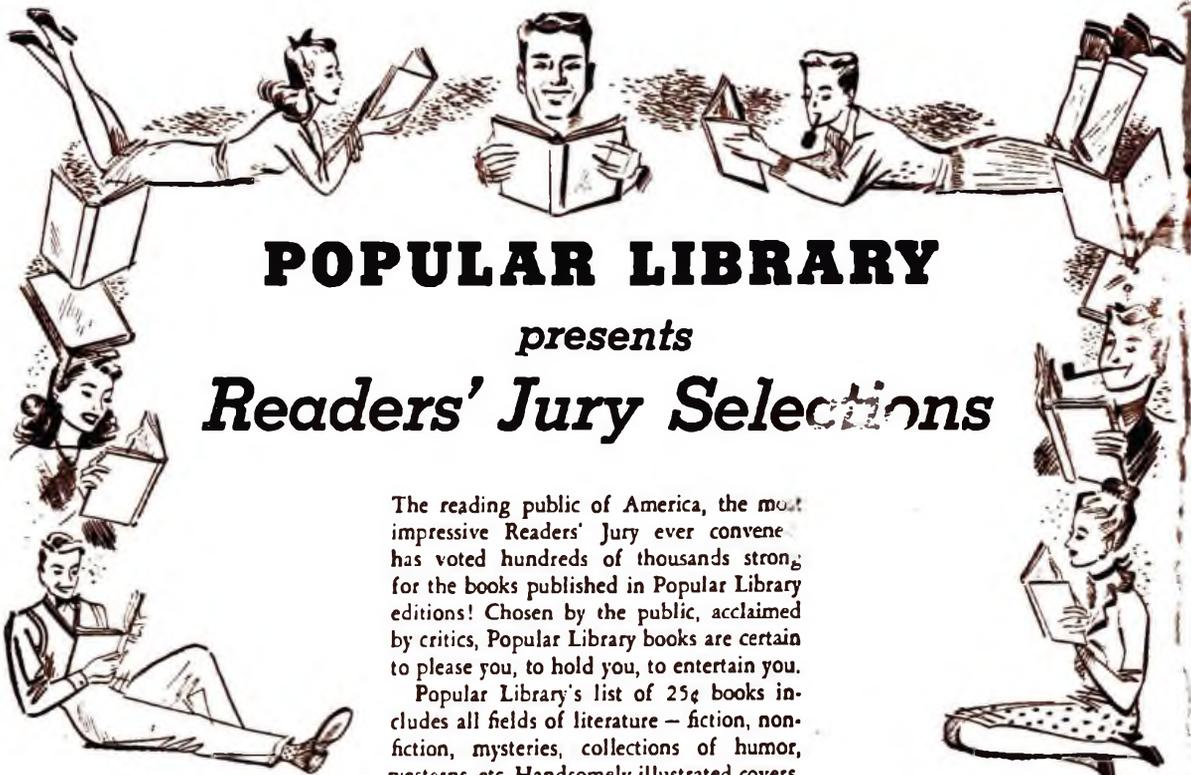
THE *SURVIVOR* MURDERS

*A Complete Tony Quinn
Mystery Novel*
By G. WAYMAN
JONES

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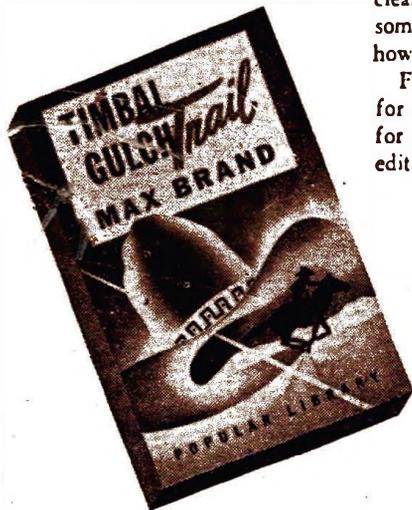
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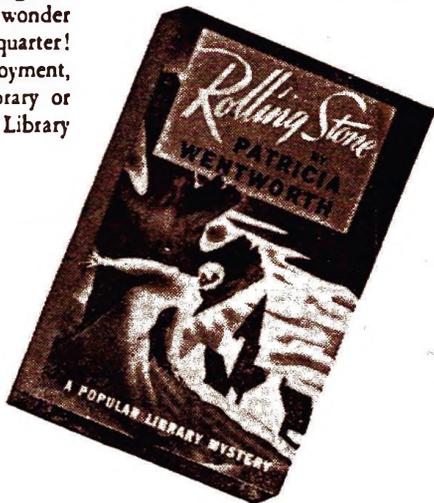
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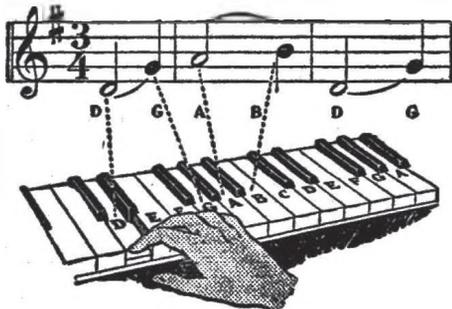
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BLACK BOOK DETECTIVE

Vol. 21, No. 2 A THRILLING PUBLICATION Summer Issue

A Black Bat Mystery Novel



THE SURVIVOR MURDERS

Featuring Tony Quinn,
Nemesis of Crime

By G. WAYMAN JONES

The Black Bat smashes into the heart of a gripping mystery when a sinister gang dedicated to death plans its most horrifying series of lethal crimes! Follow Tony Quinn on a perilous trail as he puts his weight on the side of the law when innocent lives hang in the balance. 9

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August, 1946, Issue

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OFF THE RECORD

A DEPARTMENT WHERE READERS
AND THE EDITOR MEET

TONY QUINN faces one of the most difficult problems in his entire career in *WITH MALICE AFORETHOUGHT*, the engrossing Black Bat novel by G. Wayman Jones in the next issue of *BLACK BOOK DETECTIVE*. As Special District Attorney, Quinn finds himself accused of sending an innocent man to the electric chair—and it is up to the Black Bat to prove that the convicted man was actually guilty!

Silk Kirby, Quinn's highly privileged aide, voices his opinion at the start of the whole affair.

"It wasn't much of a case, sir," Silk says. "Just a stupid man who couldn't wait for his uncle to die a natural death so he'd come into his money. Now what's he got? Not even his own life."

"You're right." Quinn nodded. "It wasn't much of a case. John Todd needed money quickly. His only source was his uncle's estate, but his uncle refused to co-operate by dying, so Todd hurried it along. Rather a blood-thirsty method he used, too. Wilbur Stone, his uncle, was accustomed to taking long walks about dawn. Todd knew it and arranged to be driving home at that time. He deliberately drove over to the wrong side of the road and even chased the poor old man with his car until he struck him down. Then Todd backed up, got out and made certain his uncle was dead."

Wilbur Stone's death was supposed to look like the work of a hit-and-run driver, but unfortunately for Todd there had been witnesses who saw what happened. Tony Quinn had been the prosecuting attorney and he had won the case that sent the nephew to the chair.

The Mysterious Visitor

On the night that Todd was to be executed Quinn and Silk Kirby were alone in the

house of the supposedly blind man when a visitor arrived. He was a tall, rugged-looking man with pink cheeks and a tanned face. It was twisted in lines of horror and his eyes were sick looking.

"I'm blind," Quinn said. "I don't recognize your footsteps so you must be a stranger—"

"My name is Raymond Alvin." The man sat down on the edge of a chair and twisted his hat nervously. "I—I'm too late. I knew that the instant I discovered the news. John Todd has been—executed, hasn't he?"

"Unless there was a reprieve I knew nothing about. Why are you interested, Mr. Alvin?"

"Because Todd is—was—innocent. I killed that old man. It was an accident."

A Baffling Trail

Quinn's expression never altered although inwardly he writhed in horror. It was things like this that composed any district attorney's nightmare.

"Suppose you tell me all about it, Mr. Alvin," Quinn said quietly.

"The morning it happened—at dawn—I was driving home. I—I was under the weather a bit, I guess. No, why not be honest. I was plastered. I know I was driving like a maniac. I never saw the old man at all, but I felt my car hit something."

Tony Quinn questioned his visitor and Alvin told a story that seemed all too convincing to the Black Bat. But when Quinn called Silk Kirby and told him to phone the police Alvin's attitude changed. He drew a gun and ordered Silk not to touch the phone. Then the visitor hastily departed.

It's Quinn's job to prove that he was not mistaken in John Todd's guilt—and finding that proof leads him on a baffling trail of mystery and murder. A trail that calls for

(Continued on page 95)



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I-I-T'S NOT HERE

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I'LL GO, SON

MY SON GAMBLING WITH THUGS! THIS COULD MAKE A NASTY SCANDAL

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TO THE NEW STAR OF "LITTLE AUGIE, GANGSTER"

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Butch's blow landed hard, the fake doctor slumped to the floor just as the door popped open and the weird figure of the Black Bat came bounding into the room (CHAP. X)

THE SURVIVOR MURDERS

By G. WAYMAN JONES

The Black Bat, Nemesis of Crime, smashes into the heart of a gripping mystery when a sinister gang dedicated to death plans its most horrifying series of lethal crimes!

CHAPTER I

Crash!

IT WAS hill country, heavily forested and having only fairly open spaces at rare intervals. A fine, steady rain was being whipped down by a strong breeze, bordering on a gale. At high altitudes, ice formed on airplane wings. This was one of the causes of the crash.

The brush, bordering a remote farm,

moved as if an animal was crawling through it on the prowl. It was barely daylight, but this Midwestern farm was awake. Lights burned in the windows. Lights were necessary on this murky, dismal morning.

The movement in the brush was accompanied by groans and pert feminine expletives. A girl, about twenty-five, dressed in a uniform that was torn and ragged, managed to stand erect by the expedient of balancing on her left leg. The right ankle was

A COMPLETE TONY QUINN MYSTERY NOVEL

When Innocent Lives Hang in The Balance, Tony

massive and swollen out of shape. Her left arm hung limply, too, and looked as if it might be broken.

She called, but her voice was too exhausted to carry across the farming acreage. She tried hopping along, but that made her arm throb and her ankle send waves of pain throughout her body. She let herself fall and started crawling again. It was more like pushing herself along.

Closer to the farm, she tried calling out again. This time a man appeared on the back porch, peered around in the early morning gloom, shrugged and went back inside.

The girl got to her one sound leg with painful slowness. She waved her good arm and this time she found the strength to yell. The man reappeared, stood there as if stunned and then spoke to someone in the house. He started running across the field.

His arm went about her immediately and she leaned weakly against him. Another man and a woman came hurrying to the spot.

Some moments later, she was inside the farmhouse and trying to transfer hot coffee from cup to her mouth. Her good hand shook so badly drinking was an impossible task and the kindly woman of the house gently took the cup and fed the coffee to her with an enormous spoon.

The girl smiled her thanks. Then her eyes grew troubled. She started talking, almost too fast to be understood. But only almost, for one of the men seized his hat and a leather coat and started for the door.

"I'm Kay Saville, hostess on an Eastern bound plane," the girl said. "It crashed about three or four hours ago. Due north of here. Right at the edge of a grove of oaks. People are dead, dying. Please get help."

"We've no phone here, Miss, but I'll take the station wagon and drive to town," the man at the door said. "Ain't far. I'll get ambulances from the hospital at Lakewood. Won't be more'n an hour."

THE girl shook her head.

"Ambulances can't reach the spot. Get horses and men. Have the ambulances wait here until the people are brought out. It was horrible. Happened so quickly we never even had time to be frightened."

"How many are dead?" the farmer asked.

"I—don't know. I was the only one who could go for help and it took me hours. I think, of the twelve passengers, five or six

were killed instantly. Some of the others were so badly hurt I'm sure they'll die."

"Now, now." The woman brought a blanket and wrapped it around the girl. "There'll be help comin' fast. Them that live will be taken care of." She flashed a glance at her husband. "And you get busy, Sam. Right away. You can blaze a trail the others can follow. You know where that oak grove is."

Sam did and he was eager to be of help. He picked up a hatchet on his way past the barn. Using this, he was able to create a perfect trail which men and horses could follow easily.

Yet, despite all their haste and eagerness, it was mid-afternoon before the rescue party reached the scene. There were two doctors among the group.

It wasn't a pleasant sight. The once graceful and sleek plane was a crumpled and shattered mass of wreckage. By some miracle no fire had started, although the odor of high test gasoline was almost sickening.

The plane crew was dead, caught in the terrific impact as the ship had nosed into the earth. There were other figures inside the cabin. Nothing could be done for them. Survivors seemed pitifully few and they were in bad shape.

One man died as a doctor knelt beside him. He was an ex-attorney named Edward Fennelley, according to the papers found in his pockets. Among them was a parole card from Alcatraz indicating he'd been released from prison only the day before.

The others were in various stages of injury. Lester Hill, a florist and about thirty, couldn't move his legs and had no feeling in them at all, which made one of the doctors shake his head sadly.

A middle-aged woman, dressed in a brown tweed suit and still wearing a rather severe hat, was plainly in great pain, but she was able to talk lucidly.

"We don't know what happened," she said. "Suddenly the plane dived. There was an awful crash. I'm Grace MacDonald. A school principal in San Diego. I was going East—to New York—to see my sister."

A portly man of fifty, nursed a broken leg which had been crudely set with branches. His face was grey and grim. Beside him lay two bodies, covered by coats. The portly man explained.

"I'm Vincent Gardet. I run a factory in

Quinn Puts His Weight on The Side of The Law!

New Jersey. Live in New York. My leg is broken. Outside of that I'm all right. Lucky, if you ask me."

One of the doctors lifted the coats and glanced at the bodies.

"Luckier than they, Mr. Gardet. Young, handsome couple these two."

Gardet nodded.

"Mr. and Mrs. Mark Rolfe. Judith, I think the girl's name was. They were married four or five days ago. This was—their honeymoon. You know of the Rolfe family.

jured were loaded aboard the horses with the exception of Lester Hill, the florist. They fashioned a litter for him.

There was one other man whose identity no one seemed to know. A sleek looking man of about thirty-five. He was good-looking, expensively dressed, and had a neatly tailored mustache. His skull was fractured. A search of his possessions revealed that he was apparently a traveling salesman for a jewelry house. His name seemed to be Harold Hewitt.



THE BLACK BAT

Wealthy, socially important. New York people. In fact everybody on this plane either lived in New York or had relatives there. Say, take a look at Sonny Coyle, will you? He's over there and pretty badly hurt, I'm afraid."

The doctor frowned.

"Coyle, the millionaire sportsman? The man who races his horses on various tracks all around the country?"

"That's him, Doc. He's very bad. We were afraid he might die. Mr. and Mrs. Rolfe lasted about an hour after the stewardess went to try and get help. Brave kid, that girl. She ought to get a medal or something."

The doctors did the best they could. In-

AND so, five persons were brought out of the wilderness. A guard was posted at the plane. There wasn't much to guard. The dead could not be harmed. Passengers not transported to where the ambulances waited, didn't need help of any kind. Not now. Of twelve passengers and a crew of three, six still lived.

The story was flashed from coast-to-coast in a matter of only a couple of hours. The dead were listed, the injuries of the living described and though no one knew it then, some of these living were existing only on a short-term lease on life.

A liner was provided and the injured placed aboard it the next morning. All had

been destined for New York. All wanted to go there, where they had people and where highly skilled doctors could mend their bodies.

They arrived at LaGuardia airport that night. Batteries of photographers were on hand. Flash bulbs popped until the night looked like a bright day. The stewardess, Kay Saville, was the heroine of the affair. With her ankle strapped, her arm in a sling, she leaned on a cane and smiled.

Her feat in crawling for help was astounding even for the glorious annals of airplane hostesses. She had crawled four miles, through practically impenetrable forest trails and brush—with a sprained ankle and a broken arm.

"It may have been four miles, but to me it seemed like four trips around the earth," Kay Saville said.

CHAPTER II

First Victim



BEFORE one of the tall downtown official buildings of New York, a large car slid to a smooth halt directly in front of a fire plug. The policeman on duty there hurried to open the door and saluted respectfully. Then he reached inside and helped a blind man out of the car.

"Good morning, Mr. Quinn. It's a nice day with a bright sun."

Tony Quinn smiled, straightened up and hung a white cane on his arm.

"I can feel the sun, Mac. Its warm and pleasant. I'd rather be outdoors today, but if people insist on committing crimes, what is a District Attorney going to do?"

The patrolman looked properly sympathetic.

"They work you too hard, Mr. Quinn. They hand you every case nobody else wants. Of course, it's because you're so good at it, but then there are other Special D.A.'s who ought to get a share of the tough ones."

Quinn bent his head and dropped his voice to a whisper. "Don't tell anybody, but I'd rather get all that work. Professional jealousy. Someone may come along who is better than I and that won't do at all."

The driver of the big car approached and nodded at the officer. He took Quinn's arm and maneuvered him across the busy side-

walk and up the wide steps to the imposing entrance of the building.

The driver was a rather small, slim man with the softest, shrewdest eyes a man could have. Deceptive eyes, for behind them lay the brain that once made "Silk" Kirby the slickest confidence man in the country. He had given that up, but his smoothness and quick thinking were still there.

They entered one of the several elevators. From every side people called Quinn's name and he answered them by name also. Voices are a distinguishing mark to a blind man.

Quinn was husky, sound looking and there was always a smile around his lips. He had been a rather striking looking man, but around his dead and sightless eyes were deep ugly scars that glistened when the light hit them at a certain angle.

The two men walked down the sixteenth floor hallway to a door labeled ANTHONY QUINN, Special District Attorney. A small, efficient staff greeted the pair as they passed through to Quinn's private office. Silk Kirby closed the door, let go of Quinn's arm and suddenly seemed wholly unattentive to the dangers that might befall a blind man.

Quinn hung his cane, hat and topcoat on a clothes tree, turned around and those dead eyes had changed. They were alive, healthy and sparkling. He walked to his desk, sat down and punched one of several buttons. Just before the door opened to admit a clerk, Quinn's eyes swiftly acquired their dead, blind look again. He asked for his mail.

"Yes, sir," the clerk answered. "There was a phone call just before you arrived, Mr. Quinn. From a woman named Grace MacDonald. She said she was on her way over about something very important."

"Very well," Quinn said. "Show her in when she arrives."

An hour went by while Quinn sat back and permitted Silk Kirby to read the mail aloud. That was Silk's job and if anyone barged into the office, he would find only an apparently blind man being helped by his servant.

Soon afterward, Quinn's ordinarily busy day began. He listened to complaints, settled arguments, prepared briefs for court battles, listened to detectives report on their progress concerning several current cases. Routine stuff, but the milk and honey of Tony Quinn's existence.

It was about eleven o'clock when they heard a siren on the street far below. Silk glanced out of the window.

"An ambulance pulling up. Somebody must have been hurt."

"If they are entering this building, see if



As the guard did his best to raise his rifle and fire, the Black Bat went hurtling off the porch in a long dive and dashed him flat upon the ground (CHAP. XIII)

it's anyone we know," Quinn ordered.

Silk departed and was gone for about fifteen minutes. His face wore a troubled expression as he sat down beside Quinn's desk.

"Woman fell down the elevator shaft. Killed instantly. They found papers in her purse showing that she was a grade school principal in San Diego. Her name was Grace MacDonald. Seems to me I heard that name before, somewhere."

Quinn arose quickly.

"You did. An hour and a half ago. A Grace MacDonald phoned and said she was coming to see me. Remember?"

Silk whistled softly.

"Yes, I do. And now she's dead. What does it mean, sir?"

"This is a modern building," Quinn said slowly. "Elevator doors can't be opened unless by hard work and deliberate intent. How could she have opened one, then? And, Silk, people who come calling on the Special D. A. usually have information not intended to do someone any particular good. She may have been murdered."

SILK jumped to his feet.

"I know what you're going to suggest, sir. Downstairs, I learned that no one has yet determined which floor she fell from. I'm going to have a look at the elevator doors of that particular shaft. Be back soon."

It took Silk half an hour. He made his report, somewhat eagerly.

"On this floor, sir, I found some faint scratches on the metal door of that shaft. They didn't look like much, but a proper tool, cleverly operated, could have been inserted between the sliding door and forced the door open when the elevator was on another floor. I checked doors on other levels, sir. They bore no scratches."

"Grace MacDonald." Tony Quinn leaned back, musing. "A school principal. I've heard of her, Silk. I don't know where. I—Silk! This morning's newspaper! That name was among the list of survivors of a plane crash. At breakfast we discussed the accident, remember? We're going to the lobby and talk with the elevator operators. Right now."

Quinn soon located the operator who had brought Miss MacDonald to the sixteenth floor.

"I remember," the operator said. "Because she looked like a sourpuss and talked real nice. And then, there were bandages on her head and on her right hand, like she'd been in an accident. Just as she got out, she asked me where your office was."

"Did anyone else get out on that floor?"

"No, sir, not that trip. But just before I had a couple of passengers, who got out there. Don Boylan and one of his tough guys."

"Silk, question all the other operators," Quinn ordered. "Find out if any of them took Boylan down. They all know him. He's been brought into this building often enough and gets his picture in the papers two or three times a year."

Quinn turned back to the operator.

"You didn't notice in what direction Boylan and his man turned after they got out?"

"Left, sir. I thought they were going to your office, but they walked in the other direction."

"There are only two offices in that direction," Quinn said. "An Appellate Court judge's office and a Superior Court clerk's office. Please lead me to the building phones in the lobby."

Quinn called both those offices. Nobody in either one had seen Don Boylan, expected him to call, or could even hazard a guess on what business he would have with an Appellate Court justice or a court clerk.

Silk returned with some additional news. "Boylan and his man got on a lift on the eighteenth floor, sir. They rode straight down. That was just after the woman hit the top of the elevator on the ground floor.

"Take me back to the office," Quinn ordered. "When we get there, telephone Captain McGrath at Headquarters and have him pick up Don Boylan and bring him to me. Right away."

"Do you think—" Silk began.

"Miss MacDonald was on her way to see me," Quinn broke in. "Death intervened. Death is the one sure method to keep someone from talking. Boylan was in the building, without any apparent business here. He got off on the sixteenth floor, but took a lift down from the eighteenth. And when Boylan acts like that, he's up to something. I want to find out. After you phone, try to ascertain where Miss MacDonald was stopping. Go there and look over her quarters. Find out, if you can, why she was coming to see me."

An hour later, two men were ushered into Quinn's office. One was Captain McGrath, short, brawny, member of the Detective Division. He looked like a detective and took pride in acting like one. He was tough, direct and honest. The type of man who gets his teeth into a job and doesn't let go until the job is finished and every culprit has been caught.

With him was Don Boylan, a dapper, smooth crook. He'd been a racketeer in his day, was known to have disposed of several enemies in a permanent way and done it so successfully that he'd never even been arrested. His interests were diverse, running from cheap gambling houses to a huge dance hall where clipping wasn't necessary. The dance hall made so much money honestly that anything crooked was uncalled for.

Boylan sat down.

"Hello, Quinn," he said with a smirk. "What have I done this time?"

"I had a phone call this morning which mentioned your name. The caller was a woman named Grace MacDonald. You know her, of course?"

"I don't know a single babe with that name. What is this? Why did she mention me?"

"I don't know, Mr. Boylan. I'm trying to find out."

"Get her up here then and ask her. I've got nothing to be afraid of."

QUINN smiled dryly. "I can't. She's dead. She tumbled down an elevator shaft in this building just a short time ago. Boylan, a few moments before that happened, you were taken up to this floor. Where did you go? Whom did you see?"

"Say, listen," Boylan protested somewhat shrilly. "If you're trying to tie me up with a kill, it's no go. I never even knew the woman—or girl, or whatever she was. Could be she worked for one of my places. I wouldn't know about that, but you don't tie me up, Quinn. I want my lawyer."

"Just a moment," Quinn said. "This woman never worked for you. She wasn't the—ah—type. Your being here could have been coincidence, but if it was, why don't you tell me the truth?"

Boylan looked highly uncomfortable.

"Because it sounds so screwy you'd never believe me anyway. But I'll talk. Because I'm not mixed up in this. Early this morning a mug phones me. Very mysterious. He says if I want to know about—a certain party—I should come to the sixteenth floor of this building and walk over near the fire stairway on the north side. Which I did."

"And, queerly enough, no one showed up, I suppose?"

"You're wrong, Quinn. Somebody was hiding on the stairway. I think it was the same voice. The mug told me to beat it to the eighteenth floor and stay there. Naturally I went, but nobody showed up. So I left."

"You mentioned a certain party concerning whom this mysterious caller seemed to have



McGRATH

some news," Quinn reminded him. "Who was that certain party?"

Boylan's jaws clamped shut.

Captain McGrath moved toward him ominously.

"It would be to your benefit to talk, Boylan," Quinn said.

"I'm not saying a word. Not a single word. I didn't knock off that woman and you can't prove I did. Either tell this flatfoot to make a pinch right now or I'm leaving."

"You may leave," Quinn said gently. "Nobody is stopping you, Boylan."

THE ex-racketeer got to his feet, sneered at McGrath and walked out.

McGrath sat down heavily. He took a cigar from his pocket, painstakingly removed the cellophane and the band. He bit off the end of it neatly and then popped half the length of the cigar into his mouth and began to chew vigorously. McGrath was murder on cigars.

"What's it all about, Tony?" he asked.

Quinn, his apparently sightless eyes staring somewhat to the left of McGrath, fumbled for a cigarette, lighted it and blew smoke in a thin column ceilingward.

"I wish I knew, Mac. I don't. Miss MacDonald was coming to see me and she was killed in the hallway right outside my office. I sent Silk to look at the elevator doors and he reported a number of suspicious scratches on the metal, as if the doors had been forced open."

McGrath looked very, very wise.

"Are you positive that it wasn't you who went out and spotted those scratches, Tony?"

Quinn made a wry face.

"That—again? Mac, will you ever get it out of your head that I'm not blind? Haven't doctors you selected said I'm stone blind? Do you still think a blind man could possibly be the Black Bat? Don't you know I'd give anything to be the Black Bat? Your obsession has ceased to be amusing. It's an annoyance now."

"Skip it," McGrath said. "I talk too much. What I believe is my own business. When I do catch the Black Bat, then the truth will come out, won't it?"

"When—you catch him." Quinn smiled. "To get on with this particular case, I believe Miss MacDonald was murdered so she couldn't talk. About what, I haven't the vaguest idea. Boylan was present when she died. That is suspicious. Yet, I don't even know who the lady is. I never heard of her before except through newspaper accounts to the effect that she was one of the survivors of that plane crash."

"Plane crash!" McGrath's cigar sagged a trifle. "Say, maybe you've got something! Listen—aboard that plane was a man named Edward Fennelley. He used to be a shyster lawyer, working for crooks and taking part in plenty of their schemes. He did work for Boylan in his day. Federal operatives caught up with Fennelley and he spent eight years in Alcatraz. He was flying back to New York when the plane crashed."

"Edward Fennelley!" Quinn said softly and his mind was filled with thoughts of a man who sold out his profession for money. An attorney as dishonest as the clients he represented and acted with.

"Now, I see it this way," McGrath went on. "Fennelley knew, perhaps, more about crooks in this town than anyone else. Why not? He was one of them. Maybe he knew too much. Maybe the plane was sabotaged."

"I doubt it," Quinn answered. "But this is very interesting. I see it another way. Fennelley died in the accident. Perhaps he lived a little while and talked. Perhaps he talked about matters dangerous to the crooks he knew so well. He could have been in a semi-coma and raving a bit."

McGrath got up at once.

"I'm interviewing every one of those survivors. They are all here in New York. If what you say is true, maybe I'll learn something. And next to locking up the Black Bat, himself, I'd certainly enjoy heaving Boylan in the clink."

McGrath went out in a big hurry.

A Try at Murder



QUINN was impatiently waiting for Silk's return, hoping he might have gained some glimmer of why Grace MacDonald had hurried to the Special D. A.'s office. The idea which linked up ex-attorney Fennelley and Don Boylan was a good one. It made sense and held water.

Tony Quinn knew all about such men as Fennelley and Boylan. Knew far more than anyone realized. For Tony Quinn could see better than the average man and—as Captain McGrath suspected—he was known as the Black Bat, the arch enemy of crooks.

It started years ago. Tony Quinn had been the head District Attorney then. A fighting, crusading civic official well on his way to cleaning out the Underworld. Then, in trying to protect certain important evidence, he had been blinded from acid hurled at the evidence by crooks.

The acid had worked almost instantly. It left those deep, ugly scars around Quinn's eyes and it plunged him into the depths of the darkest despair imaginable.

A score of surgeons pronounced his case utterly hopeless. Quinn resigned his official position and retired to his home. Silk Kirby was with him then. Silk, who had been an expert confidence man and who had come to rob Quinn's home in a moment of desperation. He didn't go through with his act of burglary, but stayed to become Quinn's friend, servant and ally.

Fortunately, Quinn was independently wealthy. He spent months touring the world before war broke out. He visited every doctor noted for clever and enterprising eye surgery. In each case he met disappointment.

Finally, he gave it all up, determined to make the best of his condition, and settled down to become a man permanently blind. Then a blond and lovely girl named Carol Baldwin had come to him with a weird offer. Her father was a police official, dying from a gangster's bullet in the back. He had followed Quinn's meteoric career, admired him and now he offered his eyes to replace Quinn's.

Quinn accepted the offer. A surgeon in a small town performed the delicate operation. Weeks later, Carol Baldwin's father was dead

and Tony Quinn was in full possession of his sight once more.

Oddly enough, he discovered that he had benefited by his experience. In jet darkness he could see as well as in bright light. Soft colors were visible to him in the darkest room. It was an unexplained phenomenon. Much like an act of nature to repay him for the agony he'd undergone.

And, during his long period of actual blindness, other senses had developed. His hearing was abnormally acute. His sense of touch remarkable. Organs of smell could detect the faintest of odors. With his eyes closed, he could actually feel the presence of an impending object, like a wall.

Quinn determined to put all these advantages into full use. Not by returning as District Attorney and being hamstrung by the mechanizations of legal processes. He wanted to fight crime in a more direct way. So he became the Black Bat—a legendary figure, garbed entirely in black, with a hood covering his head—a figure who could send fear into thieves and killers as no other agency of law and order had been able to do.

He studied crime from all angles—fingerprinting—the use of scientific instruments to detect poison, blood, and infinitesimal clues of all sorts. Mainly, though, he relied upon a hardy acquisition of common sense. The hood was necessary to hide those tell-tale scars on his face. The somber garb both characterized him and acted as a protection. He was invisible in darkness.

Silk Kirby had become his right hand man in this fight. Carol Baldwin had joined his band of crime fighters and had proved that she was both resourceful and courageous.

Between Quinn and Carol something more than friendship had developed, yet neither talked of their love. Until the Black Bat could consider his work done, he was in too much constant danger to expose anyone else to it.

The fourth member of the tiny band was an enormous man named "Butch" O'Leary. While he did not possess the suaveness of Silk Kirby, nor the tact of Carol Baldwin, he was extremely useful and fear was an utterly unknown quality to him.

So, when Tony Quinn considered this fresh series of events from all angles, it was with the mind of a trained and highly skilled investigator, with a powerful, well-trained private organization at his back.

Silk returned late in the afternoon. He had some news, not of much importance.

"Grace MacDonald was a grade-school principal in San Diego. She was on a short

leave of absence and was on her way to New York where her sister lives. I talked to the sister. Other than the sister, Grace MacDonald didn't know a soul here. It was her first trip East."

"Then how in the world did she know about me?" Quinn asked.

SILK shrugged.

"You got me there, sir. She didn't mention your name to her sister. But last night she seemed to be worried over something and refused to talk about it. This morning she made a phone call, presumably to this office and started to come here."

"She was murdered," Quinn said softly. "I'm sure of it now. Our job is to find out why she was killed. Determine what she knew that made her death so vital. Killing a woman in this building required the taking of enormous risks. It was done cleverly and coolly. We have a brainy killer to contend with, Silk. Well, let's go home and try to plan a campaign."

Silk nodded eagerly.

"Do you suppose the Black Bat may take a hand?"

"If necessary, he most certainly will. I've a feeling there is more to this than has popped out so far."

Silk brought the car around to the front of the building and returned to the lobby to fetch Quinn who had waited there. On Silk's arm, Quinn walked slowly across the sidewalk to the car. His eyes were dead and staring.

Moments later, Silk led him into the big house which was their home. There was a fair-sized estate around it, a brick wall and a neat, attractive gate. The house was the last one on a dead-end street with a narrow road leading down to the garden entrance to his estate. The location was ideal for the operations of the Black Bat.

In the comfort and security of his study, Quinn was able to drop his mask of blindness and plunge into all the newspaper stories about the crashed plane. He made a list of the survivors and what was known about them. He was deep in thought when Silk announced dinner.

They ate together, not as servant and master, but as friends. They were deep in a discussion on the case when Silk arose to answer the doorbell. He returned bearing a paper-wrapped package about two feet square.

"There was no one on the porch, sir. This package was shoved up against the door. I heard no car leaving. Sir, this has a return

address in the corner. It's from Grace MacDonald."

Quinn arose quickly and took the package. It weighed about five pounds, he judged. In the very precise writing of a school teacher was his name and address. In the corner was Grace MacDonald's name and an address Silk proclaimed as authentically her sister's. In a slanted line across the bottom were the words:

DELIVER AT 7:00 P.M.
SPECIAL MESSENGER

Silk took the package and carried it to the table. He broke the light cord easily, ripped away the paper sealing the flaps and proceeded to unwrap the thing. It was a plain white cardboard box. Silk started to raise the lid.

Suddenly, Quinn let go with a yell. He raced around the table, hurled Silk into a corner and swept the box off the table and across the room. With almost the same motion, he tipped the table over so that it landed face down on top of him and Silk.

Then the room was filled with confusion and fury. An explosion almost broke their eardrums. A big piece of ceiling came down and hit the table with a crash. So did pieces of chairs and walls. Then a moment of silence while dust and powdered plaster filtered down like a miniature sandstorm.

"Silk!" Quinn wiped his face. "Are you all right?"

"Y—yes, sir. I—think so. You?"

"The table saved us. That and my ability to hear so well. As soon as you jiggled the lid, I heard a faint hissing sound of some mechanism going off. That was a nice little present to you and me from the man who murdered Grace MacDonald. It was meant to enable us to solve her death in the most direct fashion imaginable. Granting that all three of us were destined for the same place after death."

Silk managed to shove the table away. He stood up, badly shaken and he looked with awe at the havoc in the dining room. There wasn't much there left whole. Fortunately, the house was of solid construction. No walls had been blown out although laths could be seen behind what was left of the plastered walls.

"And I waxed the floor in here only yesterday," Silk muttered savagely.

Quinn walked toward the hallway, where the damage was not as severe. In the big living room, pictures had been knocked down and a couple of windows blown out. Books

from wall cases littered the floor. He turned to Silk who had followed him.

"Get on the phone—if it still works. Call Headquarters first. Then get into touch with Carol and Butch. Have them come to the lab at once. And they are to be careful. This spot will swarm with cops and Captain McGrath in no time. Step on it, Silk."

THE mask of blindness descended over Quinn's eyes again. People were running up from houses nearby. A radio car came to a stop with dying siren. Twenty minutes later, Quinn was closeted in his library with Captain McGrath.

"I'm lucky to have a man like Silk," he explained. "As he opened the package, I heard the bomb mechanism start to work. I shouted to Silk. He shoved me into a corner and dumped the table on both of us. That saved our lives without any question."

"Silk is all right," McGrath agreed. "I'm glad you aren't hurt, Tony. But this certainly gives us the right to start an investigation of Miss MacDonald's death. I wonder if you recognize anything about this cute method of trying to rub you out?"

"I don't, Captain. Should I?"

McGrath smiled.

"Long ago, when Boylan was a plain hoodlum and rising to his present fancy pants state, he would send nice little presents to people he didn't like. They used to blow up in people's faces. Usually there wasn't much left. Not that we ever proved this against Boylan. His packages were so constructed that not a clue remained. Everything blown to bits."

"Interesting," Quinn commented. "Especially since Boylan could have murdered Miss MacDonald. You were going to investigate the survivors of the plane crash. Did you?"

"I saw all but two of 'em. A florist named Lester Hill is in the hospital. He's going to be paralyzed from the hips down, they think. Sonny Coyle stood the air trip back very well, but he lapsed into a coma a few hours ago. They say it's a fractured skull and they're going to operate on him tonight."

"Then you saw Gardet, the manufacturer, and a salesman named Harold Hewitt?"

"That's right. I didn't get very much out of them. Hewitt has a cracked skull, too, and is a bit hazy about the whole thing. Gardet isn't badly hurt though. Leg break is all. He says Ed Fennelley raved like a maniac for an hour after he was hauled out of the plane. Then he died."

"Ah, we're getting somewhere." Quinn

leaned forward expectantly.

"Relax," McGrath said.

"Gardet couldn't understand a word. It was gibberish although he thinks Don Boylan's name was mentioned."

"Well, that's something even though it's remote. We may be on the right track. Better check on Boylan's movements since he left my office this morning."

"I'll have a couple of men do it," McGrath promised. "I'm going back to the hospital. Sonny Coyle may wake up before they cart him to the operating room. It's a delicate bit of surgery, they tell me. He may not pull through."

"Is getting Sonny Coyle to talk as important as that?" Quinn asked. "If Gardet says Fennelley's raving was not understandable, there's something phony going on."

"Gardet, it happens, was lying some distance away. Sonny was right beside Fennelley. On the other side were two people who died—Mr. and Mrs. Rolfe, I think their names were. Then came Gardet. So Sonny may have heard more. He was conscious at the time."

"Good," Quinn said. "Incidentally, Mac, did you learn anything about that Rolfe couple who died?"

"Just that they were honeymooners. Why?"

Quinn rubbed his chin.

"I used to have a client named Rolfe. Middle-aged chap. Very wealthy. I doubt, though, that he was on any honeymoon. Though he was a widower. Oh, well, perhaps they aren't the same family and it doesn't make much difference anyway. Not concerning this case we're trying to solve. Good luck, Mac."

CHAPTER IV

Sinister Killer



NOTHER full hour elapsed before the debris was cleaned up, the windows covered and a tired, disgusted Silk Kirby sat down wearily. The police and reporters had gone. Nothing much had been disturbed in the library. At a signal from Quinn, Silk lowered the window shades.

Quinn arose, discarded his white cane and walked swiftly toward one of the ceiling-



Captain McGrath made a motion as if he were about to drive the blade deep into the leg of the patient (CHAP. XVI)

high bookcases which lined the walls. He thrust a hand behind a set of books. There was a soft click and a narrow door opened. He walked through it and the door closed behind him.

He was in a large and cleverly hidden laboratory. This was the headquarters of the Black Bat. Every known scientific device for snaring crooks was here, including large and complete files on men who might become dangerous to society, if they weren't right now.

Two persons came forward to meet him. One of them was Carol Baldwin. She had both hands extended and looked worried.

"Tony!" she exclaimed. "When we got here and saw the damage—from the outside only, of course—I couldn't help but wonder about you."

"I'm fine. Silk and I had the wind knocked out of us. That's all. Hello, Butch!"

Butch O'Leary nodded and smiled. He was big enough to be ungainly, almost, but those enormous arms of his could move with the speed of a striking snake. His thick legs could run and take leaps which might have won him some sort of a record. He was bull-necked, wide-faced and rather ugly in appearance. Yet his smile softened the hardness of his face and made him look quite human.

"Me, I don't like guys who send bombs," he said. "Tell me who done it and I'll wring his neck."

"I wish I knew," Quinn said with a chuckle. "I'd do some of the wringing myself. Now here is the set-up. It begins with that plane crash out West. One survivor tried to reach me. I don't know why. I think she was thrown down an elevator shaft. Don Boylan, a well known crook-about-town, happened to be in the building and his story is rather flimsy, to say the least. Boylan once had a habit of sending bombs to people he didn't like.

"It seems that a disbarred attorney named Edward Fennelley was killed in the crash. While in a coma, before he died, he raved. Under Fennelley's skull was lodged what was, perhaps, the greatest knowledge any one man has had about present-day gangs, in a long time. McGrath believes that Fennelley's ravings made sense—that they concerned Boylan, and Miss MacDonald heard him. It's fairly safe to presume she was intent upon looking me up for the purpose of telling me what she had heard. Boylan, perhaps, got to her first."

"What of the other survivors?" Carol asked quickly.

"McGrath is handling that end so far. I've a feeling, though, that things will develop. Whoever is behind this hasn't finished yet. If our theory is true, perhaps every one of those survivors will be menaced. The murderer can't be sure who heard Fennelley's ravings or how much each person heard. So, to safeguard himself, he may have to take action against all of them."

"But why the attack on you, Tony?" Carol asked.

Quinn shrugged.

"Miss MacDonald was trying to reach me. She phoned the office first. Perhaps the killer is under the impression she talked to me on the phone and told enough to set me guessing. Or, if it's Boylan, he thinks I may begin a thorough investigation and involve him."

"I think that's what you ought to do," Butch put in. "And let me take care of Boylan. Personal."

"Not yet." Quinn shook his head. "We aren't certain of enough at this moment. In fact, nobody knows just what happened to Miss MacDonald. There is even a chance that she did accidentally fall down the elevator shaft. I don't see how, but strange things do happen. I called you here to acquaint you with events so far. Just in case we find it necessary to move in. At the moment—"

A small green light on the lab bench started winking. It was a signal that someone was on the phone and the call was being transferred by Silk, to the lab. Quinn excused himself, went over and lifted the instrument. He listened, mostly. When he hung up, his face was gray and grim.

"It's happened. We're moving in. Just a few moments ago they were wheeling Sonny Coyle into the operating room. When they were ready to administer anesthesia, they discovered he was dead. Somebody had switched hypos and when he was given an opiate, preparatory to the operation, a violent poison went into his system. He was unconscious, anyhow, so there was no outward reaction. Sonny Coyle was murdered."

CAROL BALDWIN'S lovely face became grave. "We're ready," she said simply.

"You always are," Quinn acknowledged. "All right. Butch, I want you to cover a man named Vincent Gardet. Silk will give you all the information on him. See that he is protected, but don't let him know it. Lester Hill is a patient at the hospital. McGrath is guarding him. Harold Hewitt is also in the

hospital and can be protected. That leaves just one person nobody seems to have considered so far."

"The stewardess," Carol exclaimed.

"Exactly. She is in your charge, Carol. Silk has details on her also. If necessary, take her into your confidence. Live with her. Don't leave her for a moment. Except for a little while tonight. She is going to have a visitor—in black!"

These two aides of the Black Bat needed no further instructions. Quinn called Silk into the lab and he gave Carol and Butch addresses and details. In a matter of minutes, they were on their way.

Quinn ordered Silk to bring the car around.

"We're bound for the hospital," he explained. "I want a look at those survivors and also, by going there, I'll more or less take over the murder case. I don't want anyone else horning in on it."

Silk's expression and voice were both derisive.

"As if they'd take a job like this away from you, sir," Silk said. "Oh, no—if you fail, they'll simply say a blind man gummed the thing up. So much that they can't take over. The D.A. only wants nice cases with a good woman angle, a nice juicy clue and an opportunity to get the spotlight for himself. Don't worry, this is your case."

Quinn smiled. "Well, I like it that way. Tap the horn when you're out front."

The murder of Sonny Coyle had taken place in one of the big hospitals where a huge staff was maintained and visitors had more or less free access to the place.

Captain McGrath was waiting for him in one of the reception rooms.

Quinn, on Silk's arm, approached McGrath. The detective summoned a patrolman, put him on guard outside the door and closed it for privacy. He was chewing a cigar more frantically than ever.

"Not a clue," McGrath bewailed. "No prints, no witnesses. The victim was unconscious and never knew what happened. I tell you, Quinn, if Boylan is behind this, he has enlisted the help of some pretty shrewd men because Boylan isn't quite as clever as this murderer."

"You're probably right, Mac," Quinn said, thoughtfully. "But, good heavens, this is a large, public hospital. There are nurses, interns, orderlies and clerks all over the place. How could a murderer just walk in without being noticed?"

"According to the best idea of time we can figure, it happened during visiting hours,"

McGrath explained. "Coyle was in a private room. His nurse stepped out for a moment. The killer must have been close by, watching and waiting for just such an opportunity. He had about four or five minutes to do the job and get away. It takes only two seconds to switch hypos."

Quinn's blank and apparently sightless eyes were staring well to the left of where McGrath stood.

"Yes, of course," he agreed. "Yet, Mac, if you were intent upon killing a man under difficult conditions—and they are difficult in this hospital—would you slip into his room and simply substitute a poisoned hypo for one filled with a harmless narcotic? Would you have accepted the chance that this hypo might not be used at all? I hardly think so. You'd have jabbed your victim with the needle and made very certain he'd get the stuff."

McGrath frowned heavily. "Meaning just what?"

"Perhaps the hypo was substituted somewhere else. The murderer never even entered Coyle's room. Perhaps he didn't dare because he'd been seen wandering about the corridors. Incidentally, did Coyle have any visitors?"

"Only his mother," McGrath said. "She was all he had. Quinn, so help me, I'm going to get this killer. I'm even going to forget about the Black Bat so that I can concentrate on this particular job."

"Hm," Quinn smiled slightly. "The Black Bat might be very happy to hear that. Do you really mean you'll forget him to concentrate on the case or are you inferring—in the belief that I'm the Black Bat—that you are willing to accept a sort of truce for the duration of this murder investigation."

"Take it any way you like," McGrath grumbled. "Sonny Coyle was a nice kid."

"So was Miss MacDonald, we'll presume. Have you forgotten her, Mac? Now suppose you take me in to see the survivors?"

"Only two are here," McGrath explained. "Gardet went home. He had a broken leg, but decided he'd rather be home than in a hospital. I'll show you Lester Hill first because Hewitt can wait. It won't take long to interview him. Hewitt is still unconscious."

WITH Silk aiding, Quinn followed McGrath to a room, well down the corridor on the same floor where Sonny Coyle had been murdered. McGrath opened the door. In the room was a nurse and an old man, gray-haired and distinguished-looking.

On the bed lay Lester Hill, his face thin

and drawn. McGrath introduced the older man.

"This is Mr. Hill's father. Mr. Hill—Tony Quinn, one of our District Attorneys specializing in serious crimes. I mean, finding out who did them, of course."

"How do you do." The elder Hill offered his hand and then withdrew it as his face turned slightly pink. It was apparent he hadn't realized Quinn was blind.

"We'll do everything possible to insure the safety of your son, Mr. Hill," Quinn said. "How is he?"

The younger Hill answered for himself, albeit in a weak voice.

"If I could wiggle my toes, I'd feel a lot better. Mr. Quinn—do you honestly believe I'm in danger? Captain McGrath has been trying to convince me of it, but I'm skeptical."

"Two survivors of that plane crash are already dead," Quinn warned him. "Miss MacDonald and, just a little while ago, Sonny Coyle. One death might be termed purely accidental, but when two people, of a limited group, die by violence, it's best to assume the others in this group are likewise in danger."

The younger Hill winced.

"Well, if a killer ever comes for me, I won't run away. Good gosh, what an easy victim I'd be."

"No." Quinn shook his head in disagreement. "You will be guarded well. There are just a couple of questions I'd like to ask before we leave you. That is, if you feel strong enough to answer."

"I'm all right. Go ahead with your questions."

"Fine! Were you conscious between the time of the crash and the moment when Miss Saville, the stewardess, returned with help?"

"Only part of the time. I passed out right after the plane hit. They got me from the ruins of the ship somehow. Then I woke up. I was lying on the ground beside that ex-convict lawyer."

"That's what I wanted to know," Quinn said quickly. "Now—and make certain you are correct—did this ex-convict attorney talk at all?"

"Well, he was unconscious, but raving. Like a crazy person. Sometimes he shouted and cursed. Man alive, how he could swear. Other times he just repeated words over and over. Names. I remember one. It was Bowman."

"Could it have been Boylan?"

"Why, yes. Yes—come to think of it. I figured he wanted his son at first. All he'd get out was Boy—"

"Thank you," Quinn said. "If you can, try to recall anything else he said. No matter how inconsequential it may have sounded to you. Sometimes the seemingly unimportant things are the most vital. Good luck to you. I sincerely hope that you'll come out of this in good shape."

"Mr. Quinn, you're blind, aren't you?" Hill said.

"Yes. Yes, I'm blind."

Hill managed to muster a grin.

"Well, maybe I'll never walk again. I just got a feeling about that. But even so, what do I have to complain about? I can still see. And if a blind man can do the things I know you are capable of, then I'll overcome any handicap that I may have."

"I think—that's one of the most sincere compliments I have ever received. Thank you."

Hill grinned again.

"I'm well off. My business is growing flowers. They'll still grow for me even if I can't walk. And I can see them. That's where I have something on you, Mr. Quinn. Though I'm not trying to rub it in."

"You're quite right." Quinn answered smiling. "Some day I'll come to your greenhouse. I'll see those flowers too. With my fingers and with my nose. Good-by."

Silk led Quinn out. McGrath trailed behind them until he suddenly recalled that he was supposed to lead the way to the room of the other survivor.

CHAPTER V

Man in Black



AROLD HEWITT was further down the corridor. He also had a visitor in the room, a mild little man with glasses and weak, watery eyes. He wasn't dressed expensively, but he was neat. He shook hands with Quinn rather shyly, and blushed a beet red when Quinn didn't notice his extended

hand until Silk nudged him and whispered in his ear.

Hewitt was still unconscious, his head well swathed in bandages. He was, of course, incapable of being interviewed. Quinn spent only a couple of minutes in the room.

"I'm Cyrus Crandall, his uncle," the visitor explained. "He wakes up maybe once an

hour or so, but he can't remember much and goes back to sleep quick."

"He'll stay awake longer each time," Quinn said soothingly. "I understand he is a jewelry salesman."

"Yes." Crandall nodded. "He works for Marks and Company. Been with them five years. He wanted to open his own business eventually, but now I guess—well, it'll be delayed a long time. I can't help much. I'm just a weight-lifter in a foundry."

"Your nephew is young," Quinn said. "You'll be surprised at his powers of recuperation. Both physical and in a business way. And don't worry about him. He'll be well protected."

"Oh, that." Cyrus Crandall was openly derisive. "A lot of nonsense, I call it."

"Just the same, he'll be guarded!" McGrath snapped.

They gave McGrath a lift back to Headquarters and then went home. After Silk helped Quinn into the house, he put the car away and entered via the back door. Quinn was talking to Carol Baldwin. He hung up as Silk arrived.

"Carol is posing as a feature writer," Quinn said. "Kay Saville doesn't know anyone in town and couldn't get a decent room so Carol invited her to stay in her apartment. Convenient for us. I'm going to see her."

"A good idea," Silk agreed. "By the way, sir, did you notice that little guy? Hewitt's uncle?"

"Not especially. Why?"

"Well, I did. I know when McGrath and others are around you can't look at anything very much. The uncle said he was a weight-lifter in a foundry. That's heavy work. One of the heaviest jobs in any industry. I think it's too heavy for a little fella like him. Besides, his hands looked as if they'd been manicured lately and certainly they weren't rough or burned, like the hands of a foundry worker are bound to get."

"Good work," Quinn complimented him. "We'll investigate Cyrus Crandall. I was thinking, there in the hospital, that either this man Crandall or Lester Hill's father, possessed splendid opportunities to substitute the poisoned hypo for the one loaded with drugs. Crandall's nephew, however, is really in bad shape and not faking."

"He was conscious when they first got him to the hospital," Silk argued. "He could have told all he knew and helped to lay necessary plans, sir. Besides, when a man in his condition wakes up now and then, he doesn't know anybody. Maybe Crandall isn't his uncle at all, but just posing as a relative so he can stick around the hospital."

"We'll see, Silk. You are to remain here until I return. I won't be very long. Things seem to be well in hand. Hill and Hewitt are guarded by police. Butch is watching over Gardet. And Carol is always an alert sentinel, so Kay Saville is well covered too. I'm going to see her now—as the Black Bat."

Quinn entered the laboratory and rapidly changed clothes. He donned a black suit, black shirt and tie and black crepe-soled shoes. He also entirely discarded his pose of blindness. He drew a close fitting hood over his head, but soon took it off. Since a hood would attract too much attention when he was abroad, he substituted a wide-brimmed black hat. This was tilted down enough to shadow the scars around his eyes and conceal his features fairly well.

He worked at a handicap when he was operating as the Black Bat. There was hardly a policeman in town who didn't know Tony Quinn, so he had to be extremely careful.

He raised a trap door in the lab, hesitated and then returned to strap on a shoulder holster and insert a heavy automatic in the clip. He descended a ladder through the trap, found himself on a bare earthen floor of a

[Turn page]



*Tops for
Quality*



low tunnel and had to travel well bent over. He came up inside the garden house, some distance behind the mansion in which he lived.

From the garden house it was only a short distance—and a very dark distance—to the side gate. Just beyond this, a rather sorry looking coupe was always kept parked. He darted toward it and got in quickly. A moment later, the Black Bat was on the prowl.

HE PARKED the coupe close by the apartment house where Carol lived and glanced at his wrist watch. It was almost eleven o'clock. At precisely that time, Carol would leave her apartment on some excuse.

The Black Bat entered the apartment building through a service entrance. He was well acquainted with the layout of the building and went straight to a self-operated service-elevator. He rode to Carol's floor, opened the door a bit and peered out. Mostly he listened, for his acute hearing could detect the sound of anyone moving about in the hallways.

At eleven on the dot, he stood beside Carol's door. It opened and she emerged, trim-looking in a gray suit and a gray handbag under her arm.

"She's a swell girl," Carol whispered. "Not bad looking. I hope I can trust you."

A chuckle came from behind the hood which now covered the Black Bat's head. The laugh died away and his whisper was intense and serious.

"Return in fifteen minutes. She mustn't be left alone. There are some clever men working whatever scheme is behind the murders. Be on guard."

Carol opened her purse, took out a gun, not at all dainty or feminine looking, and was ready for quick action. She patted the Black Bat's cheek and hurried off toward the elevators.

The Black Bat opened the unlocked door, stepped inside very quietly and waited two or three full minutes before he moved silently toward the living room.

Kay Saville, wearing a crisp new airlines uniform, was reading the late editions about herself and the others. The Black Bat's gloved hand moved around the corner of the doorway, found the light switch and snapped it off.

Instantly, Kay Saville was on her feet, the cane she held was raised for a blow and she was trying to penetrate the darkness. A low laugh came out of the gloom.

"Please be calm, Miss Saville," the Black

Bat said. "I envy your spirit, but I don't intend to harm you. In fact, I'm here to do all I can for your safety. I'm the Black Bat."

Through the darkness he saw her lower the cane, but still retain a tense pose. He moved closer.

"Please sit down," he urged. "And don't be alarmed if, despite the darkness, it appears I can see every move you make. I can see in the dark."

She sat down slowly. "So—I've heard. I—I know that all you do is to help people. But a meeting like this, in darkness, is bad on the nerves."

"Suppose we get right down to business," Quinn suggested. "You know by now, that two survivors of that plane crash are dead. We know that one was deliberately murdered and I'm willing to bet Miss MacDonald was murdered too. I think, Miss Saville, that someone is intent upon killing every survivor of that crash."

"But why?" she asked plaintively. "I don't see any reason for it."

"Aboard the ship was an ex-attorney named Fennelley," the Black Bat said. "You may recall him."

"I remember the way he looked at me," she replied hotly.

"I guess he hadn't seen a woman in years," the Black Bat went on. "He'd been in prison. Now Fennelley used to be the mouthpiece for practically all important mob leaders in their hey-day. I imagine he knew more about them, their methods, tricks and bloody history, than any other man. To defend them properly, he had to be told the truth in order that he might manufacture the series of lies which would get his clients off. So, Fennelley could be a highly dangerous man."

"But he's dead," Miss Saville protested.

"True. Yet he did not die immediately. He lived until help reached the survivors. Part of the time he was raving. Mentioning names. I wonder if he spoke lucidly and said too much. Someone overheard and recognized the danger in which he was placing certain individuals."

Kay Saville's face wore a look of alarm.

"Then—someone—one of the survivors is in with the crooks who are trying to kill us all? That's the only way the murderers could have heard about it."

"Exactly. You're quite shrewd, Miss Saville. Now what I want to know is this: did you hear Fennelley say anything?"

She was slowly rotating the cane between her hands.

"I helped to drag him out," she said. "I knew he was dreadfully hurt. There was so

CHAPTER VI

Sinister Visitors

much blood and his face—" She shuddered. "He spoke, but it didn't make sense. I'm afraid I did not pay much attention to him."

"Did he mention anything that sounded like the name of Boylan?"

"Boylan?" She seemed to hesitate. "Why—no. I don't think so. He mumbled something about prison—and getting even. Yes, I remember that. He seemed to be angry about something. Weakly, of course. The man was dying."

THE Black Bat spoke gently.

"Miss Saville, you may be in considerable danger because of what you know. Therefore, don't tell anyone. Not even this girl who rooms with you."

Kay Saville chuckled.

"I room with her. Your city is so jam-packed with people I couldn't find a suitable place to stay and recuperate. You see—I have no one to go to. Miss Baldwin works on a newspaper. In exchange for my story she is going to provide me with a home. I trust her implicitly. And, while I think of it, how did you find me?"

The Black Bat laughed. "I know many things, Miss Saville," he said. "For instance, the cane you are holding. It's loaded! The tip of it has been hollowed out and filled with lead. You can kill a man with that cane."

Kay Saville gasped.

"So that's why it seemed so heavy and made so much noise. They gave it to me at the airlines office. Nobody knew where it came from."

She tried to penetrate the darkness to see the Black Bat, without any success at all. The curtains of the room were pulled all the way down. Carol had seen to that, under the excuse that Kay must be kept hidden.

"I hope that you don't think I'm carrying this darned cane because I want to kill anyone with it," she went on. "I'm going to get another. I'm going to—"

She stopped short because she began to realize that she was talking to herself. Somewhat grimly, she hobbled toward the door and turned on the light. There was nobody else in the room. She had heard no sound of her visitor's withdrawal.

Two minutes later, Carol breezed in, with more newspapers. Kay told her in words that tumbled over one another, about the Black Bat's visit.

Carol pursed her lips.

"Imagine that! And I missed him. Kay, this is going to make your story even more exciting than ever."



ILK Kirby busied himself around the big house after Tony Quinn departed as the Black Bat. Somehow, Silk managed to keep the house in excellent order, be with Quinn during the business hours of the day and act as both liaison man and active agent for the Black Bat.

He was energetically polishing the dining room table which had been marred by the explosion. Silk thought hard as he worked. His mind was always busy when the Black Bat was turning his attentions to some series of crimes. Silk knew that before long he'd have an active part in the events to follow and he was endeavoring to sort out the suspects. There were enough of them.

Lester Hill, the florist, Hewitt the jewelry salesman, Vincent Gardet the portly manufacturer, now being guarded by Butch. Kay Saville, the heroine of the plane crash and, most of all, the inscrutable Don Boylan with a finger in every pie of crime.

Silk's thoughts were shattered by the clamor of the doorbell. He sighed deeply. Visitors coming at a time when Tony Quinn was missing from the house—and when his absence could not be explained—were definitely annoying. Especially Captain McGrath who had acquired the recent habit of dropping in unexpectedly to see if his sudden arrival would reveal the fact that Tony Quinn was the Black Bat.

Silk made up his mind that if this was Captain McGrath, he'd get no further than the threshold. He wiped his wax-stained hands on a clean cloth and walked to the front door. He opened it.

Something dark and shapeless came hurtling at him. He tried to duck—too late!

It was a heavy coat of some kind and it enveloped Silk just long enough so that he was helpless. Two men came into the house. One of them promptly seized Silk and held the coat over his head, muffling the shouts Silk was emitting.

The other man closed the door. He reached into his pocket and took out a hypodermic needle, approached Silk, seized Silk's shirt and ripped the sleeve half off. Then he thrust the needle into Silk's bare arm.

The pain of the jab turned Silk into a near maniac. He got that temporarily free arm into working order, seized a throat with his fingers, and squeezed hard.

The second man was trying to put the hypo away and subdue Silk at the same time. His efforts were not very successful. The needle part of the hypo caught on his own clothes, but finally he managed to get it into his pocket.

Silk had the first man pinned against the wall by now and, somehow, he succeeded in getting free of the restraining coat over his head. Silk could punch hard for a man his size and he let go with a couple of good ones.

They drew groans from the first attacker. Silk hammered home a couple of more. Then the second man drew an arm around Silk's throat and pulled back his head. Silk reached up with both hands, knocked the man's hat off and grasped two fistfuls of hair.

His victim let out a wild screech of agony. The first attacker reeled about, trying to regain his senses and stop the pain that surged through his middle. He wasn't very successful at either venture.

Silk didn't waste precious breath yelling for help or calling down condemnations on his two enemies. He just fought, with all the skill and fury he possessed. He was doing a pretty good job too. The man, minus a handful of hair by now, was trying his best to cover up against Silk's blows. Once he lashed out, clipped Silk across the face and sent him catapulting back, but Silk returned with the resilience of a brand new spring.

He bounced back with force enough to drive his opponent against the wall with a loud bang. He clipped the man on the jaw, stepped back and measured him for a haymaker. He started the blow and it landed, but not very effectively. Silk wondered what was wrong. A blow like that should have ended this half of the battle.

The second man regained enough of his wits to come back into the melee. Silk fell to his knees at one fairly light blow. He got up again and landed a couple of punches as ineffective as that haymaker.

Then, suddenly, he recalled the jab with the needle and he knew he was on his way out. Summoning every ounce of strength and will-power he had left, Silk whirled as if to attack one of the pair. The man drew back. Silk turned sharply again. The hallway spun madly, but he had to keep on going.

The second man retreated. Silk's confused mind couldn't fathom the fact that all these two men waited for was the effect of the drug coursing through his system.

SILK reached the door, got it open and started through. He wanted to shout for help, but he didn't dare. If help came now, if these men were captured and he was saved, Tony Quinn's absence would be noticed. That must not happen. But Silk did want to get away.

He knew the two men were after him fast now. He reached the top of the porch steps. Then, very slowly, like a very tired and very old man, he sagged against a newel post and crumpled in a limp heap. He groaned, just once.

"Hurry!" one of the pair rasped. "The blind man will be coming down. We must have aroused him. I thought that stuff worked in a matter of seconds. He darned near killed both of us even with that big jolt in him."

"Never mind that," muttered his companion. "Bring the car out front. I'll carry him. Make sure nobody is on the street. After you take us to that place we hope is safe, ditch the car and be certain there are no prints anywhere on it. Let's go!"

A moment later, Silk was hoisted to the shoulder of one intruder and carried to the sidewalk where the car waited. He was put in the back, on the floor and promptly covered with a blanket. Bot men in the front seat, peered around. The neighborhood was deserted. All the racket of Silk's savage attack had been inside and well muffled.

The man beside the driver opened the car door.

"If anyone comes, drive off," he said. "I've got something to do inside the house now. It won't take a minute."

"But Quinn—" the driver started to say.

"You fool. He's stone blind! What if he is aroused and downstairs? He won't be able to see me."

The man was gone no more than two minutes. As he hopped into the car, the driver pulled away. From beneath the blanket on the floor in the rear, came Silk's deep, steady breathing. It was a "snatch" that had almost failed—but not quite.

The Black Bat turned into the street fronting his home, no more than five minutes after Silk had been taken. He entered the blind street beside his home, parked the car and took a quick look around. The hood was stowed into a pocket and the wide-brimmed, black hat covered his face very well.

He got out, crossed the sidewalk and disappeared into the darkness of the estate. One minute later he was in the lab, removing the regalia of the Black Bat. He donned the tweeds he always wore around the house,

picked up his cane and opened the secret door leading into the library.

"Silk," Quinn called out.

There was no answer. Quinn's eyes were suddenly glazed over. He was the totally blind man again. He called once more, putting a whine into his voice. Then, tapping his cane, he walked into the hallway. There, he saw the evidences of a bitter struggle. Quinn inspected the first floor, went to the second and when he was certain he was quite alone, he dropped his mask of blindness and went to work.

By the marks on the floor, he knew there

AROUND TOO MUCH AND WE'LL SEND HIM BACK IN SMALL FRAGMENTS.

Quinn sat down slowly. It was very seldom that a sense of defeat struck him, but now it hit home. Silk had been kidnaped. He had been kidnaped for the express purpose of keeping Tony Quinn from investigating these airplane murders. So long as they held Silk a prisoner, they also held Tony Quinn in their power and they knew it well.

"But they haven't got the Black Bat tied and gagged," Quinn muttered.



were at least two men who had taken Silk away. There were also two tiny drops of some fluid on the polished waxed floor. Quinn knelt, touched one with his fingertip and gingerly tasted of the substance.

He worked even faster then. He secured a blotter and painstakingly soaked up what was left of the fluid. Next he carefully preserved some of the many strands of hair which Silk had so apparently yanked out of one victim's head.

Quinn concealed these bits of evidence before he returned to the dining room. The mirror which had fallen and somehow hadn't broken, was propped against the wall. On it someone had printed words with what looked like lipstick.

KEEP YOUR NOSE CLEAN AND HE WON'T BE INJURED. SNIFF

HE AROSE and went to the telephone. He dialed Police Headquarters, asked for McGrath and learned that he'd gone home. He hung up, dialed McGrath's house number and got the detective on the wire.

"Come over at once," Quinn said. "I'm not sure what happened. I was asleep. The sounds of a terrific battle woke me up. By the time I got downstairs, Silk was gone. I need help. Come quickly Mac."

"I'll be there in ten minutes," McGrath said curtly. "Meantime, I'm calling for a radio car to race there. You need protection."

McGrath beat his promise by two minutes and when he arrived, Quinn was waiting on the porch, tapping his cane nervously, his face lined with worry.

In the hallway, things had changed a trifle. Quinn had deliberately upset two chairs and a small table with a lamp on it. The lamp

had a china base which was splintered all over the floor.

"Silk is gone!" Quinn reiterated. "I heard a terrible racket downstairs. When I got down, I stepped into fragments of china. From a lamp on a table, which I determined was upset. Also, a couple of chairs. Someone must have either kidnaped or killed Silk. I can't even look for—a corpse—if he's dead."

McGrath eyed the damage in the hallway and sped to search the entire house. His face was gray and grim when he returned. There were three radio cars outside now, their riders waiting for orders. They got them in a crisp, even-pitched voice.

"Fan out and look for a car with an unconscious or tied-up man in it," McGrath said. "Stop and search every car. And do this fast. I'll phone headquarters for more help. It's a wild goose chase, but we can't afford to take chances."

"Do you think he's dead?" Quinn asked querulously.

"I'm sure he isn't dead," McGrath snapped. "He was snatched and, believe me, the men who did it suffered plenty. Silk must have put up one devil of a battle by the looks of the place. There is even human hair on the floor. It may be a clue, although to make it click we need the head it came from."

"Mac," Quinn said, "are you sure? Are you certain he isn't—dead?"

"What's the use holding back?" McGrath sighed. "They left a message. Written in lipstick on the mirror in what's left of your dining room. It says that if you stick your nose out, they'll lop off Silk's. If you let them alone, Silk won't be hurt. That's it, Tony. Looks bad."

CHAPTER VII

The First Suspicion



DELIBERATELY Quinn tapped his way into the living room, found a chair and sat down heavily. The cane between his knees was gripped by two hands that shone white at the knuckles.

"Without Silk, I don't amount to very much, Mac," Quinn said. "He's been my eyes."

"You've still got a pair," McGrath said harshly. "Yes, I mean mine. Are you going to take this lying down, Tony?"

"No—I don't except to, although I shall be very careful. Mac, I need a little time to think. There must be some way to find Silk. Until he is found, I'll remain in the background, but I'll be working. Naturally, it will be necessary for me to visit the office as usual. I'll require help for that. Perhaps they'll assign a man to assist me."

"I'm assigning myself," McGrath grumbled. "Shucks, Tony, we've had our differences. Until now, I'd have sworn you were the Black Bat. I'm not so sure after this. If you could see, you wouldn't have permitted them to take Silk, no matter if you did have to show that you were not blind. I realize just what he meant to you. I like him too. We hiss at one another now and then, but it's friendly."

"You're a pretty good fellow, Mac. I appreciate all this—and I'm accepting an offer of your personal help. Because blind men need help. The next attack may be made against me and how could I defend myself? I'll expect you in the morning at nine, then?"

"I'm staying all night," McGrath said doggedly. "Who'll get your breakfast?"

Quinn mustered a smile.

"Oh, that. I'm quite capable of cooking my own breakfast, Mac. I do it often. Don't make me out as being completely helpless."

McGrath still wasn't certain.

"But suppose they come back for you?"

"Leave your gun, Mac. I know how to handle one."

"You—shoot a gun?" McGrath gasped.

"Why not? I shoot at sounds and if anyone enters this house before morning, I'll know he has no business here. Mac, you need a little lesson in the fact that a blind man isn't as helpless as he seems to be. I'll give you one. The electric light bulb in that broken lamp, is still intact. I felt of it. Unscrew it from the socket and bring it to me."

McGrath, mystified, obeyed. Quinn's fingers closed around the bulb.

"Now, Mac, just to satisfy yourself that I won't be able to see, put out every light and draw the shades in this room. Close the door also. Then I'll go to the far end of the room. I'll plug my ears if you like, until you are ready. Your task is to approach me and grab me without my throwing the bulb and coming reasonably close to you. Are you game?"

"Why, sure. Look, Quinn, maybe you can do this. I doubt it, but if you have that much faith, keep it intact. If you heave the bulb in the wrong direction, it might get you all upset."

"Try me," Quinn urged.

McGrath shrugged and prepared the room.

He waited until Quinn was at the far end, extinguished the last light and then removed his shoes. Without making a sound, he tiptoed halfway down the room, crouched beside a chair and studied the situation. He decided on a flank attack.

He began crossing the room and successfully negotiated that. McGrath couldn't see Quinn, but a blind man couldn't move noiselessly. The burly detective reached the opposite wall, started sidestepping and grinned a bit. This was too easy.

Suddenly, Quinn's voice rang out:

"You have your back against the north wall, midway down the room. Right about—there."

The electric light bulb hit the wall and exploded about five inches from McGrath's head. He gave a yelp of alarm.

"How close did I come?" Quinn asked. "I threw a couple of inches to the left of the spot I knew you were at."

"You missed me by a whisker," McGrath grumbled. "I'm picking splinters of glass out of my hair right now. Wait a minute—don't throw anything else. I'm going to turn on the lights. You certainly don't need them, but I do."

When Quinn was seated again, with McGrath standing in front of him, Quinn smiled.

"Well, who won that game?" he asked. "Do you believe now I can shoot and hit an intruder?"

McGrath laid his service pistol on the table beside the chair.

"Murderer or no murderer, if that lug comes here tonight, I'm going to feel sorry for him. You win, Tony. Hands down. I'll sleep better now. If we'd pulled that trick with the lights on, I'd have sworn you could see."

"Nine o'clock then," Quinn said. "Let yourself out, Mac. The door closes with a spring lock and I'll latch it besides. I'll be quite all right, now that I have a gun."

McGrath checked all windows and all other doors before he departed. The moment his car pulled away, Quinn jumped to his feet, retrieved the strands of hair and the blotter with which he'd sopped up those mysterious spots of fluid from the hallway floor.

He made his way to the hidden laboratory. First, he examined the hair under a microscope, but that was a distinct flop. It was just medium brown, healthy hair indistinguishable from hair possessed by millions of men. If he had a suspect, he might be able to do something with pigmentation, thickness and other features. The hair was worth

retaining at any rate. He put it away.

Next, he carefully cut off that portion of the blotter which had soaked up the fluid. He did a routine analysis and soon developed the fact that it was a drug, usually given by injection. Quinn put both elbows on the lab bench, propped his chin in his hands and gave way to considerable concentrated thinking.

The men had used a hypo on Silk. Obviously, Silk had put up an excellent battle. Did that seem as if Boylan's pugs had made the attack? Men of the type Boylan would send, would never think of using a hypo. A crack of a blackjack or gun butt was effective enough anesthesia for them.

And they'd have been picked men, bruisers. Would Silk have been able to put up that sort of battle with two of them? Even to yanking hair out of one intruder's head? Silk's kidnaping may have been the result of Boylan's planning, but if so, Boylan was using a brand new type of hoodlum.

Quinn switched his trend of thought. Silk might be held safely, but there was no guarantee of that. A dead man is a much easier prisoner to handle and if they knew Silk's reputation, they'd be well aware that he was pretty smooth. All-in-all, the ideas percolating in Quinn's mind were not comforting.

He was deprived of the one man who might remain in the house and stall a visitor while Quinn operated as the Black Bat. Without such protection, his work was going to be difficult and risky. The only consolation lay in the fact that McGrath was more or less neutral in this case. Still, if he showed up when Quinn was supposed to be at home, gained entrance and discovered the house empty, his suspicions would increase a hundred percent. In fact, they'd stop being suspicions and become evidence of guilt.

Quinn decided the safest course to follow was apparent obedience to the demands of the kidnapers. He couldn't risk putting Silk in jeopardy of his life. Silk might wangle a way out. Therefore, by day Tony Quinn would be cautious, yet active enough to allay McGrath's suspicions. By night, if he could keep on making McGrath believe he was able to take care of himself alone, he'd operate as the Black Bat. Swiftly, ruthlessly, the moment he had anything to go on.

That was the logic behind his little game with the detective. Yet Quinn had played it fairly. His eyes had been tightly shut when McGrath started edging closer. Quinn had determined his whereabouts strictly by the use of his uncanny hearing.

He wanted to meet Butch and find out if

the survivor named Vincent Gardet was safe and accounted for during the evening. Carol too, should be told of the newest development, but Quinn was afraid to take a chance. The house might be watched. By McGrath's men perhaps, for the detective might not have been satisfied with Quinn's prowess. Or, agents of the kidnaper could be there.

Quinn went back to the living room, picked up McGrath's revolver and tapped his way to the staircase. As an afterthought, he went to the door and double-locked it. Then he marched upstairs and went to bed.

He didn't sleep much. Silk was too predominant on his mind. He began to wonder about the efficiency of the men behind this scheme. Taking Silk as hostage might eliminate Quinn from the race, but what of that? There were still sixteen thousand local policemen and hundreds of State Police who wouldn't give up the hunt because Quinn's friend had been taken prisoner.

Gradually, through Quinn's mind, filtered the idea that perhaps there was more to this than appeared on the surface. Perhaps Silk had been kidnaped because he, personally, was a menace to the men behind murder.

If so, was it because of something Silk had seen, thought unimportant and never mentioned? Or did Silk know the people involved, and were they afraid to show themselves so long as Silk was in a position to spot them?

Quinn couldn't figure it out, but he meant to find out. The Black Bat would soon be prowling again and this time he'd be ready for any action that might turn up.

The following morning, Quinn was ready when Captain McGrath drove up. McGrath hurried into the house and took Quinn's arm as they headed back to the car. The detective captain had nothing much to report.

"We threw a cordon around the area and stopped hundreds of cars," he said. "Nothing doing. We interviewed neighbors and no one saw a blasted thing. Every cop in town has Silk's description, but of course that won't do any good unless they are forced to move him or he manages to get loose."

Quinn settled himself in the police car and waited until McGrath got behind the wheel.

"Silk is a smart chap," Quinn remarked. "But I have an idea the men who handled this snatch aren't exactly morons. Have you done anything about Boylan?"

"We made him account for his time every minute after he left your office and right up to the moment when Silk was taken. Boylan has a mighty good series of alibis. They could be framed, of course. Boylan never did carry

out his own dirty work and you can issue orders to hoodlums by messenger or telephone and still retain a cast iron alibi."

"I'm wondering if whoever has taken Silk prisoner, will communicate with me today," Quinn said slowly. "Just to let me know he is all right and so long as I lay low, he'll continue to be in good health. That's a usual procedure to follow up the initial threat. If they try that and allow Silk to send some personal message so I'll believe he is alive, Silk might find it possible to tell me something."

"What are you getting at, Tony?" McGrath asked.

"I'd rather, for today and tonight at least, that I be alone. I can take care of myself. If you or a lot of cops are around, they'll never dare try to make contact. I want them to."

"It's your own neck," McGrath said. "Maybe you're right though. Okay, I'll deliver you to the office and I'll stay away until you phone. Meantime, I'm going to start work on Boylan. Quiet searches of his joints, sending out stool pigeons. Usual routine stuff."

"Good, if your men are very careful. No raids or anything like that. They may come later, but if so, I'll order them, Mac."

CHAPTER VIII

The Strange Letter



PON reaching the Criminal Courts Building, McGrath turned Quinn over to one of the clerks in the office. This clerk read the mail, but it contained no letter of assurance from the kidnapers. Quinn plunged into his regular work. There wasn't much else he could do.

Butch O'Leary had called in early in the morning. He'd managed to get a room across the courtyard from the suite which Vincent Gardet occupied and could keep an eye on him. According to Butch—and told with much disgust—watching a man with a broken leg wasn't very exciting. Gardet had no visitors, though he'd written several letters and done some phoning.

Quinn hadn't told Butch of Silk Kirby's predicament. Butch was headstrong and might decide that two huge fists could do more good than patience. It was far better



CAROL

that Butch know nothing of that episode.

Carol had also phoned in, but she was quick to realize the finding of Silk was better handled by the Black Bat. She had an assignment of vast importance too. Guarding Kay Saville was no easy task, for the murderers might strike at any time.

At seven o'clock, Quinn sent a clerk who'd worked overtime, for sandwiches and coffee and then dismissed him. Alone in the office, he could relax a trifle and drop his pose of blindness. He made up his mind to remain there until nine o'clock, before calling it a day. After nine, Quinn would go home and retire quickly. Then the Black Bat would take wing.

A half hour went by. The building, so busy and noisy by day, was quiet as a graveyard. So quiet that Quinn heard the footsteps coming along the tiled floor of the corridor. He sat down quickly and his eyes assumed that blank stare again.

The steps were quick and almost nervous. Hesitant, too, for they passed by his office door, paused and then returned. He heard the door open gently. Quinn's right hand dipped into a desk drawer where he'd placed McGrath's revolver.

If these were killers bent on destroying him, he'd be forced to shoot it out. But with the build-up he'd provided for McGrath, the detective would be apt to take any good shooting as being perfectly possible by a blind man.

There were two people all right and they had stopped just outside the gate leading into the outer office. Quinn could hear whispered voices and one seemed to be that of a woman.

Then a man's voice called.

"Anybody home?" It was a frail, thin little voice.

"Come in," Quinn called back. "I'm all alone."

The man who appeared in the doorway was about five feet five with mousy gray hair and mild blue eyes. He held a brand new hat in his hand, unconsciously squeezing it out of shape. When he stepped into the room, the woman appeared. She'd been directly behind him, but was even shorter and thinner so that even the diminutive man had cut her off from Quinn's vision.

"Who is it, please?" Quinn asked. "I'm blind. I can't see you."

"Oh! Oh—he's blind, Martha. Did you hear that? He can't see."

The little gray-haired woman seemed to have more spunk. She pushed by her companion with a toss of her head. She was wearing a small flowered hat set precisely erect and the stemmed flowers bobbed crazily as she approached.

"My stars!" she said, "A body would think being blind is a disease the way you act, Floyd. We're looking for a lawyer named Quinn, mister."

"My name is Tony Quinn. I'm an attor-

ney. Please sit down and tell me who you are and what you want at this hour. The office is supposed to be closed."

"Closed?" the man said in a surprised voice. "But this is Wednesday night. In Walboro, lawyers stay open on Wednesday nights."

"Floyd, let me do the talking," the woman commanded sharply. "Mr. Quinn, we had to see you. We're Mr. and Mrs. Floyd Spiers. The parents of Judith."

"Judith?" Quinn frowned, but he was relaxed. Certainly these two elderly people were harmless. He quietly closed the desk drawer to conceal the gun.

"Yes—Judith Rolfe," Mrs. Spiers said, as if that explained everything.

"I'm sorry," Quinn apologized, "but really, I'm at a loss to place you."

"Our Judy married Mark Rolfe. They were k-killed!"

"Oh." Quinn made a round "O" of his mouth. "Yes, I remember now. In the plane crash. Very unfortunate. I once knew a man named Rolfe, but he couldn't have been the man who married your daughter."

BOTH looked crestfallen. "Oh, but we thought you did know him. That you were his lawyer and we hoped you could help us."

"What on earth gave you that idea?" Quinn asked.

"Why, Judy wrote home and said that Mark told her to tell us that if anything happened, you would be the man to see. They traveled by air so much. Judy was afraid, I guess."

Quinn leaned back in his chair.

"Mark Rolfe? Do you know his father's name?"

"Oh, yes. He's dead though. He was James Rolfe. I—I think he was in the manufacturing business. Something having to do with glassware.

Quinn nodded.

"So that's it. Yes, I once acted as James Rolfe's attorney. I remember drawing up his will. His son was the sole heir. I lost track of him after that. So your daughter married Jimmy's son, eh? Of course I shall be pleased to help you."

The two old people looked at one another as if their prayers had been answered.

Mrs. Spiers kept her role of spokesman.

"Then we came to the right man," she said. "Mr. Quinn, we want to reach Mark's folks. We haven't been able to find them. We attended to the—funeral arrangements.

We didn't have much money, but we knew that Mark was well off so we explained and the undertaker was very helpful."

"I see," Quinn said slowly. "I think Mark has a cousin somewhere. I'll have to check back. Unquestionably, there is a considerable estate. That phase you will have to take up with Mark's relatives. If you like, I'll handle your end of it."

"Would you?" they chorused and then Mrs. Spiers kept on talking.

"We'll pay, naturally," she said. "All we want is to see that everything is fair. If there is any money, we don't want much. Just the funeral expenses and things. We're old. My husband is retired and lives on a pension. We have our little home in Walboro, free and clear."

"That's right," Mr. Spiers chimed in. "We just want to be fair."

Quinn hardly heard them. To his acute ears came the sound of someone moving stealthily across the outer office toward the closed door to the room he now occupied. Quinn's right hand dropped down below the surface of the desk and quietly pulled open the drawer to expose the revolver once more.

But no one attempted to enter. Instead, a white envelope was being slipped very slowly and quietly beneath the door. Quinn saw it and wanted to get at that envelope in the worst way. But so long as these people were present, it was out of the question.

The envelope, he knew, contained some word from or concerning Silk Kirby. Quinn had to sit there and listen to the old people prattle about their daughter and what a nice boy her husband had been, even though they only had seen him once.

"They were married on Friday, Mr. Quinn, and they were killed on Tuesday of the following week. Their happiness was so short. But at least they died together. Pa and I always hoped for that."

The old man nodded and smiled. Quinn arose.

"Then if you will leave everything to me, I'll see that matters are taken care of. You might tell me where I can reach you. As soon as I know anything definite, I'll call at once."

"Everybody in Walboro knows us." Mrs. Spiers bobbed her head and the flowers swayed like wheat in a storm. "We don't ever go any place much."

Quinn extended his hand vaguely. "Thank you, Mr. and Mrs. Spiers. It won't require more than a day or two. I'll go right to work on it."

He picked up his cane and tapped his way to the door, opened it and stood there. The envelope lay tantalizingly on the floor almost at his feet, but he made no motion to pick it up.

Mrs. Spiers spotted it. "Why, someone must have dropped something," she exclaimed. "It's an envelope."

Quinn shrugged. "Probably fell out of the wastebasket."

"No, it's sealed. Maybe it's important."

Quinn held out his hand and she put the envelope into it. That did it. Quinn had to know the contents at once. Seconds might be precious. He ripped the seal, extracted a single sheet of paper and if he was ever tempted to betray surprise, it was now. The sheet of paper was perfectly blank. There wasn't a mark on it.

"Would you mind—reading this to me?" he asked and held out the blank piece of paper. Mrs. Spiers reached for it.

Suddenly the door burst open and two men came in. Both held guns. Without the slightest hesitation, they rushed toward the trio. Neither man spoke. They were evilly dressed except for their shoes, which were highly polished and looked expensive.

Quinn saw them. He'd know them again, but at this moment he could do nothing except stand there with a frown on his face, as if he were trying to puzzle out what his eyes missed.

ONE of the two men reached for the blank piece of paper which Mrs. Spiers still held. She gave a sharp cry, jerked back her hand and moved aside. The intruder made a savage pass at her with the barrel of the gun he held.

Her husband shouted and moved in with his fists half raised. Puny fists against men such as these. The fact that they were armed didn't bother old man Spiers at all. The second gunman gave a hoarse laugh, stepped behind Spiers, smashed his gunbutt down on the old man's head. Spiers crumpled without a sound.

Mrs. Spiers screamed, dropped the piece of paper and knelt beside her husband. One of the gunmen raised a foot and ruthlessly kicked the old woman out of his path. He bent and picked up the strange paper, glanced at it and then the pair backed toward the door.

During the entire time, neither had uttered a word. Quinn, unable to do anything about this, could only let them go. If the Spiers hadn't been present, he might have risked battling it out with the pair, but this was

no time for it. The outer door slammed.

"What in the world is going on?" Quinn asked petulantly. "What happened?"

"Two men." Mrs. Spiers looked up. "They hit my husband. He's badly hurt, Mr. Quinn. They came here for that letter you received. They got it too."

"Did you see what was written on the paper?" Quinn asked.

"Not a thing. It was perfectly blank. It seems so silly that two men would want it so badly as to nearly kill my husband. Mr. Quinn, how can I get a doctor here?"

Quinn used his cane, tapped his way back to the office and called McGrath. He asked that an ambulance be sent. Then he went back to where Spiers still lay. The old man's face was white and there was blood congealing on his gray hair. Quinn knelt awkwardly, nearly upsetting himself against Mrs. Spiers. He murmured an apology, fumbled for Spier's wrist and felt the pulse.

"He'll be all right," Quinn told the woman. "The pulse is good and that's the important thing. An ambulance and the police are on their way. I'm very sorry you were mixed up in this. You see, besides being a regular lawyer, I'm Special District Attorney. A prosecutor. And I have enemies—lots of them."

"But why did they want just a plain blank piece of paper?" she asked.

"There was probably a little writing on it somewhere, Mrs. Spiers. You didn't see it, that's all. If you will go into my office, you'll find a heavy coat on the rack. Fold it and put it beneath your husband's head. That will help."

CHAPTER IX

Attempted Murder



MCGRATH came in a rush. So did an ambulance from the same hospital where two of the survivor victims were being treated. There was nothing astounding about that. The hospital was the closest to Quinn's office.

Quinn still held the envelope in which the blank sheet of paper had been

delivered.

"I don't get it," McGrath grumbled. "That old lady told me, before she went out with the stretcher, that she is positive there wasn't a line written on either side of the paper."

Why should anyone send you a message in that way and not have it be a message at all?"

"And why, Mac, would a couple of gunmen risk a great deal to get a blank piece of paper back? That is just as important and mysterious."

McGrath snapped his fingers.

"Listen. This is what must have happened. They were going to send you a message about Silk. Okay! And Silk was to add some little note to the effect that he hadn't been harmed. But Silk is smart. Somehow, he got a blank piece of paper. Maybe he scratched on it with his fingernail, or the blunt end of the pen. Almost anything could have been done to send some secret message. The note was delivered and suddenly those kidnapers knew what Silk had done. So they came to get the note back. How's that?"

"A perfect theory. Perhaps the only answer to it all. Mrs. Spiers wouldn't have noticed anything like secret writing on the paper. You're getting better, Mac."

But Quinn knew that theory was wrong because he had held the paper. He'd managed to pass sensitive fingertips over the surface of it and he'd encountered no faint indentations what-so-ever. It was still a perfectly blank sheet of paper.

McGrath scowled.

"Any time you like, Tony, we'll stage a raid on Boylan's spots that will turn out every crook he has hidden there. I'd have pulled it long ago except for Silk. If Boylan has Silk and we don't obey that lipstick message on your mirror, they'll kill him. Those mugs never keep their word about anything unless it's bad. They'll keep their word on this."

"I know, Mac. That's what I'm afraid of. Did your stool-pigeons find out anything?"

"I sent out a dozen. Usually good men too. Some of 'em have an in with Boylan's men. Boylan is laying low and he seems to have been for days. In fact, all the information I got was that some new specialist in fixing gambling wheels and machines, had turned up from somewhere out West. Man, if Boylan makes his gambling games any more crooked, he'll cheat himself."

Quinn got up.

"Let's go see if Hewitt, the jewelry salesman, has come out of it yet. Then I'm going home. I still hope they'll try to get into touch with me again. I want to be around when they do."

"Just as you say," McGrath agreed. "I was wondering about Hewitt myself."

They reached the hospital and Quinn, on McGrath's arm now, stepped into the ele-

vator to Hewitt's floor. As the elevator doors opened, they ran into confusion. A policeman, in uniform, was propped against the corridor wall while an intern examined his head. McGrath let go of Quinn's arm and sped to the scene. Quinn followed, much more slowly.

He was in time, however, to hear the policeman's story.

"I was sitting outside Lester Hill's door, just as the orders said. All of a sudden somebody slugged me. It must have been with a baseball bat because I passed out right away. I'm sorry, Captain. They tell me Hill got it pretty bad."

"McGrath," Quinn said loudly. "Take me in to see Hill at once."

McGrath led the apparently blind man into the room. Doctors and nurses were just finishing their work over him. Hill was conscious and able to talk a little. One surgeon recognized Quinn and explained.

"Obviously an attempted murder. The patrolman on duty outside was struck on the head. He could have been approached easily enough from around the corner. Whoever did it must have worked fast. He darted into this room. Hill was sleeping. The assassin plunged a knife into Hill's throat. Intending, I suppose, to sever the jugular. His knowledge of anatomy was poor, fortunately, and he missed. Hill will recover I'm sure."

Quinn moved over until his knees struck the side of the bed lightly.

"Mr. Hill," he said. "You now have concrete evidence that this is no joke. Someone is trying to murder every survivor of that plane crash. You were supposed to be the third victim. Now—to prevent anything like this from happening again, either to you or the other survivors, we have to trap the killer."

"How can I help?" Hill asked in a weak voice. "I never even saw the man who knifed me."

QUINN rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"The motive will reveal the murderer," he said. "Think hard. Didn't you hear that ex-convict attorney raving about someone in particular?"

"I—told you before—it sounded like Boylan. But I really heard nothing. Fennelley just raved. He didn't even make sense most of the time."

Quinn called to McGrath and the detective hurried to his side.

"Put two men inside this room, Captain. They are to be well armed and ready to shoot to kill. Mr. Hill may not know very

much, but the killer is taking no chances. He stands ready to commit more murder simply on the suspicion that these survivors may have heard something. Nothing like this must happen again. And provide a similar guard for Harold Hewitt. Are you certain Hewitt is all right?"

"Let's go see," McGrath suggested.

Attendants were getting ready to give Hill a narcotic as Quinn and McGrath left. Down the hall they found the door to Hewitt's room wide open. His uncle was still there, seated beside the window. A nurse had just finished putting a new dressing on Hewitt's head. The old bandages lay on the floor.

"How does he look?" Quinn asked McGrath.

"Nearly dead, Tony. Man, if that killer ever gets in here, he could polish Hewitt off with a flip of his little finger. Nurse, is there any change?"

"No, sir." The nurse picked up the old bandages. "He recovered consciousness for about five minutes at six o'clock, but lapsed into a coma again. I was at his side. He did not say a word. I had orders to call the police if he did. Now where on earth is that pair of scissors?"

Quinn backed away awkwardly.

"I hope I'm not impeding your work, nurse."

"Oh, no, sir. But I cut off the old dressing with a big pair of scissors and now I can't find them. They'll turn up. I'll be through here in a moment or two. I spilled medication on the pillow slip and I'll have to change it."

She left the room for a moment and returned with a fresh pillow slip. McGrath stepped up to the bed, taking Quinn along. He let go of Quinn's arm and bent to help the nurse raise the sick man's head while the pillow was removed and the cover changed and then put back."

Quinn talked to Hewitt's uncle for a moment, but the old man knew nothing. He seemed discouraged.

"I don't know what will happen next. They tell me one of the men who was in the plane with Howard was nearly murdered just a few minutes ago."

"Well, don't let that worry you," Quinn said. "In a very short time two policemen will be installed in this room steadily. Your nephew won't fall victim to that killer."

Quinn nudged McGrath in a signal to leave. In the hallway, Quinn stopped the detective.

"Mac, I imagine they brought Mr. Spiers to this hospital," he said. "Let's look him up.

After all, I'm his attorney and I owe him that courtesy."

"Why not?" McGrath shrugged. "Maybe he saw something on that phony letter you got."

They walked down another wing to reach Spiers' room. He was sitting up in bed, wide-eyed and alert. Mrs. Spiers occupied a chair beside the bed.

"Why, it's Mr. Quinn." She arose quickly. "How nice of you to come."

Quinn kept his blank stare turned her way.

"How do you feel, Mr. Spiers?" he asked.

As the man answered, Quinn turned his head in that direction.

"I guess I'm harder headed than anybody thought." Spiers chuckled. "Got me a nice sound headache, but outside of that I'm all right. When will they let me out of here?"

"You'd better stay for the night," Quinn suggested. "By the way, did you notice that letter I received just before those men burst into my office?"

"All I saw was the envelope and the piece of paper you took out of it, Mr. Quinn. Martha tells me there wasn't a blamed thing written on it. Kind of peculiar, don't you think?"

"A masterly understatement," Quinn said. "Good night, sir. Good night, Mrs. Spiers. I'm sure neither of you has anything to worry about."

McGrath helped him out of the room. Halfway down the corridor, Quinn slowed up. "Mac, wasn't there supposed to be a patrolman on duty outside of Hewitt's room too?"

McGRATH sighed. "There was. It's mostly my fault. I'm not tough enough. I told those two dodos not to leave their posts for anything. They obeyed until somebody telephoned downstairs for the cop in front of Hewitt's door to get on the wire. The caller said he was me. Imagine that? So the cop trots all the way to the phone booths at the end of the hall and knows nothing until the whole thing is over. That won't happen again, believe me."

"It better not," Quinn said grimly. "Unless we want to add another name to this series of murders. What about Vincent Gardet?"

"We've got a man watching the hotel where he lives and the hotel dick is co-operating. Only person allowed to see Gardet is his doctor. Nothing to worry about there. Want to go home now, Tony?"

"Yes," Quinn answered. "You may drop me in front of the house. I'll make my way

alone. Since Silk has gone, I'm rather amazed at what I can do without help. Call for me in the morning, Mac—unless you hear something of Silk."

McGrath, on their way to the elevator, saw Hewitt's nurse. "Did you find your scissors?" he asked.

She smiled.

"They were on the floor beside the bed all the time."

Quinn and the captain talked about the case in further detail as McGrath drove the police car to Quinn's home. He sat in the car until he saw Quinn unlock the door and enter the house. Quinn accomplished this without many false moves.

Once inside, Quinn stood and listened. There wasn't a sound. He was quite certain that he was alone. He took no chances though and his mask of blindness never altered. He made his way to a telephone in the living room, dialed Butch O'Leary's number and waited. There was no answer.

In a flash, he was streaking toward the secret lab. He'd tried to reach Butch in the room he'd taken at the hotel where Gardet lived. Butch wasn't there so something must have happened. Butch was supposed to be ready for a call on the hour, every single hour.

In five minutes, Tony Quinn, still greatly worried, had vanished and the black-clad nemesis of crime was prepared for action. The Black Bat made his way to where the coupe was parked and drove straight to Gardet's hotel.

Where was Butch O'Leary?

CHAPTER X

One Blow of a Fist



EXACTLY at ten o'clock, Butch waited for a telephone call from the Black Bat. He allotted ten extra minutes and then realized no call was coming. He peered out of his window, looked across the court and saw Gardet seated in a chair reading. His injured leg was propped up on another

chair.

Butch swore softly. Of all the assignments the Black Bat had ever given him, this was the dullest. He decided to go down to the lobby for cigarettes, some newspapers and have a look around. Butch knew that a

policeman in plain clothes was around the building and that the house detective was especially alert. But neither of them suspected Butch.

He rode the elevator down, kidded the cigar counter girl again and made his purchases. He installed himself in a lobby chair from which he could watch all elevators and the stairway doors. There was no other way to reach the upper floors except by means of the service entrance, which he knew was under good surveillance by McGrath's detective.

Butch paid no attention when a burly man with a goatee, glasses and carrying a small black bag approached the desk. But the hotel detective did. There was some soft talking. The goateed man fumbled in his pockets, pulled out a stethoscope and then found a business card. The hotel detective glanced at it and reached for the telephone. He made an outside call.

Butch began to get interested. He drifted idly over toward the desk. He was in time to hear the hotel detective ask a question.

"Doctor Gladstone's office? Is the Doc in? No? Well, did he send another doctor named Wilson to call on Mr. Gardet? Yeah, okay—Thanks."

The hotel detective laid the business card on the desk and turned to the goateed man.

"You can go up, Doctor. Suite Twelve Thirty-three. I'll call Gardet and tell him you're coming."

The doctor picked up his bag and walked to the elevators. Butch parked an elbow on the desk, about two inches from the card which still lay there. Under pretence of looking at his newspaper, he read the card.

It was one of Dr. Gladstone's business cards and scrawled across it were a few words:

I am sending Dr. Wilson in my place. Please allow him to enter.

The signature, like that of most physicians, was hardly legible. Butch passed over all that. The house detective had telephoned, using the phone number printed on the card. Butch memorized it. Business cards and phone numbers could be fakes.

He ambled over to the phone booths and consulted a directory. The number listed under Dr. Gladstone's name was different from the one printed on the card.

Butch ran for the elevator, not caring who saw him run, either. He reached an elevator, ready to ascend, in about a dozen long bounds. He told the operator to go direct to the twelfth floor. It wasn't so much what Butch said as the way he said it. He acted plenty tough. No passenger argued and the

operator even tried to coax additional speed from the lift.

As the door slid open at the twelfth floor, Butch went racing down the corridor. He reached the door of Gardet's suite and tried the knob. The door was locked. He tapped on the panels, drew back and got set to crash his way through if no one answered.

"Who is it?"

The voice was that of Dr. Wilson.

"House detective," Butch answered. "I brought up your business card. If you have to come again, you'll need it."

"Oh! Thank you."

The bolt turned, the door opened a crack

He sprang at Butch. But the huge man leaped nimbly aside, thrust out a hand and the fake doctor went reeling to the left. He almost fell, but regained his balance and promptly reversed the knife so that he held it by the point. He drew back his hand.

Butch grabbed a chair. The knife came hurtling at him, as straight as a blade could be thrown. Butch raised the chair. The knife hit it, was imbedded half through the bottom and quivered with a slight hiss, like that of a serpent.

Butch dropped the chair, spread both arms wide and started moving slowly toward the fake doctor who kept backing up while his



BUTCH

and Butch hit it.

He drove the doctor back into the middle of the room. He was a strange doctor indeed, and his method of treatment was just as strange.

Butch got a glimpse of Gardet and went into action. Gardet was still seated in the same chair, but his arms were pinned to it with adhesive and more was plastered over his mouth and his eyes.

That was all Butch saw. The doctor was getting ready to perform some surgery, only the knife he held wasn't exactly the type used in operating rooms. It was more like the ones Yank troops used in jungle fighting—big, wide and sharp on both sides. It was a highly dangerous weapon in anyone's hands and this man appeared to have some training in its use.

features were growing whiter and whiter with alarm. Suddenly he charged. One foot came up in a vicious kick that missed.

BUTCH'S punch didn't miss. But because the fake doctor moved simultaneously, the blow struck him squarely on the throat.

He raised both hands, gurgled something and clutched at his neck. Then he slowly sank to the floor. Butch bent over him in some alarm. The man was obviously dying and Butch didn't want that to happen. He was on the verge of calling for help when the room door opened and a dark figure leaped noiselessly into the room.

Butch straightened and his mighty fists were doubled and ready for business. Then he recognized the intruder and relaxed. The

lights winked out and a familiar voice whispered to him in the darkness.

"Over here," Butch called very softly. The Black Bat moved unerringly to his side. Butch put his lips against the Black Bat's ear.

"This mug on the floor said he was a doctor sent by the regular M.D.," Butch explained. "Only he was a fake and a killer. He tried to polish off Gardet, but I got here in time. Then he tried to work over me and I let him have it. I—think the faker is dead."

The Black Bat knelt beside the form. His uncanny eyes needed no light. He spent about one minute examining the man. Butch didn't move an inch. In this inky darkness, he'd stumble against something. The Black Bat returned to his side.

"You hit him on the throat and broke his larynx," the Black Bat said. "He strangled to death. He had it coming, but I wish he'd lived. That man could have told us things. Here is what to do, Butch. Gardet's eyes are covered. Apparently, that was done so that if Gardet didn't die right away, he'd have little opportunity to study his murderer. The fake doctor is pretty well disguised. Now you walk out of here quietly. Try not to make any noise at all. I'll tell Gardet I killed this man. Downstairs you'll find the coupe, parked opposite the service entrance."

"A cop was posted there," Butch gasped.

"He was posted there. I put him to sleep and he's resting comfortably on the coal pile. I had to do it. I thought they'd reached you. Get in the coupe and wait."

Butch crept out of the room. After a moment the Black Bat snapped on the lights. Then he walked over to Gardet and carefully removed the adhesive from his eyes. There wasn't much danger that Gardet had overheard anything. Gardet had fainted.

The Black Bat removed the rest of the adhesive and then fetched a glass of water. In a couple of minutes Gardet's eyes opened slightly, grew wide and he opened his mouth to scream. The Black Bat's gloved hand promptly covered his mouth.

"You're no longer in any danger. I'm the Black Bat. Apparently, I got here just in time. If you want proof, look to the left. The so-called doctor who came to treat you is—dead. I killed him."

"Thank heavens!" Gardet breathed a sigh of relief. "What an idiot I've been. I thought the cops were crazy when they told me I might be in danger. That man came in here and said he was taking the place of my regular physician. He pretended to look at my leg, opened his kit and all of a sudden he started putting adhesive over my wrists and

face. How could I resist, with a busted leg?"

"He knew that too," the Black Bat said grimly. "Now, Mr. Gardet, you must be certain that the danger is real. This man failed to kill you, but there will be others who will try. They think you know too much."

"About that dying ex-convict who raved for an hour before he passed on? Honest, I couldn't make any sense from what he said. The racketeers are mistaken. I couldn't harm them in any way."

"Are you positive that Fennelley said nothing which might put you or anyone else on the track of some criminals? Remember that Fennelley knew more about crime and criminals than our best detectives. If he raved, his words had a meaning, provided they could be understood."

"But I understood nothing—except the name of Boylan. I told the police about that. I never heard of anybody named Boylan and that's all he said clearly. The rest of it was gibberish."

"Then why are these men so intent on killing you? Understand this, Mr. Gardet, besides being in danger from these killers, you are also under suspicion. I'll admit much of that suspicion has been removed as a result of this attempt upon your life, but some of it remains."

"How? Why? What have I done?"

"You never stopped to think, I suppose, that someone, among you survivors, is associated with the murdering gang. That must be the explanation. It was someone who heard Fennelley say more than gibberish and believes you others heard him too. Our suspects are limited. You and Hewitt, who is unconscious and has been since soon after he reached the hospital. Then there are Lester Hill, who was nearly murdered tonight, and the stewardess Kay Saville. That's all. The other survivors are dead. Now do you understand?"

"Yes. Yes, I sure do. And I don't wonder I'm suspected. Naturally, I deny it all. In fact, I'd like to prove my innocence by helping all I can."

THE Black Bat laughed.

"You're rather handicapped, Mr. Gardet. The greatest help we can get from you is what you know and that seems to be precious little. Your story is like Hill's. He heard gibberish too. Tell me—where were you seated when the crash happened?"

"Behind a couple of love birds. Honey-mooners. Rolfe, I think the man's name was."

"Oh, yes. A tragedy. They were both killed."

I imagine people felt sorrier for them than for the rest of you. Something about romance always adds zest."

"Well, they can go on feeling as sorry as they like," Gardet grumbled. "I'm not talking, except to you. Maybe they were in love. Maybe they had just been married, but I'm telling you that girl was sore. They didn't speak or hold hands or even look at one another. All she did was stare out of the window."

"Which just makes it worse," the Black Bat said. "They were killed before they could make up. Excuse me just one moment."

The Black Bat went over to where the dead man lay and proceeded to search him. His pockets contained very little and there was no identification on any of his wearing apparel. The Black Bat stowed a deck of playing cards into his own pocket, that being the only item of interest the fake doctor carried.

Next, the Black Bat removed a small metal case from somewhere in his clothing, took a single paper sticker from it and pasted this in the center of the dead man's forehead. It was a black sticker shaped like a bat in full flight.

"What on earth is that for?" Gardet was leaning far over in his chair.

"A sign that I killed this man. So you won't be suspected, Mr. Gardet. The police will recognize my trademark. And I shall phone them at once to come and get this body and to arrange better protection for you. If anything occurs to your mind, concerning what Fennelley said, tell the police immediately. The only way you can remove this danger hanging over your head is by telling what these killers are afraid you know. Once that is done, they'll have no further reason to kill you. The damage they fear will have been accomplished."

"If only there was something I could tell!" Gardet groaned. "I swear there isn't."

The Black Bat had moved quietly to the door. He stepped outside after a quick look. Two minutes later, he was in the coupe beside Butch and being driven home.

There he used the secret entrance, went at once to the telephone and dialed Police Headquarters. He asked for Captain McGrath.

"This is the Black Bat," he said. "Go to Gardet's. You'll find your detective in the basement. I put him out of the picture because he might have some illusions about capturing me. An attempt was made on Gardet's life tonight. I got there in time and I was compelled to kill the would-be murderer. Happy hunting, Captain."

Quinn hung up, waited a couple of minutes and the phone rang. He waited another full minute before answering it. His voice, the normal voice of Tony Quinn, was just different enough from that of the Black Bat to arouse no suspicions.

"Oh!" McGrath sounded disappointed. "I—just heard from the Black Bat. He says he killed a man who was trying to murder Gardet. I'm going right over there. See you later."

Quinn hung up, turned around and grinned at Butch.

"McGrath means well," he said. He wants to co-operate and give me a chance to operate as the Black Bat, but he simply cannot resist temptation. He wanted to find out if I'd phoned him from somewhere else and I couldn't possibly be home in time to get his call to this house."

"Yeah." Butch was looking around with a puzzled expression. "Where's Silk?"

CHAPTER XI

Visit in the Night



TONY QUINN still wore his regalia and before answering Butch he snapped a switch which would transfer all phone calls to the secret lab. He led Butch there and handed him a cigarette.

"Now, take it easy, Butch. Silk was kidnaped last night. Under circumstances that were most peculiar. Obviously, Boylan must be back of it. If so, he's using new methods. Silk was drugged."

"Doped?" Butch scowled. "The lugs Boylan hires don't need drugs. They just slam a guy on the head."

"I know. Besides, Silk put up a terrific battle. It must have lasted until the drug took effect. Now Silk isn't a heavy fighter. He's reasonably good, but against men such as those Boylan would send on a job like this, Silk wouldn't have stood a chance."

"Just the same I'm going to look for him," Butch growled. "Who else is it but Boylan? He used to be a snatch expert."

"We're both going hunting so save your eagerness," the Black Bat warned. "However, we can't leave until Captain McGrath either phones back about Gardet or comes here to see me. So relax and stop trying to smoke that cigarette in two puffs. Here—

have another."

The Black Bat went over the whole case with Butch, relating every detail. It served to refresh his own memory as well as bring Butch up to date on developments.

"But look," Butch argued. "If those guys don't know anything—about what Fennelley said—why not let them say so to the newspapers? Then Boylan will maybe believe it and stop trying to polish them off."

"I'm afraid he'd think it was nothing more than a trick." The Black Bat shook his head sadly. "Men like Boylan don't even trust themselves. Suppose, Butch, we play a little gin rummy while we're waiting. Your nerves are ready to pop."

Without waiting for Butch's acquiescence, the Black Bat took out the deck of playing cards he'd found on the fake doctor in Gardet's hotel suite. He opened the cardboard box and gently passed the cards through his fingers. He examined them for a moment or two and then dealt a poker hand.

"We'll make it draw poker," he explained. "The bets will be theoretical. That is, we'll make them verbally and we won't settle up because I think you're a pretty poor poker player, Butch. You're too nervous tonight."

"I'm a good poker player," Butch thundered. "I'll prove it."

They bet fantastic sums. Within ten minutes Butch laid down his latest hand. He held four aces.

"And let's see you beat that," he gloated. "So far, I been pushed all over the place. You just topped me every time but it'll take some topping this time."

"Such as a king high straight flush?" the Black Bat laid down his cards and Butch gasped.

"We'll call it quits," the Black Bat chuckled. "I've cheated you unmercifully, Butch. These cards are marked. A gambler's deck. I could deal anything I wanted."

BUTCH picked up one card and passed his fingertips over it.

"So help me, if these are studded, it must be some job."

"They are—and it is some job. My fingertips are especially sensitive and that alone enabled me to feel the tiny marks. The gambler who handles cards like these uses an emery board on his finger ends to make them sensitive. I got these cards from that phony doctor. It appears that he was some sort of a gambler."

"Which means what?" Butch asked.

"I don't know, exactly. It has set me thinking. However, one of McGrath's stool

pigeons brought news that Boylan had recently hired some sort of a gambling sharp. An expert on roulette wheels and such. I think we can safely assume that he'd know how to mark cards too."

"Boylan again," Butch ground out. "No matter which way we turn, he always comes into the picture. Of course he's behind the whole thing. I wish McGrath would call and get it over with so we can start hunting for Silk."

McGrath's call came twenty minutes later. "I'm in a devil of a stew," he said. "The Black Bat was right. Gardet backs him up, says he practically saw him kill that fake doctor. And, Tony, for the first time, I think I've got a line on the Black Bat."

"Should I start packing?" the Black Bat asked with a laugh.

"I may have been all wrong. It's like this. A man commandeered an elevator at Gardet's hotel, went to the twelfth floor and got into Gardet's room in time to save his life. Now that man obviously must have been the Black Bat."

"And you have a description of him?"

"He's a giant of a man. You know, there was a time or two when I had a glimpse of him in his hood and outfit and I thought he was pretty huge. Much bigger than you, Tony. Now I'm surer than ever. Besides, Gardet told me the Black Bat said he'd phone me as soon as he left the hotel."

"Shame," the Black Bat chided. "You called me the instant the Black Bat hung up. To see if I was home."

"Well, you can't blame a man for trying," McGrath said weakly.

"It's all right, Mac. How about that dead man? Know who he is?"

"Never saw him before. If he belongs to Boylan's mob, he's obviously a newcomer. Maybe he is that gambler one of my stoolies told me about. I'm sending his prints to the F.B.I. by special messenger."

"Let me know if you learn anything from them," the Black Bat said. "And make the guard around Gardet stronger. I'm going to bed now. Unless something very important turns up, don't disturb me, Mac. I haven't had much rest lately."

The Black Bat dropped the phone on its cradle and sat there staring into space for a moment or two. He glanced at his watch. It was nearly midnight. He went over to one of the many steel filing cabinets, pulled out a file on Don Boylan and consulted it briefly.

"Quite a character," he said slowly. "Boylan maintains an elaborate home on Long Island where he lives like a gentleman, with

half a dozen sentries posted about the estate. Now Boylan is being annoyed by the police. Very much so and, in the past, he has always retired to this Long Island home when he was in a jam. Perhaps it helps his sense of morale to be amidst the surroundings of a gentleman. He'll be there now, in all likelihood. And so shall we, Butch."

"I'm ready." Butch extended both massive hands and made fists of them. An anticipatory grin crossed his big face.

"Just the same, you're taking one of these along," the Black Bat said sternly. He slid an automatic toward Butch. "Boylan's boys don't play patty-cake and, while I fully acknowledge the prowess of your fists, they're impotent against the power of a little chunk of lead or steel. Take the gun, Butch, and let's go."

They used the coupe again and reached the vicinity of Boylan's estate in short order. That coupe was an especially made job. It looked dilapidated, but under the seedy old hood were cylinders that purred smoothly and could send the light car along at a remarkable speed.

They parked the car a quarter of a mile from Boylan's place. The Black Bat's sharp eyes discovered another big place which was closed up for the season so he rolled the coupe behind that house where it was securely hidden.

The Black Bat led the way now and, as they crossed the estates, his strange eyesight served them well. He avoided—and signaled Butch to avoid—any pitfalls such as garden tools and furniture, low hedges and bushes that were invisible on this intensely dark night.

Soon they reached the fence which hemmed in Boylan's property.

The Black Bat spoke in a whisper.

"Get this, Butch. If we find Silk, your job is to get him away. I'll stay behind, should circumstances demand it and hold off Boy-

lan's men. Those orders are not to be contradicted. Is that clear? Not even if you see a chance to pop one of the boys right on the nose."

"I'll be good," Butch promised. "But I hope one of those lugs gets in my way."

"You shall have your ice cream and pie," the Black Bat whispered. "This fence is patrolled. Someone should be along soon and we'll wait. I'll give you the honor of conking him."

"Honor, my foot," Butch grumbled. "It'll be nothing but a pleasure."

The Black Bat listened carefully, stood erect and peered through the tall fence. His eyes penetrated the darkness perfectly and saw no one. He signaled Butch. The big man made a stirrup of his two hands. The Black Bat inserted a foot and was promptly raised high enough to scramble over the fence.

He dropped lightly.

Butch walked back a little, started to run and gave a flying leap. He secured a grip and hauled himself over too.

Then they quickly sought the shelter of a bush.

Some minutes following, a man sauntered along just inside the fence. He carried a rifle in the crook of his arm and he was whistling softly. The whistle stopped as a vast hand clamped across his mouth. The rifle was wrenched from his grasp and then a fist crashed down squarely on top of his head. That was quite sufficient.

The Black Bat grinned at Butch, bent and examined the sentry. He'd be unconscious for at least an hour.

Butch packed a powerful anesthetic in those fists.

THEY sped noiselessly across the estate and reached the borders of the house. It seemed that Boylan threw his sentries to

[Turn page]

Many Never Suspect Cause of Backaches

This Old Treatment Often Brings Happy Relief

Many sufferers relieve nagging backache quickly, once they discover that the real cause of their trouble may be tired kidneys.

The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking the excess acids and waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

When disorder of kidney function permits poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights,

swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, a stimulant diuretic, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. Doan's give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills. (Adv.)

the very edge of the estate and left the house itself more or less unguarded.

At any rate, nobody seemed to be patrolling here.

The Black Bat ordered Butch to remain prone behind a tree. He then moved silently up to what appeared to be a cellar door. It was locked.

He studied the lock, there in the blackness, and saw that it was of late model, but not absolutely pick-proof.

From a tidy, flat kit of tools, the Black Bat took a slim bit of metal and inserted it into the lock. Here again, those extra-sensitive fingers were able to detect the mechanism of the lock.

There was a click and the door opened quietly.

Butch joined him and they descended half a dozen steps to where another door blocked their way. The outer one was closed without making a sound and the Black Bat attacked the second lock. This one was simpler than the first lock. They stepped into a very large cellar.

The house was quiet. Apparently, if Boylan was here, he'd gone to bed. At least he wasn't entertaining, which was a lucky break. Butch, rather helpless in the dark, moved only when signaled to do so. He stood brushing against the Black Bat's invisible form. Butch felt the Black Bat stiffen and move forward quickly. Butch remained riveted to the spot.

If he blundered against an empty barrel or an old chair, he'd create an alarm. Butch knew his own shortcomings. He was too big to move noiselessly through the darkness without help.

A hand touched his arm and he was led across the cellar. A match flared in the Black Bat's hand and threw a weak light in the direction of a large, heavy straight-backed chair that stood against the further wall.

IN THE floor, beside the chair, lay thick ropes obviously cut through with a sharp instrument. A filthy strip of cloth which looked like a gag was there too. And the cement floor was scuffed, as if someone had desperately applied a pair of hard heels against it.

"Silk!" Butch whispered hoarsely. "They kept somebody tied up here. It must have been Silk."

"Take it easy," the Black Bat warned. "These clues indicate you're right. He may still be in this house and if we raise a rumpus too soon, they might kill him. We can't take chances where Silk's life is concerned."

"What do you want me to do?" Butch asked, with a foreboding of the reply.

"Stay right here. If anyone comes down, put him to sleep as quietly as possible. I'm going upstairs and talk to Boylan."

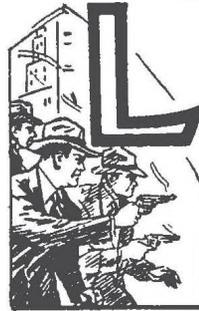
"That's dangerous," Butch warned. "He'll have men in the house sure."

"It is dangerous, but necessary. Stand ready to leave fast. If I find Silk, I'll tell him to head for the cellar. Good luck, Butch. And if a shot is fired, wreck the lighting system. It's right behind you."

The Black Bat drew his automatic. The safety made a metallic click as he shoved it off.

CHAPTER XII

Gambler's Story



LEADING up from the cellar to the first floor was a second door which wasn't locked. The Black Bat opened it a crack. The hallway was dimly illuminated, but nobody was about. He slid through the door, closed it gently and studied the set-up of the place.

Boylan had put a lot of money into this house. It wasn't garish. Portraits on the walls were at least semi-masterpieces. The furniture was heavy stuff and expensive and of surprisingly good taste. The Black Bat's estimation of Boylan went up a notch or two.

He located the stairway to the second floor, but wasn't even tempted to mount it. First, he had to make certain a path was cleared for a quick getaway. He possessed no illusions as to how Boylan and his men would react to the presence of the Black Bat.

Even if he came to help them, they'd cut him down. To men of their sort, the Black Bat was a target for any of their guns. Gangland had sworn to kill him on sight and this was gangland even though the setting didn't betray the fact.

There was a study, likewise empty. The library was dark. The Black Bat passed across the large dining room, in which fifty people could easily be seated at the enormous table. He gently pushed the swinging door to the butler's pantry and there he stopped. He heard the voices of two men.

It was better to retreat than attack. He might be able to silence them quickly, but it was too much of a risk. He returned to the stairway and went up it.

There were a dozen doors on the second floor, all closed. The Black Bat paused at each one and pressed an ear against the panels. If anyone was inside, asleep or not, he'd have detected their presence. He was halfway along the hall when he heard a door-knob twist. Instantly, the Black Bat slipped into one of the unoccupied rooms. He left the door open a tiny crack.

"Good night, Don," a man said. "I wouldn't worry too much. McGrath is just off the beam again. Things like that always happen to people like us."

The man who emerged was known to the Black Bat as a top criminal lawyer. Boylan must have been badly worried to have called him in. The lawyer went downstairs and the Black Bat heard someone come from the kitchen to let him out. Soon the house was quiet again.

Don Boylan had asserted his ego by wearing a pair of purple pajamas. He was propped up in bed, reading newspapers and puffing on a fragrant cigar.

He never did know what made him look up but, when he did, his hand darted toward the pillow.

"Uh-uh," a voice said crisply. "There are easier ways to die."

Boylan slowly placed both hands on the outside of the bed covers and struggled into a more erect position.

"All right," he said. "So the Black Bat has come calling. I'd like to know how you got this far. Now that you're here, what's this all about?"

The Black Bat, automatic ready for business, approached the bed and deftly extracted a small revolver from beneath Boylan's pillow. He put this on a table some distance away.

Then he carried a chair over beside the bed and sat down.

He spoke softly.

"Usually when I come calling on people like you, I don't leave without collecting a few specimens for the police department. This time, however, I'm making a visit only to talk to you, Boylan. Get this though. Should any of your men approach this room and enter with or without your express orders, I'll start shooting. My first bullet will be for you."

"Fair enough," Boylan commented. "If anyone comes, I'll send him away. Now let me say something. When you try to leave here, my hooded friend, I'll do everything I can to kill you or have you killed."

The Black Bat laughed softly.

"Now that we understand one another,

let's get down to business."

"You know, you're the one man I'm afraid of," Boylan said smoothly. "I can handle cops in my stride. They abide by laws. They have to. But you're different. Sometimes, you just start shooting and ask your questions afterwards. Nobody has got even close to you. I always thought that if I met you face-to-face, I'd take a chance and shoot. But I know better. The way you handle that gun, for instance."

"All of which leads up to what?" the Black Bat asked pleasantly enough.

"Now that I've seen you, perhaps I've got nothing to be afraid of, after all. One thing about you—you're a square shooter and you'll listen to reason. So I'm going to give you some."

"Good. Especially about Fennelley," the Black Bat insisted. "Did he have very much on you?"

BOYLAN shuddered.

"Fennelley could have put me in the chair. I can say that now because he is dead and I've nothing more to fear from him. He was the one and only man who could do that to me. I'm glad he's dead, but I have nothing to do with all this stuff that's happened since he was killed."

"There are people who believe otherwise, but I'm still listening, Boylan."

Boylan puffed on his cigar a moment.

"This is how it is, Black Bat. Years ago, I was a hoodlum. Why not admit it? I made my start that way and I have hoods working for me now because they're necessary. But I've changed. My dough is all in gambling houses. Nice, clean stuff. I'm making more than I ever did and I'm satisfied. Why should I start getting rough and tough all over again?"

"You've lost the point to this entirely, Boylan" the Black Bat said. "What Fennelley knew could have ruined you. Now, before he died, he raved while in a coma. What he knew came out then. Including your name, spoken distinctly enough so that witnesses recognized it. These witnesses—or survivors—have had a ghastly and astonishing death rate.

"Two of them are dead, one was almost killed tonight and I frustrated an attempt on a fourth by almost a miracle. These people could be considered to know what Fennelley said about you. Dangerous things. So you're the logical man to polish them off. Now do you understand?"

"Yes. I'm on a bad spot. But, so help me, I didn't have anything to do with it," Boylan

protested. "The whole thing is being framed on me. Listen—when this first started, I got a phone call to be at a certain place at a certain time. So what happens? One of those survivors is heaved down an elevator shaft. And I'm nice and handy. What's even worse, it happened in the building where the smartest D.A. we ever had keeps his offices. I'm talking about Tony Quinn."

"And your being called there was part of the frame, Boylan?"

"Certainly. But I can't prove it. I got scared after that. I came out here and I haven't left the place. Not once. I may need an alibi and I'm getting one. That's the absolute truth."

"If only you had a reputation for telling the truth," the Black Bat sighed. "I half believe you though, except for one little item. In your cellar is a chair in which someone was held prisoner and later on taken out of the cellar in a big rush. Ropes were cut, a gag thrown away. It so happens that Tony Quinn's servant was kidnaped. A message was left indicating that if Quinn kept his nose out of this affair, the servant would be unharmed. But he would be murdered the moment Quinn became active. Against you, Boylan? Who else?"

Boylan had the look of a man facing death. "Black Bat—honest—if anybody was tied up in my cellar, I didn't know a thing about it. Believe me. And if I was going to snatch somebody, a man Tony Quinn liked would be the last man I'd try to take."

"Still—the evidence in the cellar says otherwise, Boylan. If you are guilty, I know how useless it is to keep questioning you. So I'll start on a fresh tack. You imported a man to help in your gambling houses, an expert with roulette wheels and such. That's true, isn't it?"

Boylan was startled and showed it.

"Why, yes. How you ever found out I don't know."

"Now look here, Boylan, I'm not interested in your gambling houses, whether they are honest or crooked, or whether or not you retain a man to rig your wheels. That has nothing to do with two murders, a kidnaping and attempts at other murders. Just the same, I want to know who this man is."

"I don't get it," Boylan argued. "I don't mind answering a simple question, but I like to know reasons."

The Black Bat regarded Boylan through the slits in the hood. His eyes were bright and very alert. The gun he held was steady as a rock.

"I thought you were smarter than that,

Boylan. You claim innocence. You swear that no one was held prisoner in your cellar—that you were framed into going to a certain office building. Well, if that is the truth, someone is doing a mighty clever bit of framing. Someone close to you. Now will you tell me who this gambling expert is and where he is now?"

Boylan answered quickly. "I'm really beginning to believe you will help. Mind you," Boylan waved a hand, "it still goes that I regard you as a dangerous man and I'll kill you whenever I get a chance. The mug I hired is called Joey West. Maybe a monicker. I wouldn't know about that. He's the best man in the country on roulette. So valuable, I let him live right here with me. Now are you satisfied?"

"Is he here right now? When did you see him last?"

"Not more than half an hour ago. Why?"

"Nothing much," the Black Bat answered. "Remain just as you are. I'm leaving, Boylan. Good night."

THE Black Bat backed up to the door, snapped the light switch and the room was plunged into darkness. The door opened a little, closed again and Boylan leaped out of bed.

He streaked toward a satin bell pull and was reaching for it when a gun drilled into the small of his back.

"You really meant that about trying to stop me, Boylan. A pity because I was actually developing some faith in your stories. But if they are true, I was helping you and, therefore, killing me would only harm yourself. Yet, you tried to send an alarm."

"Killing you is even more important to people like me, than getting out of the jam I'm in," Boylan snapped. "I happen to be innocent and I'm not afraid. But knocking you off would have done a lot of men like me, a great deal of good. I'm sorry I muffed it even if I'm depending more on you to clear me than the cops."

"Why, Boylan!" The Black Bat laughed softly. "You're actually confused. What you need is sleep."

The Black Bat's gun arose and came down with a heavy thud against the gambler's skull. Before he could drop, however, the Black Bat caught him, carried him over to the bed and tucked him under the covers. If anyone looked in, it would seem that Boylan had fallen into natural slumber. The Black Bat took a firm grip on his gun.

From here to the estate fence would be dangerous ground!

CHAPTER XIII

Dangerous Plans

GLIDING along the hallway like an inky shadow, the Black Bat had reached the head of the staircase when the alarm came. A shout sounded from outside. Someone had probably found the unconscious sentry and he was giving warning. The Black Bat raced back to the landing and entered

one of the vacant rooms. A man rushed to the second floor and banged on Boylan's door. He received no answer, entered and let out a loud yell.

That brought a second man and then a third. Others would be approaching the house from sentry duty, but there was a chance that no one was downstairs at the moment. The Black Bat descended the staircase fast, reached the front door and opened it.

One of the rifle-armed guards was mounting the porch. The Black Bat went through the door fast. The guard did his best to bring the rifle up in time, but he failed. In a long dive the Black Bat hurtled off the porch steps and hurled the man to the ground. His fist lashed out once. Once was sufficient.

The Black Bat ducked back into the house. Other men came running across the lawn but halted in dismay and terror as the Black Bat arose to his feet. The Black Bat aimed his gun over their heads and fired once. They turned and fled, and almost instantly, the lights winked out. Butch had been ready for the signal. The Black Bat moved softly to the cellar door, opened it and descended a couple of steps. There he waited, leaving the door ajar a trifle.

The shot brought the three men downstairs. Others had found the unconscious guard at the foot of the front steps. They held a hasty conference in the hallway.

One man spoke in excited tones.

"Boylan is out like a light and he's going to be mighty sore if we don't get the guys who did this," he said.

"Okay, Matt," another man said. "But whoever got out the front way was the mug who banged Louis on the head. He kept going. Our best chance to land him is to get the cars out and cover the roads. He's bound to have come here in a car."

"That's smart," a third man agreed heartily. "Let's go!"

They headed for the door. The Black Bat whispered one word.

"Joey!"

One of the three men near the door turned quickly. Through the darkness the Black Bat studied him carefully. He was about forty-five, quietly dressed and gray at the temples. Obviously, no professional gangster. His answer to the name of Joey proved that he was Joe West, the gambling expert Boylan had hired.

"Who called me?" West asked. "Someone called my name."

"You're hearin' things," one of the other hoodlums said. "Come on. Shake the lead loose. We can head them off if we move fast."

The Black Bat closed the door quietly, slipped down the stairs and hissed a signal to Butch. He went to the big man's side.

"Good work," he praised. "You put those lights out just in time."

"Yeah—and I thought you'd suddenly gone nuts," Butch complained. "I guess it was you who started down the steps and then stopped to listen. But when you called out a guy's name, I was ready to begin shooting."

"I did that for a purpose, Butch. I wanted to identify a man named Joe West. That has been accomplished. Our next job is to get out of here. They are going to take all cars out of the garage and start closing in on the roads. Which means we don't have to be in any great hurry."

"Did you get any trace of Silk? That worries me most."

"No. Boylan swears that if Silk was here, he never knew about it."

"That mug would lie rather than tell the truth. Look—in my hand! I stepped on this thing when I went over to the light switches. It's a gold penknife. You gave it to Silk for Christmas two years ago. His initials are engraved on it. And Boylan says he wasn't here, huh? Let me have a crack at that monkey!"

"Oh, no. Not now. If I'm wrong, Butch, you can have Boylan all to yourself. Right now we're leaving the premises. By the same route we entered. Keep that gun handy. If they leave any guards, we'll have to shoot our way clear."

They heard cars being driven out of the garage. The Black Bat waited until the last one had gone. Then he led Butch from the cellar and onto the estate.

There were still a couple of men patrolling, but they were no match for the Black Bat's

ability to move through darkness. He and Butch climbed the fence and retreated in the direction of the estate where they had hidden the coupe.

They avoided the cars sent out with Boylan's men merely by waiting until these cars returned from the fruitless search. Then Butch drove back toward the city.

THE Black Bat spoke in thoughtful tones. "There won't be much for you to do until tomorrow, Butch," he said. "Gardet is heavily protected. So rest up because tomorrow night we're going after Silk. We'll find him this time."

"Maybe find him dead," Butch said disconsolately.

"No, I'm sure he isn't dead. But the trick we'll have to pull to reach him cannot fail because, if it does, then Silk will be killed. As Tony Quinn, Special D.A., I've moved rather cautiously and given the kidnapers nothing to take out on Silk. But tomorrow night it's going to be different. Report to the lab at ten."

He dropped Butch off and then drove home. By an ingenious arrangement of lights, he was able to tell whether or not there had been any phone calls or visitors punching the doorbell. Apparently, nobody had been there to see him.

The Black Bat slipped out of his regalia and became Tony Quinn once more. He entered the library by the hidden door and proceeded to Silk's room. There he opened the closet and studied the shoes on the rack. They were all rubber heeled and rubber soled. Silk liked to move about quietly.

Tony Quinn went back to the library, sat down before a cold fireplace and tamped tobacco in a well colored pipe. He lighted it, leaned back and calmly sent his mind traveling over the whole strange case, right from its beginning when that plane had crashed in a Midwestern forest area.

The logical thing to assume, he knew, was that Don Boylan had engineered the murders. He had the only motive so far brought to light. The ruthlessness exhibited was a quality familiar to Boylan too.

But even more interesting than this former hoodlum and present day gambling-house owner, was the identity of the survivor who had provided the information which set this ball of murder rolling downhill.

It hardly seemed as though Lester Hill could be responsible. He was a moderately successful florist without the slightest apparent connection with anyone like Boylan. And a man who was, perhaps, crippled for life

from the crash. Most certainly, he hadn't gotten out of bed and killed Sonny Coyle. Nor had he been responsible for the murder of Grace MacDonald. Just as certainly he wouldn't have allied himself with that murder attempt. It had been much too close.

Then there was Howard Hewitt, traveling salesman, whom McGrath had investigated. He had discovered that Hewitt represented a very good wholesale house, had worked for them no less than eight years and called upon customers of the highest type. If Hewitt was a crook, he'd have shown his talents long ago. Several million dollars worth of precious gems had undoubtedly passed through his hands.

Furthermore, Hewitt was supposed to have lapsed into unconsciousness from a skull fracture, so how could he have transmitted the necessary information to Boylan or someone like the gambler? Yet, unconsciousness could be faked. A man with a fractured skull isn't one hundred percent incapacitated if he doesn't want to be and is willing to take chances. Quinn sorted Hewitt into his file of probables.

Gardet seemed to be the best bet. While he had a broken leg, he was still able to telephone. He'd been conscious all during that agonizing waiting period at the wrecked plane, which meant he overheard Fennelley's ravings right up to the time the ex-convict attorney had died.

With Gardet too, rested the same idea which existed with Lester Hill. The attempt on his life had been genuine. That fake doctor hadn't known Butch was on hand. He had been an interesting crook too, carrying marked playing cards in his pocket. Not a Boylan type of thug.

Quinn considered Kay Saville. So far, she hadn't made any move to involve herself as a suspicious character. Furthermore, she had proven herself a genuine heroine, something which murderers and crooks definitely are not. And she hadn't been at the scene of the crash during most of Fennelley's ravings.

To offset all of this lay the one fact that, so far, no attempts had been made on her life even though she admitted hearing Fennelley speak. Perhaps Carol was hiding Kay Saville so effectively that the murderer couldn't find her.

There were minor characters too who seemed highly interesting. Lester Hill's father betrayed the least amount of suspicion. That uncle of Hewitt's said he was a foundry hand, yet his hands were smooth and well cared for. He was almost too meek and mild. He'd been present at the hospital

when one murder and one attempted murder had been staged.

THE intriguing details were in the form of clues. The puzzling blank sheet of paper mysteriously delivered to his office while Mr. and Mrs. Spiers were present. The way two men had come for it and the tactics they used. It had been wholly unnecessary to slug old Mr. Spiers. Either of the two crooks could have handled him with one hand and his wife with the other. Their brutality seemed almost planned and executed.

The manner by which Silk had been kidnaped was another thing. It bore none of the earmarks of a job executed by any of

Boylan's thugs. Yet why else would he have been snatched except to make Tony Quinn toe the mark? And who else was Tony Quinn operating against? His only suspect was Boylan.

There too, Quinn possessed some grim doubts. Boylan had seemed sincere in his avowal of innocence in keeping Silk imprisoned in the cellar of his home. Boylan's word meant nothing, but certain facts could not be disproved.

In the first place, would Boylan have been fool enough to keep Silk so close at hand when he knew very well that McGrath might pull a series of raids that could feasibly include the Long Island dwelling? Also, those

[Turn page]



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scratches on the cement floor of the cellar were misleading. They indicated that the man tied up in that chair had tried to brace himself to get free.

But Butch wore nothing except rubber heeled and rubber soled shoes which would leave no scratches. At least, none that deep, no matter how hard he dug heels against the cement. Silk's penknife looked like a plant. Kidnapers would scarcely have permitted him to retain a knife, above all things! And even if they'd taken it away from him, he'd have been extremely careful not to leave such evident clues lying about.

Quinn's mind went back to Mr. and Mrs. Spiers. The attack on the old man had been genuine enough, but it did bring him to the hospital where Hill and Hewitt were lodged. That seemed somewhat suspicious although that hospital had been closest to Quinn's office so that its ambulance would be the one to respond to any emergency call there.

Quinn made up his mind to do several things the next morning. Among them was the idea of checking on Mr. and Mrs. Spiers, digging into the history of Hewitt's uncle with the smooth hands and—a somewhat risky plan concerning Carol and Kay Saville.

Quinn dumped the contents of his pipe into an ash tray, arose and walked slowly upstairs, using his white cane to help feel his way along. He went to bed and slept soundly. His last waking thoughts were of Silk and he felt reasonably certain that Silk was in no danger thus far. In a matter of just a few hours though, his peril was going to increase a thousandfold. Now the Black Bat had to act more openly.

CHAPTER XIV

Plans for Action



WHILE Tony Quinn was preparing his own breakfast, he gazed ruefully at the still wrecked dining room. It would have to wait until Silk returned. Quinn went to the library again and sat down at a table on which a telephone rested. He dialed the number of Carol's apartment.

The arrangements were that if he had to make such a call, Carol would pretend, for Kay Saville's benefit, that the caller was her editor. Carol answered the telephone.

"Nothing doing?" Quinn said. "No at-

tempts to reach Kay?"

"It's so quiet it's boring," Carol reported. "Have you any news on that other affair?"

"Silk? Not exactly, but I have high hopes. Carol, I'm going to alter our procedure with Kay radically. We've taken extreme steps to shield her. I want that reversed. Bring her all around. Expose her to any possible attempts against her life as much and as often as possible. Can that be done?"

Carol laughed lightly.

"If you knew the offers we've had to turn down. She's a heroine. Banquets, speeches, radio talks. But do you think it's prudent?"

"I'm going to take a chance. Which means you must be very careful and observant. Yet, I have an idea she'll be perfectly safe. If nothing happens, then a theory I've cooked up, will really hold water."

"Within an hour she will be going places," Carol promised.

"Good. If our luck holds we should have this cleaned up by tomorrow with everyone out of danger."

Quinn hung up, tapped the edge of the table with his fingertips for a moment and then called Long Distance. He asked for the Chief of Police in Walboro and soon had that official on the wire. Walboro, he knew, was a small town and the chief would probably know everyone there.

"This is Tony Quinn, district attorney," Quinn explained.

"I've heard of you," the chief answered crisply. "What can I do for you, sir?"

"Two residents of your town are now here, Chief. I want to find out what you know about them. They are Mr. and Mrs. Spiers."

"Spiers? Oh, yes, I know them well. Fine people. They've been living here about five years. I think Mr. Spiers is retired and has a small income. They own a little bungalow, take part in church affairs and live quietly. I've never heard an ill word spoken of them. The only time they got into the public eye was when their daughter married some wealthy young man. Both of them were killed in a plane crash just the other day."

"What was the daughter like?" Quinn asked.

"Well, we didn't know Judy so well. She'd been away at school and working elsewhere. The wedding was held here though. Just a quiet affair with a few friends."

"Were any relatives of the bridegroom present?"

"I'm sure none came. There were no strangers there. As I understand it, the romance was rather swift. Perhaps Mr. Rolfe's people didn't have time to reach the

wedding. At any rate, they went away soon after the ceremony."

"Thank you," Quinn said and hung up slowly. Mr. and Mrs. Spiers seemed to be very well regarded and in full keeping with their appearance and mild manners.

Quinn phoned the hospital next. Mr. Spiers had been discharged already. Lester Hill was coming along fairly well. Hewitt was still flirting with the border line between consciousness and unconsciousness.

Before Quinn hung up, Captain McGrath was honking the police car horn out front. Quinn donned his hat and coat, opened the door and tapped his way to the sidewalk. McGrath helped him into the car.

"Anything new?" Quinn asked.

"Not a thing. Every move we make against Don Boylan is stopped cold by his alibis. Stoolies report nothing. Boylan seems to be laying very low. No further attempts on the survivors but there, I'd say, the murderer has missed the bus. He'll require an army to reach those people now. We've really got them guarded."

"Good, Mac. Silk's absence worries me terribly, but so far I haven't taken any open steps in variance with those orders written on my mirror. So we have reason to hope that Silk is unharmed. However, we cannot simply wait for developments to occur. We have to make them. I'll explain when we reach the office."

THERE was a warning letter for Quinn in the first mail. One of his clerks passed it to Captain McGrath. He read the brief note:

A CERTAIN PARTY IS STILL IN
GOOD HEALTH.
BE SMART AND MAKE SURE HE
REMAINS IN THAT CONDITION.

McGrath put the letter into his pocket.

"I'll check it for prints," he said. "Hopeless, I know, but routine. It's printed in block letters on untraceable stationery. I doubt we'll get any sort of lead out of it."

"True," Quinn said. "But it's at least reassuring, if we can believe it. Here is our plan of action. I'm going to secure search warrants for every one of Boylan's places, including his home on Long Island. At ten tonight, I want raids made simultaneously on all his city gambling places. Thirty minutes later, raid his residence. Is that clear?"

"Yes. But why the delay in knocking off his house?"

"Please don't ask questions I can't answer now," Quinn begged. "There is a reason—a

mighty good one. You are to be in charge of the city raids. If we happen to be wrong about Boylan, no material harm is being done to our community with his places closed up."

"Just as you say," McGrath shrugged. "I'll be waiting for those search warrants."

McGrath departed and Quinn went to work. First, he telephoned the wholesale jewelry firm for whom Howard Hewitt worked. All he learned there was that Hewitt was a capable salesman, worked faithfully and made a good income.

"But as he is involved in this mess, we can eliminate him from all suspicion by clearing his name completely," Quinn explained. "To do that I will require a list of the customers he calls on. Can you furnish me with that at once? I'll send over for it."

The firm could and would supply the list. Quinn dispatched a clerk. Next, he phoned Freddie Rolfe, a cousin of Mark Rolfe who had been killed in the plane crash. He asked Freddie to call at the office immediately.

Routine occupied him then, although he could hardly keep his mind on it. There were three special worries. Silk's present peril, whether or not he could move fast enough to prevent Silk from being killed later—and the deliberate exposure of Kay Saville as a victim for the murderers.

Early in the afternoon Freddie Rolfe arrived, a middle aged man with a huge diamond on one finger.

"Mark got himself married rather suddenly," Rolfe said. "In fact, the rascal never told us a thing about it. Now he's dead. Things happen fast sometimes."

"Hm, don't they," Quinn said dryly "I called you here because a Mr. and Mrs. Spiers—the parents of Mark's wife—came to me for help. They buried their daughter and son-in-law and they aren't wealthy people by any means. There must be a considerable estate."

"It's worth at least two million dollars," Freddie Rolfe declared placidly. "I don't know who'll inherit it now. However, I'm not a poor man. You see that those people of Mark's wife are very well taken care of. It will require considerable time to straighten out the estate. The whole thing will be turned over to you, Quinn. I don't know a better man to handle it."

"Thank you," Quinn said. "I'll proceed as rapidly as possible. First some cash ought to be advanced to those old folks. You haven't the faintest idea of what Mark's wife was like?"

"Only that she was a blonde, very attractive and they stopped at the Park Royal Hotel for one day in California. Mark wired

me from there on a business matter. He wanted me to sell out a lot of stock. Fortunately, I didn't take care of it until too late. The stuff went up several points. He was an idiot to sell them anyway."

Quinn arose and extended his hand gropingly. Rolfe took it in a firm grasp and departed. Quinn sat down again, idly musing. Mark Rolfe had wanted to sell a lot of stock when the market was dead against such a move. Why? Quinn thought he knew most of the answers now.

The search warrants for Boylan's places and his home came through on schedule. Carol phoned late in the afternoon to report.

"Kay made a radio broadcast on the Rhineland Program this morning," she said. "In time to get her pictures and the story in every newspaper that's been on the stands since noon. She made a couple of speeches this afternoon. We strolled Broadway and some of the side streets. We shopped, visited places of interest and went to big hotel lobbies. If anyone is after Kay, they certainly would have taken action by now."

"You may leave Kay at any time," Tony Quinn said quietly. "She is in no danger. She never has been."

"But Kay heard that lawyer raving," Carol reminded him.

"What Fennelley said after the crash, in his delirium, has nothing to do with what happened, Carol," Quinn explained. "Not a thing. I merely wanted to prove it. And thanks to you, I did."

"What about Silk then?" Carol asked anxiously.

"He is still missing, but I feel fairly certain I can get a line on him tonight. Tell you all about it in the lab—after midnight."

CAROL nodded. "It's a date," she promised.

With McGrath certain to be busy with the impending raids, Quinn felt free to act as the Black Bat.

After McGrath had brought him home, Quinn ate lightly, consulted a long series of notes he had made in connection with Howard Hewitt's activities as a jewelry salesman. They were highly interesting.

Hewitt sold only to very exclusive stores. Nothing ever happened to his customers but, oddly enough, there were usually burglaries or neat gyp rackets worked in towns which Hewitt had recently visited. This had happened so many times as to eliminate any possibility of coincidence.

At nine, Butch arrived. Quinn locked up the house, entered the lab and gave Butch

some orders.

"We'll have to use two cars. I'll take the coupe. Go to the garage and switch marker plates on the light sedan. There is a pair of trick plates you can attach. Dirty them up a bit. The car too, if you can. Our plans are simple up to a certain point and then the conditions we find will have to determine our next moves. Be ready in twenty minutes."

CHAPTER XV

The Stage Is Set



PROMPTLY within the time limit he had set, Tony Quinn donned the Black Bat's regalia and he strapped on a double shoulder holster, slipping two automatics beneath his arms. There was a good chance of some shooting.

Shortly afterward, he led the way to Boylan's Long Island estate. Both he and Butch parked some distance down the road and in a well concealed spot.

"I'm going close to Boylan's house," the Black Bat said. "Shortly after ten o'clock, I'll signal with a flashlight. When you get that signal, trail the next car following the wink of the flash. I'll catch up later and take over for part of the distance with you trailing me. Then we'll swap, so the man we're after won't suspect he's being tailed. All set now?"

"I'll be all set when I get some of those crooks to smash," Butch declared. "If they hurt Silk, don't try to stop me when I go into action. Because you won't be able to."

The Black Bat faded into the darkness and Butch was alone. He took up a post from where he could watch for the expected signal. Meanwhile, the Black Bat reached the vicinity of Boylan's home, but he didn't attempt to enter the estate. After last night's episode, the guards were bound to be especially careful.

His watch indicated ten o'clock. The raids in the city were just being started. Boylan's men would phone him. Boylan would know very well that his home was bound to be raided too because this was an all-out affair, sparing nothing.

At ten minutes after ten, lights began to glow in almost all the rooms of Boylan's place. At ten-fifteen, the Black Bat's sensitive ears picked up the sound of a car starter

whining into life. Headlights gleamed. A car was approaching the gate.

It stopped so a guard could open up. The Black Bat was very close by, well able to see into the car and identify the driver. He was Joe West, Boylan's expert in crooked gambling equipment. Joe didn't look too pleased about things. His jaw was set in angry lines.

He turned toward the city. The Black Bat quickly made his way across the road and, from a sheltered position, snapped on his flashlight once. He was certain it would not reflect in West's rear view mirror. Butch would have picked up the signal and moved into action. The showdown was at hand.

Three miles further on, the Black Bat's speedy coupe caught up with Butch O'Leary. Butch turned off on a side road, but only to back out soon afterwards and follow again. The Black Bat took up the chase. Twice more, before reaching the city limits, they switched places again. They also did so once in the city itself.

Joe West finally turned north far uptown and came to a halt before a very ordinary brownstone-front house. There was a sign on the door indicating that no more rooms were available.

Clad now in the wide-brimmed hat instead of the hood, the Black Bat waited until Butch parked and came over to the coupe. Butch clambered in. They eyed the house coldly.

"And now how do we get inside without arousing everybody there?" the Black Bat said "If we blast a way in, they may execute Silk immediately."

"But why?" Butch argued. "Listen. Once we bust in, they'll be afraid to kill him, won't they?"

"On the contrary. Should we break in, we'll force their hand and make them commit another murder. Because Silk wasn't kidnaped due to his connection with Tony Quinn, or because his being held would keep Tony Quinn from making a rapid investigation. These crooks know better than that. Silk was taken because he knew too much. What he could tell would send these men where they belong, to the chair. So Silk is a potential menace. But, as a prisoner, he has his uses too. I'd naturally delay a bit before taking action and delay is what these men want."

"Why not ring the bell, bust the lug who answers it and get in that way?"

"Can't be done. Someone is in the third floor window watching from behind a thin curtain. I can see him now, smoking a cigarette. The glow gave him away. But wait—

this house is set close to the sidewalk. From the third floor, the entrance can't possibly be seen, nor the walk directly below the window. There is a way of getting inside, Butch. A very obvious way."

"I don't see any, except through the door," Butch complained.

"In the center of the sidewalk is a man-hole covering a coal chute. Stay here. As soon as the block is empty of people, I'll walk down close to the buildings, open the coal chute cover and slip down. Immediately after, you follow me. I'll be waiting on the coal pile."

The plan would work—the Black Bat hoped. He raised the cover and slipped through in a matter of half a minute. Butch wasn't long delayed and he managed to pull the cover into place after him. The darkness was intense and movement on the pile of coal was dangerous.

THEY solved it by sliding slowly down to the cement floor. The Black Bat led the way again, his uncanny eyesight serving him well. Butch followed, one hand on the Black Bat's shoulder.

They located the stairway and went up it. At the top, they could hear a radio playing softly. The Black Bat whispered in Butch's ear.

"Draw your gun," he said. "These brownstone houses are all alike inside. This door will open into a hallway. Joe West just arrived and everybody in the house, except the spy on the third floor, will be downstairs listening to his report."

"I'll just sail into the whole crowd," Butch said with grim anticipation.

"No! We must trick them into revealing where Silk is before a free-for-all starts up. One of them might reach him before we could get there. Stick them up. Advance well into the room so that one of their number can slip out behind you. Remember, I want him to slip away. Everything clear now?"

"What should I do after this mug gets out of the room?"

"Nothing at first. Just hold them there as long as you can. Should you hear sounds of a fight upstairs, use your own judgment from then on. Ready?"

"Oh, boy! Wait'll I use my own judgment!"

Butch beamed happily. He snapped off the safety of his gun, pressed the door open a bit and they could hear excited voices. Butch opened the door further, peered out and then stepped lightly across the hallway.

As he did so, the Black Bat passed him and went up the stairs to the second floor. He made no more sound than the nocturnal creature he was named after.

He heard Butch give a roar and a command. There were some sharp retorts until Butch shouted again. Then a moment or two of silence. From the top of the stairway, the Black Bat saw one man back out of the room. He was pale and shaking. A slim, nervous type who was obviously unused to things like this.

He tiptoed up the stairs. At the top, he passed close by the Black Bat without seeing him. He kept going to the third floor and whispered to the man on watch there. This man emerged from the front room, drew a gun and started downstairs.

As he reached the second floor landing, an arm encircled his throat and a gun butt collided with his skull. The Black Bat eased him to the floor and then moved very fast.

On the third floor, he stopped for an instant to listen. He heard a whining voice and sped lightly in that direction. The door of one room was open. Through it he saw Silk, tightly bound, lying on a bed. Over him stood the man who'd escaped from the room downstairs. He held a gun and was backing up a trifle to aim it.

"You can die that way if you like," the Black Bat said cozily.

The man whirled around. He did choose that way to die. His gun blazed. In the hands of a man more accustomed to shooting fast, the results might have been bad, but the killer's nervousness caused the slug to whistle dangerously close to the Black Bat's ear.

There was one other shot. The gunman screamed and folded up gently. The Black Bat kicked the gun out of his hand, stepped over him and looked down at the bed. Silk grinned up at him. A gag prevented him from speaking.

DOWNSTAIRS, an atomic bomb seemed to have burst. The Black Bat cut Silk loose quickly and helped him up.

"Thanks." Silk's lips were dry and he could hardly talk.

"Take this!" The Black Bat put a gun into his hand. "I'm going down to help Butch. No need to explain, Silk. I know the whole story. Or most of it."

The Black Bat rushed down the stairs, reached the ground floor and found he had very little to do. Butch was in the process of cleaning up. There had been only three men in the room, besides the one who slipped away. Two of these were down and com-

pletely out. By their position, it was clear that Butch had merely grabbed each one, conked their heads together and let them drop.

The third man had a knife and was trying to wield it while Butch held him by the shoulder and slowly squeezed until all sensation went out of the killer's arm. The knife clattered to the floor.

Butch transferred his grasp to the man's throat, lifted him off the floor and walked over to the wall. He banged the killer's head against it—just once—and then let go. He dusted his hands as if he'd touched something abhorrent.

"Silk?" he demanded of the Black Bat. "Did they hurt him?"

"He's on his way down, under his own steam," the Black Bat said. "Just gather up these men and tie them. There's another on the second floor landing and the one you let get away is on the third floor. I don't think he requires tying up."

In a few moments all the prisoners were secure and placed in a room where they could hear or see nothing. Silk, drinking water from a large pitcher, was now able to smile a little.

"They gave me nothing to eat or drink," he said with difficulty. "They were afraid of me, sir. Of what I knew. This whole thing—the truth, I mean—was covered by a cloud of carefully framed evidence to draw attention away from the real goal of these killers. It's not Boylan."

"I know," the Black Bat said. "Save it for later on. Give Butch and me a chance to get home. Then phone McGrath. Tell him the Black Bat was here and freed you, that there are prisoners here to be picked up, and that the Black Bat has gone to see Tony Quinn—to explain the whole situation. Then come back home."

"Yes, sir." Silk nodded. "And—and thanks. They were going to kill me eventually, but they figured that so long as I was alive it would prevent Tony Quinn's taking any kind of action."

"Silk," the Black Bat said. "Did you succeed in sending me a blank piece of paper on which you had managed to create some sort of an invisible message?"

"Why, no, sir. They were pretty careful. I never got a chance to send any sort of message."

"All right. Carry through those orders and then hurry home so you'll be in time for the kill. We've got our murder beasts backed into a corner, though they aren't aware of that yet. Come on, Butch!"

CHAPTER XVI

Real Motives

NO DOUBT about it, McGrath arrived at Quinn's home in record time. Silk came shortly afterward and eased Tony Quinn's difficulty in moving about as a blind man.

"You're a trifle late, Mac," Quinn said, "The Black Bat was here. I'd guessed part of the truth, but he augmented it and

confirmed the whole business. First, we're going to the hospital."

Silk brought the car around and McGrath traveled with Quinn. At the hospital, McGrath had to use his authority, but they were finally allowed to see Lester Hill.

"Mr. Hill, has anything of further interest occurred to you?" Quinn asked.

"No, sir," Hill said, "I've tried and tried to think. Fennelley didn't say anything more than I told you."

"Very well. Now answer this question—and it is very important. Were you conscious all the time?"

"Yes, I'm sure I was."

"Who helped take Mark Rolfe out of the wrecked plane?"

"Why, that school teacher. She was pretty strong and worked hard to help all of us."

"Good. Remember that, Captain. Now, Mr. Hill, one more thing. Did you see Mr. and Mrs. Rolfe die?"

Hill closed his eyes at the memory.

"Yes. I was close by."

"Who died first?"

"Mrs. Rolfe. She died about a half hour before her husband went."

"I think that's all," Quinn said. "Captain, we'll see Mr. Hewitt next."

Hewitt was attended by a nurse. His uncle had apparently gone home. Quinn whispered something in McGrath's ear and the detective sped out of the room to make a phone call. When he returned, he was smiling slightly.

"I sent two men to bring in the uncle—to your office. He gave the hospital his address so he could be reached if Hewitt underwent any change."

"Good," Quinn said. "Mac, have you a jackknife?"

"I sure have."

McGrath drew a knife from his pocket.

"Open the small blade and go over and stick it into Hewitt's leg. A good, hard jab. If the wound is deep, there are doctors to clean it up. Just stab him, so it will hurt very much."

McGrath opened the blade, hesitated a moment and then stepped over to the bed. He pulled the covers down. The nurse started to protest, but Quinn silenced her with a sharp word. McGrath raised the knife.

"Don't," Hewitt shouted and sat up. His eyes were open wide. "Okay—okay! I know when I'm licked."

Quinn smiled wryly.

"You're a very good actor, Mr. Hewitt, to convince the doctors that you have been unconscious all this time. That was so you could not be questioned, of course. Now suppose you tell us just what you heard about Boylan."

"I was afraid of what Boylan might do to me," Hewitt said. "That's why I faked unconsciousness. I figured if he thought I couldn't talk, he'd take no action against me. Fennelley, when he was dying, told how Boylan had killed two men. He named names and places. I remember them all. I'll talk."

"I don't believe that will be necessary," Quinn said. "What Fennelley raved about doesn't mean a thing and Boylan never intended to harm you or any of the others. Captain, place this man under arrest and have him well watched until he can be locked up. Then check on him thoroughly. You will find that his record as a jewelry salesman is excellent."

"What do I pinch him for then?" McGrath demanded.

"He's a member of a very clever mob. A combination of burglars, blackmailers and confidence men. Hewitt sold these very valuable jewels. That seemed to end his interest in them, but he finally always managed to make his customers talk about the individuals who'd purchased them. Then the gang went into action and got the jewels by various methods.

"Sometimes it was plain burglary, often by intimidation and perhaps, most of all, by slick confidence tricks. Now we'll go to my office. Silk, will you telephone the Royale Hotel and ask Mr. and Mrs. Spiers to step over to my office at once. It's a crazy hour, but tell them one of Mark Rolfe's relatives is here and has to leave before dawn."

On the way to Quinn's office, McGrath kept shaking his head.

"I still don't get it, Tony," he said. "I know the Black Bat put you hep to this course of action, but it doesn't make sense to me."

"Wait," Quinn advised mildly. "You'll see. I was rather surprised too."

Outside his office, Quinn, Silk and McGrath found Hewitt's uncle held firmly by a big detective. And Vincent Gardet was there, too, on crutches. Kay Saville, alone and bewildered, was anxiously waiting for results. Then Mr. and Mrs. Spiers arrived.

"I've a little business to attend to first, Mr. and Mrs. Spiers," Quinn said. "You may find it quite interesting so just come into the office with all the others."

"But w-we'd rather not," Mrs. Spiers objected. "M-my husband may be injured again."

"Nonsense," Quinn said flatly. "Come along."

He sat down behind his desk, those dead eyes of his staring at no one. Quinn began to explain.

"We have been through a strange case. One in which the truth was so well concealed that we were led along a wholly unproductive and useless trail. We believed that Fennelley had raved while dying, and told facts which would place a gangster named Boylan in danger. Boylan was the type who would resort to murder to protect himself. The real villains behind this racket were well aware of that fact and capitalized on it. Because what Fennelley said had nothing to do with these crimes."

Gardet spoke up. "All I want to know is why they tried to kill me."

"Mr. Gardet, who died first after the crash, Mr. or Mrs. Rolfe?" Quinn said.

"The girl died first. By a half hour at least."

TONY QUINN nodded.

"Thank you," he said. "Miss Saville, are you there? Oh, good! Now you were on your way for help when those two young people died. Am I correct?"

"Yes. I thought they were so badly injured that they couldn't possibly survive. I wasn't surprised when I learned they had died."

"Exactly," Quinn said. "But you don't know which of them died first. You can't, because you were not present. Therefore, you have never been in the slightest danger. The killers were not interested in you at all. Now I shall relate the facts as I learned them and as part of them were provided by the Black Bat.

"Miss Grace MacDonald helped carry Mark Rolfe from the plane. Mark was conscious. He told her to see me in reference to a legal matter. I had been his father's attor-

ney, he relied on me and wanted Miss MacDonald to reach me. She tried—and was murdered.

"At that time, Boylan entered the picture. He was lured to this building—framed into being suspected. That frame-up was built up higher and higher. We all believed in it. A bomb was sent to my home—because the killers knew Miss MacDonald had phoned my office and they were afraid she'd told me too much over the wire. Later, they realized this might be a mistake.

"The bomb was another touch typical of Boylan. He used that at one time in his sordid history. A member of the gang named Joe West, who is now locked up, joined Boylan's establishment to keep an eye on him and to further the frame.

"Silk was taken prisoner to keep me in check, but this Joe West rigged clues to indicate that Silk had been held a prisoner in Boylan's cellar. One member of the gang almost killed Mr. Gardet. The Black Bat appeared just in time. This man was a professional gambler and sharpshooter. A member of a confidence gang.

"The kidnaping of Silk was likewise not the doings of Boylan's men. Silk can tell that story in its entirety. Sufficient now to relate that the men who snatched him were amateurs. They used dope and couldn't even handle Silk between them before the drug took effect.

"So we come to the other murders. Sonny Coyle, for instance. Someone switched hypnos on him. That was done by Hewitt's uncle, who is probably not related at all.

"But after the murder, McGrath posted so strong a guard that Hewitt's fake uncle couldn't get busy again and something else had to be done. Mr. and Mrs. Spiers were sent to visit me. On a perfectly logical excuse too. As the parents of Mark Rolfe's wife, they consulted me as their attorney. But, in reality, they wanted a crack at Lester Hill. Sort of killing two birds with one big deceit.

"A blank piece of paper was placed under my door. Two gunmen—so-called, and dressed in the apparel Boylan's men would choose—came for that blank piece of paper. They slugged Mr. Spiers and he was taken to the hospital where Lester Hill was. All part of a plan. Spiers, not being guarded, was able to knock out Hill's police guard and stab Hill. Unsuccessfully, I'm glad to say."

"But why?" McGrath thundered. "What's behind it?"

"Two million dollars, Captain. The biggest stake any confidence mob ever went

after. Judith—Mark Rolfe's wife—was a member. She got Mark to marry her. They were going to try and bleed him dry through her. But the plane crash changed their plans. Incidentally, Hewitt was aboard simply to watch them. It was he who concocted this daring change of plans and passed on the information that Fennelley could be considered as having talked too much.

"This change in plans was necessary and a sure thing, if the survivors could be silenced. All except Hewitt who would later perjure himself. Here is the reason. If Mark Rolfe died first, his widow would automatically come into his estate, even though she lived only a short time afterwards. Then, in turn, her people would inherit. Two million dollars. But, if it was proved that Judith died first, Mark's estate would go to his heirs. The killers tried to prevent that by murdering everyone who could testify truthfully that Judy did die first.

"Mr. and Mrs. Spiers, so harmless acting, were ideal to handle their end of things. They fooled Mark, but I think he had guessed the truth before he died. He asked to have all his holdings converted into cash so these crooks couldn't get at them. I think—that's all. The whole gang is captured. They'll stumble over one another to confess in order to save their own precious necks."

"That's enough for me," McGrath snapped.

Silk stepped forward, his face grim.

"May I add a word, Captain?" he asked. These killers knew me. When they found me working for Mr. Quinn, they realized I was potentially dangerous. I might recognize their tactics or, if I saw any of them, expose them as frauds. Mr and Mrs. Spiers, for instance, are not man and wife. They're a front for the headquarters of the gang in a pleasant little Midwestern village. And they are

two of the most despicable characters I've ever known. They kidnaped me so I couldn't act against them."

LATER, Silk drove Quinn home. At a dark corner they picked up Carol and Butch. Tony Quinn explained the whole thing to them. He added a few facts which he could not have told McGrath without revealing that he was not blind.

"I suspected Hewitt. So I managed to slip a pair of heavy surgical scissors into his pillow. His head would rest against them and I knew if he was conscious they'd pain him so much he'd remove them. Which he did and that act confirmed my suspicions.

"Then that message on the mirror. It was worded to resemble the language of gangsters, but it turned out a mixture of gangster lingo and excellent English. That made me suspicious. Also, I began to encounter evidence of a smooth, polished mob at work. They operated like confidence men and suddenly the reason for Silk's kidnaping was plain. From then on, I devoted my energies to getting him free so I could reveal the real scheme behind these murders."

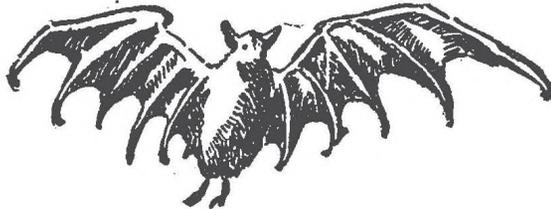
"It wasn't much fun," Silk commented. "Tied up and wondering when they'd get rid of me."

Butch laughed.

"But I had my fun. Knocking those crooks against the wall was a pleasure. Well, where do we go from here?"

"Back to the lab," Quinn said, "I think we've something to celebrate. After that, who knows? At this moment, somebody may be getting the idea that money in vast sums can be had for the mere little effort of killing a few people."

"I think," Carol said quietly, "we'll be ready for them."



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WITH MALICE AFORETHOUGHT

An Exciting Complete Book-Length Tony Quinn Novel

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Johnnie reached out and yanked the rifle from Raycheck's grasp

TWO THOUSAND AND ONE VICTIMS

By NORMAN A. DANIELS

With only a rose as a clue, Private Detective Johnnie Vane goes on the hunt for a corpse—and the killer!

IF Private Detective Johnnie Vane's mental desire to kick himself had been carried out, he would have been black and blue from head to foot. Topping the hill, he could look down over the moonlight-swept valley and see the elaborate estate which was owned by his latest client, Nana Irwin.

He braked the car as he neared the high

gates which formed the only way of getting into the estate, without the use of a ladder or dynamite. He stopped and blinked his lights three times. Those were the instructions.

Brush crackled five yards to the left of the car and Johnnie's hand automatically darted toward his shoulder holstered gun. Then he

relaxed. It was Nana Irwin. It couldn't possibly be anyone else because no other person in the world could look like that.

She was dressed in a turtle-necked sweater, a couple of sizes too big. She wore black slacks and tennis shoes. Her hair was combed back and lashed, somehow, at the nape of her neck. Mrs. Nana Irwin never did have a figure and these clothes did nothing for what she did have. Besides, Nana Irwin looked about seventy. Johnnie Vane guessed she was fifty-five or, at the outside, sixty.

She popped into the back seat of the car as if afraid a dozen goblins were at her heels. Then she fumbled in a pocket of her slacks and took out a very large and very rich pipe. It seemed to be already tamped down and ready for action. She lit it, and the resulting fog of smoke made Johnnie cough.

"I like strong tobacco," Mrs. Irwin explained happily. "And I like it in a pipe. That's one of the reasons those relatives of mine believe I'm going crazy. Johnnie, you've had time to think it over. Do you think I'm out of my mind?"

Johnnie thought so, but he also recalled the two thousand dollars with a promise of three more.

"That's what I'm suppose to find out," he said diplomatically. "Don't ask me to make up my mind before I've had a chance to look things over."

She slapped his shoulder.

"Good. Now here is the reason I wanted you to come and live at my home. I'm worth something more than seven million dollars. I wish I didn't have it. One million would suffice, but I can't throw it away. There are—entanglements. Now, living with me and on me, are some people who'd really know how to go through a sum like that."

"Just name them and let me form my own opinions after I know them better."

"A good idea. There is Walter Lane, my cousin. Lydia Barry, my sister-in-law. Her husband—my brother—died seven years ago. Chris Sterling is my nephew. He's the only one I really give a hoot about. You won't meet him for a couple of days. He was called away on business."

"That's all?" Johnnie asked.

"All who'd stand to profit if I were sent to an insane asylum. Cousin Walter has a friend up here for a few weeks. His name is Alonzo Quigg and I don't like him. He's always eyeing me and sneaking around the place.

"My attorney, Bruce Glazer, appeared upon the scene so coincidentally I think he's giv-

ing advice to the others on how to get me put away. There are no servants, except for Gus Raycheck, the gardener. That's all."

Johnnie rolled his window down all the way and breathed some fresh air untainted by the acrid smoke from Nana Irwin's pipe, which was working like Vesuvius in full eruption.

"Now," he said, "let me get this straight. Your relatives would come into your money if you died . . ."

"I won't die for years and they know it," Nana said confidently.

"Okay. They know it and are sunk unless they can prove you're insane. If you were confined to an asylum, they'd control the estate which would amount to practically the same thing. You believe they are trying to get proof of insanity."

"That's right, Johnnie. They'll do it too if I give them a free hand. Your job is to find out who is responsible. What methods they intend to use."

"Something tells me I'll earn every dime of the fee you've promised, but a contract is a contract. I'll do my best, Mrs. Irwin."

"Call me Nana," she urged. "It's a veritable stinker of a name. But we're supposed to be old friends, you and I. I've told them you're a rose grower—like me. It's my hobby. I've grown more types of roses than any individual in the country. Tomorrow I'll show you my greenhouse."

She got out of the car, opened the gates and jumped aboard with agility after Johnnie drove through. They reached the house, one of those places with a concrete drive, ornamental trees and shrubs, roomy architecture and a big winding porch.

A MAN whose appearance could only be called average stepped onto the porch under the light.

"That's Cousin Walter," Nana whispered. "The major-domo of the premises. If I had servants, he'd be giving orders. Hasn't got a dime, except what I give him."

Walter Lane was of medium height, of medium weight. His handshake was of medium firmness, and his eyes were blue and not medium. They were hard as flint.

"Welcome," he said with a cordiality that did not seem natural. "We'll try to make your stay very pleasant. I'm sure you will find Nana's roses most interesting."

Johnnie murmured something polite, went in and met the others. Sister-in-law Lydia Barry was austere, cold as jellied madrilene and skinny. Johnnie wondered, if she turned

sideways, whether he'd be able to see her at all.

Attorney Bruce Glazer was animated, possessive and friendly. He ran to a couple of chairs and a prominent bay window. His whole face lit up when he smiled and his laugh was a booming roar. But no matter how much Bruce Glazer laughed his eyes never changed. And they were the true barometer of what lay behind his skull. Johnnie decided the attorney was a shrewd, calculating opportunist who dwelt behind the dazzle-paint of mirth.

The other man in the room wore a goatee, which automatically made Johnnie dislike him. His manner was smooth, highly polished and two degrees on the hither side of femininity.

"Mr. Quigg and I," Cousin Walter explained, "intend to go into business together. He's a mining engineer."

Johnnie would have bet that Quigg didn't know gold ore from iron pyrites, and he was unable to quench his suspicion. Carrying his bag, he followed Nana to the second floor where a room had been assigned to him.

Nana spoke in a whisper.

"There is no one near you. Move about all you like. The greenhouse is out back. Gus Raycheck is my gardener. I'll introduce you in the morning. The phone in your room is a direct line. Nobody can listen in. I guess that's all."

Johnnie turned to face her as he put his suitcase on a chair.

"Just a minute, Nana. One thing you haven't told me is how these people hope to prove your mind is slipping."

She smiled at him.

"I've got a temper. When it boils over, look out. Occasionally, I've been known to lift a few odds and ends from a five and ten. Not because I want or need them, or can't afford them. I merely looked for a thrill. That's supposed to be kleptomania, but it isn't. I can control the impulse. I wear nothing but old clothes.

"For a woman of my wealth to do that can probably be construed as a symptom of insanity. I don't consider it anyone's business how I dress. To be honest, I like old clothes because they're more comfortable. Once I showed up at a formal affair in slacks. I wanted to create a sensation. I did."

She whacked him on the shoulder, grinned and went away. Johnnie closed the door and sat down on the edge of the bed with a look of awe. Perhaps, he thought, she was balmy. Maybe her relatives were right in wanting

to put her away.

He got up, went over to a small desk and reached for the telephone on it. In this suburban area there were no dials. He gave a city number to the operator and reached one of the three men he employed for routine jobs.

"Johnnie here," he stated briefly. "What did you learn?"

"On Walter Lane, very little. He gambles when he has any dough. Drinks whenever someone treats. The guy looks and acts important, but he isn't. The lawyer, Bruce Glazer, is a shyster. He's always in debt. Lives high and there's some talk that he mooches a bit on the estates he handles. No proof though."

"What about the nephew, Chris Sterling?"

"Nice kid as far as we could discover. Sells bonds and works hard. Funny thing, he hasn't shown up in the last two days though. His boss is worried about him."

"He's on a trip of some kind," Johnnie explained. "What about Lydia Barry?"

"Just a name," the detective answered. "Everyone knows of her, but not a thing about her. I think she's something of a recluse. She has a little money of her own. No much."

"Okay," Johnnie said. "There's another guy here, goes by the name of Alonzo Quigg. I don't know who he is or where he lives, but you might try to get a line on him. Let me know as soon as you do and take down this phone number."

JOHNIE gave it, hung up and unpacked. The others were in their rooms. He'd heard them mount the stairs.

He put on a pair of crêpe soled shoes. The house was silent and dark. He moved noiselessly into the hall. A doorknob turned and he darted back into his room, leaving the door open a crack. With no light in his room or the hall, this could not be noticed.

Someone moved with sure tread, indicating expert knowledge of the house. The person reached the stairs and went down softly. Johnnie reached the head of the steps. The person was leaving the house.

As the front door opened, there was enough moonlight so he could identify the figure. It was Nana Irwin, still clad in slacks and a turtle-necked sweater. She seemed to be holding something at her side. One arm was rigid.

Johnnie hurried to her room. It wasn't locked and he went in. With a small flash he began looking around. The room reeked

of strong tobacco. Nana surely liked her pipe. He rummaged through some drawers and found nothing of interest. A huge clothes closet contained several pieces of luggage. He picked up a couple and found them empty. A third one, a Gladstone bag, seemed a little heavier. He opened it and gasped.

Inside were at least fifty pieces of jewelry—all brand new and all expensive. Nana never wore jewels. What was she doing with all this? Johnnie frowned. She'd admitted stealing knickknacks purely for the excitement. Maybe she'd gone further and pilfered real stuff for the same reason. If so, she was either crazy or on her way to that mental condition.

Someone else was in the hall and coming his way. Johnnie hastily closed the closet door behind him. Whoever entered Nana's room was using a great deal of stealth. Again moonlight, this time filtering through the windows, enabled Johnnie to make an identification. It was Alonzo Quigg. He looked nervously around the empty room. Then he went out. Johnnie heard him hurrying downstairs. Finally the front door opened and closed softly.

Johnnie let him go. He proceeded to examine Nana's desk. It was locked, but no drawer lock could keep Johnnie Vane out. He opened it deftly with a lock picker. In the big middle drawer were checkbooks, literature about investments, bankbooks and innumerable bills, mostly unpaid.

He moved to close the drawer when his eyes fell upon one bit of white paper which seemed to be stained. He touched a finger to the red spot, turned the flash on his fingertip and grunted. Blood! Fresh blood!

He hurried out of the room, left the house fast to hunt for either Nana or Quigg. He found Nana first, or rather she found him. A sibilant hiss brought him to a full stop.

She stepped from behind a bush and signaled he was to be quiet. Without a word, she led him to a small cement pavilion, topped by a cement dome. There were concrete benches and they sat down.

Nana spoke in a whisper.

"I'm glad to find you on the job. That fool Quigg follows me wherever I go. I've got to know why and who he is. That's your job."

"I'm working on it," Johnnie said. "But why are you out here at this time of night?"

She hesitated for a second.

"I—like to walk in the moonlight. That's all."

Johnnie was looking down at her hands.

"You like to do more than walk, Nana. You've been digging in the dirt with your bare hands. Why?"

She gave a curt laugh. "I stopped at the greenhouse for a moment. I always get my hands in the dirt there. Have you discovered anything yet?"

"I have. Nana, this is a direct question calling for an honest answer. In your Gladstone bag I discovered several thousand dollars worth of jewelry. All kinds of small stuff. How did it get there?"

She raised one smudged hand to her cheek and looked very still and shaken. If this was an act, she should have been playing Broadway.

"So help me, Johnnie, I never even knew it was there. A plant, that's what it is. They'll accidentally find the stuff and say I stole it. Once, two years ago, a department store detective stopped me.

"I'd swiped—of all things—a couple of lipsticks. He saw me do it, but when they found out who I was they just apologized and put the price of them on my bill. The others know about this. They're trying to capitalize on it."

"Well, I'm working for you," Johnnie said, "and I'm not satisfied you're losing your mind. So get back to your room and really hide that stuff. Work fast and watch out for Quigg. He was checking on your room a little while ago."

"And what were you doing in there?" she asked coyly.

"Searching it. To find if you're losing your mind, I have to investigate you too."

SHE rose.

"I'm glad you were honest about it. Prowl all you like. I'll be getting back now."

He waited until she had disappeared. Then Johnnie located the greenhouse. It was big enough to be a commercial place. Lights shone feebly through the front of it and Johnnie walked on in.

A stooped, graying man stepped into view. He held a rifle at a ready angle. His shoes were dirty and slashed, evidently to ease his bunions. Johnnie promptly elevated his arms.

"Take it easy, Pop," he warned. "I'm a friend of Nana. She said she'd meet me here half an hour ago. I'm late. Did she arrive?"

"Nana ain't been here tonight," the man said sullenly. "Your name Johnnie Vane?" At Johnnie's nod, he lowered the rifle. "Then it's all right. Nana told me who you are. I'm glad you came. Listen, if Nana gets here,

we've got to keep her out of the greenhouse."

"What happened?" Johnnie asked and wondered why Nana had lied to him.

"Plenty. When she hears about it, this greenhouse and the big house, too, are going to be ripped down, brick by brick. You ever see Nana in one of her tantrums? No? If she starts, get out. Go ten miles away. An atomic bomb is safer."

"Yes, yes, but what happened?"

"Somebody came in here and turned on the insect killing gas. There's a big tank of it in the middle of the greenhouse, near a gas proof room where we put infested plants to get rid of the bugs. This tank was new and not connected, but somebody turned it on. The gas filled the whole place and every blasted plant she owns has shriveled and died."

Johnny exhaled sharply. He pushed by the old man, opened a door leading into the greenhouse proper and quickly withdrew. Gus had snapped on the lights and Johnnie saw those rows and rows of plants, all dead—all beyond any hope of saving. The acrid gas was overpowering.

"This was done deliberately," Johnnie told Gus. "To get Nana so riled she'll crack. It's enough to drive anyone crazy. Keep it quiet for the time being. I'll try to prevent Nana from coming here right away. How many entrances has this place?"

"Another at the back. It's easy to slip in and out that way," Gus explained. "About this gas now. We only release a little bit of it in the gas-proof room. Otherwise the plants will die. Somebody knew all about it and turned the whole tank loose."

"Keep your eyes and ears open," Johnnie warned. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

Johnnie left the greenhouse and began prowling around the estate. He saw Quigg after a few moments and the goateed man seemed to be hurrying to the house. Johnnie let him go. He wanted to find out why Nana had lied, why she'd been grubbing in the dirt, what she'd been carrying when she left the house and how that fresh bloodstain got in her desk drawer.

He reasoned that the use of her hands to dig implied that the soil was very soft. He used his flashlight lavishly and searched for a spot which had been recently cultivated. He found it easily. A bed of tulips had been weeded and the dirt loosened around the plants.

It took him only a few moments to locate the spot where Nana had dug. She'd displayed too much caution in trying to con-

ceal the spot. The dirt was too carefully packed down.

He clawed the dirt away. In a rather shallow hole he found a knife—of the ordinary kitchen variety, it was sharp, a dangerous weapon. And bloodstained. Dirt adhered to the blade like glue. Johnnie bit his lip in exasperation. It looked as if he'd been a prize fool. Nana was crazy. She murdered someone. But whom? Nobody was missing.

Then Johnnie thought of the report from his operative. Chris Sterling, the nephew, hadn't showed up for work and he had a reputation for being steady. His absence from the house was only vaguely explained.

RUNNING footsteps made Johnnie stand erect. They sounded like the steps of Nana and she was heading for the greenhouse. He heard Gus Raycheck's protesting voice, then a shrill shriek from Nana. She'd discovered what had happened to her beloved roses.

The screaming kept up. Nana ran toward the house now with Gus trailing behind her. Johnnie let them go. He had other things to do at the moment and with everyone occupied in the house, he had a free hand.

He inspected the garage first. There was nothing there. The only other outbuilding was the greenhouse. He entered it and stepped out again hastily. The fumes were overpowering. There was a shovel in one corner.

He picked it up, went around to the side and smashed in several big panes of glass. He did the same thing on the other side. With fresh air filtering through, the effect of the gas was considerably lessened. Johnnie entered the greenhouse again, still carrying his shovel.

He turned on all the lights. The place looked like the surface of a gigantic grave, several days old, with all the floral gifts as dead as the occupant of the grave. Midway along the narrow, oblong building, he saw a large heap of rubbish—dead leaves, branches and dirt. It was piled three or four feet high. He prodded it with his spade. The dirt was soft.

He pushed aside some of the branches and his spade struck something more substantial. He wasn't surprised. The body hadn't even been carefully buried, just lodged in the dirt hastily and the branches thrown across it as camouflage.

It was the body of a man no more than thirty—not a bad looking chap even with

his throat slit from ear to ear. There was little blood.

Johnnie searched him. There wasn't much—about forty dollars, some change, keys, a wallet with identification card in the name of Chris Sterling and several small pieces of paper which had been thumbed quite a bit. On each was written a name and an address. Most of the addresses indicated they had to do with greenhouses.

Johnnie left the place quickly. As he neared the house, he could hear Nana's screams of rage. She certainly sounded like a maniac. He entered by the back door and managed to make his way upstairs without being seen.

Johnnie used the telephone.

"Listen, Mac," he said, "this has to be done fast. There's been a killing up here. Either Nana did it or someone is trying to pin the blame on her. The dead man visited a number of florist places—greenhouses, I think. I'll give you the names and addresses.

"Use all the boys and question the owners. Rout them out of bed—do anything—but find out why Chris Sterling visited them. Call me back as soon as you can. Don't take over an hour. Start reporting as soon as you get any kind of information."

"Okay," Mac replied. "Say, about this Alonzo Quigg. The only guy by that name is a society doctor. You know, swell bedside manner, a lot of aspirin and barbiturates and a knack for writing great big bills."

"That will be Alonzo," Johnnie said grimly. The whole thing was shaping into a definite pattern now. "Step on it, Mac. I don't want to report the kill until I've got someone to throw to the cops."

He hung up and bustled downstairs. The scene in the living room was amazing. Nana had been hurled into a big chair. Attorney Glazer and Walter Lane held her pinned there while Alonzo Quigg was methodically fixing a hypo. Lydia Barry had retreated to a corner, where she cowered in terror.

"Put that hypo down," Johnnie snapped.

Quigg glanced at him and went on drawing a colorless liquid into the needle.

"Please don't interrupt me," he said. "I'm a doctor. A psychiatrist. Mrs. Irwin's mind has snapped. She needs a sedative quickly."

"I'll give you a sedative with my fist," Nana roared and began struggling again. Quigg walked toward her. Johnnie intercepted him. He brought down the edge of his hand and struck Quigg's wrist. The hypo landed on the rug and Johnnie quickly put

his foot on it.

"Let her go," he ordered Lane and Glazer. They didn't move. "Let her go," he roared again, "or I'll start getting rough myself. Nana isn't crazy. She's in a fit of temper and she has a right to be. Someone killed all her plants. And—there happens to be more than plants dead. Chris Sterling has been murdered."

LANE and Glazer let go, straightened and looked positively awed. Nana massaged her arms.

"I thought so," she said. "Chris never failed to phone me if he was away. That settles it. Chris was a good boy—the very best. The only decent one among you pack of leeches. And one of you killed him because Chris knew very well I had no tendency toward insanity. He wanted to help me. You wouldn't let him. Johnnie, who did it?"

Dr. Quigg advanced somewhat uncertainly.

"Mrs. Irwin, for your own good, let me give you a sedative. You need it. I've been watching you for five days. Believe me, I only want to help you. A few short weeks of treatment . . ."

"Good gosh!" Walter Lane bellowed. "Is she out of her mind? Really? Then perhaps she killed Chris."

"I'm not crazy and I didn't kill him," Nana shouted. "Johnnie, don't let them do this to me. Tell them you're a detective."

Quigg shrugged. "Another mental aberration. Why should you need a detective? Gentlemen, I instruct this detective to guard Mrs. Irwin until I can get the necessary papers filled out. She must be committed at once. There has been a murder. Undoubtedly she did it. If the police arrive before we act, there will be too much strain on my patient."

"I'm not your patient," Nana bellowed. "And I'm staying here until I know who killed Chris. Johnnie, I paid you to protect me. Start protecting."

Johnnie moved toward her. He expected no resistance of any kind. Not until he looked into the muzzle of a gun which Walter Lane held.

"Stay where you are," Lane said. "We're going to do as Dr. Quigg wishes. I hired him to come here and observe Nana secretly. He is satisfied that she has lost her mind. You represent an insane client, young man. You have no standing here."

"Suppose," Johnnie said cautiously, "I take that gun away from you."

"I'll shoot you the moment you take one step further toward me—or Nana."

"Now, Mr. Lane," a new voice cut in, "I wouldn't do that. Because if you don't drop the gun, I'll drop you. Nana ain't crazy. I won't believe it and the detective is right. The doctor is crazier than all his patients put together."

Lane turned slowly. Gus Raycheck lounged against the door frame. He was chewing something and his jaws moved rhythmically. He held a rifle carelessly, but with just the right amount of carelessness to prove he knew how to use it—fast. Lane dropped his revolver and Johnnie picked it up.

"Thanks, Gus," he said. "Nana, there's a study upstairs. We're going there. Just the two of us. Gus, watch them."

In the privacy of the study, Johnnie laid all the facts on the line. Nana grimly stoked her pipe and applied flame.

"Maybe I don't look as if I'm grieving over Chris, but I am. I just don't show my emotions—except my temper. And that's up and down like a flash. So you found the knife? You did better than I. The Gladstone bag was gone when I got to my room. Dr. Quigg had it. He accused me of stealing the stuff."

"Don't beat around the bush," Johnnie said wearily. "The knife, Nana. What's it all about?"

She blew a thick cloud of smoke around her head as if to obscure her visible reactions. "You'll think I am mad, Johnnie. When I went to my room, I noticed my desk drawer open. The knife was in there, still wet with blood. I didn't know what happened, but I recognized it as part of the pattern of things. So I thought it best to hide the knife."

"With Dr. Quigg trailing you every moment?" Johnnie groaned. "No wonder he diagnosed your condition as mental."

"What are we going to do?" Nana asked. "Soon as the police come and Quigg tells his story, they'll haul me away. Quigg can back it up too. Burying the knife, possession of a lot of pilfered jewelry, the way I act. Certainly they'll think I'm crazy."

"Which," Johnnie observed slowly, "is what the murderer of Chris wants them to think. That murder was planned to be pinned on a madwoman. What I want to find out is—was all this schemed so the killing could be safely committed—or was the murder incidental? Just something the killer took advantage of?"

"I don't know," Nana said. "You're the

detective. I'm paying you."

Johnnie arose.

"For that money you expect action. All right, you'll get it. The door to this room is open. They can hear voices downstairs, but not words. Keep talking. Chatter about anything. Now and then walk around a bit. I want to get back to the greenhouse without anyone knowing it."

HE WENT to the window. It was a fifteen-foot drop to the ground. He removed a thin summer drape, ripped it in half and tied the ends together. He fastened this to the radiator, threw the other end out of the window and calmly let himself down hand over hand. In three minutes he was inside the greenhouse once more.

Gus Raycheck's living quarters were in a small ell off the greenhouse proper. Johnnie looked in. Everything was spick and span, as might be expected of a careful man like Gus. A sound that resembled a faint clicking, startled him.

Johnnie drew his gun. The sound came from behind a closed door. He opened it carefully and then relaxed. It was the bathroom. The faucet was dripping and made that sound. He looked the tub over.

Then he went out and returned to where the body lay. Over everything in the greenhouse lay a fine film of poisonous powder from the gas. He gently removed most of the branches lying above the corpse and stood looking down at it.

There was no film of powder on the dark blue suit. It would have been starkly visible. Therefore, he realized, the corpse had been brought in here after the gas had been turned on and finally allowed to settle.

The body had been, and still was, warm. Death had come only a short time before, so he was sure the blood on that knife was Chris' blood. But Chris had been missing for two whole days and kept alive during that length of time. Where had he been?

No cars had driven onto or near the estate. And why murder the man anyway? He'd harmed no one. Only someone with an afflicted mind . . . Johnnie cursed softly and gave up that line of thought. He'd been paid by Nana and she deserved the benefit of all his doubts for that money.

He returned to the house, entered through the back door and didn't care whether or not he was seen. No one looked out from the living room. He went on upstairs. The door to Lydia Barry's room was ajar.

He pushed it open and walked in. Opening

one bureau drawer he gave a startled whistle. The drawer was half full of lipsticks, compacts, boxes of powder and small vials of perfume—all five-and-dime stuff.

He picked up a handful, walked into the study and dropped it in Nana's lap.

"From Lydia's room," he accused. "She's the kleptomaniac, isn't she? You took the blame. I'll bet every time you were caught with some pilfered item in your possession, Lydia was along. You took the stuff away from her.

"If they found it on you, they'd just say you were daffy, bill you and let it go at that. You don't stick seven-million-dollar widows in the hoosegow for swiping five-and-ten stuff."

"All right, Johnnie," Nana said belligerently. "It was Lydia. She is a kleptomaniac, but I've tried to keep it quiet. She stole those real jewels. She's like a raven. Anything that shines attracts her and she wants it. But Lydia lives with me. She's odd, but I like her. I try to protect her. Now are you satisfied?"

"Sure," Johnnie said, "but you might have told me—unless you're trying to make me earn my fee the hard way. Come on downstairs. I'm going to show you a killer."

"You know who did it?" Nana cried eagerly.

Johnnie nodded.

"Yes. Did the phone in my room ring while I was gone? No? Those men of mine are getting slower by the day."

Downstairs, Gus relaxed his vigilance, although he still held the rifle supported against his hip. Attorney Glazer moved forward belligerently. His fists were clenched, his eyes burning hotly.

Johnnie gave him a mild shove and Glazer swung. Johnnie grabbed him around the waist and the pair danced like two grizzly bears until Johnnie suddenly let go, reached out and yanked the rifle from Raycheck's grasp.

"Line up," he snapped. "Every one of you. Next thing, you'll gang up on me. Gus, if they do, I expect you to stand by my side. Meantime, I'll keep the rifle on them. If any shooting must be done, I'll do it. I'm a detective. I'm expected to shoot."

"Okay," Gus agreed quickly. "You see anyone make a pass, yell and I'll do some slugging. Bunch of rats, that's what they are. Saying Nana is out of her mind."

"That's right," Johnnie nodded vehemently. "Now all you people are going to take orders. Each one of you remove your

shoes and stockings. Snap it up. You, too, Gus. You might as well be in on it. Then they can't say I showed any preference."

"Take off our shoes?" Dr. Quigg gaped.

"Take 'em off!" Johnnie repeated in a roar.

THEY hastily stripped themselves of shoes and stockings. Johnnie walked along the line, gazing thoughtfully at bared toes. He asked each person a single question.

"When did you take a bath last?"

It seemed they'd all bathed just before retiring. Johnnie paused in front of Raycheck.

"You have a bath tonight?" he asked.

"Sure." Raycheck glanced down at his own feet. "Oh, wait. No, I didn't. I was getting ready to when I discovered the gas had been released."

"It certainly wouldn't do you any good to lie, Gus," Johnnie said. "You have bunions. You slit your shoes for comfort and that lets all the soil you work with creep in. Your feet are dirty. Why, then, had your bathtub been used tonight?"

"I don't know anything about it." Gus seemed startled. "What's having a bath got to do . . ."

He made a savage grab for Johnnie's rifle, missed and took a punch in the face for his trouble. He went down, but bounced up again, as resilient as a man twenty years younger. His face was a mask of crimson rage. Somehow he'd drawn a knife. Johnnie swung the rifle by the barrel. It hit Gus alongside the head with a startling crack and the gardener dropped.

"Quigg," Johnnie said softly, "if you have another hypo, give this man a shot. It's better than tying him. He'll fight like a fool until they throw him into a cell. Now—does anybody here know why Gus murdered Chris Sterling?"

"But—but why are you so sure he did?" Walter Lane demanded.

Johnnie shrugged.

"Slicing a man's throat means a lot of blood, and I mean plenty. There were no stains anywhere. So Chris was killed in a place where the blood could be washed away easily. What's better than a bathtub? Gus' was still dripping and still wet. Yet he had not bathed.

"Furthermore, I know that Chris was held a prisoner here for a couple of days. Not in the house. He'd have been discovered. Nor in the garage. So where else was there ex-

cept in Gus's greenhouse lodging? He kept him tied up or doped or both. I don't know. Gus kept a gas mask in the greenhouse, didn't he?"

"Yes," Nana replied. "He needed one when he worked in the gas-proof room. So Gus killed my flowers. Two thousand plants?"

"He did. Let me bring further proof. The murder knife was placed in your room. Gus knew they were going to try to have you committed as an insane person, so a murder might be expected of you. The blood on the knife was still damp. Whoever brought it had to enter through the back door. Because everyone else was in the living room with me.

"Everyone except Gus, that is—so I suspected him. I got the rifle away so there'd be no gunplay. He might have tried to shoot his way out. He put the body in the greenhouse, thinking no one would enter because of the gas. Later, he could dispose of it. But I still don't know why he killed Chris."

There was a faint buzzing. Johnnie raced for the stairs and ran to his room. He came down more slowly.

"The boys who work for me just reported that Chris had been touring various greenhouses in town," he said. "It seems he wanted to find out if Gus had sold any

rare rose plants recently, and it seems Gus sold plenty."

Nana jumped to her feet.

"That's it! He's been stripping my greenhouse of plants I bred. They're worth a small fortune. I didn't want to release them yet. That's why he flooded the greenhouse. By killing all the plants, I'd never know how many were missing. I'd be too disgusted to look."

Johnnie sighed.

"That's the story. Nana is no more insane than I. Dr. Quigg, there is a difference between eccentricity and insanity. You ought to read up on it sometime. Glazer, I don't know if you've been tapping the till on Mrs. Irwin.

"If you have, I'd make it up pronto. Lane, I'd move out of here. Now! Before Nana orders me to throw you out. You started it all by trying to prove Nana insane. Gus took advantage of the situation."

"I'll handle him—and the others," Nana said grimly. "I'll mail you a check, Johnnie. Then I'm going to work. I've got to grow those plants again. Two thousand murders! That's what Gus committed."

"Two thousand and one," Johnnie said softly. "Remember Chris?"

"Try to Stop Me and I'll Shoot! I've Killed Two Men Already— So What's the Difference?"

RAYMOND ALVIN swiftly produced a nickel-plated revolver and turned it toward the Black Bat and Silk. It was rather strange conduct on Alvin's part, for he'd just meekly confessed to two lethal crimes—and now he suddenly, for no apparent reason, changed his mind about surrendering!

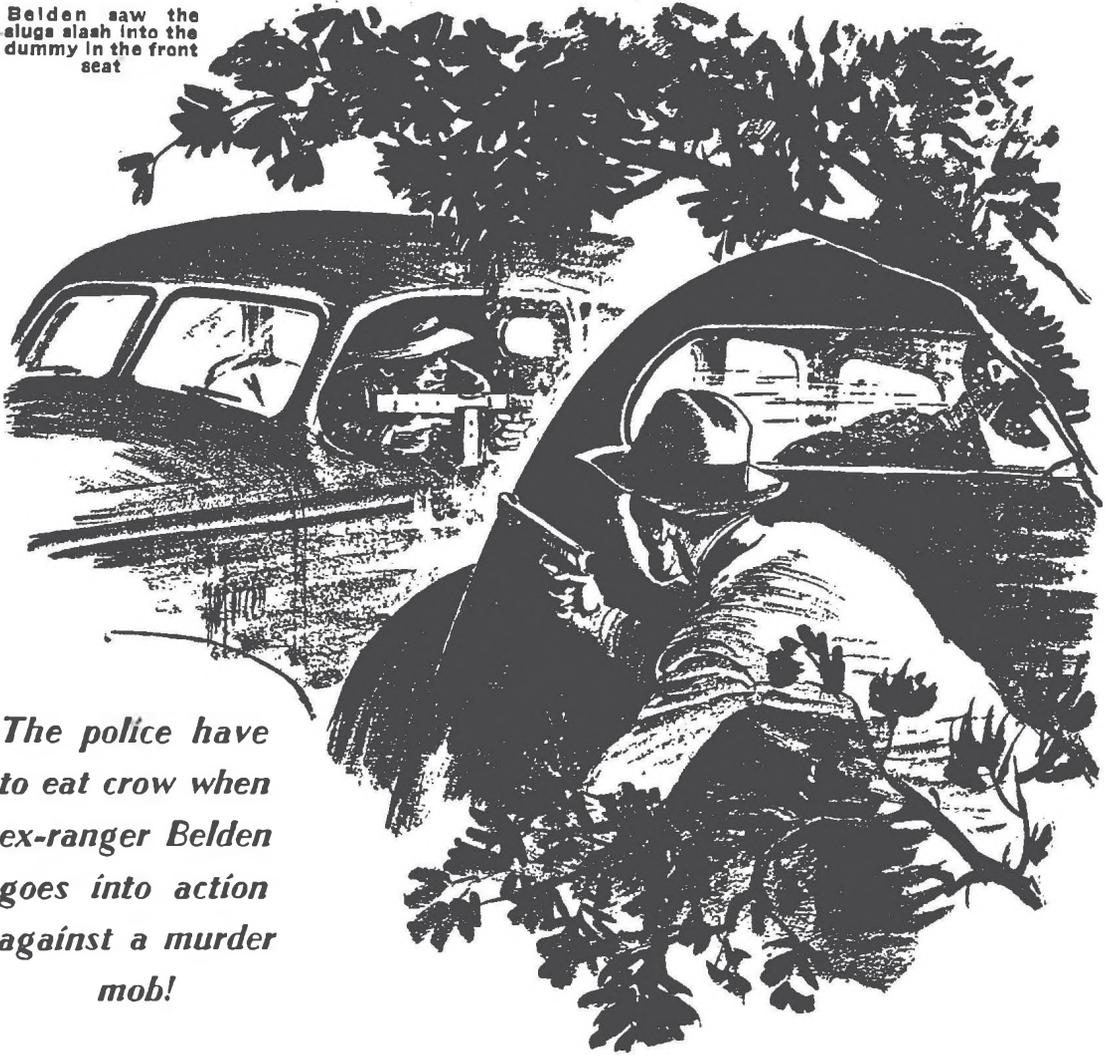
Silk backed away as if to block the door of the Black Bat's office and put up a fight. Alvin paid little attention to Tony Quinn, considering him blind and helpless, but moved toward Silk with determination in his eyes. Silk, with a shrug, finally stepped aside, and Alvin backed through the door, exited from the house and ran out into the night. . . .

Then, taking full advantage of all he had learned from Alvin's visit, Tony Quinn went into action and planned a campaign to solve the baffling case set forth in *WITH MALICE AFORETHOUGHT*, next issue's baffling complete mystery novel by G. Wayman Jones.

WITH MALICE AFORETHOUGHT is one of the best yarns G. Wayman Jones has ever written, and it brings you the Black Bat and his aides at top sleuthing form. Look forward to this splendid novel for an unusual reading thrill!



Belden saw the slugs splash into the dummy in the front seat



The police have to eat crow when ex-ranger Belden goes into action against a murder mob!

KILLERS CAN'T KICK

By ROBERT SIDNEY BOWEN

CHIEF of Detectives Holland spoke in a slow earnest voice, but the tightness about his eyes showed that he was struggling to hold his angry disgust in check. "Study them well," he said, tapping a row of five photographs on his desk. "Are you sure you don't recognize any of them?"

Tommy Belden bent his head to stare at the five photographs long and hard. Yet it was a pose on his part.

Ten minutes ago, when Holland had first shown him the pictures of the five men, Belden had recognized two of them instantly. The other three he had never seen in his life. But those first two he had seen very definitely. Yesterday afternoon, at five o'clock, to be exact.

Belden didn't let that truth show in his face when he lifted his eyes and met the searching, hopeful eyes of the head of the Waltham detectives.

"I couldn't say for sure," Tommy Belden said. "Not under oath in court."

Holland ran a tongue across his lower lip, swallowed and looked down at the photographs with eyes that seemed to beg the pictures to come to life, so that he might have the pleasure of throttling all five of the crooks with his bare hands.

Suddenly he switched his gaze to the Army discharge button on the lapel of Belden's suit coat.

"I guess you killed your share of Nazis, didn't you, Belden?" he asked gently.

The discharged veteran gave him a surprised look, then shrugged.

"I guess so," he replied. "Hope I got more than my share. The whole rotten lot deserved killing."

"These five men in the photographs aren't one bit better than the rottenest Fascist you ever saw, Belden," the chief of detectives said. "If you'd met them in German uniform in France, you'd have shot them without a second of thought. Instead you're helping them save their dirty hides. They're murderers and slaughterers every bit as much as the Nazis, only in a different way. Don't you realize that, Belden? Don't you see how you're protecting them?"

A faint flush started stealing up Belden's neck. He struggled to look the police officer in the eye. Then he shook his head.

"No," he said. "How?"

HOLLAND snapped open his mouth as if he were going to bellow with rage. But he checked himself almost instantly.

"Look, Belden," he said with an effort, "yesterday afternoon, shortly before five, the Bay State Gem Company was robbed of seven thousand in cash and some thirty thousand in uncut stones. A bookkeeper and the switchboard girl, who were the only two in the offices at the time, were shot and killed.

"The four men who did the job ran into a lone woman, a Mrs. Kempler, who was passing the street entrance as they came out. They shot and killed her, too. Then they jumped into a car just as you were crossing the street. The car fender hit you and knocked you down.

"You also were shot at. Luckily for you, the speeding car sent the bullets wild. Witnesses too far away to see the faces of the killers and get the car's plate number did see Mrs. Kempler get shot and you get side-swiped by the car.

"Belden, you must have had a good look at the men in that car. Yet you refuse to make identification from any of these photographs. Why?"

"Why are you so sure I recognized any of the five?" Belden countered, nodding at the photographs.

"Because they are five rats who have been getting away with robbery, blackmail and murder in this town for almost a year now!" the chief of detectives said viciously. "All of them have records. But they are all clear of the law right now, as far as our being able to pin anything new on them.

"That one on the right," Holland went on, is Farmer Hicks, the mob head, if you want to call him that. As dirty a skunk as ever took up crime. But he is the exception because he has brains. Plenty of brains. He has used them to hamstring us at every turn.

"We know that Hicks is behind all that's

been taking place, yet we haven't one single shred of proof that would stand up in court. His lawyers happen to be the best in the business.

"But Farmer Hicks slipped yesterday," Holland continued. "He or one of those with him in the car missed killing you. You're alive. You saw at least a couple of the men in the car.

"You're our trump card to take into court and help us clean out the worst nest of human vermin the city of Waltham has ever known. Don't you see, Belden? Don't you see what a chance you have to help us? To help every decent citizen in Waltham?"

The ex-service man didn't reply for a moment. He lowered his eyes to the photographs and pensively scraped a thumbnail along the angle of his jaw. Presently he sighed and gave a little shake of his head.

"Sorry," he said. "It all happened pretty fast. I wouldn't want to swear to anything that might not be so."

Holland's face became beet red. It was obvious that he could not check his rising anger much longer. But he didn't let it flood out on Tommy Belden.

He fixed a burning glare on a plain-clothes man slumped down in a chair in the corner. This second-grade detective had a face as impressive as the back of a hack. He was chewing gum and snapping it with his tongue.

"Krause!" Holland thundered. "Throw that damn gum away or get out of here! How many times have I warned you?"

The plain-clothes man jumped as if he had been shot. He instantly popped the gum out of his mouth into his hand, and from his hand, into a near-by wastepaper basket.

"Sorry, Captain," he gulped. "I guess I forgot again."

The chief of detectives' eyes turned back to Belden's face. They were filled with cold contempt.

"You want me to tell you something, Belden?" he asked in a chilly voice. "The killers have reached you, haven't they? Somehow they got your name and address from the hospital, where the ambulance took you for a check after you got hit by the car.

"We asked you to come down here today and identify them from these photographs," Holland went on. "But they threatened you, didn't they, Belden? They scared you stiff and shut your mouth. How long do you think they'll let it rest that way?"

"I'll tell you, Belden! Until they can really get you for keeps! Use your head. I know that you recognized at least one of those photographs. I could tell while you were looking at them.

"Give us the help we need, Belden. Speak out, so we can round up the lot and put them where they belong. We're helpless, as it is now. In the past, they seemed to know

every move we made, and they always beat us to the punch. But this time it can be different. This time you can make it different, Belden!"

Tommy Belden didn't reply. He just sat there in his chair, eyes on his folded hands, a tumultuous conflict raging within him. Eventually he lifted his head and gave it another little shake.

"Sorry," he said in a dull flat voice. "I'm afraid I can't be of any help to you. Everything happened too fast."

The faint hope that was showing on Holland's face faded away. He made sounds deep in his throat and stood up.

"All right," he said. "I'm bitterly disappointed. I'd never have believed that a man could go through the war, as you have done, with so little guts. Krause, show him out!"

BELEDEN went hot all over. He was filled with the savage impulse to take a poke at Holland's granite jaw. He killed the urge, however, said nothing and walked over to where the plain-clothes man stood holding open the door.

No sooner were they out in the hall than Krause slipped a stick of gum into his mouth and began chewing vigorously.

By the time the elevator came up, the plain-clothes man was once again snapping gum with his tongue, and with such irritating regularity that Belden felt like taking a poke at his jaw, too.

That desire almost became a fact when Krause nodded Belden into the waiting elevator and gave him a crooked good-bye grin.

"S'long, baby face," Krause called as the doors closed shut between them.

Tommy Belden was still fuming inwardly when he entered his three-room apartment on the west side of town.

There he stood looking at the fishing rods and trout flies on the living room table and the boy's leather wind-breaker slung over the back of a chair. Belden's heart seemed to melt and run down into his legs, making them so weak he had to put a hand against the living room door jamb for support.

For several moments he stood there, staring at the fishing gear and the leather wind-breaker out of eyes that were dulled and made listless by a flood of agonizing misery.

Presently he shuffled to a chair and let his body drop into it. Face buried in his two hands, he cursed tight-lipped and bitterly for a full two minutes. Since that didn't help, he leaned back in the chair, fixed his vacant eyes on nothing at all and let memory go back to a phone call he had received last evening.

It had been just after he arrived from the hospital and was alone getting supper for himself and young Johnny Burke when the phone rang. Walking into the other room to answer it, Belden figured it was Johnny

calling from downtown to confess that he had stayed to see some movie through the second time.

But it had not been a boy at the other end of the phone. It had been a muffled, gruff voice, as if the owner were speaking through a handkerchief over the mouthpiece. And the words Belden heard were as vivid in his memory now as when he had heard them for the first time.

"Belden?" the voice had asked. And when Belden had stated it was he, the voice continued, "Listen good, Belden, because I'm not going to repeat. We've got the kid. He was at your place when we came to pay a little call. So we took him along. We know all about him, Belden. It would be tough if anything happened to him, wouldn't it? Well, that's up to you, Belden. Be smart and keep your trap shut.

"The cops will be asking you down tomorrow maybe to look at pictures," the voice continued. "Be smart, mister, and nothing will happen to the kid. Be stupid, and you can guess what. Just give the cops the go-by. We'll call you tomorrow night—if you play mum with the cops. We mean business, Belden. Listen!"

There had followed a brief moment of silence. Then, in the receiver pressed to Belden's ear, sounded the scared wowl of a boy in pain.

"Hear that, Belden?" the voice spoke again. "Well, be smart. Call you tomorrow night—maybe!"

The line clicked dead. Belden's memory of the call was as vivid as if it were actually taking place this very minute.

A violent shudder raced through him. He gripped the arms of the chair so tightly that his fingers hurt. Slowly he turned his head until his eyes came to rest on a framed photograph on the mantelpiece.

It was a photograph of two battle-stained sergeants of the Ranger battalion. The one on the right was Belden. The one on the left, looking a few years older than he, had been his closest buddy until the Battle of the Bulge.

He stared at the photograph until a mist in his eyes blurred it out.

"Don't worry, Chuck," Belden murmured softly. "Don't worry. I don't know how I'm going to work it, but I'll work it somehow. So help me, I will, Chuck!"

For a full half hour Belden remained slumped in the chair, battling with his thoughts and encountering nothing but a state of half-frenzied helplessness at every turn. At the end of the half hour he forced himself out of the chair and went out into the kitchenette to throw together something to eat. By the time he had it ready, he discovered he couldn't eat.

The first forkful was like a lump of lead that slid down his throat to his stomach. He

tried to force himself to chew. That was impossible, too. His insides were tied into knots and refused the food.

He lighted a cigarette and sat staring unseeing through the curly smoke. He lighted a fresh one from the butt of the first. He kept doing that until the ash tray on the table was filled with butts.

The jangle of the phone bell in the living room brought him up out of the chair.

HE MADE the living room and the phone in no more than half a dozen leaping strides. He yanked off the receiver and shouted into the mouthpiece.

"Hello? Hello?"

"We found out you did okay, Belden," spoke the voice at the other end of the wire. "Now listen carefully. We're going to give you the kid. He's okay. You can have him back for being smart. You know the old Mill Road that runs out toward Shelton?"

So great was his relief and excitement that Belden couldn't speak for a moment. With the receiver glued to his ear, he struggled with a paralyzed tongue. During the moment or so he struggled, Belden was conscious of a sound in the receiver, as if the owner of the voice at the other end was flicking a thumb nail against the phone in impatience.

"Sure, sure!" Belden finally blurted out. "I know the road. I know it well."

"Oke, then," the voice said. "Get into your car in half an hour and drive out Mill Road. Don't speed, or the cops may stop you. Drive along until you come to Hagen's Pond. Stop about fifty yards this side of the wooden bridge. Right by the clump of pines that's there. Stay in the car and wait, with just your parking lights on. Got that?"

"Yes, I've got it!" Belden shouted as he heard the impatient nail-flicking sound again. "I'll be there."

"Alone!" the voice spoke again. "Stay smart, Belden, and do like I told you."

The echo of the last was cut off by the click of the line going dead. Belden had to try twice before his shaking hand could fork the phone receiver. Cold sweat oozed out on his face. Some of the drops were trickling down his cheeks. He brushed them off with his hand, swallowed hard and turned to Chuck Burke's photograph.

"How would you make the play now, Chuck?" he asked in a desperate voice. "That crook is a liar, Chuck. It's nothing but a sweet little ambush. But what can I do but walk into it? They won't bring Johnny, Chuck. They want me. That's all. This is the way they figure to kill me. But they won't, Chuck. I won't let them. I can't! We both know I can't!"

The ex-Ranger sergeant emphasized the last with a savage shake of his head. Turning from the photograph of his dead pal,

he walked into the bedroom. Unlocking the bureau drawer, he took out the Army .45 that had seen so much service with him in Europe. For a moment he handled it fondly. Then he got down to business.

He fitted a clip of cartridges into the handle and worked the ejector slide so that there was a cartridge in the chamber. Slipping on the safety catch, he dropped the gun into his coat pocket.

He was turning away when he made another decision. He rummaged around in the drawer until he found another full cartridge clip. He slipped that into his pocket.

Going to the closet, Belden took out a hat and a heavy top coat. He stuck the hat on his head and carried the top coat over his arm. The last thing he did before snapping off the bedroom light and leaving the room was to pick up a pillow and thrust it under his arm.

Outside in the living room, Belden took one last long look at Chuck's photograph, ran his tongue across his lower lip and, with the faintest of nods, snapped off the living room light and went out of the apartment.

Ten minutes later the ex-Ranger sergeant was driving through downtown Waltham toward the old Mill Road that wound out into the country from the northern side of town. Soon he was definitely conscious of another car trailing him a block and a half back. To make sure, Belden took a couple of unnecessary turns. Each time he saw in the rear-view mirror the driving lights of the other car following him.

Anger and worry flooded through him. On impulse he pulled into the curb in front of a brightly lighted drug store. Getting out of the car, Belden crossed the sidewalk and stood staring at the window display. His eyes, however, saw nothing that was on display. They were fastened on the moving reflections on the glass of people passing behind him.

Then, when the car that was trailing him, came abreast of the store, he turned, shrugged one shoulder as if he hadn't seen what he wanted, and walked back to his car.

WITHOUT appearing to do so, he took a good look at the car going by. It was with great effort that he checked a violent start. The machine was a police car. Krause was behind the wheel. Anger mounted in Belden.

"Should have known that Holland would have my place watched," Belden muttered. "Now I've got to give Krause the slip or not go out to Mill Road at all."

The ex-Ranger deliberately waited until Krause's car was lost in traffic ahead. Then he drove away from the curb in a hurry and took the first turn he came to. He took more turns, because twice he was certain that Krause had got back on his trail. Finally,

when Belden swung onto Mill Road, which wound off into seemingly nowhere, there was no sign of any car behind him.

He began to breathe a bit easier. That is, if a man driving straight into a death ambush can breath easy at all.

There were no lights on Mill Road. Belden had hardly traveled a mile before there were not even lights from houses set well back from the road. There weren't because there wasn't a house to have lights. Hunched over the wheel, Belden drove at a moderate rate of speed, his eyes constantly studying the road ahead and the clumps of trees and bushes that bordered both sides. His Army .45 was on the seat beside him. Every now and then he took his right hand from the wheel and touched the gun to quiet his jangling nerves.

A nerve-racking drive of nine miles and finally Belden's headlights revealed a clump of pines a hundred yards his side of a wooden bridge. His blood was cold now. His heart was hammering desperately. But his hands on the wheel were steady, and there was cold determination stamped on his face. He felt a little as he had felt when he went with the British Commandos on the ill-fated Dieppe raid in 1942—nervous, tied up tight, yet ready for instant action and burning with a savage desire to fight it through no matter what.

Twenty-five yards from the clump of pines, Belden slid the car out of gear, extinguished the driving lights and snapped on the parking ones. He let the car coast to a stop. But he kept the engine turning over, and he held his gun in his hand until he was sure that the clump of pines beside the road did not hide waiting death.

For several minutes the ex-Ranger sat leaning well forward to protect as much of his body as he could, with his gun trained dead on the clump of pines. But nothing happened. No smash of a gun, and a bullet speeding at him. Nothing.

Sliding over on the seat, Belden propped the pillow behind the wheel, draped his top coat about it and stuck his hat on the top. A punch or two to straighten the improvised dummy, and he was satisfied that in the lights of an approaching car it would look like a man slumped comfortably behind the wheel.

Finally Belden slid out of the car. And at practically the very instant his feet touched the ground, he let out a sharp gasp and stood stock-still. It was not because he had stepped on something that hurt his foot, or because anything had suddenly happened. On the contrary, it was because an idea flashed through his brain. He had suddenly added two and two and made it to come out four.

"So!" he breathed fiercely. "Sure! That connects. That makes sense. I should have

tumbled at once!"

He stood for a minute while an explanation of the phone calls came to him. Then, when he caught the sound of a car beyond the bridge, he stooped quickly to the ground and stole back until he was hugging the right rear wheel.

Gun propped for a shot, his body completely hidden from the approaching car, Belden was still able to see the slightly bouncing lights on the road.

Presently, a dull hollow rumble told him that the car was crossing the wooden bridge. Then the automobile seemed to ease off speed and to veer a little toward Belden's side of the road. His heart pounded mightily. But now that danger was practically upon him, his muscles were coolly relaxed and waiting for the right moment.

That moment came when the car drew abreast of Belden's automobile. The strange car was traveling at no more than a snail's pace. Suddenly the silence of the night was shattered by the yammering fire of a sub-machine gun.

Belden saw the slugs slash into the dummy in the front seat of his car. One of the bullets shattered the windshield. Then the death car was by and starting to pick up speed.

TOMMY BELDEN was swiftly in action. In what was but the continuation of a single movement, he was around the back of his own automobile and up on the running board of the driver's side of the other car. With his gun he knocked aside the sub-machine gun that was being pulled back in through the driver's window. Belden rammmed his pistol muzzle straight into the killer's face.

"Brake, Krause, or I'll spill your brains all over!"

Belden emphasized the last by banging his .45's barrel against the plain-clothes man's mouth and breaking off two front teeth.

Krause howled with pain and mortal fear. He braked so hard that Tommy Belden was almost thrown off the running board.

Belden hung on, however. With his free hand he jerked the sub-machine gun from the other's grasp. Then, taking his gun off the plain-clothes man for an instant, Belden jerked open the rear door of the police car and slid inside.

"All right, where have they got the boy?" Belden demanded.

Krause turned his head and stared at him. "Got the boy?" he mumbled through his broken teeth and bleeding lips. "What are you talking about?"

Belden whipped his left hand in a slicing motion that caught Krause at the nape of the neck just below the hair-line. The man groaned with pain. His whole body was paralyzed for a moment.

"Learned that one where rats like you wouldn't have the guts to go, Krause," Belden said coldly. "Now, get this. For you the party's all snafu, as the air boys say. You like to snap gum too much, Krause. You muffled your voice on the phone tonight with a handkerchief or something, but you forgot all about that gum in your mouth, and how you like to snap it.

"I heard the sound it made through the handkerchief, but I didn't tumble until just a couple of minutes ago," Belden added.

"No wonder you tailed me. But not on Holland's orders. On Farmer Hick's! To make sure I wouldn't pull any funny stuff coming out here. I did, though, didn't I, Krause? Your slugs ruined a good top coat and maybe my car. But skip that for now. Where are Farmer Hicks and the boy?"

The use of the plain-clothes man's muscles had slowly returned. He wagged his head about, but he didn't say anything. Belden gave him fifteen seconds in which to answer. The other waited them out in silence.

"Okay, Krause!" Belden said with deadly softness. "I once did this to a Hun. He didn't like it at all."

As the ex-Ranger spoke, he dropped his gun into his lap and caught Krause's head from behind with his two hands. He got his finger tips against the man's eyeballs and twisted. At the same time he dug the thumb of each hand in under the bottom part of the man's ears. And then he pulled the whole head sharply backward. Krause screamed, but the pain was so intense that his clawing hands were useless. In fact, he only clawed once with his hands before he quit cold.

"Don't! You're killing me! I can't stand it! I'll tell! They got the kid at Hicks' place. O-h-h-h!"

Belden released the pressure of his fingers slightly, but only slightly.

"Go on, rat!" he commanded. "Let's have all of it. Where is Hicks' place? Who's there, and what's the set-up?"

The plain-clothes man took a deep breath that made a rasping sound in his throat. If by any chance Krause was considering a frantic effort to wrench himself free, the idea was killed instantly, for Belden jabbed both thumbs in a movement that must have filled Krause's head with white pain.

"Talk and cut the stalling," the ex-Ranger sergeant said evenly. "Give out, or I'll turn you over to Holland in pieces, Krause. Alive, maybe you can explain to him how you've been tipping his hand to your brother rats all these months. But in pieces, Krause, you won't be able to say a thing for yourself."

The mention of Captain Holland's name sent a shiver of terror through Krause. It was a moment or two before he could get his tongue to move.

"I didn't have any part in that thing yes-

terday," he began to whine. "I didn't even know they'd grabbed that kid staying with you until I went to Hicks' place. He had me do the phoning to you, and I had to. Hicks did me a couple of favors once. I got in too deep. He could have got me sent up for life. You don't know Hicks. He's bad!"

"Forget Hicks!" Belden cut in, tight-lipped. "You thought you'd plugged me just now, didn't you?"

"But Hicks!" Krause wailed, almost hysterical. "I had to."

"Sure, sure!" Belden said. "My heart's breaking. Skip that part. Tell me what I want to know. All of it, and fast!"

KRAUSE groaned as more white fire shot through his head. For an angry instant Belden thought the man was going to faint. But Krause didn't. He began talking as if he couldn't get the words off his tongue fast enough.

"Hicks' place is over on Route Sixteen, about three miles from here," the detective said. "There's a gate at the front. He's got a man there all the time. All of them are there—Hicks, Ryan, Cordeau, Ape Meeker and Cullin. And the kid, too. When I was there last night, they had the boy in a room right at the top of the stairs.

"There's a sort of balcony, with three rooms leading off," Krause continued. "The kid's in the center room. Ape Meeker is watching him. Belden, you can't do anything alone. They've got plenty of guns there, and Vinny is on the gate. You'd never get by him."

Belden didn't say anything for a minute. He was thinking of the five names Krause had reeled off. Each name he had seen stamped on the bottom of one of the five photographs Captain Holland had shown him. That little Johnny was in their hands filled him with a cold, calculating fury.

"And the loot, Krause?" Belden asked as thought of the gem robbery came to him. "Is it there?"

"It's there," the detective hastily assured him. "In the wall safe downstairs. Hicks is going to split the money tonight, after I took care of you. Not the stones, though. He said we'd have to wait, because he has a deal cooking to turn them into cash. Belden, give me a break. Let's go back to Holland and get a bunch of the boys. I'll show them how to get into that place. Honest! I hate Hicks' guts. This can be an out for me. Give me a break, Belden!"

Revolted disgust surged through Belden. It was with a great effort he refrained from jabbing his thumbs right through into Krause's head.

"That thug on the gate know you?" Belden asked. "He'd let you through in this car? The truth, Krause!"

"Yes, he knows me. Vinny knows this

car," Krause gasped. "But you're crazy in what you're figuring. Vinny has got a gun. And even if you drilled him first, the shots would warn the others. I tell you—"

"Never mind telling me!" Belden cut him off. "You drive to that place. Drive just as if you were coming from the little sneaking job you didn't do. Right up to the gate. Get Vinny to come up to your side. And don't bat an eye, Krause. I've killed better Huns than you, so it will be a pleasure. Get me?"

"Y—e—s—s," the other stammered. "But for goodness sake, watch him. He's got eyes like a cat, and he can shoot fast!"

"I love the kind who shoot fast," Belden said grimly, and he took his hands from Krause's head. "Now, hold it a minute!"

His gun back in his hand, Belden held it against Krause's neck. Leaning forward, he ran his other hand over the plain-clothes man. He found Krause's police gun in a shoulder holster and deftly tossed it on the back seat.

"Just in case, Krause," he said. "Your rotten hide is now in my hands. If you want it to be plugged with holes, play it stupid just once. Drive to Hicks' place."

The drive took about twenty minutes. All of that time, countless thoughts raced back and forth in Tommy Belden's mind. Half a dozen times, at least, he was tempted to call a halt to his plan of impulsive action and speed back to Waltham for Holland and others to help him storm Hicks' place. Each time, though, Belden rejected the idea.

Little Johnny was in their hands, so a gun battle between the police and Hicks' rats would automatically make Johnny's life worth less than nothing at all. No, Belden had to play this one alone. It was like a few times over there in France. All kinds of help was available, but he couldn't take the risk of strength in numbers spoiling everything.

No, he had to play this alone, and to play it perfectly, or he'd never forgive himself the rest of his life.

As Krause swung the car off the highway onto a narrow gravel road, Tommy Belden snapped out of his rambling thoughts and concentrated on each next second to come. The plain-clothes man had driven with only his parking lights on. The night was not too dark, so Belden could see the high stone wall that presently loomed up ahead. Then the huge iron gates.

"Take it slow from here," he said softly to Krause, and he crouched below the window level. "Go right up close and get Vinny to come to your side of the car. Easy does it, Krause!"

The plain-clothes man gave a faint bob of his head to show that he had heard. At the same time he eased down the car's speed to let it coast up to the gates. There, the detective stopped the car and stuck his head

out the window.

"It's Krause, Vinny," he called in a low voice. "Open up. They're waiting for me."

BELEDEN raised his head just enough so that he could peer over Krause's shoulder. His two hands were empty. His gun, Krause's weapon and the sub-machine gun were on the floor beside Belden. He didn't need a gun for what he was going to do.

Breath locked in his lungs as he saw the dim shadow of a figure move from the left to the center of the gates. There was the dull clanking of metal. The gates swung slowly open.

Krause shifted gears and drove slowly between the opened gates. He stopped right beside the man who had opened them. The man rested a hand on the gate as he cradled a machine gun under his other arm. From what Belden could see of him, Vinny seemed bored, waiting for Krause to drive on so that he could close the gates and go back to whatever he'd been doing.

"Vinny," Krause said softly, "is the boss still mad? He's around, isn't he? I got a pint for you, Vinny. Here, take it."

The man at the gate moved close to the car. He started to say something as he reached out with one hand. But it wasn't any more than an inarticulate grunt that had the chance to come off his lips.

Like two snapping whips, Belden's hands went out, caught the man about the head and neck and yanked him hard up against the window sill. He twisted viciously at the same time. With one hand at the base of the man's head, Belden rammed the heel of his other hand up under the man's chin. There followed a sickening snapping sound. As Belden let go, the man's body slid slowly down the outside of the car to the gravel driveway, where he lay still, his head twisted in a grotesque position.

"Gosh!" Krause gasped in stunned awe. "Broke his neck like you would a match!"

Belden didn't comment. He now had his .45 in his hand. In a short but savage motion, he laid the gun against the right side of Krause's head. The plain-clothes man probably didn't know what hit him. He went out like a light and fell over on the seat.

"You'll stay cooked for as long as it's going to take me," Belden muttered, climbing quickly out of the car.

Reaching back, he picked up Krause's revolver and slung it away in the darkness. Then he picked up the dead gatekeeper's machine gun and threw it away. He thrust his own gun into his suit pocket and took the sub-machine gun with which Krause had tried to kill him.

Holding the big weapon in his hands, he stood by the gate for a moment, peering intently at the lights of a house seventy-five yards away. There were trees in the way.

As far as Belden could tell, all the lights were in rooms on the ground floor.

"First, we reconnoiter," the ex-Ranger said softly, stepping off the driveway onto the grass. "If I'm lucky, maybe I can pull that same trick we did at Dieppe. Here's hoping, Chuck."

Ten minutes later Belden had circled the house twice. He learned all that was needed. The house was a more-or-less spread-out affair, badly in need of repairs. Belden had been able to spot four men in the downstairs living room. The fifth, the one Krause had called "Ape" Meeker, he hadn't been able to spot. Belden guessed that Meeker was upstairs with Johnny. But he wasn't sure, so he gave up his original plan to slip inside. Besides, the bit of luck he had prayed for was his.

At the rear of the house was an old barn. It was in ten times as dilapidated a condition as the house. But it could serve Belden's purpose perfectly, for there was hay in the loft and a lot of thrown-out, junky wooden furniture in the stable.

The ex-Ranger crouched in the darkness just inside the stable, staring unwinking at the rear of the house thirty-to-forty yards away. The kitchen light was on. During the minute or so Belden took to inspect, no shadow of a moving figure inside passed the window.

"This is it," he murmured, and he pulled a cigarette lighter from his pocket. "Make it good, and make it fast!"

He touched the flame of the lighter to the hay. He gave the flames just enough time to get going good, then he bolted out of the barn and ran swiftly around to the front of the house.

Like a cat, just as silently, he went onto the porch and crouched before one of the front windows. Inch by inch, he raised his head until he could peer into the room.

Four men were seated about a table playing cards. The fifth, Ape Meeker, was still absent. A drink was at each man's elbow. Their laughter and talk came faintly to Belden through the glass of the window.

Three, four, five minutes dragged by. Belden's body was drenched in sweat. He repeatedly fingered the sub-machine gun in his hands. It took all of his will-power to stop from smashing the barrel through the glass and blazing away.

Soon the crackling of the blaze in the barn reached his ears. By turning his head, he could see the faint reflection of the mounting flames on the clump of pine trees that stood to the left of the house.

SUDDENLY, one of the card players in the front room saw the reflection of the flames on the window glass. It was Farmer Hicks, who was seated facing the left side of the living room. Belden saw him leap to

his feet with a loud shout, knocking over his chair.

The others twisted around in their chairs to look. Then all four raced to the window. They were there for a short second. As Hicks shouted, they spun away from the window and went pounding through the door that led into the kitchen at the rear of the house.

The door had hardly swung shut behind them before Tommy Belden crashed in the window glass with his machine gun. He went through the opening in a single leap and sprinted for the stairs leading up to the second-floor balcony.

As Belden went up, a huge man appeared and came bounding down the stairs. Belden let go with his sub-machinegun. The man took the short burst straight in his chest.

A revolver flew from his fingers. His body smashed back against the steps, then started rolling down the stairs.

Belden leaped clear and went charging upward. He reached the door of the center room on the balcony. It was unlocked. He sent it crashing open.

Light from downstairs poured into the room to reveal a ten-year-old boy, face wet with tears, huddled in terror in a chair. Belden ran toward him and put one arm about him.

"It's okay, Johnny!" Belden said swiftly. "Everything's okay. They're not going to do a thing to you. Just come out here and lie down. Lie down flat, Johnny, back against the wall. Don't worry. Everything is going to be fine. I won't let them touch you."

As Belden spoke, he led the youth out onto the balcony, then made him lie flat against the wall, so that no part of him was visible from the bottom of the stairs.

Then Belden sprawled down at the head of the stairs. Thrusting the sub-machine gun out in front of him, he deliberately fired a yammering burst into the card table below. Just a short burst. Then he waited, his face hard and cold, his eyes fixed on the door leading to the rear of the house.

He had perhaps a full minute to wait. Footsteps pounded on the kitchen floor. The living room door flew open.

Farmer Hicks came charging into the room. In his right hand he held a gun. But when he saw the bullet-shattered card table, he pulled to a halt and stared at it owl-eyed.

Three other men crowded in behind him. For a split second they, too, gaped at the table.

It was all Tommy Belden needed.

"Up here, killers!" he called.

Four heads jerked around and up. Four hands started to snap guns into aim. But Tommy Belden wasn't playing the big-hearted hero who gives the villains the first shot.

The sub-machine gun jumped in his hands as the muzzle started spurting tongues of

flame. Hot bullets swept the four below off their feet, knocked them flat with not a breath of life remaining in any one of them.

Belden stopped shooting to get to his feet. The coldness was gone from his face. There was a warm smile on his lips as he turned to the shivering boy crouched on the floor.

"It's all right now, Johnny," Tommy Belden said gently as he helped the youth to his feet. "Nobody's going to hurt you. Everything is swell. We'll go after those trout tomorrow, just as I promised. Wait a couple of minutes while I use the phone down there to call a fellow. How'd you like a ride in a police car? Siren and all? I think maybe I can work it."

"Gee!" the youth breathed, and he wiped his tear-stained cheeks with a grubby hand. "I'd like that."

Twenty minutes later, Captain Holland and half of the Waltham police force came charging through the front door. Belden and Johnny were seated on a couch with their backs to the dead men on the floor.

They turned and stood up as the police officers came in. Holland started to open his mouth, but he checked what he was to say when he spied the dead men.

"The five of them!" Holland finally gasped, as if unable to believe his eyes. "You said so on the phone, Belden, but I thought you were kidding. And Krause is still out cold in the car by the gate. But who is the boy, Belden? You didn't say anything about him."

TOMMY BELDEN gave Johnny a reassuring pat on the arm, then walked over to Holland.

"He's the reason I couldn't come through for you, Holland," Belden said in a low voice. "He's Johnny Burke, son of Chuck Burke, my buddy in the service. The kid's mother died when he was born. Been

brought up by Chuck's sister. Chuck was nuts about him. Always talking about teaching him trout-casting after the war."

"Chuck won't be back. The first day of the Bulge fight Chuck died in my arms. Begged me to do the things for Johnny he'd planned to. Of course I promised.

"Only yesterday morning Johnny arrived from his aunt's to visit me. Hicks grabbed him. He phoned me to let me know they had him. Said they'd call again tonight. You know the rest.

"I couldn't help you, Holland. It would have been curtains for Johnny. The risk was too great. I could only hope I'd get some kind of a break. Krause gave it to me.

"Look, Holland, the safe Krause spoke about is behind that sea picture over there. I've left that for you and your boys. Do me a favor, will you?"

The police officer looked at him, grinned a little crookedly, then thrust out his jaw.

"You do me one, Belden," he said. "I called you things this morning, hoping you'd take a poke. I was that sore. I'm not sore now. But take the poke just the same."

"No," Belden said, shaking his head. "I'll take one of your police cars instead. Johnny will get a kick out of working the siren. And maybe it will start him forgetting things fast."

"Sold!" Holland said emphatically. "My own car's out by the gate. Sergeant Knoll is in it. He'll give the kid a ride he'll remember all his life. The boy can work the siren all he wants. Go ahead. I'll send a man out to tell Knoll. And—thanks for the one-man clean-up, Belden. Drop around sometime and give me all the little details. Lads like you can teach us plenty!"

Belden promised to drop around sometime. Then he walked over to where young Johnny Burke sat waiting with red-rimmed eyes that were now shining with eager anticipation.

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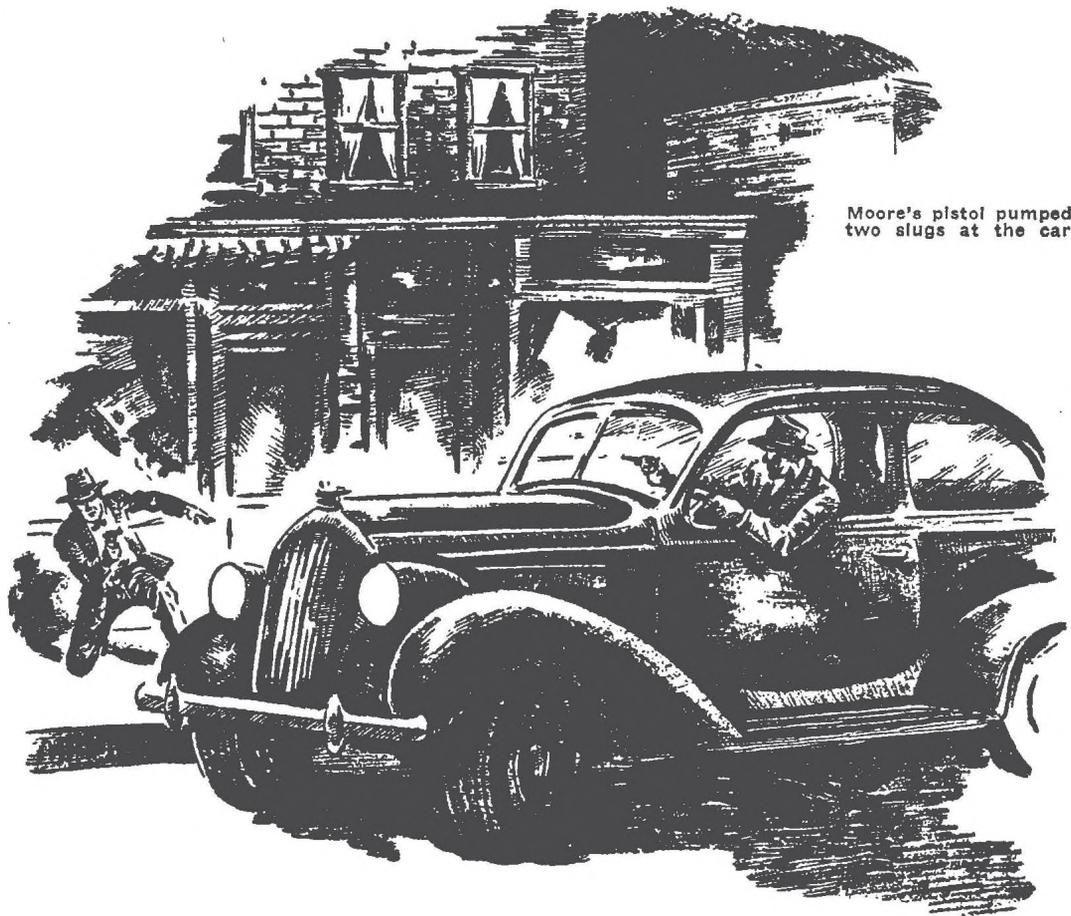


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Moore's pistol pumped two slugs at the car

MURDERER'S RETURN

By WAYLAND RICE

Detective-lieutenant Alec Moore uncovers a vicious swindle scheme—and rapidly takes the trail of a ruthless killer!

THE doorman of the ultra exclusive men's club opened the taxi door, started to help the occupant out and then stepped back. The man in the cab was certainly not going to be permitted to enter the club. His appearance was decidedly against it.

He was white-haired, very thin and had a distinguished look about him, but his clothes were a motley array of something from a second hand dealer's store. The trousers, of a coarse, heavy material, hadn't had a pressing for many months. The coat was torn at the shoulder and fitted the man like a sack. He wore no tie and his shirt was filthy.

"Good evening, Roberts." The man nodded to the doorman as he stepped out of the cab. "You've put on weight."

Roberts stared at the man's retreating back as he went up the steps to the club entrance. Then Roberts gave vent to a violent exclamation.

"Courville! Roger Courville!" he gasped. "But—but he's d-dead!"

A steward in the club saw Roger Courville too, as he moved to intercept this unsavory character who had no business in the club. But the steward stepped aside swiftly as recognition dawned in his eyes.

"Roger Courville! Wanted for murder!"

He hastened into the main clubroom and wrecked the until now perpetual silence with words that were garbled except for Courville's name. A very tall, broad-shouldered and graying man jumped from his chair. He rushed over to the steward and seized him by both coat lapels.

"What did you say?" he demanded. "Roger Courville!"

The steward shuddered

"Yes, sir, I saw him plain as day, sir. I couldn't be mistaken even though he is disguised."

"What do you mean, disguised?" the man shook the steward again.

"He—he used to be a fashion plate. He—he looked like a tramp."

"But you are certain it was he?"

"Yes, Mr. Donnelly. He was a member of this club for so long—before he k-killed his partner and then they said he was dead, too. It was like seeing someone rise from the grave, sir."

Donnelly let go of the man. He looked up at the wide staircase where Roger Courville had vanished.

"Well, I'll know him. He's my brother-in-law, worse luck. Before the police get here, I want to have the satisfaction of punching him a few times."

Donnelly ran up the stairs lightly. He was at least fifty-five, but seemed as athletic as a man twenty years younger. The other men in the club gathered in an excited group, talking in whispers. Nobody ever spoke loudly in this club.

They talked of Roger Courville, his strange disappearance and the murder of his business partner, Paul Graham. Of the five years of silence and now—Roger Courville had returned. Either from the grave or to the grave. There was a murder warrant out for him.

Within the next two or three minutes, two things happened simultaneously. First, there was a loud yell from upstairs and the sound of running feet. On the heels of that, the club door opened and admitted four men who held drawn guns and had badges pinned to their coats.

At their head was the youngest of the quartette, a lithe young man with eyes the color of gun metal and hair black as midnight. There was something about him to both excite interest and give a feeling that he could be depended upon.

going. He climbed the steps two at a time, making more noise than this club had heard in half a century.

At the landing he stopped, gun ready, eyes narrowed. Then he saw Donnelly backing slowly out of one room far down the corridor. Donnelly had his hands raised, as if to ward off the sight of something he couldn't bear to see.

The detective reached his side and took a quick look into the room. The man he wanted was there. Roger Courville sat in a high-backed chair and looked straight down at his feet. He was very dead and even from the doorway, the detective knew why. Courville's throat was swollen and discolored. He'd been choked to death.

"Let go of me," Donnelly shouted. "I've got to phone his daughter and the police. Let go! Who the devil are you anyhow?"

The detective showed his badge.

"Lieutenant Alec Moore, Homicide. That man is Roger Courville?"

"Yes. I'm his brother-in-law. He's much thinner and quite a bit older looking, but that's him all right."

Lieutenant Moore approached the body and made a hasty examination.

"He hasn't been dead very long," he said significantly. "You were up here several minutes, weren't you?"

Donnelly wet his lips.

"I—don't know exactly. The steward told me Courville had come back. I went looking for him. This door was closed. When I opened it, Courville was in that chair sitting erect, with his head against the back of it. I spoke to him and he didn't answer. I thought he was alive and that he still hated me so much that he wouldn't talk to me. When he refused to answer, I shook him."

Lieutenant Moore went to the telephone on a nearby table and put through a call for the medical examiner and the police specialists who follow close in the wake of murder. While waiting, he glanced around the room and wondered if it was some sort of a museum.

Half an hour later, after the experts had arrived at the club, Lieutenant Moore was ringing the bell of a sedate old mansion far uptown. A considerable estate went with it and the whole house was fairly well concealed from the avenue by rows of trees and shrubs. Roger Courville had lived here before he turned crook, murderer and fugitive.

The girl who answered the door made Moore blink. She was a willowy brunette with gray eyes and a full, lovely face. There was an unspoken question on her parted lips.

NO INTRODUCTIONS were necessary. The detective heard that yell as he came through the door and he kept right on

Moore said, slightly disconcerted:

"Police. Are you Miss Vera Courville?"

"Yes," she replied. "The police? What on earth—? Is it about my father?"

Moore nodded.

"Afraid so and it isn't pleasant. May I come in?"

She stepped aside, her eyes filling with tears. She led him into a drawing room where a young man was sprawled out in one of the big chairs. He was about Moore's age and build, but he had a baby face with a cream-colored complexion and naturally rosy cheeks.

"This is Lieutenant Moore," the girl said. "Of the police. Lieutenant, my fiance, Elliot Hale. The lieutenant has news of Dad, Elliot."

"Well, what is it?" Hale demanded. "Listen, if you caught up with him, if he isn't dead, then he is innocent."

"We caught up with him," Moore said, "and he is also dead. He appeared mysteriously at his club tonight. A short time after he entered the club, he was murdered."

The girl swayed and clutched at the back of a chair. Hale quickly sprang to her side, flashing Moore a venomous look.

"Darned neat way of breaking news like that," he snapped.

"It's the best way." Moore sighed and sat down, twirling his hat slowly around one finger. "I've had plenty of experience at it, too. Miss Courville, as soon as you feel able, I'd like to ask a few questions."

"Ask them of me," Hale said. "I know about as much of what happened as Vera."

"All right. Let me rehash the circumstances which led to Mr. Courville's disappearance first. That was five years ago. He was in the brokerage business with a man named Paul Graham. It seems they manipulated some investors' money illegally and were in danger of being arrested for it. Courville and Graham proceeded to cash in on all their assets. Possibly getting set to run out."

"May I correct you, Lieutenant?" Vera Courville said with determination. "Graham may have intended to run out, but not Dad. If he cashed in everything he owned, it was to accumulate money enough to pay back the people he is supposed to have cheated."

"I'll concede that." Moore smiled at her. "Anyway, your father vanished. A day or two afterwards, Graham was murdered and there was some evidence pointing to your father. But we discovered your father's clothes on one of the big bridges. Apparently he'd jumped off and his body was washed out to sea. It seems we were wrong."

"You're still wrong if you think he killed Graham," Vera said vehemently.

Moore nodded.

"Quite possibly I am because if your father was the murderer, why did he come back? Why did he openly expose himself to people at the club who knew him so well? And, more important than that, why was he murdered?"

"And where has he been all these years?" Hale added.

Moore said, "I may be able to tell you that quite soon. Miss Courville, have you a cigarette, please?"

She mechanically proffered an inlaid humidor box of cigarettes. Moore took one and slowly rolled it between his fingers.

"Odd brand," he observed. "But very good, I expect."

"My father used to smoke only these," Vera explained. "I got used to them."

"Are they easily obtainable?" Moore went on, making no attempt to light the cigarette.

"Only one firm carries them," Vera said. "Why are you asking all these questions?"

"It's my business." Moore smiled slightly. "You didn't see your father once since he returned? Please be certain of your answer, Miss Courville."

She flushed and held her head high.

"I didn't see him. I'd have given my life to have talked to him, listened to him explain."

Hale regarded Moore stonily.

"This detective," he addressed Vera, "is leading up to something. Out with it, Lieutenant."

"Well, you see," Moore smiled slightly, "I found a number of loose cigarettes in Courville's pockets. This particular brand. Now Courville wouldn't have been apt to purchase these. He was well known before he disappeared and might be recognized. So I think he got the cigarettes in this house. That he was, perhaps, living here."

VERA looked startled. Hale started to say something, but she waved him to silence.

"Lieutenant, this is a very big house. There are eighteen rooms. Some of them I haven't even looked into for months. Before Dad vanished, he paid up all obligations on the house, paid the taxes and insurance for ten years. I've really very little money. I have to work for a living, but I reside in this house because it costs me practically nothing. My father might have been here, but I didn't know it."

Moore arose.

"Suppose we take a look around."

Vera was instantly agreeable, but Hale was not.

"I think you ought to talk to a lawyer before you let this policeman prowl through your home. Why, he might arrest you before it's over," he said peevishly.

Moore displayed more patience than he knew he had.

"Miss Courville, I'm trying to do much more than merely prove your father did hide here. More than find his murderer. I want to prove he did not kill Paul Graham five years ago. I don't think he did. Otherwise, why was your father murdered this afternoon? The law would have killed your father anyway if he were guilty."

Vera impulsively took Moore's arm.

"That's just what I was thinking. I'll show you around. I'll help in any way I possibly can. I'll try not to think of what happened to Dad until this is all over with."

Hale tagged along, grumbling a bit, but Vera and Alec Moore were too engrossed to pay any attention to him. The house was huge. They started with the first floor and in the kitchen, Vera discovered a single aluminum pan was missing and a few cans of foodstuffs. It was on the third floor, in one of the old servant's quarters, where they found the evidence that Courville had really secreted himself here.

There were more of the cigarettes, some newspapers only a day old, and a few odds and ends a man might carry in his pockets. By the number of butts it seemed that Courville couldn't get enough of them.

"Wherever he spent those five years," Moore observed, "there must have been very few cigarettes. It's given me an idea and we'd better go back downstairs. I expect a phone call to confirm my hunch."

The phone call came five minutes after they were in the drawing room. Moore listened intently. Then he turned from the telephone and faced Vera and Hale.

"By certain things that were discovered on your father when he was being examined," he said to Vera, "we surmised that he'd been out of the country. We were right. Your father was discovered on a South Pacific island—one of those small places where rubber is grown. He'd been trapped there since the Japs infested the area. He gave an alias, but we were able to find satisfactory proof as to when he had originally reached the island and assumed his false name.

"He was brought back to the United States on a freighter," Moore continued, "arrived day before yesterday and promptly disap-

peared again before he could be checked in."

"But why?" Hale demanded. "Oh, it's true he was wanted for murder, but Vera or I would have hidden him. For years, if necessary."

"He must have had his reasons," Moore commented thoughtfully. "Perhaps he hoped to prove his innocence before making his presence known. At any rate, I intend to find out."

Vera accompanied him to the door.

"If you do prove that Dad didn't kill Paul Graham five years ago, it will relieve the shock of his death to me, Lieutenant. I'll do anything I can to be of help."

Moore held her hand tightly and looked into those amazingly clear eyes. He didn't say anything, just let go of her hand and walked out. He returned to Headquarters and dug out the old files on the murder of Paul Graham. He studied these for more than an hour and learned nothing further than he already knew.

Courville and Graham had conducted what seemed to be a perfectly honest business. Then Courville had suddenly liquidated everything he owned. Turned it into cash—and there had been many thousands of dollars represented. Shortly afterward, Graham had done the same thing. Then one day Graham's body had been found in his car, which was parked on a little used road. He had been shot through the head.

The last person known to have been with him was Roger Courville. Fingerprints indicated Courville had been a passenger in the car recently. The utter lack of any attempt on the part of Graham to defend himself, proved the attack which killed him had been unexpected and made by someone Graham trusted.

Courville was listed as the probable murderer. A widespread search had been started, but a week later, his coat and hat were discovered on a bridge. The case had been tentatively closed with Courville listed as Graham's killer and a suicide, himself. Graham's money had vanished.

BUT now Moore knew that Courville had left the country for some half deserted island. To hide? Perhaps, but then why had he come back?

There was a knock on the door and a patrolman poked his head in.

"That cab driver who brought Courville to that club is here, Lieutenant. The doorman knew him and he was easy to find."

The cab driver sat down, nervously fiddling with his hat. He needed no urging to talk.

"This guy, Courville they said his name was, first hailed me at Clark and Carmody. That was night before last. He had me drive him to the Blair Building and told me to be sure to wait right outside. He was gone about an hour."

"What time was that?" Moore asked.

"After eleven at night. Near twelve, I think. My records ought to show."

"Never mind. It was long after any usual office hours. Go ahead."

"He tipped me—twenty bucks. Never got a tip like that before in my life. Maybe that's why I remembered him so well. He told me to be at Clark and Carmody the next night at exactly ten o'clock. Well, I was there. He slips out of a doorway and gives me the address of a cheap restaurant downtown.

"When we get there," the cab driver continued, "he gets out of the cab, goes to a doorway nearby and stays there until another cab pulls up. An elderly man gets out and Courville comes from the doorway with his hand stretched out. He says, 'Good to see you again, Addison.' That's the name. It was kind of odd and it stuck."

Moore made some notes and nodded to the cab driver to continue.

"So I get another twenty after he comes out—alone. I dropped him at Clark and Carmody, with orders to come back tonight at nine. Well, when I meet him this time, he's laughing to himself. You know how a person laughs when he's pleased about something. And he hummed and whistled all the way to the club. That's all, Lieutenant. I didn't know he was a killer."

Moore dismissed the man and settled back for about five minutes of thinking. Then he contacted the superintendent of the Blair Building and found out what he wanted to know without too much difficulty. There was only one tenant whose first name was Addison listed in the building directory—Addison Young. He was the man who had purchased the brokerage business after Graham's death.

Moore thought it would be a good idea to pay Mr. Young a visit.

The penthouse apartment where Addison Young lived was a rather good indication of how well he was doing with the brokerage business he had purchased. He listened politely to what Moore had to say. Then he shrugged.

"Looks like I'm in it. Yes, Courville did contact me. I was, to put it mildly, surprised to hear from him. Like everyone else, I thought he was dead. I agreed to meet him and I made up my mind that if his story wasn't satisfactory, I'd notify the police."

Moore nodded.

"I take it his story was very good."

"In my opinion, yes. Here it is. Graham told Courville, five years ago, that he had sold thousands of dollars of stock in a rubber plantation which turned out to be worthless. He confessed he did it to get a lot of money fast. Graham, it seems, was crooked.

"Courville wasn't according to his story. He talked Graham into an agreement to pay back every penny. To do it, both men had to liquidate everything they owned and do it secretly so no one would suspect. Well, they did. But Courville wasn't satisfied. He decided to investigate that rubber plantation to see if anything could be salvaged from that worthless investment and he left the country abruptly.

"He learned that he was wanted for Graham's murder about six months later. It was just at that time that the Japs sneaked up on us. It was impossible then to leave that island."

"And what did he want to see you for?"

Young scrutinized Moore carefully for a moment.

"He asked confirmation of the fact that when I took over the firm, there were no cash assets. That's all. There weren't. Hardly a dime, but I made a million out of it since then. He also told me he had entered my offices, checked the books and knew I was telling the truth."

Moore extended his hand.

"Thank you, Mr. Young. I might add that people have been known to commit murder to get control of an outfit like Courville's and Graham's, but I doubt you did. Courville never mentioned the murder?"

"He merely swore he hadn't done it. That he was sailing across the Pacific when it happened." Young's features darkened. "I also resent the implication that I killed Graham to get that business. I didn't."

"Then you have nothing at all to worry about, have you?" Moore countered with a wide grin.

But Moore himself was worried about it. Outside, he went to a drug store and phoned Headquarters. He had detectives assigned to check on the movements of Addison Young, Donnelly, who was Courville's brother-in-law, and on Elliot Hale, Vera's fiance.

THIS done, Moore got into his car and started across town toward the club where Courville had met death. He first became aware that he was being followed after he made several turns and a pair of headlights stuck in his rear view mirror. Just to be pos-

tive, Moore did a U-turn. A difficult thing in this traffic and against the law, but he did it expertly. The other car did it, too, but awkwardly.

Moore made another sharp turn, into a rather narrow and dark side street. After he straightened the wheel, he kept going for a few yards and then pulled up to the curb. The pursuing car was traveling too fast and it sailed on by. Moore filed the registration numbers away in his mind.

But, contrary to his expectations, the car stopped too, heading carelessly into the curb and bouncing back as its front tires hit the cement. Nobody got out. Moore did, his curiosity thoroughly aroused. He freed his gun and approached cautiously.

As he neared the car, he saw a man's arm dangling limply out of the window beside the driver's seat. It looked exactly like the lifeless arm of a dead man. Moore began to move faster.

When he approached the front door of the car, there was a flash, an explosion and a bullet whizzed very close. Moore hit the sidewalk flat. There was another shot. This one went wild. His service pistol pumped two slugs at the car. He knew he had hit it.

The motor suddenly revved up to a high pitch. The car mounted the curb, veered off it onto the road and continued on quickly, until it swerved around the corner and vanished.

Moore picked himself up. Two patrolmen were coming from different directions. He identified himself and ordered one to put the numbers of that car on the radio.

He was smiling somewhat grimly as he resumed his drive toward the club. He was getting close to someone's secret and his persistence must have rankled a great deal for such an attempt to be made on his life.

But Moore didn't disqualify his opponent as any ordinary killer. He had brains, displayed by that neat trick of feigning unconsciousness so that he could maneuver Moore into a better position for the kill. The killer realized he'd been outwitted when Moore stopped his car suddenly around the corner, but he had quickly altered the situation to his own benefit.

Twenty minutes later, Moore was in the room where Courville had been murdered. After locking the door, Moore looked around. This was some sort of a relic room. The walls were covered with animal heads and even a huge swordfish was mounted on a panel.

A desk in one corner was roped off and carried a neatly lettered sign indicating that

one Jonathan Devers had used this desk. Behind it was a very old, high-backed chair with a cushion seat. This, too, had a velvet rope tied from arm to arm so the chair could not be used. Apparently, Jonathan Devers had also occupied this chair at some ancient date. He must have been one of the originators of the club.

Moore was no respecter of tradition when it came to murder. He stepped over the roped off space, opened the desk drawers and upon finding them empty, he pulled them all the way out. He looked into the drawer slots for hidden compartments and even measured the desk carefully to be certain every inch of it was accounted for in drawer space.

Then he examined the big chair. He prodded the stuffed seat without any results. The intricate carving of the back required considerable patience to examine. Again, no secret hiding place. Moore stepped back, surveying the two pieces of furniture critically.

Courville had secreted something in this room, regarding the spot as a safe hiding place. It was, therefore, logical that he should have selected either of these pieces of furniture. It would have had to be fairly spacious, too, if Moore's hunch was correct.

He approached the cumbersome chair again. This time Moore turned it over. His eyes brightened in triumph. There was a false bottom. In a short while, he discovered the control. The seat could be lifted up when one fancy scroll-like portion of the design was firmly rotated. He raised the seat and cursed. There was nothing inside.

Moore descended to the lobby of the club where there was a call from Headquarters waiting for him. The detectives assigned to check on the suspected men, had filed tentative reports. Neither man had shown suspicious moves. Donnelly had attended a formal dinner one night, the theatre the next. The night of the murder he was at the club.

Addison Young, whom Moore had just left, spent nearly all his time at his office working. Elliot Hale had been with Vera. Nothing unusual because he seemed to be with her constantly. Moore's eyes narrowed slightly and he tapped fingertips nervously against the telephone table.

AS HE was leaving the club, Moore saw a car pull up. Donnelly got out and walked briskly toward the entrance. He scowled as he noticed Moore.

"Has your snooping around gotten anywhere?" he demanded. "I doubt it. You detectives don't know how to cope with a case like this. Deprived of stool pigeons, you are

usually stumped. Well, perhaps you can tell me. Who killed Courville?"

"Maybe you did." Moore's eyes were on the car which Donnelly drove. He grasped the man's arm and held it tightly, despite Donnelly's vocal protests. He led the man to where the car was parked, looked keenly at it and pointed a finger at a jagged hole through the rear door.

"That's a bullet hole," he said. "A trademark I provided. The registration numbers match, too. Mr. Donnelly, when I said you might have killed Courville, I wasn't fooling. This car, not more than an hour ago, was following me. The driver did his best to gun me right out of this case and onto a morgue slab. Now don't tell me it was stolen. Not unless you reported that fact at least over an hour ago."

Donnelly looked blank for a moment.

"Lieutenant," there was considerable respect in his voice now. "I swear I know nothing about it. For the past two hours I was in my office. The car was parked on a side street. It was there when I came out, just as I left it. I never noticed that bullet hole."

"You have the benefit of the doubt, Mr. Donnelly," Moore said, slowly. "I didn't see the man behind the wheel of this car. He made very certain of that. You may be telling the truth, but I'll check on it. Who else saw you in the office?"

"No one," Donnelly groaned. "I was all alone. I didn't even make a phone call. You've got to believe me. I can't back up my statement any way at all, but it is the truth."

"We'll see," Moore said noncommittally. "I'm commandeering the car, however, just in case there are fingerprints. Tell me something. You swore you saw no one on the second floor of this club building when you went up to see Courville. Could a man have been there and got away as you climbed the steps?"

Donnelly said eagerly:

"Yes, of course someone could have left secretly. By a service stairway. And not be seen either because the stairway leads to an old kitchen that isn't used any more. There is a door to the alley right from the kitchen."

Moore made no comment. He climbed into the car and drove it to Police Headquarters. He waited until the fingerprint men determined that the only prints were Donnelly's and there were not too many, at that.

Moore gave up that angle as entirely unsatisfactory and instead, set the wheels rolling for what he hoped would be the crisis of this case.

At the unearthly hour of three in the morning, Moore drove to Vera Courville's home. Donnelly, Addison Young and Elliot Hale had all been summoned there by Moore. Vera let him in and she had a smile that, under the circumstances, was warm.

"Gentlemen," Moore said, "one of you killed Courville. I've been over this thing from every angle and I'm sure that I'm right. This is what happened five years ago. Paul Graham and one of you plotted to take a successful brokerage business away from Courville.

"Graham sold a lot of stock that he later claimed was worthless. Courville, as Graham and his accomplice knew he would, insisted on converting his assets into cash with the purpose of paying every penny back. Graham pretended to agree and he and Courville both did just that.

"But Courville became suspicious, perhaps by intuition or by something he heard or saw. He decided to investigate, personally, the island where that rubber plantation was located. But he'd already converted his assets. He might be gone a long time.

"He believed someone wanted to get his money so he hid it in an antique chair at the club. A chair which was roped off and never used. He was sure he'd return fairly soon but for obvious reasons didn't. He was trapped on that island by war."

"He didn't kill Paul Graham, then?" Vera asked slowly.

"No," Moore answered. "He couldn't have because we know now he was already at sea when this happened. The murderer was the man who influenced Graham to carry out this scheme. His motive? The acquisition of the money which belonged to Graham and Courville. He got Graham's.

"Courville was missing and the killer decided it was a wonderful opportunity to pin the blame on him. He did this by the simple expedient of setting the stage to make it seem that Courville had killed himself. It worked, too, because Courville had completely vanished."

"A moment ago you inferred that one of us was the killer," Donnelly said. "Name the man and prove it—if you can. Otherwise, I'd apologize if I were you."

"I'll do neither at the moment, Mr. Donnelly," Moore answered smoothly. "You had a motive for killing Courville. You hated him intensely. He married your sister. You were against the marriage. You've fought him for years and you never came near Vera with the slightest offer of help."

"Prove I killed him," Donnelly insisted.

"Or stop this idiotic talk."

"I can't," Moore admitted. "Not right now. But you had the opportunity. You followed Courville up the stairs in the club. You were gone long enough to have strangled him."

Addison Young hastily moved away from Donnelly.

"I don't know whether you know this, Lieutenant, but I happen to know that Donnelly needs money, too."

"So?" Moore grunted. "I didn't know it. But you, Mr. Young, you, too, are involved. You happen to be the only man who knew that Courville wasn't dead and that he had returned. Courville met you by appointment. You could have planned the whole thing."

"For a motive we have your succession to the business. You didn't pay much for it, but you made plenty out of it. It was worth a fortune to get Graham and Courville out of the way."

"I didn't kill him and I'm not afraid of any such accusation, Lieutenant. When Courville was murdered, I happened to be in my office."

"And who will corroborate your statement?" Moore inquired casually. "I've already checked on the alibis of all three of you. Hale is the only one who couldn't possibly have done it because he was here with Vera. Isn't that right, Vera?"

She nodded.

"Elliot hasn't missed very many nights. He does all the work around here. The repair work, I mean. I can't recall, though, what he was doing at the time my father was murdered."

Hale grinned.

"Why, Vera, have you forgotten? The underground watering system for the lawn was jammed and I fixed it."

Vera smiled.

"Of course, Elliot, I'm sorry. I helped you part of the time."

"You see?" Moore told them. "Hale is the only one of you who has an alibi. Now if I can get hold of the cash and the bonds which were stolen from Courville, they will firmly convict the man responsible. I don't think he has had time to dispose of them yet. So I am going to order a search of your offices and your homes, gentlemen."

"The search warrants are waiting for me at Police Headquarters now. Hale, will you take my car and drive to Headquarters for them? Later, you and I will conduct the search."

"Why I'd be glad to," Hale said. "Whom shall I see?"

"Captain Johnson. He will give you a sealed envelope. Bring the warrants here at once."

HALE hurried out. Donnelly sat down, grumbling heavily. Addison Young walked the floor. Vera went over and sat beside Moore on a long davenport. Twice Donnelly started to say something, but refrained. Young began smoking long, thin cigars as though they were cigarettes.

After what seemed like an eternity, but was actually a short while, Hale came back, flourishing the envelope. Moore didn't get up.

"Hale," he said, "I lied a bit about those search warrants. I haven't obtained them yet."

"But this envelope?" Hale gasped.

"It contains a single piece of paper," Moore said. "On it is written a man's name. The name of the murderer of Paul Graham and Roger Courville. Open it, Hale, and read the name."

Hale ripped the seal, unfolded the paper and then reached for his hip pocket. His hand froze. Moore had a gun pointed straight at his heart.

"Donnelly," Moore said, "walk carefully behind Hale and remove that gun from its holster. Don't get in my line of fire."

Slightly dazed, Donnelly obeyed and dropped Hale's revolver on the table. Moore motioned Hale to extend his hands. Handcuffs snapped into place. Hale looked down at them, up at Moore's steady accusing gaze and then he began to babble incoherently. Moore called out. Two detectives entered the room.

"He acted just as you hoped, Lieutenant," one of them said. "Made a flying trip to town, stopped at his apartment and came out with a package. Then he went to one of the terminals and checked the package. We grabbed it. There's more cash in that bundle than you ever saw at one time."

"Okay," Moore nodded. "Book him. He's talking his head off. I depended on surprise to throw him off balance and it worked. I knew, since he believed I was going to search Donnelly's and Young's offices and homes, I might decide to search his and he'd take any opportunity to reach his apartment and really hide the loot."

Vera, stunned by all of this, finally recovered her voice. "But, Lieutenant, Elliot was here with me."

"He was outside fixing the sprinkler system," Moore said. "You didn't see him every moment. It would have been simple to plug the system, tell you he was going out to

repair it. Instead, he drove quickly to town, murdered your father, got the loot and hid it at his apartment. Then he returned here, unplugged the system easily enough and you honestly believed he'd never left the premises."

"You certainly gave us a bad time for awhile," Young commented wryly.

"I had to," Moore stated. "If Hale got suspicious, he might have taken a run-out powder. But I believed he was our man all the time. Because the man who killed Courville had to know he was alive and that he had returned to the States. He also had to keep an eye on Courville.

"I think Hale noticed certain food items missing and guessed he was here. He knew Courville would go to the club to get the money he'd hidden so well five years ago. Vera, did Hale suddenly decide to repair that sprinkler?"

"Why—yes," she said. "He told me he meant to fix it all along. Then, that evening, he jumped up and went to work."

Moore nodded.

"He knew that Courville was afraid of being seen and had contracted for a cab to pick him up close by. He saw the cab waiting and went into action."

"And—the loot you just mentioned?" she asked hesitantly.

"There is your motive. At least part of it. Your father could have reopened the whole mess by reappearing and Hale couldn't have that. Most of all though, Hale knew very well that your father had concealed the proceeds of his investment sales and that the money was somewhere around.

"The hat and coat on the bridge, giving silent evidence of your father's suicide, also intrigued me. Obviously, from what I had learned, your father couldn't have put them there. So, someone had to obtain that hat and

coat. Hale was the logical candidate because he had free access to the house at all times.

"Then, too, why the suicide build-up anyway? Because Hale wanted your father to come back and was trying to make things easy for him. We'd hardly be looking for a man we believed to be dead. If all indications were strong enough that your father was dead, he'd be far more willing to take the risk of returning for the money.

"Hale banked on the fact that your father had been trapped on one of those Pacific Islands by the war but would come back as soon as he could. When he did, Hale wanted to be around to get his hands on your father's hidden money.

"He'd gotten Graham's, but that wasn't enough. Not for Hale. So when your father did return, Hale was posted right here and could follow all his moves. It became a matter of waiting until your father went to the hiding place.

"Hale saw him enter the club, realized the money must be hidden there in one of the rooms on the second floor which wasn't used much. Hale was right. He slipped in the back, ran up the rear steps and—well—you know the rest."

"Yes," Vera said tonelessly. "I know."

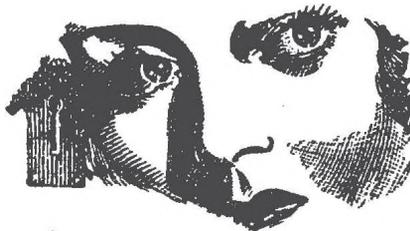
"Vera, this part isn't nice, but it's the truth. Hale was your fiance for more than five years, yet he never showed any inclination to marry you. He merely wanted an excuse to hang around in case your father came back."

"I'm glad—that he—didn't marry me," Vera shuddered.

"So am I," Moore smiled and whispered. "I'm glad it was Hale and I think you know why."

Her hand tightened around his.

"Yes," she said. "I do know why."



Framed for murder in Paris, Lois Warren uses her razor-keen wits to turn the tables on a clever and resourceful slayer in CODE GIRL, an exciting mystery yarn by Barry Perowne coming in the next issue!



"Reach high!" the detective ordered

DEATH WITNESS

By ANTHONY TOMPKINS

Theatre prop man Steve Sterling gets mixed up in some mighty real drama when he sees a killer—and must act!

STEVE STERLING thought there was nothing quite as desolate and dead as an empty theatre. The rows and rows of seats out front, seemed to be occupied by ghosts, but within a week there would be an enthusiastic audience paying good money to see Ross Clayton's and Ronnie Royle's newest show. The Clayton-Royle productions were noted for their lavishness.

Steve Sterling knew this theatre well though he was prop man at the Regal, an equally big theatre four blocks away. He held a long, fat envelope which had been

carefully sealed by Charlie Richards, his employer. It was destined for Ronnie Royle, half owner of this theatre and its business manager. Royle usually stayed behind the scenes, letting Ross Clayton take all the glory.

Steve reached the wings, found the spiral steel stairway and ascended it. Above stage were the offices. Four of them. As Steve walked briskly down the corridor, there was a single shot—then another. They came from one of the offices.

Steve was no hero. At twenty-four he was

a goodlooking aspirant for the stage, but gunshots were out of his line. Quite automatically, he stopped in his tracks. He heard one of the doors open.

That meant whoever was coming out probably carried a gun. Steve's mind pounded home the fact that if he remained alive, he could do something about this—but if he faced an armed murderer and got killed, he'd serve no purpose at all.

So Steve ducked for cover. He twisted the knob of the nearest door, prayed hard and his prayers were answered when the door opened easily. He didn't close it all the way, but left a crack through which he could observe whoever came down the hall. There was no other way out except to pass the office where he was hidden.

Footsteps, fast and furious, clattered hollowly, their echo picked up and accentuated by the vastness of the theatre.

Steve saw him then.

He was about thirty, dark-haired, slim and lithe. His eyes seemed to be coal black and he wore dark clothes. Though the weather was much too warm for it, his hands were encased in grey gloves. He had a furtive, half-frightened manner and swept on by, but Steve knew he'd recognize this man again among a thousand others.

He heard him descend the ladder and then Steve reached for a telephone on Ross Clayton's desk, for it was the office of the theatre impresario into which he'd blundered. Steve hesitated a moment. Perhaps those hadn't been shots, though they'd certainly sounded like them. Before he did anything rash, he'd better make sure the situation called for extreme measures.

HE CREPT out into the hallway and moved down to the office from which the man had emerged. The door was closed, but not locked. He stepped inside and his breath faltered.

Ronnie Royle lay in the middle of the flamboyant blue and yellow rug. His arms were outflung, his eyes stared glassily at the ceiling and he had been shot twice. At least, there were two slowly spreading bloodstains on his white shirt front.

Steve shuddered at the sight. The only dead people he'd ever seen before had been decently laid out in coffins. This was stark, grim and real. He took a step toward the very large desk in one corner of the room. There was a telephone on it. Then he stopped. Perhaps if he moved around, he'd destroy evidence. There were other phones. He backed up slowly, closed the door and

raced toward the other office.

There he seized the phone and dialed the operator.

"I want a policeman," he said and his voice was pitched a couple of octaves higher than usual.

He suddenly realized that he had almost witnessed a murder. That he had actually seen the killer was a certainty.

Someone spoke something and Steve began to talk. He gave his name, the address of the theatre and a brief resume of what had happened. He was ordered to stay there. As he hung up, he thought he heard something move. It required all the courage he could muster to open the office door and peer into the hallway. It was empty.

Then he thought he'd better rush down to the front of the theatre. There was no one around to show the police how to reach these offices. Their location was very unusual. The idea fascinated him and he proceeded to put it into effect, although he knew in his own heart that what he wanted to do was get as far away from that corpse as possible.

He clattered down the steel staircase, over part of the stage, down the steps to the aisle and along this as fast as he could run. He scooted across the lobby and waited by the empty ticket office.

About five minutes later, he saw a black sedan pull up with a rush. Three men got out. One of them was grey-haired, husky and moved like a man of about twenty-five. Steve ran out to meet them.

"You did the phoning?" the grey-haired man asked. "Good. Now calm down and tell me just what happened."

"I was delivering this envelope to Mr. Royle for my boss. I'm a prop man at the Regal Theatre, just down the street. When I got to where the offices are, I heard two shots."

"Together or separated?"

"They were about—twenty seconds apart," Steve estimated. "Then someone came out of Mr. Royle's office. I thought he might have a gun so I ducked into Mr. Clayton's office. He and Royle run this theatre. I left the door open a bit and I saw the man who came out. I'd recognize him again in a minute."

"You're doing all right," the grey-haired detective praised. "Go on."

"I didn't try to stop him," Steve went on. "I figured he had a gun. Well, about a minute later I went to Mr. Royle's office. He was lying on his back on the floor. I think he'd been shot twice through the chest. He

wasn't moving and his eyes were wide open. He's dead all right."

The grey-haired detective issued orders. His two men rushed for the back of the theatre. Steve accompanied the detective down the aisle toward the stage.

"I'm Captain McDonough of Homicide," the detective introduced himself. "It isn't often we run across a witness with any sense. You did very well indeed."

They climbed the steel stairs, hurried down the hallway and McDonough opened Royle's office door. As it swung wide, the Captain flashed for his gun.

"Drop it," he snapped. "Then lift 'em—high."

Steve peered over McDonough's shoulder. He blinked in the sheerest amazement he'd ever experienced. Royle no longer lay on the floor. He was seated behind his desk, slumped in the chair. The bloody wounds were there on the shirt front. Nothing could have changed that. And on the spot where the body had lain, stood a man whom Steve knew well.

It was Ross Clayton who owned this theatre with Royle. Clayton was holding a gun by its barrel. He dropped it quickly and raised his hands.

"Are you an officer?" Clayton asked. "Thank heavens you arrived so soon. Hello, Steve. What are you doing here?"

"I'll ask the questions," McDonough showed his badge. "And I'll start with the same one you just asked. What are you doing here?"

"Why, I was in one of the dressing rooms downstairs," Clayton said. "The phone rang. It was Royle and he asked me to come to his office as fast as I could. When I got here—well, you can see what happened. I found the gun lying on the rug. I picked it up by the barrel so there'd be no smudging of fingerprints. I . . . good grief! Do you think I killed Royle?"

McDonough turned to Steve.

"You say you saw the killer leave this office. Is this the man you saw?"

"Oh, no, sir," Steve said quickly. "I know Mr. Clayton and the man who left here right after the shooting didn't look like Mr. Clayton at all. I'm positive of that."

MCDONOUGH eyed Steve critically for a moment. Then he turned to Clayton.

"When did you get that phone call from Royle?" he asked.

"About three minutes ago. I came right up. Royle sounded very strange and dis-

traught. Naturally I hurried."

"But, Mr. Clayton," Steve blurted, "Royle couldn't have phoned you three or four minutes ago. He was dead ten minutes ago. I saw him and I checked the time. And Mr. Royle wasn't sitting in that chair. He lay on the floor—right there, right where you are."

Steve pointed and McDonough went over to the spot. He bent and studied it carefully.

"No signs of blood," he observed. "Steve, are you sure of this?"

"I saw it," Steve said earnestly. "Why would I lie? If you find the man who passed along the hallway just after the shots were fired, you'd have the murderer. Mr. Clayton didn't do it. I'll swear to that. I didn't even know he was in the theatre."

"Umm," McDonough grunted. "All right. Clayton, you'll have to come with us to Headquarters. Under the circumstances you can't object."

"No," Clayton said. "I suppose not. Thanks, Steve, for what you did."

At Headquarters, Clayton was put in charge of a detective who led him to another room. Steve sat down in McDonough's office and made a formal statement. He signed it and then he was led to the identification division.

"It's only a ghost of a chance," McDonough said, "but you might find the picture of the man you saw in our files. Tell me, did you notice any distinguishing mark? Anything at all?"

Steve hesitated.

"Well, yes. He had a mole growing in the middle of his right cheek. I thought he wasn't bad looking except for that . . ."

McDonough turned to one of the fingerprint men.

"Mole in center of right cheek. Get busy and sort out our pals who are marked that way."

Some ten minutes later, Steve started going through a group of rogue's gallery photographs. All the subjects were equipped with moles on various parts of the faces. It was clear that the identification expert was taking no chances.

Then Steve gasped, for a familiar face stared back at him. It was the man he'd seen in the corridor. There was the same lean face, narrow, almost pointed chin and dark, brooding eyes.

McDonough picked up the photo and its accompanying record.

"Studs Harris, eh? He's always been a cheap punk. Never thought he'd run to murder. I wonder what he was after? Guys

like Harris never kill unless there is something big in it for them. We'll find out. I'm sending out an alarm for him. Shouldn't take long to drag him in. Mind waiting, Steve?"

"No, of course not," Steve said. "Good gosh, imagine the luck. You having his photo and all. Now Mr. Clayton can go free. Why, he never killed anyone. He wouldn't think of such a thing."

They permitted Steve to wander around Headquarters and he studied everything he saw. Some day, he hoped, he'd perhaps play the part of a detective in some stage show. He'd know what that part was all about too.

It was almost two hours later when Captain McDonough sent for him. Steve was just stepping out of a phone booth after calling Charles Richards, his employer. It had suddenly occurred to Steve that Richards must be wondering what happened to him.

In McDonough's office sat the man Steve had seen in the corridor. He glared at Steve, but said nothing.

"Harris is a trifle reticent today," McDonough said. "He won't even tell us the time. Well, Steve, is he the man?"

"Yes, sir," Steve said. "That's the man and I'm not making any mistake. I couldn't. I saw him from no more than three feet away. That's the man."

Harris opened his mouth to utter two words.

"You're nuts!"

McDonough shrugged.

"It would be better if we had two witnesses. Okay, I'll lock Harris up. Maybe he'll decide to talk later."

Someone stepped into the room. It was Charles Richards, Steve's employer. Richards was a hearty looking man, not too hard to work for and usually very pleasant, but now there was a puzzled expression on his rather wide face.

"Hello, Steve," he said. "Hello, Harris. What are you doing here?"

"Do—do you know him?" Steve gasped.

"Why, of course I do," Richards said. "We had a conference this afternoon. About a play Harris wants to write. Seems he can do a prison play from experience. He has a good idea. I was thinking of having one of my pet writers collaborate with him. I—Steve, this isn't the Harris you were telling me about over the phone? The one who . . .?"

"He's the man I saw," Steve answered, feeling less sure of himself with every passing moment.

"That's impossible. Harris was in my of-

fice at the time you left with the envelope for Royle," Richards exclaimed. "He was sitting in the waiting room. Say, maybe that's where you saw him and you unconsciously picked out his picture as the man you thought you saw in the theatre."

"He's the man I saw leaving Royle's office," Steve insisted. "Nobody can make me think any different."

RICHARDS frowned and Steve felt his heart sink. His own boss was against him.

"Now, Steve, don't put it that way. After all, I have no interest in this, beyond the fact that Royle and I were excellent friends. But Harris here, was in my office for a solid hour after you left. How could he have killed Royle when you say he did? Oh, Captain, if you want verification of this, call my secretary. He'll back me up because he talked to Harris at considerable length before allowing him to see me."

McDonough picked up the phone as Richards gave him the number. He talked to the secretary and ordered him to come to Headquarters at once.

"That does it," McDonough growled. "I think I've been taken for a nice little ride. Steve, I had a lot of faith in you. But it's busted all to blazes now and I've a new angle on you. You have stage ambitions. You work for Richards as a prop man. That's a low beginning. But you hoped that by helping Clayton out of this rap, he'd be obligated to give you a real job.

"Mr. Richards," the Captain continued, "you know the show business. Was there any trouble between Clayton and Royle?"

"None that I ever heard of," Richards answered. "I thought they were fast friends as well as business partners. But I insist that Mr. Harris cannot possibly have been in the theatre when Steve claims he was. I didn't check on the time, of course, but Harris was in my office before Steve left and for a full hour or more afterwards."

Harris spoke up then.

"Thanks, Mr. Richards. It's tough on a man like me who has served time in prison. The police pick you up on the slightest pretext. I kept quiet, planning to get an attorney and then have you brought in. Captain, I don't blame you. This young man is responsible. An honest error, no doubt, but an error for all that. May I go now?"

"I'm booking Ross Clayton for the murder," McDonough said. "And maybe I'll lock you up too, Steve. I should but I haven't the heart to throw a dumb cluck like you in a

cell. Only get out of here fast before I change my mind."

Steve left, his steps lagging, his mind in a racing turmoil. He'd been so sure of himself and proven so unaccountably wrong. He'd pointed a finger at a man and accused him of murder. But there couldn't be two men who looked so much alike. Harris had a highly individual appearance—and that mole. He couldn't be mistaken and yet he was.

Why would Richards lie about it? He didn't know Harris except for the interview of this same day. And what motive did Harris have for killing Royle? That they had ever met was highly improbable. Steve raked his brains for some sort of solution and none came. Not the faintest ray of one.

He went back to the Regal. There were props to be arranged. This play called for a lot of them. There was one fire scene which was Steve's duty to make as realistic as possible. There were a couple of smudge pots to create smoke that came out of set windows. Red spots, shining through this smoke created an illusion of tongues of flame hissing madly.

At four o'clock Richards sent for him.

"Steve," he said, "I don't hold against you what happened today. It was just fortunate that I happened to come to Headquarters in an effort to help you. I saw Harris and naturally I recognized him. That's just what you did, quite unconsciously and honestly. He was sitting in the office as you passed through on your way to Royle.

"I suppose you glanced at him, in that habitual way we all have at times, and never saw him at all except subconsciously."

"But I saw someone come out of Royle's office after the shots were fired," Steve insisted. "It couldn't have been Clayton because he was in one of the dressing rooms downstairs. Royle telephoned him there . . ."

"Steve," Richards chided. "Don't be so naive. Clayton said Royle phoned him, but from your own story, Royle was already dead at that time. I think Clayton was trying to mess the affair up so badly no one could make head or tail out of it."

Steve tensed. "Then—you believe that Clayton killed him?"

Richards nodded.

"I'm sorry to say it, but I do. So does Captain McDonough. The truth finally came out. Royle and Clayton were ready to split up and had been arguing for days about how the business should be divided. They came to blows night before last. Clayton hung one on Royle's jaw, but he took a nice beat-

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ing himself. Clayton's hot-headed. A fool—to have resorted to murder."

Steve wagged his head solemnly from side to side.

"I wish I could convince myself that I hadn't seen Harris. But I did. I'll always swear I did."

Richards leaned back in his chair.

"Steve, I don't want to see you get into any trouble. You're a nice boy and you're bound to go places in this field. But if you get mixed up with the defense in this case, you may never see the inside of a theatre again. Unless you buy a ticket."

"What do you mean?" Steve asked.

Richards smiled.

"You saw someone all right. You saw Clayton heading for Royle's office with a gun in his fist. You ducked and then you began thinking. Clayton is one of the biggest producers in the business and has the best theatre in town.

"If you played up to him, he'd send you places fast. Just forget the whole thing, Steve. If they call you on the carpet, admit you're wrong. Now let's go to work. We've a show to put on tonight."

STEVE went through his paces that night, hardly knowing what he did. His mind was much too concerned with the strange series of events which had involved him so thoroughly. Nothing tied up. There was too much coincidence. Harris, being at Richards' office at that very crucial moment. But was he there? Richards had no reason to lie, nor did his secretary.

Clayton, according to the evening papers, was tied up firmly, with a motive well established. There was nothing about Steve's story. Apparently Captain McDonough had been certain that didn't get out.

But Clayton was bound to tell his attorneys and they'd call Steve without the slightest question. He'd have to tell the truth as he saw it. Directly contradict Richards who was his boss. It wouldn't turn out. There'd be recriminations. He might even lose his job.

Steve operated his fire-making unit, but the performance had no feeling for him tonight. There were far more important things than make-believe on his mind. After the last curtain, he slipped away and went to a lunchroom around the corner. He occupied a booth in solitary style and drank cup after cup of coffee.

Something Captain McDonough said still impressed him. If Harris was involved, he had committed the crime for greed. Yet

Royle's office must have been searched. If anything valuable was missing, they'd have known it and regarded Harris with fresh suspicion. One thing about Mr. Clayton, his motive couldn't have been greed because he was a very wealthy man.

Therefore, Steve reasoned, if Harris did it, if he was right in identifying him, then Harris took something from Royle. He wasn't the paid-assassin type nor could he have known Royle and been his enemy. Royle had always lived a highly exemplary life.

Steve pushed his empty cup away and arose. He had to do something. Clayton was innocent and Harris guilty, no matter what Richards claimed. They said he was wrong, but why couldn't it have been Richards who erred? Harris was a smart enough crook to have picked it up and carried the ball. Richards had given him leeway enough. A taxi took Steve to Clayton's penthouse apartment.

Mrs. Clayton was young, pretty and in tears. She knew about Steve's story and welcomed him.

"I know I was right, Mrs. Clayton," Steve said, "and that makes your husband innocent. He was framed, somehow. Royle and your husband were excellent friends as well as business partners. That is, until a few days ago when they quarrelled. What I want to know is this. Did Royle carry anything of value on him?"

"Not that I know of," Mrs. Clayton sobbed. "He wasn't a heavy spender. Except where his wife was concerned. He bought her nice things. I talked to her this afternoon. She won't believe that Ross did it. It's ghastly, all this. Bad enough as far as Ross' position and mine may be, but after all, Ronnie is dead. And it was his thirtieth wedding anniversary today."

"His wedding anniversary," Steve said thoughtfully. "That called for a gift and he bought his wife nice things. Mrs. Clayton—I wonder if you'd find out where Royle usually purchased these gifts."

"Why, I already know," she said. "At Baldwin's. A famous jewelry store. Ronnie loved gems."

"One thing more," Steve said. "If you know Baldwin, or whoever runs the store, will you telephone him and ask if Mr. Royle bought anything of value there today?"

She nodded, wholly conscious that Steve was doing his best to help her husband. She finished telephoning and came back into the room.

"It's odd how you guessed that, Steve,"

she said excitedly. "Mr. Royle purchased a thirty thousand dollar pearl necklace this morning. It had been ordered and he picked it up then."

Steve was on his feet.

"That's it!" he cried. "What happened to the necklace? No one ever mentioned it. If the police found it, they'd have made something of it. I know where that necklace went. Into Harris' hands. I'll bet he saw Royle buy that necklace and followed him to steal it. He had to kill Royle, but after all—thirty thousand dollars is a lot of money."

"But your own employer swears that Harris was at his office when the murder happened," Mrs. Clayton protested despairingly.

"Hang what Richards says." Steve knew he was on the track now. "He could be as mistaken as he claims I am. I'll work the thing out somehow. I may fall on my face doing it but, believe me, Harris will be underneath me if I do go down."

Steve went back to the theatre where he worked. It was empty and desolate now, but he had a key and let himself in. He was after certain props which he hoped would help him out, but he suddenly remembered that he didn't know where Harris lived.

He entered Richards' office and used the phone. He called Headquarters, stated that he was the city editor of an important newspaper and that his reporter had neglected to obtain Harris' present address. It was given to him immediately and Steve recognized it as a small, moderate rate hotel.

Steve was rising from the chair behind Richards' desk when he saw two long envelopes on the desk. They were exactly alike. One contained recent press clippings, the other certain documents of sale concerning some things Richards had purchased from Clayton and Royle.

ONE of those envelopes Steve had been taking to Royle when the murder occurred. It should have been the one with the documents, but he knew the envelope he'd carried was the one containing those clippings. He'd carried it a long time and more than once, while excited, he'd twisted the thing and wrinkled it badly. The other envelope was fresh and clean.

Steve gave vent to a low and rather hollow cheer. What he knew from those two envelopes would help only if he managed to involve Harris beyond any hope of his lying out of it.

He hurried backstage and accumulated
[Turn page]

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two smudge pots and a pair of red spots. With this apparatus arranged in a neat bundle, he set out for Harris' hotel.

They wouldn't give room numbers of the guests so Steve inserted a blank piece of paper in an envelope, addressed it to Harris and handed it to the desk clerk. The envelope was promptly inserted in slot number 702.

Steve rented a room himself, asking for one on the seventh floor. He paid in advance and was escorted to 706 by a bellhop. Steve estimated that Harris' room was the last one down the hall.

It was after midnight, but Steve waited another hour. The hotel was silent now. He crept down the corridor toward Harris' room and listened outside the door. He was in there all right. Steve could hear him walking about.

He allowed another hour to go by, but kept a sharp watch on Harris' door. From time to time he listened outside it, until he was certain that the ex-convict was asleep.

Returning to his own room, Steve set up the smudge pots and got the red spots ready. He tiptoed back to the end of the corridor where Harris' room was located and arranged the smudge pots. He found a couple of outlets in the baseboard, plugged in the red spots and tested them briefly. Then he looked for any signs of watchmen's stations. There were none, indicating that the hotel was not patrolled.

He called Headquarters from his own room. Captain McDonough was off duty, but they gave him his house phone. He called that number and McDonough answered sleepily.

"Don't get sore because I woke you up, Captain. This is Steve Sterling," Steve said. "Well, what do you want?" the captain was not happy at being awakened. "Listen, Steve, I'm not taking much more from you. The more I think about that stall you gave me, the madder I get."

"I'll probably get twenty years for what I'm going to attempt right now," Steve chuckled. "Harris lives at the Hotel Edwin, seventh floor. I want you to come over here. Believe me, it's important."

"What are you trying to prove, Steve?" McDonough showed some interest.

"That I've been right all along," Steve stated firmly. "Clayton didn't murder Royle. The fact that they had a battle over personal differences was merely an unfortunate incident. Harris killed Royle. I know why and I'm prepared to furnish proof enough to put him where he belongs—in a death cell.

Are you coming over?"

"If this is another crazy trick . . ." McDonough warned direly.

"It isn't," Steve said. "If anything goes wrong, you can bring me in. This time you'll have plenty of evidence against me. But I want the truth to be known. I know that I saw Harris come out of Royle's office. I'm going to prove that he is the killer. And if I'm wrong—well . . ."

"I'll be over," McDonough interrupted. "How soon?"

"Half an hour. Not before. Don't spoil anything no matter what you may think or see. I'll make Harris produce the evidence of his own guilt. Something he can't lie or be alibied out of."

Steve hung up, considered his next move from all angles and realized that because Harris was going to be frightened out of his wits, there was no reason why the other tenants should be scared too. Fortunately, it was a small hotel with only eight rooms to a floor.

Steve went to the lobby. As he expected, the desk clerk was also the night telephone operator and he was fast asleep behind the desk. The switchboard was inside a panelled cubby hole provided with a door. Steve crept into it, closed the door and proceeded to call all the rooms on the seventh floor with the exception of Harris'.

"This is the desk clerk," he explained to the either irate or very sleepy guests. "There is going to be a test blackout. Yes, I know any danger of air raids has passed, but the authorities insist we have another. Morale purposes, I guess. It will consist only of the fire alarm system going off. Just remain in your rooms. Do nothing. Don't be alarmed."

HE REPEATED that request to every tenant on the floor. He discovered that three rooms were empty, or their occupants refused to answer the phone at this hour.

Steve tiptoed out of the switchboard cubby hole, passed the desk clerk and used the stairs to visit each floor. His work around the theatre had consisted, in part, of helping the stage electrician so he knew a great deal about such things. Steve carefully disconnected each fire alarm bell except the one on the seventh and top floor. There he closed the heavy fire door behind him.

This done, he glanced at his watch. McDonough should be on his way by now. It was time to start proceedings. He lit the

[Turn page]

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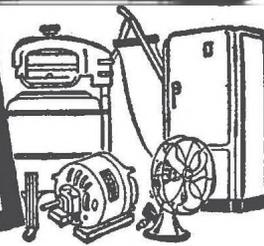
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smudge pots, turned on the red spots and waited until the whole end of the seventh floor hall was filled with heavy smoke. The red lights, playing through the smoke, made the scene so real Steve almost felt the heat from those mythical flames.

Then he pulled the fire alarm and the seventh floor gong began to sound. It wouldn't be heard on any floor below, he felt certain. The other tenants on the seventh floor would think it was just the test, turn over and grumble, but stay in bed.

Steve hurried to Harris' door and banged on the panels. He was certain some smoke had already filtered beneath the door. He heard a sleepy word of inquiry, then a yell and two bare feet hit the floor. A key turned in the lock. Harris' tousled head stuck out of the partly open door and he yelled again. The smoke was swirling heavily.

Harris ran back, slid into his shoes, seized a robe and was almost in the hallway when he turned back. Steve, squinting through the smoke, saw Harris dart into the bathroom, heard the clatter of a porcelain cover and then Harris emerged, coughing, and shielding his face against what he was sure must be flames.

He rushed through the door, down the hall and when he reached the end of the smoke blanket, he came to an abrupt stop. Steve was already gaining speed.

He hit Harris low and brought him down with a resounding crash. Harris suddenly realized this was some sort of trick and he started to fight. He had learned all the tricks of dirty fighting and Steve realized he'd never master this crook. But he might hold him if he could keep on absorbing this kind of punishment. He did collide a fist with Harris' face a couple of times and that slowed the man down a bit.

Then Harris put his knee to work, drove it into the pit of Steve's stomach and sent giddy waves of pain through him. Harris managed to straddle Steve. His hands wound around Steve's throat and began to squeeze. Steve reached up, put the heel of his hand against Harris' chin and slowly forced his head back. Further and further, until he thought Harris' neck was made of rubber. All the while those fingers shut off the flow of air to Steve's lungs.

But the steady pressure did it. Harris had to let go. He jumped up, aimed a kick at Steve and missed. His unlaced shoe flew off and hit the wall.

By now tenants were popping into the hall. Steve heard the whine of the elevator. He got to his feet. Harris was racing madly

toward the fire door. Steve sprinted after him, wondering what held him up. His knees were rubbery, his lungs ached and that smoke was filling his eyes and making them gush tears.

He brought Harris down again. This time Steve had some help. Captain McDonough stepped out of the elevator, took in the situation and promptly collared the crook. Steve arose, walked up to Harris and dug a hand into his lounging-robe pocket. He drew out a strand of fine pearls.

"Here it is," he gasped to McDonough proudly. "Royle's pearls. He bought this yesterday morning. Harris saw him take them away, followed him and killed him. I can prove Royle had these pearls at the time of his death."

"And what about that alibi?" McDonough demanded, half satisfied with Steve's story. The pearls backed him up and Harris' suddenly frightened eyes were further proof of guilt.

"Richards framed Clayton," Steve explained. "I don't know why, Captain. He sent me to Royle's office with an envelope. But he gave me the wrong one and hurried after me. When he got there, I was telephoning you. Richards listened, hid and when I went out front to wait for you, he put Royle's body in the chair. Then he laid the murder gun on the floor and telephoned Clayton whom he knew was in the dressing rooms downstairs, pretending to be Royle.

"Later on, I telephoned Richards from Headquarters and told him the whole story, mentioning Harris' name. Richards came down, presumably to help me out, but he wanted to see Harris and alibi him. He did and Harris was smart enough to pick up Richards' lead. Richards' secretary backed him up. He had to or lose his job."

"For gosh sakes, put out that fire or whatever it is," McDonough grumbled. "What were you trying to do, scare the daylights out of Harris?"

STEVE nodded and smiled grimly. "I reasoned that Harris had the necklace, but never found time to hide it well. [Turn page]

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So it was probably in his room. I created the effects of a fire. He bit. He remembered the necklace and got it."

"Let's go down to Headquarters," McDonough suggested. He handcuffed Harris. "I'll send a couple of men to bring in Richards. If you're telling the truth, that guy is slated for a nice stretch."

McDonough was thorough. When Richards came in, he was confronted by Harris, battered and glowering in guilt. Clayton turned accusing eyes on him. Richards broke down.

"It was a crazy thing to do," he admitted. "I didn't care who killed Royle. I hated him. Clayton too, because they'd taken an option on a play I wanted. A play that will be the biggest thing in years. I thought, with Royle dead and Clayton locked up for murder, the option would drop and I could pick it up. I—I meant to tell the truth once I had the play. I thought that nothing would happen to Clayton because the innocent never suffer. I was a fool. An idiot."

"That," McDonough observed dryly, "is an understatement. Clayton, you're free, of course. Steve, if you can't find another job, see me. I'll turn you into a cop."

"Not for this lad," Clayton said. "I've some plans of my own for him. Come, on Steve."

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OFF THE RECORD

(Continued from page 6)

the services of the Black Bat, and in which Butch O'Leary, Carol Baldwin and Silk Kirby all play a vital part. Here is one of the many exciting scenes from this swift-moving novel:

The large house was apparently not guarded. The Black Bat slipped up to the back door, examined the lock and went to work on it with a slim bit of metal from his kit of tools. It required almost ten minutes, but finally the lock gave way.

The house smelled as if it had been closed up for many months. Dust was thick over everything. The Black Bat's eyes swept the floor, looking for footprints and finding none. He checked on every room and was certain that nobody had been in that house from the moment Alvin left it to run away.

Then his eyes fell upon the telephone. It was free of dust. He knelt on the floor. At closer range he saw scuff marks made by someone who walked very carefully. The dust was disturbed, but ordinary eyes would have had difficulty in detecting this fact even in broad daylight. The Black Bat began to straighten up. At that moment, the morgue-like quiet that filled this dead man's house was shattered by the clamor of the telephone bell.

It came so unexpectedly that the Black Bat jumped nervously. He hesitated a second or two and then lifted the receiver. With his mouth some distance from the transmitter he growled a greeting.

He was more than mildly surprised when a woman's voice came over the wire. It was a low, rather cultured voice.

"I did as you suggested. There isn't a trace of anything wrong and anyway he'd never notice. Do you hear me? He'd never—"

The Black Bat suddenly dropped the phone and dived for the floor. A gun cut loose. Two bullets whizzed above the Black Bat and slammed into the wall. Another did its best to ferret out his position on the floor, only the Black Bat had wiggled quickly from the spot. His own gun was drawn and ready. . . .

That's just a sample of the action—and from that point on things really start to hum as the complications increase at an alarming rate—and the Black Bat is thrust into one perilous situation after another!

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[Turn page]

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LETTERS FROM READERS

HOW did you like the stories in this issue of **BLACK BOOK DETECTIVE**? Which story appealed to you the most? We are eager to hear from our readers—so tell us what you think!

We certainly appreciate the many fine letters that we are constantly receiving, and we want your opinion, too. Write and tell us which stories you liked best and about those which did not strike your fancy. By knowing just what you like we are better able to plan future issues of **BLACK BOOK DETECTIVE** for your greater entertainment.

And now let's take a look at just a few of the many letters we have been getting:

It was a dark, cold night and there I was stretched out comfortably on the couch in the living room reading a copy of **BLACK BOOK DETECTIVE**. I was alone in the house. The rest of the family had gone to the movies but I had decided to stay home because I had a slight cold. I was reading the Tony Quinn novel, **BLIND MAN'S BLUFF**—and this is the part I had come to: "He raised the gun and brought it down. Not in a long, swinging blow which would create a distinct thud as it hit Silk's skull, but a shorter blow more calculated to stun than anything else. It hit Silk well to the back of his head and pain and blackness exploded inside his skull. . . ."

And just then the legs at the head of that old couch gave way beneath my weight—and I hit the floor with a thud. Boy, if that isn't really living a yarn—then I don't now what is! But all the same I think **BLACK BOOK DETECTIVE** is a swell magazine.—*Jerry Norton, Buffalo, N. Y.*

You don't really need to act out the action in the magazine to that extent, Jerry! Anyway, thanks a lot for your letter.

I have been a reader of **BLACK BOOK DETECTIVE** for some time and like it very much. Sometimes I would like to see Carol Baldwin play a bigger part in the stories about the Black Bat—but keep up the good work.—*Nancy Fenton, Jacksonville, Fla.*

You'll find that Carol is usually kept right

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busy in most of the Tony Quinn yarns, Nancy. And thanks for your letter.

I have read BLACK BOOK DETECTIVE for some time—and the stories I liked best were WITHOUT BLOOD THEY DIE, GUARDIAN IN BLACK, THE WHITE WITCH, DEATH FOR CHARITY, MURDER DEALS IN ERSATZ, THE SKELETON'S SECRET, THE MARKED MAN, MURDER ON THE LOOSE, MURDER AMONG THE DYING, and BLIND MAN'S BLUFF.—Donald Smith, New York, N. Y.

Thanks, Donald. That's naming them all right. But didn't you like any of the short stories in the magazine? Every one of those yarns you listed is a Black Bat novel.

You asked for opinions—so here's mine. Have been reading BLACK BOOK DETECTIVE since January 1942 and my favorite authors are: G. Wayman Jones, Norman A. Daniels, Ted Stratton, C. S. Montanye, Ray Cummings, Joe Archibald, Ted Coughlan, Robert Wallace, Allan K. Echols, Robert Sidney Bowen, Hal K. Wells, Owen Fox Jerome, J. Lane Linklater and Frank Johnson. Keep them all writing.—Dave Keene, Boston, Mass.

Well, you didn't name all of the authors who have appeared in BLACK BOOK DETECTIVE but you named quite a few, Dave. And I'm sure all those you singled out will greatly appreciate your commendation. Thanks for writing.

That's all for this time—but let's hear from more of our readers. Please address all letters and postcards to The Editor, BLACK BOOK DETECTIVE, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. See you all next issue. —THE EDITOR.

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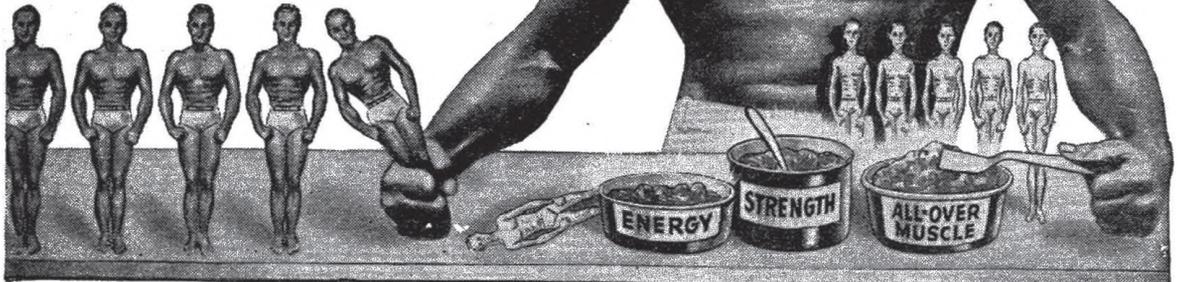
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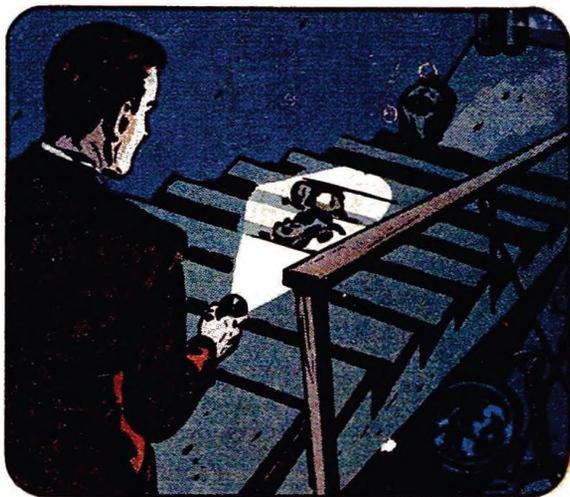
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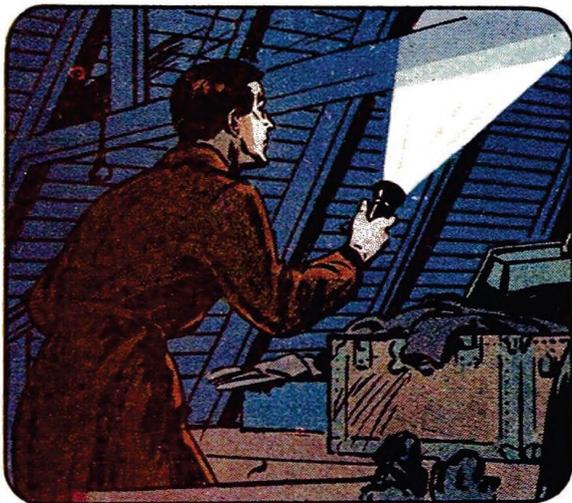
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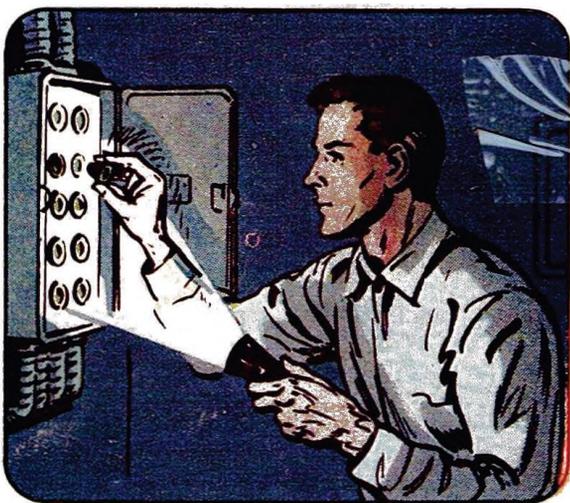
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