"MAN KILLER" By RAOUL WHITFIELD

BLACK MASK

DETECTIVE, WESTERN, STORIES OF ACTION

APR., 1932 · 20¢

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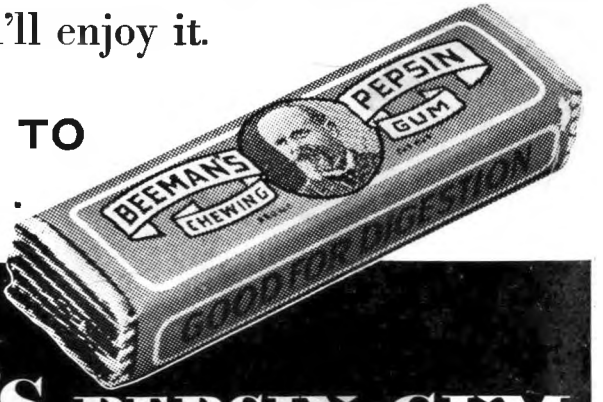

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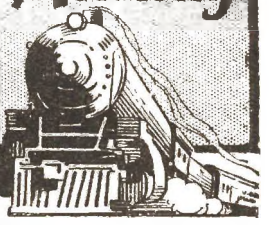

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BLACK MASK

A MAGAZINE OF DETECTIVE, WESTERN STORIES OF ACTION

JOSEPH T. SHAW, Editor

VOL. XV No. 2 APRIL, 1932

Contents

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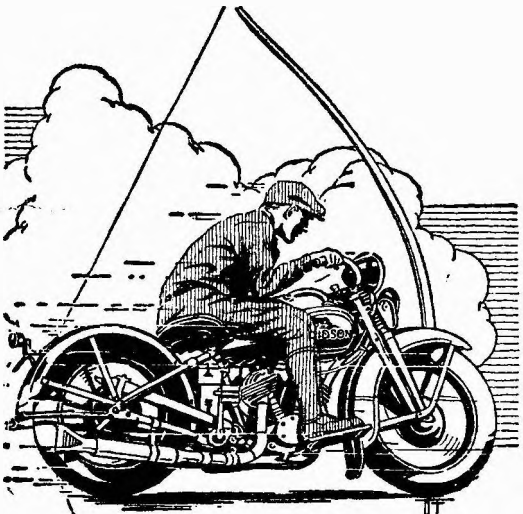

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Can you imagine a man afflicted with either halitosis or body odors, succeeding equally as well as one not saddled with these unforgivable faults? Of course you can't. One goes ahead, the other lags behind. One is popular, the other is not. Nine times out of ten.

The insidious thing about these ailments is that while others are painfully aware of them, you yourself never realize their presence. And both matters are so delicate, that even your best friend won't bring them to your attention.

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BLACK MASK

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While it is commonly classed as a detective fiction magazine, it has, with the help of its writers, created a new type of detective story which is now being recognized and acclaimed by book critics as inaugurating a new era in fiction dealing with crime and crime combatting.

BLACK MASK stories republished in book form have been best sellers in the open book market and their writers have achieved international fame.

The magazine has developed such authors as Dashiell Hammett, Raoul Whitfield, Frederick Nebel, Carroll John Daly, Erle Stanley Gardner, Nels Leroy Jorgensen, Horace McCoy, Earl and Marion Scott, Tom Curry, William Rollins, Jr.; and a number of others, all of whom have been recognized by critics when their stories have appeared in book form or have been included among the anthologies of best stories selected by O'Brien and the O. Henry Memorial.

It has a flock of new writers, whose first stories are appearing in the magazine and who promise to become every bit as famous—such as Paul Cain, Ed Lybeck, Stewart Stirling, James Moynahan, J. J. des Ormeaux and the like.

It publishes as well stories of the BLACK MASK peculiar type by other authors, already widely known—as H. Bedford-Jones, Thomson Burtis, Bertrand W. Sinclair, Eugene Cunningham.

BLACK MASK'S requirements are simply expressed, but it holds rigidly to a high standard of readable, fast-running, convincing fiction. It does not accept poor stories.

These are some of the reasons why BLACK MASK differs from all other magazines and stands alone, by itself, and why it cannot be imitated successfully.

The Editor

Man Killer

She was a knockout and had come in of money; she held the gun when the but Don Free wasn't sure she had done

DON FREE stood just inside the entrance door of the Hammond Agency and blinked gray eyes in the direction of Jen Carle. The girl used a lipstick deftly, slipped it into a drawer of the desk behind which she sat, relaxed in the chair. Don Free continued to look at her; finally he swore cheerfully.

She said: "Well—like it?"

Free grinned; it made him look ten years younger, almost boyish. He used his whole face when he grinned.

"Gave me a shock," he replied. "Platinum, eh?"

She nodded and touched her hair with long, slender fingers. When he'd last seen her, ten days ago, she'd had long, brown hair. It had been touched with gray, and he'd liked it.

She said again: "Well—like it?"

Free let his grin become a smile, and looked older. He had a strong face, slightly browned. He was clean shaven and his lips were too thin to make him handsome. Otherwise his features were good. He looked towards a narrow corridor running from the outside office—

By RAOUL WHITFIELD

for a bunch man fell; the killing

the door of it stood half opened.

"Sure, Jen," he said thoughtfully, but not as though he were thinking about the color of her hair.

She shrugged. "Which means you don't," she stated. "And that's all right, too."

He nodded. "I wouldn't know, Jen," he said. "It doesn't matter, anyway. I love you for what's *under* the mattress stuff."

She said with faint bitterness. "Like hell you do."

He took off a light brown coat and a brown felt hat, put them on a chair.

"Tim inside?" he asked.

She nodded, and her eyes grew narrow. "And loving being there," she said with more bitterness. "The man killer's with him."

Don Free looked at a picture of Abe Lincoln, hanging on the office wall.

"The man killer?" he said.

Jennie Carle nodded, her lips smiling. "Go on in and get a load of her," she suggested. "Better knock first."

Free looked slightly puzzled. "Business?" he asked.

She closed her eyes and hit the desk with a clenched fist.

"If it is—it's funny business," she said.

Free spoke slowly. "Now, Jen. Times are bad—the agency needs business."

She breathed something he didn't catch, and then said more clearly:

"I'm damn' glad you got back. Tim needs someone to tell him a woman's only a woman."

Free half closed his eyes and whistled softly. "You're not getting *that* way. Jen—after all these years?"

He watched the bitterness in her eyes.

"All these years—that's the trouble," she said. "Better go in, Free—he's expecting you."

She chuckled a little, with bitterness in it. Free looked at the face of Lincoln again.

"Better buzz in that I'm here, Jen," he said.

She lifted a French phone and after a few seconds said:

"I didn't disturb you too much, Mr. Hammond? I wouldn't want to, you know. Free's here."

She replaced the apparatus and shrugged at Free. "Okey," she said. "Be sweet to her—she's so damned young, and in so damn' much trouble."

Free looked at Hammond's secretary and whistled again. Jen Carle lifted papers from her desk and held them so her face was hidden. Free went from the room and along the corridor. At the end door he rapped, but went right in. Tim Hammond stood near a window that wasn't very far above where traffic made sound. The girl sat in a chair near Hammond's desk. She was very beautiful. Hammond said:

"Hello, Free. That was nice work in Philly. Twelve years' back alimony. It'll be a good lump for his wife. Did he kick much?"

Free grinned. "Offered me five grand, just to go away and forget. Said he'd dropped a lot recently, at Monte Carlo. Got nasty, but he came through. The new one is fed up with Paris and the Riviera, and he wants to stick in the States for a while."

Hammond was short and thick-set. He had gray hair and a handsome, dissipated face. His eyes were deep-set and gray. He nodded and gestured towards the girl.

"Miss Reynolds," he said. "My assistant—Don Free."

Free lowered his head slightly and smiled. The girl said:

"Hello, Mr. Free."

Her voice was soft and very smooth. Her enunciation was very lovely. She was beautiful in a very feminine way, and yet she hadn't the quality of a doll. Her eyes were brown, almost the color of her hair. She was tall and slender, and very perfectly dressed. Her hat was a concession to a new style, yet not the style itself.

Hammond said a little grimly: "Unfortunately, Miss Reynolds is in trouble—serious trouble."

The girl looked at the carpet on the office floor. Free said nothing. When she raised her eyes there were tears in them. She looked at him for several seconds, then lowered her eyes. Free said:

"That's too bad."

Hammond nodded and went over and sat down behind his desk. He chewed a finger knuckle.

"Anyone outside when you came in?" he asked.

Free shook his head. Hammond's gray eyes held little expression.

"Miss Reynolds has killed a man," he said slowly. "About an hour ago."

Free said: "Well—killed him, eh?"

Hammond nodded. The girl, with her head still lowered, shivered a little and made a moaning sound. Hammond said:

"A lot of others have tried to kill this same man, but it never took. He rated killing, Free. But there's the law—"

Free said slowly: "Sure, there's always the law."

Hammond smiled thinly. "It was Bandor, Free. Tony Bandor."

Free sucked in a slow, long breath. He swore very softly. The girl looked up and said fiercely:

"I didn't mean to kill him, want to kill him! I *had*—to kill him!"

Hammond said: "That's the way it was, Free."

Free narrowed his eyes and said: "That's the way *what* was?"

Hammond looked at the girl and spoke gently. "That's all right, Miss Reynolds. Don't worry." His eyes went to Free's. "It was like this," he said, and then was silent for several seconds. When he went on it was as though he were reading a newspaper item. "Recently Miss Reynolds inherited quite a sum of money. She's always lived in New York, but she hasn't gone about so much. Miss Reynolds likes horse racing—a fine sport, Free. Now

and then she used to make a bet. With the inherited money she increased her betting a bit, naturally."

He paused and Free said: "Naturally."

Hammond nodded. "About a week ago she had a streak of luck and made a big winning. The bookie was hit pretty hard, and he felt she should meet his backer. It happened to be Bandor. Miss Reynolds didn't know anything about him, but she thought he was pretty nice. Tony could be that way, you know. Well, it turned out he wasn't so nice. And about an hour ago he got himself killed."

Free looked at the girl's bowed head and said nothing. Hammond frowned.

"Miss Reynolds was perfectly justified, of course. But we don't want the usual mess. Publicity, jury trial—the tabs smearing her name all over everything. You know how it is."

The girl shivered again. Free looked at Hammond, smiling just a little.

"I know how it is, Tim," he said. His voice held a peculiar note and Hammond continued to frown.

The girl spoke, without lifting her head, very softly:

"I told him—I didn't care about—the bet. I'd let it go. But he wouldn't—"

Her voice broke. Hammond said: "Well, let's not worry about that. Tony's dead, and the set-up doesn't look bad. But we've got to be careful, Free. Awful careful. Miss Reynolds went to Burkley right away, and he sent her here. Burkley, you and I—and Miss Reynolds—we're the only ones who know she killed him."

Free said a little grimly: "That's fine, if it's right." There wasn't much enthusiasm in his voice.

Hammond said: "It's right. Tony met Miss Reynolds at the *Paramount* at three. They sat through part of a picture, then he told her he had cash for her at his place. He said he always settled with cash. They took a cab down to the Village—got out three or four blocks from his place. It's a nice old-fashioned, three-story brick house, with window boxes."

The girl said a little shakily: "Green window boxes—it looked so nice—"

Hammond said: "Yeah, with green window boxes. They went inside—Tony using a key. He showed her around, and then took her into his radio room. He's a radio fan. He can get China. It's a sound-proof room. Well, things didn't go so good, Free—and Tony got shot. Miss Reynolds came out, and she doesn't think anyone saw her. Tony didn't use the house much—he told her he only went there on important business. The room was sound-proof, so the chances are he's still where he fell. Miss Reynolds went right to her lawyer, and Burkley sent her to me. I happened to be in."

Free said: "That was lucky."

Hammond's eyes got very small. Free looked at the girl.

"Sure Bandor was dead?" he asked quietly.

She raised her head and dabbed at her eyes with a small handkerchief. He didn't think he had ever seen a more beautiful woman. She wasn't a kid, yet everything was fresh, youthful. Her lips and eyes were lovely.

She nodded slowly. "His eyes—were open, staring terribly," she said softly. "I waited—perhaps a few minutes. It seemed hours. I'm sure—he was dead."

Free said: "What did you do with your gun?"

Her eyes widened. "It wasn't—*my* gun," she said. Her voice rose a little. "It was his—"

Hammond said: "It was in the radio room, Free. You see? It was just in there, on a cabinet or something. Miss Reynolds isn't sure what the gun was on. She just grabbed for it. She's been through a lot, Free."

Free nodded. "Sure," he agreed. "Well, what did you do with the gun you killed him with, Miss Reynolds?"

She shivered a little, then sat erect. Her eyes met his squarely.

"I brought it away with me," she said. "It's—in my bag."

Free looked at Hammond and Hammond nodded. "I've had a look at it, Free. A ten slug Colt, with two slugs used. Miss Reynolds thinks she shot twice. Tony was close to her—and she thinks she got him in the stomach and heart. She was pretty excited, you see—and she just grabbed the gun and squeezed it. You know how it goes, Free."

Free's eyes were very small. "Sure, Tim," he said. "It's happened before. She noticed the gun right after she got in the radio room, eh?"

The girl said: "About five minutes after. Mr. Bandor—he didn't seem to notice it, or if he did he didn't pay any attention to it. When he said he wouldn't let me go—I remembered the gun. It was all—very terrible—"

Hammond sighed. "Poor kid," he breathed.

Don Free looked at the carpet. "Well—you don't think you were seen going in the Greenwich Village house, or coming out. You haven't been playing around with Tony Bandor. The shot was fired in a sound-proof room, and you've got the gun. A lot of guys were after Tony, and the police know that. Only three of us know that you killed him."

Hammond reached for a pack of cigarettes laying on his desk.

"That's about it, Free," he said. He rapped on the desk surface before he lighted the cigarette. When he spoke his voice held a thoughtful note. "What I'm afraid of is a slip-up."

The girl said huskily: "Oh, ——"

Hammond said: "They *might* have been seen at the *Paramount,* or on the way downtown, or going in the house. She *might* have been seen coming out. And there's this bookie who had Bandor as a backer."

Free nodded. "What's his name?" he asked.

The girl said: "Kronnen—Eddie Kronnen. He has an office in the James Building, but I've never been there."

Hammond blew a thin stream of smoke towards the ceiling. He spoke very quietly.

"Self defense, Free. But we've got to be careful. If anyone is wise, they won't run to the police. They'll come after Miss Reynolds. She's just inherited a lot of money. I think we can handle the police, unless things get too hot. I'd like you to buzz around the Village and find out if they've found the body yet. And you might get a line on Kronnen, see if he knows anything, or suspects anything."

Free looked towards the girl's handbag. Hammond watched him and said: "We'd better keep the gun, Miss Reynolds."

She handed the bag to him, and he opened it. He put a handkerchief in his palm, covering his fingers, and took the Colt from the bag, got it in a drawer of his desk. The girl said:

"I will pay you well, Mr. Hammond—"

He smiled at her. "Naturally," he agreed. "But just once. We're not blackmailers, Miss Reynolds. That's what I'm worried about."

Free looked at the girl. "You wore gloves when you grabbed the gun?" he said.

She nodded. Hammond said: "That's all right, anyway. I've used cloth on the gun, and Miss Reynolds has never been finger-printed, of course."

Free smiled a little. "Sure," he said. "But she might be."

The girl widened her eyes, and her lips trembled. Hammond frowned at Free.

"See what you can dig up," he said. "Take it very easy, of course. Call me back at seven and we'll eat together."

Free nodded. "Okey," he said. His eyes met those of the girl. "It'll be all right, Miss Reynolds," he told her. "Don't let it hit you too hard. He was a louse—and a mark for somebody's bullets pretty quick, anyway. Just stay with it."

She covered her face with gloved hands and her body shook. Free nodded to Hammond and went from the office. In the outside room he stood beside Jen Carle, offered her a cigarette she refused, and lighted one for himself. She said:

"A knockout, eh?"

He shrugged. "One kind of one," he replied. "What was the idea of you calling her a man killer, Jen?"

Bitterness was in her voice again. "She's got Tim going," she said. "I went into the office just before you arrived. She was crying and he was patting her shoulder. He told me to get out, and knock before I came in —the next time. A lot of them have cried in there, but this is the first time I've caught Tim patting one on the shoulder."

Free grinned. "Yeah—this is the first time you've *caught* him," he said dryly. "What's her first name, Jen?"

She said: "Mary."

Free nodded. "That good, old-fashioned name," he breathed.

The secretary swore. After a few seconds she said:

"What's her trouble, Free? Anything serious?"

Free grinned again. "Can't tell yet—nothing much, I'd say. Just one of those things."

Jen Carle frowned. "One of what things?" she asked.

Free chuckled. "You women!" he muttered. "She's an agency client, Jen —her secret is our secret."

Jen sniffed nastily. Free said: "I'm going to poke around some. But if anyone calls or comes in—you might say I haven't come back from Philly yet."

She nodded. He looked at her hair and said: "It's all right, Jen—I like it."

She frowned at him. "You think it's business in there, Free?" she asked. "Give it to me straight."

"I'm damned sure it's business, in there, Jen," he replied. "Don't be that way."

He put on his coat and hat and went from the office. There was a side entrance to the building, and he used it. In the cab, on the way downtown, he decided that Tim Hammond had acted rather strange, and that Jen Carle was worried about something besides a pat on the shoulder. Mary Reynolds he hadn't been able to figure, but he was willing to agree that she was a man killer, of one kind or another.

2

AFTER an hour he had got nothing of importance, and he called the agency. When he asked Jen if Tim was inside alone she said that he was but that she thought it had broken him up to let his pal go. Free said:

"Switch me in."

Hammond said: "Hello, Parker," in a cheerful voice and Free spoke slowly.

"On that downtown deal everything seems quiet. Maybe I'd better pick up somebody and go inside for a peek. What's the address?"

Hammond hesitated and after a few seconds gave it to him.

"You want to be pretty careful, Parker," he warned.

Free said: "Sure I want to. You believe the lady, of course?"

Hammond grunted. "Naturally," he said. "I just called Burkley and checked up. He isn't worried about the police but he says we've got to protect our client. He's afraid of the friends of the man in that house—the sleeping chap. See?"

Free said that he saw. "I'll be sure everything is right outside, and get in for a peek. Then we'll know how to move. Our client might have made a mistake on what happened."

Hammond said: "She didn't, Parker; but handle it that way, and then call me."

Free was smiling a little as he hung up. Hammond was seldom sure about

women clients' stories, but he was sure about the one this client had told. And it had been a pretty wild story.

He picked up Crail, one of the agency men, at his flat, and twenty minutes later they were on a quiet Village street not far from Tenth. Free said:

"If a cop comes along tell him you're off duty, and looking for Joe Cline. Cline had a beat around here a few weeks ago, but got himself transferred nearer his home. Don't get too far away from the place, unless you have to. I don't want anyone coming inside."

Crail said: "Right." He walked along the sidewalk near the house front. His police uniform fitted him pretty well.

Free went up three or four steps and into a clean vestibule. It was almost dark. He tried the knob of the inside door and when nothing happened he got a few keys from his pocket and went to work. After about two minutes the door opened. As he went inside he turned and saw Crail strolling in front of the house. Inside everything was quiet.

It was dark, but not absolutely black. Free went through two rooms downstairs, neither very large. The place was furnished nicely and didn't look as though it had been used much. He went up one flight of stairs and went through another room. There was a narrow hall leading towards the rear of the house, and there seemed to be a door at the end of it. When he got close to the door he saw that it was tightly fitted. His left hand was gloved; he found a knob and opened the door slowly. The air in the room was bad —and it was very dark. There were no windows, or else the windows were heavily covered. Free got a small flashlight from a pocket and snapped the button.

There was a heavy explosion—Free's body pitched to the right, struck against the open door. His right hand jerked a Colt free of his pocket; the flashlight struck the floor and rolled a little. There was a second roaring explosion—and the bullet made sound as it tore into the carpet somewhere near the flashlight. Free, on his knees beside the opened door, let his body fall. It made thudding sound as he struck the carpet, which was thick.

He lay motionless, his gun at his side, one arm thrown out. Faint light from behind, from the narrow hall, came into the room. The flashlight beam was still streaking light—across the carpet. With slitted eyes Free saw a motionless hand caught in the yellow-white beam—a diamond glittered on a half-stretched finger.

There was the sharp odor of gun smoke in the room. The beam of the flashlight suddenly caught shoes—brown shoes. There were the cuffs of trousers, narrow and gray striped. Legs moved across the beam—Free's slitted eyes could see almost to the knees of the moving man. Then the color was gone from the beam of light. There was a faint swishing sound, a very soft thud —as though a heavily padded door had closed.

Free lay motionless for almost thirty seconds, his Colt gripped tightly in the fingers of his right hand. The hand was beside the opened door. When he pulled himself to his knees he reached for the flashlight, moved it slightly. The beam struck Tony Bandor's body. Bandor's head was twisted to one side; his eyes were staring. His lips were drawn back slightly from white, even teeth. The diamond on a finger still shot color out. He was dead.

Free listened as faint sound seemed to come from the hall or the stairs, or a room below. He snapped out the flashlight, stood up. With his gloved hand he found the knob of the door, went into the hall and closed the door very softly behind him. He stood for several seconds, listening—and then moved to the head of the stairs. It took him almost five minutes to reach the floor below. The entrance door was

heavily curtained, but as he neared it he saw the figure of Crail stroll past the house. A cab cruised by, and Crail looked towards it blankly.

Don Free put his Colt out of sight, opened the door and went to the vestibule. He closed the door behind him, then turned the knob. There was a spring lock, and he could not open the door. He pulled his brown hat low over his eyes, saw the rip in the cloth of his coat sleeve that the first bullet had made. His lips were pressed tightly together as he went from the vestibule, down the few steps. Crail's back was to him, and he walked along behind the uniformed man.

At his side he slowed down a little. There were people on the street, but no one was near them. Free kept his head low and fumbled with his hat brim with both hands.

"Hear anything—from inside?" he asked.

Crail said softly: "Yeah — two shots — not too loud, though. Two cabs were passing and there was 'L' racket."

Free said: "All right —I'll be seeing you."

Crail spoke thickly: "You okey?"

"Okey." Free was a little ahead of the uniformed man. "No one came out —ahead of me?"

Crail said: "No."

Free walked faster, took his hands away from his hat brim. He stopped at the corner and lighted a cigarette. When Crail passed close to him he said:

"Get out of the uniform and stick around the flat."

Crail nodded his head very slightly and went on. Free went around the corner and after a few seconds hailed a cab. He pointed to the street along which he had just come.

"Go down there about half way, and park on the south side if you can," he said. "Kill your engine, but stay back of the wheel. Don't turn or talk to me, even when I tell you what to do next."

The cab driver nodded. Don Free got inside, hunched down in a corner of the seat. The cab moved forward and around the corner. The driver took it half-way eastward on the block and parked on the south side. The house in which Tony Bandor was lying dead was about fifty yards to the eastward, and on the north side.

The street was a quiet one, but ten persons passed the three-story house with the green window boxes, while Don Free watched. No one was passing when a medium sized man came from the house. He wore a gray overcoat and hat, and his trousers were gray. From the distance Don couldn't distinguish a stripe. The man held a handkerchief over his mouth, looked up and down the street, barely noticing the cab. Then he moved down the few steps, turned eastward. Jim Lanner, another agency man, came along from behind the cab and stopped near it. Without looking at Free he said softly:

"I had a damn' bad stomach ache when you called me from Crail's flat. Is that my man?"

Free said: "Forget the stomach ache, and don't lose him. He counts."

Lanner nodded and went along in the same direction as the one who had come from the house. He had a tabloid in both hands and he read it as he went along. Don Free straightened and was about to tell the driver to keep Lanner's tall figure in sight, when a cab came eastward fast and halted two houses past the one occupied by Bandor.

A woman got out and paid up. She was young and slender, and looked good at seventy yards. The cab went on, and the woman stood near the curb, fumbling in a bag she held in her right hand. A messenger boy passed her. She looked at the cab twice, then took something from the bag, snapped it shut. Instead of going into the house before which the cab had halted, she walked rapidly westward, made a sharp turn and went into Bandor's place. Her figure was lost from sight in the vestibule.

Free whistled softly and hunched back in the cab again. A minute passed, then another. A uniformed officer came westward slowly and when he was a hundred yards or so from Bandor's place the street was very quiet. The first scream was shrill and terrible, but it reached the street faintly. The second got outside the house more loudly, and the uniformed officer heard it. He increased his pace, and was almost in front of the green window boxes when the woman came out. She screamed again in the vestibule—and the uniformed cop ran towards her.

Free's cab driver was stiff in the seat, but he didn't turn his head. Free was frowning. He leaned forward a little and said:

"All right—Seventh and Fortieth street, and make it fast."

The driver twisted his head and looked at him with hard, blue eyes. Then he shook his head.

"Wait'll that cop comes out of there," he said.

Free narrowed his gray eyes on the driver's. "What happens in there won't make any difference to *me,*" he said. "Get going."

The cab driver shook his head. "You picked me up at the end of this street and had me come back here. I want to know what's wrong in there—before I take *you* anywhere."

Free swore softly. Then he smiled a little. "Know who lives in there?" he asked.

The driver shook his head. "And I don't care who—"

Free interrupted. "Tony Bandor lives there," he said very slowly. "And what happens in there is his business, and maybe mine. It's not yours—"

He watched the eyes of the cab driver get wide, and the hardness go out of them. He said thickly:

"Tony—Bandor—"

Free nodded. "That's the name," he said. "And I want to get to Seventh and Fortieth, very quick."

The starter made sound and the engine made more sound. The driver muttered something that had the word "sorry" in it, and the cab jerked forward. When it passed Bandor's house Free saw that the door of the vestibule was half opened. Then the window boxes were behind. He settled back in the cab. The one with the gray coat and trousers was not in sight, ahead—nor was Jim Lanner. The cab turned northward and moved along at good speed.

At Fortieth and Seventh Free got out. He tipped the driver a dollar, and the man said:

"I wasn't figuring to be nasty back there. Just careful like."

Free smiled and nodded. "Sure, it always pays to be careful," he said.

The driver grinned. Then his eyes got hard again. "It sounded like that woman had seen something pretty bad in there," he breathed. He grinned again. "But you never can tell about a woman."

Free smiled a little tightly. "Never," he agreed.

3

EN CARLE looked up from her machine and smiled at him. He went over close and looked at her hair.

"I like it better all the time," he said. "Has the man killer gone?"

She nodded. "About ten minutes after you left. She was crying."

Free nodded. "Tim didn't go with her?"

She shook her head, and her eyes grew smaller. Free nodded again.

"I'm expecting a call," he said. "Get it right to me. Tim's inside?"

"Inside," she said. Her eyes widened as she stared at his coat sleeve. "You've torn your coat, Free."

He looked in the wrong place first, then found the rip. He whistled in surprise.

"Now how the devil did that happen?" he breathed. "In the cab, I suppose."

She looked doubtful but didn't say anything. Free went along the corridor and rapped on the door of Hammond's office. Hammond said: "Come in."

He went in. The agency head was seated back of his desk, and Free went over and sat on a corner of it. Hammond looked at him without speaking, and used his eyes without missing the cloth tear. He leaned forward and looked at it more closely. Then he swore.

"Bullet?" he asked.

Free said: "Bullet—the other one didn't come that close."

Hammond cleared his throat. "What did *yours* do?" he asked

Free shook his head. "I didn't use any." He pressed his lips together tightly, then parted them. "What's the game, Tim?" he asked.

Tim Hammond looked puzzled. "Game? You know as much as I do—more," he said.

Free shook his head. "Not one way. Tony's dead. I didn't stick around long enough to learn just how he got it. I had Crail outside in a cop's uniform, and Jim Lanner up the street. When I went inside this radio room, or whatever it was—someone took two shots at me. I went down and let my flashlight roll. I think whoever fired was satisfied he got me. He got out of the room without using the door I'd opened. He wore gray striped trousers with a narrow cuff. I took things easy getting out of the house—but this one left after me. Lanner picked him up and I'm waiting for a call. At least, Lanner picked up a fellow with gray trousers who came out of Bandor's house. Then a woman came along in a cab went in. Tall and slender and dressed nice. She yelped and ran out screaming, and a cop was on the street. They went back in together, and I came on up here."

Hammond tapped on desk wood with knuckles. "So the police know Bandor's out of things," he said.

Free nodded. "And someone else knew it, before I got there," he replied.

Hammond frowned. "You didn't see the face of the one who shot at you?"

Free shook his head. "He must have heard me coming up the stairs—he had the lights out. My flash was on the floor and he crossed in the low beam. I could only see to his knees. But I think Lanner's got him tailed."

Hammond nodded slowly. "Then the Reynolds girl *did* finish Tony," he breathed softly.

Free said: "Think so?"

Hammond narrowed his eyes and sank low in the chair.

"You don't, eh?" he replied.

Free shrugged. "She isn't young. She is fresh-looking. She doesn't look like the sort of little fool that would chase along to Bandor's place without expecting to be kissed, Tim."

Hammond shrugged. "You're getting old, Free. What she expects doesn't count with us. She went down there, and naturally she'd pull the innocent stuff on us. She's worth a lot of money. Something went wrong, and she finished Bandor. Then she got scared. She went to Burkley—and that was wise. Burkley knows what to do in something just like this. He sent her over here. They're both thinking the same way. She killed Bandor, and someone will guess that she did. Then

they'll close in on her. We've got to stop that."

Free smiled coldly. "The agency is getting up in the world," he said grimly. "We now protect man killers."

Hammond swore gently, then smiled. "How about taking five minutes out—and we'll both weep for dear, old Tony Bandor," he said with sarcasm. "He'll be missed at church on Sunday. I don't imagine he spotted out more than eight or ten guys—and he only beat three stick-up indictments."

Free smiled cheerfully. "All right, Tim. A girl comes and and says she killed Tony and she's frightened because his friends might guess that she did and come after her. I go down to check up on her story. Tony's dead, but someone inside opens up on me. Why? There wasn't much light on me—I've been away ten days. I don't know much about Bandor's mob. Supposing the girl who went in and found Tony's body had gone in when I did. What would have happened?"

Hammond grunted. "What would?" he asked.

Free smiled with his eyes narrowed. "She'd have got the same dose—only more of it, because she wouldn't have had sense enough to fall and stay down," he said. "That gent in there was expecting someone—someone he wanted to kill. That's my hunch. I wasn't the one."

Hammond looked thoughtful. "Or he was in the room, and figured he'd better play safe. Maybe he thought you were a dick. Or maybe he was nervous, or hopped up. We can't figure what he thought. He missed you and he got outside, and Lanner is tailing him. That's good enough. The police know Bandor's dead. That's all right if Miss Reynolds wasn't seen."

Don Free looked at the knuckles of Hammond's right hand and he spoke slowly, softly.

"You wouldn't fool me, would you, Tim?"

Hammond closed his eyes, and when he opened them they held a hard expression.

"Jen's been talking to you, Free," he said. "She's been worried lately. I've had some conferences, and just my luck the ladies have been nice looking. Jen's been getting nervous—she had her hair done over. Notice it?"

Free smiled. "I noticed it," he replied. "You wouldn't fool me, would you, Tim?"

Hammond said sharply: "You don't think Miss Reynolds finished Bandor, is that it?"

There was a little silence, and then Free spoke in a quiet voice.

"The Bandor mob is a hard one, Tim. We both know that. I'm working for you, but I'm not dying for you—not if I can help it. I'm entitled to know all the truth kicking around, and I don't think I know all of it."

Tim Hammond stood up and looked squarely at Free. His eyes were expressionless.

"You're my best man, and I'd hate to see you quit the agency, Don. You've got this the way I got it."

Free said: "You were talking to Miss Reynolds before I came in, and after I went out. She didn't say anything of importance, anything I don't know?"

Hammond said: "She didn't say anything of importance—anything you don't know. It comes down to this. She's been living a pretty quiet life around the city, without too much money. She inherited a lot of money, and her life hasn't been so quiet. Instead of doing the usual and losing her money, she won some more. Kronnen couldn't pay, and he turned her over to Bandor. Bandor went at it too fast—and left a gun laying around. He got the works, and the girl didn't throw hysterics. She calmed down, got out of the house with the gun, went to Burkley. He sent her here. You know the rest."

Free sighed. "All right, Tim," he said. "What next?"

Hammond frowned. "You'd better

find out who the fellow that shot at you is. We can learn how the police are thinking. And there's Kronnen. Miss Reynolds has changed her apartment hotel, and is going to sit tight under another name for a while."

The phone on Hammond's desk made buzzing sound. He lifted it, then handed it to Free. Free said:

"Yes?"

Jim Lanner's lazy tones came over the phone: "The stomach ache is better. My man took in a Western picture at a small house, for fifteen minutes. I think he had a shot—he picked a chair near a wall, in a dark spot. He was pretty shaky going inside—dropped his ticket twice. We're in a speake now—he's drinking beer in another dark corner, and he's alone. I've got a hunch he's meeting someone here. He goes for his wrist-watch every few minutes. After the picture we took a short walk, and that helped the stomach ache."

Free said: "That's fine—talk some more and work in the speake address. If I get down there too late and you've gone, I'll go over to Crail's flat—and you call me there. We'll stay apart, if you're still in the speake. He might have spotted me, inside the house, and your stomach ache might get worse, if that's the case."

He could hear a radio yapping over the wire. Lanner talked and worked in the address. He went on.

"I've got a wall phone, and I can see my man. He's just met his pal. He's smooth-shaven, with a long nose. He's big and wears clothes like a plain-clothesman. His left arm is in a sling—black cloth. Neat but not gaudy. They're sticking around—the bad arm one is sitting down."

Free said: "All right—I'll be right along."

He hung up. Hammond said: "Lanner's got your man in a corner?"

Free nodded. "What's this bookie Kronnen look like—did Miss Reynolds say?"

Hammond nodded. He's a big fellow with a long nose. Smooth-shaven and middle aged. He broke his arm sometime ago, and wears it in a sling. She said he seemed rather nice, and she felt sort of sorry for him, after she'd won this money."

Free grinned. "Lovely client, Tim," he said. "Feels sorry for bookies, murders mob leaders—"

Hammond interrupted sharply: "The personal habits and feelings of our clients are not important, Free."

The ripped cloth of Free's coat felt jagged under his finger. He took the finger away and smiled coldly.

"Kronnen's with the fellow who shot at me," he said. "I'll go down that way and see what happens."

Hammond swore. "That's bad," he breathed. "Kronnen is liable to have known Bandor took the girl to his place. And he owes her the money. With Bandor dead he hasn't got the out he figured on. If he goes for the girl—"

Free pulled the brim of his hat low on his forehead. He looked at Hammond's dissipated face.

"He doesn't know where the girl is—New York's pretty big."

"And it gets small in a hurry," Hammond breathed.

Free looked at the agency head narrowly. "Well—if they get her and she won't pay—they'll kill her. And that'll make it even up."

Hammond swore. His eyes were very small. "It won't make it even up for *us*," he said. "We're being paid for keeping her in the clear."

Free smiled narrowly. "That's so," he said. "I almost forgot that. You'd better eat without me."

Hammond nodded. "I'll have something sent in—and stick around. Give me a buzz when you get a chance. I'm glad you got back in time to handle this, Free."

Don Free moved towards the office door. He didn't speak. At the door he turned and smiled, closed the door behind him. He went down the corri-

dor and into the office. Jen was taking a call; she said:

"Wait a second."

She motioned to Free. Crail was on the wire.

"Just got a tip," he said. "Tony Bandor's been done for. In a sound-proof room of a Village house he used, under cover. Or maybe you knew about it, Free."

Free said. "Yeah, but what do the police know?"

Crail said: "Two slugs in the body—one close to the heart. No gun around—no one heard the shots. A flame of his is being held—she found the body and got hysterical. She says she thought he was a real estate operator. She's a show girl. Her name's Gray and the police think maybe she did the job, then came back and put on an act."

Free coughed. "That all?" he asked.

"That's all so far," Crail said. "The sound-proof room had a couple of radios, in it, and Tony was supposed to have been a nut on the dial stuff. But there was a tight fitting door and stairs going down to the first floor. And the police think the room was used for the kill stuff. It isn't pretty enough for a love nest. That's all."

Free said: "I'll lay five it'll *be* a love nest in the tabs, just the same. All right, Crail—buzz in again if you run into something."

He hung up and Jen said: "Still like the hair?"

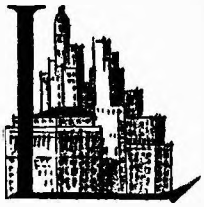
Free grinned. "When your hair has turned to platinum—I will love you—just the same—" he sang, off key. "Has Miss Reynolds called since she left?"

Jen Carle frowned. "No," she said. "But I wouldn't be surprised if she did."

Free looked at the Lincoln picture. "Be nice to her, if she does, Jen," he told her. "She's very young and innocent."

The secretary made a sniffling sound. "She's very young," she agreed, and Free went outside and towards the elevators.

4



LANNER looked at Don Free blankly as he passed close to the tall one's speakeasy table. Free picked a chair at a table that kept his back to the one at which the gray trousered one and his companion sat. He faced a mirror that wasn't too good, but it was good enough.

The one whose arm was in a sling had small eyes, a long nose and thin lips. It was the left arm that was in the sling. The shorter man with the gray trousers kept his head low and after five minutes of beer sipping Free hadn't been able to get a good look at his face. He seemed to be about the build of the one who had come from the house with the green window boxes.

Free finished the beer, lighted a cigarette. The tall man rose and said a husky: "So long." He had to pass close to Free's table, but the agency man did not look at him. Someone called from near the bar: "How they runnin', Eddie?"

The one with the arm in a sling shrugged. "So-so," he replied, and went towards the hall that led to the entrance door of the speake. It wasn't an exclusive speake; Free had got in easily on the strength of mentioning two political names that counted in the Village. He imagined Lanner had worked it the same way.

The one with the gray trousers ordered another drink. Free called the waiter and paid up. He passed close to Lanner's table, dropped a box of matches and leaned over to pick it up. A radio was making sound.

"Stick with your man—I'll take Kronnen," he said. "I think they'll get together again."

Lanner looked blankly towards the radio loudspeaker. Free picked up the matches and went outside. Kronnen was hailing a cab. Free almost lost the

one with the slinged arm before he could pick up a cruiser, and the cab driver almost lost the other taxi in traffic, on the way uptown. At Seventh and Fortieth the cab they were trailing pulled over against the curb and the long nosed one descended. Free leaned forward and said:

"This'll do."

He paid the fare, got slowly from the cab. Kronnen wasn't hard to keep track of; he moved slowly, almost wearily. When he went into the building that held the offices of the Hammond Agency Free swore softly. Kronnen bought cigarettes at a small counter that was still open. Two elevators were running—Kronnen headed for one that had only the operator inside. Free didn't follow. The elevator doors closed. The indicator showed that it stopped at three. It went on up to seven and came down with a messenger boy. Free got in and said: "Three."

When he went into the Hammond Agency office Jen was pulling a small hat over her platinum colored hair. She looked at him and raised eyebrows.

"Back so soon?" she said.

Free grinned. "Did Tim just tell you to send a big man with a long nose and an arm in a sling—inside?" he asked.

She nodded. "A Mr. Harper," she replied.

Free nodded. "Yeah," he said. "That hat goes nice with the hair, but you should use a lighter colored lipstick."

She thought it over and said: "I think you're right. Thanks, Free. Shall I buzz Tim?"

He shook his head. "Never mind. I'll wait around a bit."

She finished fixing her face and said: "Don't mind if I leave you? I've had a rotten day."

Free looked at the picture of Lincoln. "Run along," he told her. "And don't worry."

She looked at him with her eyes almost closed. "Don't worry?" she repeated. "About what?"

He smiled and shrugged. "About anything," he said. "Just smile. Be happy. Laugh and the world laughs with—"

She swore at him and went to the outer door. Beside it she stopped for a few seconds, turned and looked at him.

"A lot of things can happen in ten days, Free," she said very grimly. "Or maybe you know that."

"I've suspected it," he said. "Let's see—I was away about ten days—yes?"

She said very softly: "Yes." She went out and closed the door behind her.

Don Free stood near her desk, frowning. After a few seconds he went along the narrow corridor, knocked on the door of Hammond's office and opened it. Hammond was seated back of his desk and Kronnen stood near a window. Hammond said:

"Hello, Free."

Free nodded. "Hello, Tim," he replied. Kronnen smiled just a little. It made him looked very good-natured. Hammond said:

"You tailed Mr. Kronnen back here, eh?"

Free nodded. "Yes."

Kronnen rubbed a lower lip with knuckles of his right hand.

"One of your boys?" he said a little throatily. "Damned efficient."

Free said; "Thanks, Mr. Kronnen."

Kronnen chuckled. "Not at all," he replied, and made a gesture with his right hand. Through the black of the sling cloth Free could see the white of the plaster cast.

Hammond said: "Is Miss Carle still outside, Free?"

Free shook his head. "She just left," he replied. "Said she'd had a rotten day."

Hammond raised his eyebrows slightly. Kronnen was looking at Free with a slightly puzzled expression.

"I've seen you somewhere, recently," he said. "But I have a bad memory. Can't remember faces."

Free nodded. "I'm the same way."

Kronnen looked more puzzled. "But in your line of business—that's bad, isn't it?" he asked.

Free smiled. "It's not good in yours, either, is it?" he asked pleasantly.

Kronnen narrowed his eyes. "In other words—we were both lying," he suggested. "You were at Mac's place, down in the Village."

Free nodded. Hammond said: "Mr. Kronnen came in about a serious matter. Someone murdered Tony Bandor a few hours ago, in a house he sometimes used, down in the Village."

Free said without any expression in his voice or eyes:

"That's too bad, I suppose."

Hammond tilted his chair back slightly. "Mr. Kronnen knows who murdered Tony."

Free smiled at Kronnen. "That so?" he said almost pleasantly.

Kronnen smiled back at him. "It's so as hell," he said throatily.

Free coughed. "I'll bet the police will be interested," he announced.

Hammond looked at Kronnen, who was watching Free with half-closed eyes. The bookie took his eyes away from Free and spoke to the agency head.

"Does he know why you had him tailing me?" he asked.

Hammond shook his head. "No, but he can know *now*. He's all right, Mr. Kronnen."

Free said nothing and Hammond spoke slowly. "I wanted you to pick up Mr. Kronnen, Free—because a client of ours believes he owes her a large sum of money."

Free said: "Sure."

Hammond said: "This client is wealthy and she nicked Mr. Kronnen for forty thousand at a nearby race track. On the level, of course. Things have been bad for Mr. Kronnen for some time, but he's always kept his books on the square. He couldn't pay the forty thousand, but he was acquainted with Tony Bandor. In fact Tony had promised to fix this matter up. I didn't know all this, of course. I simply knew that our client was anxious to have me talk with Mr. Kronnen. Well, everything looked all right—and then Tony Bandor was murdered. That would have made it bad for Mr. Kronnen."

Free said: "*Would* have made it bad?"

Hammond nodded. "Would have," he repeated. "Except for the fact that Mr. Kronnen knows who murdered Bandor."

THERE was a little silence, and Free said finally:

"Well, let's see—it would have been bad for Mr. Kronnen's money man to be dead in about every case but one. The client who wanted you to find Mr. Kronnen must have murdered Tony Bandor, Tim."

Kronnen said very grimly: "That's the way it went."

Hammond looked at Free, and neither of them spoke. Hammond shifted a little in his chair. Traffic sound came up from the street. Hammond said finally:

"May I ask why you have come to the agency, Mr. Kronnen?"

Kronnen smiled a little. "I knew Tony pretty well, and I know some of his boys. One of them was around when Tony and Mary Reynolds went into his place. When she came out alone it seemed a bit funny to him, strange. He chased along. She went to a well-known lawyer's office, then came here. She was pretty nervous. When the body was found I put two and two together—and figured she'd gone to Burkley for advice—and he'd sent her here."

Hammond nodded. "Uh huh—and what did you think she'd said here?" he asked quietly.

Kronnen shrugged. "I had a hunch she'd told the truth, said that Tony had got rough and that she'd shot him in self defense. I had an idea she might have thought you could fix up an alibi for

her, or Burkley might have thought of that. Or maybe she just came to tell you she was worried."

Free said with a faint smile. "With her looks and a straight story—I don't think she'll need an alibi."

Hammond said: "Or maybe she just came to tell me she was worried about what?"

Kronnen said: "She isn't a fool. She was lucky at the track, but she used her head, too. I think maybe she knew more about Tony Bandor than he thought. And after she'd finished him she kept her head and got scared. Scared of his mob."

Hammond nodded slowly. "It's a thought," he agreed.

There was another silence, then Kronnen smiled a little and spoke softly.

"It should be worth a lot of money to her— to have the boys calmed down, or tossed a fall guy. In a way, I don't blame her. Tony was tough on women. But I'm a business man, and if she comes at me for that forty thousand—"

He shrugged, and the smile went from his lips. Hammond said:

"Getting at it more directly—you think that she murdered Bandor. You know the mob pretty well, and you're willing to toss them someone to take the slam—and let her out—for that forty grand?"

Kronnen lowered his voice and the smile came back again. It was in his eyes, and hard.

"For that forty grand—and about sixty more," he said. "I told you I was a business man."

Hammond rapped on the desk with his knuckles and Free looked at the ceiling. Kronnen said:

"She inherited over half a million from some relative she hadn't seen for years. It was easy to take—it shouldn't be hard to hand over a small chunk. A stretch in a female big house—she wouldn't like that."

Free smiled. "And then—there are Tony's boys," he said. "They might rather strangle her."

Kronnen looked serious. "They might," he agreed, and half closed his eyes.

Hammond stood up. "You're sure you can make the fix, Mr. Kronnen?" he said. "And having made it—that'll be the end? No blackmail—just a business deal."

Kronnen nodded. "I'm sure I can fix things," he said. "And if it wasn't just a business deal—I wouldn't come to you. You don't blackmail through a detective agency. I just thought your advice to her might count more than any suggestion I could make."

Hammond walked back and forth, nodding thoughtfully. Free said:

"There's just one thing. She was seen going into Bandor's house with him—and later she came out alone. She was followed to a lawyer's office, and then here. Bandor's body was discovered. That doesn't exactly make her a murderer, Mr. Kronnen."

Kronnen coughed and shrugged. "Still," he said very slowly, "I think she might be willing to forget about forty and to pass over sixty—to have the boys convinced *someone else* murdered Tony."

Hammond frowned. "I think maybe you're right, Mr. Kronnen, he said. "Where can I reach you—after I get in touch with her?"

Kronnen coughed again. "Ill ring you in an hour," he suggested. "I move around a lot, and it's difficult to say just where I might be at a certain time."

Hammond said: "All right—I'll be here, and I hope I'll have been able to get in touch with our client."

Kronnen looked at Free and said grimly: "I hope so."

He nodded to Free, bowed very slightly to Hammond, and went from the office. After a few seconds Free went outside, looked around and locked the outer door. Then he went to Hammond's office again. The agency head was slumped in his chair, frowning.

"It doesn't look so good now, Free," he said. "That was what I was afraid

of—they were seen going in together, and she was seen coming out, going to Burkley—and coming here. And this Kronnen has an inside with the mob—and some brains."

Free said: "You could turn her over to the police—let Burkley be her mouthpiece. The police would protect her, and it's good odds she'd get off."

Hammond shook his head. "Too much muck. Her looks might not help enough—the prosecution would yap that she was just another of Bandor's girlies. Even if she did get off—it would cost her as much, maybe more."

There was a little silence, then the agency head said:

"Tossing the mob a slam guy is better."

Free half closed his gray eyes, smiled with his thin lips and said:

"I've been away ten days, Tim. You got over liking Jen Carle in that time."

Hammond said nastily: "What's that got to do with this man killer case? What if I did?"

Free shrugged. "The agency racket is tough—and Mary Reynolds is a swell looker. I wouldn't rush things, Tim."

Hammond swore at him. "It's my agency," he said.

Free nodded. "I'm not too much of a church guy, Tim. But this office used to have a certain code. Things have changed suddenly. First you protect a man killer—then you throw in with a blackmailer to try and save her."

Hammond made clicking sounds and smiled sarcastically.

"The big point is that I believe the girl. Tony Bandor was no good. She killed him in self defense. I want to get her off in the easiest way."

Free looked at Hammond narrowly for several seconds, then shrugged.

"You're the boss, Tim," he said. "Lanner was sticking with the fellow who came out of Bandor's house shortly after I was shot at. What about that?"

Hammond shrugged. "One of Bandor's mob. Got it before that show girl arrived. Naturally, *he* didn't run out yelling for the police. But when you popped in he got scared—and let loose. Met Kronnen to tell him things."

Free said coldly: "Why didn't he figure *I* might be another of the mob. Was he just in there popping at anything that opened the door?"

Hammond said slowly: "Listen, Free—Bandor's dead. Mary Reynolds admits she shot him to death. Kronnen is wise that she shot him to death, and gives her an out—a money out. Let's worry about that, and not why one of Bandor's boys squeezed lead at you."

Free lighted a cigarette and smiled coldly. "Okey," he said finally. "What next?"

Hammond spoke quietly. "I'll go to the girl and advise her to pay up and take a long trip. She can play the ponies in India and see something else besides the Empire State Building, on the side. The police won't get anywhere—or they'll get the guy Kronnen figures should be tossed along. And that goes for the mob of Tony's. It's the best way."

Free was silent. Hammond said: "Let Lanner stick with his man. You go out and eat—and come back in about an hour. I may have things fixed by then."

Free said: "Calling me off, eh?"

Hammond shrugged. "Unless Miss Reynolds doesn't agree with me. Then you can stick around and try to keep the mob from finishing her."

Free grinned. "Fine," he said. "Well, I guess you're right, Tim."

Hammond grunted and reached for his hat. "Sure I'm right. She was lucky against Kronnen, but her luck didn't hold out with Tony Bandor. She won and she lost—and now she's got to forget about forty grand and dig in for another sixty. Maybe she's learned that green window boxes don't make a romance."

Free went with Hammond towards the outer office. He said:

"It seems to me we're getting our hands pretty dirty on this deal, Tim."

Hammond swore. "We're protecting a client to the best of our ability—and we're going to be paid well for it," he said.

Free shrugged. "If you turned her over to the police—she'd have one tough fight—a legal one. She'd win, and that would stop any blackmailing."

Hammond swore again. "I can take care of Kronnen," he replied. "He'll get his money just once."

Free smiled doubtfully. They switched out the lights—went outside. Hammond closed the door and locked it. They went down in the elevator. In front of the building Hammond hailed a cab. Free said:

"I'll go around the corner to a chop house for my feed."

Hammond nodded. "See you in an hour or so—that was a swell job you did in Philly, Free."

He got inside the cab and slammed the door. The cab moved away. Free went towards the corner of Forty-first, his lips pressed tightly together. Ten minutes later, as he was going into the agency building again, he was thinking the same thought. And he breathed softly to himself:

"But it isn't such a swell job you're *trying* to do—in New York, Tim!"

5

WHEN Jim Lanner came into the agency office with the gray trousered one Don Free was seated in a chair that faced the vacant one behind Hammond's desk. The chair was tilted against a wall of the office. Rod Farley, of the Times Square precinct, was seated in another chair. Free said:

"Hello, Jim—he came along without crying?"

Lanner smiled narrowly. "I've still got a gun on him," he said. "After I phoned you he got suspicious. And I can't say he *wanted* to come up here."

Free smiled cheerfully. "The Village air is milder," he stated. "You've met Farley, Jim? Square plain-clothesman—one of the best around this section."

Lanner nodded to Farley, who was looking at the gray trousered one. Farley said cheerfully:

"Poky Lake's the name. Didn't know he was lined up with Bandor, Free. Used to be a tough guy, some years ago. Got the 'Poky' tag because he was always eager to take a crack at somebody. I'd heard he'd quieted down."

Lake had blue, expressionless eyes, small features and thick lips. He looked at Farley, who was tall and red faced, and spoke a little indistinctly.

"I don't know what this is all about. This guy jumped me with a rod and said come along. I figured he was after my twelve bucks, but I guess not."

They all smiled and Free gestured towards some spare chairs.

"Sit down, boys," he said. "The others'll be along soon. Sorry I can't offer any drinks, but I can send down for some ice cream."

Lake sniffed and said: "Take the rod off me and I'll go get it."

Free grinned. "Keep it on him, Jim. It makes me feel more comfortable."

Lanner smiled and went over and sat down. "I searched him sort of quickly, in the cab coming up," he said. "No bang-bang tools."

Free continued to smile. "Keep it on him, anyway," he said. "Just for fun."

Lake sat in a chair, scowling. "Even a private dick can get in trouble—puttin' a gun on a guy and making him go places," he muttered.

Free said: "Were you the fellow that did this, Lake?"

He had his overcoat on, and lifted the damaged sleeve. Lake looked puzzled.

"What is it?" he said. "Dirt?"

Free shook his head. "Bullet rip," he replied. "A guy named Bandor—Tony Bandor—was shot out, down in the Village. In a house down there. The house had green window boxes. Very pretty. I got a rumor that he was

dead, and went in to see. Someone let go twice at me. I thought maybe it was you."

Lake swore. "If you're tryin' to pin the Bandor kill on me—"

Free interrupted. "You came out of the house a few minutes after this guy tried to get me. I thought maybe there was some connection."

Lake widened his eyes. "Me?" he breathed. "Like hell I did. I was in Jersey until I walked into Mac's place."

Farley grinned and shook his head. "Stick to the facts, Poky," he advised. "The New York state line starts down along the Hudson water somewhere."

Lake closed his eyes and looked bored. Free said:

"How about it, Jim?"

Lanner said: "Well—both of us saw him come out of that house with the green window boxes. That's where I picked him up."

Lake swore very hoarsely. "It's a frame," he breathed. "And it won't take."

Free shrugged. A door made a slam sound and there were footfalls. After a few seconds a voice said:

"Hammond?"

Free called: "Come on in, Mr. Kronnen."

Lake's eyes were expressionless. The footfalls grew louder and Kronnen came through the half-opened door, into the room. He saw Lake almost at once; his mouth opened and he yawned. After the yawn he looked around. Free said:

"This is Eddie Kronnen, boys. Kronnen—that's Farley over there. Precinct detective. Lanner, there, is out of this office. You know Poky Lake, I believe."

Kronnen said: "Yeah—sure. Hello, Poky."

Lake swore again. "It's a frame, Eddie," he breathed. "They're trying to pin Bandor's kill on me."

Kronnen raised his eyebrows a little, then looked at Free.

"Where's Hammond?" he asked, and there was a peculiar tone in his voice.

Free tilted his head, resting the back of it against the wall. He half closed his eyes, looking at the ceiling, and spoke almost absently.

"He should be along any minute, unless he found Miss Reynolds difficult," he said.

Poky Lake's eyes narrowed a little. Kronnen stood near the desk, looking at Free and breathing quickly but evenly. His injured arm moved a little in the sling. Farley said:

"Who's Miss Reynolds?"

Free closed his eyes. "Lovely lady," he said slowly, casually. "She says she murdered Tony Bandor. Tim believes her."

Farley blinked at Free. "She says she—"

He checked himself. Kronnen was facing Free, his right-hand fingers clenched at his side. His big body was tense, and his lips bared his teeth.

Lanner said: "And *you* don't believe her, Free?"

Free opened his eyes and smiled at Lanner. "Hell, no," he replied. "Her story was lousy. It had more holes in it than Tony had in him."

Kronnen was breathing more slowly now; his right-hand fingers unclenched. The outer door made clicking sound, then closed softly. There were footfalls that grew louder in the corridor. Tim Hammond came into his office.

He halted just past the door, looked from one face to another. He had a cigarette in his left hand, and after seconds he went around behind his desk and squashed it in an ash tray. Free said:

"Hello, Tim. Did she hand over the sixty thousand?"

Hammond pulled back his desk chair very carefully, put his hat on the surface of the desk and seated himself. He looked from one face to another. His skin was pale, and the corners of his mouth twitched slightly at intervals. After a little while he leaned forward

and placed elbows on the desk, closed his hands and held fists at his ears.

"What's all this, Free?" he asked very softly.

Free smiled at him. "Gathering of the clan," he said. He slipped his right hand in the right pocket of his gray coat and pulled the pocket material up so it rested on his right leg just above the knee. "Did the Reynolds girl hand over the sixty thousand?"

Hammond's face twisted. "I'm running this agency, Free," he said in a hard voice. "You've been getting yourself too well known around town, even if you've only been back a short time. I don't like that—what do I owe you?"

Don Free continued to smile. "Let's see—counting my expenses on the Philly trip and two weeks pay ahead—say about five hundred, Tim."

Hammond nodded slowly. He reached down at his left and opened a drawer. Keys made jangling sound in his fingers. He closed the drawer, opened another. He tossed bills on the surface of the desk, five of them. Free stood up, walked over and picked them up. Hammond was looking down at the keys. He said suddenly:

"Good ——!"

Free backed away from the desk, smiling coldly. When Hammond's eyes lifted and met his, Free nodded.

"Sure—the key to the gun drawer isn't there, Tim," he said. "I came back, used it on the drawer, and took the gun out. I looked it over. And I didn't put it back in again."

Hammond's eyes got very small. Free said: "It was like this, Farley—this Reynolds girl brought along the gun she said she'd killed Tony Bandor with, and Tim had it locked up."

Farley nodded. "Well?" he said questioningly.

Free stopped smiling. "She didn't kill Bandor with *it* or with *any other* gun," he said slowly.

Poky Lake said hoarsely: "It's some kind of a frame, Eddie."

Eddie Kronnen kept his eyes on Free, but Free was watching Hammond. He spoke quietly.

"Lanner, you watch Lake. I'm leaving Kronnen to you, Farley. I'll take care of my ex-boss, Mr. Hammond."

Hammond said very slowly but in a strained voice:

"Get the hell out of my office, Free—you're fired! Get moving right away!"

Free shook his head. "I came back here just in time to sit in on the tail end of a racket, boys," he said steadily. "I've been getting too virtuous for Tim—or he's been getting too crooked for me, one way or the other. Lake's right, except for the tense he used. It *was* a frame—a two way frame. I was to be made permanently quiet—that chance just came along. It looked better than sending me out of town all the time. The Reynolds girl was to be nicked—sixty thousand now and then some more every once in a while—"

Hammond spoke very softly and huskily. "He's talking rot—he knew I was going to fire him—"

Free chuckled. "Hammond's too dumb to run an agency," he said. "He'll be a good looking trusty in stir. He'll have some company Farley. Too bad Tony Bandor can't be along. But there was a slip-up."

Tim Hammond was swaying his body a little, from side to side, very slowly. His hands rested on the desk surface, and the fingers moved nervously. The others were all very still. Free stood with his back near the wall opposite the desk.

"It was Hammond's idea," he said slowly. "He might have got improvements on it from Bandor. Or Kronnen. Or even Poky Lake. Anyway—this Reynolds kid had come into some money and she liked to play the horses. Maybe they fixed it so that she got the right tips and won, or maybe she just was lucky, and that gave them the idea. Kronnen said he couldn't pay up, but he had a backer. He brought in Bandor.

Bandor was nice, and the Reynolds girl was beautiful and dumb.

"She went down to the Village, saw the green window boxes, and went inside. Bandor had a gun planted. He put on his act. He'd fixed it so she'd seen the gun. And she'd seen movies. So she grabbed the gun and let him have it. He went down. That was all fine and dandy—the way things were supposed to go. All the gun did was make noise, and Bandor didn't even get a powder burn. The Reynolds girl took a quick look and was sure he was dead. She got out of the house, calmed down a little, remembered what she'd read in the tabs about Burkley—and went to him. That was a break for the House of Hammond. Burkley and Tim, here—they get on together. Miss Reynolds was sent over here. Not that it would have made any difference—Tim would have got after her anyway."

He paused and Hammond said heavily: "It's the dam'dest line I've ever heard!"

Free smiled coldly. "Bandor was in a bad spot, before they figured this deal. He was worried about his health, the police—and money. He was supposed to drop out of sight. I suppose Tim, here, would have told the Reynolds girl things had been fixed quietly. And then he would have started the bleeding process. A half million is nice to shoot at. There was a split with Bandor, for playing dead—and there was Kronnen to take care of. But plenty for all."

Farley whistled softly. "And after Bandor played dead—someone really got him," he breathed.

Free nodded, his eyes on Hammond's. "Sure," he said. "It was too good a chance. The girl was framed—why not finish Tony and make it right?"

Farley drew in a deep breath. "It was a natural," he muttered.

Jim Lanner spoke softly. "They had their man killer all lined up. Who really got Bandor, Free?"

Free shrugged and looked puzzled. Then he smiled pleasantly and looked around at the faces in the room.

"It wasn't Hammond," he said. "He was too busy here in the office. Too busy figuring how he could get me bumped out." Free narrowed his eyes on Poky Lake. "Was it you, Poky?"

Lake made a strange, chuckling sound. "Now I'll tell one," he said hoarsely.

Free looked at Kronnen. "I guess it was you, Eddie," he said. He looked at the black sling of the left arm intently, and he nodded. "Sure it was," he breathed. "You were in the house—you and Poky. But you could get close to Bandor without him being suspicious, with your gun all set in that left hand cast."

Kronnen's eyes went to Hammond's. He said shakily:

"This is a hell of a joke—me with a broken arm—"

Free said to Farley. "You know most of them, at the tracks. Remember this one?"

Farley nodded. "I'd never forget that nose," he replied. "Yeah—he used to pay off left handed. Think they called him Lefty Kronnen for a while there."

Free's eyes were on Hammond's again. "Well—Kronnen finished Bandor. He got clear or he stuck inside. I walked in and surprised Poky puttering around. Poky let go at me, but he missed. I caught the gray of his trousers in the flash-beam. He came out and Lanner picked him up. I think maybe Kronnen made a quick duck after the kill, and then met Poky to learn if it had been right, at Mac's place. I've got a hunch that Poky might have been tipped I was coming down—he seemed to be ready for me. Hammond tipped. He's been getting careful of the old-timers around here, lately. Jen Carle, his secretary, she was slated to be fired pretty quick. Even a change of hair color couldn't have saved her."

Free smiled at Hammond. It was a hard, bitter smile.

"When I walked into Mac's—Kronnen got a jolt. So did Poky. But Kronnen came up here and told Hammond what he already knew—that I was still alive. They decided to bluff on through. Well—here they all are."

Farley nodded. "How'll we work it?" he said slowly. "Take 'em to the precinct and knock hell out of them?"

Free nodded. "Poky'll talk first. Have the doctor look at Kronnen's left arm. He'll find it's never been broken, probably. I've got the gun the dumb beauty thought finished Bandor. It'll show no bullets came out of the muzzle—they didn't cover up on that because Hammond didn't figure the gun would count. I can identify those trousers of Poky's. We'll dig in and find out how Mary Reynolds won so much at the track, from Kronnen. It may take a little time—but we've got them, Farley."

Farley nodded and Jim Lanner said: "That's what comes from Tim hiring good men to work for him."

Hammond leaned across the desk and smiled with his lips. He looked at Free.

"How'd you do it, Free?" he asked. His voice was dull, almost lifeless.

Free smiled coldly. "I was willing to believe Mary Reynolds beautiful enough to be dumb enough to go to Bandor's place," he said. "I couldn't quite see her using the gun—and I certainly couldn't see Tony leaving one loose, in sight. And you were pretty tight with that gun she brought in, Tim—there *was* a time when you would have let me see it. And those two shots were fired at me too quickly, Tim. I was expected. When I got a look at the gun the girl was supposed to have used—I sat here and did some thinking. And I figured out how you might have framed the girl, and how someone might have finished off Bandor. That was worth something to someone else—and Kronnen knows who. Did you get the sixty thousand from the girl, Tim?"

Hammond didn't speak and Farley said in a hard, low tone:

"We'll get all that, at the station, Free. Let's start moving—"

Hammond took both hands out of sight, and shoved the desk forward and over. He swore hoarsely. Kronnen turned and his plaster cast made movement within the sling. The first bullet from his gun chipped plaster from the wall just to the right of Free's moving head.

Farley's gun crashed and Kronnen bowed his head, slumped forward. Dark metal spilled in a hunk from the plaster of the cast. Hammond raised his right hand and Free squeezed steel. Both guns crashed at once—there was a little stinging pain along the side of Free's left hand. Hammond swung his body so that his face was to the wall behind his desk. He let his gun drop and leaned against the wall, arms at his sides. After a few seconds his body slipped downward.

Poky Lake didn't move from his chair. His eyes held a dead, doped expression. Free looked at a scratch on his left hand, went over and looked down at Hammond. He heard Farley say:

"I guess Kronnen's—through."

Hammond looked up at Free as he leaned against the wall, a twisted smile on his lips.

"You had it right, Free," he said weakly. "Only Kronnen finished Bandor—and tried for you, too. He got out of the room as you were falling—and Poky crossed in the light of—your flash. The Reynolds girl's check for sixty grand—it's in my—pocket—"

Free said: "The dumb brat—"

Hammond said hoarsely: "First—and last payment—"

He shivered and closed his eyes. Farley looked at Free and said:

"You hit?"

Free shook his head. "Just a scratch. Stick around—I'll phone from the outer office."

He went from the room and down the corridor. He was calling an ambulance when an elevator operator

stuck his head in through the half-opened door space. He looked frightened.

"Anything wrong in here?" he asked. "I thought I heard shooting."

Free said grimly. "You heard shooting, but there's nothing wrong."

When he'd finished calling the precinct station the operator's head was still showing. His eyes were wide and he said stupidly:

"Is anyone dead—what's it about?"

Free sighed heavily and reached for a cigarette. His fingers were shaking a little as he lighted the tip of it.

"Somebody's dead," he said tonelessly. "You can read all about it—tomorrow—"

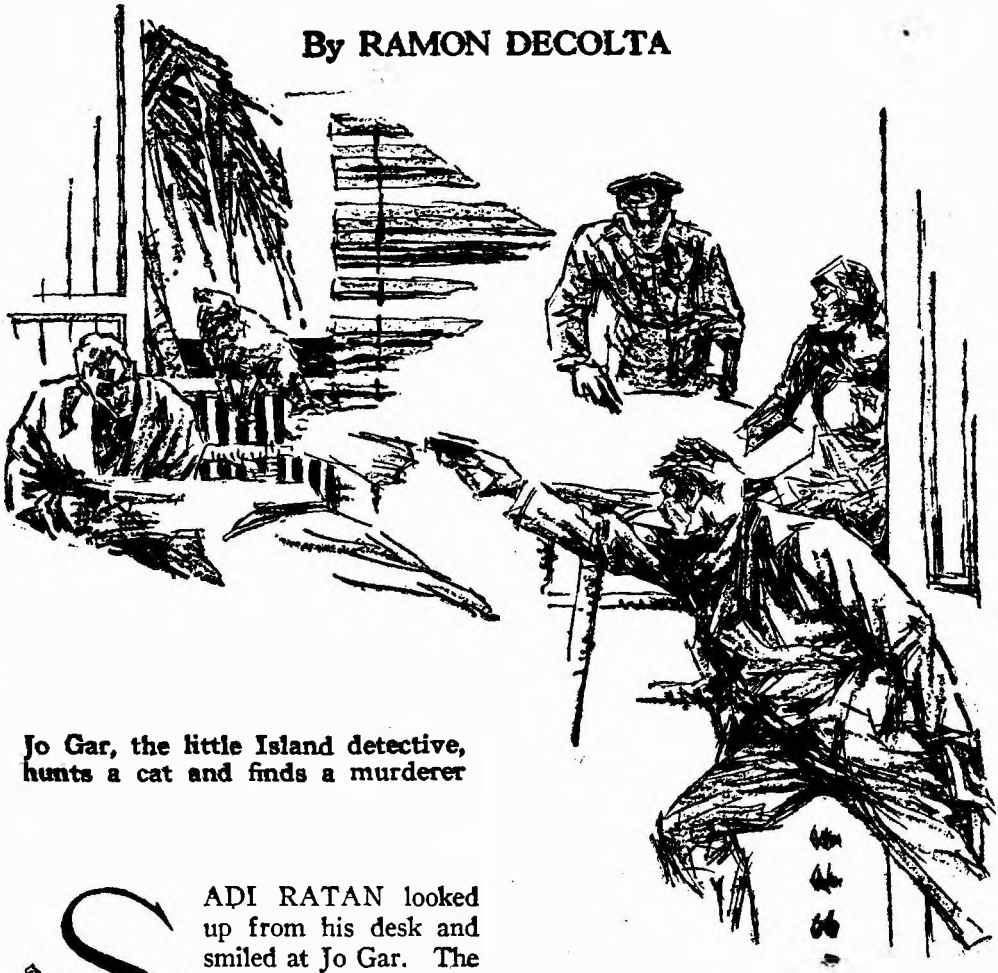
The operator stared at Free. "Somebody's dead—" he repeated thickly. "What's it—about—"

Free went towards the corridor that led to the office. He said half to himself as he went:

"It's about a gal with more looks than brains—and an agency boss who *thought* he could make her—a man killer."

The Siamese Cat

By RAMON DECOLTA



Jo Gar, the little Island detective, hunts a cat and finds a murderer

SADI RATAN looked up from his desk and smiled at Jo Gar. The police office was hot, the streets of Manila were hot. Tropic heat had been fierce during the past few weeks; it would be fierce for many more. But the Filipino police lieutenant did not seem to mind heat. His brown face was handsome and his dark eyes seemed alert and unwearied. He said in an amused tone:

"You were surprised, Señor Gar, at my sending for you?"

Jo Gar dabbed at his face with a large handkerchief, got it in a pocket of his duck suit. His gray-blue eyes smiled a little.

"I was surprised at your *request* for me to come here, Lieutenant," he corrected quietly.

The police lieutenant waved his left hand a little airily.

"We are very busy," he said. "That escape of the Chinese from Billibid Prison — the disappearance of the English woman. Several small but annoying robberies. Yes, we are very busy."

The Island detective got his stubby-fingered hands in the pockets of his duck coat and said nothing. Sati Ratan

inspected a fly-specked ceiling and the slowly swinging fan. Then he said:

"Knowing that you had not been retained by John Collings in the matter of the search for his wife, and knowing that you would not be interested in the search for the two escaped prisoners or these minor store hold-ups—I thought of you for another matter."

He paused and smiled. Jo Gar smiled back at him and lighted a brown paper cigarette. He said:

"With your fine efficiency you will capture the escaped convicts quickly. The English woman has a habit of disappearing; she will return shortly. I am sure you can pick up the store thieves, Lieutenant."

Sadi Ratan frowned slightly, then smiled again.

"Of course," he said. "But I regret you have not been retained in any of these instances."

The Island detective inhaled and wondered what the lieutenant of the Manila police was getting at. There was very little good feeling between them; it was the first time Sadi Ratan had sent for him. Jo said:

"Business cannot always be good."

The police lieutenant made another gesture with his left hand.

"An American named Brail—Walter Brail—has been in to see me. He has been in Manila only a week or so. He is wealthy and wanders about the world. An unfortunate thing has occurred. He has lost a cat."

Sadi Ratan looked down at a paper before him and tried not to smile. Jo Gar's eyes were expressionless. He said nothing. The police lieutenant went on.

"It is a very unusual cat—he is much attached to it. A Siamese cat. He is very anxious to recover it, and that is not exactly a police matter. So I suggested you, Señor Gar."

Jo Gar bowed very slightly. "It was kind of you, Lieutenant," he said.

Sadi Ratan looked him in the eyes, smiling peculiarly.

"I told him that perhaps you would consider such an assignment below your dignity—"

Jo Gar shook his head. "On the contrary—I am a great lover of cats," he interrupted. "Where shall I find this American, Lieutenant?"

Sadi Ratan's eyes widened a little, then narrowed. He said:

"He is staying on the Bay, at the Manila Hotel. The cat escaped from his screened porch there. There has been much searching, and he is advertising, of course. He will be glad to see you, Señor Gar."

The Island detective nodded, still smiling. "It was very good of you to think of me," he said. "I shall try to return the favor at some time."

Sadi Ratan gestured carelessly again. He looked at his wrist-watch.

"You will go to the hotel tonight, Señor?" he asked.

Jo Gar nodded. "I shall go there immediately," he said. "The name is Walter Brail—and the American has lost a Siamese cat."

The police lieutenant's eyes were serious. "That is so," he said. "And the best of luck, Señor Gar."

Jo smiled and bowed again. He went from the office and to the *Escolta,* Manila's main business street. It was almost nine o'clock in the evening, and not too many people were about. The Island detective hailed a *carromatta,* climbed slowly inside. He spoke to the Filipino driver in his native tongue, settled back in the comfortable seat.

The driver shrilled at his pony. The distance was short, and though Jo Gar thought a great deal about Sadi Ratan's mocking tone, and the idea of sending for him—he reached only a half decision. The police lieutenant had thought it would be amusingly insulting, when he had not been retained by those concerned in more important matters, to call Jo over and suggest his search for a cat. And yet, he felt there was something beyond that. He doubted that Ratan, who was not a fool, would

bother with such a childish sort of humor.

He was smiling a little as he left the *carromatta,* and entered the hotel. In a not uneventful career as a free lance detective he recalled that this was the first time he had ever been concerned with a Siamese cat.

THE suave clerk behind the desk smiled and then looked serious.

"Mr. Brail is very disturbed," he said. "He has created a great deal of worry in the hotel. He will be glad to see you Señor Gar. I will call him."

Jo Gar nodded and waited. The clerk spoke to the switchboard girl and then motioned towards an enclosed phone. Jo went to it and when a heavy voice said: "Yes?" he said: "Señor Gar speaking, Mr. Brail. Lieutenant Ratan of the local police has told me you were interested in finding a Siamese cat—"

The heavy voice interrupted: "Ah—good, Señor Gar. I am glad you have come. Please come right up."

The phone clicked. Jo went to the desk and the clerk smiled at him.

"It is two flights up, Number Twenty-eight—at the extreme north wing. Our finest suite. Shall I send a boy—"

Jo Gar shook his head. "I know the way—the opera singer who lost her bracelet occupied the same suite, about a year ago, I think."

The clerk nodded. Jo smiled and said: "Mr. Brail is traveling alone?"

The clerk said: "He has his valet—an English valet. There are just the two of them, and there was the cat."

The Island detective nodded. "A fine cat?" he asked.

The clerk nodded. "Very beautiful," he said. "I saw it in the basket. Beautifully marked—very large."

Jo smiled and moved towards the broad stairs. The hotel was low and spread out, with fine gardens and a beach on the Bay. Ceiling fans circled silently, and stirred iced air. Jo climbed the stairs slowly, accustomed to the tropics and knowing the results of speed. The corridors were wide; on the second flight he moved along the north wing towards the suite that faced the Bay, hung almost over the waters of it.

When he reached the double doors he knocked. After a few seconds he rang a bell that made sound he could hear from the corridor. Out on the Bay there was the deep-toned whistle of a big boat. Jo rang the bell again.

Seconds passed. He rapped sharply on one of the wooden doors, with his knuckles. The padding footfalls of a hotel maid sounded from along the corridor, and the Island detective went towards the woman. He said:

"I have just talked with Mr. Brail, in Suite Twenty-eight, from downstairs. He asked me to come up. He does not answer the bell, or my knock."

He followed the Filipino maid back to the double doors. She rang the bell several times, tapped on the door. She called in a high-pitched voice: "Señor Brail—Señor Brail—"

There was no sound from within the suite. The maid jingled keys on a ring and turned one in a lock. She pushed open a door and called again: "Señor Brail!"

Jo Gar walked past her through a small foyer and into a large, wicker-chaired living-room. He was half way across the room when the Filipino maid screamed. She screamed terribly—and ran towards the corridor. Jo Gar went over and looked down at the figure of the man. The man was lying on his back, with his arms and legs spread. His eyes were opened. There was blood on his lips—and his hands showed long, jagged streaks of red, scratches. He was dead.

Jo straightened and looked around the room. His body stiffened as he glanced towards a wicker divan near the screened porch that hung over the Bay. The Siamese cat crouched motionlessly

on the divan, its eyes focused on his figure. It was a dusty gray, huge for a cat. The black marking of its face and ears and the blueness of its eyes stood out in the reflected light from a table lamp. In the corridor the Filipino maid was still screaming, and there were sharp voices coming from below. Everything in the room was very motionless—Jo Gar, the body on the floor—and the figure of the Siamese cat.

SADI RATAN stood just inside the living-room of the suite and frowned at Jo. The hotel clerk said:

"Mr. Brail left the hotel at about five o'clock. He returned at about eight-thirty—and a half hour before Señor Gar called. Perhaps not that long. He asked if his cat had been found, and said he'd sent his valet along the Bay front, to inquire at the houses. Then he went upstairs. Nobody called to see him, until Señor Gar arrived."

Jo said: "That is, nobody *announced* that he was calling."

The clerk shrugged. Sadi Ratan looked at the body, then at the medical man.

"Two knife wounds—one in the back of the neck—one to the heart. They caused the death."

The doctor nodded. "Apparently," he said. "The scratches on the hands and wrists look like cat scratches."

Sadi Ratan glanced towards the Siamese, sleeping on the divan. He frowned. Jo Gar said to the clerk:

"When did you last see Phelps, this valet?"

The clerk thought for several seconds. "Around four o'clock. He went out without stopping at the desk. He's tall and very thin. He has a sad face."

Sadi Ratan said: "It's after nine-thirty, and he left at about four. That's a long time to be walking around the Bay front, looking for the cat."

The clerk looked at the Siamese. "How did it—get back here?" he asked.

Jo Gar spoke grimly. "The cat didn't knife Brail in the neck and the heart. Brail spoke to me, say five minutes before I came into this room. That is, a heavy-voiced man spoke to me."

The clerk said: "Señor Brail had a heavy voice."

Sadi Ratan looked at Jo Gar narrowly. "He didn't tell you over the phone that his cat had been returned, or had returned. Yet the chances are the cat was here then."

Jo Gar shrugged. "Perhaps," he said. "It's possible for a person to go down from the screen porch. There are vines that are strong. The suite below is not occupied. There's another stairway and several ways out of the hotel. After I spoke to Brail, if it was Brail, I talked at the desk a bit. Brail might have been dying then."

Sadi Ratan said: "How about the cat?"

Jo Gar shrugged. "The clerk says the cat disappeared this morning at about ten o'clock. These Siamese can climb. It might have been wandering around on the roof. The roof was searched, but it might have been missed. The porch isn't completely screened—the cat might have come back *after* Brail was murdered."

Sadi Ratan said: "I want to see Phelps—I think Brail talked to you, and that the cat was here then. There is something very strange about this."

Jo Gar smiled narrowly. "There is something very strange about most murders," he said quietly.

The telephone at one end of the living-room made ringing sound. Jo Gar started towards it, but Lieutenant Ratan caught him by the arm.

"I will answer, if you do not object," he said. "This is *my* investigation."

The Island detective stood aside, shrugging. "I thought you had turned the case over to me," he said slowly.

Sadi Ratan frowned. "A lost cat is not a murder case," he stated. *"This* is a matter for the police."

Jo Gar smiled a little more broadly. "I think you are correct," he stated as

the police lieutenant neared the telephone. "A very *good* matter, Lieutenant."

The police lieutenant lifted the receiver. He listened for several seconds after he said: "Lieutenant Ratan speaking." His body grew tense and he swore once, in Spanish. The Siamese cat uncurled itself and stood up. It jumped lightly from the divan and crossed the room, paying no attention to the body of Walter Brail. Jo Gar watched it closely, his eyes half closed. The room seemed to be growing hotter. Sadi Ratan said sharply:

"I will be there immediately—do not allow the body to be disturbed."

He hung up the receiver, faced Jo Gar. His handsome face held a grim expression.

"Phelps is dead," he said slowly. "His body has been found, along the Bay front, by some boys in swimming. He committed suicide and left a note. You will come with me, please, Doctor?"

The Island detective watched the doctor nod. Sadi Ratan looked at him thoughtfully.

"Would you care to come, also?" he asked.

Jo Gar sighed, shook his head. "I think not, Lieutenant," he said tonelessly. "A murder *and* a suicide—it is most certainly a matter for the police."

IT was almost midnight when the Island detective went into Sadi Ratan's office. The police lieutenant was slumped low in his chair, relaxed and smiling. He moved a palm leaf fan gracefully, so that wind struck his handsome face. Jo Gar closed the door behind him and stood near it.

"You appear pleased, Lieutenant," he said.

Sadi Ratan nodded and gestured with the fan. "My men have captured the two escaped Chinese. The English woman has been found wandering beyond the city. And we have the murderer of Walter Brail. Things become quiet again."

Jo Gar said: "You have Brail's murderer?"

The police lieutenant nodded and took time in speaking. He was enjoying himself.

"The valet, Phelps, was the murderer," he said in a satisfied tone. "It was all very simple."

Jo Gar looked at his stubby, browned fingers. "Most murders are very simple," he agreed.

Sadi Ratan continued to smile. "Phelps had been with Brail for almost ten years. He wrote in the note he left that he has hated Brail for the last three of them. He did not show his hatred. He hated Brail because he would not give him money, back him in a small business he wanted to start in London. Every year for the past three or four years Brail had promised to let him go, back him in this business. But he never did it. Phelps hated to travel, and Brail was traveling most of the time.

"A month or so ago Brail told the valet that he was leaving him ten thousand dollars, in his will, and that he could start his business after Brail's death. He joked about it, showed Phelps the clause in the will. And the valet knew that Brail would never back him in his business while he was alive. He hated him all the more—Brail was in good health and younger than Phelps. The valet thought about murder—he first thought about it in Shanghai. In the note he stated he almost went through with it ten days ago, in Nagasaki. He wanted that ten thousand dollars. Tonight he murdered Brail. And when he realized what he had done—he shot himself. He wasn't the type who could kill and live, that was all."

Jo Gar said very softly: "So?"

Sadi Ratan smiled a little. "He deliberately let the Siamese cat loose. He wanted to get Brail along the Bay front in some deserted spot. But he decided Brail was suspicious, would not go. He

followed Brail here, knew that he had reported the loss of the cat to the police. At first he thought he would wait. Then he decided the missing cat would make things more difficult for the police. He returned from the supposed search and when Brail stepped away from the phone after talking to you, he stabbed him twice. He went down the vines, below the screened porch and was not seen. But he couldn't stand being a murderer. He wrote this note—and shot himself."

Jo Gar looked at the polished floor of the office.

"You've compared the handwriting with other writing of Phelps?" he said slowly.

Sadi Ratan nodded. "Naturally," he said, still smiling. "We went right back to the hotel and got to work. We found a copy of Brail's will, and the clause leaving the ten thousand to the valet was there. We compared handwriting of the last note—it was written hurriedly, of course, almost scrawled. But it is Phelps' handwriting. Simply a murder for money, of greed. And Phelps was too weak for such a thing. He used the cat to attempt getting Brail from the hotel, in some deserted spot, searching. But that didn't work."

The lieutenant of police smiled and shrugged. "So—you won't have to worry about the Siamese cat, Señor Gar, after all."

Jo Gar smiled a little. "On the contrary," he said very quietly. "I think I shall have to worry very much about the Siamese cat."

Sadi Ratan straightened in his chair. He narrowed his dark eyes.

"Why?" he asked.

Jo Gar's eyes were expressionless. "Because the valet did not murder Brail. Because the valet did not leave the note you found—and because I do not think Phelps committed suicide," he said tonelessly.

Sadi Ratan stared at him, his mouth slightly opened. He rose from the chair, said grimly:

"I am aware that you have been right several times in the past, Señor Gar. You have also been fortunate. But when you say what you have just said, in the face of the evidence we have—"

He broke off, gesturing widely with his arms. Jo Gar said quietly:

"You wished to amuse yourself, Lieutenant—and you thought you were insulting me by suggesting that I should search for a lost cat. There have now been two deaths. And because one appears to explain another, you eagerly accept any evidence that comes along. *I* do not accept your evidence."

The police lieutenant said angrily: "The case is closed. We have the motive, the manner—and the confession. You have not been retained—"

The Island detective grinned. "I am retaining *myself*," he interrupted. "My reward will be obtained in a way familiar to you, Lieutenant. I shall be amused at you."

Sadi Ratan swore in Spanish. A nasty smile twisted his handsome face.

"The press will be amused—Señor Gar does not agree with the police and will hunt down the murderers of *both* Walter Brail and his valet," he mocked.

The Island detective inhaled smoke from the Filipino cigarette.

"The press has been amused before," he said quietly. "But not at me."

Sadi Ratan shrugged. "Again—I wish you luck," he said. "A simple case has been closed. The cat has returned. You are not satisfied—shall I tell you why?"

Jo Gar said: "Please do."

The police lieutenant continued to smile. "You are disturbed because I suggested you hunt for the Siamese. When I suggested it you did not show it, Señor Gar. And the murder gave you the opportunity to be first on the scene. When it was cleared up so easily, by us—"

He smiled more broadly, bowed slightly. Jo Gar smiled back at him.

"By a pencil scrawl on paper," he corrected. "That is what bothers me,

Lieutenant. It is cleared up so easily."

Sadi Ratan sighed. "You prefer the mysteries of the Siamese cat, perhaps," he said mockingly.

Jo Gar watched a thin curve of smoke from his cigarette, his eyes expressionless.

"Perhaps," he agreed, and went from the office to the quiet of the hot *Escolta.*

N the morning the Island detective read in papers printed in several languages that Winton Phelps, English valet of Walter Brail, wealthy and eccentric American, had murdered for money to be left him, and had then, half mad with regret for what he had done, shot himself to death. The police had his confession note—the facts checked with a will found in Brail's baggage, the handwriting was that of Phelps.

A Siamese cat had been lost by Phelps in an attempt to lure his master to a deserted spot, but Brail had been murdered in his hotel suite. Another item in all of the papers stated that it was believed by the police that Señor Gar had been engaged to search for the lost cat, which always traveled with the eccentric Brail, and that Señor Gar had stated he did not accept the police theory of murder and suicide.

Jo Gar smiled and breathed softly: "Always this Siamese cat—Sadi Ratan is much amused. He is not concerned with the fact that having murdered and escaped, having the ten thousand dollars left to him, this Phelps killed himself. And so quickly, after writing such a note. And Lieutenant Ratan is amused with the cat, yet he does not *think* too much about it."

It was a reeking hot day, but the Island detective spent the morning moving about Manila, on the outskirts. He talked with two Chinese, and with a Malay who had a savage appearing Siamese cat. He asked many questions. After a light lunch he went to his home and had a *siesta.* At four he rode to the police station and received permission from a Filipino sergeant to look at photographs. It was almost six when he had finished, and Sadi Ratan was coming in as he went out. The police lieutenant grinned at him.

"You called to see me?" he asked.

The Island detective shook his head. "I have been looking at pictures," he stated.

Sadi Ratan widened his dark eyes, brushed dust from his well-fitting khaki uniform.

"You found the one you sought?" he asked.

Jo Gar nodded. "I think that is so," he said.

Lieutenant Ratan chuckled. "Was it of a cat?" he said gently.

The Island detective smiled back at Ratan. The lieutenant of police continued to chuckle and went inside of the police building. Jo Gar walked slowly in the direction of the Manila Hotel. At the desk he asked for Cummings, the director. Cummings was a short, red-faced man; he came to Jo's side with a frown.

"I've been away—just got in this morning. Up at Baguio, keeping cool. Terrible thing—the valet killing Brail. Terrible for the hotel."

Jo Gar nodded. "Unfortunate for Brail, also," he said quietly. "You heard that Brail had a Siamese cat he was very fond of, perhaps?"

Cummings nodded. "Of course," he replied.

The Island detective nodded. "Who is taking care of the cat now?" he asked.

Cummings frowned. "The floor maid," he said. "She said she wasn't afraid of it—I think she said she'd had one before at some time. So we turned it over to her until we get word from Brail's relatives in New York. Terrible thing."

The Island detective nodded his head thoughtfully. They moved towards

some palms and Jo said very softly:

"Sadi Ratan is easily convinced, Mr. Cummings. I do not believe that the valet murdered Brail, nor that he committed suicide."

The director blinked at Jo. "You don't think—that the police are correct—"

Jo Gar shook his head. "The theory of the valet losing the cat to get Brail away from the hotel is weak. He must have had many chances to murder Brail, in more or less deserted spots. And if Phelps *had* stabbed Brail to death—then he committed suicide too soon after the crime. Also, I cannot quite see a man with the courage to murder not going through with what he started. And then, there is the Siamese cat."

Cummings said: "What about it?"

Jo spoke tonelessly. "I have asked questions about the breed. They are savage, part monkey. At times they are very affectionate. Blood excites them—they are extremely nervous. Apparently I talked with Brail from downstairs here, within five minutes of the time he was stabbed. When we entered the suite he was dead. The Siamese cat was on the divan, and not the least bit disturbed. There were scratches on Brail's hands and wrists."

Cummings said: "Well?"

Jo Gar sighed. "I do not think Brail spoke to me on the telephone. I think he had been dead some little time—long enough for the cat to have gotten over its nervousness. If the cat had *been* in the room when Brail had been struck down it would have still been excited when I entered the room. If it had come in *after* the murder, the body and the blood would still have been having an effect."

Cummings sucked in a deep breath. Jo Gar said very quietly.

"But the Siamese was almost sleeping—it was not at all excited."

The hotel director half closed his eyes. "Well?" he said again.

Jo Gar shrugged. "The one who spoke to me as Brail was Brail's murderer. Brail was dead at that time. He had been dead for some little time. As I went upstairs—the murderer escaped."

Cummings said: "How about the scratches on Brail's hands and wrists?"

The Island detective frowned. "According to the statements Lieutenant Ratan has been giving to the press, they were caused in the struggle. Fingernail scratches—of Phelps. He states that Phelps' nails were quite long, and several were broken. I disagree with him, but I do not think they were cat scratches."

Cummings said again: "Well?"

Jo smiled faintly. "Phelps was shot through the mouth. The gun muzzle was very close—but that does not mean it was suicide. I think he was murdered by the same ones who murdered Walter Brail."

The hotel director said: "By the same *ones?*"

Jo nodded slowly. "Ones," he repeated. "I do not know the motive. But I could make a guess. In my own way."

The hotel director looked at Jo Gar narrowly. They had known each other over a period of years, and there were things that Cummings remembered.

"If I can help, Señor Gar—"

Jo's eyes were slitted on the broad stairs beyond the palms. They were more almond shaped than usual.

"I would like to look over the suite again, more carefully," he said. "The Siamese cat is now in the hotel?"

Cummings nodded. "The maid has quarters here—the cat is in her place, at the rear of the hotel."

Jo took his eyes away from the broad stairs. "I would like the maid to bring the Siamese to the suite," he said. "But first I should like to call Lieutenant Ratan. He might be interested."

Cummings grunted. "He told me that you were a fool, and that the case was finished."

The Island detective smiled tightly. "It is very likely that what he meant

was that if I *had been* a fool the case would now *be* finished," he said softly.

WHEN Sadi Ratan came into the living-room of Suite Twenty-eight he stopped and stared at Jo Gar, then at Hernandez. Jo smiled and gestured towards Hernandez.

"I asked the señor to come here so that the Spanish papers could have the story," he said. "You do not object?" His tone was expressionless.

Sadi Ratan grinned at the newspaperman. "Not if it is an amusing story," he replied.

The Island detective spoke a little grimly. "I think you will like it," he said. "There is a cat in it."

He nodded to the hotel director who went to the telephone. Jo Gar said:

"I have just one request—*I* should like to do the talking, and I shouldn't like anyone to show surprise at what I say. I think we'd better be sitting down and taking things easy, as the Americans say."

They seated themselves. Cummings came away from the phone and said:

"She will be right along."

Less than a minute later there was a rap on the half-closed door that led to the corridor. Jo said:

"Please come in."

He was smiling as the maid entered, holding the Siamese cat in her arms. The cat regarded them stolidly; the light was fading and its eyes were very blue. Jo Gar looked at the maid and said:

"Just set the cat down and let it wander around, please."

She said: "*Si* señor," and did as instructed. The Siamese did not move around much; it stayed close to her and watched the others in the room. Jo rose slowly, still smiling.

"You are not frightened of the cat?" he asked the maid.

She shook her head, a very faint smile on her lips. She was dark haired, medium in size. She was good looking for a Filipino girl, slenderer than most of them. Her English was very good.

The Island detective said: "You are not frightened—of *this* one?"

Her dark eyes widened. The smile had gone from Jo Gar's face.

"Of *this* one?" she repeated slowly.

The Island detective nodded. "This one has seen a man murdered," he said very steadily and softly. "It has seen blood on the man's—"

He stopped as the Filipino maid raised a hand towards her throat. She said in a choked voice:

"No—please—"

Jo Gar turned his head back to her and pointed towards the floor. He spoke loudly, huskily.

"Walter Brail's body was lying about there—when I came in. The cat was on the divan. Brail was dead—there was blood on his lips. A knife wound in the heart and in the neck—"

He let his words die, went towards the spot on the floor where Brail's body had lain. The room was very quiet; he could hear the swift breathing of the maid, behind him. Cummings was breathing heavily, too.

Jo Gar turned slowly. He walked a few feet towards the maid, then stopped.

"You screamed last evening—when you saw the body. You did not go near the body. All you saw was a figure lying on the floor. Yet you screamed, again and again. You ran down the corridor screaming—"

The maid spoke in a broken voice. "I was—frightened. I felt—that he was dead—lying there—"

Jo Gar moved nearer her. "You are not afraid of a cat. A cat that belonged to a dead man. A cat that was in this room when the man was murdered, knifed—"

She said in a strangled voice: "I've had—Siamese cats—before—"

Sadi Ratan spoke in a protesting voice. "What is it that you want to know, Señor Gar?"

The Island detective paid no attention to Ratan. He moved closer to the maid, his gray-blue eyes very small and his lips pressed together in a straight line. When he parted them he said very grimly:

"You are the sort of woman who screams again and again when she sees a body lying on the floor—and yet you are not at all afraid of a dead man's cat. A strange breed of cat—"

There was fear in the girl's eyes. She raised her browned hands, pressed palms against her face. Jo stepped forward quickly, caught her wrists in his hands. He said sharply:

"Your fingernails are very short—I think a doctor would say they had been cut very recently."

The maid pulled herself away from him. She swore fiercely, in a half Spanish, half Filipino dialect. When she had finished Jo Gar slipped right-hand fingers in the right pocket of his duck suit.

"And I do not think—that your nails were clipped short, *last* evening," he said slowly.

The maid's eyes were staring into his. Sadi Ratan muttered something that was not distinguishable to Jo. The maid said brokenly:

"I didn't—do it—I didn't! I know you think—I killed him. I didn't! I knew when you sent for me—"

Her words trailed off. She turned and started towards the door that led to the corridor. Jo Gar said sharply:

"Wait!"

She stopped, faced him slowly. The Island detective took the Colt from his pocket, held it low at his side. He smiled coldly at her.

"I saw you ten days ago—a Sunday, at a cock fight. You were not alone. The face of the one you were with interested me. I thought I had seen it before. I remembered that face—and a half hour ago I saw it again. Photographs of it have been sent around the world. You were with Pedro Savon—a very clever forger, thief and murderer—"

The maid screamed shrilly, loudly—the one word: "Pedro!"

There was the crash of a gun from the corridor door, and as Jo's body swung to one side something crackled on a far wall. A figure came into the room, swaying from side to side. Jo Gar dropped to his knees, saw the Siamese cat streak across the floor. Savon's gun crashed again. The cat screamed and seemed to leap from the floor. Jo Gar squeezed the trigger slowly—his Colt crashed.

Pedro Savon fell forward, struck the floor heavily. His gun spun from nerveless fingers. The maid cried out and ran towards the motionless body, but Sadi Ratan blocked her way, gun in his right hand.

Jo Gar stood up, went over to Savon. The man was unconscious—the bullet had clipped him over the right ear. It was not a deep wound. The maid was fighting to get to his side. Cummings said grimly:

"Is he dead, Gar?"

Jo shook his head. "A doctor can save him, but what is the use? He won't talk—we might just as well let him die here—"

The maid pulled herself free from Ratan's grip. She said bitterly:

"No—don't let him die—this way! I'll—talk!"

The Island detective said: "Good—fast, please."

She spoke hoarsely, in a strained voice. Her eyes were on the man on the floor.

"Pedro went to Phelps, the valet. They drank together. Phelps hated Brail because he would not give him money to back him in the business. The business he wanted to start, in London. Pedro knew Brail carried a large sum of money and jewels. He offered to share with the valet. I met Pedro here in the Islands—I love him. We wanted to get away from here, and Pedro swore no one would be hurt.

"And then—Phelps lost his nerve. He said he would not rob Brail. He threatened to go to the police. Pedro said we must work fast—I let the Siamese cat out, hid it in my quarters. Pedro wanted Phelps out of the way, and knew that Brail would make him hunt for the cat. We were searching Brail's luggage when he surprised us. He tried to fight, and I held his hands —while Pedro struck him—with the knife. The scratches—he got them—then—"

Her voice sank to a whisper. Jo Gar said quietly:

"And then—"

She said: "Pedro answered your telephone call. We got away—I had to work very quickly, washing my hands. I had brought the cat in when we came to search the rooms. We were going to leave quickly, on one of the big boats. The cat was excited, at first. But it grew calm before I let you in. Then I ran out, screaming. I couldn't stand the sight of the body. And I didn't know until hours later—that Pedro had murdered the valet. He was afraid he would go to the police. We had not taken anything, but Pedro knew Phelps would tell of the plans—"

She paused, and Jo Gar said: "Pedro forged the note?"

She nodded. "He knew about the will—and the clause in it. He said the police would find the will, and believe. Phelps had told Pedro many things, but he lost his nerve—"

Jo said: "Let her go, Lieutenant—"

Sadi Ratan stepped to one side, and the maid dropped on her knees beside Savon. Cummings said:

"The cat's dead—one of this Pedro's bullets got it."

Jo Gar looked at Sadi Ratan with narrowed eyes. He smiled a little. Hernandez muttered:

"This *is*—a piece for the paper!"

The police lieutenant frowned. Jo Gar said slowly:

"It does not matter—but I was sure the Siamese would not have been so calm, if the murder had been committed as I was on my way up. Or unless it had been in the room—even longer than she says it was. But I was not far wrong."

Cummings grunted. "I'll call a doctor," he said. "*I* would say you were just about right, Señor Gar."

Sadi Ratan breathed softly: "The note—the gun beside Phelps' body—the clause in the will—"

Jo Gar sighed. "You were so willing to be convinced, Lieutenant," he said very quietly. "So willing that you could not, naturally, become interested in such an amusing creature as—a Siamese cat."

The

A client asks RACE WILLIAMS for protection—of the two-gun kind

By

PART I

THERE were two things that sent me to Baltimore. Curiosity and money. I knew nothing about the case. A lad giving the name of Hulbert Clovelly had paid for a long-distance call, asked me to leave immediately for Baltimore and go straight to the Carleton Hotel and wait for his ring. When he backed up that request with a wire for five hundred dollars I believed that he meant it—and went.

The Carleton Hotel proved a good shack. I scribbled the name *Race Williams* smack across the register, picked me a good room and bath, did a wash and ate a dinner which would set my client back $4.85 when he got the expense account. I'm not on a diet, you understand. Then I went to my room and waited.

Almost on the minute of twelve my phone rang. It was not the same voice that called me on the long distance. At least, I didn't think it was. The calmness had gone out of it; a fear had crept in. It was a wavering, shaky voice, with a gulp to it.

"Mr. Williams—Race Williams—the private detective?" The voice had a squeak at the end of it which nearly took my ear off.

"That's right," I cheered him up. "You are—?" and I waited.

"Hulbert Clovelly. Things have taken a bad turn. I need you." And he went on to tell me of the money he had sent me.

"Yes, yes—I know all that," I cut in on him. "What do you want? If it is imperative—important—you better lay a finger on it right off the bat." And when he started to argue: "No, you don't have to explain. If it isn't legitimate, you'll be the sorry one." And I put a bit of a threat in that, for contrary to the general opinion of so-called private detectives, I never work a crooked racket. There were lads who'd gladly pay five hundred berries, or even more to trap me to my death. And fair is fair. Any time a lad puts up that much money to trap me, he is entitled to

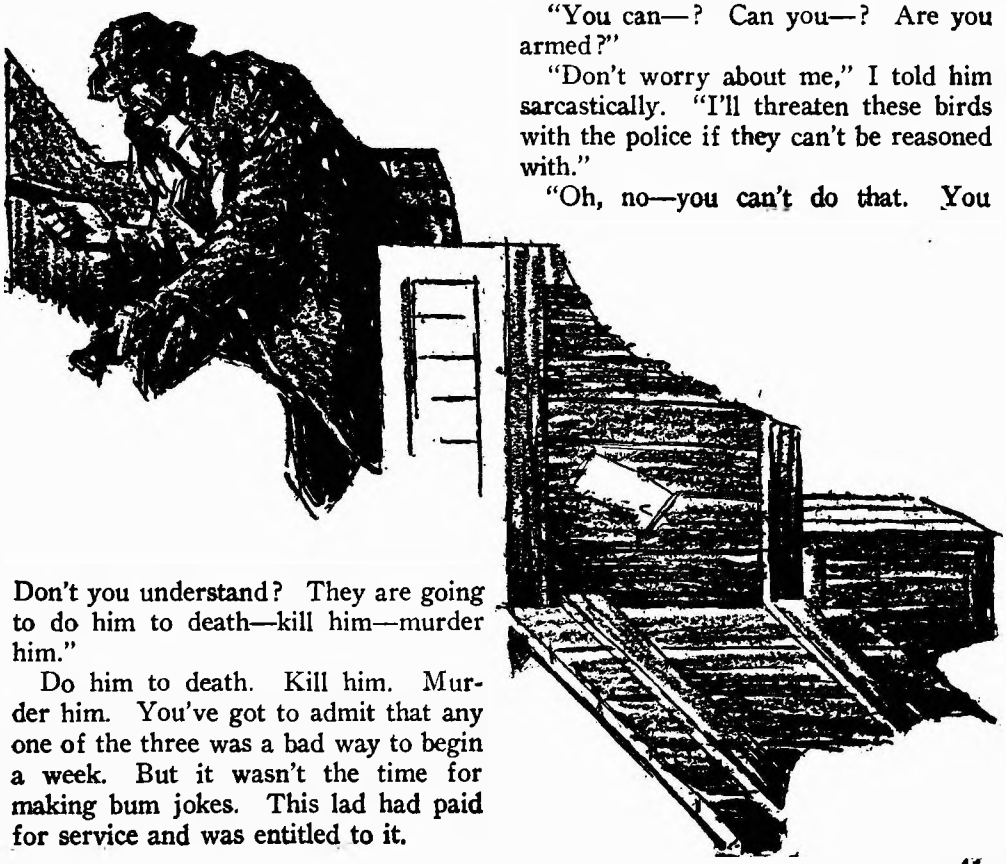
Amateur Murderer

CARROLL JOHN DALY

a bit of a run for his money. And I'm the boy to give him that run.

"Now," I finished, "tell me what's on your chest; if you need me right away, or—"

"Need you! Right away!" He damn' near split my ear drum. "The—he has taken refuge in a warehouse. They are hunting him out now, to—to—to—



Don't you understand? They are going to do him to death—kill him—murder him."

Do him to death. Kill him. Murder him. You've got to admit that any one of the three was a bad way to begin a week. But it wasn't the time for making bum jokes. This lad had paid for service and was entitled to it.

"Who is he—and where is he?" I snapped into business.

"I don't know if it's too late. He's my friend. I—"

"Come! Where are you? Out with it, man," I demanded. He seemed like a loose thinker.

And he told me. He was in a cheap restaurant on the other side of town. Close to the warehouse, he said. Then he wanted to give me directions. But once I got the name of the street I knew I'd find it. While he wanted to chew the fat I gave him orders to stay put, and I'd be down.

"You can—? Can you—? Are you armed?"

"Don't worry about me," I told him sarcastically. "I'll threaten these birds with the police if they can't be reasoned with."

"Oh, no—you can't do that. You

really can't. That's why—why you're in it. Because the police can't—must not be called."

"All right then. I'll shoot them to death for you." And with that bit of pleasantry I hung up the receiver, grabbed my hat, shoved a gun into a hip pocket, shoved the other rod a bit tighter in its shoulder-holster and sought the elevator. This case looked like it was going to start with action. And I like action.

I didn't take a taxi directly from the hotel door, nor did I drive smack to the little restaurant. I let the driver help me out on my street directions, spotted the restaurant as we drove by it, climbed out a block and a half away and around the corner, and letting the taxi go I hoofed it back.

The lad was watching for me in the doorway of a beanery. Anyway, a man stepped out; walked uncertainly towards me; hesitated when I didn't give him a tumble, and when he started by me I grabbed his arm—and spoke.

"You sent me some money. How much? When and where—and what name did you use?"

After gulping a moment he gave the answers like the back of an arithmetic book, and we got down to business. He was a lean man, without age. His eyes set far back in his head. His cheeks were sunken and pallid. His lips, a dry colorless thickness. And he had a way of doing tricks with his fingers when he spoke. But he got his line over clear enough.

"My friend—McNab. He telephoned you, to New York. My health is not good. He's handling things, and—"

"Yes, yes—all that can come later. Where is he?"

"The warehouse—down the block—around the corner. They followed us. I got away. They wanted me, I think. McNab ran into the warehouse." He walked me to the corner and pointed. "That building down there. No, don't go any farther now. One man is by the entrance; by the little side door. I saw him from the alley I hid in. There's something black in his hand—short, snub-nosed. Something—"

"From your description one might suspect it was a gun." But such light humor was lost on him. "All right." I steadied him as he started to lean against me. "I'll get this McNab out of there."

"And me—you don't want me?"

"No," I said, and meant it. "I don't want you." And since he needed a bit of stirring up, I added: "You can stay alive and tell the authorities where to ship the body."

Not a pleasant thought? Maybe not. If there was a lad on the door, with a gun, these boys meant business. That didn't bother me any. If lads didn't occasionally wait around for others, with guns, I couldn't make such a good living using mine.

Just before I left him Clovelly clutched me by the sleeve.

"No—no violence, please. Just stamp around—make a noise. Frighten them off."

I looked at this pale, bent bird. Certainly he needed someone to take care of him.

"I'll just—"

I stopped. We both raised our heads and drew back in the little alley at the end of the warehouse. Somewhere above us—distant, indistinct, and dying almost before I was sure I had heard it, had come a shriek—a piercing shriek of terror. Someone had cried out. Quick, sharp notes of fear had come from that musty warehouse.

"I'll be in the restaurant over—" Clovelly started. But I was gone, slipping close to the warehouse; hurrying down to that little door just by the corner, where the man who watched was supposed to be.

And I saw him. Dimly, his figure there in the darkness as I passed. Just a shadow that moved irresolutely towards the street, stopped uncertainly. And I turned quickly, pushed my shoulder close against the building, edged

back to the doorway and waited beside it. My jacket collar was turned up high, my slouch hat pulled well down over my forehead.

He did the expected. Out came his head—cautiously, furtively, around the corner of that entrance. It was so easy, it was to laugh. I didn't have to do a thing; didn't have to move. I didn't even stick my gun in his face. He saved me the trouble. He just popped his head out of that doorway and smacked his face flat against my rod that was waiting.

"Easy does it, Buddy." I shot the words through the side of my mouth as I saw his right hand half struggling in his jacket pocket. "You pull out that rod, and—plop—right like that comes a shovelful of dirt."

Silly talk, that? Sure. But then, this was silly business. As a gunman, this lad was a flop. I pushed his head back in the doorway with my gun, and where his head went his body had to follow—and that was well back in the darkness.

He had more guts than I gave him credit for. He made a quick, sudden movement of that right hand in his pocket. But that was a stall. I knew it the moment he ducked his head and his left hand flashed up with the knife. Maybe he saved his life by that lowering of his head. Maybe I saved it for him, for as a rule I don't like shooting lads unless I'm more or less acquainted with them. Not from the book of etiquette, that. Let's call it native caution.

Since his head was just below my gun and since my left hand held the wrist that was half out of his jacket pocket while my right arm had warded off the downward thrust of the knife, I just did the easiest thing. My right hand went up and down quickly, forcibly. There was a dull thud as steel hit bone—real bone at that, and the would-be knife sticker folded up and lay down in the little hallway.

I took the gun, of course. Partly because he might come to before I was finished with my business, and partly because I thought firearms were dangerous for him to play with. Then I hopped his crumpled form, found the door open in the back of that hallway and was right in the center of ten thousand evil smells. Damp ones mostly. I won't say there were fish in that warehouse, but I will say that there had been fish in it in its time. And the memory of the fish still lingered.

2

T was while I was drawing my pocket flashlight that I bumped into the stairs. And those stairs were of the common household cellar variety. Plenty of space to slip your feet in between them and, so, smack your face on the rough, splintery wood before sliding back down. No guard rail on either side—but no creaks to them either, which I rather liked.

Cautiously, yet rapidly enough, my hand now feeling the steps above, I went up. And I reached the top. There was no doubt about that. My head struck solid wood, my hand shot up and felt the braces of iron—and I knew it was a trap door.

Rather tricky work starting that door open. But once it gave enough to assure me there was darkness above, it was easy going. After a few preliminary squeaks I knew I had nothing to worry about. There were answering groans of old planks; creaks and cracks that offset my own and made the hinges of that trap door sound like the whining of a baby.

Yep—creaks of old beams, that came from back in that warehouse. Groans of the boards, too, that sounded almost human—and they were human. Plainly, now, I made out the moan of a man; a muffled, distant, drawn out sort of sigh, as if lips were tightly compressed.

The trap was up and I spotted the

light. There—perhaps fifty feet to the back—a wavering, jumping light. And I saw the shadow of a partly open door. The light was shining from behind that open door.

I braced myself, crawled up the little ladder effect at the top of the stairs and stood on the floor above.

Voices from that room where the light had ceased to waver and had become steady. Mumbled, incoherent, yet threatening words, I thought. And again, clearly, the muffled groan.

One quick pencil of light from my flash across the floor almost to that door—then darkness, and I was on my way. I'm a good judge of distance. Ten steps forward, a little move to the right, and I passed the huge packing box that had stood for a moment in the light of my flash. Then straight forward, a slight trip over some sacking—which helped deaden the fall of my feet rather than accentuate them, and I was close to the little door and the tiny streamer of light.

I bent my head slightly and looked into that room. The glare of the light threw into bold relief a rusty iron support that stretched from the floor to the ceiling. Standing with his back against that pillar of iron was a man. He was a weazened little, weather-beaten fellow with broad shoulders, thick lips, bulgy eyes and a matted shock of sandy hair. His face! There were deep gashes across it—fresh gashes. For as I watched, the blood ran down and trickled over his hanging lower lip. And then I noticed why the man stood so stiff and straight. His hands were behind his back, his wrists bound to that iron upright.

Then he spoke, addressing his words to a figure hidden by the door frame from where I stood.

"If you go to murder, the bloke downstairs will tell. He'll know. You can't tell—he might be listening now."

"He didn't get a look at me." A metallic voice came out of the darkness. "He was picked to do this job, but he'll never know my voice, for he'll never hear it again. You asked me when we came up why I talk like I do. Now you know why. No one—"

The man in the light cut in.

"A'fore Gawd, Governor, I wouldn't blow on ya. And I didn't. I come, like you said, to have a little talk and tell ya you was safe in my hands."

"You came," this from the lad who sounded as if he were talking through the wrong end of a fish horn, "to blackmail me to the tune of twenty-five thousand dollars. You came because you thought there would be more from me than from the girl. Now—what did you tell her?"

I saw a white hand stretch out of the darkness and caught the sharp glitter of the knife it held as it pierced the circle of light.

Raising my gun, I waited. I could have shot that hand off, but the knife paused a safe distance from the bound man's throat.

"Wacco," said the voice behind the knife, again, "how much did you tell Rita? Oh, I know you told her about Carl Fisher, and Hulbert Clovelly—but what else?"

"Nothing else. I swear it. I never knew till she told me. I never had any idea you were Farron Bronson. *She* told me that. Don't! Not the knife again. I wouldn't squeak on a' old lag. Not Wacco, Governor. I— Not the knife again!" And the terrified little figure tried to draw back.

"Wacco," said the voice again, "I believe you. You need have no fear. You shan't feel the knife again. My secret, which I would not trust to any man, is safe with you. I know that."

"That's right, Governor." The little twisted, cut face raised now, the pop eyes flashed a bit and a tongue licked shrewdly at dry lips. "I'll go back to England, like I promised."

"You won't have to do that, Wacco. It isn't necessary. I can be assured of your silence without—"

The voice stopped. No white hand

stretched out of the darkness now. Just a moment of silence—then the sudden roar of a gun; an orange blue streak of flame, and the face that had been Wacco's was— But we won't go into the horrible. Wacco simply gave at the knees, hung limp from his bound wrists and slid to the floor.

The thing was so sudden—so unexpected and so brutal that it stunned even me. And I want to tell you, that's something. Not that it unnerved me. For I acted at once. Kicked the door further open and looked for the hidden figure. And I didn't see him. A door closed softly; just the swish of wind and the creak of hinges, and my own flash was out—sweeping the room that was empty. Empty of life, I mean.

Then I spotted the door and dashed to it. The man called Bronson was gone, and the door was locked behind him. That was my mistake—running to that door. I should have gone around the open space from the doorway I came in. But I could not have known that, and there's no use crying over spilt gin.

I didn't know who Wacco was, nor what part he played in the game. But I did know that Wacco was dead and I didn't want to be mixed up in the thing.

3

WHEN I started to leave I went down those old steps in a hurry, pausing at the door only long enough to observe that the lad I had knocked out had walked, or was carted away. Anyhow, he wasn't there.

I reached the dirty little restaurant and went in. It was deserted but for two men at a table in the rear. One of them was Hulbert Clovelly. Now, I can't be sure—and it may have been on my mind that he looked like a sleigh-rider—but it did seem to me that he jabbed something in his arm and pulled down his sleeve quickly as I entered. The other man at the table was not looking at him, but watching the door and me.

He was somewhere in his thirties; blond, clear blue eyes and a pleasant, honest face—if an honest face means anything today. He was drinking coffee and eating a piece of cake.

"Sit down," he said. "You're Mr. Williams and I'm Lu McNab, Mr. Clovelly's assistant and friend."

"Oh—" I said. "The lad who was chased into the warehouse."

"No." He smiled, but it was a rather serious smile. "Mr. Clovelly thought that, but I went down the side street. We saw someone Mr. Clovelly had cause to fear, and I believe he went into the warehouse. I hope nothing happened there."

"No—" I lit a butt easily, paused a moment and looked at Clovelly. Then I said: "Only—a man called Wacco was shot to death. Do you gentlemen want to know who—"

And Clovelly cut in.

"Wacco. Killed! I knew it. I—I should have prevented it, and—"

McNab leaned over and took him by the arm.

"We were here to prevent it, Hulbert," he said. "I think if you had told Mr. Williams the truth he might have gotten there in time. But you were late in telephoning him. You did nothing until you missed me. You—" And as Hulbert Clovelly suddenly buried his head in his hands: "There—it isn't necessary to question him, Mr. Williams. It was through my advice that he wired you," and looking up as the greasy proprietor came in: "Will you get a taxi, Mr. Williams? We can't talk here—and I don't like to leave Mr. Clovelly."

I don't like to be ordered about, but the request was a natural one. I got up and left them.

It was a punk section of town and I had trouble getting a cab. But I did get one finally.

My hysterical client had calmed down a bit. His face was a whitish yel-

low in the darkness, but his lips were set tightly and he was fairly steady as he climbed into the taxi. The husky assistant and friend, McNab, held his arm to steady him.

"The Park View," McNab told the driver, and we were off—Clovelly and I in the rear seat and McNab facing me, his back to the driver.

"Can you tell me," he said, "who killed this Wacco?"

"A man," I said, "called Farron Bronson."

McNab knitted his eyes. Hulbert Clovelly clutched at my arm and his whole body shuddered, but he said nothing.

"So—" said McNab, "it's that bad then." And suddenly: "How much would you want, Mr. Williams, to spend the night at the Park View Hotel under the name of another man?"

I had had that line before, and the answer was not as easy as the simple "yes" I had given then. Now I was cautious.

"It would depend," I said, "on the name of that man."

"Of course," McNab nodded, "it would not be entirely without danger. What do you mean 'it would depend on the name of the man'?"

"Simply if I were to pose as Al Capone I would want a heap of jack, a machine-gun or two, a steel vest—and even then, I don't know."

"I see." I think that he smiled. "The name, then, is Hulbert Clovelly. The price we offer is one thousand dollars over and above your expenses and the five hundred retainer we sent you. There may be something bigger in it for you later. Mr. Clovelly doesn't think that there will be an attempt on your life."

"Then why the offer?"

"To find out if there will be. To find out if certain people have tracked down Mr. Clovelly. We understand you accept money to face danger—real or imaginary. Does the price suit you?"

"Oh—the price is all right," I told him. "It seems tricky. Won't these people know Mr. Clovelly—am I to sit in the dark and wait?"

"On the contrary, you are to act as you would in any hotel room. These people, as you put it, have never seen Hulbert Clovelly. We have been at the Park View Hotel for a few days. I did the registering. Mr. Clovelly has spent his time in his room. When I telephoned you we had learned that a certain party was in town. But if it were to track Mr. Clovelly or the unfortunate Wacco we do not know. We have brought you here to find out. Mr. Clovelly's clothes are still in his room. I left word he would return to the hotel. You will simply ask for the key to room No. 746."

"And the police?" I was thinking the thing out.

"The police must be out of it. Entirely out of it. If Mr. Clovelly were in a position to use the police we would have sought that protection. Shall we say a thousand dollars, then, to spend a single night in a hotel room under the name of Hulbert Clovelly?" And quickly, as I rubbed my chin: "If there were anything criminal in the procedure we would hardly suggest that you take Mr. Clovelly's name. It wouldn't make sense."

"Crime never does make sense," I told him. I was thinking up some questions. Yet—perhaps the less I knew, the better. Certainly the thing was in my line. Unlawful to pose as another man? Hardly—and easy to work out of with the police. It wouldn't be the first time I took an assumed name.

"You'll do it?"

"And if my life is attempted, what do you gain?"

"Knowledge—as well as fear," he said. "Will you do it?"

'Yes—" I finally told him. It was late now—not much of a vigil to keep in a large hotel room. "Is there anything else you wish to tell me?"

"Not at the moment," he said. "Here are five hundred dollars." He shoved

a roll of bills into my hands without counting them. "And here is the Park View Hotel. I think we will leave you outside. You will find us in the morning at the Jefferson Hotel. Simply ask for Mr. McNab. I'll have the other five hundred ready for you."

"Scotch." I smiled. Somehow. Well, it's funny how a bank roll will make you coddle more or less to a lad.

I hesitated there, flat against the wall of the Park View Hotel, as the taxi pulled away. Then I looked at the entrance to the hotel again. A girl was coming down the steps. She was carrying a light bag and looking back up into the now dimly lighted lobby. For a minute, perhaps, she stood under the single lamp. What I could see of her face was good—and there was a tilt to her head. If she was making a decision, she didn't motion picture it. But finally she decided against going back into the hotel. At least, she came down the remaining steps with a determined air.

There were two taxis just to the left of the hotel; on the side away from me and nearer the corner. They were regulation hotel cabs. Either one would have suited the girl. She raised her hand towards the nearer cab. The chauffeur saw her, came to life, stepped on the starter—and the motor whirred. Then, as the girl crossed the sidewalk to the curb, two men suddenly came into the picture from the darkness. They came from either close to the hotel or around the corner, though I favored the idea that they came from the shadows against the building. Why did I favor that? I don't know, but at the moment that was my thought.

They weren't together. That is, apparently they weren't. For one sought the first cab and the other sought the second cab. The driver of that first cab must have fancied a man passenger rather than a woman, or maybe a bill went into his hand. Anyway, he gave up his idea of drawing up for the girl.

A car which had been further down the block broke into life. It was not a hotel cab. It was not a taxi—at least, not a regulation metered taxi. It was a big blue limousine.

The two taxis went speeding down the street. The thing was a cinch, from my point of view. The two men were simply there to take those cabs out of the way: nice and quiet-like, without fuss or trouble—or anything suspicious, to be looked back on later.

In a way, I think the girl was on—but she didn't have time to figure it out exactly. The big car had swung to the curb; the chauffeur had hopped quickly from behind the wheel instead of leaning back, and now stood with the door open, his right hand sort of helping the girl into the car.

Maybe she drew back and maybe she didn't. I couldn't be sure of that. But she did take one hasty look at the hotel lobby, and I caught her voice when she spoke to the chauffeur. Half in the car she was then.

"The railroad station," she said.

That was all. She was in the car, the door slammed closed, the chauffeur hopped quickly in behind the wheel and threw the car into gear.

Where was I? Why, I simply dog-trotted from the shadows to the curb, swung aboard the car, jerked open the door and was inside, closing the door behind me just as the car started.

4

THE chauffeur didn't see me burst into his car. Not that I cared much, except perhaps for a bit of pride that I do things well. As for hearing me! Well—maybe he heard the door close, or the noise of it closing. Maybe he didn't, for he kept the car in low gear, the engine making the devil of a racket. Later I knew the reason for that low gear and the racing engine. Yes—later. Three seconds later, to be exact.

"Don't be frightened," I started in before I was fairly into that car. Just started, mind you. Then I stopped dead —for two reasons. One was to curse as a foot kicked me in the shin. The other was the bit of a row going on in the far corner of the car. I saw it plainly in the quick flash of a street light, for although the front curtain between the driver and the rear was drawn, the side curtains were up.

Yep—four of my senses went into action at once. See—hear—feel—and smell. I heard the girl's stifled scream. I saw the hard cruel face of the man who held her tightly, and I smelt the soft odor of chloroform. The "feel" was entirely on my shin.

The man had seen me, too—for all the good it did him. At least, I think he saw me—for he had thrown the girl on the seat and half risen, crouched in the car, a hand in a jacket pocket, clutching something that he tugged from that jacket pocket—or almost from it. Then I let him have it. I crashed him a right, smack on the chin, that nearly put his head through the side of that car. I could hear his skull crash against the steel, and wondered if he'd be so proud of the fact that his car was one that wouldn't be damaged because of an all steel frame.

Then, since he wasn't in condition to help himself, I slipped the gun from his pocket, quickly broke it open, tossed it on the floor and put the cartridges in my pocket. Not that I thought he would be likely to use it again, but I carry two rods that I know—and I don't want to be cluttered up with any extra hardware; and being of a nervous type I don't like loaded revolvers hanging around—if they belong to others, I mean.

The driver was still raising hell with that engine, though not so bad. I eased the would-be kidnaper on to the floor, got a foot on his neck so I'd be tipped off if he wanted to get frisky again, and tossing the bottle of chloroform that was wrapped up in a heavy bit of cloth out of the window I gave my attention to the girl. The car had dropped into high now and had a gentle purr. I liked that. It showed the confidence the driver had in the lad in the back.

The girl was not "out"—far from it. I had to pull her back on the seat as she grabbed frantically at the handle of the door, as if to jump out.

"Easy does it, lady," I told her. "I don't know how much of the fracas you saw, but I'm—"

"I know—I know," she said, falling back in the seat. "But I did not know, till you spoke, if it were you or the other man. You are my friend?" And there was a puzzled sort of question in her voice.

"If not exactly a friend, not an enemy." I tried the jocular. "Anyway, a rescuer."

"But, the chauffeur?"

"We can turn him over to the first cop we see, and—"

"No—no." She clutched at my arm. "I don't want to do that. Must I? You're not an officer?"

She was trying to get a slant at me, but I pushed back in the darkness. Oh —I would have pushed forward and handed her a business card if things had been different. But, now, I was employed for the time being. I was supposed to be back in that hotel, posing as another man. This was simply an amateur job.

"No." I eased her mind. I don't like the cops mixed in with my affairs, either. "I was just passing and saw the play. I don't know where this fellow is taking us, but it certainly is not to the railroad station."

"You're very—"

And my hand went over her mouth. I knew then that I should have stuck a gun in that driver's back right after I laid out his pal. But I had expected the car to hit for the country. I didn't expect things to happen so quickly.

It was the sudden appearance of another car alongside of ours and the

squeak of brakes—the jerk forward in the seat as we came to a stop. The other car, heavily curtained, had stopped just a bit ahead of us and across the street. Only its curb lights were burning.

I half leaned forward to jerk up the curtain on the window behind the driver, and didn't. A single man had climbed from that other car. He looked up and down the street, jerked something black and snub-nosed into his right hand, and walked slowly and with great assurance towards us.

He nodded once to the driver, and I think the driver said "Okey." Then he reached the car, stood so a moment, as though he would peer over the window, thought better of it—and twisting the handle jerked the door open. And I saw his face.

Boy! All he needed to be the old-time villain that forecloses the mortgages was a mustache to twirl with his fingers. In every other way he was cast for heavy melodrama. But he was one of those boys who have a weakness. His was to talk before he looked, and his voice was deep and sinister.

"Come on out, girlie. You are going to keep your date. You know who you got a date with?" And with the heavy dirt that might have done justice to a great tragedian, he threw the big line of his act. "You have a date—a date, perhaps, with death. Or worse—a date with—*Bronson.*"

This lad had an expressive face. Things registered on it even in the dim light. He wasn't sure, of course, just what had happened, but he suddenly knew something had gone wrong. At heart he was a timid soul. And sometimes timid souls are more dangerous than stout-hearted ones. To this extent anyway. They get panicky quickly. He was close to that stage now. But his shaking hand that suddenly raised the gun was dangerous, in spite of the tremor in his voice.

"Joe—Joe—it's all right? She—"

"Oh—yeah?" was all I said as I tapped him. Maybe I should have gone in for light banter. I'm not bad at it. Something told me it wasn't the time for it. The man under my foot had started to twist.

So we'll let it go that I tapped him. Rather viciously, perhaps, as I chewed over the name *Bronson,* and thought of the dead man in the warehouse, with his head blown in. But I just brought the nose of my gun down across his forehead.

His eyes rolled up, his lips sort of dropped, and after resting his chin on the edge of the open tonneau door he flopped back into the street.

It was as I leaned forward to close that door that the shots came. Two quick ones, from across the street. Close to the parked car, but the blaze of the gun was not within my range of vision.

I acted quickly after that, put a couple of .44's into the parked car for general effect, then leaned downward, dragged that twisting, stuttering, dazed form at my feet more erect and hurled it into the street.

There were two more shots, as with a final lurch he joined his friend on the

pavement. Then the shots stopped. I thought I heard a little curse of satisfaction, as if the boy with the gun thought he had dumped me over. I jerked up the curtain, pulled down the front window and stuck my rod in the driver's back as he was rising to climb from behind that wheel.

"On your way, Bozo—and make it snappy," I told him.

He knew the feel of a gun all right, and knew the purpose of it—and was up on his underworld etiquette—that the man with the gun talks and the one without listens.

He was the well-trained chauffeur, too, and knew the impression to make on his new boss. He did sort of start with a jerk that nearly tore the open door from the car, but it swung back, and it was easy to grab the handle and slam it shut.

No more shots. Nothing but the roar of our engine, which performed better now—and I gave my instructions to the driver.

"Hit the main street—and hit it quick. And don't run down any policemen." And in way of encouragement: "If you're a good boy you'll get home for breakfast. If not," another jab of the gun, "you may get home for it but you won't eat it."

I shoved my coat collar up a bit now—jerked my hat down, too. The name *Bronson* had, in the words of the literati, interested me.

5

I TOOK a squint at the girl. She was tightened up in the corner, trying to hold in her sobs. It's the way of women, I guess. I stretched out a hand and patted her arm there in the blackness.

"That's all right, kid. It's over now, and the time to bawl is over, too. You were a regular guy when a regular guy was needed." No bull or flattery about that either. It was the truth. She might have raised particular hell and gone into hysterics at an important moment and so put a bullet into one of us.

"Come—come!" I squeezed her arm slightly as the car turned into the main thoroughfare. "It's time we were leaving our agreeable chauffeur. The cry's over—take a laugh."

She suddenly grabbed at my hand and clutched it tightly, placing it against her cheek. Her face was soft and wet. It was funny, too. I've met all kinds of women—good, bad—real good and damn' bad, and thoroughbreds, too. But I couldn't remember that little trick. I liked it and didn't like it. It's hard to explain. One thing was certain. She didn't belong in this sort of thing. She was young; she was class; she was—But—Hell! she was talking.

"Just a few minutes to get my train." She was looking out of the window, so she must have seen a clock somewhere. "You don't mind. The station!"

Somehow, I didn't like to lose the girl altogether. Besides, there was Bronson; and there was—well, there was my client.

"The station," I told the driver, and that was all. It was surprising how he had improved since working for me. He just nodded and turned in the right direction. I looked back at the girl.

"I haven't even really seen you," she said. "And I don't know who you are. You act as if it meant nothing to you. How did you happen to do it?"

"Impulse," I told her. "Forget it." And then: "You'll be seeing me again, I think."

"You believe that? Believe in fate?"

"Fate!" I laughed. "No—it's simply in the cards. We'll be brought together."

"Yes—" she said, "we will. I believe that, too. At least, I hope that." Then suddenly: "No, I don't. I don't. I've been born to be unhappy." And the car pulled up at the deserted railroad station.

The chauffeur sat straight and stiff. Both his hands were on the wheel. I could sit up straight in the seat and see

the whiteness of them. No, I wasn't holding my gun against his back any more. But I was covering him. And he knew it or guessed it—or he was just a cautious man.

"You think," the girl said, as she opened the car door and lifted her little bag from the floor, "that something will bring us together again. If not Fate, if that is not the name for it, then what name—"

"The name of Bronson," I told her simply, and watched her face.

She turned now in the open doorway and looked at me—or tried to look at me there in the darkness. Then she stepped to the street, sort of backing from me.

"Bronson—" she said. "Something tells me that you won't believe me, but I never heard that name before tonight."

"Easy does it, kid," I warned her, as I came to my feet. And for the first time I got a good slant at her. At first you might think there was that sharpness that you find in the faces of too many girls. Her features were sharp—yes, but a lad with a flair for beauty would picture it as a finely chiseled face, while you and I would simply say she was nice to look at. There was a directness to those brown eyes of hers too.

"You're not going to tell me—about yourself?" I said. "Who you are—why this happened?"

She seemed to think a minute.

"No—" she said, "I'm not. I'd like to but I won't." And very slowly and thoughtfully—and maybe, too, just a bit hopelessly: "I'd like to know who you are because—I like to dream. It won't ever come true, of course—but it might help, to think it would. That some day I could see you and thank you."

"Yeah?" She was talking like a book, and I didn't like it. I don't know why. The kid was getting under my skin, I guess. She talked romance, but it sounded as if she meant it.

Then, as I didn't say anything more, she gave me one long, searching look and beat it.

I swung quickly as the girl flashed through the doors of the station. And I wasn't any too soon either. All this had taken place in jig time—that is, the time I had my back to that driver—or rather, just my side to him.

He had the gun in his hand, a sneer on his face—and murder, I guess, in his heart.

But the gun was only in his hand, not yet raised above the door of the car, when I swung and crashed mine against his chest. I hadn't seen his gun until then, but I knew it was there just the same. And it stayed there—stayed beneath that door. He had only to raise it a bit, just a few inches, to fire into my arm, at least—for my elbow was on the flat surface of the open window and prevented his hand coming up.

It was a bad moment for him. There wasn't time to argue him out of firing. This guy was bad. He hadn't given me a lot of lip. He was one of those big, strong, silent men—and now he would be silent forever. My finger half closed upon the trigger. He dropped his gun and spoke.

"A flattie. A bull." His lips just formed the words, and my gun hammer slipped back again with a tiny click that made his face turn from a sickly white to a pasty yellow.

I heard the steps. The measured tread of heavy feet—easy feet. The next moment I was in the car and had slammed the door.

"Park View Hotel," I said simply.

He didn't speak as he threw the car into gear—and I gave him credit for being nervous when the car jumped forward, rather than think he was trying to give me a jolt. Anyway, he made it directly to my hotel; jerked to a stop before the door.

I climbed out on to the sidewalk.

"Get out!" I told him. "Make it snappy!"

I half looked at the hotel—at the street, deserted except for a few people

crossing down by the corner. Then I jerked the door open, and grabbing him by the collar dragged him into the street.

He stood there now, fully my size, a good ten pounds over my weight.

I just stood and faced him a moment, my face close to his. Then I lifted my gun and tucked it into its shoulder-holster. Mean eyes glinted; a coarse forehead drew into dirty ridges; his hands, at his sides, twitched spasmodically. He was looking me over.

He didn't have the guts to do it. We stood there man to man. He had just as much chance of drawing a gun as I had. At least, from his point of view he had. And he did it suddenly. Just what I might have expected from the kidnaper of a girl. He drew back his foot and kicked at my shins.

Just kicked at them, mind you—nothing more. I stepped back and let him have it as he swung his right arm wildly. A guy in my business has to know where to hit and when to hit. Anyway, I landed square on his beak. Did I break it? I'm not a doctor and I didn't stop to examine it. He just crashed back against the fender, clutched at it, slipped on the curb and buried his face in the gutter. The bust in the beak was my idea. Sticking his face in the gutter was entirely his. But I was satisfied.

Why did I do it? I don't know—or maybe I do know. It's psychology, I guess. I couldn't just shoot him to death before the hotel. I'm only human. The urge to sock him was there. It made me feel a whole lot better. And, stupid or not, I did it. I don't like kidnapers. And I'm a guy who shows my dislikes.

6

I

A CLOCK hammered out the hour of two as I entered the hotel and hit straight to the desk. Head bent slightly, I said to the night clerk:

"I've come back. Key, please. 746."

The clerk eyed me a moment, then reached back in the boxes, got himself a key and gave it to me. I turned, entered the elevator at the end of the hall and stirred up the sleeping boy.

The seventh floor hall was deserted. I slipped a gun from a hip to a jacket pocket and went to room 746. I shoved the key in the lock, spun the knob, pushed the door open slightly and held it so. There was a light in room 746. Hospitable? Certainly—if you looked on it from that point of view. But I didn't. I had been warned that my life might be sought.

I raised my right foot and sent the door crashing back. If there were a lad lurking behind the heavy wood, he would be surprised at the result. That is, be surprised a half hour or so later, when he came to.

The door crashed against the solid wall—with a bang that must have sat a few of the patrons bolt upright in bed. It also sent someone else bolt upright. That was the man who sat to the left of the window, in the easy rocker beneath the reading lamp. He sort of jolted erect, and let the paper he had been reading fall across his knees. But the lighted cigar still reposed between his lips, though the ashes dropped from the end and sported playfully across his vest.

Heavy rimmed glasses found plenty of room on his nose, and the thick black ribbon lost itself some place beneath his jacket.

"Really, you gave me quite a start." He spoke in a low, soft voice that was almost a whisper, as the wrinkles in his forehead stretched themselves up on to the baldness of his head beneath the light.

I looked at him coldly enough as I took in the room, but I stayed put not far from the bathroom door, which was open.

"I guess," I said slowly, "I'll give you another start. On your way! Or perhaps this isn't my room—the right room." The last was supposed to be heavy sarcasm. But it didn't register.

"You are in your room." He folded

up his paper, dropped it on the floor beside him, carefully brushed the ashes from his vest, and then he leaned forward and peered at me over the glasses. "That is, of course, if you are, as I presume, Mr. Clovelly—Mr. Hulbert Clovelly."

I stepped into the bathroom and out again. Then I walked about the room; jerked open the closet door, found it empty; half bent to look under the bed —then stepping to the open window, held the curtains aside and peered out.

The room was on a court. My visitor smoked serenely on as I tried to make sure there wasn't a fire-escape, or if there was, to make sure that no one was occupying it. He cut in on my stage business.

"Don't be so fussy. There's a red light at the end of the corridor; another down the hall, if you turn left. I assure you the hotel is amply protected against fire hazards. There is no fire-escape outside your window, and no man—"

And as I took my eyes off him for a moment and pushed back the curtain, peering into the darkness—I saw it, or at least I thought I saw it. A distant shadow across the court; a figure, perhaps, in a window; a long pointed cylinder. I jumped back and ducked low.

There was a distinct humming sound. I recognized it even as I ducked. The whir of a high powered air rifle.

I did feel the tiny jar to my hat, and I did hear the dull thud as the leaden pellet struck into the wall across the room. Then I stepped aside and pulled down the shade, and was facing my visitor in the chair.

He looked up at me and smiled, pointed a finger at my hat and said:

"There's a hole in it. Very close to the brim." Then he got to his feet and walked across the room, felt in his vest pocket, produced a pen knife, opened it with a quick jerk and proceeded to dig into the tiny hole in the wall.

"Rather powerful for an air gun," he said, as he lifted the bit of lead from the hole with two fingers. "But very effective, my dear Mr. Clovelly." And he kept looking at me over his glasses, his head cocked, his chin down on his chest. "It flattened quite a bit, you see. It had a soft nose, that would spread out and tear a rather ghastly hole in one's anatomy—and cause considerable damage, even later death. Death, while one had a chance to consider his past mistakes and—"

"Give me that bullet." I stepped forward and held out my left hand. My right was still stuck in my jacket pocket.

"Why—certainly." He held the little flat disk of metal up, so that the roughened, sharp edges showed—then dropped it daintily into my hand. "It is yours. It was meant for you."

I put it into my pocket and still looked at him. He certainly was very sure of himself.

"You wanted to have me killed. Why?"

"I!" And his eyebrows went up. "I thought you understood my attitude distinctly on that subject. Didn't Wacco give you my message? To avoid all misunderstanding, I am Sam Wentworth—Whispering Sam Wentworth." And after a pause: "You know why I'm here, of course."

"I can guess," I said, in a tone of deep meaning.

"Of course you can. We've never met, but it's not too late for us to become friends." He paused, turned in the center of the room. "I want to see you live for a long time. Indeed, so much so that I'm here to offer you one hundred thousand dollars for the diamond, Mr. Hulbert Clovelly—alias Carl Fisher."

"Yeah!" I showed an interest. It was real.

"Don't be foolish. Bronson is back with us now. He didn't think we'd find out who you were. Sometimes I think he always knew. He'll get the 'ice' and kill you. I tell you, he's changed from the old days. He's a killer. He'd double-cross me. He'd double-cross you. He offered me an extra split to put out Rita." And suddenly leaning forward;

"I know you sent it to the little girl down South. She won't have it on her, of course—but she'll talk, if properly persuaded. Come on, now. I'm in a position to swing the deal and take the short end of the purse."

"I'll think it over." The thing was all Greek to me. "Now—Get out!"

"Get out!" he cried—and the polished man of the world disappeared. "You'll think it over, eh? Well, you can't. The girl came up to see you tonight. And they got her. I arranged that. Bronson don't know about that racket yet. I hire everyone who works for him. Look here! You know Bronson. You know how far he'll go for information. I've kept the girl from him until I could see you. Now—he'll have her in half an hour."

"So you think you have the girl." I tried that one out.

"You don't believe it? It was I who sent for her, under your name. Oh, I figured it out that you'd sent the rock to her. And I have her now. You don't believe me? Listen!"

And he recounted to me the kidnaping of the girl I had saved. He told me of the two men he had planted, to take off the regular taxis. And he gloated over the girl's suffering, painting a picture of what Bronson would do to her if I didn't come through with the "diamond."

"So you got her, did you?" I said. "How do you know the deal went through?" And the thing in my face began to register in his mind.

"You wouldn't dare," he cried out. But just the same, he drew back from me. "You're a coward. You're only an amateur in this racket. You're yellow—you're a stool-pigeon. You're— Don't do that. By —— I'm armed."

And I raised my right hand and smacked it across his mouth, like to knock his teeth out. His hand half stole to his hip, and my other hand came up and swiped him another back handed stroke. Why? Don't ask me. I said I don't like kidnapers. And I liked that kid. And, damn it! I didn't like this lad.

His hand was close to his hip now. There was blood on his mouth. Tiny bubbles of saliva, too, smeared with red. I liked that. He fought to control his impulse to draw a gun.

"Don't! Don't!" He backed away. "You know, or have heard, of my reputation with a gun. Must I—"

"Why not—if you have the guts for it?"

"You're mad—mad," he cried. And I had him by the throat, forcing him to his knees.

"Listen." I guess I hissed the word like any ten, twenty and thirty stock company villain myself. "If anything happens to that girl—anything—through you or Bronson or anyone—you'll die. I'll kill you."

"You're mad." He choked out the words again as I tightened my fingers upon his neck. His bulging eyes looked into mine. What he read there didn't help him any. "My —— you're going to strangle me." And his fingers tore frantically at mine, upon his thick throat.

Was I? I guess not. I never lose my head that much. His tongue was out. His lips were a bluish black. His fingers were only twitching, helpless efforts. I didn't let him go altogether. There was abject terror in his face—his blackening face. I loosened my fingers a bit.

"If anything happens to me, the girl dies," he gasped.

"The girl left the city long ago, you goat," I told him. "She's safe now."

He didn't believe me at first. Then he did, and he tried a different line.

"Safe maybe. But for how long? I don't have to tell you. You know that Bronson never forgets—never forgives—never lets up on a double-crosser. It's you—and it's the girl now. We know she has the stuff. You didn't think your real name was known. Well—you know now. You'll have to go for the diamond. And the girl! Bronson will get her—

make her talk. One hundred thousand dollars—you'll be safe in London. I'll arrange everything. You can't get rid of it yourself."

He was getting back his confidence now. I didn't like that. Here was a chance to learn something—maybe, who the feared Bronson was. And I tightened my fingers suddenly into his throat—and loosened them at once.

Distinctly on the door came a knock—a rather loud knock, the first one. But the second was louder still. Imperative—commanding.

7

MY hands no sooner dropped from Sam Wentworth's throat than he was on his feet, staggered once, caught his balance, lurched across the room and sort of fell sidewise, gripping at the bathroom door. Then he closed that door softly and I was alone in the room as the knock came again. This time a voice also. Then the knob turned, a key grated in the lock and the knob turned again.

The door swung open and I took a smile. I might have known. This time there was to be a little light comedy, that helps out in every melodrama. The night clerk was there. He pranced right in—that is, for three quick steps. But he motioned to the man behind him to stay planted squarely in the doorway, where he could keep an eye on me. I looked the second lad over. Big, broad, and dumb. I labeled him for the night porter.

The clerk was trying to peer over my shoulder and into the room, then under my arm or around my side.

"Well—" I said. "Lost anything?"

"No, no—indeed not." He had dropped his mask for a moment and was almost human. Then he was the night clerk again. "Someone telephoned the office. Heard a noise here; angry voices too. I just thought—"

And the clerk was saved the bad taste of asking a guest a too personal question. The bathroom door opened suddenly. Collar straightened, coat pulled down, what hair there was—brushed back, and a sleek smooth smile to his lips, Whispering Sam Wentworth stepped out of that bathroom. He moved quickly and easily for a heavy man. Just glided out that door, lifted a hand almost over the night clerk's shoulders, plucked his hat, top coat and cane from the costumer with a single movement, and with a nod and a smile—in which there was no trace of excitement, said:

"Good evening, Mr. Hulbert Clovelly. Later, perhaps, we can discuss the matter. Your pardon, my man." His cane shot up, touched the night porter lightly but authoritatively on the side, and he was gone.

I turned to the clerk. "Do you want the room? Do you want a written apology for something or other, or do you just want someone to talk to the rest of the night?"

Apparently he wanted neither. Without a word he turned and left me.

That was all. I closed the door, slipped off some clothes, and snapping out the light climbed into bed. I thought of Clovelly and decided to collect my extra five hundred bucks and chuck the thing.

I thought of the girl and decided—But I don't know what the hell I did decide. I guess I just decided to sleep.

It must have been an hour later that I woke up. Something was scratching against my door. Then it stopped—and came again. It sounded like a lad working on the lock—carefully, cautiously. Maybe I was going to have a look at Bronson. Somehow, I was getting curious about this bird. He sure seemed to command a lot of respect in certain circles. But that he had killed a man was certain. Brutally, and without—

As I reached the door the scratch turned into a knock. Not loud, perhaps, but recognizable as a bid for me to an-

swer. I did. I'm a curious guy, and want to know all that's going on.

I braced a foot against the door, opened it a fraction of an inch and held it against the pressure from without.

"It's me—the girl." I hardly caught the voice. "You know. Let me in."

The girl. She had followed me then —grabbed another cab and— But she couldn't have. She must have thought she was visiting Clovelly. The station had been a fake. She— But I said:

"Wait a minute and I'll let you in."

"No— I can't stand here in the hall." And I think she added, "you fool." But her voice was too low to be sure—and besides, I didn't think she'd exactly pull that line on me. Anyway I heard her add distinctly: "Someone's coming."

I stepped back into the darkness. Partly felt my way and was partly guided by the light from the window.

I found my trousers and slipped into them as she closed the door tightly—locked it—and breathed heavily with relief.

I crossed to the window as I slipped on my jacket, found the shade and jerked it down just as the girl spoke.

"Where the hell is the light?" she said. Then she laughed.

Her voice was louder now; her tones harsher, harder. The light snapped on. I shouldn't have been surprised. I know, but it was a shock when I saw her. She was not the girl of the kidnaping.

She was not bad to look at. That is, in one way. Cold, hard beauty. Even keen shrewdness, if not exactly what you'd call intelligence, in her face. Her mouth, that had rosebud lips when she first looked at me, was too damn big for beauty when she opened it and laughed. And she did laugh—easy and naturally too. And then, suddenly: "Who the hell did you expect to come here?"

"Who are you?" I asked.

"Me?" She sort of puffed out her front and jerked up her head. "Didn't you guess? I'm Bronson's girl. Rita Haskins."

"Yeah?" And with a grin: "Bronson has a lot of friends."

"Somehow," she put hard green glims on me, "I didn't expect to find you this kind of a guy. Oh, I didn't care if you were a sniveling coward or not. You've got brains, kid—lots of them. And you had the guts to step out for yourself when the big chance came. Just one mistake. You didn't think Bronson would ever connect you up with the name of Hulbert Clovelly."

"Just what do you want now?" I asked.

"I don't know." She watched me. "You're different than I expected. But I don't know. Would you go as far as —as a killing?"

"You mean murder?" I put it to her straight.

"If you want to call it that." There was no horror in her face—in her voice.

"Who's to take the ride?" I asked her.

"Bronson. He's got to go. It's him or me," she said. "He'd never chuck me out and let me live. And he's through with me. Wacco will talk tonight. It was Wacco, of course, who told me you were Hulbert Clovelly."

"Bronson tried to kill me tonight," I said.

She looked puzzled at that.

"He must be pretty sure of getting the stone from her then. But that's all the more reason for putting him out. Will you do it? He'll kill you sure, if you don't strike first. Me too."

"And why your interest in me?"

"Because you can't get rid of the diamond—I can. I know a collector who'll take it with blood all over it. I want to handle the deal. And I want half the price, and I want Bronson dead. Look here! I'm going to set him up for you. You'll only have to stick a gun in his back and give him the works."

"I see," I told her. "I'll think it over. How much can you get for the rock?"

She chewed over her answer. In a

way, when I saw that shrewd, beautiful, evil face, I didn't exactly wonder that Bronson might have a natural desire to knock her over before dropping her out of his life. But I think she told the truth when she said:

"Two hundred grand. Two hundred thousand dollars, spot cash. Half yours and half mine. With Bronson dead, there's me. I think I could like you. And when I like a guy—I like him."

Her arms went around my neck, her body sort of slid to and fitted against mine. She knew her stuff, and I daresay she would have her moments.

One hand half held me to her. The other— I felt the leather of her handbag cold against my neck, just above the collar. Then the empty hand caressing me—my hair—my cheeks, her lips turning up towards mine—slightly parting; alluring, clear white teeth; overpowering perfume, if you can believe the advertisements.

Her face moved quickly; her cheek pressed against mine so that I didn't see her eyes. But I had seen them—seen them when her body clung close; when her full red mouth held a promise. And those eyes were not soft. They were green and cold—and, perhaps, held a sort of determination in them. And I did it.

My head snapped up, with force enough to knock her teeth out. My hand gripped her right wrist and twisted violently. There was a dull thud, and a tiny .25-caliber automatic lay on the floor.

The girl stood there, looking at me a minute. Those hard, cruel eyes were surprised now—slightly stunned too. She felt her mouth; pulled awkwardly at a loose tooth.

"Jeeze!" she said. "Jeeze! You might have knocked my teeth out."

"I ought to wring your neck," I told her, as I shook her—and got a few more teeth loose, maybe. "You tried to kill me." I let her go.

"No." She shook her head. "Only tried to scare some sense into you."

"Do you expect me to believe that?"

"No—" she flashed suddenly, "I don't. Yes, I'll kill you if you won't kill Bronson. It's my life or Bronson's life—or your life."

"So it's me or Bronson." I stroked my chin as I slipped her gun into my pocket. "Maybe I'll kill him for you."

"You're a real man." She shook me by the shoulder now. "I never expected to find you like this. You'll do it?"

"I'll give you my answer later," I told her. "Where can I meet you?" It wouldn't be bad to have a line on this dame.

"Don't bother about that. I'll meet you. I know where you'll be going; where you'll have to go. It will draw you like a magnet."

The door closed; the woman was gone. She had given me an earful, and no mistake. Of course, I tried to think it out. Jumbled thoughts that wouldn't be worth the trouble of putting them on paper.

This time I didn't even get to sleep. Feet came softly down the hall, a key grated in the lock, the knob turned and a body pushed against the door.

The door knob rattled and shook again as I started to put on some things. Then a loud, booming voice that seemed familiar—although I couldn't place it.

"Come on—open up! There's no use to try to hide it. I know she's in there."

"All right, brother," I called out, in a sleepy voice as I again got into some clothes. "Is there a fire, or—" And I was across to the door, but not opening it at once. This game was rather a rough one.

Now the night clerk was talking. There was elation in his voice and a sort of "I told you so."

"Women are not allowed in the rooms, Mr. Clovelly. You know that. We'll have to ask you for your room. If this gentleman will—"

Again my gun shot into my jacket pocket. Then I plugged on the light, stepped forward and flung open the

door. A giant of a man almost fell on me. Behind him was the night clerk. A little cockier this time.

The big man lurched half across the room, had a look-see in the bathroom, half turned towards me—and bellowed:

"Come on, young fellow—me lad. Where's the dame? We know—" And he faced me. His mouth hung open and the unlighted half of a cigar toppled over his lower lip and just hung there. But his amazement was no greater than mine. The world's master detective was on the job. Gregory Ford. Head of one of New York's biggest detective agencies. I knew him of course—had been on cases with him—and against him.

8

SOMETHING about him made me laugh; then I closed up my face, jerked a thumb towards the clerk and winked. Gregory Ford took the cue.

He turned to the clerk. "Outside! You must have been sleeping. There's no one in here—no woman. You want to be careful." Gregory Ford's stomach came out, masquerading as his chest, and his cigar shot straight up in his mouth. "This man might sue you, you know."

The clerk left, and Gregory and I were alone.

"Now—" said Gregory Ford, "what's the racket? For Rita must have come in here."

"No girl here," I told him. "What put that idea into your head?"

"I saw her," he told me. "But I couldn't go prancing down the hall after her. I lost her in the corridor. All right. I could make it unpleasant for you. You've got a strange moniker down on the register. Hulbert Clovelly. Why that?"

"It's as good as another," I told him. "You're a detective, or so listed and licensed. You don't go around advertising it—that is, all the time." But I did see that the name Hulbert Clovelly seemed to mean nothing to him.

"All right, all right." He threw himself into a chair. "Want to swap a few yarns?"

"I don't know." I sat on the end of the bed. "Talk if you want. If it's interesting I may talk back."

"Interested in hearing anything about the Mayfair diamond?" And he shoved his slouch hat back and regarded me a moment. "That got you, eh?"

"Of course," I said easily, "the Mayfair diamond would interest anybody, even if it hasn't brought the hard luck and the deaths that follow the Hope diamond over the years."

"No." Gregory Ford stroked his chins. "Not over the years, it don't. But it's brought enough deaths. Smack—like that." He snapped his fingers. "Didn't read about it, did you?"

"No, I didn't. But I'm very much interested." Which was the truth.

"Yeah—I believe that." Gregory Ford's eyes got narrow. "Want to hear more?"

"Sure."

Gregory Ford made a race track out of his mouth with the unlighted cigar, crossed his legs, looked at me out of the corner of his eyes, and got a load off his chest which was far more, interesting to me than he thought it was. For I believe he felt that he was just showing me his knowledge, and that I knew what he knew all along.

"Well," said Gregory, "as everyone knows, the Mayfair was owned by Charlie Remington, the English bachelor millionaire. Charlie went broke in the crash, but kept his head up so that his many creditors wouldn't hear about it and jump him. But he had to get money to patch things up and get it quick."

Gregory scratched a match, held it a moment without bringing it to his damp cigar, and threw it away. That was a trick of his.

"The Mayfair," he went on, "had been a hobby with him, although he kept it in the vault of a bank; but it was the least conspicuous of his properties he could sell.

"He made—or thought he had made—a secret deal. Four hundred thousand dollars was the price; and four men were in the deal—the purchaser, a big jeweler, the head of the insurance company, and Remington's lawyer, and all sworn to secrecy.

"But there was one unknown man who got on to the transaction, and the last man in the world who should have been in on it. You tell me his name and I'll go on with the story."

"His name," I told Gregory Ford, with great assurance, "was Farron Bronson."

And Gregory Ford was startled.

"Bronson!" He sort of straightened, and the ragged end of the cigar clapped against his huge nose, which explained, perhaps, why he kept it unlighted. "Bronson, eh? I don't like to think it but it may be so.

"Three years ago—yes. He was the greatest jewel thief in Europe; but, you see, no one knew Bronson more than as a name except one man, an old-timer called Colonel Stallings.

"Stallings built up an organization of high-class crooks for Bronson. They caught Stallings, but he wouldn't talk and he died in prison not long ago.

"They say Bronson tried one more robbery without Stallings that went blooey. He left his own fingerprints on a safe and committed his first murder—a girl. He went to pieces. Last heard of him was in the slums of Paris, broken, down and out. It don't seem reasonable that he could come back. Perhaps he has. Anyway, I have his fingerprints with me now." And Gregory tapped his breast pocket.

"But, to get back to the Mayfair—the messenger with the diamond left the bank, guarded by two picked men from Scotland Yard. Right in front of Hudson's Jewelry Shop, he was stopped by two men. He was shot to death without warning and one of the two men grabbed the bag. In the exchange of shots that followed, a Scotland Yard man was killed, as was one of the hold-up men. The other one, who grabbed the bag, was wounded so badly that he had to be helped to the scaffold when he was hanged—and there you are."

"But if the men were caught, what became of the Mayfair diamond?"

"There was a third man, who lay hidden outside that jewelry store—by the next building—beneath an iron grating in the sidewalk; an iron grating which was opened far enough for a man to receive the bag containing the diamond, and leave with it by the cellar below. The position of the rusty grating after the shooting; the broken lock on the rear door of the cellar in that adjoining building, are all we—or rather, the English police, have. But, at that, it was not much of a price to pay for such a prize. Two dead men, who won't have to share in the profits, and a famous diamond worth, as it stands in the open market, at least four hundred thousand dollars."

"Why tell me all this?"

"It's history. You can read it in any of the papers of a few months back. You're a detective—or people think you are—which serves the same purpose, though others may simply call you a gunman. You're in Baltimore under an assumed name. I'm in Baltimore under my own. And Rita Haskins, a known diamond smuggler, is in Baltimore—was, or is, in this hotel—and not so long ago was in this room with you."

"And if she was, where does she fit in? The robbery took place in London. Rita, as you say, may be a jewel thief—but there are hundreds of other jewel thieves in America, you know."

"Sure," he admitted. "Thousands, I daresay. But only one who stood on the end of the gangplank when the *Mauretania* sailed for America, within ten hours after the robbery."

"And she was searched when the ship docked in New York."

"No, she wasn't. Because, you see, she did not sail. Now, that's expensive—and don't often happen, you know. Yet it happened twice on the sailing of the *Mauretania* that day six months ago. One other passenger who booked his passage did not sail. Maybe that had something to do with Rita changing her mind also."

"And you found out the name of the other passenger who did not sail?"

"Certainly," said Gregory Ford. "He was the secretary to Charlie Remington. He was, I am fairly certain, the man who lay hidden beneath that grating and escaped through the cellar door with the broken lock. He was the man who decided to take it all for himself. Four hundred thousand dollars. Not bad work for an amateur."

"So you think Rita is in on this?" I asked.

Gregory Ford stroked one of his chins and tried to look clever. "And Rita is ready to make a deal with me. It's a question of price."

"And you tell me all this!"

"Sure. If Rita came to see you, she came for the same reason she came to see me. Just a question of the highest bidder. We might knock down on the price, Race. We might even work together. It ain't a one-man job. It takes brains as well as a gun."

"How about Charlie Remington pulling this deal himself?"

"He was home at the time, but he disappeared from London that night when the Scotland Yard men went to question him. He didn't have a hand in it. Once the proposed sale and the robbery became known he was ruined. Big shots in the city were on his notes for close to one million dollars. He got hold of fifty thousand dollars cash and disappeared. They haven't heard of him since."

Gregory stretched himself to his full height, yawned and grinned.

"How did the diamond get into America?" I asked. "Every well-known crook must have been watched."

"It is at a point like that where a *real* detective shows his stuff. Here's the way I dope it. This secretary who got the diamond through the grating, who double-crossed Bronson, Rita Haskins, or whoever was in on the deal, must have worked for Remington under an assumed name. When he got the diamond, he simply resumed his real name and sailed home under his own passport.

"Now, Rita Haskins knew this man's real name and she wants $25,000 to spill it to me. I don't know if it's worth it—if I could trust her. But, mark my words, Remington's secretary had that Mayfair diamond and Bronson was after it and after him."

"And what was this secretary's name?"

"Oh, hell—everybody knows that. He called himself Carl Fisher. What's the matter, Race?"

9

MAYBE there was something the matter. Maybe I did suspect it all along—maybe I didn't. My client, Hulbert Clovelly alias Carl Fisher, was the present holder of the Mayfair diamond. He was wanted in England for a bit of a necktie party, for the murder of the Scotland Yard man. He might even have shot him down from the grating. My client was— Oh, hell! that was what got me. Any way you looked at it, the girl I had saved was involved. But Gregory was talking.

"Well—I've unloaded a chestful to you. Now it's your turn. Who're you working for in this—the man who wanted to buy the rock? He'd do anything to get it."

"No. I'm working alone, I think."

"You think!" Gregory Ford sneered. "And a twenty-five thousand dollar reward offered by the insurance company

for the return of the Mayfair diamond. You think!"

"It's not a bad bit of change." I pretended indifference, but I certainly was interested.

"You're hot stuff in a back alley—with spitting lead, Race. A fool for courage and a remarkable aptitude for placing bullets between lads' eyes. But you're over your head now, Race. Rita Haskins will make a monkey out of you. This takes brains. You better come in with me. I'll take care of you on the reward, and I'll pay you well. You know more than you've told me. But don't forget I know more than I've told you too. Here's your chance for sure money. I want Carl Fisher."

"I'll let you know later." I yawned, and my eyes blinked. "I'm dead tired now."

And, strange as it may seem, Gregory got the idea and left.

The next morning I checked out fairly early. I didn't want to see Gregory Ford. Gregory would have an interest in me. Rita would have an interest in me. And as I thought that out I went down the steps—and saw Gregory Ford.

He was standing a bit down the street from the hotel and his back was to me. But I knew him. And I was sure of him because of the girl he held by either arm, shaking her—apparently pleasantly to the casual passerby—but, somehow, I thought differently.

The girl was Rita Haskins. She saw me. And as she saw me I spotted the roll of bills that she shoved into her handbag.

It gave her a shock all right as her face slipped around Gregory's left arm, and her eyes narrowed—grew suddenly wide—and her large mouth opened, the hole in her face distracting from her beauty. But her surprise was genuine. Maybe not surprise—maybe just amazement—and maybe a touch of fear. Anyway, she cried out.

"Look out!" She fairly shot the words at Gregory Ford. There was no doubt. I heard it and Gregory heard it, and anyone else passing, who had a mind to—or rather, an ear to—heard it. And then she said something else. I'm not sure what it was, but will give it as a guess on my part. She said, I think: "That's him now."

Anyway, Gregory Ford ducked a hand quickly under his armpit and swung around, still holding the girl with his left hand. His eyes met mine almost at once, shot to the left and right and behind me—then he half turned back to the girl, and did himself a bit of a curse.

The girl twisted suddenly, brought a hand sharply down on Gregory's funny bone—and was gone, moving quickly to the corner and around it.

Gregory hesitated about following her, I think. Saw the eyes of a curious few, who loitered and looked back over their shoulders, and decided to let her go. Which was just as well, considering her slender but muscular young body and Gregory's huge bulk. Gregory Ford was built for comfort, not speed. But he came up to me now, passed me, looked into the lobby, and as I started down the steps swung and caught me by the arm.

"Anyone pass you—anyone at all, Race?"

"Sure." The street was pretty well crowded. People were passing in and out of the hotel. I shrugged my shoulders. "She got some money out of you—didn't she, Gregory?" I asked him.

"Yeah." He tilted his hat on the side of his head as he looked the crowd over. "But I won't worry about that. She'll give me the real name of this Fisher or return the money—or I'll drag her in. It wouldn't be hard to hunt up something on a dame like that if a guy was of a curious turn of mind."

His hand fell upon my shoulder.

"There's a job open for you, Race, with me." He snapped out his watch. "Open until say—dinner time. You'll get me here at the hotel. After that—"

"Thanks," I said. "I'll think it over." And then to myself I thought, Why not? I'd be through with Hulbert

Clovelly within the next hour. I might make a better deal with Gregory. Business is business. So, as he left me, I said:

"I'll look you up by dinner time, or—"

"You'll work alone, eh?" His eyes got beady and studied me. "Where you going, now?" he added shrewdly.

"To see a man about a dog," I told him, and left him flat.

But over my shoulder and through the corners of my eyes I saw Gregory run a hand through his hair and nod his head slightly towards me. A man loitering in front of the hotel pulled down his hat, jerked his jacket by both lapels, screwed his face into that "honest citizen" look and moved his dogs in my direction. No. Gregory may not have looked the detective of fiction, but he acted like one. Operator 666 was on the job. "Follow that man," was his watchword—and the man was yours truly, Race Williams.

My shadow was a second edition of Gregory Ford. A bit smaller, not quite so heavy, more chunky, perhaps, than stocky, but the same extra assortment of chins. "Be nonchalant" was his motto as he slowed down with me and gazed into shop windows. I grinned to myself. It's easy to take private dicks off your tracks.

I just walked along until I spotted two taxis, one behind the other. The two drivers were talking. I gave them the hearty smile and the heavy hand—full of money. But the conversation first.

"You have the second cab," I said, when I found out which was which. "Well—I'll hop this first one, and a squatty guy will come up to you and ask you to follow me. There'll be a ten spot for driving him around the first corner and letting me go my way in the first cab. He's a private dick, hunting divorce evidence," and with a wink that I knew that sensuous mouth would understand— "He might get it. I'll give your buddy, here, the ten for you if you work it right."

"Okey, Boss." And we became partners in the little affair of the grand run-around for the imaginary wife.

So I hopped the first cab, drove off, and had the satisfaction of seeing the astute operator, 666, jump into that second cab, talk hurriedly to the driver and slam the door.

I knew my ten was good. I know how these operators work and just what they can run in on an expense account. Operator 666 might be good for a bunch of promises and a ten-cent cigar. Anyway, the cab behind turned the first corner and kept right on going. The ten had worked. Money well spent, and not so much of it—besides which, I got results before I parted with that sawbuck. It was good pay for the driver of that second cab—good money for a half-block ride.

I leaned over and slipped the ten into my own driver's hand.

"For your buddy," I said. "Now—the railroad station—and there'll be another ten in it for you to forget where you took me."

I smiled in satisfaction—then I frowned. I leaned forward and told my driver to take a right turn. The next block I ordered a left turn—and later another right. After that I was as sure as I could be, without a written affidavit, that another little shadow was on the job. The car that followed me this time was not a taxi. Maybe I'd get arrested for holding a parade without a license. This boy in the flashy gray sedan that tailed me must be one of the Bronson outfit, or maybe another Ford operator—which second thought I liked because it flattered my vanity.

But the station it was, and I let it go at that. It would be as good a place as another to lose a lad—better, no doubt.

The lad in the sedan had a good driver. I could see the figure in the rear lean forward and talk to him as we approached the station. And the driver did his stuff in and out of the traffic which closed up the gap between us considerably. It was nice driving. Disarming, under ordinary conditions

too. Just a man in a hurry to make a train. So it was that the car behind was smack on our heels, or on our rear wheels, as I left the taxi, paid the driver without glancing towards the car behind. I had a good slant at my shadow in the mirror of the taxi as he stepped from the car and slipped quickly to the protecting shadows of the wall.

Yep—I knew him. He was the boy who had tried to take a bit of a chunk out of my shoulder with the knife, there by the warehouse. But he didn't recognize me as the lad who had slapped him down with a gun muzzle. At least, I don't think he did. For there was nothing in his face that showed it. Anyway, that was my conclusion. Maybe I was wrong. I have been wrong before, you know. And what's more, I expect to be wrong again.

This lad was not an expert shadow, or he knew I was on—and didn't care. He stuck pretty close to me as I entered the station and went straight to the men's wash-room. It was a good hour. Not many were hunting up trains. I wanted to get rid of him, and I didn't intend to do it by jumping in and out of taxis at ten dollars a jump. Besides, I didn't like this bird. He came from the enemy's camp. He had tried to take a shot at me, had nearly dug a piece out of my shoulder—and he couldn't very well appeal to the police—and neither could I.

There was a bit of a thrill in walking down that station to the men's wash-room. My right hand was sunk in my coat pocket. Of course it would be foolish for the lad behind me to open fire there in the public station. But such things have been done, you know. Anyway, at the first shot I'd swing, draw and knock him over—that is, of course, if that first shot missed. That was where the thrill came in. And the longer the thrill, the more I began to dislike this second rate gunman who was following me. I have pride in my work. This lad should be disposed of quickly, cheaply. The finesse necessary for Gregory Ford's little shadowing act would be wasted on this bird. What he needed was a pop in the mouth. And life is funny that way. You generally get what's coming to you.

I made the wash-room, just a few feet ahead of my heel. The door swung closed behind me. I looked down the length of that room. One man had his head buried in a wash basin; the attendant was cleaning out another bowl down the line—and there was no one else about. I turned quickly as the door swung open and the boy friend came in.

One for the Book

By STEWART STIRLING

Johnny Hi Gear is an unbidden guest at a private pineapple party

THE Big man tilted the dull silk hat off a wind-tanned forehead, rested a foot on the brass rail and an elbow on the mahogany:

"How long you been running a carnival gyp, Joey?"

The white mustaches of the old Italian on the other side of the bar bristled, the musty skin flushed darkly and he turned frosty blue eyes in the direction indicated by the ebony cane which the other pointed at the far end of the speakeasy.

"Ha. *Datta* t'ing, you mean? It is nota mine. . . . I no lika you see it in my place." He glared at the aluminum-painted machine, with its slots and dial and hand-crank, as if it were a dangerous animal.

The man in evening dress fished a slice of orange from the bottom of his glass.

"They're rigged to clip seventy, eighty per cent for the house, aren't they? The suckers don't ask for a break, do they? What the hell?"

The speakeasy proprietor shrugged.

"I don't needa jack so bad. It's a stick-up racket, mister, around men who been drinking. You know what?"

The other chewed the orange, shook his head.

"Lasta week, two deesa bums muscle in here and dump datta junk on my bar. 'Run it and like it,' dey tella me. 'Cut

us for feefty a week and you taka de rest yourself.' "

The big man smiled.

"Baloney!"

"I tol' 'em where dey could stuffa de slot machine . . . and I kicked da collector out on his pants w'en he try gyp me for first week's rent," said the Italian.

"Watch your step, Joe." The big man climbed into his overcoat. "You don't want to be taking slugs, instead of the machine. Lot of these jack-pot babies are sniffers, you know."

Little Joe Massetti nodded.

"Yellow-bellies w'en dey're offa de stuff and mad dogs w'en dey have a card. . . . I know, Johnny."

"Well . . . be seeing you."

"Be good boy, Johnny."

The big man closed the inside door after him and let himself out through the iron-grilled door which led to the areaway. Before he could swing the gate behind him, two figures stepped close beside him from the shadowy gloom under the steps.

"Back up . . . back up," said one pleasantly.

Johnny hesitated. He could not see either of them clearly . . . could not be sure whether they carried guns.

"Whassa matt'r. Whass wrong?" he said thickly.

"Go on back, you mug." The other man's voice was a high, piping falsetto. "Reverse it." He put a hand against Johnny's chest, shoved hard.

Several things happened so fast as to be practically simultaneous: Johnny slipped, he swung a short uppercut, his hat skidded off into the slush, something hard jabbed painfully in his stomach and he recognized it for an automatic while he was saying "Hah," quite involuntarily.

He had dropped his cane: now he lifted his arms from his sides and showed gloved palms.

"No need of the broderick," he said, quietly. "And you won't find any heavy dough on me, either . . . but go ahead."

The pleasant voiced one swore savagely and swung a hard flat hand at his face.

"——! This ain't Massetti. This kluck's twice as big as Little Joe—"

He poked the gun lower and Johnny grunted at the hurt.

"Jeeze," squeaked the falsetto. "That's a honey, boss. Nearly give the works to the wrong beezark." He laughed, shrilly. "What we gonna do with him?"

The one with the gun kicked the silk hat to one side, picked up the cane and broke it over his knee.

"Ah, go on, you mug," he snarled at Johnny. "Beat it before I change my mind and plug you."

Johnny started up the three steps to the sidewalk when they pushed him. He sprawled flat in wet snow. Something hit him in the back of the head. . . . It was the broken cane.

He got to his feet, fighting mad, saw the two figures watching, caught the reflected gleam from the automatic; thought better of it.

He brushed his trousers and limped slowly down the street.

2

HIS face was scratched and bleeding, his shins ached, his groin pained fiercely. He was hatless, soaking wet and cold with rage.

But he walked far enough down the block to spot the black sedan with the open windows and softly purring motor. The driver he deduced from a glowing cigarette tip; he could not see his face. The license was sure to be a fake, but he noted the cracked head-lamp, the dented fender and new hub-cap.

That watchful driver meant that whatever was due to happen at Little Joe's would be over in a rush: if Johnny was going to step into that picture he had to do it in a hurry. He turned and limped back towards the speakeasy.

Behind him, gears meshed softly; tires slithered in the snow. The getaway man was going into action.

All Johnny needed was a minute; he

counted on uncertainty in the lookout's mind for sixty seconds. As he dived into the areaway, he picked up the broken cane. He shoved the piece with the crook on it, through the scrolled opening in the grille about a foot under the metal plate guarding the latch, held it hard against the knob inside, pressed and pushed upwards slightly and leaned on the gate. There was a click; the door swung open.

He got inside, closed the door as the sedan slid to a stop before Little Joe's place. The driver was on the running-board, as it pulled up.

Johnny paused at the inner door to work his gun free from his shoulder-holster; he put his ear to the wooden panel.

"*Dio Mio!* Notta dat. . . ." Little Joe's voice was hoarse with terror. "I'll pay . . . for da machine . . . don't maka me—" The words ended with an unpleasant gurgling sound.

Johnny went in, quietly.

The white-haired old Italian was bent grotesquely backwards over his own bar, his head resting on the brass plate used to drain beer sloppings. A waxy-skinned, pinch-featured thin man behind the mahogany held the white hair in one hand while with the other he attempted to force something that shone of copper between the speakeasy proprietor's clenched teeth.

A blocky, beefy-faced man with lustreless gray eyes and a cruel slit of a mouth stood before Little Joe and twisted his wrists savagely.

"Swallow 'em, punk," sneered the red-faced man, as Johnny got the door open. "Get 'em down. They're only .32's. Good f'r what ails you . . . cure guaranteed to last. Easier t' chew 'em than have 'em *pumped* into you. This way you last three, four days. Maybe that'll straighten up somea you gees that been high-hattin' us lately." He laughed as Waxy-Face stuck his thumbs into Massetti's jaws and forced them open.

"Up," snapped Johnny. "Way up. . . . quick!"

The man behind the bar let go Little Joe's hair, the Italian slumped to the floor in a faint and the beefy man whirled on his toes like a boxer.

"You?" He spat out a short, astonished sibilant and reached for his pocket.

Johnny put his right arm out low and straight.

"I'll let you have it," he warned.

A blunt-nosed automatic emerged from the stocky man's coat. . . .

Johnny fired at his belt buckle; the man raised his gun slowly.

"Well!" Johnny let go twice more, point blank. He could not miss that chunky chest at eight feet. The man spun half-way round, his mouth opened noiselessly but he got his automatic on a line with Johnny's heart.

Johnny swung to one side, there was a stab of light and something hit him in the shoulder like a sledgehammer blow. He tried to work the trigger again, heard his gun crash to the floor and realized that his right arm was useless.

The red-faced man took two steps forward and snarled:

"You hadda stick *your*——dam nose in. You asked for it, you—— —— so . . ." he took deliberate aim, "here it is."

Johnny ducked, let his knees buckle and rolled as he fell; powder grains stung the side of his face and the sound of the shot was deafening, but he felt no pain. His head crashed into the brass foot-rail, his shoulder lunged into the face of the bar and he wondered what delayed the finishing shot.

. . . . Then he heard the four quick notes of the Klaxon.

"Kippy," shrilled a voice from the other side of the bar. "That's Pete's signal . . . c'mon . . . let's scram."

Johnny lay very still: perhaps they would think he was dead.

"We can't leave no trail like this." The thick-set man swore obscenely. "Frisk that wise guy. . . . I'll go through Massetti."

The waxy-faced one kicked Johnny in the knee, flopped him over and took his wallet, cigarette case and a watch

that Johnny valued above price.

"Hop it up, Kippy," begged the thin man. "C'mon."

Little Joe had recovered, was on his knees, mumbling a prayer in Italian.

"Here you!" Johnny saw the man called Kippy take something like a big black egg from his overcoat and told it in front of the Italian's eyes. "Here's where you have one on th' house . . . pineapple flavor."

He pulled the pin and ran to the door; Waxy-Face was already outside.

"You won't crash no more parties, wise guy," snarled Kippy, looking at Johnny from the door. "You c'n go f'r that . . . that's one for the book."

He tossed the bomb at Johnny and vanished.

3

ALL Johnny could think of, during that split second, was that it was a hell of a way to cash in . . . with his head in a spittoon.

But his muscles flashed into action, even before the black egg which hatched death was out of Kippy's hand; twisting and rolling his body towards the protection of the battered iron safe at the end of the bar. He drew his legs under him, like a falling cat, covered his eyes with his good arm and ducked. . . .

. . . he was lifted and slammed against the big iron box; the air was a paralyzing burst of searing flame and he lost consciousness.

How long he was out, he never knew; when he first heard the ringing of the concussion in his ears and opened his eyes, he could see nothing and thought, momentarily, that he was blind. Then he smelt the acrid fumes of powder and alcohol — realized that the lights must have been shattered—got a match from his pocket shakily.

Clouds of plaster dust and a rain of splinters and shattered glass obscured the wreckage, but he saw something gruesome on the floor ten feet away—and winced as from a blow. He felt sick and weak, his eyes were blurry and his hands unsteady at lighting the matches . . . but there was no need of worrying about Little Joe Massetti any more.

He leaned limply against the crazily uprooted bar and rescued a bottle which had not been smashed . . . it had a Hennessey Three Star label . . . he cracked off the neck, and let hot fluid pour into his bruised mouth. He wiped his face, wet with perspiration—and shivered. Why he had not been blown to bits like the red, raw thing on the floor there . . . he did not know.

Presently his ears made out another sound than the high-pitched ringing which echoed and reechoed through his numbed brain — a confused noise of whistles blowing, people shouting, feet pounding on pavements.

Someone was hammering at the front door. In a minute or so the place would be seething with cops and plain-clothesmen . . but he couldn't wait to see them. He had an appointment with a red-faced man and a coke, and he had to be in shape to keep that date. He couldn't do it in Bellevue, or in the Tombs as a material witness. Even the fact that he was on the confidential list of the Commissioner as an under-cover man wouldn't help him in this jam.

He got some more of the Three Star down and shook his head to clear it. His right hand was wet; he looked down, it was covered with blood. Gritting his teeth he got the hand in his overcoat pocket, with the aid of his left. Then he picked up the gun . . . there were still three shots left . . . he remembered.

The noise at the front door had redoubled.

He picked his way over debris, across the horrible thing that had been Little Joe Massetti but five minutes ago, and found what he was looking for: the trap door to the barrel cellar. Every speake has one.

He lifted the iron ring, tugged and

got the trap open. He backed down the beer-soaked stairs just as the iron-grille crashed open and feet hurried along the corridor to the inner door. He dropped the trap above him.

The cellar was pitch-dark, slimy with grease and seepage, close and fetid. He got out a match, lit it and worked his way towards the front of the cellar. There would be a street-level opening somewhere . . . twice a week the furniture van would pull up and drop fifteen or twenty half barrels of Jersey beer down that opening, after paying the cop-tax of a dollar a barrel.

He located it by the time the emergency patrol and the ambulance pulled up in front of the speakeasy. They would search the cellar in a few minutes, of that he was sure. So he pushed the metal hatch open and looked out; there were a dozen people in the street and two internes getting a stretcher ready. He bit his lips as he thought of getting what was left of Little Joe on a stretcher.

There would be a bluecoat in the area and more on the way. He had to bluff it out now, if he was to make it good.

"Jeeze!" He shouted to one of the bystanders, a negro musician bound Harlemwards after his night-club duties. "What happened . . . hey?"

"Still blew up, boss." The black man hurried on, anxious to be the first to give information. "Wop runs a still—that's what they say, boss."

"Crying out loud," said Johnny. "Scared me so I fell off a pile of barrels. Here . . . gimme a hand; I've got a game wrist."

The negro reached down to the loading platform, heaved him flat on the sidewalk. Johnny got to his feet, dizzily.

"Lordy, boss . . . you look like you was inside that still. The wop's croaked . . . they gone in for him."

"I'm kayo. Just scratched up a little. I gotta report this . . . I'm supposed to be watchman . . ."

Johnny thought the explanation was pretty cockeyed, but he couldn't dope out anything better . . . and he started down the street. Curious eyes followed him—suspicious whispers followed him . . . but none of them belonged to uniforms, so Johnny sauntered on casually.

He turned up his coat collar to hide the dirt and blood on his collar and shirt.

Fifty feet from the Avenue he looked back at the gathering crowd—and saw a black sedan creeping slowly along behind him, close to the curb. It had a cracked head-lamp and a dented fender.

He broke into a run, pulling out his gun. At the corner is a church; the car caught up to him as he dodged into the blackness of the chapel door. Orange blades of light knifed through the sedan's windows. . . . Stone chipped from the portals and lead rang against bronze doors.

Johnny steadied himself, fired three times from a crouch as the car passed. The black car swerved suddenly, hurdled the opposite curb and smashed head on into an iron railing; finally flopping on its side.

4

TWO men got out of the rear of the car and ran around the corner; one was a short stocky figure, the other thin and taller. The driver of the car did not move; looked as if he were asleep at the wheel. Traffic whistles shrilled; down the block behind him a motorcycle stuttered into rapid-fire.

Johnny tried the church door. It was unlocked. He wandered through the high-vaulted chapel, sat in one of the pews for a minute to pull his shaken nerves together.

Voices came to him from the dim, quiet vault above him . . . then he realized, with a start, that those voices were real. Here, in the church, close to him. He dropped on his knees and crouched low.

". . . all covered . . . if we can smoke this high-hat baby . . . what's his name?"

It was Kippy. Johnny began crawling on one hand and a knee, but he kept

his gun in the hand on which he rested his weight and went softly.

"John Hiram Gear . . . Hotel Metropole . . . what a break . . ." said the other, shrill voice. Johnny cursed through his teeth; they had taken his wallet—he had forgotten that. In his wallet were cards, papers and . . . a sweet roll of the ready. Well, he had to get them before they got him . . . and he had been planning to do just that, for Little Joe's sake, as well as his own. . . .

He reached the door of the anteroom, through which one might have access to the great hall of the church . . . and the Avenue. The voices had ceased. He got his head around the corner of the door, his gun lifted.

The place was but faintly lighted, but he could see that it was empty. He got to his feet in time to hear the sound of a gently closing door. He walked unsteadily through the minister's room, down the long, carpeted aisle past the high pulpit, to the high, paneled doors.

By the time he reached the Avenue, there was only a cruising yellow to be seen . . . and a knot of curious men being shoved back from the ruin of the black sedan.

Johnny hailed the taxi.

"Metropole . . . in a rush, buddy," he said.

"My ——! fella!" The driver turned around in his seat. "You been *hurt*. Better let me take you to a hospital."

"I said . . . the Metropole. And snap it up. If I wanted to go to a hospital I'd—"

There was a backfire noise and the side window of the cab made a queer tinkling sound: a thousand little cracks radiated from the round hole a foot from Johnny's head.

"Now . . . will you step on it?" Johnny swore harshly . . . the driver galvanized into activity, jerked his clutch in and the car leaped forward.

"Listen . . . you," he said in a scared voice, as he wheeled the machine around a corner by inches. I gotta damn' good mind to take you around to Forty-seventh Street. By jeeze . . . I think that's where you belong . . . you look as if you'd mixed up in something . . ."

Johnny worked his gun free once more, kept it where the jockey wouldn't see it and chuckled:

"Don't be a sap. If there was anything wrong with me, would I be asking you to take me to the Metropole? I live there . . . you can check me up with the doorman. And if you get me there fast, so's the house doc can fix these scratches of mine . . ." he gritted his teeth as his arm jolted against the rocking side of the taxi . . . "there's a ten-spot in it, for you." There was something less negotiable in it, if he refused, Johnny thought, grimly.

"Say, get me right . . . I'm no yellow-belly," said the driver. "But I don't hire out to be shot at . . . and somebody's got to pay for that glass."

Johnny grunted. They were pulling up before the hotel now.

"Coupla stick-up gees, that was. They tried to put the stopper on me once before, tonight . . . that's all there is to it." Johnny tried to make his voice convincing.

"Oh, yeah?" The driver was skeptical. "And don't forgetsis. . . . I gotta make a report on this . . . you better be on the up-an'-up, or they'll be puttin' the finger on you." He stopped the car with a jerk.

The doorman was there. Johnny got out of the car, painfully.

"What's my name, Timmy?" He grinned at the big, jovial, uniformed Irishman.

"Ye don't even know th' name of yourself, is it? "The doorman came closer. "And have ye been hittin' th' high spots, th' night, Mister Gear?"

"Hell," said the driver. "I thought I'd seen your pan before . . . you're Johnny Hi Gear, the big dice an' card boy, uh?"

Johnny said: "Lend me a ten-spot, Timmy."

Timmy looked wonderingly at the

bruised face, the shattered window and the coat-sleeve stuck in the right-hand pocket.

"Sure . . . sure," he hastened. "You better git inside, Mister Gear. . . . I'll take care of the taxi."

"Give him a tenner," said Johnny from the revolving doors. "And much obliged."

He got up to his room, with no more attention than the surprised glances of early morning scrub-women cleaning the lobby, the proffered assistance of a bell-hop and the unexpressed curiosity of the elevator-boy.

When he got to his room, he locked the door, got out a cigarette and sat on the bed beside the phone.

"Let me talk to Doc Benter," he said to the sleepy phone operator. "Hello, Doc . . . this is Johnny Gear. C'mon over. And bring your kit of tools. . . . Oh, I had an argument with a telephone pole," he finished with a chuckle. He eased himself down to wait.

Three minutes later there was a knock on the door.

He opened it.

"Positively my last appearance," said Kippy. "Get back . . . go on."

5

THE cigarette was between Johnny's lips. He took a drag on it, blew the smoke in Kippy's face and walked slowly backward. The other followed closely; shut the door and locked it.

"We was expectin' you to buzz th' house-doc," he said in a flat, brittle tone. "So little Egghead is sittin' on Benter's belly, right now." He backed Johnny into the armchair before the little writing table, put a hand against his chest and shoved him to a sitting position. "Anyhow, you ain't gonna need no doc."

Johnny said: "Hell you say."

Kippy reached over his shoulder, got the desk drawer open and pulled out paper and pen.

"You're gonna go bye-bye, sucker. But I'll deal you a break . . . you can pick y'r exit."

"That's nice." Johnny thought he knew what the letter-paper meant.

"Yeah. If you act wise, you can take a punch on the chin and let the bulls pick you up f'r the Massetti kill. Just write a little note right now telling 'em how you happened to bump him off with one 'f these Dago footballs . . . make it plenty strong, too. Then . . ."

Johnny grinned.

"—Then you put a rod in my chest and let go—that it?"

Kippy lifted gross eyebrows in mock amazement.

"Don't be like that. Why should I trig you when you're a swell out f'r me an' Egghead? Huh? Be your age."

Johnny tapped the pen with his left hand.

"No sale. I can't use my right mitt, at all."

Kippy kicked viciously; his heavy boot caught Johnny in the ankle and he cried out, involuntarily.

"Use your left," snarled the beefy-faced man. "Or I don't give a damn what you use. But write that note, now . . . or take a drag on this . . ." he snatched the cigarette out of Johnny's mouth and jammed his automatic savagely against Johnny's teeth.

Johnny rolled with the blow, closed his eyes, said "nnnh-h-h" dully and fell over on the floor. Kippy gave him the boot in the ribs, but Johnny didn't stir.

Kippy swore in disgust.

"Out like a light . . . well, baby, I'll bring you back to life." He went into the bathroom and ran the water. Then he came back, got an arm under Johnny's head and poured ice-water down his neck.

Johnny sat up, dizzily.

Kippy was squatting near him, a glass in his left hand, the gun in his right. The little, pale eyes were sneering.

"Come out of it, delicate. You gotta

letter t' write. Don't forget it."

Johnny saw something on the carpet, it glittered faintly in the darkness of the rich maroon velvet.

"Yeah." He spoke thickly. "Sure." He leaned forward, got his left hand over the object and added: "You'll have to lift me."

Kippy said: "Get up yourself, you ——! And get up *now.*"

Johnny lurched to his feet, swung a little and tossed something out of the open window.

Kippy lifted the automatic menacingly.

"What the hell . . . what'd you chuck outa that window? What was it?" He took a step forward, his head lowered, his eyes glittering.

Johnny sat down, reached for the pack of cigarettes on the desk.

"Mind if I smoke?" He spoke very politely.

Kippy showed uneven, gold-capped teeth.

"What — was — that—you—threw?" he said, spacing his words carefully.

Johnny flipped open his lighter.

"My life insurance," he said, easily. "The key to this room." Kippy's finger tightened on the trigger and Johnny tried to keep his voice calm and steady. "You won't want to be found in here with a hundred and eighty pounds of first-degree evidence, will you, Kippy?"

The stubby finger relaxed its pressure on the trigger, the gun dropped muzzle-down and the stocky man backed towards the other side of the room. Then he whirled quickly and tried the door; he had locked it himself . . . and now there was no way to get out.

"All right . . . all right," he said. "Don't think that'll keep you from takin' the full dose, Mister Johnny Hi Gear. . . . I been in tighter spots than this, an' I'm still pickin' 'em up an' layin' 'em down."

He reversed the gun, walked deliberately to Johnny's chair and clubbed him twice, where the bullet had hit his right shoulder.

Johnny thought he was going to pass out of the picture for good, but he managed to keep a grip on his reeling senses. Kippy smashed the Colt against the side of Johnny's face as a final caress, went to the phone and called: "Doc Benter, please."

"Hello . . . Egghead? Listen close, kid. Johnny's done a fadeaway . . . and I want doc to come right up . . . but Johnny locked th' door before he fainted. Get th' extra key from the desk and jump right up. . . . Right?"

He hung up.

"You got just as long as it takes Egghead to beat it up here, to get ready for the big dive, mug. I had just enough of y'r —— dam' . . ."

He looked in astonishment at the bed, across the room—a lazy coil of thick, white smoke was curling from the floor like mist.

Johnny spoke from the floor, where he had dived when his lighter had ignited the edge of the woolly blankets, the sheet and mattress:

"Think it over, hard-boiled. You're in bad enough, as it is."

He threw one of his shoes through the window.

6

KIPPY stared.

The cloth smoked furiously; oily waves of thick gray fumes oozed to the window level, eddied around the ceiling.

Then the man across the room ran to the bathroom. Johnny got to his knees, used his left hand to yank the curtains from their wooden cornice and throw them on the blazing blankets.

Kippy dashed out of the bathroom, panic in his fish-like eyes; his voice throaty with fear:

"Jeeze . . . you wanta burn us t' death? You wanta . . . " he spilled half a tumbler of water three feet from the blaze. The smoke was quite dense now.

Johnny got to his feet; grabbed the phone and hollered: "Fire . . . fire!" loudly. Then he left the receiver off

the hook and said: "The John Laws will be here before your pal, Egghead, makes the grade. What about it, Kippy?"

"——!" The other screamed in rage and fright. "I'll fix your works, you crazy . . ."

There was a knocking at the door.

"Who's inside? Who's in there?" said a voice. It was not Egghead.

"Get the police!" yelled Johnny. "And bring an extinguisher."

"Open the door . . . what's burning?" The voice was getting excited.

Kippy gulped in the fog-like coils of thick, acrid smoke. He slipped the safety on his automatic and stuck it under the bed, fired once, twice. Then he put a bullet through the pillows . . . another through the foot of the bed.

Johnny crawled past him through the smoke to the bathroom, got inside and closed the door, turned the lock. There was a ventilator which kept the air a little clearer; outside the curtains had blazed up . . . one of the chair seats was beginning to burn.

Feet were padding up and down the corridor; voices came over the transom in fragmentary clarity:

". . . Sent in the alarm . . . break it down . . . something about police . . . that's Johnny Hi Gear's room. . . ."

Johnny ran water in the bowl; drank a glass of ice-water. His arm and shoulder were one throbbing ache. His face was swollen and bleeding . . . his lips cut and bruised. One ankle was knifing him with pain.

Ping! The medicine-cabinet mirror tinkled to the wash-bowl in silvery, shattered bits of glass. Kippy was trying to write him off the books.

He stepped into the bathtub, turned on the cold shower and watched a row of little holes appear in the panels of the door. Concrete chipped from the walls and metal rang loudly, but he was untouched.

Crash! Someone was trying to break down the door. Why didn't the fools get the duplicate key, Johnny wondered. Then he realized that it was Kippy who was trying to smash his way through to freedom.

The falling rain of cool water cleared the air a bit—he could breathe more easily now. He sniffed; there was a pungent odor in the smoke . . . he recognized it for extinguisher-fluid . . . they must be putting it in through the transom.

Then someone was hammering on the bathroom door:

"Open up . . . come out of there, you fool . . . do you hear? Come out . . . the fire's over."

It was a new voice and Johnny turned the lock and stepped out. Water dripped off him in pools; his clothing was plastered to his skin and he could only stand erect with an effort.

A smallish, black-haired man in a derby hat and a dark suit stood outside the bathroom door; the room was full of men seen vaguely through the wreaths of smoke which drifted out through the wide-flung windows.

"Well . . . maybe you'll tell us what it's all about?"

"Get him?" Johnny started stripping off wet clothing, grunted with the reaction from his shoulder. The corridor was crowded with curious guests, bellhops, maids, policemen.

The houseman gave him a hand with his soaking coat.

"Boy! You're plugged, for fair. What happened?"

"Did you nail him?" Johnny wanted to know, wringing water from his trousers, kicking off his remaining shoe. The walls of the room were smoke-stained, discolored; the carpet was a mess. Curtains and draperies had been torn down, pictures smashed . . . and the bed smelled like burning goat-hair.

One of the harness bulls stepped in:

"That bird . . . the one with the burned face . . . was he the one who was shooting off that rod? My ——! man! You're *hurt!*"

Johnny swore softly as he got into a dry dressing gown; he had to lift his right arm into the sleeve.

"Some," he admitted. "That's a present from the . . . gee you let walk away . . . suppose he's halfway . . . to Albany by now." Talking was painful.

"Oh, yeah?" The bluecoat was scowling. "Listen, fella. That playmate of yours is with Sergeant Connolly, right now. At the doctor's. He got burned, half the skin is off his face. But he's where we can put the bracelets on him; if he's the rod that worked on you . . . we'll be havin' fun."

Johnny said: "Oh! At the doctor's? With a sergeant? We better snap down there, *pronto*. Maybe . . . your officer will need the doc . . . unless . . ."

. . . It was a curious procession, that pell-mell rush down the two flights of stairs: half-dressed women, timorous bell-hops, plain-clothesmen . . . and Johnny.

The door to Doc Benter's room was open.

Sergeant Connolly lay on his face, his arms outstretched. The house physician was in the closet, trussed up with belts and cords. Connolly had been hit from behind, with a blackjack. The doctor was unconscious, but unhurt.

On the desk, under a green-shaded lamp, lay a silver hypodermic.

7

HEY untied the doctor, gave him whiskey and let him talk. The sergeant didn't respond so easily.

". . . Look out for the thin one," mumbled the physician. "He's full of cocaine. . . . Hello, Johnny. You look bad . . . who's the policeman?" They got the story from him, in bits. Egghead and Kippy had jumped him, after gaining entrance to his room in the guise of patients. Kippy had departed: Egghead had tried one means of crude torture after another until the doctor had consented to reveal the small stock of drugs he had. Then the thin man had stoked up . . . he was as dangerous as a mad dog, thought Benter.

The officer came to, after a minute or so, but it was another five before he could explain.

"Had this heavy-set one in front of me" . . . he put a hand to his aching head and rested his elbows on knees, dispiritedly. "Didn't know which one was the doc . . . he got back of me, for a second, and gave me the tap . . . where'd they go?"

Nobody knew.

Cops ran around in circles; bandages and plaster were put in action; Johnny's arm got attention; telephones went hot-wire with overwork—but Kippy and the Egghead had vanished into thin air.

"You better get a good, long sleep, Johnny." Benter was finishing the dressing on his arm. "I suppose the precinct will want to nurse you in Bellevue, as a material witness . . . but I can stall 'em off for a day, maybe. Urgent danger . . . infection . . . you know."

"Thanks a lot," said Johnny. "I don't want to be cooped up, right now. I got things to do."

"You better not do 'em," growled Benter. "You mean hunting for that couple of thugs? Lay off—leave it to the cops."

"They'll never lam outa here." The bluecoat who had been left by the sergeant's orders, as a guard over Johnny, was heavily confident.

Johnny said: "Yeah?" and got a hooker of rye inside his belt. The cop took one, with him.

"They know these babies," nodded the patrolman. "Kippy Minzer . . . he's got a record like Legs Di-mond . . . out on parole now, he is . . . Thanks." The second glass followed the first in close formation . . . then a third.

"Slot machine was his racket?" Johnny inquired as he filled the cop's glass for the fifth time.

"You know it." The officer unbuttoned the top button of his coat. "Them slot machines, now. They're lousy. . . .

Jeeze, this's good stuff." He held his glass to the light admiringly.

"Have another." Johnny got amber liquid right up to the brim, nodded affably, though his arm hurt like hell.

"Mind 'f I do," said the policeman.

"Warms you up," Johnny filled up more glasses and Benter, refusing one, watched him curiously. Two more buttons came free on the blue coat. Then the officer stepped out of the room for a minute.

"Got a gun, doc?"

"Sure, Johnny . . . but I wouldn't let you have it, shape you're in."

"Hell. Self-protection, doc. This dumb bunny in uniform would be about as much use in a jam as nothing at all. He's cocked, now."

"Mm, huh." The doctor went over to a closet, took something off the shelf. He laid it on the desk beside Johnny.

"Don't say I gave it to you. It's a .32 . . . and all ready to work. But you pinched it, if anything happens. I never gave it to you. . . ."

Johnny got the gun in his left dressing gown pocket and grinned.

"That's *my* story, too."

"What you goin' to do, now you've got it ?"

"Listen, doc." Johnny got over near the door, stood with his back to the wall. "I'm the only witness to a pineapple-throwing that these two worked early this morning. The man that went out was a good friend of mine. They tried to get me, too . . . but I got a break. I'm going to turn 'em up, before they turn *me* up. They came into the Metropole to put the tag on me . . . and again I had some luck. So . . ."

"Maybe you won't be so fortunate the third time."

Johnny said: "I'd thought about that." The patrolman came in the room, bleary-eyed. Johnny edged through the door without waiting to hear what explanation the doctor might give. He was at the turn of the corridor when the door opened and the bluecoat bellowed:

"Hey, you. Hey, Mister Gear. *Hey!* You can't run away like that . . ."

It was an effort to climb the two flights of stairs. He was short of breath when he reached the end of the corridor leading to his room.

There was a big closet five feet away and Johnny paid it no attention, but the minute of waiting to get his breath was the margin between death and life, for . . .

. . . The door opened, an inch at a time, the aperture away from him. Noiselessly he got to the stair-door and stepped into the well. Through a half-inch crack he could see Kippy, sidling along the wall towards the door of the room he had left only an hour before. He tried the door, called softly, found no one on guard and went in.

Johnny's first impulse was to follow—then he remembered Egghead. That coke-eater would be nearby . . . but where. Johnny thought he knew. He stepped to the closet, got his gun out and said:

"Come out, Egghead . . . and come out backward, too. When you've got the door open, chuck your rod on the floor."

The closet door opened slowly.

8

JOHNNY saw a thin back, jabbed his .32 at it and heard something drop on the floor. He picked it up by the trigger guard, stuffed it in a side pocket, with his left hand.

"Ever hear how a man dies with a hole in his kidneys?" Johnny was walking Egghead down the hall, keeping close behind him, prodding him with the revolver. "Takes a week or ten days . . . they say its the most terrible way to kick in, that there is."

"You got me wrong, mister. I never hurt no one. Not me. You got me wrong."

"I've got you *right*, Egghead. You're going to stay that way. And—unless you want me to drill two holes in your kidneys, you'll tell Kippy to come out,

when we get to my room. Ask him nice and quiet. Say I've gone to the hospital. Make it sound natural . . . or else . . ."

Egghead started to turn around. Johnny drew the gun back six inches and lunged at the small of the thin man's back. It straightened him up like a galvanic shock.

They halted in front of Johnny's room.

"Do your stuff," whispered Johnny.

Egghead started to swing his right arm, backward and forward, just a little, but he said nothing.

"Stick your arms up. Clasp those mitts behind your neck. Go on . . . or I'll give it to you right now. That's better. Now *talk!*"

Egghead muttered something unintelligible.

"When I count three . . . I'll pull the trigger," Johnny said softly. "One, two, thr—"

"Kippy!" Egghead's voice was shrill.

"You lousy fink . . . what you doing out in that hall?" The man inside was sore.

"Boss! We better scram. That mug's not comin' back today. They took him to the hospital."

"Shut up. Do what I told you, or I'll come out there and blow you apart—hear me?"

Johnny put his mouth close to Egghead's ear:

"Tell him to go to hell . . . you're going to beat it," he whispered.

Kippy said: "You going?"

"You go to hell . . . I'm gonna scram."

Egghead's tone was not defiant, but the words carried sufficient surprise, for the door opened.

Kippy looked into the muzzle of Johnny's gun and lowered his head, as a bull does when it makes its charge.

"I'll be a —— ——," he said. "You double-crossing dope, you . . ."

"That'll be all," said Johnny. "Get up those mitts."

"He made me, boss," whimpered Egghead.

"Yeah?" Kippy's hand went to his left shoulder and Johnny fired. Not at the chest, not at the stomach. Right between the eyes.

There was a simultaneous spurt of hot flame from Kippy's gun.

Egghead murmured: "Ah!" in astonishment and buckled at the knees.

"You've got a bullet-proof vest, Kippy," said Johnny. "And I had this snowbird, for my bullet-proof. That's an even break."

Kippy could not hear him. He lay, face down, over the threshold of the wrecked room. A thin stream of dark red ran away from his forehead like a piece of cord.

The policeman he had slipped came pounding down the hall.

"Say, you," he bellowed, belligerently.

"Pipe down. Get a little sense, copper. This is a break for you, if you use your head. You've been in on a cleanup—if I say so."

"Well. . . ." The officer was dubious.

"Get a load of this," said Johnny in an undertone. "You came up to my room with me . . . an errand, see . . . and they shot it out with us. You get a rating, account of this, if you're smart."

"Sure," breathed the cop. "I make you, mister. You sure are a busy little powder-burner, ain't you?"

Johnny felt very tired.

"I'm going back to doc's room. I need a good double-order of sleep. But don't forget, what I told you. How it happened."

"I'll play ball," said the man in uniform. "What'll I do with this . . ." he turned Egghead over. The coke's face was pasty-gray and his lips were blue.

Johnny looked at the wet spot on the thin man's vest.

"He might be patched up for the chair," he said, finally. "Anyway . . . he's got a chance."

"I'll take him in," said the cop.

"Hell, yes." Johnny walked towards the stairs, through the curious crowd. "He's one for the book, all right."

Lead

Gerry Kells from the East, who pulled a "fast one" in West Coast gambling, skirts the edges of the political racket and sits in when the blow-off comes

AT one-thirty, Kells got out of a cab and went into the Sixth Street entrance of the Howard Hotel. In the elevator he said: "Four." Around two turns, down a short corridor, he knocked at a heavy old-fashioned door.

A voice yelled: "Come in."

There were three men in the small room. One sat at a typewriter near the window. He had a leathery good-natured face, and he spoke evenly into the telephone beside him: "Sure. . . . Sure. . . ."

The other two were playing cooncan on a suit-box balanced on their laps. One of them put down his hand, put the suit-box on the floor, stood up.

Kells said: "Fenner."

The man at the telephone put one hand over the mouthpiece, turned his head to call through an open door behind him: "A gent to see you, L.D."

The man who had stood up, walked to the door and nodded at someone in the next room and turned to Kells. "In here."

Kells went past him into the room and closed the door behind him. That room was larger. Fenner, a slight, silver-haired man of about fifty, was lying on a bed in his trousers and undershirt. There was an electric-light on the wall behind the bed. Fenner put down the paper he had been reading and swung up to sit facing Kells. He said: "Sit down," and picked up his shoes and put them on. Then he went over and raised the blind on one of the windows that looked out on Spring Street. He said: "Well, Mister Kells, is it hot enough for you?"

Kells nodded, said sarcastically:

Party

By PAUL CAIN

"You're harder to see than De Mille. I called your hotel and they made me get a Congressional O. K. and make out a couple dozen affidavits before they gave me this number." He jerked his head towards the little room through which he had entered. "What's it all about L.D.?"

Fenner sat down in a big chair and smiled sleepily. He took a crumpled package of Home Runs out of his pocket, extracted a cigarette and lighted it. "About a year ago," he said, "a man named Dickinson—a newspaperman—came out here with a bright idea and a little capital, and started a scandal-sheet called *The Coaster.*"

Fenner inhaled his cigarette deeply, blew a soft gray cone of smoke towards the ceiling. "He ran it into the ground on the blackmail side and got into a couple libel jams. . . ."

Kells said: "I remember. . . ."

Fenner went on: "I got postponements on the libel cases and I got the injunction raised. Now it's the *Coast Guardian; A Political Weekly for Thinking People.* Dickinson is still the editor and publisher, and"—he smiled thinly—"I'm the silent partner. The first number comes out next week, no sale, we give it away."

Kells said: "The city campaign ought to start rolling along about next week. . . ."

Fenner slapped his knee in mock surprise. "By George! That's a coincidence." He sat grinning contentedly at Kells. Then his face hardened a little and a faint fanatical twinkle came into his eyes. He spoke, and it was as if he had said the same thing many times before. "I'm a *working* boss, Mister Kells. I gave this city the squarest deal it ever had. They beat my men at the polls last time, but by ——! they didn't beat me—and next election day I'm going to take the city back"—he paused, and then very pointedly made the pun—"like Bow took Richman."

Kells said: "I doubt it." He smiled a little to take the edge

off his words, went on: "What did you get from Perry?"

"Nothing." Fenner yawned. "I got to his wife right after you called and gave her your message and arranged for her bail. She's witness number one for the State. It took me a little longer to beat the *incommunicado* on Perry, and when I saw him and told him she had confessed that he killed Haardt, he closed up like a clam."

Kells took off his hat and rubbed his scalp violently with his fingers. "It must have taken a lot of pressure to make a yellow —— like him pipe down."

Fenner said: *"Who* killed Haardt?"

"Perry'll do for a while, won't he?" Kells put his hat on.

"Are you sure you're in the clear?"

"Yes." Kells stood up. "You've got enough to work on. Lieutenant Reilly, who was your best in on the force, is in a play with Jack Rose to take over the town and open it up over your head. Dave Perry was in on it. They want it all, and they figure that you and I and a few more of the boys are in their way."

He walked over to the window and looked down at the swarming traffic on Spring Street. "Doc Haardt was in their way—figure it out for yourself."

Fenner said: "You act like you know what you're talking about."

"I do."

Fenner went on musingly: "One of the advantages of a reform administration is that you can blame it for everything. Maybe opening up the town for a few weeks isn't such a bad idea."

"But it's nice to know about it when you're supposed to be the boss. . . ." Kells smiled. "And it won't be so hot when it gets so wide open that a few of Reilly and Rose's imports from the East come up here and shove a machine-gun down your throat."

Fenner said: "No."

"Me, I'm going to scram," Kells went on. "I came out here to play, and by the——if I can't play here I'll go back to Broadway. My fighting days are over."

Fenner stared quizzically at Kell's battered face, smiled. "You'd better stick around," he said—"I like you."

"That's fine." Kells went to a table and poured himself a glass of water from a big decanter. "No, I'm going down to the station and see if they want to ask any questions, and then I'm going home and pack. I've got reservations on the *Chief*: six o'clock."

Fenner stood up. "That's too bad," he said. "I have a hunch that you and I would be a big help to one another."

He held out his hand, Kells shook it, turned and went to the door. Then he turned again, slowly. "One other thing," he said. "There's a gal out here—name's Granquist—came out with a couple of Rose's boys—claims to have a million dollars' worth of lowdown on the administration. I can't use it. Maybe you can get together."

Fenner said: "Fine. How much does she want?"

Kells hesitated a bare moment. "Fifteen grand."

Fenner whistled. "It must be good," he said. "Send her out to my hotel. Send her out tonight—I'll throw a party for her."

"She'll go for that. She's Scotch-screwy." Kells grinned and went out the door and closed it behind him.

He went into the Police Station, into the reporters' room to the right of the entrance. Shep Beery looked up over his paper and said: "My ——! What happened to your face?"

They were alone in the room. Kells looked with interest at the smudged pencil drawings on the walls. He sat down. "I got it caught in a revolving-door," he said. "Does anyone around here want to talk to me?"

"I do, for one." Beery put the paper down and leaned across his desk. "What's the inside on all this, Gerry?"

"All what?"

Beery spread the paper, pointed to headlines: *Perry Indicted for Haardt Murder; Wife Confesses.* Beery's

finger moved across the page: *Gambling Barge Burns; 200 Narrowly Escape Death When Joanna D. Sinks.*

Kells laughed. "Probably just newspaper stories," he said.

"No fooling, Gerry, give me a lead." Beery was intensely serious.

Kells said: "You or your sheet?"

"That's up to you."

Kells trailed a long white finger over his discolored right eye. "If you read your paper a little more carefully," he said, "you'll find where an unidentified man was found dead near a wharf at San Pedro." He put his elbows on the desk, leaned close to Beery. "That's Nemo Kastner of Kansas City. He shot Doc Haardt on Jack Rose's order and helped frame it for me. He was shot by O'Donnell, his running-mate, when they had an argument over the cut for Haardt's kill. He set fire to the ship. . . ."

". . . And swam four miles with a lungful of lead." Beery had been thumbing through the paper; pointed to the item.

"Uh huh."

"Who shot O'Donnell?"

Kells said: "——! you're curious. Maybe it was Rose. . . . Is he going to live?"

"Sure."

"That's swell." Kells took a deep breath.

"Now that's for *you*," he said. "Perry will have to take the fall for Doc's murder for the time being. He was in on it plenty, anyway. Kastner's dead and I couldn't prove any of it without getting myself jammed up again. If anything happens to me you can use your own judgment, but until something happens this is all under your hat. Right?"

Beery nodded.

Kells stood up, said: "Now let's go upstairs and see if the captain can think of any hard ones."

They went out of the room into the corridor, upstairs.

The captain was a huge watery-eyed Swede with a bulbous, thread-veined nose.

Beery said: "This is Kells. . . . He thought you might want to talk to him."

The captain shook his head slowly. He looked out the window and took a great square of linen out of his pocket and blew his nose. "No—I don't think so," he said slowly. "Cullen and the cab-driver say you was at Cullen's house yesterday afternoon when Haardt was shot."

He looked up at Kells and his big mouth slit across his face to show yellow uneven teeth. "Was you?"

Kells smiled faintly, nodded.

"That's good enough for me." He blew his nose again, noisily, folded the handkerchief carefully and put it in his pocket. "Perry's the only one to say you killed Doc. Lieutenant Reilly thinks you did, but we can't run this department on thinks. . . . I think Perry's guilty as hell."

They all nodded sagely.

Kells said: "So long, Captain." He and Beery started out of the room.

The captain spoke again as Kells went through the door.

"Where was you last night?"

Kells turned. "I was drunk," he said, "I don't remember." His eyes glittered with amusement.

The big man looked at him and his face wrinkled slowly to a grin. "Me too," he said. He slapped his thigh, and laughed—a terrific crashing guffaw.

His laughter followed Kells and Beery down the stairs, through the corridor, echoing and reechoing.

Beery said: "See you in church, Gerry."

Kells went out into the sunlight. He walked down First to Broadway, up Broadway to his bank.

The teller told him he had a balance of five thousand, one hundred and thirty dollars. He asked that the account be transferred to a New York bank, then changed his mind.

"I'll take it in cash."

The teller gave him five thousand-dollar notes, a hundred, a twenty and a ten-dollar bill. Kells took a sheaf of twenty-four new hundred-dollar bills out of his pocket and exchanged twenty of them for two more thousand-dollar notes. He folded the seven thousand-dollar notes and put them in a black pin-seal cardcase, put the case in his inside breast pocket. He put the five hundreds and the smaller bills in his trouser pocket and went out and got into a cab.

He said, "Lancaster Hotel," and looked at his watch. It was two-forty: he had three hours and twenty-minutes to get home and pack and make the *Chief*.

2

"GERRY." Granquist called to him as he crossed the lobby.

He waited until she had crossed to him, smiled ingenuously. "*Gerry* in the hay, baby," he said very gently. "*Mister Kells* in public."

She laughed softly—a metallic softness.

Kells said: "Did you get my note?"

"Uh huh." She spoke rapidly, huskily. "I woke up right after you left, I guess. Your phone's been raising bloody hell. I'm going home and get some sleep. . . ."

She held out a closed black-gloved hand, and Kells took his key.

He said: "Come on back upstairs—I've found a swell spot for your stuff."

"Oh—yeah?" Her face brightened.

They went to the elevator and up to Kells' room. Granquist sat in a low steel-gray leather chair with her back to the windows, and Kells walked up and down.

"L. D. Fenner has been the boss of this town for about six years," he said. "The reform element moved in last election, but Fenner's kept things pretty well under control—he has beautiful connections all the way to Washington. . . ."

Kells paused while Granquist took out tobacco and papers, started to roll a cigarette.

"You wanted to sell your stuff to Rainey for five grand," he went on. "If it's as good as you think it is, we can get fifteen from Fenner. . . . That's ten for you and five for me"—he smiled a little— "as your agent. . . ."

Granquist said: "I was drunk when I talked to Rainey. Fifteen's chicken-feed. If you want to help me handle this the way it should be handled, we can get fifty."

"You have big ideas, baby. Let's keep this practical."

Granquist lighted her cigarette. She said: "How would you like to buy me a drink?"

Kells went into the dressing-room and took two bottles of whiskey out of a drawer. He tore off the tissue-paper wrappings and went back into the room and put them on a table.

"One for you and one for me," he said. He took a corkscrew out of his pocket.

The phone buzzed.

Kells went to the phone, and Granquist got up and took off her gloves and began opening the bottles.

Kells said: "Hello. . . . Yes—fine, Stella. . . . Who? . . . Not Kuhn, Stella—maybe it's Cullen. . . . Yeah. . . . Put him on. . . ." He waited a moment, said: "Hello, Willie. . . . Sure. . . ." He laughed quietly. "No, your car's all right. . . . I'll send one of the boys in the garage out with it, or bring it out myself if I have time. . . . I'm taking a powder. . . . The *Chief:* six o'clock. . . . Uh huh, they're too tough out here for me. I'm going back to Times Square where it's quiet. . . . Okey Willie. Thanks, luck—all that sort of thing. . . . G'bye."

He hung up, went to the table and picked up one of the opened bottles.

He said: "Do you want a glass or a funnel?"

Granquist took the other bottle and sat down. She jerked her head towards the phone. "Was that on the square—you're going?"

"Certainly."

"You're a sap." She tilted the bottle to her mouth, gurgled.

Kells went to a little table against one wall, took two glasses from a tray and went back and put them on the center table. He poured one of them half full. "No, darling—I'm a very bright fellah." He drank. "I'm going to get myself a lot of air while I can. The combination's too strong. I'm not ambitious. . . ."

"You're a sap."

Kells went to a closet and took out two traveling bags, a large suit-case. He took the drawers out of a small wardrobe-trunk, put them on chairs.

"You'd run out on a chance to split fifty grand?" Granquist was elaborately incredulous.

Kells started taking things out of closets, putting them in the trunk. "Your information is worth more to Fenner than anyone else," he said. "If it's worth that much, he'll probably pay it. You can send me mine. . . ."

"No, —— damn it! You stay here and help me swing this or you don't get a nickel."

Kells stopped packing, turned wide eyes towards Granquist. "Listen, baby," he said slowly, "I've *got* a nickel. I'm getting along swell legitimately. You take your bottle and your extortion racket and scram. . . ."

Granquist laughed. She got up and went to Kells and put her arms around his body. She didn't say anything, just looked at him and laughed.

The wide wild look went out of his eyes slowly. He smiled. He said: "What makes you think it's worth that much?"

Then he put her arms away gently and went to the table and poured two drinks.

AT six o'clock the *Chief* pulled out of the Santa Fe Station for Chicago. At about six-forty Kells dropped Granquist at her apartment house on the corner of Wilcox and Yucca.

"Meet you in an hour at the *Derby*."

She said: "Oke—*adios*."

Kells drove up Wilcox to Cahuenga, up Cahuenga to Iris, turned up the short curving slope to Cullen's house. The garage doors were open, he drove the car in and then went up and rang the bell. No one answered. He went back down and closed the garage doors and walked down to Cahuenga, down Cahuenga to Franklin.

He stood on the corner for a little while and then went into a delicatessen and called a Hempstead number. The line was busy, he waited a few minutes, called again.

He said: "Hello—*the* Mrs. Perry? Swell. . . . Listen—I'm going to be very busy tonight—I've got about a half-hour. . . . You come out and walk up to Las Palmas, and if you're sure you're not tailed come up Las Palmas to Franklin. . . . If you're not absolutely sure take a walk or something. . . . I'll give you a ring late. . . . Yeah. . . ."

He went out and walked over Franklin to Las Palmas. He walked back and forth between Las Palmas and Highland for ten minutes and then walked down the west side of Las Palmas to Hollywood Boulevard. He didn't see anything of Ruth Perry.

He went on down Las Palmas to Sunset, east to Vine and up Vine to the *Brown Derby*.

Granquist was in a booth, far back, on the left.

She said: "I ordered oysters."

Kells sat down. "That's fine." He nodded to an acquaintance at a nearby table.

"A couple minutes after you left me," she said, "a guy came into my place and asked the girl at the desk who I was. She said: 'Who wants to know?'

and he said he had seen me come in and thought I was an old friend of his. . . ."

"And. . . ."

"And I haven't got any old friends."

"Wha'd he look like?" Kells was reading the menu.

"The girl isn't very bright. All she could remember was that he had on a gray suit and a gray cap."

Kells said: "That's a pipe—it was one of the Barrymores."

"No." Granquist shook her head very seriously. "It might have been a copper who tailed us from your hotel, or it might have been one of. . . ."

Kells interrupted her suddenly. "Did you leave the stuff in your apartment?"

"Certainly not."

Kells said: "Anyway—we've got to do whatever's to be done with it tonight. I'm getting the noon train tomorrow."

"*We're* getting the noon train."

Kells smiled, looked at her for a little while. He said: "When you can watch a lady eat oysters, and still think she's swell—that's love."

He ordered the rest of the dinner.

Granquist carried a smart black bag. She opened it and took out a big silver flask, poured drinks under the table. "Just to keep our wheels turning," she said.

The dinner was very good. After a while, Granquist asked with exaggerated seriousness: "Have I told you the story of my life?"

"No—but I've heard one." Kells was drinking his coffee, watching the door.

"All right. *You* tell *me*."

Kells said: "I was born of rich but honest parents. . . ."

"You can skip that."

He grinned at her. "I came back from France," he said, "with a lot of sharp-shooting medals, a beautiful case of shell-shock and a morphine habit you could hang your hat on."

He gestured with his hands, said: "All gone."

"Even the medals?"

He nodded. "The State kept them as souvenirs of my first trial."

Granquist poured two drinks.

"I happened to be too close to a couple front-page kills," Kells went on. "There was a lot of dumb sleuthing and a lot of dumb talk. It got so, finally, when the New York police couldn't figure a shooting any other way, I was it."

Granquist was silent, smiling.

"They got tired trying to hang them on me after the first three, but the whisper went on. It got to be known as the *Kells Inside*. . . ."

"And at heart you're just a big sympathetic boy who wouldn't hurt a fly."

"Uh huh." He nodded his head slowly, emphatically. His face was expressionless.

Granquist said: "Me—I'm Napoleon."

Kells beckoned a waiter, paid the check. "And beyond the Alps lies Italy," he said. "Let's go."

It was raining a little.

Kells held Granquist close to him. "The Manhattan is just around the corner on Ivar," he said, "but I'm going to put you in a cab and I want you to go down to Western Avenue and get out and walk until you're sure you're not being followed. Then get another cab and come to the Manhattan. I'll be in ten-sixteen."

The doorman held a big umbrella for them and they walked across the wet sidewalk and Granquist got into a cab. Kells stood in the thin rain until the cab had turned the corner down Hollywood Boulevard, then he went back into the restaurant.

Ruth Perry was sitting in the corner booth behind the cashier's desk. She didn't say anything.

Kells sat down. There was a newspaper on the table and he turned it around, glanced at the headlines.

He said: "What do you think about the Chinese situation?"

"Who was that?" Ruth Perry in-

clined her head slightly towards the door.

Kells put his elbows on the table and rubbed his eyes with his fingers. "None of your business, darling," he said. He looked up at her and smiled. "Now keep your pants on. I stand to make a ten or fifteen thousand dollar lick tonight, and *that* one—" he gestured with his head towards the door—"is a very important part of the play."

Ruth Perry didn't say anything. She leaned back and looked at the ceiling and laughed a little bit.

Presently she said: "What are you going to do about Dave?"

"What do you want me to do?"

"I'm not going to go on that stand and lay myself open to a perjury rap."

Kells shook his head. "You won't have to, baby. The trial won't come up for a month or so and we can spring Dave before that"—he smiled with his mouth—"if you want to."

They were silent a little while.

Then Kells said: "I've got to go now —call you around twelve."

3

HE got up and went out into the rain. He walked up to the corner of Vine and Hollywood Boulevard and went into the drug-store and bought some aspirin. He took two five-grain tablets and then went out and crossed the Boulevard and walked up Vine Street about a hundred yards. Then he crossed the street and walked back down to the parking-station next to the Post Office. He stood on the sidewalk watching people across the street for a little while, then he went swiftly back through the parking-station and down the ramp into the garage under the Manhattan Hotel.

He got out of the elevator on the tenth floor and knocked at the door of ten-sixteen. Fenner opened the door.

Fenner said: "Well, Mister Kells—you didn't catch your train." He smiled and bowed Kells in.

They sat in the big living-room and Fenner poured drinks. He poured three drinks and leaned back and said: "Where's the little lady?"

"She'll be up in a few minutes."

Someone came out of the bathroom and through the bedroom. Fenner got up and introduced a dark medium-sized man that came in. "This is Mister Jeffers—God's gift to Womanhood. . . . Mister Kells."

Kells stood up and shook hands with Jeffers. He was a motion-picture star who had had a brief and spectacular career; had been on the way out for nearly a year. He was drunk. He said: "It is a great pleasure to meet a *real* gunman, Mister Kells."

Kells glanced at Fenner and Fenner shook his head slightly, smiled apologetically. Kells sat down and sipped his whiskey.

Jeffers said: "I'm going up and get Lola." He took up his glass and went unsteadily out of the room, through the small hallway, out the outer door.

"You mustn't mind Jeffers."

Kells said: "Sure." Then he leaned back in his chair and stared vacantly at Fenner. "Have you got twenty-five grand in cash?"

Fenner looked at him very intently. Then he smiled slowly and shook his head. "No," he said. "Why?"

"Can you get it—tonight?"

"Well—possibly. I. . . ."

Kells interrupted him, spoke rapidly. "I've talked to the lady. She's got enough on Bellmann to run him out of politics—out of the state, by ——! You're getting first crack at it because I have a hunch he isn't sitting so pretty financially. It's the keys to the city for you—it's in black and white—and it's a bargain."

"You seem to have a more than casual interest in this. . . ."

Kells nodded. "Uh huh," he said, smiled. "I'm the fiscal agent."

Fenner stood up and walked up and down the room, his hands clasped behind him, a lecture platform expression on his face.

"You forget, Mister Kells, that the Common People—the voters—are not fully informed of Bellmann's connections, his power in the present administration. . . ."

"That's what your *Coast Guardian's* for."

Fenner stopped in front of Kells. "Just what form does this, uh—incriminating information take?"

Kells shook his head slowly. "You'll have to take my word for that," he said. He leaned forward and put his empty glass on the table.

The door-bell rang. Fenner went out into the hall, followed Granquist back into the room. Kells got up and introduced her to Fenner, and Fenner took her coat into the bedroom and then came back and poured drinks for all of them.

"Mister Kells has raised the ante to twenty-five thousand," he said. He smiled boyishly at Granquist.

She took her drink and sat down. She raised the glass to her mouth. "Hey hey."

They all drank.

Granquist took a sack of Durham, papers out of her bag, rolled a cigarette.

Fenner said: "Of course I can't enter into a proposition involving so much money without knowing definitely what I'm getting."

"You put twenty-five thousand dollars in cash on the line and you get enough to put the election on ice." Kells got up and went over to one of the windows. He turned and went on very earnestly: "And it's a hell of a long ways from that now."

Fenner pursed his lips, smiled a little. "Well—now. . . ."

"And it's got to be done *tonight*."

Granquist got up and put her empty glass on the table.

Fenner said: "Help yourself, help yourself."

She filled the two glasses on the table with whiskey and ice and White Rock. She said: "Do you let strangers use your bathroom?"

Fenner took her through the hallway to the bedroom and turned on the light in the bath. He came back and sat down and picked up the telephone, asked for Mister Dillon. When the connection was made, he said: "I want you to bring up the yellow, sealed envelope that's in the safe. . . . Yes, please—and bring it yourself." He hung up and turned to Kells. "All right," he said: "I'll play with you."

Kells sat down and crossed his legs. He studied the glistening toe of his left shoe, said: "It's going to sound like a fairy tale." He looked up at Fenner. "Bellmann's a very smart guy. If he wasn't, he wouldn't be where he is."

Fenner nodded impatiently.

Kells said: "The smarter they are, the sappier the frame they'll go for. Bellmann spent week-end before last at Jack Rose's cabin at Big Bear." He leaned forward and took his glass from the table. "Rose has been trying to get a feeler to him for a long time, has tried to reach him through his own friends. A few weeks ago Rose took a big place on the lake, not far from Bellmann's, invited Hugg and MacAlmon—Mac is very close to Bellmann—up for the fishing, or what have you? They all dropped in on Bellmann in a spirit of neighborliness, and he decided that he'd been wrong about Rose all these years. Next day he returned the call. When Hugg and Mac came back to the city, they left Rose and Bellmann like that"—he held up two slim fingers pressed close together.

Granquist came in, sat down.

Kells turned his head in her direction. Without letting his eyes focus directly on her, he said: "That's where the baby comes in."

Fenner lighted a cigarette, coughed out smoke.

"She came out with friends of Rose from K. C." Kells went on. "Bellmann

met her at Rose's and took her big. That was Rose's cue. He threw a party —one of those intimate, quiet little affairs—Rose and a show-girl, Bellmann and—" he smiled faintly at Granquist—"this one. They all got stiff—I don't mean drunk, I mean stiff. And what do you suppose happened?"

Kells paused, grinned happily at Fenner. "Miss Granquist had her little camera along, took a lot of snapshots." He turned his grin towards Granquist. "Miss Dipsomania Granquist stayed sober enough to snap her little camera."

Fenner got up and took Granquist's empty glass, filled it. He looked very serious.

Kells went on: "Of course it all came back to Rose in the morning. He asked about the pictures and she gave him a couple rolls of film that she'd stuck into the camera during the night, clicked with the lens shut, blanks. She discovered that the lens wasn't open when she gave them to him, they had one of those morning after laughs about it. Bellmann had a dark green hang-over; he didn't even remember about the pictures until a day or so later, and then he wrote Miss Granquist a couple of hot letters, with casual postscripts: 'How did the snapshots turn out, darling?' cracks like that."

Kells got up, stretched. "You see, it gets better as it goes along," he said.

"What are the pictures like?" Fenner was standing near Granquist, his little pointed chin thrust towards Kells.

"Don't be silly. They're right out of the pocket of one of those frogs that work along the Rue de Rivoli." Kells ran his fingers through his hair. "That's not the point though. It's not what they are, it's who they're of: Mister John R. Bellmann, the big boss of the reform administration, the Woman's Club politician—at the house and in the intimate company of Jack Rose, gambler, Crown Prince of the Western Underworld—and a couple of, well—questionable ladies."

"And exactly what am I buying?"

"The negatives and one set of prints. My word that you're getting all the negatives and that there are no other prints. The letters. And certain information as to what Mister Bellmann and Mister Rose talked about before they went under. . . ."

The door-bell rang.

Fenner said: "That'll be Dillon." He went out into the hallway and came back with a sandy-haired, spectacled man. Both of them were holding their hands above their shoulders in the conventional gesture of surprise. Two men whom Kells had never seen before came in behind them. One, the most striking, was rather fat and his small head stuck out of a stiff collar. His tie was knotted to stick straight out stiffly from the opening in his collar. He held a short blunt revolver in his hand.

The fat man said: "Go see if the tall one has got anything in his pockets."

The other man went to Kells. He was a gray-faced nondescript young man in a tightly belted rain-coat. He went through Kells' pockets very carefully and when he had finished, said: "Sit down."

Dillon shifted his weight from one foot to the other, and the fat man, who was almost directly behind him, raised the revolver and brought the barrel down hard on the back of his head. Dillon grunted and his knees gave way and he slumped down softly to the floor.

The fat man giggled quietly, nervously. He said: "That's one down. Every little bit helps."

Kells sat down on the divan and leaned back and crossed his legs.

The fat man said: "Put your hands up, Skinny."

Kells shook his head.

The young man in the rain-coat leaned forward and slapped Kells across the mouth. Kells looked up at him, and his face was very sad, his eyes were sleepy. He said: "That's too bad."

Fenner turned his head, spoke over his shoulder to the fat man. "What do you want?"

"I don't want you. Go sit down in that chair by the window."

Fenner crossed the room, sat down.

The fat man said: "Reach back of you and pull the shades shut."

Granquist said sarcastically: "Now pull up a chair for yourself, Fat." She leaned forward towards the table. "Ain't you going to have a drink?"

Kells said: "Don't say ain't, sweet."

The fat man sat down in the chair nearest the door. His elbows were on the arms of the chair and he held the revolver loosely on his lap.

He said: "I want a bunch of pictures that you tried to peddle to Bellmann, girlie."

"Don't call me girlie, you —— ——!"

Kells looked at Granquist, shook his head sadly. "That's something you forgot to tell me about," he said.

"I want all the pictures," the fat man repeated, "an' I want two letters—quick."

Granquist was staring at the fat man. She turned slowly to Kells. "That's a lie, Gerry. I didn't crack to Bellmann."

Fenner stood up. "I won't stand for this," he said. He thrust his hands in his pockets and took a step forward.

"Sit down." The fat man moved the revolver slightly until it focused on Fenner's stomach.

Fenner stood still.

Kells said: "Does the fellah who sent you know that if anything happens to me, the whole inside gets a swell spread in the morning papers? . . ."

The fat man smiled.

". . . The inside of Haardt and the barge and Perry, and the Sunday-school picnic at Big Bear?" Kells went on.

Granquist was watching him intently.

"I made that arrangement this afternoon." Kells leaned sidewise slowly and put his empty glass on an end-table.

The fat man looked at Fenner, and Kells, and then he looked at Granquist and at the bag tucked into the chair beside her. He said: "That's a dandy. Let's have a look at it, girlie."

Granquist stood up in one swift and precise movement. She moved to the window so swiftly that the fat man had only time to stand up and take one step towards her before she had moved the drape aside with her shoulder, crashed the bag through the window.

Glass tinkled on the sill.

Kells stood up in the same instant and brought his right fist up from the divan in a long arc to the side of the gray-faced young man's jaw.

The young man spun half around and Kells swung his right fist again to the same place. The young man fell half on the divan, half on the floor.

The fat man moved towards Kells, stopped in the center of the floor.

Granquist yelled: "Smack him, Gerry, he won't shoot."

Kells stood with his feet wide apart. He grinned at the fat man.

Fenner was standing near Granquist at the window. His eyes were wide and he tried to say something but the words stuck in his throat.

The fat man backed towards the door. He said: "I ain't got orders to shoot, but I sure will if you press me." He backed out into the semi-darkness of the hallway and then the outer door slammed.

Granquist ran across the room, stopped a moment in the doorway, turned her head towards Kells. She said: "I'll get the bag," and she spoke so rapidly, so breathlessly, that the words were all run together into one word. She went into the darkness.

Kells turned to Fenner. "Give her a hand," he said.

He bent over the young man, took a small automatic out of the rain-coat pocket and handed it to Fenner. "Hurry up—I've got to telephone—I'll be right down."

Fenner took the automatic dazedly. He looked at the man on the floor and at Kells, and then he came suddenly to life. "It's in the court," he said excitedly. "I can get out there from the third floor."

"Maybe the bag was a stall. Don't let her get out of your sight." Kells sat down at the telephone.

Fenner hurried out of the room.

Kells waited until he heard the outer door slam, then got up and went to Dillon. He knelt and drew a long yellow envelope from Dillon's inside breast pocket. It was heavily sealed. He tore off the end and spread the envelope by pressing the edges, looked inside. Then, smiling blankly, he tucked it into his pocket.

He went to the broken window, raised it carefully and leaned out over the wet darkness of the court for a moment. He went into the kitchen and stood on the stove, looked through the high ventilating window across the narrow air-shaft to the window of an adjoining apartment. Then he went into the bedroom and got his hat and Granquist's coat and went out of the apartment, across the corridor to the elevator.

On the way down, he spoke to the elevator-boy: "Is it still raining?"

"Yes sir. It looks like it was going to rain all night."

Kells said: "I wouldn't be surprised."

4

THE night clerk came out of the telephone operator's compartment.

Kells leaned on the desk. He said: "Your Mister Dillon is in ten-sixteen. He had an accident. There's another man in there whom Fenner will file charges against. Have the house-dick hold him till Fenner gets back."

He started to go, paused, said over his shoulder: "Maybe you'll find another one trying to get in or out of the court. Probably not."

He went out and walked up Ivar to Yucca, west on Yucca the short block to Cahuenga. The rain had become a gentle mist for the moment; it was warm, and occasional thunder drummed over the hills to the north. He went into an apartment house on the corner and asked the night man if Mr. Beery was in.

"He went out about ten minutes ago." The night-man thought he might be in the drug-store across the street.

Beery was crouched over a cup of coffee at the soda-fountain.

Kells sat down beside him and ordered a glass of water, washed down two aspirin tablets. He said: "If you want to come along with me, you *might* get some more material for your memoirs."

Beery put a dime on the counter and they went out, over to Wilcox. They went into the Wilcox entrance of the Venice, upstairs to the fourth floor and around through a long corridor to number four thirty-two.

Granquist opened the door. Her face was so drained of color that her mouth looked bloody in contrast to her skin. Her mouth was slightly open and her eyes were wide, burning. She held her arms stiffly at her sides.

There was a man lying on his face half in, half out of the bathroom. His arms were doubled up under his body.

Beery walked past Granquist, slowly across the room to a table. He turned his head slowly as he walked, kept his eyes on the man on the floor. He took off his hat and put it on the table.

Kells closed the door quietly and stood with his back against it.

Granquist stared at him without change of expression.

Beery glanced at them.

Kells smiled a little. He said: "This isn't what I meant, Shep—maybe it's better."

Beery went to the man on the floor, squatted and turned the head sidewise.

Granquist swallowed. She said: "Gerry, I didn't do it. I didn't do it."

Beery spoke softly, without looking up: "Bellmann."

Kells locked the door. He looked at the floor, then he went to the table and

reached under it with his foot, kicked an automatic out into the light.

Granquist walked unsteadily to a chair. She sat down and stared vacantly at Beery bending over the body. She said in a hollow, monotonous voice: "He was like that when I came in. I stopped downstairs and then I came up in the elevator and he was like that when I came in—just a minute ago."

Kells didn't look at her. He took out a handkerchief and picked up the automatic and held it to his nose. He held it carefully by the handkerchief and snapped the magazine out of the grip, said: "Two."

Beery stood up.

Kells laughed suddenly. He threw back his head and roared with laughter. He sat down and put the automatic on the table, wiped his eyes with the handkerchief.

"—— ——!" he said brokenly. "—— ——, it's beautiful!"

Granquist stared at Kells and then she leaned back in the chair and her eyes were very frightened. She said: "I didn't do it." She leaned back hard in the chair and closed her eyes tightly. She said: "I didn't do it," over and over again.

Kells' laughter finally wore itself out. He wiped his eyes with the handkerchief and then he looked up at Beery. "Well," he said, "why the hell don't you get on the phone? You've got the scoop of the season."

He leaned back and smiled at the ceiling, improvised headlines: "Boss Bellmann Bumped Off by Beauty. Politician—let's see—Politician Plugged as Prowler by Light Lady."

He stood up and crossed quickly to Beery, emphasized his words with a long white finger against Beery's chest.

"Here's a pip! Reformer Foiled. Killer says: 'I shot to save my honor, the priceless inheritance of American Womanhood.'"

Beery went to the telephone. He said: "We've been a Bellmann paper—I'll have to talk to the Old Man."

"You —— damned idiot! *No* paper can afford to soft-pedal a thing like this. Can't you see that without an editorial O.K.?"

Beery nodded in a far-away way, dialed a number. He asked for a Mister Crane, and when Crane had answered, said: "This is Beery. Bellmann has just been shot by a jane, in her apartment, in Hollywood. . . . Uh-huh very dead."

He grinned up at Kells, listened to an evident explosion at the other end of the line. "We'll have to give it everything, Mister Crane," he went on. "It's open and shut—there isn't any out. . . . .O. K. Switch me to Thompson—I'll give it to him."

Granquist got up and went unsteadily to the door. She put her hand on the knob and then seemed to remember that the door was locked. She looked at the key but didn't touch it. She turned and went into the dinette, took a nearly empty bottle out of the cupboard and came back and sat down.

Beery said: "What's your name, sister?"

Granquist was trying to get the cork out of the bottle. She didn't say anything or look up.

Kells said: "Granquist." He looked at her for a moment, then went over to the window, turned his head slightly towards Beery: "Miss Granquist."

Beery said: "Hello, Tom," spoke into the telephone in a low, even monotone.

Kells turned from the window and crossed slowly to Granquist. He sat

down on the arm of her chair and took the bottle out of her hands and took out the cork. He got up and went into the dinette and poured the whiskey into a glass and brought it back to her.

He sat down again on the arm of the chair. "Don't take it so big, baby," he said very softly and quietly. "You've got a perfect case. The jury'll give you roses and a vote of thanks on the 'for honor' angle—and it's the swellest thing that could happen for Fenner's machine—it's the difference between Bellmann's administration and a brand new one."

"I didn't do it, Gerry." She looked up at him and her eyes were dull, hurt. "I didn't do it! I left the snaps and stuff in the office downstairs when I went out—the bag was a gag. . . ."

Kells said: "I knew they weren't in the bag—you left it in the chair when you went into the bathroom."

She nodded. She wasn't listening to him. She had things to say. "I ran back here when I left Fenner's. I picked up the stuff at the office—had to wait till the manager got the combination to the safe out of his apartment. Then I came up here to wait for you."

She drank, put the glass on the floor. She turned, inclined her head towards Bellmann. "He was like that—he must have come here for the pictures—he'd been through my things. . . ."

Kells said: "Never mind, baby—it's a set-up. . . ."

"I didn't do it!" She beat her fist on the arm of the chair. Her eyes were suddenly wild.

Kells stood up.

Beery finished his report, hung up the receiver. He said: "Now I better call the station."

"Wait a minute." Kells looked down at Granquist and his face was white, hard. "Listen!" he emphasized the word with one violent finger. "You be nice. You play this the way I say and you'll be out in a month, with the managers throwing vaudeville contracts at you. Maybe I can even get you out on bail. . . ."

He turned abruptly and went to the door, turned the key. "Or"—he jerked his head towards the door, looked at the little watch on the inside of his wrist—"there's a Frisco bus out Cahuenga in about six minutes. You can make it—and ruin your case."

Outside, sultry thunder rumbled and rain whipped against the windows.

Kells slid a note off the sheaf in his breast pocket, went over and handed it to her. It was a thousand-dollar note.

She looked at it dully, slowly stood up. Then she stuffed the note into the pocket of her suit and went quickly to the chair where Kells had thrown her coat.

Kells said: "Give me the Bellmann stuff."

Beery was staring open-mouthed at Kells. "——! Gerry, you can't do this," he said. "I told Tommy we had the girl. . . ."

"She escaped."

Granquist put on her coat. She looked at Kells and her eyes were soft, wet. She went to him and took a heavy manila envelope out of her pocket, handed it to him. She stood a moment looking up at him and then she turned and went to the door. She put her hand on the knob and turned it, and then took her hand away from the knob and held it up to her face. She stood like that for a little while and then she said: "All right," very low.

She said: "All right," again, very low and distinctly, and turned from the door and went back to the big chair and sat down.

Kells said: "Okey, Shep."

5

ABOUT ten minutes later Beery got up and let Captain Hayes of the Hollywood Division in. There were two plain-clothesmen and an assistant coroner following close behind him.

The assistant coroner examined Bellmann's body and looked up in a little while and said: "Instantaneous—two wounds, probably .32 caliber — one touched the heart." He stood up. "Dead about twenty minutes."

Hayes picked up the gun from where Kells had replaced it under the table, examined it, wrapped it carefully.

Kells smiled at him. "Old school," he said, "along with silencers and dictaphones. Nowadays they wear gloves."

Hayes said: "What's your name?"

Beery said: "Oh, I'm sorry—I thought you knew each other. This is Gerry Kells . . . Captain. Hayes."

"What were you doing here?" Hayes was a heavily built man with bright brown eyes. He spoke very rapidly.

"Shep and I came up to call on my girl friend here—" Kells indicated Granquist, who was still sitting with her coat on, staring at them all in turn, expressionlessly. "We found it just the way you see it."

Hayes glanced at Beery, who nodded. Hayes spoke to Granquist: "Is that right, Miss?"

She looked up at him blankly for a moment, then nodded slowly.

"That'll be about all, I guess." Hayes looked at Kells: "You still at the Lancaster?"

Kells nodded. "You can always reach me through Shep," he said.

Hayes said: "Come on, Miss."

Granquist got up and went into the dressing-room and packed a few things in a small traveling-bag.

One of the plain-clothesmen opened the door, let two ambulance men in. They put Bellmann's body on a stretcher, carried it out.

Kells leaned against the door-frame of the dressing-room, watched Granquist. He said: "I'll be down in the morning with an attorney. In the meantime, keep quiet."

She nodded vaguely and closed the bag, came out of the dressing-room. She said: "Let's go."

The manager of the apartment-house was in the corridor with one of the Filipino bell-boys, a reporter from the *Journal,* and a guest.

The manager said: "I can't understand it—no one heard the shots."

Hayes said: "Uh huh."

One of the plain-clothesmen looked superiorly at the manager. He said: "The thunder covered the shots."

They all went down the corridor except Beery and Kells. Beery said: "So long," to the captain.

The manager stayed behind a moment. He said: "I'll close up Miss Granquist's apartment."

Kells said: "Never mind—I'll bring the key down."

The manager was doubtful.

Kells looked very stern. He whispered: "Special investigator." He and Beery went back into the apartment.

Beery called his paper again with additional information: ". . . Captain Hayes made the arrest. . . . And don't forget—the *Chronicle* is always first with the latest. . . ." He hung up, lighted a new cigarette from the butt of another. "From now on," he said, "I'm going to follow you around and phone in the story of my life, from day to day."

Kells asked: "Are you giving it an extra?"

"Sure. It's on the presses now—be on the streets in a little while."

"That's dandy."

Kells went into the kitchen, switched on the light. He looked out the kitchen-window and then he went to a tall cupboard—the kind of cupboard where brooms are kept in a modern apartment—opened the door.

Fenner came out, blinking in the bright light. He said: "I would have had"—he swallowed—"would have had to come out in another minute. I nearly smothered."

"That's too bad."

Beery stood in the doorway. He said: "For the love of the ——!"

Fenner went into the living-room, sat down. He was breathing hard.

Kells strolled in behind him and sat down across the room, facing him.

Fenner took out a handkerchief and dabbed at his mouth and forehead. He said: "I followed her, as you suggested, and when she went in through the lobby, I came up to the side-stair intending to meet her up here."

Kells smiled gently, nodded.

"I didn't want to be seen following her through the lobby, you know."

"No."

Beery was still standing in the kitchen doorway, staring bewilderedly at Fenner.

"I knocked but she hadn't come up yet," Fenner went on, "so I opened the door—it was unlocked—and came in."

Kells said: "The door was unlocked?"

Fenner nodded. "In a few minutes I heard her coming up the hall and she was talking to a man. I went into the kitchen, of course, and she and Bellmann came in. They were arguing about something. Bellmann went into the bathroom, I think, and then I heard the two shots during one of the peals of thunder. I didn't know what to do —and then when I was about to come out and see what had happened, you knocked at the door."

Fenner paused, took a long breath. "I didn't know it was you, of course, so I hid in the cupboard."

Kells said: "Oh."

"I thought it would be better if I didn't get mixed up in a thing of this kind, anyway."

Kells said, "Oh," again. Then he looked up at Beery. "Sit down, Shep," he said. "I want to tell you a story."

Beery sat down near the door.

Kells stretched one long leg over the arm of his chair, made himself as comfortable as possible.

He said: "This afternoon I told Mister Fenner"—he inclined his head towards Fenner in one slow, emphatic movement—"that I knew a gal who had some very hot political info that she wanted to sell."

Beery nodded almost imperceptibly.

"He was interested and asked me to send her to his hotel tonight. I had a talk with her, and the stuff sounded so good that I got interested too—took her to Fenner's myself."

Fenner was extremely uncomfortable. He looked at Kells and dabbed at his forehead; his lips were bent into a faint forced smile.

"We offered the information—information of great political value—to Mister Fenner at a very fair price," Kells went on. "He agreed to it and called the manager of his hotel and asked him to bring up an envelope containing a large amount in cash."

Kells turned his eyes slowly from Beery to Fenner. "When the manager came in—a couple of benders came in with him. They'd been waiting in the next apartment, listening across the air-shaft to find out what they had to heist —it was supposed to look like Rose's stick-up—or Belmann's."

Fenner stood up.

Kells said: "But it was Mister Fenner's. Mister Fenner wanted to eat his cake and have it too."

Fenner took two steps forward. His eyes were flashing. He said: "That is a lie, sir—a tissue of falsehood!"

Kells spoke very softly, enunciating each word carefully, distinctly: "Sit down, you dirty —— ——!"

Fenner straightened, glared at Kells. He half turned towards the door.

Kells got up and took three slow steps, then two swiftly, crashed his fist into Fenner's face. There was a sickening crackly noise and Fenner fell down very hard.

Kells jerked him up and pushed him back into the chair. Kells' face was worried, solicitous. He said very low—almost whispered: "Sit still."

Then he went back to his chair and sat down.

"He's been over-acting all evening," Kells inclined his head towards Fenner. "One of the boys sapped the manager. They fanned me and made a pass for

Granquist's handbag. She tossed it out the window; I smacked one of them and the other one went after the bag. Granquist faked going after the bag too, and I sent Fenner after her, figuring that the stuff wasn't in the bag and that she'd come back here and that the three of us would get together here for another little talk."

Fenner was pressing himself back into the corner of the chair. He was holding his hands to his bloody face and moaning a little.

"When I sent Fenner after Granquist," Kells went on, "I gave him a gun—one of the boy's. He was so excited about getting to the bag, or keeping G. in sight, that he forgot to frisk the manager for his big dough. . . ."

Kells took the yellow envelope out of his pocket. "So I got it." He leaned forward, pressed the edges of the envelope and a little packet of cigar coupons fell out on the floor.

"Almost enough to get a package of razor blades."

Beery grinned.

Kells said: "Granquist headed over here, so Fenner knew that the bag had been a stall, followed her. When she came in past the office, he ducked up the side way and, figuring that she had come right up, knocked at her door."

Beery said: "How did he know which apartment was hers?"

"He had us tailed from my hotel early this evening. His man got her number from the mail-boxes in the lobby, gave it to him before we got to his place tonight."

Beery nodded.

Kells said: "Am I boring you?"

"Yes. Bore me some more."

"Bellmann had come up here after some things he wanted—some very personal things that he couldn't trust anyone else to get. He probably paid his way into the apartment—I'll have to check up on that—and didn't find what he was looking for, and when Fenner knocked, he thought it was either Granquist, who he wanted to talk to anyway, or whoever let him in."

Kells took a deep breath. "He opened the door, and . . ." Kells paused, got up and went to Fenner. He looked down at the little twisted man, smiled. "Mister Fenner knows a good thing when he sees it—he jockeyed Bellmann into a good spot and shot him through the heart. . . ."

Fenner mumbled something through his hands.

"He waited for a nice roll of off-stage thunder and murdered him."

Beery said: "That's certainly swell. And I haven't got any more job than a rabbit." He stood up and stared disconsolately at Kells. "My——! Bellmann killed by the boss of the opposition—the most perfect political break that could happen, for my paper—and I turn in an innocent girl, swing it exactly the other way, politically. My ——!"

Beery sat down and reached for the telephone.

Kells said: "Wait a minute."

Beery held up his right hand, the forefinger pointed, brought it down emphatically towards Kells. "——!"

Kells said: "Wait a minute, Shep." His voice was very gentle. His mouth was curved in a smile and his eyes were very hot and intent.

Beery sat still.

Fenner got up. He was holding a darkening handkerchief to his face. He tottered towards the door.

Kells went past him to the door, locked it. He said: "Both of you —— pipe down and sit still till I finish."

He shoved Fenner back into the chair.

"As I was about to say—you were a little late, you heard Granquist outside the door, wiped off the rod—if you didn't, I did when I put it back—put it under the table and ducked into the cupboard."

Beery said slowly: "What do you mean, *you* wiped it off?"

Kells didn't answer. Instead, he squatted in front of Fenner. "Listen, you," he said. "What do you think I

put on that act for—ribbed Granquist into taking the fall? Because *she* can beat it." His elbows were on his knees. He pointed his finger forcibly at Fenner, sighted across it. *"You* couldn't. You couldn't get to first base."

Fenner's face was a bruised, fearful mask. He stared blankly at Kells.

"A few days ago—yesterday—" Kells went on, "all I wanted was to be let alone. I wasn't. I was getting along fine—quietly—legitimately—and Rose and you and the rest of these——gave me action."

He stood up. "All right—I'm beginning to like it." He walked once to the window, back, bent over Fenner. *"I'm taking over your organization, Fenner.* Do you hear me? *I'm* going to run this town for a while—ride hell out it."

He glanced at Beery, smiled. Then he turned again to Fenner, spoke quietly: "I was going East tomorrow. Now *you're* going. You're going to turn everything over to me and take a nice long trip—or they're going to break your ——damned neck with a rope."

Kells went to the small desk, sat down. He found a pen, scribbled on a piece of Venice stationery. "And just to make it 'legal, and in black and white,' as the big business men say—you're going to sign this—and Mister Beery is going to witness it."

Beery said: "You can't get away with a . . ."

"No?" Kells paused, glanced over his shoulder at Beery. "I'll get away with it big, young fellah. And stop worrying about your job—you've got a swell job with me. How would you like to be Chief of Police?"

He went on writing, then stopped suddenly, turned to Fenner. "I've got a better idea," he said. "You'll stay here, where I can hold a book on you. You stay here, and in your same spot—only you can't go to the toilet without my O.K." He got up and stood in the center of the room and jerked his head towards the desk. "There it is. Get down on it—quick."

Fenner said: "Certainly not," thickly.

Kells looked at the floor. He said: "Call Hayes, Shep."

Beery reached for the telephone very slowly and deliberately.

Fenner didn't look at him. He held his hands tightly over his face for a moment, and mumbled! "My ——!" and then he got up and went unsteadily to the desk, sat down. He stooped over the piece of paper, read it carefully.

Kells said: "If Granquist beats the case—and she will—and you don't talk out of turn, I'll tear it up in a month or so."

Fenner picked up the pen, shakily signed.

Kells looked at Beery, and Beery got up and went over and read the paper. He said: "This is a confession. Does it make me an accessory?"

Kells said: "It isn't dated."

Beery signed and folded the paper and handed it to Kells.

Kells glanced at it, looked at Fenner. "Now I want you to call your *Coast Guardian* man, Dickinson, and any other key-men you can get in touch with, and tell them to be at your joint in the Manhattan in a half-hour."

Fenner went into the bathroom, washed his face. He came back and sat down at the telephone.

Kells held the folded paper out to Beery. "You're going downtown, anyway, Shep," he said. "Stick this in the safe at your office—I'll be down in the morning and take it to the bank."

Beery said: "Do I look that simple? I've got a wife and family."

Kells grinned. He didn't say anything. He put the folded paper in his pocket.

"Anyway, I'm not going downtown. I'm coming along."

Kells nodded abstractedly, glanced at his watch. It was twenty-two minutes past ten.

Outside, there was a long ragged buzz of far-away thunder. The telephone clicked as Fenner dialed a number.

6

THEY sat in Fenner's apartment at the Manhattan, and Beery, at Fenner's instance, poured many drinks.

Fenner sat at one end of the divan, still holding a handkerchief to his face. That had been explained as a result of the hold-up earlier in the evening.

Hanline, Fenner's secretary, was there—and Abe Gowdy, Fenner's principal contact man with the liberal element. They hadn't been able to reach Dickinson.

Gowdy swung the vote of every gambler, grafter, thief, bootlegger and so on, in the county, excepting the few independents who tried to get along without protection. He was a bald, paunchy man with big white bulbs of flesh under his eyes, a loose pale mouth. He wore dark, quiet clothes and didn't drink.

Hanline was a curly-haired, thin-nosed Jew. He drank a great deal.

He and Beery and Kells all drank a great deal.

Kells walked up and down. He said: "Try him again."

Fenner wearily reached for the phone, asked for a Fitzroy number. He listened a little while, hung up.

Kells stopped near Fenner, looked first at Gowdy, then Hanline.

"Gentlemen," he said. "Lee"—he indicated Fenner with a fond pat on the shoulder—"Lee and I have entered into a partnership." He paused, picked up a small glass full of whiskey and cracked ice, drained it.

"We all know," he went on, "that things haven't been so good the last three or four years—and we know that unless some very radical changes are made in the city government, things won't get any better."

Hanline nodded.

"Lee and I have talked things over and decided to join forces." Kells put down the glass.

Gowdy said: "What do you mean, join forces, Mister Kells?"

Kells cleared his throat, glanced at Beery. "You boys have the organization," he said. "You, Gowdy—and Frank Jensen, and O'Malley—and Lee, here. My contribution is very important political information, which I'll handle in my own way and at my own time—and a lot of friends in the East who are going to be on their way out here tomorrow."

Hanline looked puzzled. Gowdy glanced expressionlessly at Fenner.

"Bellmann's dead," Kells went on, "and the circumstances of his murder can be of great advantage to us if they're handled in exactly the right way. But that, alone, isn't going to swing an election. We've got the personal following of all this administration to beat—and we've got Rose's outfit to beat. . . ."

Hanline said: "Rose?"

Kells poured himself another drink. "Rose has built up a muscle organization of his own in the last few months—and a week or so ago he threw in with Bellmann."

Hanline and Gowdy glanced at one another, at Fenner.

Kells said: "There it is." He sat down.

Fenner got up and went into the bedroom. He came back directly, said: "It's a good proposition, Abe. Mister Kells wants to put the heat on Rose. . . ."

Kells interrupted: "I want to reach Dickinson tonight and see if we can't get the first number of the *Guardian* on the streets by morning. There are certain angles on the Bellmann thing that the other papers won't touch."

Hanline said: "Maybe he's at Ansel's—but they don't answer the phone there after ten."

"Who's Ansel?"

Hanline started to answer but Gowdy interrupted him. "Did you know that

Rose was backing Ansel?" Gowdy was looking at Fenner.

Fenner shook his head, then spoke to Kells: "Ansel runs a couple crap-games down on Santa Monica Boulevard—Dickinson plays there quite a bit."

Kells said: "So Dickie is a gambler?"

Hanline laughed. "I'll bet he's made a hundred thousand dollars with the dirt racket in the last year," he said. "And I'll bet he hasn't got a dollar and a quarter."

Kells smiled at Fenner. "You ought to take better care of your hired men," he said. Then he got up and finished his drink and put on his hat. "I'll go over and see if I can find him."

Eeery said: "I'll come along."

Kells shook his head slightly.

Hanline stood up, stretched. He said: "It's the first building on the south side of the street, west of Gardner—used to be a scene-painter's warehouse or something like that—upstairs."

"Thanks." Kells asked Fenner: "Dickinson's the guy that was typewriting at the place downtown?"

Fenner nodded.

Hanline said: "If you don't mind, I'm going back downstairs and get some sleep. I was out pretty late last night."

"Sure." Kells glanced at Gowdy.

Gowdy said: "I'll stick around."

Kells and Hanline went out, down in the elevator. Hanline got off at the fifth floor.

Kells stopped at the desk, asked for the house detective. The clerk pointed out a heavy, sad-eyed man who sat reading a paper near the door. Kells went over to him and said: "You needn't hold the man Fenner was going to file charges against."

The man put down his paper. He said: "Hell, he was gone when I got upstairs. There wasn't nobody there but Mister Dillon."

Kells said: "Oh." He scratched the back of his head. "How's Dillon?"

"He'll be all right."

Kells went out and got into a cab.

7

NSEL'S turned out to be a dark, three-story business block set flush with the sidewalk. There were big For Rent signs in the plate-glass windows, and there was a dark stairway at one side.

Kells told the cab-driver to wait, went upstairs.

Someone opened a small window in a big heavily timbered door, surveyed Kells dispassionately.

Kells said: "I want to see Ansel."

"He ain't here."

"I'm a friend of Dickinson's—I want to see him."

The window closed and the door swung slowly open. Kells went into a very small room littered with newspapers and cigarette butts. The man who had looked at him through the window, patted his pockets methodically, silently.

Another man, a very dark-skinned Italian or Greek, sat in a worn wicker chair tilted back against one wall.

He said: "Your friend Dickinson—he is very drunk."

Kells said: "So am I," and then the other man finished feeling his pockets, went to another heavy door, opened it.

Kells went into a very big room. It was dark except for two clots of bright light at the far end. He walked slowly back through the darkness, and the hum of voices grew louder, broke up into words:

"Eight. . . . Point is eight, a three way. . . . Get your bets down, men. . . . Throws five—point is eight. . . . Throws eleven, a field point, men. . . . Throws four—another fielder. Get 'em in the field, boys. . . . Five. . . . Seven out. Next man. Who likes this lucky shooter? . . ."

Each of the two tables was lined two-deep with men. One powerful green-shaded light hung above each. The dice-man's voice droned on:

"Get down on him, boys. . . . Ten—the hard way. . . . Five. . . . Ten—the winner. . . . All right, boys, he's coming out. Chunk it in. . . ."

Kells saw Dickinson. He was standing at one end of one of the tables. He was swaying back and forth a little and his eyes were half closed, and he held a thick sheaf of bills in his left hand.

"Seven—the winner. . . ."

Dickinson leaned forward and put his forefinger unsteadily down beside a stack of bills on the line. The change-man reached over, counted it and put a like amount beside it.

"Drag fifty, Dick," he said. "Hundred dollar limit."

Dickinson said thickly: "Bet it all."

The change-man smiled patiently, picked up a fifty-dollar bill and tossed it on the table nearer Dickinson.

A small, pimpled old man at the other end of the table, caught the dice as they were thrown to him, put them into the black leather box, breathed into it devoutly, rolled.

Kells elbowed closer to the table.

"Eleven—the winner. . . ."

Dickinson stared disgustedly at the change-man as a hundred dollars in tens and twenties was counted out, lain down beside his line bet. The change-man said: "Drag a C, Dick."

"Bet it!" Dickinson said angrily.

Kells looked at the change-man. He said: "Can you raise the limit if I cover it behind the line?"

The man glanced at a tall well-dressed youth behind him for confirmation, nodded.

Kells took a wad of bills out of his trouser pocket and put two hundred-dollars down behind the line. Dickinson looked up and his bleary, heavy-lidded eyes came gradually to focus on Kells.

He said: "Hello there," very heartily. Then he looked as if he was trying hard to remember, and said: "Kells! How are ya, boy?"

At mention of Kells' name it became very quiet for a moment.

Kells said: "I'm fine."

The little, pimpled man rolled.

The dice-man said: "Six—the easy one. . . . He will or he won't. . . . Nine—pays the field. . . . Six—right. . . ."

The change-man picked up Kells' two hundred-dollar bills, tossed them down beside Dickinson's bet."

Dickinson grinned. He said: "Bet it."

Kells took a thousand-dollar note from his breast pocket, put it down behind the line.

Dickinson said: "Better lay off—I'm right. . . ."

"Get down on the bill." Kells smiled faintly, narrowly.

"—— damned if I won't." Dickinson counted his money on the table and the money in his hand: "Four hundred, six, eight, nine, a thousand, thousand one hundred and thirty. Tap me."

The tall young man said: "Hurry up, gentlemen — you're holding up the game."

Several men wandered over from the other table. The little man holding the dice-box said: "——! I don't want. . . ."

Kells was counting out the additional hundred and thirty dollars.

Dickinson said: "Roll."

"Eleven—the winner."

The change man picked up Kells' money, cut off a twenty for the house, threw the rest down in front of Dickinson.

The little man raked in the few dollars he had won for himself, walked away.

The dice-man picked up the box.

Kells said: "Got enough?"

"Hell, no! I'll bet it all on my own roll." Dickinson held out his hand for the box.

"Make it snappy, boys." The tall young man frowned, nodded briefly at Kells.

Dickinson was checking up on the amount. He said. "Two thousand, two hundred and forty. . . ."

Kells put three thousand-dollar notes

behind the line. The dice-man threw a dozen or more glittering red dice on the table—Dickinson carefully picked out two.

"Get down your bets, men. . . . A new shooter. . . . We take big ones and little ones. . . . Come, don't-come, hard way, and in the field. . . . Bet 'em either way. . . ."

Dickinson was shaking the box gently, tenderly, near his ear. He rolled.

"Three—that's a bad one. . . ."

Kells picked up his three notes, and the change-man raked up the bills in front of Dickinson, counted them into a stack, cut off one and handed the rest to Kells.

"Next man. . . . Get down on the next lucky shooter, boys. . . ."

Kells folded the bills, stuck them into his pocket.

Dickinson looked at the tall young man. He said: "Let me take five hundred, Less."

The young man didn't look at him; turned and walked over to the other table.

Kells gestured with his head and went over to a round green-covered table out of the circle of light. Dickinson followed him. They sat down.

Kells said: "Can you get the paper out by tomorrow morning?"

Dickinson was fumbling through his pockets, brought out a dark-brown pint bottle. He took out the cork, held the bottle towards Kells. He said: "Wha' for?"

Kells shook his head, but Dickinson shoved the bottle into his hands. Kells took a drink, handed it back."

"Bellmann was fogged tonight and I want to give it a big spread."

"The hell you say." Dickinson stared blankly at Kells. "Well wha' d' y' know about that!" Then he seemed to remember Kells' question. "Sure."

Kells said: "Let's go."

"Wait a minute. Let's have another drink."

They drank.

Dickinson said: "Listen. Wha' d' y' think happened tonight? Somebody called me up and offered me ten grand, cold turkey, to ditch Lee."

"Ditch him, how?"

"I don't know. They said all I had to do was gum up the works some way so that the paper wouldn't come out. They said I'd get five in cash in the mail tomorrow, and the rest after the primaries."

"What did you say?"

"I said; 'Listen, sister, Lee Fenner's been a —— damned good friend to me. I said. . . ."

Kells said: "Sister?"

"Yeah. It was a broad."

They got up and went through the semi-darkness to the little room, out and downstairs to the street. It was raining very hard. Dickinson said he had a car, and Kells paid off the cab, and they went into the vacant lot alongside the building.

Dickinson's car was a Ford coupé; he finally found his keys and opened the door.

Then a bright spot-light was switched on in a car at the curb. There was a sharp choked roar and something bit into Kells' leg, into his side.

Dickinson stumbled, fell down on his knees on the running-board; his face and the upper part of his body sagged forward to the floor of the car. He lay still.

8

KELLS lay down in the mud beside the car and drew up his knees, and he could taste blood in his mouth. His teeth were sunk savagely, deeply into his lower lip and there were jagged wires of pain in his brain, jagged wires in his side.

He knew it had been a shotgun, and he lay in the mud, with rain whipping his face, and wondered if Dickinson was dead; waited for the gun to cough again.

Then the spot-light went out and

Kells could hear the car being shifted into gear; he twisted his head a little and saw it pass through the light near the corner—a black touring-car with the side-curtains drawn—a Cadillac.

He crawled up on to the running-board of the Ford and shook Dickinson a little, and then he steadily, painfully, pushed Dickinson up into the car—slowly.

He pressed the knob that unlocked the opposite door, and limped around the car and crawled into the driver's seat. He could feel blood on his side; blood pounded through his head, his eyes. He pried the keys out of Dickinson's hand and started the motor.

Dickinson was an inert heap beside him. He groaned, coughed in a curious dry way.

Kells said: "All right, boy. We'll fix it up in a minute."

Dickinson coughed again in the curious way that was like a laugh. He tried to sit up, fell forward, his head banged against the windshield. Kells pulled him back into the seat and drove out of the lot, turned east on Santa Monica.

Dickinson tried to say something, groped with one hand in the side-pocket. He finally gave it up, managed to gasp: "Gun—here."

Kells said: "Sit still."

They went down Santa Monica Boulevard very fast, turned north on La Brea. Kells stopped halfway up the block and felt in Dickinson's pocket for the bottle; but it had been broken, the pocket was full of wet glass.

They went up La Brea to Franklin, over Franklin to Cahuenga, up Cahuenga and Iris to Cullen's house.

Kell's side and leg had become numb. He got out of the car as quickly as he could, limped up the steps. Cullen answered the first ring. He stood in the doorway, looking elaborately disgusted, said: "Again?"

Kells said: "Give me a hand, Willie. Hurry up." He started back down the steps.

"No! —— damn you and your jams!"

Kells turned and stared at Cullen expressionlessly, and then he went on down the steps. Cullen followed him, muttering, and they got Dickinson out of the car, carried him up into the house.

Cullen was breathing heavily. He said: "Why the hell don't you take him to the Receiving Hospital?"

"I've been mixed up in five shootings in the last thirty-two hours." Kells went to the telephone, grinned over his shoulder at Cullen. "It's like old times—one more, and they'll hang me on principle."

"Haven't you got any other friends? This place was lousy with coppers *yesterday.*"

"Wha's the matter, darling?"

Kells and Cullen turned, looked at the stairway. Eileen, Cullen's girl, was standing half way down. She swayed back and forth, put her hand unsteadily on the banister. She was very drunk.

She drawled: "Hello, Gerry."

Cullen said: "Go back up stairs and put on your clothes, you!" He said it very loudly.

Kells laughed. He said: "Oh ——! I can't telephone. Cal Doc Janis—will you, Willie?" He limped to the door, looked down at his torn, muddy, blood-stained clothes.

"Loan me a coat, Willie," he said. "I'll get wet."

A BLACK touring-car with the side-curtains drawn was parked in the reserved space in front of the Manhattan. Kells had been about to park across the street; he slowed down and blinked at it. The engine was running and there was a man at the wheel. It was a Cadillac.

He stepped on the throttle, careened around the corner, parked in front of the library. He jumped out and took the revolver out of the side-pocket, slipped it into the pocket of Cullen's big coat; he turned up the deep collar and hurried painfully back across the street,

down an alley to a service entrance of the hotel.

The boy in the elevator said: "Well, I guess I was right. I guess it's going to rain all night."

Kells said: "Uh huh."

"Tch, tch, tch." The boy shook his head sadly.

"Has Mister Fenner had any visitors since I left?"

"No, sir—I don't think so. Not many people in and out tonight. There was three gentlemen went up to nine a little while ago. They was drunk, I guess."

He slid the door open. "Ten, sir."

Kells said: "Thank you."

He listened at the door of ten-sixteen, heard no sound. He rang the bell and stood close to the wall with the revolver in his hand. The inner hallway was narrow—the door would have to be opened at least halfway before he could be seen.

It opened almost at once, slowly. A yellow-white face took form in the darkness, and Kells stepped into the doorway. He held the revolver belly-high in front of him. The yellow-white face faded backwards as Kells went in, until it was the black outline of a man's head against orange light of the living-room, until it was the figure of a short Latin standing with his back against the wall at one side of the door, his arms stretched out.

Beyond him, Fenner and Beery kneeled on the floor, their faces to the wall. On the other side of the room, O'Donnell stood with a great blue automatic levelled at Kell's chest.

O'Donnell was bare-headed and a white bulge of gauze and cotton was plastered across his scalp. His mouth was open and he breathed through it slowly, audibly.

Except for the sharp sound of O'Donnell's breathing, it was entirely still.

Kells said: "I'll bet I can shoot faster than you, Adenoids."

O'Donnell didn't say anything. His pale eyes glittered in a sick face, and the big automatic was dull and steady in his fat pink hand.

Fenner leaned forward, put his head against the wall. Beery turned slowly and looked at Kells. The Mexican was motionless, bright-eyed.

Then Beery said: "Look out!" and something dull and terrible crashed against the back of Kells' head, there was dull and terrible blackness. It was filled with thunder and smothering blue, and something hot and alive pulsed in Kells' hand. He fell.

THERE was a light that hurt his eyes very much, even when they were closed. Someone was throwing water in his face. He said: "Stop that, —— damn it—you're getting me wet!"

Beery said: "Sh—easy."

Kells opened his eyes a little. "The place is backwards."

"This is the one next-door, the one across the air-shaft, where Fenner's stick-up men were stashed. Fenner had the key." Beery spoke very quietly.

"——! my head. How did I get in here?"

Beery said: "Papa carried you." He stood up and went to the door for a minute, came back and sat down. "And what a piece of business! You were out on your feet—absolutely cold—squeezed that iron, one, two, three, four, five, six—like that. One in the wall about six inches above my head, five in baby-face."

"That was O'Donnell." Kells closed his eyes and moved his head a little. "Then I faw down." He opened his eyes.

Beery nodded.

"Who hit me?"

"Rose."

Kells looked interested. "What with—a piano?"

"A vase. . . ."

"Vahze."

Beery said: "A vase—a big one out of the bedroom. I don't think he had a gun."

"Would you mind beginning at the beginning?" Kells closed his eyes.

"After you left, Fenner and Gowdy sat there like a couple bumps on a log, afraid to crack in front of me."

Kells nodded carefully, held his head in his hands.

"After a while, Gowdy got bored and went home—he lives around the corner. I was sucking up a lot of red-eye, having a swell time. Then about five minutes before you got here, the bell rang and Fenner went to the door, backed in with Rose and O'Donnell and the spiggoty. O'Donnell and the spick were snowed to the eyes. Rose said: 'What did Kells get from the gal that bumped Bellmann, and where is it?' Fenner went into a nose-dive—he was scared wet, anyway. They made us get down on the floor. . . ."

Kells laughed. He said: "You looked like a couple communicants."

". . . and Rose frisked both of us and started tearing up the furniture. Some way or other, I got the idea that whether he found what he was looking for or not, we weren't going to tell about it afterwards."

Beery paused, lighted a cigarette, went on quietly: "Rose was sore as hell, and O'Donnell and the greaser were licking their chops for blood. The greaser kept fingering a chiv in his belt —you know: the old noiseless ear to ear gag."

Kells said: "Maybe. They popped Dickinson and me outside Ansel's. If they're that far in the open, they'd want to get Fenner too."

"And Beery—the innocent bystander. . . ."

"I doubt it though, Shep. I don't think Rose would have come along if it was a kill."

"Well, anyway—he'd gotten around to the bedroom when you rang. He switched out the light and waited in there in the dark. You came in and went into your wild-west act with baby-face, and Rose came out behind you and took a bead on your skull with the vase —vahze. Then he and the greaser screwed—quick."

Kells reached suddenly into his inside pocket, then took his hand out, sighed. "Didn't he fan me?"

"No. I grabbed O'Donnell's gun when he fell—anyway, I think Rose was too scared to think about that."

Kells said: "Go on."

Beery looked immensely superior. "Well, the old rapid-fire Beery brain got to work," he said. "I figured that you had to be gotten out of there quick, and I remembered what you'd said about this place next-door. Fenner was about to go into his fit. I got the key from him and talked about thirty seconds' worth of sense, and carried you in here —and the gun." He nodded at the revolver on the couch beside Kells.

"Where's Fenner now?"

"Over at the station, filing murder charges against Rose and the greaser."

Kells said: "That's swell."

"The house-dick and a bunch of coppers and a lot of neighbors who had heard the barrage got here at about the same time. It was the fastest police action I've ever seen; must have been one of the radio cars. I listened through the air-shaft. Fenner had pulled himself together, and told a beautiful story about Rose and O'Donnell and the Mex crashing in, and O'Donnell getting rubbed in a fight with Rose."

Beery mashed out his cigarette. "He's telling it over at headquarters now—or maybe he's on his way back. You've been out about a half-hour."

Kells sat up unsteadily. He said: "Give me a drink of water."

A LITTLE later there was a tap at the door, and Beery opened it, let Fenner in.

Fenner looked very tired. He said: "How are you, Gerry?"

"I'm fine, Lee—how are you?" Kells grinned.

"Terrible—terrible! I can't stand this kind of thing." Fenner sat down.

"Maybe you'd better take a trip, after all." Kells smiled faintly, picked up the revolver. "Things are going to be more in the open. I'll have to carry a gun." He looked down at the revolver.

"By ——! I'll get a permit for a change," he said. "Can you fix that up?"

Fenner nodded wearily. "I guess so."

"And Lee, we made a deal tonight—I mean early—the twenty-five grand, you know. I'm going to handle the stuff, of course; but in the interests of my client, Miss Granquist, I'll have to consummate the sale."

Fenner looked at the floor.

"A check'll be all right."

Fenner nodded. "I'll go in and make it out," he said. "Then I'll have to say good night—I'm all in."

Kells said: "That'll be all right."

Fenner went out and closed the door.

Kells sat looking at the door for a moment, and then he said:

"Shep—you're the new editor of the *Coast Guardian.* How do you like that?"

"Lousy. I don't carry enough insurance."

"You'll be all right. A hundred a week and all the advertising you can sell, on the side."

"When do I start?"

"Right now. I parked Dickinson up at Bill Cullen's. I'll drop you there, and you can get the details from him—if he's conscious. I'll turn the, uh—data over to you."

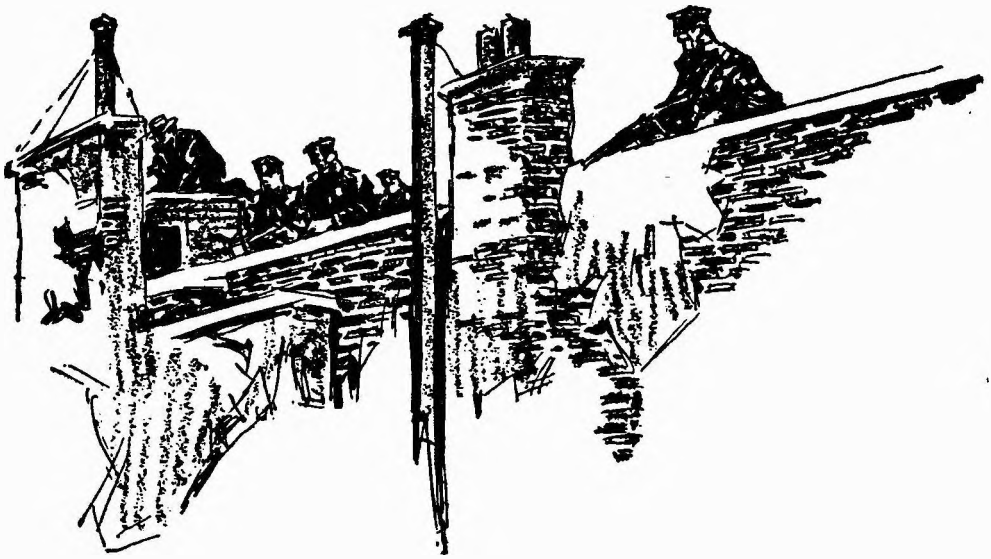
Beery rubbed his eyes, yawned. He smiled a little and said: "Oh, well, what the hell. I guess I'm beginning to like it, too."

Kells looked at his wrist. "The —— smashed my watch—what time is it?"

"Twelve-two."

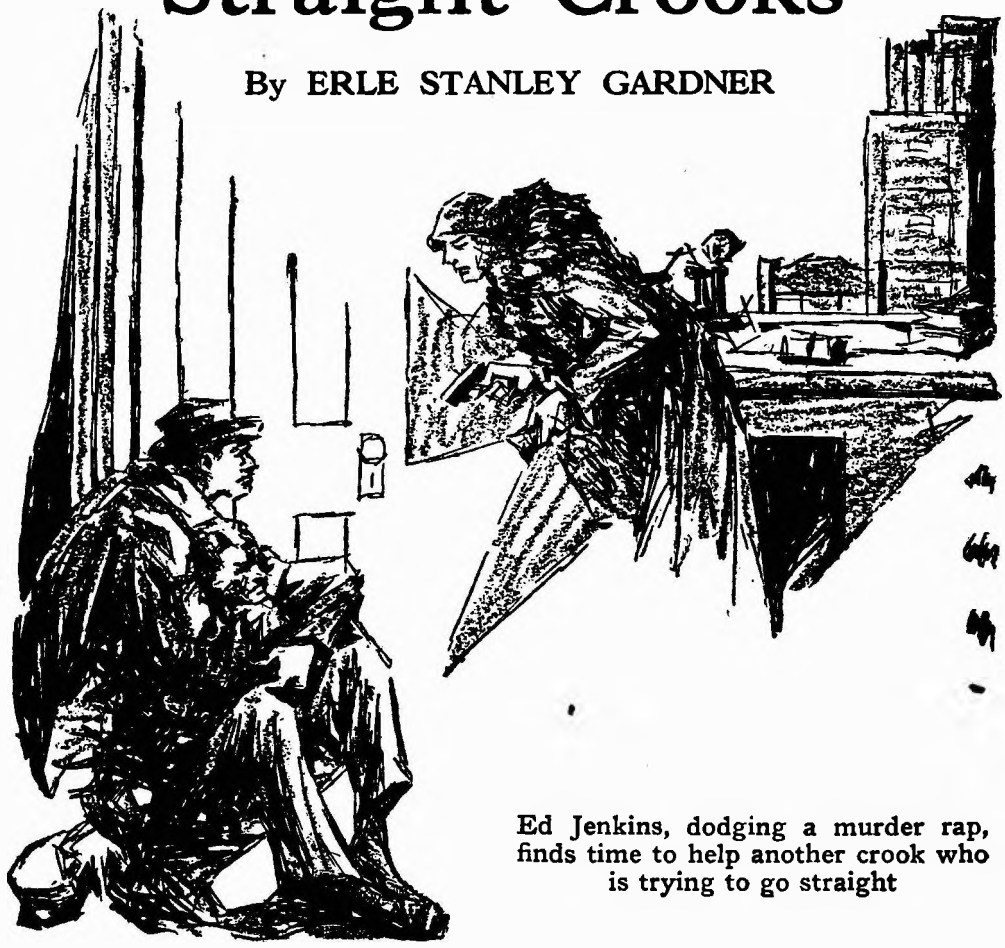
"——! I'm late." Kells picked up the telephone and called a Hempstead number.

He said: "Hello, baby. . . . Sure. . . . Have you got any ham and eggs? . . . Have you got some absorbent cotton and bandages and iodine? . . . That's fine, I'll be up in about ten minutes. . . . I've been on a party."



Straight Crooks

By ERLE STANLEY GARDNER



Ed Jenkins, dodging a murder rap, finds time to help another crook who is trying to go straight

THE CRACKER paused before the door of the apartment and listened. It was a fool move. We'd already determined, as nearly as we could, that the apartment was empty. Standing before the door, bent over, was simply suicidal. We couldn't tell when someone was going to pop out of one of the other apartments, even if it *was* after midnight.

I pushed him to one side and fitted a skeleton key.

The Cracker started to whisper. I kicked viciously at his shin. He shut up.

A skeleton key is a difficult thing to handle. It nearly always makes more or less of a noise, and sometimes has to be held at just a right angle. It isn't like a regular key that fits the guides perfectly.

The Cracker was peering nervously up and down the hallway, looking like a bum actor trying to register guilt. I could have killed him with pleasure.

The bolt clicked in the door. I pulled in on the knob so the latch wouldn't make a racket, turned, and pushed the door noiselessly open.

The apartment was dark as pitch.

The Cracker started to whisper something again.

I grabbed him right by the knot of the necktie and dragged him in the apartment with me, turned, closed the door and talked to him there in the dark.

"No wonder you're a cheap crook with a list of petty convictions as long as your arm," I snarled at him. "For —— sake don't stand out in the hallway and whisper. Talk out like a man. A whisper always attracts attention, low-voiced conversation sounds on the up and up. People strain their ears to listen to whispers."

He was yammering.

"Don't make so much racket. Maybe this apartment ain't empty."

"Listen," I told him. "You shadowed the broad out. You telephoned the apartment, you sent a telegram. The telephone didn't answer, and there's the telegram notice on the knob of the door right now. What more do you want?

"I admit we're taking a chance, but when we've done all we can to smooth out the way ahead of us, we've got to quit worrying and barge right ahead.

"If the apartment was occupied do you think we'd stand any more chance of a getaway by hissing out a lot of whispers than by talking right out?"

And I clicked on the light switch.

The Cracker jumped back, shielded his face with his arm.

"No, no, not the lights! Use a flash!"

I laughed at the cheap crook. Use a flash! Signal to anyone who saw it through the windows or against the shades that a burglar was in the place! No wonder The Cracker was a cheap hanger-on of the underworld! Turn on the lights and no one would think anything of it. Use a flash . . . oh hell, what was the use of trying to educate the bum?

The curtains were drawn, the shades down. The apartment might have been left to order for our visit.

The Cracker got his nerve back after a second or two.

"I guess you're right," he said, speaking out of one side of his mouth.

He was a tall, skinny cuss, and he carried his head thrust forward, his stomach pulled in in a sort of a crouch, as though he'd been trying to make himself look inconspicuous. It's the sort of a humped up appearance one sees sometimes on a tall girl who's tried to make herself look short by humping herself down—and not kidding anybody except herself, and ruining what might have been a good figure.

The Cracker was the sort of a bird who looked like a crook. He gave the impression of trying to hide behind something, even when there wasn't anything to hide behind.

The apartment had four rooms. It was furnished with a pretty good grade of furniture, and there were a few individual touches to it.

The sitting-room was spick and span. The bedroom was a mess of clothes. There was a dress on the floor, lying in a crumpled circle, just as though a girl had walked out of it and left it right where it had dropped. Some stockings had been washed out and hung over the foot of the bed to dry. The bathroom had some filmy underthings hanging over the edge of the bathtub, on faucets, over the towel hangers.

There were trays filled with cigarette ashes, a flask of whiskey, some tubes of cosmetics, a piece of soft paper smeared with wiped-off facial cream.

The Cracker stood in the doorway and rubbered about him.

"Well," I snapped, "let's get busy!"

He started at that, walked over to the davenport, moved the sofa cushions, and began exploring around in the cracks between the upholstery.

"It won't be there," I said.

"Why not?" he wanted to know, twisting his head on his long neck and leering at me. "I guess I got as much right to think as you have!"

I sighed, then started to explain, because I really didn't want to have trouble with him.

"It's because the bedroom's so mussy," I said. "That shows the kind

of a girl she is, careless, sloppy. But this room is cleaned up all spick and span. That means she doesn't live in it much of the time, or else that she has a maid. In either event she'd have the stuff in the bedroom."

The Cracker got sore.

"Say," he said, "I don't know what gives you the right to be so damned superior! I'm in on this job, the same as you are, and I guess I gotta right to look where I want to."

"Okey," I said, and moved into the bedroom.

The mattress didn't show any signs of having been tampered with. I ran my hand around the inside of the pillow cases and found nothing. Back of the pictures showed dust, nothing else. I went through the bureau drawers as a matter of habit, not that I expected to find anything there.

I'd about finished with the conventional places when The Cracker came to the door.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I was nervous. I had no business flyin' off the handle."

"Forget it," I told him, "and look around the edges of the carpet."

He got down on his hands and knees and started searching.

I covered every place I could think of, and drew a blank. I even dipped down inside a big jar of cold cream and smeared my fingers all up, on the off chance that this might be the hiding place.

The Cracker got up from the floor and shook his head lugubriously.

I eyed him speculatively.

"Not here," he said.

I moved over towards him.

"How sure were you that they were here?"

"Awful sure."

"And you don't think she's got them with her?"

"I know she ain't. She's afraid the bulls may search her."

I frowned.

The Cracker started questioning me again.

"Why are you so anxious for them? Why not just go ahead and call in the cops and let them shake her down?"

I shook my head.

"If we find 'em it won't prove anything," he said.

"It'll prove all I want to prove."

"Well, just what is that?"

And I saw the eyes of the man slit a little, as though he was laying a trap for me.

I repeated the story I'd given him before.

"You know the case. Two people hold up a cabaret party, Mr. and Mrs. C. Carton Wright; Mr. and Mrs. Stanley Simpson. They get jewels from Mrs. Wright, and then Simpson makes a charge. There's a shot and Simpson dies. Now I want to solve that murder. My client is paying me to turn up the killer. If this broad has got the bracelet and ring, we've got something to base a third degree on. You claim you know she has the stuff. I'm checking that knowledge, that's all."

The Cracker kept his eyes slitted.

"They had Ed Jenkins, The Phantom Crook, tagged with that crime for a while," he said.

"Sure they did. They pin everything on him that they can't pin on anybody else. But he got himself in the clear by showing the thing couldn't have been pulled by him. One of the chorus girls gave him an alibi."

The Cracker continued to study me.

"You're a funny detective," he drawled. "You act more like a high-class crook."

I didn't know what he had in mind, but if he had thought that statement would have got a rise out of me, he had another guess coming. I yawned and reached for a cigarette.

"Maybe," I said. "My methods are my own."

He continued to watch me. I wondered then if the man had more brains than I'd give him credit for. Did he suspect that I was The Phantom Crook?

That I wasn't a detective at all, but Ed Jenkins, himself?

I lit the cigarette and held the match for a second or two, so that he could see my hand was steady.

"And there was a mysterious girl mixed up in it," he said.

"Yeah," I told him. "But you know who pulled the job, and so do I."

As a matter of fact, it was on account of that mysterious girl that I was mixed up in my present surroundings. Norma Gay had been the queen of the diamond thieves. She'd reformed and started to go straight. But a couple of men had framed her, had her present when what was intended to be a gem robbery was pulled. But Simpson had become impulsive, his wits muddled perhaps by a few too many highballs, and the robbery rap had become a murder case, a frying job.

I'd been accused for a while, then Norma Gay had helped me clear my name. But, until the men who had actually pulled the job had been uncovered, Norma Gay could be brought into it at any time.

I don't think Norma had figured the play out. But I had seen it from the minute I won into the clear. The two crooks knew who Norma was. They had only to spill the information to the police, and Norma would be in bad on account of her record. And the chorus girl hadn't given Norma any alibi.

So I'd started out to solve the case, on the quiet, and here I was, in company with The Cracker, in the apartment of a girl who was supposed to be the moll of the bird that had done the killing, and the moll was supposed to have the ring and bracelet that had been taken from Mrs. Wright.

The Cracker had turned stool pigeon. He figured me for a private dick, or I thought he had. Now he was talking funny. I moved over towards him, carelessly, but I kept the balls of my feet on the floor and my weight balanced over them. If I had to, I could slam home a right that would put The Cracker out of the way for a while and I didn't like the way things were going.

The Cracker had put his finger on the weak spot. If I'd been a detective I'd have gone after the evidence in another way. As it was, it was a case of a crook chasing a crook. The police had pinned everything on me they couldn't explain any other way. I was a convenient goat—and I was too damned weary of the perpetual fight to try and keep my name clear.

Let 'em go ahead and pin things on me, and then let them try to catch me. What the hell did I care? I'd earned the nickname of "The Phantom Crook" because I'd always been able to slip through the fingers of the police, and I was willing to keep right on slipping.

It gave life a zest anyway, my wits against those of the police. And, if they caught me, they were welcome to me.

THE CRACKER sucked in his under lip and gnawed on it in an ecstasy of nervousness. He seemed to be waiting for something to happen.

"Well," I said, "if it's not here, it may be somewhere else. Let's take a look in the kitchen."

He snorted.

"That baby never used the kitchen!" he said. "This apartment was a gift to her. It's just so much velvet. She sleeps here and that's about all."

"Yeah," I told him, not really paying too much attention to what he had to say, "it's pretty soft for Mabel Morgan."

"I'll say," said The Cracker.

He moved out towards the living-room again, stared at the davenport.

I followed his eyes and shrugged my shoulder. The bedroom had been a blank. Maybe I wasn't as shrewd at

doping out hiding places as I thought I'd been.

I went to the kitchen.

The Cracker was right. It hadn't been used. Not by the same baby who had littered up the bedroom, at any rate. Here again everything was slick and clean, spick and span.

"Sugar sacks and flour sacks are always nice hiding places," I told The Cracker.

There was a little uncurtained window up over the sink.

I didn't want to switch on the light with no cover over that window—not until I saw whether or not somebody's bedroom was where I could be seen prowling about the kitchen.

So I walked towards the back door, found the key in the lock, twisted it, and looked out on a little balcony that ran down to a court.

It was a sort of a service entrance for the rambling apartment building. The place was a network of wooden stairs and landings. There was a moon, and that, coupled with the reflections of light from a globe that burned in the alleyway, showed the deserted court with its twisting staircases.

There wasn't any bedroom that had a view of the kitchen window. There was the window of another kitchen opposite, but it was after one o'clock. People wouldn't ordinarily be in kitchens at that time, and I wanted light, so I decided to take a chance.

I went back into the kitchen, switched on the light and then looked into the living-room.

The Cracker was standing over by the davenport, running his fingers around the cracks in the upholstery.

I grinned at him.

"Thought you covered it the first time."

"No," he said. "I only got half way around, and you was so sure it wasn't here, that I gave in to you. I still figure it's a good place."

I watched him while he ran his hand around, saw the crestfallen expression on his face as he drew a blank, and laughed at him.

"Come on," I said, "we'll try the kitchen."

I looked up at the window over the sink.

It was a square affair, and, on either side of the frame were the little brass fasteners for a roller shade. But the shade wasn't there. There wasn't even any lace curtain there. That window was just as bare and blank as though the kitchen was part of a vacant, unfurnished apartment.

I didn't like it, but life is always a question of taking chances. The man that doesn't take chances simply doesn't live, that's all. If he acts so blamed cautiously that he doesn't take the risk, he just doesn't act at all—and life will get him in the end, anyway, so what's the difference?"

I found the flour bin, and rolled up my sleeves and started groping around.

The Cracker was over in the cupboard on the other side, moving cans around.

The bin was deep. I had to lean way over and grope. I made a good job of it and drew a blank.

"Any luck?" I asked The Cracker.

"No luck," he said. His surliness had left him. Perhaps I'd convinced him, after all, that my methods weren't so irregular.

I found the next bin loaded with potatoes. It wasn't much of a lead, but I worked through them. I could hear The Cracker, behind my back, working through the cans of baking powder and spices. I finished with the potatoes, took a few steps, and stopped in my tracks.

The kitchen was covered with linoleum, and my feet made a peculiar, rasping sound against the linoleum.

The Cracker looked up at me, his face stamped with alarm.

"What is it?" he whispered.

"Have you found the sugar?" I asked.

"No," he said.

I grinned.

"Then that's our lead. Somebody's been into the sugar recently—after the kitchen was swept out, and the place is so neat that that means after the last meal was cooked here. I just stepped on a crystal of sugar."

"Gee!" he said, and there was awe in his voice. "You sure called the turn."

I walked towards a cabinet, and found I was walking on sugar all the way. I walked back towards the back door, and my feet crunched again.

I grinned at The Cracker.

"The cabinet," I said.

I opened it up. There was a big tin of sugar. I pushed my hand down in it. My fingers felt something solid. I pulled it out. It was a platinum bracelet set with diamonds and emeralds. I fished down into the sugar and pulled out the platinum diamond ring. It was engraved.

There wasn't any doubt about it. The two pieces that had been taken from Mrs. Wright by the man, or by one of the men, who had killed Stanley Simpson.

The Cracker hissed a jubilant chuckle.

"I gave you the straight dope! I told you she had 'em! You didn't think so, for a while. You thought I was stringing you. I could tell it when you didn't find anything in the bedroom!"

I nodded. He'd called the turn there.

All of a sudden the expression of joy died from his face. His mouth sagged. He cocked his head on one side as though he was listening.

"Good ——!" he said, and jumped for the light switch.

"Did you hear that?" he asked, his voice quivering.

"Hear what?" I asked.

The switch clicked. The lights went off.

"A woman screamed," he said.

I waited. There was nothing save darkness and silence, a silence that was broken only by the heavy breathing of The Cracker.

After a minute or two that breathing became more quiet.

"Shucks," he said, "I'm getting jumpy," and switched on the light. His grin was sheepish.

"Well," he said, "we did what we started to do, so let's get outa here. We don't need to stick around any longer than we have to."

I nodded at that. It was good logic.

"Whatcha goin' to do with the stuff?" he asked.

"Put it back in the sugar, tip off the police," I told him.

The Cracker extended a long arm.

"Sure it's the stuff?" he asked.

I dropped them into his palm.

"Sure," I said.

"Well," he observed, "we gotta be careful about leaving anything to show we——"

And he made one great leap for the light switch.

"The bulls!" he hissed.

The switch clicked off, and I knew he was right. There came the shrilling noise of a police whistle, and it sounded from the corridor, out in front of the apartment we had burgled.

The Cracker went for the back door. I could hear his feet crunch on the sugar as he ran across the linoleum. He jerked the door open.

"Come on," he whispered. "It's suicide to be trapped here."

I knew he was right, but I waited.

I wasn't at all certain there weren't police at the back of the house, and if The Cracker wanted to do the exploring and find out, I was willing to let him.

I'll say one thing for him, he made a quiet getaway. He may have been alarmed, but he didn't make the mistake of rushing down those wooden stairs, making enough noise to alarm the entire place. He went down smooth and easy.

After about five seconds, I followed. If there was any fire to draw, The Cracker would draw it. But everything was quiet and peaceful save for a light

flashing on in an apartment across the way, and the muffled sound of the police whistle from the hallway.

The Cracker was first out into the alley.

I let him take the chance. Then, as there was no sound of a hail, no shots, no sirens, I went after him. It was a boob play, running out exactly the way the police would have expected a crook would go, and I had my heart in my mouth, waiting for a hail.

But everything was going nicely. The Cracker was getting the breaks. Left to myself, and I'd have done something the police wouldn't have expected a crook to do, gone into another apartment, or slipped off my clothes, and padded around in my underwear, as though I'd been an alarmed sleeper who hadn't acquired the pajama habit, for it was a cinch there'd be a crowd gathering around the corridors. That whistle was making an awful racket.

But I wasn't at all certain about The Cracker. I figured he hadn't had presence of mind enough to slip those tell-tale articles of jewelry back into the sugar. He probably had them in his pocket.

And I needed to get those little bits of jewelry; so The Cracker was like a magnet for me. I had to follow.

He burst out of the alleyway and had sense enough to slow to a sauntering walk. He strolled to the corner. I kept about fifty feet behind him. The sound of the whistle didn't carry out this far, and there weren't any sirens.

It began to look as though some hysterical dame had started tooting on the police whistle to call the police. If the officers had been in the hallway, they'd have busted in the door instead of making all that commotion.

But one thing's sure in the crook racket, and that is that a crook has no business hesitating in a strange apartment when somebody's bearing down hard on a police whistle in front of the door of that same apartment.

A cruising cab came along and The Cracker signaled. It came to the curb.

I came up, walking a little more rapidly.

"I beg your pardon," I said, formally, for the benefit of a passing pedestrian who happened along, "but I had telephoned for a cab, and I think this is mine."

The Cracker was quick enough to take the hint.

He bowed and grinned.

"No use getting sore about it, or starting an argument," he said, "we can both take the cab—if we're going the same way. I'm going out on Virginia Avenue."

I bowed and let my smile match his own.

"Right on my way," I said.

We both climbed in the cab.

The Cracker gave an address, out on Virginia Avenue.

"What did you do with the trinkets?" I asked.

"Gosh, I stuck 'em in my pocket! I guess I pulled a boner, I should have left 'em there!"

I nodded.

He fished a hand in a side pocket, pulled them out.

"Here," he said, "you take 'em. It's all right for a detective to have those things, but it's sure dynamite for a crook to have 'em!"

I put the things in my pocket.

"Step on it!" called The Cracker to the driver. He was nervous.

The cab made time through the deserted streets, pulled up at a little flat building, a four-family affair that looked respectable but gloomy.

"C'mon in," said The Cracker. "I got some more dope I can spill."

"Fine," I said.

I paid the cab. The Cracker fitted a key to the door. The cab ground into gear and breezed out into the quiet street. I could see it swing at the corner, then the close air of The Cracker's staircase assailed my nostrils. The Cracker slammed the door behind us.

I went up the stairs first.

"I'll set out the milk bottle," said The Cracker, and took a milk bottle towards the stoop. "Make yourself at home. There's a bottle o' hooch in the cabinet over the radio."

I switched on the lights, walked towards the cabinet.

There sounded a succession of backfires from a couple of blocks down the street. At first I thought they were shots, but there was a certain lack of crack about them that labeled them as exhaust backfires.

I walked through the living-room into a corridor and opened a door. It was a bedroom. There was a little stand by the bed and an ugly six-shooter in a holster on the stand.

Evidently The Cracker always played it safe.

I grabbed the gun, taking care to touch only the leather holster, and stuffed it in my inside pocket. Then I ran through the corridor to the kitchen, found some back stairs and went down them on the run.

There was a board fence at the alley and a gate that was locked. I jumped, grabbed the top of the fence and shinnied over. As I dropped on the other side, I heard running footsteps coming around the side of the flat.

I sprinted down the alley, paused at the street, turned left and picked up a cruising cab at the next corner. I gave him an address on Virginia Avenue that would make him swing around and run past the entrance to The Cracker's Flat.

There was a low touring car parked in front, a car that had a blue light over the license in back. A man was standing near the car, and the motor was running.

HE cabbie ran along to the Virginia Avenue address, then I saw, to my audible consternation that the building there was all dark, and gave him an address that would take me uptown.

I left him there, stowed the gun under an armpit where it wouldn't show, and bought a newspaper from one of the early truck drivers that was taking a shipment out to the suburbs.

The paper had headlines smeared all over it. The headlines accused Norma Gay of the murder of Stanley Simpson.

I'd known that was coming.

I went directly to Norma Gay's apartment. It was in a cheap house where whatever anyone did was nobody's business. Norma had done things to her face which made her pretty well immune from casual recognition, but she hadn't been able to do things to her fingerprints, and it looked as though somebody pretty close to the inside was gunning on her trail.

Norma answered the door at the fourth ring. Her voice over the telephone was far from being patient.

"What the hell!" she wanted to know.

That was Norma. Hardboiled and not letting anyone call her at two o'clock in the morning.

"A friend," I said, "with a newspaper."

I heard the electric buzzer showing that the catch was off the door, and went up. Some people were having a party in one of the apartments on the second floor. Outside of that, the place was quiet.

I padded down the hallway. It was cold, dank with the peculiar atmosphere which emanates from crowded sleepers.

Norma Gay opened the door. She had a kimono wrapped around her shoulders, and her eyes were wide and dark with emotion.

"I knew it was you," she said, and that was all the greeting.

I walked in and she closed the door. She put down the window, lit a cigarette and reached for the paper. Her face turned a shade paler as she read the article. Then she looked up at me.

"Well, Ed, that's the end."

"How so, Norma? We can beat the rap, if we work fast."

She shook her head.

"It can't be done. There's something back three years that hasn't been cleared up with me, and there's my record. What's more, *I* haven't got any alibi. You know that the couple who sat at my table did the job. I know it. Beyond the fact that we know it, we haven't got a shred of proof. The chorus girl let you out, but no one's going to let me out. I was wandering around there in the dark, and I can't prove I didn't pull the job. With my record, the D. A. wouldn't have to prove I *did* it. I'd have to prove I *didn't*."

I tried to argue with her.

"We can find those two," I said. "If we use our heads."

Her shake of negation was flatly final.

"You're game enough to help me try, and then we'd both get into hot water. Nope, Ed, I'm going to dust out of the city and hit the trail. I'm on the lam, and I'm lamming right now."

"Where?" I asked.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Got any money, Norma?"

For a second or two I thought she winced. Then she made a laugh out of the grimace, whether it had been a wince or the beginnings of mirth.

"You talk like a fish, Ed. I'm lousy with the coin."

"I could let you have some."

She made a gesture with her hand.

"Be your age, Ed. Think I'd be broke in a time like this? Get out of here and let me put some clothes on."

"Can I see you off?" I asked.

She snorted.

"And me wanted for murder! You cannot! You can't see me any place. I trust you, Ed Jenkins, trust you a lot, but not enough to let you know where I'm going. I'm that sort of a woman. I can't bring myself to trust anyone. I'd feel uneasy if my own mother had any idea where I was going."

"You got a place picked—a hideout?" I asked.

"Of course!" she said.

I got up and gave her my hand. She took it.

"I'm sorry, Ed. I got you in a mess, trying to help me. I should have lammed long ago. Good-bye."

"Good-bye," I told her, and walked to the door.

I felt the pressure of her hand on my shoulder, then I was pushed out into the dank corridor and the door slammed.

I went down the stairs, past the apartment where the party was in full swing, and some girl was shrilling with alcoholic laughter, out into the crispness of the before-dawn air.

I had to walk a couple of blocks before I got a cab.

"Swing around the block, slide down the avenue, turn out your lights and park when I tell you," I told the driver, "but keep the motor running—and the lights out. I pay the fines."

"Okey," he said, and made the swing.

I ordered him into the curb when we were half a block from Norma's apartment, and then slumped down in the cab so that I could just see over the top of the windshield.

Ten minutes slipped by and then a cab came grinding down the avenue, stopped at the curb in front of Norma's apartment entrance. She came out, trimly tailored for the street, carrying a couple of suitcases.

The cabbie jumped out and put the suitcases in the cab.

"Follow that car," I instructed my driver. "Don't crowd. When it stops, swing into the curb well behind it, and then wait."

"Okey, buddy," he said. "You pay the fines?"

"I pay the fines."

"Okey."

The cab ahead swung into motion. We lurched away from the curb and tailed it.

We ran for about a mile, well down into the district of exclusive shops. The cab ahead turned a corner, slowed in speed, stopped.

My driver turned.

"Close enough?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said, and got out, standing

right close to the cab, keeping in the shadows.

There was a hotel on the corner up where Norma's cab had stopped, and Norma walked in the front entrance. I figured I knew the answer, and doubled back around the side street where I could watch the side entrance.

Norma had left the suitcases in the cab.

She came out of the side door, walking like a young lady who knew exactly where she was going. I managed to tag along, although she was nervous and stopped once or twice to size up the back trail.

She took to an alley at last, and I didn't dare to go in after her until she'd had a few seconds start. Then I eased into the shadows and waited where I could watch the lighted exit of the alley on to the other street.

Norma didn't come out. The alley had swallowed her.

I slipped along the shadows, looking and listening and came clean to the end of the alley without having anything give me a clue as to where she was.

I worked on back.

There was a fence along the alley and some gates. Then there was an iron grille and a gate in the grille that had a formidable lock. I paused, ran my hand over the lock and had my answer.

The lock had been wired for a burglar alarm, and there was a concealed switch along the bottom of the lock. The switch had been kicked out, and the lock was open.

I paused to put on gloves.

Then I opened the gate and eased my way inside.

THERE was a protected runway and a door. The door was ajar. I caught a glimpse of big bars which had been pushed back. It had been a clean cut job of lock work. There wasn't a trace of violence.

I went through the door, taking my time and listening every few steps. I caught the stale smell of a room where there's little ventilation. Coming in out of the fresh air of the night, the place stunk, a reek of stagnant smells.

There was a light burning in the front of the store, and I could see one corner of a massive safe. I thought I heard the rustle of motion, and paused.

Then, listening, there was the sound of swift motion right beside me. I ducked back and something "whooshed" through the air where my head had been.

Someone had taken a swing at my head with a club that must have been the size of a baseball bat. The impetus of the swing carried past, and there was a terrific racket as the assailant floundered over some obstruction.

Instantly, I heard the quick rasp of an exclamation, and saw the stabbing beam of a flashlight. Then someone fired a shot. A moving body came running from the lighted interior of the store, and I could see it silhouetted against the gleam, crouched, running swiftly.

There was another shot.

This time the spurt of streaming fire came from the darkness near my side, and the fire was directed at that running figure.

I thought I knew the answer, but it was a case of act first and do the thinking afterwards.

I flung myself forward in a football tackle, crashed down on the figure that was pulling the trigger. A flashlight beam stabbed the darkness again, settled on my face, and I felt the pressure of something cold against my neck.

"Stick 'em up—*high!*" hissed a voice in my ear.

Then there was a gasp of surprise. I recognized the gasp. It came from Norma's lips.

"What are *you* doing here?"

"I think," I said, "that I'm holding the watchman."

"They don't have one," said Norma.

"Let's look," I said.

She swung the flashlight down to the huddled figure that was under my arm.

It was in uniform, one of those "merchant patrols" that are hired by groups of stores to prowl around, switch off lights and report suspicious circumstances. There was a gun on the floor near his hand, and his eyes were glassy with fright.

He'd evidently seen Norma go in, or else had stumbled on the open door and had walked in, not certain of what was happening. Then he'd heard me following along and had crouched in the darkness, figuring on taking a full swing at my head with his nightstick. That would have been a sweet mess.

I reached down, jerked the coat up and over his head. It made a pretty effective blindfold.

"Yell and you'll be shot," I told him.

I looked up at Norma.

"Ready?"

"Ready."

We went out on the run. The figure behind us got to its feet and let out a husky bellow, heedless of the admonition I'd given him.

I pushed Norma through the gate, pulled it shut and shot the bolt. The Merchant Patrol was locked in. He bellowed and screamed.

"Follow me," I told Norma.

We got to my cab before the chase got too hot. There was a police whistle blowing somewhere, and a bull was banging a nightstick on the pavement, but no one knew exactly where the commotion was centered.

Norma was almost all in as I got her to my cab.

"Can they trace you from your suitcases?" I asked her.

"I don't know," she gasped.

I ordered the cabbie to pull up alongside of the other car.

"We'll have to crawl in a hole," whispered Norma in my ear. "It's a mess. The cabbies will testify."

"Sure they will," I said, and chuckled.

"Well," snapped Norma, "I don't see the joke."

"You will," I told her.

We slowed alongside her cab. I had the driver fling in the suitcases. I was careful to keep my hat pulled way down over my eyes, and I paid him off by flinging a five dollar bill at him, and telling him to drive to a certain apartment, wait five minutes, and, if no one was there, to call it a day.

The apartment I gave him was the one The Cracker and I had burgled.

The police whistles were sounding, and there was a siren.

My cab driver glanced around him, curiously.

"Sounds like a raid," he said.

"Yeah," I grunted at him. "Make it snappy. Out Virginia Avenue. I'll tell you when to stop."

He shifted into gear.

"Okey," he said.

I figured from the noise, that the bull on the beat had located the trouble in the jewelry store. He and the Merchant's Patrol were good for a few minutes rag chewing before they found out what it was all about, but the siren indicated that the Patrol had managed to hook in the burglar alarm.

I don't know whether my driver was suspicious or not. I think he was. But he couldn't figure the play.

When we came to the place where The Cracker had his flat, I stopped the cab.

"This'll do," I said.

We got out.

I dragged out the suitcases. Norma looked at me doubtingly, started to say something, then thought better of it.

I paid off the cab driver. There was a calculating look in his eyes.

"I got a short memory for an extra five spot," he said.

I gave him the five. He drove away —in a hurry.

"He's going to double-cross us," said Norma. "Oh, Ed, why did you cut in on it?"

I stared at her.

"You said you had plenty of money. What you meant was that you were broke, but you figured on pulling a job and making getaway money. You had that jewelry store all planted!" I charged.

She didn't say anything for a minute, then she straightened her shoulders, looked me in the eye.

"You're damned tootin' I did," she said. "Know why? Well, the bird that runs that place was the one that gave me my last rap, ten years ago. I ranked a job for him and got nothing. He caught me, claimed that I'd got away with five thousand dollars worth of sparklers. I claimed I hadn't. But I had to admit I'd sprung the joint and they all laughed at me. I got an extra jolt because I wouldn't tell where the sparklers were.

"The place was covered by the insurance company. It paid the loss. The guy that runs the place had the insurance, also the sparklers, that he'd salted away.

"When I said I had getaway money I meant it. That bird just owed me five grand with interest, and I figured on collecting. I had the lay all figured out. If anything happened and I had to make a fast getaway, I planned on copping from him.

"You followed me—and then—hell!"

"Did you get anything?" I asked.

"Don't be a simp," she said, and stuck her hand down the front of her dress. She pulled out a chamois bag, thrust in her hooked forefinger, pulled the bag open. The light glittered on an assortment of sparklers that represented a wad of money.

"Give 'em here, Norma," I said.

She thrust out her jaw.

"Ed, you're going to give 'em back!"

"Sure I am, but not just the way you think."

She hesitated.

"Don't argue. Time's precious. You're going straight."

"Ed, it ain't worth while."

There were tears in her eyes now, and she was fighting to keep them back, blinking her lids, but keeping her gaze on mine, straight and unfaltering.

"I've done the best I know how. I worked and saved a little money, and a damned ex-cop blackmailed me out of it, bled me white. They've done nothing but hound me from pillar to post, and now I'm—" She passed over the stones.

"Now you're going straight," I said, picking up one of the suitcases. "Grab that other bag."

She was a crook who knew her onions and didn't lose her head in an emergency, and she'd been in tight places before. She knew it was no time for argument.

SHE followed me up to the door of the flat. I rang the bell.

There was a moment of silence.

"Do you know what you are doing Ed?" she said. "The bulls will come here."

"Sure they will," I told her.

"The taxicab driver will spill what he knows."

I laughed.

"There's a better reason than that," I said.

"What is it?" she asked.

But there were steps on the stairs, and I pushed her to one side, stood where only my face was visible through the diamond shaped pane of glass in the doorway.

The Cracker switched on the porch light, looked into my face, and switched it off again. He hesitated with his hand on the door knob, then suddenly turned the bolt and opened the door.

"You!" he said. "What happened to you?"

"I heard a car backfire, and it sounded like a shotgun squad answering a hurry-up call, so I played safe and ducked out. Did anyone come?"

He grinned at me.

"Boy, but you're a wise baby. It's a

good thing you're weren't here. I'll say there was a squad out. I was registered here, and could prove it. They were looking for some prowler someone had seen earlier in the evening, half an hour or so before we got here. They might have asked you embarrassing questions. . . . Who's the broad?" he asked.

"She's okey. We're spending the night, or what's left of it. You got a spare?"

"Yeah, sure. C'mon in."

We trooped in. It was significant of the character of The Cracker and the way he fitted into things that he didn't offer to take the suitcase Norma was carrying, but let her lug it up the stairs.

We all filed into the living-room. Norma dropped the suitcase with a bang. The Cracker was still dressed. He looked from one to the other of us.

I sank into a chair.

"So you figured out who I was?" I asked.

His eyes flickered away from mine for a split fraction of a second.

"Why, you're a detective, just like you said."

I grinned at him.

"You know better than that, Cracker. I'm Ed Jenkins, The Phantom Crook, and you tried to two-time me."

His knees buckled and he dropped into a chair.

"No, no, no. Honest to Gawd, I—"

I got up and walked over to him.

"Get up," I said.

"No, no! Honest I didn't know. I thought. . . ."

"Get up!"

He grasped the arms of the chair, pulled himself slowly up. He couldn't face me.

"You're crazy," he mumbled.

I laughed, and the laugh didn't have much pleasantry in it.

"Listen," I told him. "You wanted to frame me with possession of the jewelry from Mrs. Wright. Then you knew that'd throw me into the mess with Norma Gay. So you thought up a slick scheme, you and the man that's backing you.

"You picked an apartment, had a deal all planned. That apartment didn't belong to any Mabel Morgan any more than it did to me. There was some woman in there who was a fair housekeeper, but you had her called out of town by some fake message, and then planted the scene so I'd bite.

"The woman was called away in a hurry, probably had some confederate of yours visiting her, that would account for the mess in the bedroom. That would account, also, for the curtain being pulled out of the square window over the sink. When the kitchen light went on and off, and on and off again that would be the signal that you'd 'planted' the stones with me.

"You had them with you all the time. They never were in the apartment. You planted them in the cushions of the davenport when we first went in there. Then, when I told you how absurd it would be for the stones to be hidden there, you figured you'd let me 'discover' them some place else.

"You didn't have them when you were in the bedroom, or you'd have 'found' 'em under the carpet. You wished you'd had 'em then, because I indicated I thought that was a likely place. But you wanted me to be the one who actually made the find.

"So when I said the flour or the sugar might be nice places, you figured on planting 'em there. You had to go back to the davenport to get them, and you did it on the theory that you hadn't made a complete search. Then, when you got the chance, when my back was turned in the kitchen, you stuck 'em in the sugar, knowing I was going to search there.

"The thing proves itself because I walked all over the kitchen floor when I went in the first time, and there wasn't any trace of gritty sugar underfoot. But there was sugar that stuck to your hand and in your fingernails when you plunged your hand down into the sugar pail, and then when you slipped back to the cupboard and the spices, you

dropped this sugar on the floor, scattered it all around so that we could hear it when we walked.

"So I ran along and played your little game, just to see what it was. And you played the signal nicely on the light. That brought the police whistle into play, which was blown by a confederate of yours who had been watching the kitchen window for the signal.

"Then you made your 'escape,' keeping me with you. You planned that so I wouldn't leave the ring and the bracelet in the sugar. And you had your confederate all primed to call the bulls for a rush raid just as soon as I reached your flat.

"Think of how nice and pretty you'd have been sitting with Ed Jenkins, The Phantom Crook, caught, and, in his pocket at the exact moment of his capture, the jewelry that had been taken in the robbery that led to the murder!

"And you might have done it, if it hadn't been for the grit of that sugar underfoot. But that tipped me. So I walked into your little trap, only to walk right on through and out again.

"Now, by ——! you'll tell me who that confederate is, or I'll have you frying on the electric chair like an egg in a hot skillet! You're mixed in this thing deep enough so you can't explain unless you cave in.

"Now cave. You've got until I count three."

I could see Norma Gay's face. The eyes were wide with astonishment. And The Cracker's face was a study. Hatred, bewilderment, chagrin and fear, all struggling at once.

"Listen, you've got me wrong. I swear that I was. . . ."

"One!" I started.

His voice took on a sharper, almost hysterical note.

"No, no! Now listen. I don't know a thing about that police whistle. If there was any—"

"Two!"

He braced himself.

"Well, if you feel that way about it—"

"Three!" I said.

He clamped his jaw, started his fist.

I had been waiting for that. My right took him square in the stomach, a short arm jab that had the weight of my body behind it. My left slammed him on the jaw as he started to wilt.

He dropped into the chair—out.

"Okey, Norma. The bureau drawers," I said.

"What about 'em?"

"Your things," I told her. "Let's make it a homelike party."

I ran to the bedroom, ripped out the bureau drawers, jammed the things from two drawers into one, unpacked Norma's suitcases and put the things in the bureau drawer I'd emptied.

"The taxi driver will squeal," she said.

"He won't have to," I told her, jamming things from suitcase to drawers. "I played a little joke on The Cracker. When I went through here the first time, he'd left his gun on the dresser. I knew it'd be lousy with his fingerprints, so I took it along to plant on a job.

"It happened that you furnished me with just the opportunity I wanted, and I dropped the gun and holster there by the Merchant Patrol. He'll find it when he goes to look for clues. They'll develop latents on it, and check over the men that might be in on it. They've got The Cracker's fingerprints in the identification bureau, and they'll have the job tied on him inside of ten minutes after the prints come in for classification, particularly in view of the lead they'll have on the place from the cab drivers.

"Come on, we're going out the back way!"

She was a baby who had been trained in a hard school, which was a good thing for me. There were none of the gasps or hysterics. She blinked her eyes once or twice to keep her mind

concentrated, nodded once, gulped and grinned.

"LET'S go," she said.

We went.

"What's next?" she asked as we slid down the fence into the alley.

"Make certain the bulls come," I told her. "We'll wait. After that we've got to act quickly."

We slid around to the Avenue, and waited.

The bulls were slow. It was ten full minutes before they came. They came in numbers.

I grinned at Norma.

"Okey. Now we start."

"For what?"

"For the girl that's about the only witness that's worth a hang, the chorus girl who gave me the out, the one who said she'd know the two men who were with you if she saw them again."

"You mean Gertrude Brown?"

"That's the one."

"What'll she do?"

"She may have a chance to do some good identifying."

Norma shrugged her shoulders.

"You're running the party," she said.

We walked a ways before we called a cab, and then we went out to the place where Gertrude Brown had her apartment. Day had broken, a drab day that had wisps of fog drifting over the tops of the buildings. The morning was chill. It was a bad time to wake up a chorus girl.

We had to lean on the doorbell for a while. Finally the latch clicked. We went up.

Gertrude Brown blinked at me. She'd known me as a private detective when I'd called on her before and secured a written statement.

"My Gawd," she said, "I lose more sleep over you than I do over my debts."

She was big and blonde, hardboiled as a picnic egg, and a square shooter.

She sucked in a prodigious lungful of air in a great yawn.

"Baby," I told her, "you're going to lose a lot more sleep."

"Yeah?" she asked, and her tone was one of extreme cynicism.

"Yeah," I told her. "You're going to clear up the rest of that murder case this morning."

She snorted.

"I'm goin' right back to poundin' the pillow," she said. "If I hadn't thought you was a telegram from a sweetie, I'd have let you lean on that doorbell until you were black in the face."

I grinned at her.

"Come on, Gertrude, be a sport!"

She sneered.

"How often I've heard *that* line!"

I tried another angle.

"This will clear the thing up and release an innocent man of suspicion."

"Uh huh," she said. "I was willing to tell all I knew and all I saw. And I told it just that way, and about got laid out on a marble slab for tellin'. But that was what a square shooter should do, and that's what I did.

"But when it comes to runnin' out in the chill of the morning for some Phantom Crook that's nothing in my young life, and playing detective . . . yeah, a fat chance!"

I jerked my head towards Norma Gay.

"She's asking you to do it to right a wrong for a working girl."

The blonde turned her ponderous head, let her eyes slither over Norma in cold appraisal.

"How do you cut in on this?" she asked.

And Norma told her, told her in clear, crisp, clean-cut sentences.

"Because I'm Norma Gay, the girl that's 'wanted,' that's how I cut in on it. I'm a crook. I've been a crook. I tried to go straight. Two men fastened down on me like leeches and bled me white. Then when there wasn't any more for them, they tried to pull a robbery and frame me for the rap. The

robbery turned out to be a murder, and I'm left holding the sack, unless I can get the two men who sat at that table. . . ."

That was as far as she got.

"Sit down," said the blonde chorus girl, "both of you. The gent can close his eyes if he's easy shocked, 'cause I'm dressin.'

"Why the hell didn't you come clean in the first place? Afraid I'd turn you in—and you a girl that's had to support a flock of blackmailers! Hell! Wait until I get my clothes on!"

She probably was trained in the lightning change stuff on the stage. But it seemed to me she just walked as far as the bathroom, turned on the water, made a splash and came out, clothed for the street.

"Let's go," she said.

Norma turned to me.

"Where do we go?"

"*We* don't," I said, "because it's too dangerous." I explained recent happenings to her. "We've got to lay low. But either one of two things will happen. Either The Cracker's accomplices or masters, whichever way you want to figure 'em, will leave The Cracker in the lurch, or else they won't.

"If they leave him alone he'll squeal and spill the whole play. If they come to his support, they'll naturally bail him out. And they won't let any grass grow under their feet in getting bail."

The girl squinted her eyes.

"You think they'll question him in connection with the Simpson murder?"

I grinned.

"If they don't they're dumb. I planted those diamonds in his apartment where the police will be sure to find 'em, and I put the bracelet and ring that tie up the murder case with the diamonds. When the police get those—well—"

The blonde blinked her pop eyes at me.

"What do I do?"

"Go plant yourself in front of the jail," I told her. "Keep a watch for the men you saw at the table in the cabaret on the night of the murder. One or both of 'em will probably come up, perhaps with a lawyer, trying to get cash bail for The Cracker. When you see them make a commotion."

"How much of a commotion?" she asked.

"Plenty," I told her.

I loaded her in the cab, sent her on her way. Norma and I picked up another cab.

"Where?" I asked Norma.

Tears came to her eyes.

"I'm on the dodge, Ed. They've got me hooked in with that murder case. You've brought pressure to bear on The Cracker by tying him up with me, my clothes in his apartment and all that.

"It puts The Cracker on the spot, but it puts me on the spot, too. If The Cracker weakens and spills what he knows, it'll be okey. But if he sits tight —well, it's a frying job, and I'm on the dodge."

She looked pathetic in the morning light, with her face showing what she'd been through.

"Two of us together," I said, "two crooks on the dodge."

"——! Ed," she said, after a minute, "how glad I am you took those diamonds away from me . . . I guess I can make it now, but it seemed like that bird owed me the stones he'd sent me up for stealing—anyway. Let's stick together until this thing breaks."

"Let's go," I told her.

We went. It was touch and go whether the newspapers and the cops would start playing back trail and yelling for a mysterious man and a girl. We got a suite in a downtown hotel and waited.

The extras hit the streets around nine o'clock. They gave us the answer.

The blonde had waited in front of the jail. She'd collared a flatfoot cop on the way up and sold him on her idea. About seven, there had been two men and a lawyer drive up in a closed car. The men had bail for The Cracker, and they'd have made it stick, too.

The blonde barged out of the car and made a vociferous identification. The flatfoot cop had been dubious. The lawyer had gone into action with a barrage of gab, and it looked as though the party was off, until one of the men, figuring it was getting pretty close to a showdown, tried to make a sneak. The copper got into action. He couldn't handle the situation. The blonde did a football tackle, got one of the men down on the sidewalk and sat on him.

The Cracker saw what he was up against, and saved his own hide by squealing, and he squealed plenty. That had started the show. The lawyer tried to get his men to keep quiet, but they were each one trying to pin the fatal shot on the other.

It was a complete blow-up. I looked across at Norma.

The hardboiled little cuss was sitting there, reading the newspaper.

"It gives me a chance, Ed! It gives me a chance to begin over," she kept saying. She repeated the words mechanically, over and over.

After a while she got up. Then she tiptoed to the door, looked out.

"You ain't sorry, Ed?" she asked.

I laughed at her. "Sorry for what?"

"Getting tied up with a crook again?"

"A straight crook!" I told her.

She slipped into the corridor, closed the door. I waited for her to come back. After a while I began to wonder. There was a knock on the door. I opened it. A bellboy handed me a plain envelope. I knew what it was, even before I ripped open the seal.

"Dear Ed: You are a lone wolf. You tied up with me to give me a break, and now I've got it. I won't come back, so don't wait. I don't think you'll see me again. You're too damned straight, Ed, to be teamed with a crook—and I went bad on that gem job. If it hadn't been for you. . . .

"Bye bye,
Norma."

That was the note. I knew she'd faded from the picture.

Perhaps, some day, in the teeming millions of the big city, our paths were destined to cross again. In the meantime she'd walked out of my life—to give me a break.

I got up and closed the window, shivered a little bit.

It seemed hard to be always on the dodge, always ducking for cover, always avoiding my fellow man . . . she may have been a crook, but she was a straight crook. That was the game we'd played with the law—and won.

Straight crooks!

SHORT SKITS ON BLACK MASK WRITERS

CARROLL JOHN DALY.—A mild-mannered, affable gentleman, in such contradistinction to the rip-roaring, two-gun, two-fisted, blustering Race Williams, the wonder is such a vigorous character could emanate from so temperate a mind. Called often the master of action-fiction writing, Mr. Daly, by inclination, intent and frequent habit is the world's greatest humorist; and if the laugh is on him, the joke does not suffer in his telling. Not long since, a fellow-townsman said to a friend; "You know this Carroll Jahn Daly—him that writes books? Sure an' I'd loike to meet th' gintleman." They were introduced.

"Kin I buy wan av your books, Mr. Daly?"

"Why, certainly. I'll sell you a copy for $2.00, or, you can get it at Macy's for a dollar thirty-four."

"Thin I'll go to Macy's."

And a few days later—

"I've bought me wan av yer books, Mr. Daly."

'Fine"—rubbing hands together—"If you will bring it over to the house, I'll write my name in it for you."

"Didn't I pay me dollar thoirty-four fer it? Phwy th' divil should I let you spile me perfectly good book by writin' your name in it?"

Mr. Daly says the joke in this story is that the man hadn't seen his sample of handwriting.

Like all geniuses, Mr. Daly places little importance upon such a slight matter as authentic spelling, but he says that after wasting a half hour seaching for chaos under "K," he gave up the matter and has since put the responsibility on the editor.

His hobbies—aside from writing—are poker for moderate stakes, and prize-fights with plenty of action—and from experience we will say Mr. Daly has remarkable facility in picking the winners in either case.

Mr. Daly's Race Williams stories, after their appearance in BLACK MASK, go immediately into books and their fame has spread throughout this country as well as abroad.

In fact, one of our most frequent requests from readers is to the effect —"Give us more Race Williams."

BEHIND THE MASK

PAUL CAIN said "Howdy" to us in the February issue—with "FAST ONE." And we were very glad to say "Howdy" to him.

Personally, we hadn't for some time seen anything quite so fast and smooth as "Fast One" with the exception of "Lead Party" which is in this month's number.

We don't go in for predictions that this or that writer will hit the high spots with our own readers. We leave that for you to say, if you like 'em.

But we can chortle about this: When a number of our stories have gone out in book form we have observed critics and other people sit up and take considerable notice.

You know how they are raving about Dashiell Hammett, Raoul Whitfield, Carroll John Daly. Putting them on the screen, and heading some for the stage. Even one or two enterprising critics went out and "discovered" them—just like the Pilgrims discovered America.

So—we'll get right up now and say that if and when "Fast One," "Lead Party" and their subsequent stories around the same characters are moulded into shape for book publication and brought out as one book, Mrs. Cain's young son Paul is going to wake up some morning to find himself famous—right along with Dash and Raoul—and maybe then some.

Yeah—we'll go on record for that.

AND while we are on this Howdy subject we might point out that during the past year eleven new names have been added to the Black Mask Howdy Club.

Are they good?

Say—they have to be.

You see, you readers are so doggone particular, you want your reading stuff just so, you don't want to be hoodwinked, bunkoed or joshed, so just naturally we have to make the restrictions pretty hard.

When you come to figure that we have about 400 applications a month, you'll see that the fellow who gets in has something on the ball besides polish.

And these eleven are in addition to the regulars who have made Black Mask what it is today; and now the whole outfit are conspiring together to whoop her up and make Black Mask an even better magazine with each succeeding month—just watch 'em.

Referring to the past year, a Black Mask fan—and a very thoughtful friend—from over in South Wales, sends us an analysis of his impressions of the year's issues. According to his preference, he picks them in this order:

"Taking it month by month, I thought October was the best, with February, May, August, September and November next."

How does this jibe with your ideas?

He also names his best liked stories and favorite writers. He likes them this way, and he likes them that, and he comes right out and says just so.

Gosh, if plenty of you other fellows would only take that trouble, what a cinch this editorial job would be.

Will someone please tell the correct spelling of { finagling / finaygling / phenagling / fenagling } and if you happen to be an etymologist — where did she come from—and why?

Speaking of the fellow who imitates, Rudyard Kipling takes time off to say:

"They copied all they could follow,
But they couldn't copy my mind;
And I left 'em sweating and stewing
A year and a half behind."

Thank you, Mr. Kipling.

J. T. S.

May—A Banner Card

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ED JENKINS • DON FREE • RACE WILLIAMS

BACKWASH - - - - by Frederick Nebel

Featuring hard-boiled, rapid-fire Steve MacBride and his crony, Kennedy, the ubiquitous newshound, in a baffling tangle of mysterious disappearance and swift pursuit.

WALKING DYNAMITE - by Raoul Whitfield

Don Free, who turned up his crooked boss in "Man Killer"—this issue—gets the job of guarding a man from a "walking dynamite" of a killer.

BLACK - - - - - - - - - by Paul Cain

A powerful story where vengeance is confounded with justice and the effect is much the same.

UNDER THE GUNS - - by Erle Stanley Gardner

Tells a thrilling adventure of Ed Jenkins, The Phantom Crook, who dodges the closing jaws of a police trap and finds himself placed "under the guns" of his enemies of the underworld.

THE AMATEUR MURDERER - by Carroll John Daly

Race Williams, Private Investigator, wearer of two .44's and expert in their use, learns they're not enough for the serious business he has taken in hand.

WYATT EARP - - - - - by Stuart N. Lake

A stirring episode in the life of the gamest Frontier marshal of the West.

DEATH OF A DEAL - - - by Thomson Burtis

It was a sweet deal in the making and had its moments until it ran crosswise to the wishes of a wild crowd of hunyacks.

The MAY BLACK MASK is another banner number
On the newsstands April 12th

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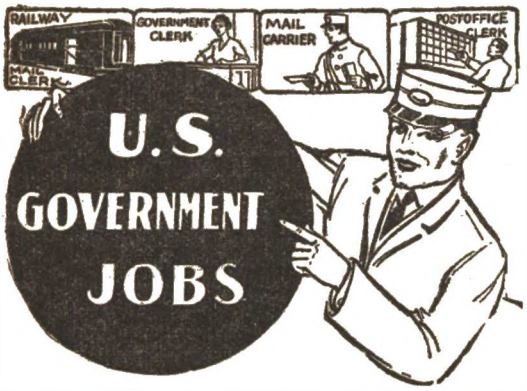

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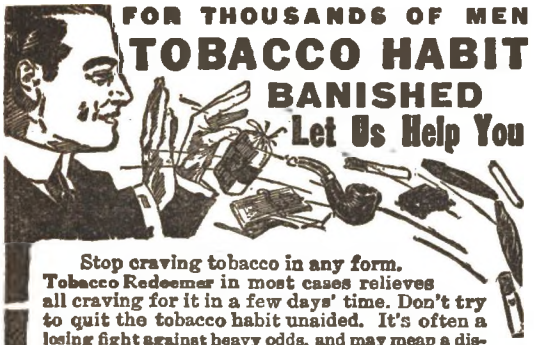

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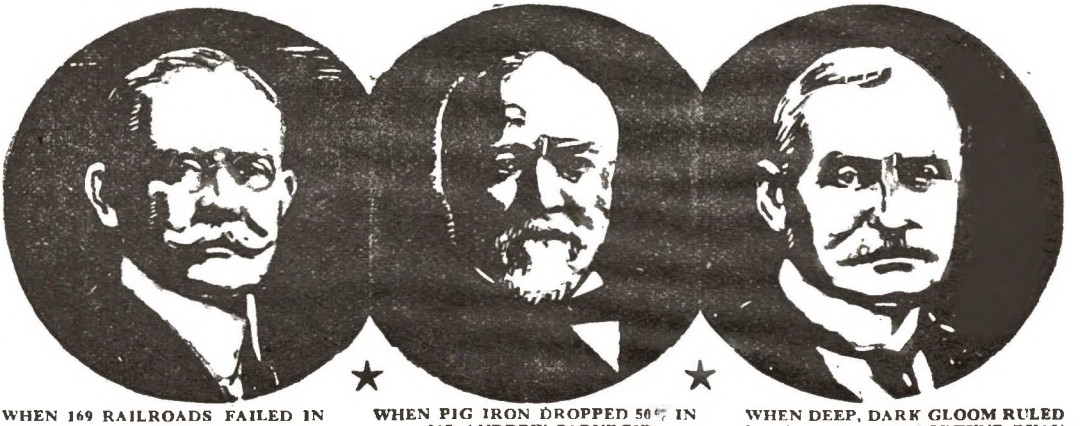
THEIR Confidence was Justified



WHEN 169 RAILROADS FAILED IN 1893, JOHN H. PATTERSON SAID:

"The year has been unparalleled in the history of the United States. Great questions were to be solved, every industry was stagnant. Some closed down, some lost courage, while a few pushed ahead and worked harder than ever with confidence in the future. We did not let the hard times interfere with our work. When times got duller, we advertised the more and worked the harder."

WHEN PIG IRON DROPPED 50% IN 1907, ANDREW CARNEGIE DECLARED:

"This panic will soon run its course and pass away leaving no impediment to the return, in due season, of another period of wholesome, because needed, expansion of our resources. . . .

"We have had the greatest expansion of modern times. Reaction had to come—will prove healthful. Nothing can stay the rapid progress of the Republic. She is all right."

WHEN DEEP, DARK GLOOM RULED IN 1921, THOMAS FORTUNE RYAN SAID:

"Our merchants have been buying only what they can sell quickly for cash. The consumer has had to listen to so much pessimistic talk that he buys only what is absolutely necessary. People everywhere have been scared. They are getting over that.

"Our people are the greatest consumers of food and manufactured articles in the world in normal times—and normal times are coming back. . . ."

AMERICA CAME THROUGH!

In 1893 stark ruin stalked through the land. 467 banks failed in a few months. Mills, furnaces and factories shut down everywhere. Bankruptcy was on every hand. America had twice as many unemployed per thousand population as she has today. But she put them all back to work.

In 1907 panic broke loose. The production of pig iron dropped 50% in less than a year. All but the strongest men lost heart—"We are ruined," they declared, "recovery cannot come in our time." Yet in two years prosperity had returned.

In 1921, when many honest and thoughtful people were predicting worse conditions, the country was already beginning to climb to the greatest era of prosperity it had ever experienced.

History tells how America has fought and won 19 major depressions. Good times always follow hard times, as surely as day follows night. Prosperity always comes back. It is coming back *this* time, too.

Above all things, let us have faith.

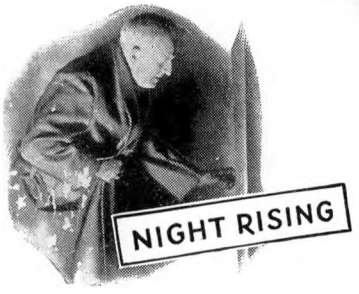
America Has Beaten 19 Major Depressions She will Beat this one

THE NATIONAL PUBLISHERS ASSOCIATION

"As the most nearly self-contained nation, we have within our own boundaries the elemental factors for recovery."

(From the Recommendations of the Committee on Unemployment Plans and Suggestions of the President's Organization on Unemployment Relief.)

This Little Gland Robbed Me of Sleep and Health



Until I Discovered a New Hygiene for Men Past 40

It had been coming on for years—this devilish thing called "Prostate Trouble!" I gave it little thought at first, because I figured that all men experience a certain change about my time in life. That was my big mistake. I thought it was *just* the breakdown of oncoming age and that I would have to put up with it. I did for a while, but a year later my condition went from bad to worse at an alarming rate.

These Common Symptoms

My sleep was broken a dozen times every night. In fact, one restful sleep was a luxury. I had developed in my back legs, and I was chronically constipated. I was run down in body and almost broken in mind—practically an invalid at 58. I talked to scores of men. In fact, I talked to practically every man I met or could get to listen. As I look back now I think I was practically insane on the subject.

Faces Surgery

It has been my experience that a majority of men past 60 and a surprising number even at 40—had one of these distressing symptoms, but few men had it as bad as I did. I had seen my doctor, of course. But he could offer me but little relief. I spent hundreds of dollars in an effort to avoid an operation, for I had learned that gland surgery was usually dangerous. This insidious little gland that robbed me of sleep and health now threatened my very life.

The Turning Point

Then I read one of your advertisements. I admit I mailed the coupon without the slightest hope. There probably never was a more skeptical mind than mine. But this simple little act turned out to be the biggest thing in my life.

I can never thank you enough. I am now sixty. I can go to bed at ten o'clock and sleep straight through. My doctor has pronounced me in normal health. My entire body is toned up, and I feel almost like a youngster. I have had no return of the trouble, and now use your pleasant treatment just fifteen minutes a day, over one or two months, just to make sure that I keep my perfect health.

Millions Make This Mistake

When I was at my lowest ebb, I encountered so many prostate sufferers that I know there must be millions of men doctoring for sciatica, pains in the back and legs, bladder and kidney weakness, chronic constipation, loss of physical and mental capacity and a host of supposed old age symptoms, *who should probably be treating the prostate gland!* In fact, I learned not long ago that certain medical authorities claim that 65% of men at or past middle age suffer from disorders of this vital gland.

My advice to these men is, not to make the mistake that I made. Send the coupon for that little book, "The Destroyer of Male Health." Find out the facts about this little gland, which the book contains. It explains a prominent scientist's discovery of a new home hygiene—explains how, without drugs or surgery, without massage, diet, or exercise, this method acts to reduce the congestion and combat the dangerous symptoms

Scientist's Book Sent Free

See if these facts apply to you. Learn the true meaning of these common complaints and see why these ailments in men past 40 are so often directly traceable to a swollen prostate. The book, "The Destroyer of Male Health," is sent without cost and without obligation.

Simply mail the coupon to W. J. Kirk, President, 4852 Morris Ave., Steubenville, Ohio.

If you live West of the Rockies, address The Electro Thermal Co., 303 Van Nuys Building, Dept. 48-F, Los Angeles, Calif. In Canada, address The Electro Thermal Co., Desk 48-F, 53 Yonge St., Toronto, Can.

W. J. Kirk, President,
4852 Morris Ave., Steubenville, Ohio.

Please mail me at once your Free booklet, "The Destroyer of Male Health," and full details about the new home treatment. I am not obligated in any way.

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ONCE a woman smoker has been introduced to Camels it's a case of love at first light. The first cool, mild fragrant puff of smoke from this fresh cigarette is sufficient to win her to Camels' ever-growing ranks of friends.

Maybe it's because her throat is more sensitive than a man's that she's so quick to grasp the difference between the mildness of this air-sealed cigarette and the stinging bite of parched or toasted tobaccos.

Blended from choice Turkish and mild, sun-ripened Domestic tobaccos, Camels are made with just the right amount of natural moisture and kept that way until delivered to the smoker by the Camel Humidor Pack.

These cigarettes are never parched or toasted. The Reynolds method of scientifically applying heat guarantees against that.

If you haven't smoked Camels lately, perhaps you've been missing something. Why not switch over for just one day? After you've known their rare, throat-easy mildness, then leave them—if you can.

R. J. REYNOLDS TOBACCO COMPANY
Winston-Salem, N. C.

Don't remove the moisture-proof wrapping from your package of Camels after you open it. The Camel Humidor Pack is protection against perfume and powder odors, dust and germs, in offices and homes, even in the dry atmosphere of artificial heat, the Camel Humidor Pack can be depended upon to deliver fresh Camels every time

"Are you Listenin'?"

R. J. REYNOLDS TOBACCO COMPANY'S
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CAMEL QUARTER HOUR, Morton Downey, Tony Wons, and Camel Orchestra, direction Jacques Renard, every night except Sunday, Columbia Broadcasting System

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See radio page of local newspaper for time

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