

15¢

# BLACK MASK★

DETECTIVE STORIES



an Oliver Quade story by

**FRANK  
GRUBER**

a Clay Holt spy story by

**CARROLL  
JOHN  
DALY**

**EMILE C.  
TEPPERMAN.**

**H. RANDOLPH  
PEACOCK**

**MAY  
1939**



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# BLACK MASK

**A MAGAZINE OF GRIPPING, SMASHING DETECTIVE STORIES**

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**F. ELLSWORTH, Editor**

**J. B. MAGILL, Managing Editor**

**VOL. XXII No. 2**

**May, 1939**

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**IN JUNE**

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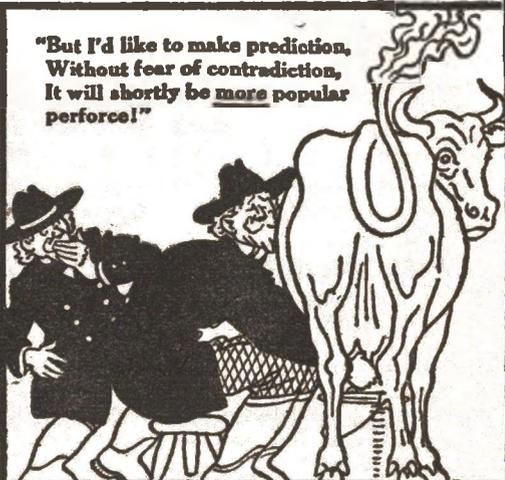


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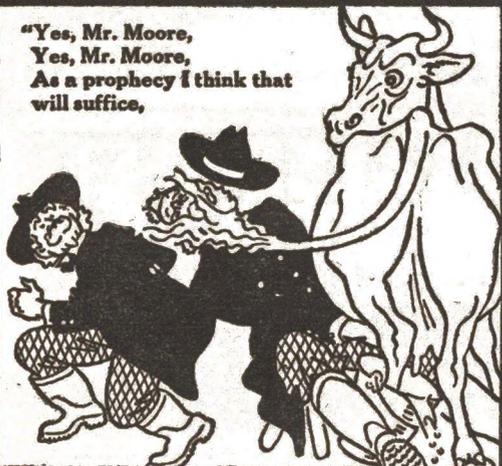
"Oh, Mr. Mattingly,  
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## BEHIND THE BLACK MASK

**I**N WORKING out an Oliver Quade story I always determine, first, the background for the yarn. I generally try to have an original or colorful setting for a yarn. This isn't always as simple as it sounds.

Although Hollywood backgrounds have been used repeatedly by other writers, I'd never done a Hollywood story. Mainly because I'd never been in Hollywood until recently and I always believe I should know a little of a background, from personal observation.

So, when the opportunity presented itself for a Hollywood trip, I decided to write a story with a Hollywood background. After giving it some thought I came to the conclusion that just about every phase of Hollywood had been covered by other writers—except the animated cartoon studio.

The thought struck a responsive note in me, for I'm very fond of Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck. . . . So I emerged with Desmond Dogg and "FUNNY MAN," in this issue of **BLACK MASK**.

To Mr. Hugh Harman of the Harman-Ising Cartoon Studios, I am in-

debted for the courtesy of a personally conducted tour through a "cartoon factory." I want it understood, though, that none of the characters or situations in "FUNNY MAN" refer in any way to the Harman-Ising Studios. They are entirely fictitious, only the factual material and the "atmosphere" was obtained from H-I.

For the benefit of those who came in late, I'd like to report that Oliver Quade will soon be portrayed in a motion picture, Paramount Pictures having bought the film rights to all the Quade stories, for Lynn Overman. The story now "in the works" is "DOG SHOW MURDER," which appeared originally in the March, 1938, issue of **BLACK MASK**.

I hope every reader of **BLACK MASK** goes to see this picture at least ten times, for if it's a success there'll be more Oliver Quade pictures.

I've promised myself a treat. If "FUNNY MAN" is ever filmed and I'm still around Hollywood, I'm going to see Mr. Lynn Overman do the scene where he imitates Desmond Dogg.

—Frank Gruber

# FUNNY MAN



HARLIE BOSTON grabbed Oliver Quade's arm. "Look," he said, "a movie studio!"

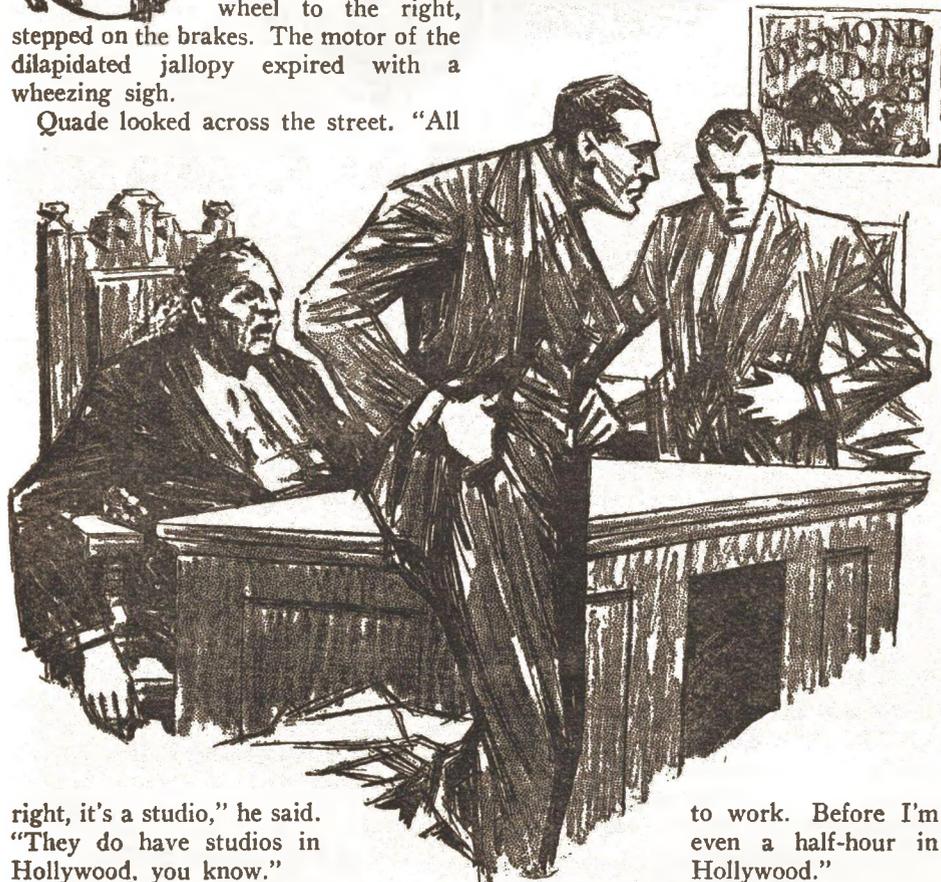
Quade twisted the wheel to the right, stepped on the brakes. The motor of the dilapidated jallopy expired with a wheezing sigh.

Quade looked across the street. "All

suppose, Charlie, you've got a stray quarter—or even a dime, somewhere about you?"

"You know damn well I haven't. You got my last cent in Arizona."

"In that case, I guess I've got to go



right, it's a studio," he said.

"They do have studios in Hollywood, you know."

"The sign by the gate says Slocum Studios." Charlie Boston's voice was eager. "Do you suppose this is the place where Hedy Lamarr works?"

"And if it is, would she want to see you? Come on, we've got things to do. We've got to get located. After all, we were lucky to make it from San Bernardino on three gallons of gas." He looked hopefully at Charlie Boston. "I don't

to work. Before I'm even a half-hour in Hollywood."

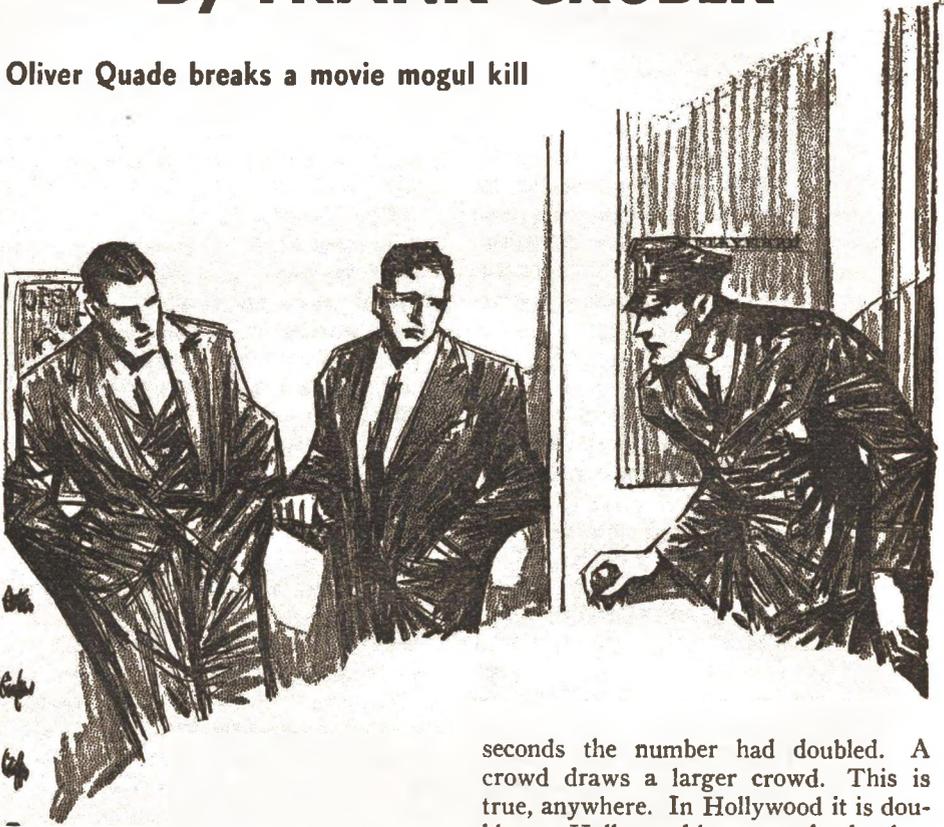
"Where can you work around here?"

"Right there," said Quade. "Where all those people are hanging around the studio gate. If I work fast I won't need a peddler's license."

He opened the door of the flivver beside him and it came away in his hand. "If we ever get any money, Charlie, we'll buy a new car and send this one to China."

# By FRANK GRUBER

Oliver Quade breaks a movie mogul kill



He walked across the street toward the studio gate. Before he quite reached it he turned to the right and stopped with his back against the stucco wall.

He raised his hands dramatically and began talking in a voice that rolled out over Wilshire Boulevard and drowned out the noise of the traffic.

"I'm Oliver Quade, the Human Encyclopedia!" he boomed. "I know the answers to all questions. I know the distance to the moon and the sun. I can name all the presidents and vice presidents. I can recite the batting averages of every major league baseball player. I am the Human Encyclopedia, the walking compendium of human knowledge."

There were twenty or thirty people already hanging around the gates when Quade began talking. Inside of thirty

seconds the number had doubled. A crowd draws a larger crowd. This is true, anywhere. In Hollywood it is doubly so. Hollywood has more freaks than any other city in the country; and they always have time to listen to another freak.

Quade thundered on: "I know the answers to all questions. I bar no holds. I'll answer any question on history, science, mathematics, business or sports. Try me out, someone. Make me prove what I say. Ask me a question!"

"Is it going to rain today?"

"It hasn't rained here in 224 days," Quade retorted. "So the chances are it won't rain today. But that's not a fair question. The answer to it doesn't require any encyclopedic knowledge. I'm not a fortune teller and can't make guesses. I'm an exponent of *learning*. Any question anyone can ask me—"

"I've got a question!" someone yelled. "Referring to a number of animals,

would you say, a herd of lions, a flock—or what?"

Quade's eyes brightened. "Now, that's the quade of question I like. It would stump practically anyone in this audience. But, ladies and gentlemen, it doesn't phase me. The answer is—a *pride* of lions. And just for fun, I'll give you extra measure. In referring to geese you would say a *gaggle* of geese; pheasants, a *nide* of pheasants. Try those on your friends, sometime. . . . All right, someone else ask me another question, any subject at all."

It came instantly. "What are felt hats made of?"

"Rabbit fur," Quade shot back. "The fur is sheered from the pelt, put through certain processes and emerges as 'felt'. . . . Next!"

A youth snapped: "A man boiling a kettle of water on top of Mt. Everest stuck his bare arm into the boiling water and wasn't scalded. Why not?"

Quade cried, "You're getting tricky now. The answer to that question is because of the low boiling point of the water at that altitude. The boiling point of water at sea level is 212 degrees, but it drops one degree for every five hundred feet of altitude. Therefore, the boiling point of water at the top of Mt. Everest, which is 21,000 feet, would be only 172 degrees—not enough to scald a person."

They came fast and furious after that.

"Who was Machiavelli?"

"How far is it from the earth to the moon?"

"Who won the heavyweight championship from Tommy Burns?"

Quade tossed back the answers swiftly and accurately. The game continued for ten minutes, then Quade called a sudden halt.

"That's all, folks. Now, I'm going to tell you how you, each and everyone of you, can learn the answers to every question that was asked here today—and ten thousand others. Any question anyone can ask you at any time. They're all here!" He held out his hand and Charlie Boston, who had lugged a valise from

the car across the street, tossed him a book.

Quade ruffled its pages. "Here it is, The Compendium of Human Knowledge. The knowledge of the ages, condensed, classified, abbreviated, all in one volume. A complete high school education, available to every man, woman and child in this audience.

"Yes, I'm selling this amazing book, the compendium of all knowledge acquired by man since the beginning of time. But what am I asking for this college education in one book . . . \$25.00? Cheap at the price! But no! Not even \$5.00, but a mere, paltry insignificant \$2.95!"

Charlie Boston stepped up beside Oliver Quade and hissed: "Scram, Ollie! A cop."

A man in a blue uniform pushed through the crowd. "Hey, you," he said, "Mr. Slocum wants to talk to you about that voice of your'n."

Oliver Quade drew himself up to his lean height and fixed the policeman with an icy stare. "Since when is a citizen of this glorious country denied the right of free speech? Are you not a servant of the people? So by what right do you dare order one of your employers not to speak!"

The cop grinned sickishly. "I'm not complaining about your talk. It's Mr. Slocum. He wants to see you in his office, right away."

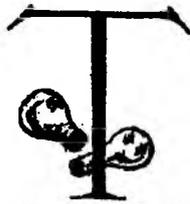
Quade waved his hands to the audience. "You see, ladies and gentlemen, that's what happens to a humble citizen when one of our millionaire movie moguls turns his thumb down. My voice raised in honest speech, in a humble endeavor to earn a livelihood, annoys Mr. Slocum, yonder in his plush-lined office and so I am arrested."

"Who said anythin' about arresting anyone?" the policeman demanded. "I only said Mr. Slocum wants to talk to you. He heard your voice and sent me out to bring you in. Hey, you didn't think I was a regular cop, did you?"

Quade brightened. "Of course not,

my good man! I see it all now. Mr. Slocum is a motion picture producer; he heard my resonant voice and—yes, of course. He wishes to talk contract with me. Lead on, officer! I'll talk to your Mr. Slocum."

The crowd was already dispersing. The policeman pushed his way through and Quade followed. Behind him came Charlie Boston, still protesting at walking into a lion's den.



THE MAIN studio building was a maze of corridors and private offices. The uniformed man led Quade and Boston down the row of offices and finally opened the door of an office that only a Hollywood mogul or a blue-sky promoter could afford.

There were two or three girls in the office and a couple of sleek-haired young men.

"Miss Hendricks will announce you to Mr. Slocum," said the policeman to Quade. "Miss Hendricks, this is the man from outside, the man whose voice Mr. Slocum heard."

A woman who looked like a middle-aged schoolteacher said, "Mr. Slocum will see you."

"Wait here, Charles," Quade said, and passed through the portals of Mr. Tommy Slocum's inner sanctum.

He went into a room that looked like a newspaper morgue. A short slight young man, who wore baggy trousers and a soiled shirt, got up from behind a littered desk and snapped at Quade:

"Can you bark?"

Quade had seen and heard many things in his life. He was almost never surprised. But his mouth fell open, now. "Can I bark?" he repeated, inanely.

"Yeah, sure. Like a dog. Let's hear you."

Quade's eyes hardened. "You mean like this?" He barked "Arf! Arf!"

Tommy Slocum sawed the air impatiently. "No, no, no! Bark like the big-

gest, maddest dog you ever heard in your life. Put feeling into it!"

Quade fixed the little man with a deadly stare, took a deep breath . . . and barked. He barked like a St. Bernard dog whose tail had been stepped on by a fat man.

Tommy Slocum cried, "Splendid! I thought you had the stuff when I heard you bellowing out there on the street. You'll do, fella, you'll do!"

Deliberately Quade looked about the room. "Where's the keeper?" he asked. "This is the crazy house, isn't it?"

Tommy Slocum guffawed. "Don't you know? This is the Slocum Studios. We make the Desmond Dogg animated cartoons."

Quade looked sick. "Desmond Dogg! And I—I barked like Desmond Dogg?"

"Sure, that's why I wanted you. Pete Rice, who usually dubs in the voice for Desmond, has laryngitis and won't be able to bark for three-four days. We need the voice tomorrow. Come in here at nine o'clock. It'll only be a couple of hours work and you'll get fifty dollars. Oke?"

"Mr. Slocum," said Quade. "You sent a policeman outside to drag me in. You interfered with my legitimate business. Your cop scared away my customers. I didn't complain. I came in here because I thought a motion picture producer had recognized my talents. And what do you do? You insult—"

"All right, what the hell's money?" snapped Slocum. "I'll give you a hundred bucks."

Quade's mouth twisted suddenly. "I'll be here at nine in the morning."

He turned abruptly and rushed out of Slocum's private office. He burst out of the room and almost knocked the wind out of one of the tallest men that ever walked a street. He was as thin as he was tall.

"What the hell!" the man gasped. "Look, where you're going!" Then his eyes popped. "Oliver Quade!"

"Christopher Buck!" Quade ex-

claimed. "The world's greatest detective!"

The long, lean man winced and darted a look around him. "Nix!"

Quade looked innocently around the office. "Are you in disguise? Shadowing someone?"

"Still the clown!" Christopher Buck spat venomously.

Quade chuckled. "What're you doing here in movieland, Buck? Didn't think you'd ever get across the plains."

"I came in an airplane," said Buck, coldly. "How did you come—riding the rods?"

"Ha-ha," Quade laughed mirthlessly. "We do have great times together, don't we? Say, Charlie, remember this bean-pole? Our old friend, Christopher Buck."

"I saw him when he came in," Charlie Boston retorted. "I was hoping he wouldn't recognize me."

Christopher Buck reddened. Then his eyes suddenly narrowed. "What're you fellows doing here?"

Quade shrugged. "Well, you know how it is, Buck, old boy. When Hollywood calls . . . I just signed a long-term picture contract."

Buck looked suspiciously at Quade. "Quit clowning, Quade. You just came out of Tommy Slocum's office. So he did hire you?"

"I just said so."

"Sure you said so, but you didn't say what he hired you for. Look, Quade, we worked together on a case once before. You helped me quite a bit—"

"I helped you, Buck?"

Buck smiled ingratiatingly. "Well, you were lucky, eh? Now, look, we're both working on the same case. Maybe for different bosses. But what's the difference? We can still work together. Pool our information, you know, and maybe split fees, huh?"

"If you did the splitting, Buck," growled Charlie Boston, "we wouldn't get a hamburger out of it."

Quade brightened. He caught Boston's eye and winked. "On the other

hand, Buck, maybe there's something in what you say. You in a hurry to see Slocum? If not, why not let's go talk about this over a cup of coffee."

Buck sighed. "Why not? Maybe I've got some things you can use and maybe you've stumbled across a bit or two that might clear something for me. Come on."

The trio walked out of the studio, through the street gate. Boston turned toward their old jalopy across the street but Quade caught his eye in a warning look. He fell behind Christopher Buck.

Buck led the way to a Packard coupé. "Might as well use my car," he offered. "Or shall we walk over to that restaurant on the corner?"

"Oh, the Brown Derby's just up the street," Quade said. "I like the atmosphere there." He had never seen the Brown Derby in his life.

The three of them climbed into the coupé and Christopher Buck tooled it into the traffic. "How long've you been here, Quade?" he asked.

"Not so long. But long enough to pick up a few things."

"What?"

"Now, now, Buck, you wouldn't want me to tell what I know, before I know what the score is, would you?"

Christopher Buck scowled. "Cagy, as always, huh? Well, who's your client—Tommy Slocum?"

"Who's yours?" Quade asked.

"Stanley Maynard's paying me. That's why I was—ah, somewhat disconcerted to see you coming out of Slocum's office. The way Maynard put it to me, Slocum wasn't to know who was having the investigation made."

"Oh, Maynard was trying to keep it dark? Does he think Slocum's a chump?"

Buck sighed. "Well, it would have come out sooner or later. . . . There's the Brown Derby. They'll probably charge you twenty cents for a cup of coffee. But—come on!"

They went into the restaurant and sat in a booth.

Quade picked up a menu. "It's almost lunch time. This avocado salad sounds intriguing."

"Long time since I ate an avocado salad," agreed Boston. "I guess I'll have it too. Shucks, Ollie, you've given me an appetite. Look, they've got a steak at a dollar and a quarter. Can you imagine getting a steak here for that? I think I'll try it."

"I'll have one, too," Quade said. "What about you, Buck?"

"I'm not as big an eater as you fellows," grunted Buck. "But go ahead, I guess we've got time. I'll just have a glass of buttermilk."

"All right, now, Quade, just what does Tommy Slocum intend to do?"

"What he always does. Sit tight! The question is, what is Maynard going to do?"

"With the case he's got and the proof, he's going through with the suit. He'd be foolish not to. He's got the goods on Slocum. It'll cost him a million before it's finished."

Quade shrugged, pretending he knew what this was all about. "There's a difference of opinion about that. That's what makes a lawsuit. Slocum's a tough customer. And he's got plenty of money."

"Maynard knows that. That's why he'd rather settle out of court at a somewhat lower figure. The Wentworth dame coming in—"

"Ah, yes!" said Quade, still groping.

"Thelma Wentworth?" Charlie Boston cut in.

"There's only one Wentworth," Buck said. "Sure, Thelma Wentworth, who'd you suppose? The thing I can't figure out is how a woman like her ever came to know Willie Higgins."

"Higgins?" said Quade. Then he shook his head quickly. "He's bad medicine. When they sent him to Alcatraz they really did something."

Christopher Buck looked sharply at Quade. "You knew, of course, that he's out?"

"Oh, sure," said Quade. "I read the

papers." Which was a slight falsehood. He hadn't read the papers in several days. He hadn't known that Willie Higgins was out of Alcatraz. But he knew who Higgins was. Everyone knew that. His career, before he had finally been sent to Alcatraz six years ago, was known to everyone.

But what Higgins had to do with Thelma Wentworth, who seemed to be known to even Charlie Boston, but was merely a name to Quade, was something else. For that matter, Quade didn't even know what Christopher Buck was talking about. He was merely cueing Buck. The lanky detective thought Quade knew something and it wasn't Quade's idea to disillusion him.

"So you see," Buck went on, "the thing's more complicated than you think. Tommy Slocum . . . Stanley Maynard . . . Thelma Wentworth and Willie Higgins, all mixed up. And maybe some others. There's money in it, though, for a couple of good private detectives and if we work together and play it right, we ought to be able to nick them for say, five or ten grand."

Quade chuckled. "Knowing you, Buck, the figure'll be five times that."

Buck's mouth twisted. "What's Slocum paying you?"

Quade smiled deprecatingly. "Well, you know, Christopher, I'm not a professional detective. Money can't usually buy my—uh, detective services. It has to be something unusual."

"Ah," said Buck, "so Slocum's really paying you big sugar? That proves he's worried about Maynard, after all. I had a hunch about that!"

"Buck," sighed Quade, "that wasn't cricket. You talked about cooperation and all you brought me here for was to pump me about what my boss is doing. I'm not going to say another word, now, until I have my coffee and steak and salad."

A triumphant light gleamed in Christopher Buck's eyes while Boston and Quade did justice to their food. When

they finished, they talked each other into having pie ala mode for dessert.

Quade finally put down his fork. "Excuse me, a minute, now, Buck. I've got to make a phone call." He got up and went to the washroom. He washed his hands, then returned to the booth. His eyes spotted the check that lay face down on the table near his own place.

He remained standing. "Something's come up, Buck!" he said. "I've got to run!"

"Wait!" exclaimed Buck: "I'll go with you."

Quade took his hat from the hook. "No, no, I'd rather go alone."

"But we haven't settled yet how we're going to work!" cried Buck. He squirmed out of the booth and was so anxious to follow Quade he grabbed up the check, and winced when he saw the amount. Quade was already moving toward the door and Boston was scrambling out of the booth.

Buck threw a coin on the table and followed. Quade waited just inside the front door. Buck hurriedly paid the check at the cashier's stand.

"You're going back to the studio, Quade?" he asked eagerly. "I'll drive you there."

"Well, all right."

As they climbed into the car, Charlie whispered in Quade's ear: "Well, it worked!"

They drove back to the Slocum Studios and Buck parked his car. At the gate, Quade and Boston fell behind Buck and allowed the tall detective to get them through the gate by showing his pass.

Once inside, Quade became reticent. "You run along about your business, Buck."

"Yeah, but that phone call," protested Buck. "What's come up?"

Quade waved a finger chidingly at Buck. "Now, now!"

Buck's face contorted angrily for a moment. "All right, if that's the way you're going to be. But remember, Quade, I'm on the job, and I'll be running into you."

"Oh sure, no hard feelings. Eh?"

Buck went off and Boston asked, "So what's it all about, Ollie?"

"We're detectives again," replied Quade. "Christopher Buck, the world's greatest detective, came all the way from New York on a job. He thinks because I once got mixed in a case that he was on—and solved it—that I'm here as a detective."

"But, hell, you don't even know who those people are that he mentioned!" exclaimed Charlie Boston.

"We got a lunch out of it, didn't we? How much was the check?"

"Three-forty!" chuckled Boston. "Which, for a tight-wad like Christopher Buck, was plenty."

"He figured he was going to have a cup of coffee—on us!" Quade laughed. "Say, Charlie, who's Thelma Wentworth?"

"Huh? Say, don't you read the movie magazines, Ollie? She's the new sensation in the films. Her and Hedy Lamarr. I knew about her, all right, but who're Maynard and Higgins? Is that the Willie Higgins, who used to be Public Enemy Number One?"

"Yep! None other. Seems he finished his time on Alcatraz. Also he knows these people. Maynard, I haven't placed. But he seems to think he's got something on Tommy Slocum. I'm going to find out what."

Charlie's forehead creased. "You're not serious in mixing in this detective stuff, are you? Not out here?"

Quade shrugged. "We're broke. That is, we are today. Although tomorrow, Tommy Slocum's giving me a hundred bucks."

"What?" cried Charlie Boston. "He really gave you a job? Doing what?"

Quade said hastily, "Oh, just a job."

"What the hell can you do around a studio?"

"Lots of things. They have producers and writers and such, in a studio, you know."

"Not in this place, Ollie. This is where they make the Desmond Dogg

cartoons. It's all done by artists." Boston looked suspiciously at Quade. "Why the mystery all of a sudden? You're talking to *me*, you know."

"Oh, hell!" said Quade disgustedly. "We're broke and we've got to make a quick stake so—well, Slocum offered me this hundred bucks for just a couple of hours work and I accepted."

"A hundred bucks for a couple of hours?" persisted Boston. "Doing what?"

Quade swore. "Barking, damn you! I'm going to imitate Desmond Dogg's bark. Now laugh, you fool!"

Boston did laugh. He laughed until the tears rolled down his cheeks. But Quade heard only the beginning of the laughter. He walked off, muttering savagely to himself.



LIVER QUADE jerked open the first door he came to and found himself facing one of the most beautiful girls he had ever seen in his life. She

was tall and slender and blond.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "You startled me!"

"Sorry. I guess I got into the wrong place. Whose office is this?" He wondered why the girl looked so pale, why her lips were so taut. His sudden entry couldn't have scared her *that* much.

She started around him, toward the door through which he had just entered. "I—I got into the wrong office myself," she said, lamely. "There doesn't seem to be anyone here."

She stepped hurriedly past him, pulling the door shut behind her. Quade stared at the door. "I must have caught her doing something," he said to himself. "She's scared stiff." He shrugged and glanced about the office. There was an inner door with a ground glass panel, on which was lettered the name: Mr. Maynard.

He walked across and opened the

door. "Mr. Maynard," he began, "I just dropped in to—" he stopped.

He was talking to a dead man.

He sat in a big chair behind a mahogany desk. His arms hung loosely at his sides and his head was thrown back. Blood was trickling from his mouth to the thick rug. It was dropping on a .32 caliber automatic that might have fallen from his limp hand.

Quade had seen dead men before. He was a man of the world and had seen many things in his time. He had never got used to death. A shiver ran through his lean body and he felt strangely cold. He backed out of Maynard's private office and closed the door, softly. Then he walked swiftly out of the other office, into the corridor. And collided with Tommy Slocum.

The little producer said, "Excuse me," and reached for the door through which Quade had just come.

Quade's hand shot out and caught Slocum's arm. "I wouldn't go in there if I were you, Mr. Slocum."

"Why not? Who're you to tell me where I can go? I'm Tommy Slocum and this is my joint. I'm the boss around here."

"I know, but just the same, don't go into Mr. Maynard's office. Not yet. He's—dead!"

"Dead, hell," said Slocum and shoved against the door. Then, as understanding swept into his brain, he recoiled. "Dead!" he squeaked in a thin voice.

"With a bullet in his head. I think you'd better call the police."

"Oh, my God!" moaned Tommy Slocum. "Stanley Maynard—dead? I don't believe it."

But he did believe it. And if he had known of Maynard's death before Quade told him, he put on a very good act.

He snapped at Quade: "You found him? All right, stick around then. Hey, Hendricks!" he roared at the top of his voice. "Come out here!"

Miss Hendricks, the school-teacherish looking secretary, rushed out of her office. "Call the police!" Slocum yelled at

her. "Tell them to hurry up. Stanley Maynard's killed himself."

Heads popped out of doors. Tommy Slocum roared at them. "Get back to your work! What do you think I'm paying you for? To gawk around? Somebody call the police department. Murder's been done. Mr. Maynard's killed himself."

"What a man!" murmured Quade.

And now the human bloodhound, Christopher Buck, popped out of nowhere. "Maynard's dead?" he hissed. "Where?" He saw Oliver Quade and clapped a hand to his skinny face. "You, Ollie, what do you know about this?"

"I found his body. He's in there." He jerked a hand toward the office door.

Christopher Buck slithered past them and little Tommy Slocum charged him. "You can't go in there, you long drink of water. Stay out!"

Christopher Buck shook off the little man. "Maynard's my client! I'm going in and no one can stop me." And in he went.

Quade stepped in swiftly after him. Tommy Slocum yelled and followed. He sobbed when he saw the dead man with the sightless eyes staring at the ceiling.

"Stanley, old boy!" he moaned.

Buck, his head craned forward, was sniffing about the office. "Through the mouth," he said, "and the gun's here. I don't believe it!"

"You don't believe what, Buck?" asked Quade softly.

"That he'd kill himself. He was so sure of winning out. Damn, what a dirty trick! Now, I can whistle for my fee."

Someone came up behind Quade and breathed on his neck. "I told you, Ollie!" exclaimed Charlie Boston. "We had no business butting in around here."

"Oh, shut up, Charlie!" snorted Quade.

"The best friend I ever had!" said Tommy Slocum.

"Oh, yeah!" That was Christopher Buck, all detective, now. He had whirled

on Slocum and was towering over him, his face grim and unforgiving. "If he was your best friend, why was he suing you for a million dollars?"

Slocum jumped. "Who're you?" he cried. "How'd you get in here? What right have you got to talk that way to me? I'm Tommy Slocum and this is my studio. Get the hell out of here."

Christopher Buck showed his teeth. "I'm Christopher Buck, the detective!" he announced. "Mr. Maynard employed me to—to uncover some evidence he wanted. I came out here from New York by plane. Mr. Maynard wanted me right away. Why, Mr. Slocum, why?"

"Hendricks!" roared Tommy Slocum. "Call the cops. Have this man thrown out of here. I don't care if he is a detective . . . Hendricks!"

A studio cop rushed into the office. "Yes, Mr. Slocum, what is it?"

"Emil! Throw this man off the lot. He says he's a detective, but I don't believe him. Throw him off. He insulted me."

The studio cop looked at the tall detective who was glowering at him. "I dunno, Mr. Slocum," the cop said, hesitantly. "The city police just pulled up outside—"

"Here we are!"

They came in, a small army of them. A hawk-faced man with graying hair was in command. "I'm Lieutenant Murdock," he announced. "What's happened here?"

Slocum pointed a quivering hand at the dead man. "Stanley Maynard, he killed himself."

"O. K.," Lieutenant Murdock said, "We'll take care of things. Just keep back . . . Johnson, clear this gang out of here. Outside, everybody. We'll handle things in here." Everyone cleared out.

Alone in an adjoining office, Quade sidled up to Tommy Slocum. "In a little while, Mr. Slocum, they're going to discover that Maynard didn't kill himself."

The producer of the famous Desmond

Dogg animated cartoons snapped: "What do you mean, he didn't kill himself?"

"I mean he was murdered."

"You're crazy, the gun—"

"Was left by the murderer, in an attempt to make it look like suicide."

Slocum's eyes widened, "You were coming out of Maynard's office when I bumped into you."

"Uh-uh," said Quade. "I never met Mr. Maynard while he was alive. Before today I had never even heard his name. I know nothing about him and had absolutely no motive for killing him. I can prove that. Can you?"

Slocum became strangely calm. "I don't get you."

"You heard what Christopher Buck said—that Maynard was suing you for a million dollars."

"That's news to me," scoffed Slocum. "Why would Stanley want to sue me? He was working for me and we were friends."

"Buck says otherwise."

"Buck, Buck!" Slocum cried, impatiently. "Who is this Buck, who seems to know everything?"

"In the East, they call him the world's greatest detective."

"I can believe that. He's been hanging around for two days trying to bother me. I've refused to talk to him. Or any private detective. My life's an open book. Every time I open my mouth a newspaperman's around to print what I say."

"They're probably outside, right now," said Quade. "They'll want to know everything about—"

"And I want to know something," Slocum flared up. "I hired you for tomorrow. What the hell are you doing around here today?"

"Giving you good advice," said Quade. "You're going to need it in a little while. When Lieutenant Murdock gets—"

The door of Maynard's private office was jerked open and Lieutenant Murdock stabbed his hand in Tommy Slocum's direction. "Mr. Slocum, I

want to ask you some questions."

"Think fast," murmured Quade.

Slocum glared at Quade, then went toward Murdock. Quade walked casually behind him and got into the other room without being noticed by Lieutenant Murdock.



CHRISTOPHER BUCK was pacing up and down, his hands clasped behind his back, a deep scowl on his face.

"Mr. Slocum," Lieutenant Murdock said. "I understand you've been having trouble with Maynard. What was the nature of this trouble? What I'm getting at is a motive for this suicide."

"I haven't had any trouble with Maynard," Slocum declared. "He worked for me. He was my right-hand man."

Buck stopped his pacing and confronted Slocum. "Then why did Maynard telephone me in New York and have me fly out here? He was going to sue you for a million dollars."

A cop stuck his head in the door. "Lieutenant, the medical examiner's man is here."

"All right, have him come in. I'm through here."

Quade stepped forward and caught the lieutenant's arm. "Just a minute, Lieutenant, you're making a mistake. Maynard didn't shoot himself."

"What the—" Murdock began angrily, but Quade whispered in his ear, "Look at the direction the bullet took. Quick, before the medical examiner tells you what's what and makes a chump out of you."

A heavy-set man came into the room, followed by a white uniformed man carrying a black bag. The heavy-set man made a clucking sound with his mouth as he regarded the dead man.

Murdock stepped swiftly around the medical examiner and peered over the desk at dead Stanley Maynard. He straightened.

"It isn't suicide, Doctor," he said loudly. "It's murder. Take a look at the course the bullet took and see if you don't agree."

The doctor made his examination, studied the dead man's face and throat carefully, then turned and frowned. "The bullet entered his mouth from above, then cut through the bottom of the mouth and entered the throat from outside—"

"Could he have done it himself, Doc?" asked Murdock eagerly.

"Umm," said the doctor. "There are powder burns which indicate the gun was held closely, but—no, he would have had to hold the gun over his head and point it downward at himself to inflict such a wound. Not impossible, but decidedly improbable. And exceedingly awkward."

"Thanks, Doc," said Lieutenant Murdock. He nodded in satisfaction and shot a swift look at Quade. Quade was deliberately avoiding Slocum's angry stare.

Buck pounced down. "So, it's murder! I knew it! Well, Mr. Slocum, what have you to say to that, now?"

Slocum drew himself up. "I say, to hell with you. And you, too, copper. If you want to ask any more questions, talk to my lawyer."

"I don't have to do that, Mr. Slocum," said Murdock, angrily. "I could take you down to Headquarters, you know."

"You want to arrest me?" snapped Slocum. "Go ahead, and see what happens."

Murdock shook his head. Slocum was a Hollywood tradition. You don't arrest a Hollywood tradition off-hand, especially not if the tradition has several million dollars behind him.

Murdock said, "I suggest you telephone your lawyer, Mr. Slocum. I'm afraid I will have to ask you a few questions later on!"

"Fine! I'll be in my office." Slocum slammed out of the room, throwing a dirty look at Oliver Quade, as he passed.

A woman's sobbing in the other room reached the inner office as Tommy tore

out. Quade moved toward the door. Murdock headed him off. "Just a minute!" he said.

Quade spoke out of the corner of his mouth. "I helped you out of a tight spot a minute ago," he reminded. "Saved your face."

Murdock reddened. "Yeah, but I want a word with you in a minute." He was looking past Quade into the other room. Suddenly, he stepped around and went through the door. Quade followed.

A girl with gorgeous blond hair was slumped in a chair, sobbing. A tall, clean-cut looking young fellow in his middle twenties, stood over her, awkwardly patting her hair.

"There, there, Thelma!" he was saying. "It's tough, but nothing you can do about it."

"What's your name?" Lieutenant Murdock asked of the young fellow.

"Paul Clevenger," was the reply. "And this is Miss Thelma Wentworth."

The girl looked up and Quade inhaled softly. It was the beautiful girl he had encountered in this very room a minute before he had discovered the dead body of Stanley Maynard. The girl whose face had been so pale and who had evidently been so frightened. Her cheeks were tear-stained now, but fright was still in her eyes.

She was Thelma Wentworth, glamour girl. Christopher Buck had mentioned her name, in connection with Stanley Maynard and Tommy Slocum—and Willie Higgins, former Public Enemy Number One!

She saw Quade now and her damp handkerchief went up to her face. "Oh, it's too horrible!" she sobbed. "I can't believe it."

Lieutenant Murdock cleared his throat and Oliver Quade stepped unobtrusively out into the corridor. He sauntered down to Slocum's office and went in. Slocum was seated behind his desk. He stopped biting his fingernails when he saw Quade. "You Judas!" he spat.

Quade grinned. "No, Mr. Slocum I was getting myself in solid with Lieu-

tenant Murdock. I told him something the M. E. would have told him inside of three minutes. I saved his face for him and he'll remember it later—when I'm working for you."

"You'll never work for me," declared Slocum.

"Oh, but you've forgotten. You hired me to be Desmond Dagg's voice tomorrow."

"Forget it. Foghorns are a dime a dozen."

Quade shook his head. "You know there isn't another voice like mine in all Hollywood. You picked it yourself. By the way, do you remember how you happened to hear it?"

"How could I help hearing it? You roared loud enough out there on the street."

"Then you must have heard most of my pitch—the questions the people asked me, which, you'll remember, I answered correctly."

"Yeah, sure. Trick stuff."

"No, it wasn't trick stuff. I can answer any question anyone can put to me. I'm the Human Encyclopedia."

Slocum sneered. "All right, Human Encyclopedia, clear out. I've got work to do."

Quade said, "Mr. Slocum, what do you know about Willie Higgins?"

Tommy Slocum jumped to his feet. "Willie Higgins!" he cried. Then he caught himself. "Higgins? That's the gangster who's serving time on Alcatraz Island, isn't it?"

"He finished his term last week," replied Quade. "Sit down, Mr. Slocum. You don't have to be afraid of me. I'm working for you, remember?"

Slocum sat down and stared at Quade.

Quade went on: "You don't have to answer any of my questions, but by this time it must be obvious to you, that you're in a jam. Stanley Maynard was murdered in your studio, just before he started a million-dollar suit against you. He'd already employed one of the highest priced private detectives in the country to acquire certain evidence against

you. So, what is the District Attorney going to say when he learns all that?"

Slocum said bitterly, "You cheap, loud-mouthed book agent!"

Quade's nostrils flared. "Listen, Slocum, you make the best movie cartoons in the business. You know your stuff. But I know mine. I'm the greatest book salesman in the country. I'm broke today, yes. But I've made fortunes selling books! I can make them again, if I want to. You call me loud-mouthed; what the hell are you? Because you've had some success, you can bellow at some people and get away with it. But you can't call me names. I've got more knowledge in my little finger than you have in that swelled head of yours."

Slocum suddenly chuckled. "That's the first time anyone has told me off in ten years!"

"You had it coming, then!" snapped Quade.

"Yeah, sure!" agreed Slocum, affably. "I don't mind it at all." He sighed. "For ten years I've worked like a dog. Everyone's fought me, tried to cut my throat. I've had to yell and fight them . . . How'd you like to work for me, steady?"

"I wouldn't work for anyone, steadily. I like to move around, see things and people. I've spent fifteen years reading the encyclopedia from cover to cover, not once but four times. And I've got a trained memory. That stuff outside this morning, it wasn't faked. I can answer any question anyone can ask me."

"What was the first motion picture cartoon?"

"Krazy Kat," replied Quade.

Slocum's eyes narrowed. "Any question, you said. All right, I was raised on a farm, so I know this one. Maybe it's not fair, but you said any subject. How many breeds of domestic turkeys are there?"

"Six. Bronze, Bourbon Red, Narragansett, White Holland, Slate and Black."

Slocum's mouth fell open. "I thought that one would get you. Even the aver-

age turkey raiser doesn't know how many different breeds there are."

"I know. Now, Slocum, what do you know about Willie Higgins?"

Slocum winced. "You get back to that. Well, I'm not going to answer you."

"Christopher Buck's going to ask you that same question."

"That long-legged lug who calls himself a detective?"

"Yes. And let me repeat, don't underestimate Buck. He's conceited, egotistic and publicity mad. But he's got a very fine detective agency in the East and a good many men who underestimated him are in various penitentiaries. I've had dealings with Buck before."

Slocum bit his nails again.

Quade said, "And what is Thelma Wentworth to you?"

"Damn!" swore Slocum. "What's she got to do with this?"

"You slammed out of Maynard's office too quick to see her. She was in the outer room with a man named Paul Clevenger. She was crying."

Slocum's eyes blazed. "The fool! Why'd she come around at a time like this? She'll get smeared all over the papers."

"She was here earlier," Quade said. "Before you got on the scene. Before I found Maynard, she came out of his office!"

Slocum choked. "Quade, I want you to do something for me. I'll pay you plenty. What do you say?"

"That's what I've been getting at, Mr. Slocum. Murdock isn't going to tackle you just now, but he'll report to the D. A. and he'll get after you. And with Buck on the other side spilling things you're going to have to have some mighty good answers."

"I know," said Slocum. "I've known that for fifteen minutes. Moody, my lawyer, will have to stall the D. A. for a while until you deliver."

"Anything special you want me to do?" Quade asked.

"Yes. I want you to find Willie Higgins."

"Then you *do* know him."

"I'm not going to tell you one single thing. But if you find Higgins and bring him to me before anyone else finds him—and I mean the police, this Buck, or anyone, I'll pay you two thousand dollars."

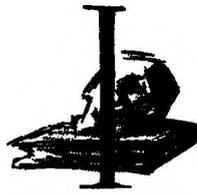
Knuckles wrapped on Slocum's door and Miss Hendricks stuck her head inside. "Mr. Slocum, District Attorney Nelson is here."

Slocum reached for his phone. "All right, Quade. Go to it!"

Quade nodded. "I'll get him for you, if I can, Mr. Slocum. But just one thing more. I'm going to be too busy to get it otherwise, so how about a ten-dollar advance?"

Slocum squinted at Quade, then thrust his hand into a pocket and produced a crumpled bill which he tossed at Quade. "Now, I'll see the D. A."

Quade saw that the bill Slocum had thrown at him was a hundred dollar note. He stuck it in his pocket and went out.



IN THE corridor, Charlie Boston was holding up the wall. Quade walked briskly past him and Boston fell in behind. "We all right?" Boston whispered. "We gonna stay outa trouble?"

"If we get out of here."

They cleared the studio building and got out into the open lot. "That does it," sighed Quade.

They came out on the street and Boston nodded to the stalled jalopy across the street. "What about that? We're still broke."

Quade waved at a passing cab. "Taxi!" Brakes screeched. "Inside, Charlie," Quade ordered. "The Lincoln Hotel!"

Ten minutes later, they climbed out of the taxi in front of one of the most expensive hotels in Hollywood.

Quade tendered the hundred-dollar bill to the cabby. The man exclaimed. "I haven't got change for anything like that!"

Quade turned and waved the bill at the doorman who was hovering over them. "Get this changed and pay the driver. I'll be at the desk, inside."

"Holy cats!" said Boston as they walked into the luxurious lobby. "Where'd you get that fish skin?"

"My client," said Quade. "And there's more where that came from. Hollywood's rolling in money."

He stepped up to the desk and said to the clerk. "I want a nice suite, facing the boulevard. And rather high up, so I don't get too much street noise."

He signed the registration card with a flourish. "Oliver Quade and Charles P. Boston, New York City."

The doorman came up from the cashier's window with a handful of bills. "Here you are, sir!"

"Front!" said the clerk snappily. "Show these gentlemen up to Suite 831 and 832."

In their suite Quade picked up the telephone book. Charlie Boston stared at him.

Quade picked up the phone. "Hello," he said. "I want the Clayton Automobile Agency. . . . Hello. Have you got a six-wheel yellow sports job in stock? Well, bring it over to the Lincoln Hotel as soon as you can. Oliver Quade is the name."

He hung up the receiver. "For the love of Mike!" groaned Charlie Boston.

"Tut-tut," said Quade, "we're mixing with moneyed people. We've got to act like money."

"So you're mixed in the detective stuff again." Boston shook his head. "I could smell it coming the minute I saw Christopher Buck. That means we're going to take a lot of punishment again and wind up behind the eight-ball."

"Not this time, Charlie," Quade said, cheerfully. "I've decided that this is one affair from which I'm going to emerge with both hands full of money. It's ly-

ing around on all sides and I'm going to grab it."

Boston threw up his hands helplessly. "There's no use talking once your mind is made up. Who're we working for—Slocum?"

"Right you are, Charlie. And at the moment we have to do only one little thing. Tell me, would you know Willie Higgins if you saw him?"

"If I saw him," said Boston. "I guess I'd know him all right. So would anybody. His pan's been in the newspapers often enough."

"Old pictures. They don't take pictures of their guests in Alcatraz. So what we've got to go by is a five-year-old likeness of him. Since then he may have gained a lot of weight, or lost it. He may have raised a mustache or a beard. No, not a beard. I don't think they'd let him do that on The Rock."

Boston said suspiciously, "Say, you don't think Higgins is in Hollywood, do you?"

"I do. And what's more, you and I are going to find him."

"Do you want to commit suicide, Ollie? Willie Higgins is so mean he'd poison his own grandmother. Five years on Alcatraz has probably made him even meaner."

"Oh, he can't be so tough," said Quade easily. "As I remember him from his pictures he was a little fellow. Even if he gained a lot of weight, he wouldn't be up to your two hundred pounds."

"Stop right there, Ollie! You're not going to get me to tackle Willie Higgins. If he was a dwarf, I'd still keep out of his way. Higgins don't fight with fists!"

The door resounded to a smart rat-a-tat. "Come!" Quade called.

A cheery-faced man came in. "Mr. Quade? My name's Clayton. I understand you wanted to see one of our sport jobs."

"That's right," said Quade. "Tell me, Mr. Clayton, is your car a better buy than the Packard?"

Mr. Clayton smiled deprecatingly. "We think it is, Mr. Quade. If you'll

come outside, I'll point out a few salient factors."

"I've seen your car, Mr. Clayton," said Quade. "It *looks* O. K. The only thing I'm not sure of is how it operates. I mean by comparison with say, the Packard and the Cadillac, both of which I've driven."

"A demonstration, Mr. Quade—" began the automobile dealer.

"Exactly! But I don't want one of *your* demonstrations. You'd look for the smooth streets and you'd whiz me around a corner with your foot touching the brake so I wouldn't even know it. What I'm getting at, Mr. Clayton, is you can't tell enough about a car with a test-tube demonstration. You've got to drive it yourself, for several days. Now, I've promised both the Packard and the Cadillac people that I'd try only one more car and then decide among the three of you. Is that satisfactory, Mr. Clayton?"

"Certainly, sir! We'll back our car against any on the market, in any price range. Of course—"

"Fine! I'll try your car for a few days and if it operates as well as the others, I'll no doubt buy it because I like the color better. Did you bring the keys up with you, Mr. Clayton?"

"Of course, but—"

"But what, Mr. Clayton? Oh!" Quade laughed heartily. "You don't know me. Quite so. Well, well! I'm Oliver Quade of New York and this is Mr. Charles P. Boston. If you're worried about us, why just stop down at the desk. Or, there's the phone—call up my friend, Tommy Slocum."

Mr. Clayton beamed. "Certainly, Mr. Quade, you drive that car as long as you wish. Take a week. When you're ready, just call me. Thank you very much. I'm sure you'll decide in our favor."

"I hope so, Mr. Clayton. And good-day, sir!"

When he'd gone, Charlie said: "Ollie, you're the biggest four-flusher in California."

Quade winked at him. "Who knows?"

We may buy the car from him yet. Our jallopy's on its last legs. Which reminds me, better run down there and get our things out of the car and see if you can't get it dragged off the street. Here." He tossed over the keys Mr. Clayton had left.

Boston started for the door. "What are you going to do?"

"Make a few phone calls."

Boston went out and Quade reached for the telephone. "Get me Consolidated Studios. . . . Consolidated? I want to talk to Miss Thelma Wentworth."

"I'm sorry," said an operator, "Miss Wentworth does not receive calls at the studio."

"But this is a matter of vital importance."

"I'll connect you with the general office."

Quade got the general office and was switched to three different persons. He used his most autocratic voice on them and finally got the ear of a Mr. Gould.

"Lou Gould," the man said. "I'm Miss Wentworth's agent. Just what is this matter of importance? I handle all of Miss Wentworth's business matters. You can tell me what it's about."

"Then tell Miss Wentworth that Oliver Quade wants to see her right away. Tell her it's the man she bumped into this morning at a certain place."

When Gould's voice came back on it sounded pained. "Miss Wentworth said she'd see you. If you'll come over here—"

Knuckles rapped on Quade's door and before he had a chance to say anything Christopher Buck's lean face appeared. Quade snapped into the telephone. "I'll call you back in five minutes. Stay at your phone." He banged the receiver on the hook. "Buck," he said, "how'd you get here?"

The tall detective came into the room and let himself down into a chair. He was so tall and lean the act was very much like an accordion folding itself.

"How come you ducked out of the studio, Quade?" he asked.

"Too many cops around—and sham-uses. So you followed me."

"No. One of my operators did. I gave him the sign when you came out of Slocum's office. I just saw your stooge downstairs. You've come a long way since New York. That's an expensive car you're driving these days."

"I like a good car," retorted Quade. "So what can I do for you?"

Buck nodded toward the telephone. "Did I interrupt an important call?"

"You did, but don't let that worry you. What's on your mind? You didn't shadow me just so you could drop in for tea."

"Slocum's on the spot," said Buck. "You know that. When I left the studio the D. A. was just about to have a warrant sworn out for him, on a first-degree homicide charge."

"Nuts! He doesn't dare do that to Slocum, not without evidence."

"I'm cooperating with the D. A.," said Buck.

"What for? Your client's dead. Los Angeles County isn't going to pay you the kind of fees you're used to."

"I've got another client."

Quade looked sharply at Buck. "Who?"

"Thelma Wentworth."

Quade's eyes barely flickered toward the telephone, but Buck caught it. "Ha! So you were talking to *her*!"

Quade said tightly, "So she's not your client. You're lying. Look, Buck, you drew a rather crude picture this morning. Around Slocum, Maynard, the Wentworth girl and Willie Higgins."

"You can see the picture though, can't you? Maynard's been knocked off. Maybe they won't indict Slocum for that, just yet, but they will when I get through. I need just one little thing. When I get that—"

"And that little thing is—"

Buck grinned wolfishly. "The same thing Slocum wants you to get from Willie. Look, Quade, we're both after the same thing. Why don't we corner

Willie together, then compromise, take the biggest fee and split?"

"Nuts!"

Buck coughed. "By the way, Lieutenant Murdock will be up to talk to you in a few minutes."

"You told him where I was? Thanks, Buck. I'll snitch on you, some time."

"Oh, I didn't do it. It was my operator, I'm afraid. Well, so you're not with me?"

"No, Buck, I'm not."

Buck uncoiled himself. "Lieutenant Murdock says you were the one who found Stanley Maynard."

He took two strides toward the door and ducked out.



HE Human Encyclopedia paced the floor for a minute, then went to the door. He was stepping out of the elevator in the lobby, when Lieutenant Murdock reached out and caught his arm. "I was going up to see you, Quade!"

"I was just going out."

"I won't take more'n a couple of minutes," the lieutenant said, walking to the divan in the corner of the lobby. As he sat down Quade observed a man across the lobby watching them covertly over the top of an open newspaper. Buck's man, no doubt.

Murdock said, "I understand you were the first to see Maynard."

Quade shrugged. "The first you know of. Someone else might have gone into Maynard's office after he was killed."

"That sounds as if you think someone else *had* been in before you."

"Not necessarily. I mean a half-dozen people could have gone in and out of his office and decided the best thing to do was keep mum."

Murdock's mouth twisted out of shape. "Dr. Lang said Maynard had died about twenty minutes before he examined the body. That would place the time pretty

close to when you found his body. What were you going in to see Maynard about? I understand you're not connected with the studio."

"Oh, but I am. Slocum hired me just this morning."

"Doing what? Buck claims you're a book agent."

"Ordinarily I am. I travel the highways and byways, selling books where I can, studying nature—"

"Nix on that stuff," Murdock said crossly. "Answer my question. Why'd Slocum hire you?"

"To bark for him! The next time you hear the voice of Desmond Dogg on the screen, that, Lieutenant, will be me!"

Murdock's face was comical to see. "You—the voice of Desmond Dogg!"

"What's funny about that? Walt Disney dubs in the voice for Mickey Mouse and Rudy Ising is the growl you hear when the big bad bear gets mad."

"I'll be damned!" said the lieutenant. "Well, did you see anyone go in or come out of Maynard's office?"

"Nope," said Quade.

"Well," Murdock got up, "listen, Quade, don't leave Hollywood suddenly. I may think of some more questions to ask you later."

"Any time, Lieutenant, any time."

The lieutenant left the hotel. Quade sauntered over to the newsstand. Out of the corner of his eye he watched the man with the newspaper.

He grinned slowly, then suddenly headed for the side door of the hotel. He jumped through and rushed to the corner, forty or fifty feet away, made a quick left turn and popped into the Hollywood Boulevard entrance.

Inside the lobby he moved swiftly to a telephone booth and, leaving the door partially open so the lights would not go on, called the Consolidated Studios.

"General office," he said. "Mr. Quade calling Lou Gould."

"Sorry," was the reply. "Mr. Gould waited for your call, but finally he and Miss Wentworth had to leave."

Quade hung up and came out of the

booth. He went to the Hollywood entrance, where a man was talking to the doorman. "Tell Buck I lost you," he said as he passed.

The shadow gulped.

Quade walked a couple of blocks and entered a drug store. As he skimmed through a telephone directory he saw Buck's operator getting a drink at the soda fountain.

Quade found a number and went into a booth. A moment later he said: "Hello, is this the Hollywood office of the Movie Fan Magazine? Well, this is Mr. Quade speaking. I'm the motion picture editor of the *Omaha News-Bee*. I'm in Hollywood doing a publicity story on Miss Thelma Wentworth, the new glamour girl. I want to check some facts in her history. Can you tell me her birthplace?"

"Certainly," said a woman's voice. "Miss Wentworth was born in Tasmania, the daughter of a British diplomat."

Quade sighed. "I'm sorry, lady, I'm from Nebraska, but we're not all farmers out there. Start all over. Where was Miss Wentworth born? Brooklyn?"

"Waterloo, Iowa," was the reply.

"Fine," said Quade. "Now give me the lowdown on Tommy Slocum. Where was he born and what did he do before he clicked in Hollywood?"

"Strangely," said the informant, "Mr. Slocum also comes from Waterloo, Iowa. He was a sports-cartoonist on the *Waterloo Independent* before he went to New York."

"One thing more—what about Stanley Maynard?"

"Stanley Maynard?" Quade detected the sudden change in the woman's tone. "Say, what did you say your name was?"

"Shade, I'm the motion picture editor of the *Omaha News-Bee*. About Maynard—"

"I'm sorry," was the reply, "but you'd better come to our office for further information."

"Thank you," said Quade and hung up.

When he came out of the booth, the shadow was thumbing through the magazines. Quade whistled pleasantly at him and went outside.

He sauntered down the street. In the next block he came to a combination magazine and cigar store. Racing tip sheets were displayed prominently on the rack. Quade went inside and said to the man behind the counter:

"Doc, I've got a really hot one at Santa Anita tomorrow. I want to place a big bet."

The man stared blankly at Quade. "What do you think this is?"

"Phooey!" said Quade. "All you take in on cigars and magazines you can stick in your ear."

"I never saw you before in my life," protested the counterman.

"I just blew in from New York. Do I look like a cop?"

"No, but just the same, I don't take horse bets. But I know a fella—How much was you figuring on betting?"

"Depends on the bookie. If the odds are right, maybe a couple of grand."

The man's eyebrows arched. "Just a minute," he said. He went to a telephone booth and closed the door tightly. He emerged in a couple of minutes, mopping his forehead. He pulled a notebook from his pocket, wrote on a sheet and ripped it out of the book. "Go to this address. Ask for Jake."

"Thanks, pal!"

The shadow was looking in the window of a shoe store next door. Quade signaled to a taxi on the corner.

Five minutes later he stepped out. As he paid the driver he shot a look at the taxi that had pulled to the curb a half-block away.

A sign on a store window said: "Argus Realty Company." The walls inside were covered with pictures of houses, maps and insurance calendars.

A young chap got up from behind a desk.

"I want to see Jake," Quade said. "Mr. Wolfson sent me over."

A man in the rear of the realty store

took his feet from his desk and slid his derby forward on his head. "You interested in a good house?" he called to Quade.

Quade went back. "Yeah, in Santa Anita."

"How much you figure on paying?"

"That depends. If I can locate my partner."

"Yeah?" Jake said.

"My partner's name," said Quade, "is Willie Higgins. Ever hear of him?"

Jake said, "You ain't a cop. So, what's your angle?"

"I want to have a talk with Willie."

Jake shook his head. "I've seen the name in the papers, Mister, but I ain't never seen the man himself. You'll have to—" His face went slack. Quade, seeing the man's eyes looking past him, whirled, just in time to see his shadow duck out of sight, outside the store.

The realtor-bookie swung on Quade. "What're you tryin' to pull?"

Quade was perplexed. "Nothing. I know Willie Higgins used to be a big horse player and since he's in Hollywood I figured you might know where he was staying."

"You lie like hell!" exclaimed Jake. "Get out and don't come back."

Quade shrugged and walked out. Outside, he looked around for the man who had been shadowing him, but the fellow was strangely out of sight now. Which gave Quade something to think about.

He took a taxi back to the Lincoln Hotel. A bright yellow sports model car was parked at the curb. When he got up to their suite, Charlie Boston asked, "You know a fellow by the name of Paul Clevenger?"

"Yes, why?" Quade said.

"He called up five minutes ago. Said he wants you to meet a friend of his tonight at the Sunset Club."

Quade knew who that "friend" was. Paul Clevenger was the young fellow who had soothed Thelma Wentworth that afternoon in Stanley Maynard's office.



LIVER QUADE and Boston sauntered into the Sunset Club. In a far corner Thelma Wentworth was seated at a table with Paul Clevenger.

Charlie inhaled softly. "If I kill the guy with her, would she give *me* a tumble?"

"According to the Bill of Rights," said Quade, "every man is equal."

She was gorgeous. No, that was an understatement. In Hollywood, she was super-colossal. She wore a white evening gown that *revealed*. Her blond hair glittered. Her features were smooth and finely chiseled.

Her eyes were on Quade as he bowed slightly. "Good evening, Miss Wentworth. Allow me to present my friend, Mr. Boston."

Young Paul Clevenger was rising. "Won't you join us?" he asked.

Quade sat down opposite Thelma Wentworth. Beside him, Charlie Boston breathed heavily.

"It's all right," Thelma Wentworth said in a low voice. "Paul . . . knows."

Quade regarded him deliberately. "You're not in the picture business, are you, Mr. Clevenger?"

Young Clevenger laughed. "Hardly. Banking's my racket."

Quade saw the possessive look Clevenger bestowed on Thelma. He looked at the glamour girl for a moment and was rewarded by a slight frown.

"Paul and I went to school together," she explained. "He's out here for a visit."

The boy from her home town. There's always one. Sometimes they forget him. Thelma Wentworth hadn't. Perhaps the fact that young Clevenger was in the banking business accounted for that. You can forget the boy from home if he's a soda jerk or works in a filling station. If his father owns the bank—and many Iowa banks are wealthy—you don't forget him. Bankers are nice people

to know. Remarkably handy to meet.

"Stanley Maynard was from Iowa—too?" Quade asked.

She winced. "No."

Paul Clevenger said, "Thelma didn't even know him. She just happened to be at the Slocum Studio—"

"Why?" Quade interrupted.

Clevenger bristled. "Why were *you* there?"

"I have a job there. Miss Wentworth hasn't."

"But," Thelma exclaimed softly, "I know Tommy Slocum as well as I know Paul. *He* used to live two doors up the street from us, in Waterloo."

"I see," said Quade. "So you were visiting Tommy and happened to go into the wrong room—Maynard's. You didn't know Stanley Maynard at all."

"She never even met him, I told you," snapped Clevenger.

"Did *you* know him?" Quade asked sharply.

"I got to Hollywood three days ago," Clevenger said, angrily. "Thelma's let me take her around. I knew Slocum slightly. That's all. I never saw Maynard, dead or alive."

Thelma's eyes widened. She was looking past Quade. He turned. Tommy Slocum was bearing down on the table. He was scowling, furiously.

"Hello, chief!" Quade grinned. "Join us?"

"You get around!" Slocum said truculently.

Quade smiled. "You know Miss Wentworth and Mr. Clevenger?"

"Of course I know them. How'd you get to know them?"

"Why, I get around," Quade quipped. "Shake hands with my assistant, Mr. Boston."

Slocum looked coldly at Charlie Boston's big hand. He sat down abruptly.

"You wouldn't think it would get so cold in the evenings," Quade remarked drily.

Tommy Slocum showed his teeth. "Did you say you were going home, Quade?" he snapped.

"Why, no, I just got here. I like this place. I've heard about it for years. When I left New York the Count said to me—my friend, Count Felix Rosoff, you know—he said to me, 'Oliver, when you get to Hollywood you must see the Sunset Club.' And Tommy, old man, he was right. Don't you agree with me, Mr. Clevenger?"

"I'm not an authority on night clubs," Clevenger replied, stiffly. "I've only been to New York twice in my life. This is the first time I've been in Hollywood."

Quade chuckled, pushed back his chair. "Excuse me a moment, Miss Wentworth? A business associate has just come in. I must tell him something."

"Good-by, Quade," Slocum said bluntly.

Quade smiled pleasantly at him and bowed to Miss Wentworth.

Boston followed him. "Buck," he said. "In soup and fish! What a man!"

Christopher Buck's face showed relief when he saw Quade and Boston. "Sit down, Quade," he invited. "And tell me what's new."

"You damn well know because your shadow followed me all afternoon," Quade said.

Buck's face was blank. "Why?"

"That was my question," Quade retorted. "Why? Anyway, I let him tag along. I could have lost him easy enough. Did once. He tell you that?"

Buck glowered at the table across the room. "Is *she* paying you, Quade?"

"She is not. And don't go getting ideas, Christopher. You might get burned."

"One of the biggest society women ever heard of, back East, shot a guy once," said Buck. "Any woman's a potential murderess. This Wentworth—"

"Is the second most important actress in Hollywood," Quade said. "And Hollywood protects its own. Get what I mean, Buck?"

"A client is paying me money," Buck said, doggedly. "I've never let down a client."

A stocky man with sleek black hair

and a shaggy tweed suit was standing behind Tommy Slocum's chair, patting the producer's shoulder and talking over his head to Thelma Wentworth. He turned and showed Quade a mouthful of gleaming teeth.

He left the table, came toward Quade. He stuck out a fleshy hand. "Howdy, Mr. Quade. I'm Lou Gould. Like to talk to you a minute."

Buck cut in: "You're Lou Gould, the actor's agent? I tried to get you at Consolidated this afternoon."

Quade clung to Gould's hand and started pulling him away. Buck shot up to his tremendous height and pushed his long, lean arm in between.

"I'm Christopher Buck," he said.

Gould gave Buck his ten per cent personality. "Yeah, sure, we'll have to get together. Give me a jingle at the office, some time."

"Well, I've got to be going," Quade said. "Thanks for the drink, Christopher. Good-night, Mr. Gould."

Lou Gould was quite willing to be rescued from Christopher Buck, but Quade knew that that would be an impossibility. When Buck got his teeth into someone, fire or water wouldn't make him let go.

"I'm going to slug Buck some day," Boston said as they left the Sunset Club.

"Some day I'm going to let you slug him," Quade retorted.

They got their bright yellow car from the near-by parking lot and drove to the hotel, where they turned it over to the doorman. "Don't get the paint scratched," Boston cautioned the man.

The lights were on in their suite when Quade unlocked the door.

The shadow who had followed Quade all afternoon was sitting in the most comfortable armchair. He was a rather slight fellow with an unhealthy complexion.

Quade said, "Are we intruding?"

"Not at all," the man replied. "This is your room. And my name's Higgins."

Charlie Boston went back a step. "Willie Higgins!"

"You know," said Quade, "I just guessed that out a little while ago. I couldn't figure out why the real estate fellow got so scared when he got a glimpse of you through the window. I thought at the time you were one of Christopher Buck's ops."

Higgins nodded thoughtfully. "Understand you been looking for me."

Quade sat down across the room from Higgins. Charlie Boston remained standing near the door, decidedly uncomfortable.

Quade said, "Tommy Slocum wants to see you."

Higgins shrugged. "So?"

"That's all. Tommy Slocum asked me to bring you to him. He didn't tell me why."

Higgins regarded Quade thoughtfully. "How much will he pay?"

Quade became suddenly annoyed. Ever since morning people had been giving him hints of things, had taken for granted he knew what they were talking about. He had played up to them, fishing out scraps of information. But as far as knowing anything definite was concerned, he was completely at sea. In a dead calm that seemed to presage the coming of a hurricane.

He said, testily: "I don't know a damn thing. Tommy Slocum seemed to think I did; so did Christopher Buck and Thel—and someone else. I don't know anything."

"From the way you talked this morning you knew everything," Willie Higgins said. "You said you were a human encyclopedia, or something, didn't you?"

"But I'm not a mind reader! All I know is that you've got something, or know something, that Tommy Slocum wants. And it has some bearing on Stanley Maynard's murder." He shot a speculative look at Higgins. "Would you be knowing anything about that?"

"I would *not*. The only thing I know, Quade, is that you're a damn liar."

Charlie Boston growled deep in his throat. Higgins glanced at him and Boston became quiet. Higgins went on:

"Not that it'll do you any good, but I was down at the Slocum Studios this morning. I saw you come up with a rattle-trap flivver. And now you're driving a big yellow bus that cost. So . . ."

"So why does Tommy Slocum want you?" Quade snapped.

"Maybe because he killed Stanley Maynard."

"I don't think he did," Quade said, slowly.

"I think he did."

Quade sawed the air impatiently. "All right, how much do you want for—it? I'll tell Slocum your proposition; that is, if you won't go and talk to him yourself."

"I won't," said Higgins. "At least, not in his place. But you can tell him that the price is a half million."

He got up and grinned crookedly. Charlie, seeing him approach, stepped hastily away from the door. With his hand on the knob, Higgins turned. "And if you're figuring on putting me at the studio when that business happened, don't waste your time. I've got four different alibis." He went out.

Charlie Boston shivered. "I could hear wings flapping!"

"Oh," said Quade, "he didn't look so tough."

"No? What about that bulge under his coat? You suppose that was a ham sandwich?"

"A half million," Quade said, thoughtfully. "And Maynard was going to sue for a million."

"For what?"

"That's one of two things I don't know. The other thing is—who killed Stanley Maynard?"



LOCUM STUDIOS' gateman was so impressed by Quade's yellow car that he permitted him to walk through the gates without a pass. Boston went to park the car somewhere on the street.

Quade sauntered into Miss Hendrick's office. "Morning," he said pleasantly. "Can you tell me where the sound room is? I believe they're waiting there for me."

"Studio Twelve, on the second floor," replied Miss Hendricks.

Quade nodded. "Say, if my secretary, Charlie Boston, the big lug who looks like a heavy-weight wrestler, comes looking for me, keep him here."

He went out and climbed a flight of stairs. Studio Twelve was a large room, soundproofed.

"I'm the new voice of Desmond Dogg," Quade told a young fellow.

"It's about time you got here," the fellow snapped. "We were just getting ready to go out and find another sap."

Quade showed his teeth in a cold smile. "Bring on your dog!"

Several men were gathered around a microphone and a layout of crazy objects. The young fellow snatched up several sheets of music.

"I'll explain what we're doing," he said crisply. "Desmond Dogg's a St. Bernard. In this particular scene he's pulling the old rescue scene. Christopher Cat—"

"Christopher?" Quade asked.

"Yes, Christopher. And don't interrupt. Christopher Cat's lost in the snow-storm. Desmond Dogg has this keg of rum tied about his neck and is leaving the hospice to rescue Christopher. The wind's howling—that's Felix—and it's snowing like hell. Desmond—that's you—is running down the mountain."

"With the keg of rum around my neck?" Quade asked.

"Yes, and don't interrupt again. You're galloping through the snow. You bark, woof-woof, and then you sing: 'Here I come with a keg of rum.' All right, Felix—wind!"

A skinny fellow with a big Adam's apple stepped up to the microphone and whistled softly. Amplified, the sound was very much like the howling of a blizzard.

"O.K.," said the young director.

"Now, you, Oscar—Desmond's feet crunching the snow."

Another man brought a bowl of baking soda up to the microphone, stuck an iron pestle into it and twisted it. The result was a sound like feet crunching on snow.

"Swell," said the director. "Now, we'll get together on it. Felix, wind! Oscar, snow! And, you, whatever your name is, you bark, 'Woof-woof,' and sing—in a dog's voice!"

The wind howled and the snow crunched under Desmond Dogg's feet and Quade barked and sang in a tone that might have sounded like a dog's if a dog could sing.

When they finished the director held out his hand to Quade. "My name's Needham. You did that better than Pete Rice. He just couldn't get that dog quality into his voice."

"I'm a success!" Quade murmured.

"Sure, why not? I'll talk to Tommy Slocum and have him give you a contract. Now then, Miss Phillips! Come over here and do your meowing!"

Miss Phillips, imitating Christopher Cat, was good enough to stampe a convention of rats, Quade thought.

They rehearsed the scene a half-dozen times, then recorded it. Needham, the director, put them through two more scenes, then called a halt. "That'll be all until this afternoon. I want to see the film run off again." He turned to Quade, "Like to come to the sweat box?"

It sounded interesting, so Quade went along. The room they went to was a miniature theater; a couple of dozen chairs in the rear, a projection room and a screen.

"You know how these cartoon pictures are made, don't you?" Needham asked Quade.

"Lot of drawings photographed, eh?"

"Ten to fourteen thousand for a single reel which lasts about eight minutes on the screen." He held up a stack of celluloid rectangles.

"The animators make the original drawings on large pasteboard strips.

There are forty to sixty scenes, or frames, to a picture. The animators draw these, put in the animals. The graduation of the movements is drawn on these celluloid panels. The photographer puts a 'cel' on the frame, photographs it, then puts down the next. The whole thing is speeded up, makes your movement."

"And ten to fourteen thousand complete drawings are made?"

"Only of the animals in their movements. Girls do that, from the animators' originals. Some girls do the tracing, others the filling in and the graduation of the movement. It's expensive business. Some of our technicolor films cost as much as a complete seven-reel film put out by other studios."

"Well," said Quade, "some people prefer Desmond Dogg to Clark Gable."

Needham grunted, called toward the projection room. "O.K., Clarence!"

The little theater went dark and a moment later the projector threw a beam of white upon the screen.

The various screen credits followed:

Tommy Slocum Productions  
Presents: Desmond Dogg's Dilemma  
Based upon the famous character created  
by Tommy Slocum  
Producer: Tommy Slocum  
Director: Hector Needham  
Original Story by Stanley Maynard  
Photography: M. V. Hilton

Desmond Dogg appeared upon the screen—a St. Bernard, against a background of mountain and snow and a hospice almost toppling off a cliff.

Quade said, "I just remembered I've got to make a phone call," and got up, groped his way in the darkness to the door, went outside.

He made his way to Miss Hendricks' office. Charlie Boston jumped up from a chair. "Where you been all morning, Ollie?"

"Barking," Quade retorted and pushed open the door of Slocum's office.

The little producer looked up, scowled. "I didn't think you'd have the nerve to come around."

"Why not? You hired me to be Desmond Dogg's voice. Hec Needham just told me I was better than Pete Rice. He wants you to sign me up on a contract."

Tommy Slocum snorted. "Quade, no man ever talked to me like you have, or did the things you've done to me."

"Why. I haven't done anything to you."

"You know damn well what I mean. What were you trying to pull on Thel—Miss Wentworth?"

"Oh," sighed Quade. "I saw Willie Higgins. He said the price is a half million—for it."

Quade was watching Slocum closely. The half million made no unusual impression.

He exclaimed, "If you found him, why didn't you bring him here?"

"He wouldn't come. Doesn't trust you."

"He doesn't trust me—and asks for a half million? He's got a crust."

"Still, I can see his point," Quade said. "He's one week out of Alcatraz and he's nervous about being seen within two miles of a place where a man is murdered."

Slocum nodded, then looked up suddenly. "Which reminds me, that cop, Murdock or whatever his name is, called up here a while ago. Said you're to be sure and be at the inquest at three this afternoon."

"What do you think the verdict of the coroner's jury will be?"

Slocum's face twisted. "What the hell you gettin' at?"

Quade shrugged, walked toward the door. "What'll I tell Willie?"

"Tell him he's crazy. He can't shake me down for a half million."

"He thinks he can," Quade said.

The telephone on Slocum's desk rang at the same instant the door opened under Quade's hand. Lieutenant Murdock came in and said:

"Mr. Slocum, the D. A.'s given me orders to take you in on suspicion of murder. I've got a warrant for your—"

Slocum howled and jerked the receiver

off the ringing phone. He yelled, "Yes!", listened for a moment. Perspiration suddenly appeared on his forehead. "All right," he said in a meek tone and hung up.

"A warrant for your arrest!" Lieutenant Murdock repeated.

Christopher Buck's head appeared over Murdock's. "Hello, Quade!" he said in a better-to-eat-you-with tone.

"Buck," said Quade, "you certainly can put your big feet into things."

"Yah!" jeered the self-styled world's greatest detective. "You got on the wrong boat this time!"

Slocum got up from behind his desk. "O.K., Sergeant!" he said.

Lieutenant Murdock said, grimly: "And you, smart boy, be at the inquest at three o'clock!"

Quade nodded.

When they were gone, Quade went out to Miss Hendrick's office. She was white around the gills. "They've arrested Mr. Slocum!" she gasped.

"But they can't make it stick," Quade said.

Charlie came over. "Buck looked like he'd just won screeno!"

"Yeah, but when he goes up on the stage to get the money, he'll find he's missing one number." Quade turned to Miss Hendricks. "You know, I'm working for Slocum. I want to make two or three long distance telephone calls. Will you have them put through?"

Wide-eyed, she nodded and Quade slammed into Tommy Slocum's private office, sat down in the producer's chair and reached for the telephone.

"Get me the *Waterloo Morning News*," he said. "Yes, Waterloo, Iowa."

Twenty minutes later Quade made his final telephone call. "Consolidated Studios? I want to talk to Lou Gould, the actors' agent. Is he hanging around there?"

"No, he isn't. Any message?"

"There is," Quade said. "You tell him to have Miss Thelma Wentworth at the coroner's inquest at three o'clock this

afternoon. That's an order!" He slammed the receiver on the hook.

Charlie Boston, draped on the office couch, said, "I wouldn't believe it of a girl like her! But if I've got to die I'd like her to knock me off."

"You're goofy," Quade snorted. "Come on, let's be bait for Mr. Willie Higgins."

Charlie Boston said, "Ouch!"

When they got out to the street, Boston said, "What're those paper tags on the jallopy? That cop's going to get writer's cramp."

The yellow sports job was parked on the side street. When Quade climbed in behind the wheel, Willie Higgins came out of a drug store near-by.

"Hi," he greeted Quade.

"Hello, Willie," Quade said. "Squeeze in."

Charlie muttered, but moved over against Quade. Willie Higgins climbed into the car. "You fix it?"

"Yeah, where'll we go?"

"Your hotel's all right with me."

Quade started the car. As he swung out into traffic, Higgins said, "They pinched Slocum, huh?"

Quade nodded. "Yeah, but you can square that, I guess."

Higgins grunted, said nothing. But when they got to Quade's suite, he said: "Where is it?"

"Do I look like I had a half million on me?" Quade asked.

"They could be big bills," Higgins said. His eyes drew together. "You trying to pull something funny?"

"The jam Slocum's in, he can't afford to. But it's going to take him a couple of days to raise the money. In the meantime—where is it?"

Higgins started for the door. "You'll get it when I get the money."

"Charlie!" Oliver Quade snapped.

Higgins' right hand darted under his left coat lapel. Charlie's fist smacked against his jaw and Quade caught the man from Alcatraz as he catapulted back. He let him down gently to the floor.

"I thought you were afraid of him, Charlie," Quade said, cheerfully.

Boston dropped to his knees, reached into Higgins' coat and brought out a .32 caliber automatic. Quade went quickly through Higgins' pockets. He tossed a sheaf of bills on the rug beside Boston. Boston's eyes popped. He picked up the bills, ruffled them.

"Grands!" he said, softly. "Forty-eight thousand bucks!"

"He's a quick spender," Quade commented. "Two G's in one day. Guess he dropped it on the races." He poked at the various objects he had taken from the unconscious ex-convict's pockets. "I guess I was right, after all."

"What'd you find?"

"Nothing," Quade said. "Nothing but the money. If I'd found something else, I'd have been wrong. Put the money back."

"Back? Why, that's more money than I ever saw in my life."

"It's small change to what Willie had before the G-boys started in on him. His trial cost him a hundred thousand. His back income taxes ran almost to a million. And I imagine the fifty-thousand-dollar fine he had to scrape up before they let him off The Rock just about broke him."

"Except for this change."

Quade shook his head. "He's made this since he got out. . . . Ah!"

Higgins was twitching. Charlie backed away hastily, darted into the other room of the suite and came back without the automatic. He winked at Quade.

Higgins sat up and held his jaw. "You lug!" he spat at Charlie.

Boston grinned. "No hard feelings?"

"I'll let you know about that later!"

Higgins got to his feet and, still holding his jaw, started for the door. Quade shook his head at Boston and the latter blocked Higgins.

"I want to ask you some questions, Willie," Quade said.

Higgins suddenly thought to look in his pockets. He pulled out the bank roll, ruffled it and nodded in satisfaction.

"Why didn't you light out with the fifty thousand, Willie?" Quade asked.

"I was going to," said Higgins, "until you said Slocum wanted to see me. Up to then I was hanging around—just in case."

"Just in case someone tried to pin a murder rap on you, eh? All right, you didn't bump Maynard. Who did?"

"I don't know," said Higgins. "I came out of The Rock without a dime. All I had was a chunk of—something. I sold it for fifty thousand. Then the guy got knocked off. Somebody might have said I did it. That long-legged shamus was nosing around. Maynard might have told him about me."

"He had," said Quade. "That's how I got interested. Well, we won't be seeing you around then?"

Higgins shook his head. "I guess I'll see what South America looks like." He started for the door and looked at Charlie. "Look me up if you come to South America, big boy."

"I want to see America first," retorted Boston. "No hard feelings?"

Willie Higgins shook his head and went out.

"I think," said Quade, "we'd better hurry if we want to get down to that inquest."



LIEUTENANT Murdock said to Quade: "I was just going to send out some boys for you."

"You can always count on Quade,"

Quade said, cheerily. "Well, I see everybody's here. Got it all sewed up?"

Christopher Buck said, "In a knot, old man."

"Can you tell now who's paying your fee, Christopher?" Quade asked.

"Sure, why not? Young Clevenger. His old man owns a bank in Iowa. He wanted me to see that Miss Wentworth didn't get mixed up. But she won't be called to testify. The lieutenant said it wouldn't be necessary."

"Well," said Quade, "if you don't want to be shown up as a sucker in front of the newspaper boys, I suggest you call the principals into the next room."

Murdock glared at Quade. "You've pulled enough jokes!"

"The joke'll be on you," said Quade, "if Tommy Slocum files a suit against you for false arrest."

Buck's eyes rolled. "What's that, Quade?"

"I mean you didn't hit the jackpot after all, Buck, old fellow. I just had a little chat with Willie Higgins."

"Willie Higgins!" exclaimed Murdock. "The fellow who just got out of Alcatraz?"

"Yep. Remember Willie, Christopher? You're the lad who told me about him yesterday."

Buck fidgeted uneasily. "Maynard gave me a bum steer, there."

"You mean you changed horses when your first one dropped dead. Well, you going to call them into the next room? Or would you rather have me spill it on the stand over there, Lieutenant?"

"I guess it wouldn't hurt to hear him," Buck mumbled to Murdock. "He's wrong, but—"

"Bring Slocum's lawyer, too," said Quade. "So he can get an idea for how much to sue."

Murdock walked off and spoke to the various principals in the case: Slocum, Thelma and Clevenger. As they passed into another room Quade fell in beside Slocum. "I just left Higgins, Tommy. He was looking up the sailing schedules to South America."

Slocum groaned. "You blithering fool! You let him get away?"

"Sure. He didn't have what you wanted. But don't worry. Desmond Dogg will save you."

Murdock growled: "Mr. Quade has some things he wants to talk about."

Quade nodded and began: "Mr. Slocum, how long have you been making Desmond Dogg cartoons?"

Slocum's nostrils flared. "Six years. But I was doing other cartoons for three

years before then. I don't see though what that's got to do with this."

"This is the laundry," Quade said. "Everything gets washed. I saw a preview of one of your Desmond Dogg pictures today. The screen credit says: 'From the famous character created by Tommy Slocum.' That isn't quite so. You didn't *create* Desmond Dogg, Slocum."

Tommy Slocum remained quiet.

"As a matter of fact," Quade went on, "Stanley Maynard, who was a cartoonist on the *Waterloo Morning News* some years ago, drew a little comic strip about a St. Bernard dog who was called Desmond Dogg. The strip didn't go over very well. When he left the *News*, Maynard got a release from the paper and tried to peddle the strip to a syndicate. They didn't take it on. Probably because Maynard wasn't such a good cartoonist and his ideas weren't so hot.

"But when you got going good out here in Hollywood, Maynard submitted his Desmond Dogg to you, Slocum. You bought it from him."

"Nothing wrong about that," said Slocum. "I bought all rights to Desmond Dogg. I put him across. I gave Maynard a job at a big salary. He didn't complain."

"Not until recently. He didn't know that a—a party somehow got the contract in which he signed Desmond Dogg over to you."

Slocum sighed, wearily. "All right, Quade, if you've got to have it all. I wasn't so prosperous five years ago. I got into a roulette game over in Willie Higgins' club and lost a pile of dough. I gave the contract to Willie Higgins. That is, I signed over a transfer to him." Slocum paused. "Of course, it was a gambling debt," he smiled nervously, mopped at sweat, "and Willie agreed to keep the whole thing quiet until I could buy the contract back. Meanwhile, he went to jail."

Quade held up his hand. "Let me tell the rest, Mr. Slocum. You transferred the contract to Willie. But Willie was

no slouch. He made it very legal. He had witnesses, and a notary public. There was nothing mentioned about it having been a gambling debt."

Slocum said, "I—"

"Take it easy," Quade snapped. "All of this comes around into a nice little pattern and I'd like to round it out while it's hot. When Willie got out of jail he still had the contract. You hadn't bought it back. So he sold it to Maynard for fifty thousand dollars. All legal and everything. Maynard in turn put the bee on you. He was going to sue you and take over your business, now that he had the contract."

"He was suing for a cool million," Buck offered.

"Sure," Quade said, "and you, Slocum, you were holding out, rather futilely, against Maynard. Your only action was based on the ground that the contract had gone to Willie on a gambling debt. And gambling debts in California are illegal. Therefore, you said a court would figure the contract was still yours. That threw Maynard for a while. But Willie had cinched the contract with a notary and witnesses. If Maynard could produce these, prove the contract was not transferred as a gambling debt, he would win the suit against you. But the transfer to Willie was old, so Maynard hired Chris Buck to find the notary Willie had, and the witnesses. They had scattered out, couldn't be located. That's the way things stood when Maynard was killed. Naturally, it looked as though you had done it, Mr. Slocum."

"But, I—"

"No, you didn't kill him," Quade smiled. "I've done a little digging around. Since you aren't guilty of murder there's no point in my exposing any of the more sordid details of your life at this inquest. I won't mention the names of the women and all, but the fact was that Paul Clevenger was blackmailing you. Isn't that true?"

Slocum blanched. "I—yes."

"He knew a lot about you. From Waterloo, and here in Hollywood. He'd

been in town longer than he claimed."

"It's a damned lie!" Clevenger shouted.

"It isn't," Slocum snapped, "and you know it isn't. I have your correspondence to prove it!"

Chris Buck grabbed Clevenger. The kid's face was white, his eyes dilated.

"Well, there it is," said Quade. "Clevenger had Slocum lined up for a cinch shake-down. For how many thousands I don't know. That's immaterial. What's important is this: Clevenger knew that if Maynard won his suit against Slocum—and Maynard couldn't help win it once the witnesses were found—Slocum would be stony broke. He wouldn't have the dough to pay off a blackmail shake-down. In a nutshell, Clevenger would be out of luck. So he killed Maynard, hoping to squelch the whole thing, or at least to stop it long enough so that he could collect from Slocum. Clevenger was broke. His old man had turned him out. The kid was pretty desperate and—"

"Let me at that guy!" Clevenger screamed. "Let me at that son of a—"

Buck hit Clevenger in the mouth. The kid recoiled, put his hand to his lips, looked at the blood on his fingers. Then he seemed to collapse like a deflated balloon. He nodded his head, looked longingly at Thelma, then dropped his eyes again. The girl just stared at him.

Quade concluded: "As for Willie—he was a little stir-whacky. When Maynard was bumped, he figured the contract reverted to him. He was trying to shake half a million out of Slocum for it on sheer bluff."

Murdock snapped cuffs on Clevenger's wrists. Clevenger roared helplessly when Thelma put her hand on Slocum's arm.

Buck said, "Nuts," and strode out.

"Quade," Slocum said, "you said Needham wanted me to give you a contract to be Desmond Dogg's voice. I'll give you a contract, but it'll be for Maynard's job."

"Ollie!" cried Charlie Boston, stand-

ing by the window. "The car! Some hit-and-run driver smacked it!"

The yellow sports job *had* been hit. One headlight was gone, a fender and running-board crumpled and the hood badly damaged.

Quade looked at the car and turned

to go out the door after Chris Buck.

"Where you going, Mr. Quade?" asked Thelma.

"To hunt up Mr. Christopher Buck. He admired this car yesterday. I'm going to sell it to him, now, at a bargain. *Sight unseen!*"



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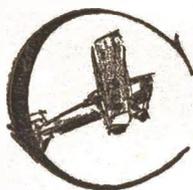
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# MURDER MADE EASY

By CARROLL JOHN DALY

Clay Holt brings death to a spy—in a plane that goes 500 miles per hour!

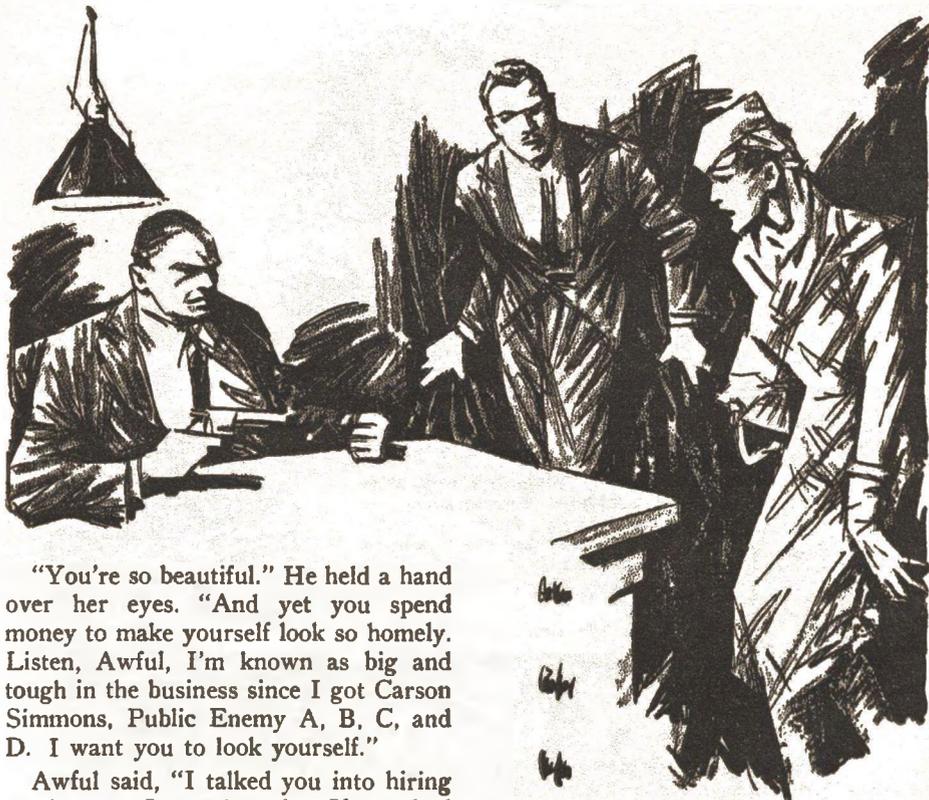


LAY HOLT swung easily out of his office, looked at his secretary assistant, said: "Bad morning, Awful." He took in with a glance that drawn-back hair, the rimmed glasses that gave those gorgeous eyes a sandy appearance. He saw too the other grotesque little jokes that she worked backward on the public.

a good looking girl you'd spend all your time chasing her around the office or taking her out. You're a sucker for women."

"Me?" Clay was indignant. "Just because I have an old-fashioned courtesy toward the fair sex!" And, side-tracking that line quickly, "Give me four or five hundred dollars. I like to feel real dough in my pockets."

"That's right, Detective Holt." Aga-



"You're so beautiful." He held a hand over her eyes. "And yet you spend money to make yourself look so homely. Listen, Awful, I'm known as big and tough in the business since I got Carson Simmons, Public Enemy A, B, C, and D. I want you to look yourself."

Awful said, "I talked you into hiring me because I was homely. If you had

tha Cummings' stiffness was more pretended than real. "You had a big case, spent the money like a drunken sailor, then turned down small cases. Here." She opened her purse and gave him fifty dollars. "Don't look at it in such disgust. You mightn't see that much again for some time. And don't give me that line about beautiful women being needed in your business. The last one you wined and dined gave you the wrong telephone number. If you want to do some real sleuthing, do it in your bank book."

"Is that all that's in the bank?" Clay looked at the five tens; at Awful's face, turned and walked out of the office.

He was all business now as he trotted down to the biggest detective agency in the city. He bolted into the manager's office, said: "I've got a bit of time, Frank. You offered me a thousand dollars sometime back. Spill the grand; I can fix it up for you now."

Mr. Frank Bead was a hawk-eyed little man. His voice choked with sarcasm. "Why, that's real nice of you, Clay. But there wasn't any beautiful woman in that case." And coming suddenly to his feet: "Damn it, Clay, that was three months ago. The client was shot dead—and what's more, I won't lend you a cent."

"Lend me a cent!" Clay's mouth opened wide. "Why, I could buy your whole works. Don't come around asking me for favors with your dime a dance clients. I'm having lunch at the Walden Hotel. There might be ten grand in it for me."

Bead said, "Keep your fingers out of the coffee," and leaned over the reports on his desk.

Fifteen minutes later Clay trod heavily into the Walden Hotel. The doorman bowed low. The clerks behind the desk smiled. Bellhops jumped to attention.

Clay handed his coat to the wide-eyed girl before the door of the dining-room. "On the level, honey, you should be in pictures. Give me a card with your address and—Hello, Charles." This to the captain as he came forward. "Same

table. You, Joe," to a boy in a white and red uniform, "call up my office and see if anything of importance needs my personal attention," and to the manager: "How's business, head man?"

"Good! And with you, Mr. Holt?"

"Immense, immense!" Clay bent confidentially toward him. "You wouldn't believe it if I told you the amount of jack I picked up last week—blackmail case. I'll be setting up an account here again I guess."

"But we agreed on that three days ago." The manager shook a finger at him. "I am not to push you for your bill—and you simply pay cash."

Clay started, shook his head. "So I've been signing for stuff, eh? Remember the amount of the bill?"

"Four hundred dollars. A mere four hundred and seventy-seven dollars and thirty-five cents, Mr. Holt."

"Is that so? Is that so?" Clay was watching the knock-out in white who was alone at a table completely across the room. Her dark hair, her black eyes and her dark complexion enhanced her spectacular beauty against the white. Her eyes were on him. They were pleading eyes—pleading for him to come to her table. Clay jerked at his tie, took one step and stopped.

"Your office on the phone," the bellhop said. "Your secretary, Miss Cummings, sir."

"Tell her—er, ask her if there is any message for me. I'll wait here by the door."

Clay was studying the woman. He was used to women looking at him. There was something else in this woman's eyes, as if she needed him more than just wanted his company. As if she were in trouble.

He turned to the returning bellhop: "What did my secretary say?"

"Why, she said, sir, if you'd excuse yourself to the lady for a few minutes she had to speak to you."

"What lady?" And as the boy started to point: "Never mind!" He slipped the boy a bill and walked straight to the

telephone booth. "Well, Awful, what's so important that you need me? I just rang you up about joining me for lunch, but—"

"I can see the but from here. Really nothing to tell you, Clay, except someone leaned down from an upper window and tossed a pineapple into your private office, blew your expensive modernistic furniture to pieces, and pushed the back of your hidden wall safe right out in the little room behind. Eight dollars fell out. So that's a find."

"The furniture—was the insurance paid up?"

"There can be no doubt of that," Awful's voice came back. "You don't own the furniture yet, you know. Or don't you know?"

"Who did it?" Clay demanded indignantly.

"A little man with a big package and a red beard. Your friend—the big monkey, Lieutenant Nevina—gave me that fool answer."

"The police are there, eh? Did you notify them?"

A pleasant but facetious little laugh came over the wire. "I'm afraid someone must have let the information leak out. You see the front of your office was blown away."

"Yeah? Better hire that furnished office across the hall and— Were you hurt, Awful?" And when she didn't answer right away, "Hell, Princess, you know that was my first thought. I think I've got a case here."

"I can imagine the sort of case! Really, Clay, is there money in it?"

Clay saw the woman in the dining-room through the booth door. She had risen to go, then sat down again. She was trying to signal him!

"Looks like the real thing, Awful! Now, about your being hurt?"

"No, Clay, I wasn't. Anyway, I carry accident insurance. But the police assured me that this was no accident."

Clay said, "Damn," when the phone clicked. He walked out of the booth to the dining-room, and before the cap-

tain could lead him to his usual table, he had pulled out a chair and sat down opposite the Woman in White.

"Hello, Helen." Clay spoke quickly as a waiter arrived. "Imagine after all these years!" And seeing she had finished her lunch: "A small cognac for the lady and a dry martini for me. . . . Imagine saying after all these years to one so young and beautiful! But it does seem a long time." He stretched a hand across the table—gripped a listless wrist, caressed for a moment the little hand itself and the long, slim fingers. "I don't like so much jewelry on a woman."

"I think," she knocked the ash from the cigarette on the end of her holder, "that you are one of the few men who can afford to dislike jewelry on a woman." She gave a half nod down the room.

Clay followed that nod. Two men and a woman were sitting almost directly facing him. He said, "I picked the right position at the table then. Don't let them bother you. I presume you wish to leave and fear that those men will try to prevent you."

"And you, Mister Clay Holt," green eyes flashed beneath long lashes, "would prevent them from preventing me."

"Exactly, Goddess." He patted her hand, added, "When you want out, you can have out."

"My name," she told him, "is neither Helen nor Goddess, though I profess liking the Goddess somewhat. My name is Una—you like that?"

"Sure." Clay looked at her generous mouth, the finely shaped nose, the life in those green eyes, the long lashes and pencilled brows. He looked, too, at the intelligent forehead. "Sure," he said again, then: "I'm not much for names. If I don't like a name it's simple enough to make up another. Now there's a girl called Agatha—" Clay stopped. He was thinking of Awful, of course. Awful fitted her well enough, yet there were times—but the woman was talking.

She put her hand under the table and gripped his after the waiter left.

"You say if I want out I can have out. Alone, I mean?" Her warm little hand squeezed tighter. "I mean without those men following me."

"Lady Una," Clay said, "I would, if you preferred it, step out with you," and when she shook her head, "They're not very tough looking customers. But I'll promise that neither one of them will leave the table until you have passed through the door and have had a few minutes to make other arrangements."

"You are a very brave and a very foolish man." She looked into his eyes for a moment. "And a very confident one; I might even say a conceited one. Here." She opened her bag. "I will telephone you later. A five hundred dollar retainer now."

"A thousand is the smallest I—" Clay started as he saw the roll in that bag. Then he saw her eyes. "Una," he stood up, "the little you request is a pleasure. You may leave when I give you the nod. Under no circumstances are you in the slightest danger. I will talk to them like a stern parent."

Clay Holt faced the two men. Of course they saw him. He wanted them to see him. Then he walked slowly toward their table.

Of the three people at that table the girl showed the most interest at Clay's approach. She was slim, sat very erect, her wide blue eyes on him. Somehow Clay thought of her as a spoiled child as he placed his hands on the back of the single unoccupied chair.

A tall man about thirty faced the girl. He wore tightly trimmed little mustaches and his clipped sandy hair bristled. Now his eyes shifted sideways to stare up at Clay.

It was the partially bald man directly across the table to whom Clay gave his entire attention. Tiny lines of veins etched his forehead and were turning a purple blue, like rivers watched from a plane far above the countryside.



HE bald man's bulging eyes rested on Clay's face, held there. It was some time before he spoke. His puckered lips moved precisely.

"Why am I favored by this visit?"

Clay said pleasantly, "I picked you out to do a lady a service. She's leaving the dining-room, and I promised her you would remain seated until a few minutes after she had gone." Clay's smile broadened. "Rather simple, eh? I'll give her the nod to leave now."

"No." The colorless eyes contracted into points of sharp steel. "She will come over and join us here. I have a message for her which will erase from her mind all desire to leave alone. Now take yourself off and inform the charming lady in white that I wish her presence."

Clay said, "I'm sorry, but I've already promised the lady. I'm a plain-spoken man, sir. It's best that you understand me in the beginning. If you come to your feet or leave this table it will be the greatest mistake of your life."

The man's huge lips puckered like a baby's. "I never make mistakes, Mr. Holt. Yes, I know you. I know that you are going to tell me how tough you are. I know that you jumped into prominence a few months ago by shooting some notorious racketeer dead on a lonely side street at two o'clock in the morning. But fame dies quickly. I did not hear of you again."

"You hear of me now," Clay told him. "I am giving the lady her signal. If you get on your feet after that, I'll bust into fame once more."

The man with the thin, sharp face spoke for the first time. "I wouldn't press the point, Major," he said. "This man, Holt, has a bad name."

The Major turned his head and looked at his companion. The girl coughed and the Major turned his eyes back to Clay. He was deliberate in his words:

"This is not a lonely street. This is the Walden dining-room at midday. You interest me, Mr. Holt. You have, you say, made the woman a promise. I will be pleased to observe how you work out your problem." He waved a hand toward the half-filled dining-room. "Give the lady your signal and I will see that she takes the chair—the back of which you now grip so tightly—not in anger, I hope."

Clay's shoulders moved up and down. He said, "I'm sorry, Major, that you insist on a demonstration which will not please you." He turned his head quickly, nodded to Una, then, pushing the chair aside, leaned far over the table. "You will remain seated, Major."

The Major very slowly looked toward the woman in white. Just as slowly he smiled and deliberately pushed his chair back and came to his feet.

"Sit down!" Clay roared the words as his right fist crashed down on the table.

The smile was wiped from the Major's face. He jarred back down in his chair. For ten seconds he wasn't fully aware of just what had happened. In that respect he was like the rest of the guests.

Every dish on that table jumped, every glass overturned. The Major's coffee bounced from the cup into his lap. The girl, with womanly instinct to protect her clothes, slid her chair back. The head waiter was there, two captains, four waiters. They looked dumbly at Clay, who had pulled out the chair and slipped into it before the few seconds of amazement were past.

Clay was the first to speak. He said easily to the head waiter, "The Major overemphasized a point in his story, and he'll want another cup of coffee."

"Yes, Mr. Holt." The man waited for further explanation which did not come, then gave quick orders to the waiters. The cloth was replaced by a fresh one; other cutlery was upon the table. The Major had his coffee.

"Billings," the Major slipped a bill into the head waiter's hand, "you will take care of the boys and accept my re-

grets." And as Billings still waited: "Mr. Holt was not quite correct; I am afraid I underemphasized a point most deplorably."

When the waiters had gone Clay lowered his voice, said: "Well, Major, how did you like my act? No hard feelings, I hope. As a rule, I charge a high purse for such a bit of fireworks."

"But today?"

"Today it was free. The woman was very beautiful, very young and—suppose I just call it an amateur performance."

The Major nodded very gravely. "Yes, I think that is correct. An amateur performance." He turned to his companion, said: "Mr. Davis, my apologies for not listening to you and very nearly mixing myself up in a common brawl. Still, you were wrong about Mr. Holt. His spirit is rough. His thinking is perhaps toward the tough side. But physically he is far from a well man." The Major shook his head. "I don't think, Mr. Davis, he has very much longer to live."

He dug his hand into his pocket, produced a huge roll of bills, handed them to Davis, continued: "Mr. Davis, I wish you to take a good look at Mr. Holt, remember all you read about him in the papers, discover what you can concerning his past bad health—then get the best advice obtainable on how long an expert predicts he can live."

Clay Holt leaned back in his chair and laughed. He said: "A bit melodramatic, Major, but I'm always willing to take a man seriously and help him out. For that bit of change you couldn't get any gunner in the city to chance it."

"Really, Mr. Holt. I am speaking more in a psychological than a physical way. Even you will find it unpleasant, and perhaps as the feeling of impending death grows on you, a fear will follow that will turn to terror. You will carry with you the feeling that perhaps any day, any hour, any minute, someone you do not know and have never even seen—never will see—is waiting for the doctor's orders."

Clay laughed again, boyishly. He said, and meant it: "I've been threatened hundreds of times but never with a psychological bullet in my back but a real one. Have your fun. I daresay there are a hundred gunmen in the city today who have the same idea as yours with the psychology subtracted, so one or two more won't bother me much, especially if I don't see them. If I do see them—well, they'll bother me less."

The Major looked at him long and steadily. "You are a remarkable man, Mr. Holt, and perhaps a stupid one. Stupid men sometimes lack the faculty of recognizing fear. But stupid men can also be very dangerous. We have finished our lunch and are leaving. You, too, I presume?"

The Major rose, inclined his head, first to Davis, then to the girl. Both came to their feet. The girl spoke for the first time. Her voice was shrill as she caught at Clay's hand when he turned to leave.

"No, Mr. Holt!" Her eyes were big and round . . . and blue through a mist. There was a sort of childlike wonder in her face that appealed to Clay. "I came too late for lunch, Major. Mr. Holt has not eaten; perhaps he will lunch with me."

"If you wish, Muriel." The Major bowed. "Mr. Davis and I have business. Good day, Miss Van Eden. Good-by, Mr. Holt. I shall never have the pleasure of seeing you again."

"Fine sort of company you keep." Clay turned to the girl. "I hope you will tell me the racket and how a girl like you got in it."

She smiled up at him. "As if you didn't know, Mr. Holt. Sit down."

But Clay did not sit down. A hand touched his arm. A voice spoke softly. "Surely you have not forgotten our engagement and that even a woman must eat."

Clay turned suddenly as he heard that voice. He stretched out his hands to Awful.

"Princess! Princess, you're beauti-

ful." Until Agatha Cummings spoke he just stood there and looked at her.

Agatha laughed. "You forget, Clay. We are in the center of the dining-room—a hundred people are staring at us."

"I like it." Clay's smile made her eyes sparkle. "It's too bad some columnist isn't here. Can't you see it: 'Clay Holt, New York's ace private investigator, noted for being seen with beautiful women, outdid himself at lunch today and appeared in the Walden Main Room—'"

"Clay," she led him to a table, "is that all you see in women, how they reflect on your own personal vanity?"

"All but you, Princess. It's the first time in over a month that you've turned Miss America. Another thing, Princess, yours is the sort of beauty that gives a man an appetite."

After they had ordered Agatha said, "I was wondering what you saw in Miss Van Eden." And, at Clay's "Good Lord!" as he started to his feet: "She's gone, Clay; turned almost at once and walked out of the room. She's pretty, of course, has a certain appeal, but her face is weak, even if there is a long line of breeding behind her."

"Cat." Clay cut a slice from his filet mignon and devoured it with zest as Agatha played with hers. "She's very young, maybe spoiled. I like the childish pout to her lips, the tilt—oh not an aristocratic tilt like your nose, Princess."

"She's weak, Clay. You're not very good at character reading."

Clay smiled. "Maybe I like weak women." And more seriously, "She's a kid trying to play some grown woman's game." And suddenly: "What do you mean she's got breeding behind her? What do you know about her?"

"She's Muriel Van Eden—Judge Van Eden's daughter. The other woman I don't know. But you won't be bothered with them now. There will be no case for you there."

"No." Clay chewed and swallowed. "I've been threatened with death already."

Yep! Just for letting the Woman in White walk out of this dining-room. The big man with the huge partly bald head and popping eyes—"

"It doesn't matter, Clay. I couldn't tell you on the telephone and I couldn't wait until you got back to what's left of the office. You have a case, something big. Twenty-five hundred dollars and a ticket on the five o'clock plane for Washington. Here's the money and a sealed envelope with your instructions."

Clay grabbed at the money, tore open the envelope, glanced at the note, said: "Good girl. Now tell me about Washington."

There was little for Agatha to tell. The man who came to the office just after the explosion met her in the hall. He left the money and the sealed envelope.

"He said," Agatha finished, "that he knew your trust in me and he knew you were broke."

"A general condition." Clay grinned: then, as he saw the head waiter at his elbow, "Greetings, Billings."

Billings bowed. "Good afternoon, Miss. And could I have a word with you, Mr. Holt? I—" Billings leaned forward. "Why, Miss Cummings! Your dress, Miss Cummings, your hair—it's very becoming."

Clay burst in on Billings' sudden embarrassment. "Don't cover up, Billings. It's her face that's becoming. And you're right. What an eye—and what tact! Remember, don't speak a word to anyone about Miss Cummings' sudden transformation."

"No, sir, Mr. Holt, not a word. I can speak freely then. Jean, one of our captains, saw the Major rise and pound the table. Jean was amazed."

"He should be." And to himself Clay thought, "The power of suggestion!" To Billings he said: "The Major come here often?"

"Yes, sir. Most evenings he spends hours in the grill; many people visit him at his table. He holds open house, so to speak. We sized him up as tight-fisted,

but when he wants extra service he's liberal beyond all our guests—except yourself, Mr. Holt. I just didn't wish you to think hard of him, though the manager thinks you said something to anger him."

"It's no use, Billings." Clay grinned. "I won't talk. I won't make a complaint, even if the Major did."

"Indeed he didn't, Mr. Holt. He spoke most highly of you to the manager. To be frank, sir, the manager would like to know if there's any difference of opinions remaining between you and Major Hoff."

"Frankly you mean hard feelings between me and Major Hoff? Don't worry, Billings. Major Hoff was interested in my health, offered to pay out of his own pocket for a doctor's opinion."

"It's like him, sir."

"Of course." Clay came to his feet. "The Major recommended everything but an undertaker for me and I'm sure that was an oversight on his part."

"I'm sure it was, sir," Billings echoed politely.



LAY HOLT felt pretty good as he saw the Princess leave by the north entrance to the hotel. He liked her easy carriage, the way women turned to look at her. Men turned, too, but he wasn't sure he liked that. Agatha Cummings! He made a face as he thought of that name. Awful or the Princess, what did it matter? She had everything, courage, loyalty and patience, a belief in him—and she could take it.

He felt good because he had money in his pocket. He liked the feel of heavy dough. He was used to it. And he was used to earning it.

Clay stopped at the cigar counter. "You still here, sweetheart?" he said to the girl behind the counter. "It's a crime. I'll speak to Georgie over at the Paris Night Spot. He'll have a place

for you sure. One of those cigars. Sure, the fifty cent ones. Do you think I smoke rope?"

He left the hotel by the downtown side. The cigar stuck in his throat, made him cough. He tossed it into the gutter and drew a pack of cigarettes from his pocket. He couldn't stand cigars. He hated the taste of them.

Cigarettes! He smiled. Cigarettes always did a man good. It did him good right then. He had turned slightly when he bent to get his light, and before he had straightened and started down the street, he had spotted his shadow.

The man held his right hand deep in his overcoat pocket. Clay couldn't see his face hidden beneath the rakishly tilted gray fedora. Clay's right hand involuntarily slipped up under his jacket. For a single moment it caressed the gun which lay snugly in its shoulder harness under his left armpit.

So the Major was on the job. The Major was a man who believed in action, and the youthful Mr. Davis of erect carriage and military bearing saw that he got it. Clay shrugged his shoulders. There was nothing easier than shaking off a shadow.

Clay's mouth became a little hard. Someone with real money had offered him business, and that someone was entitled to his work without it being hampered by a shadow—perhaps even a killer. The more he thought of it, the grimmer his face became. The Major might be as bad as he said he was. Maybe he would spend enough money to have him shot through the back of the head on a public street in broad daylight.

Clay passed up the taxis directly before the hotel and walked in a swinging zig-zag motion to the corner. It was a time like this when he felt he earned his reputation. There was only one sure way to prevent that man from shooting at him if the man so intended, and that was for Clay to turn suddenly and shoot that man to death.

Clay shook his head. The police wouldn't like that; the law wouldn't like

that. Even his own lawyer wouldn't like the job of trying to prove that the man behind him was bent on murder. As for Clay, he wouldn't get much satisfaction in knowing that he was right—if he were dead.

He breathed a sigh of relief when he saw another line of taxis; jerked open the door of the first of three, and tossing himself low against the back seat said: "Holland Tube."

The tiny mirror Clay held in his hand showed him that the man who followed him had climbed into the taxi behind and that it swung into the traffic in a line directly behind him.

Clay leaned over, and, handing the driver a five dollar bill, spoke to him seriously. The man took the money, nodded and said: "At the next light, or light after that, eh?"

"It doesn't matter," Clay told him, "just so that you are able to get one car between us and the taxi behind. Can do?"

"For five, can do," the driver nodded.

It was the third light before Clay's driver made that quick swing out of traffic and tore directly before the car already slowing down for the red flash.

"Fine!" Clay watched the light, waited until he saw the reflection of red on the cross street side, then pushed the taxi door open and stepped onto the street. He moved quickly back between the closely packed cars, reached the shadow's taxi.

Just as the line of cars started to move, Clay jerked open the door and stepped quickly into the taxi. "Don't move your right hand any further," he said, "or I'll blow it off at the wrist."

The man stared in wonder beneath his slouch hat as Clay Holt, his gun suddenly slipping easily into his hand, sat down beside him.

Clay's left hand knocked up the man's hat; the gun in his right hand jarred up the man's chin. "Brother," Clay said, "you haven't got a nice face."

"Who are you?"

Clay answered easily. "Name of Holt

—Clay Holt, who shot Carson Simmons to death up on a lonely street a few months back. Here we have the roaring traffic, the noise of a great city. A pistol shot would hardly be heard. There's no use in trying to push yourself through the back of the car. You took on the job with your eyes open. You must have known the result if you failed. I was taught never to play with firearms. I'm not playing now."

The man had his feet pulled up on the seat now, forcing his trembling body as far as it would go into the corner. "I didn't know, Holt. I didn't know it was you. I—I mean, I was only following you."

Clay's eyes were hard, and those hard eyes caught the side glance of the driver. If the chauffeur had seen him jump inside the cab or not, Clay couldn't tell. But that the man knew he was there now, Clay was certain. He felt, too, that the driver was watching for the first policeman.

"All right," Clay told the terror-stricken gunman, "open the door and jump for it."

The man clutched at the handle of the door, jerked it open, and was gone, stumbling into the traffic as Clay pulled the door shut. This time when Clay opened the little window he handed the driver a ten dollar bill.

"It would be best," he said, "to use this money to buy things that you can continue to use. A policeman won't be much good to you if you are dead. Stop by the subway."

Five minutes later Clay was on his way to the Newark airport. And he boarded a plane shortly after four o'clock for Washington.

Clay was well beyond Philadelphia before he realized that he still had his reservation on the five o'clock plane. But there was evidently nothing important about that. His instructions were simple enough. He was to arrive at the Paul Hotel in Washington at seven o'clock and, using the name of Captain Summers, ask for Colonel Esmond Stone.

He didn't wonder, think, or even try to conjecture what his job was to be. He simply hoped it would be a short one so that he might give his attention to the Major. He hadn't liked the face of the man in the taxi. He knew a killer when he saw one. But he didn't bother about that now. Billings had said the Major was often in the Walden Grill.

Clay was well acquainted with the hostess before he reached Washington. When leaving he said: "You're too smart, got too much umph, too too pretty to be playing to such a small audience in a four-a-day plane. Ever thought of the movies?"

"No," she told him, "nor the stage, nor night clubs." And when he looked up at her slightly startled: "You don't need to be so surprised. We carried you to Chicago about six weeks ago."

Clay's laugh was boyish. "You win the orchids, honey." Clay pinched her arm. "Or would ten pounds of candy put you overweight for the job?"

She smiled knowingly, Clay thought, as she went forward to assist an old lady with her rug.

At the ticket window inside Clay inquired: "Can you tell me the name of the hostess on the plane which—"

"I know." The young man went back to his figuring. "She was very pleasant to you on the trip. We have certain rules, but if you speak to one of the porters he'll deliver anything you—"

"Just like that, eh?" Clay left the window, sought out a porter.

"Yes sir. For Miss Helen from the gentleman in seat eight. Five dollars won't do. The other gentleman paid eight and—"

"Ten it is." Clay slipped the bill into the porter's hand.

With that Clay went whistling toward the cabs. He had plenty of time to keep his engagement at the Paul Hotel, and since there was still light in the sky, he spent that time driving about the capital. He didn't know how private his visit might be and would keep himself

inconspicuous for the hour before the five o'clock plane would arrive.

When the time came and he entered the hotel, he saw how silly any idea of secrecy might be. The lobby was crowded with people who talked excitedly as people do. As people do? Clay wondered. But he was at the desk. He said to the side of an over-important clerk: "Captain Summers to see Colonel Stone."

The clerk spun like a top, stared at him a moment. The quick flush of red that came into his cheeks drained to a lifeless white. Twice his mouth opened, but no words came. Then he turned, and, picking up a telephone on the counter far back behind the desk, put his mouth close to it. He talked then, for Clay saw his mouth move as three times he looked over his shoulder at Clay. At length he came from the phone, said: "The boy will take you up."

It was a head bellboy who took Clay to the elevator, and at least one of the two men who crowded in with him was a detective. Clay knew that. He surmised, too, that he was the head house detective of the exclusive Paul Hotel. Clay didn't claim any occult power, nor did house detectives stand out like poor relations in the best hotels. No, they look like prosperous business men, except that they are a little better dressed and carry that dress with more ease. Anyway, Clay always knew them.

So he was not surprised when the better dressed of the two men followed him down the hall to Suite A. He even followed Clay into the sumptuous room where a single man stood. That man was tall and gaunt and stooped slightly as he leaned upon the table. His eyes were hollows far back in his head, his cheeks sunken and his two ears flanking his head were like tugs docking an ocean liner.

Clay knew the man. He recalled now where he had heard and seen the name of Colonel Esmond Stone. His picture, too. This was the man who had taken a leave of absence from the army and was

going to fly the new mystery plane to Europe. A small bullet-like two-passenger cabin job. There were hints that it would make over five hundred miles an hour.

The Colonel looked at him and did not speak. Clay heard the key turn in the lock, felt the hand upon his arm as he was roughly swung around. The better dressed business man was different now. He glared at Clay, crashed the words through his teeth.

"What do you mean by coming here and asking for Colonel Stone, masquerading under another name. Come on!" A great hand fastened on the lapels of Clay Holt's jacket; he jerked it up and started to speak again, then found himself hurled back against the wall.

Clay said, "Come on, flat foot. You're not pounding alleys now. Bring that hand from behind your back or I'll blast you through the wall out into the hall."

The gaunt man said, "A few minutes, gentlemen." And as the house detective glared but made no threatening movement, he said to Clay, "Just who are you?"

"Captain Summers to you, Colonel, and if you still have any idea left of inviting me down here to Washington to get me arrested and keep me out of the way for something, forget it—unless you are willing to go for a dirty mess."

The Colonel smiled. Clay straightened. It was a ghastly sort of leer. The Colonel's whole face took on a cadaverous look; only his eyes seemed alive. The Colonel coughed once, then: "How did you arrive?"

"By plane," and when he got no reply: "I came on the five o'clock plane from Newark."

The house detective moved forward. The Colonel held up his hand. "That is impossible, Captain Summers. It is now after seven o'clock. At fifteen minutes after five the plane you mention blew to pieces in the air, killing all passengers and crew."

Clay Holt rocked back on his heels.

The house detective could have pulled a dozen guns then, could have led him across the room and handcuffed him as if he were a little child. He knew why the clerk had been surprised. He knew why the talking of the people was different downstairs. It was he now who found it difficult to speak. He simply took the ticket from his pocket and handed it to the Colonel.

"I took an earlier plane," he explained and his voice seemed to shake. "I drove around town and and—I wish to God I had waited for that plane."

"And be killed?" And when Clay tried to mutter something about preventing the disaster the Colonel went on: "All right, Mr. Rollins; I recognize Captain Summers now."

The Colonel followed the house detective to the door, thanked him, and when he was gone, turned and faced Clay.

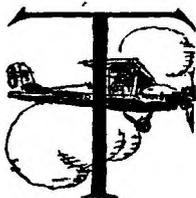
"My apologies, Mr. Holt. I have seen you before; would have recognized you the minute you came, but your arrival seemed impossible. Don't ask me for information. The company officials have already denied any possibility of sabotage. I, of course, know better, and you will shortly."

He led Clay down a narrow hall, past two closed doors, then paused before a door at the end of the hall. He turned those luminous sunken eyes on Clay.

"I envy you, Mr. Holt. You must be a very much feared man, and a most dangerous enemy. It would not have been a glorious death for you in that plane, for it would have been without purpose." After a pause while Clay simply stared, the Colonel added with almost fanatic zeal, "But what a glorious death it might have been—with purpose."

That was all. Colonel Esmond Stone simply opened the door and walked in. He said: "Gentlemen, your fear was unfounded. Mr. Holt took an earlier plane and arrived safely."

The Colonel backed from the room.



WO men rose, and one walked around the table behind which they had been seated and shook hands with Clay.

Neither one was a young man. Both their faces were familiar, but Clay placed neither. The tall, dark, stiff man with the gray hair, was certainly capable of a direct look.

The smaller, rotund man was much older. His hair was white, his mustache iron gray, thick, long, and hanging old fashionedly at the ends. His face was round, his skin smooth and soft with bags under soft gray eyes that seemed hopeless and sad. His mouth would droop momentarily, then catch itself up as if a last desperate sort of determination was holding him together before the final crash.

It was he who spoke. "Sit down, Mr. Holt. Sit down." And when the three were seated: "We thought that you were dead and were wondering now if we were two beaten old men who must give up hope or try for someone else. My friend here had decided that we had sent our last man to sure death. Indeed before the accident we had made up our minds that if there was any possibility that you were known to be retained by us, we would refrain entirely from using you."

Clay did not understand the meaning of the man's words, but he did understand the shock they had suffered and tried to cover it.

"I am deeply shocked," Clay said, "if it is true that so many unfortunate people met their death because of me. But don't have any illusion about dropping me from any work you have in mind. If that plane was blown up just to kill me, the people who did it already know of my association with you, suspected even before I arrived to see you. So they want my life. They will believe I am with you, even if I am not." And suddenly, his anger rising: "And

with you or not—I've got some pride, some sense of duty, even if you call it vengeance."

The taller man rested his hands upon the desk. "Would you," he said, "knowing this man, kill him?"

"You mean murder?" Clay was startled into the words.

"I mean justice." The tall man got up, beckoned Clay to the window, pointed to the lights in the night, said: "Far down to the left is the Capitol. Closer is the President's residence. Across from us is the Potomac River and the Washington monument. Here in this city our national laws are made; here, too, prestige, diplomacy, international rot permit our country to be pilfered of its greatest national secrets. An espionage system that our government does not understand, does not recognize, and cannot, without international complications, raise one finger to prevent.

"Our entire country is infested with spies. Understand, I am not saying or even suggesting that our government is not able to meet the situation. In case of war tomorrow we could place our hands on thousands who believe themselves unknown to our government. But today—well, in this country there is a man of unlimited resources. He poses, in an unofficial capacity, of course, as a good will ambassador without portfolio. Unlike other foreigners, he praises our citizens, our government, speaks of a strong friendship between his country and ours, lends every effort publically to cement that friendship. Yet he is the most dangerous man in the country today. He, and he alone, controls the greatest spy system that has been inflicted upon any country. There is no proof, no actual evidence—just knowledge."

The stout, white haired man cut in: "And if there was proof, the government could do nothing. The international complications would be too grave. The government recognizes this. The President himself is thoroughly informed. But if the government cannot

act openly in an official capacity, it can act in an unofficial one. Certain sums of money which may be used without permission or knowledge of Congress have been turned over to us to investigate certain activities."

He walked forward now and pounded a stubby finger against Clay's chest. "At least five great plane and train disasters, not including today's, we have already laid to his door. A great number of our agents, private men employed by the judge and myself, have met violent deaths, been brutally murdered, or disappeared entirely."

The man called the Judge said: "Why quibble, Carlton? Let Mr. Holt know the truth and know what we expect of him and what he will be glad to do as a patriotic American. Now Mr. Holt, Carlton Wilburt and I . . ."

He was still talking, but Clay didn't get it all. He recognized the stout man now. If that name gave him a shock, it also gave him a confidence, too. He was dealing with men very high up.

The Judge was saying, "So up until we thought of you, Mr. Wilburt and I never knew who each one of us hired. I would engage someone for the work, and so would he. His people would report to him, mine to me. We could not, therefore, through lost notes, memorandums, telephone conversations, or even through mistakes, ever blame anyone but ourselves. With you it was different. We knew that this head spy gave orders and many people died. We knew that we hired people and they disappeared. We decided on a great responsibility. And that's why we sent for you."

Clay said, "Just what do you want me to do?"

"We want you," the Judge leaned forward, "to remove this man."

Clay Holt's face grew hard. "You mean murder—is that correct?"

"Murder—murder." The Judge's voice was hesitant for a second, then a flow of words came. "This man has been responsible for the death of hundreds of

people. He has bought, killed, tortured, threatened, and, yes, taken the lives of children to get what he wanted from government employers. He has wormed his way into the confidence of some of our most influential people, stolen or caused to be stolen the most priceless secrets for national defense—plans and formulas and diagrams that will be used—are being used—to snuff out the lives of innocent women and children abroad and perhaps will be used for that same purpose here. And you call it murder?"

Clay said, "You haven't answered my question, Judge. You want me to shoot him to death?"

The fat man answered: "You know, of course, Mr. Holt, that this man has thousands of eyes, thousands of hands, thousands of men who will kill you, once you are suspected of working against this unscrupulous murderer. You can expect no help from the government, and none from us if you find yourself in trouble. When you leave here you will be on your own." He smiled. "It is possible that the blowing up of the plane was a simple coincidence."

Clay shook his head. "I don't believe in coincidences."

The Judge said. "You are given a great opportunity as a citizen, Mr. Holt."

Clay Holt cut in sharply. "I don't need any flag waving, Judge. There was no suicide clause in my birth certificate."

The Judge said slowly, "A dozen more people killed like that! Mangled bodies, burning wreckage—the men I have sent straight to their deaths. I understand your refusal. He suspects you now and fears you—"

"You misunderstand, Judge," Clay said. "You can deal me in. In fact, I wouldn't miss it at any—a fair price." And, with a shrug of his shoulders, "If I have to defend my life—well, we may embarrass this wholesale slaughter of yours no end."

Carlton Wilburt said doubtfully: "This man knows who you are, Mr.

Holt. Perhaps it might be better if you were to hide for a while."

"Hide!" Clay laughed. "We'll work it out my way, Mr. Wilburt. Somehow I feel a responsibility for those on that plane. Oh, I know that sounds silly. But to me it sounds silly that you know the name of this man and do nothing about it, officially or unofficially. You do know his name?"

"Yes, we know his name. International relationships all over the world are strained to the breaking point today. Even a suggestion that this well known Washington, New York and World banker and social figure was a spy would cause the most grave crisis. His arrest—well, nothing less than an open break could follow it. International politics—"

"His name?" Clay was impatient.

Carlton Wilburt said, "His name is Ernest Hoff—Major Hoff."

The name jarred Clay. He never thought of that partly bald man in connection with the destruction of a great passenger plane. And certainly he had never thought of the Major as being beyond even the retribution of the United States Government itself. But when he heard the name, Major Hoff, he fitted him in at once. Everything dovetailed so perfectly.

"You know him?" the Judge asked.

"Yes. That is, I know who he is."

"Good." The Judge nodded. "You will perhaps meet others who are working for us. Under no circumstances are you to offer them any assistance or protection that is not for one purpose only—the destruction of this human monster. We tried working from the bottom up, but new and strong men replaced the ones we had known and made the task of finding the Major's closest associates a more difficult one. You may be sure, Mr. Holt, with the disappearance of the Major the entire structure which he had built goes with him. Your service to your country will be beyond payment."

The Judge seemed tired as he led Clay to the door. "Mr. Wilburt will take you to talk with Colonel Stone. He is a

strange man who has suffered much. You will bear with him, listen to him." And before Clay could ask the question: "You act as you wish, take no orders from anyone but Mr. Wilburt or myself. And the price—no compensation would be enough to drive out this soulless beast of destruction. We are not wealthy men, but our fund will permit of ten thousand dollars. That is all, Mr. Holt, except—let no personal appeal sway you in the least. That is an order."

The door closed. Wilburt and Clay were in the hall. He led Clay down it a bit, whispered: "The Judge and I give orders together, Mr. Holt. Sometimes I am afraid this thing will drive him mad. Little wonder when I find myself awakening in the night in a cold sweat. Yes, I believe the Judge would gladly walk up to this Major on the public street and shoot him to death if he did not fear the act would bring on the very international disaster we wish to avoid."

"And you have an order to give me?"

"An order." He stroked at his chin. "I repeat that the Judge is almost a fanatic about this Major. My order is to disobey one order of his about protection—personal protection to one person, just one person."

"I don't understand."

"You will understand later." And, as he led Clay down the hall and opened a door where he could see Colonel Stone sitting, he said: "In way of helping that understanding, Mr. Holt, the Judge is Justice Richard Van Eden. . . . Mr. Holt to talk to you, Colonel Stone."

Another blow below the belt. Clay stood there and looked at the Colonel, watched him close the door. Agatha Cummings had told him that the girl was Judge Van Eden's daughter, of course. Who had put the Van Eden girl into this thing? Carlton Wilburt knew she was in it; he had given Clay more than a hint. But—

Colonel Stone was talking. Here was a man who knew his subject—didn't speak of his country or the flag; no hysteria in his voice; yet his words,

though calm and slowly spoken, carried more to Clay of a hatred of the Major than had those of either Judge Van Eden or Mr. Carlton Wilburt.

"I hope, Mr. Holt," Colonel Stone was saying, "that you will consider seriously my suggestion and permit me to be at your service day and night. From now on I will stay in the hangar with my plane in Newark. I have living quarters arranged there. I'll be there twenty-four hours every day until I hear from you." He handed Clay a plain white card. "That is my telephone number."

"Thank you." Clay looked into those sunken eyes, the cracked, broken cheeks, the lips that every few seconds twisted spasmodically.

"Yes," the Colonel went on, "many have left these rooms here to die or disappear. Some of them have been professional hunters of men, but none, I think, just like you. You may speak freely, Mr. Holt. I know everything."

"If you knew everything, you wouldn't ask me to speak freely. I'm not asking you. I do not understand why you offer me your services day and night."

"I am also offering you the service of my plane. They know that, approve of that. You may have not met the Major, Mr. Holt. I have met him. He came to me with a great deal of money and a threat. He wanted government information that I alone could give him. I laughed at him, laughed at his threats." His face twisted into a skeleton-like grimace. "Believe me, Mr. Holt, when I tell you I have never laughed since."

Clay liked to talk, but he could remain silent. He was silent now.

Colonel Stone went on. "We started here with an easy assurance of victory, Mr. Holt; now there is panic. If I even showed my face upon the street, I would be killed. I move places in the night, move my plane in the night at a speed that no man could follow. Men such as Wilburt and the Judge suggest that you might kill. That is nonsense. We must be sensible people. The Major should be

returned to the country from which he came."

"I imagine they thought of that."

"I told them of it. That is why my mystery plane has not crossed the ocean yet. That is why I am not flying alone. I am waiting to take a passenger back to his native land. A passenger, Mr. Holt, whom you will bring me. Major Ernest Hoff."

Clay said suddenly, "That's not a bad idea."

"Bad?" Eyes burned far back like deep, live coals. "It's good, Mr. Holt, very good. I can take the plane any place, day or night, twenty-four hours a day."

Twenty-four hours a day. The words rang in Clay's ears as he stepped out into the hall, took the freight elevator down, and, crossing to a drug store, telephoned Agatha at her apartment in New York.

She was there and she was stunned. Hard-boiled Clay had considered her and now she couldn't talk from crying.

"Clay, Clay!" she kept saying over and over. "I can't believe it's you. I thought the plane blew up."

"Sure, Princess," Clay said, "but it's me. And it's a racket so big that the government can't handle it without me. I'm coming right back and I want you to meet me at Benny's Sea Food House."

Clay walked to the street and flagged a passing taxi. "The airport," he said. "Yeah, I know about the blow-up. But you only got to drive me to the field, not go up in the plane with me."



GATHA was waiting for Clay when he strode into the brightly lighted Sea Food House. He said as he slid into the booth beside her: "It's horrible, Awful. You might have dressed up and been the Princess. It's Major Hoff and he's been the cause of most of our plane disasters. I suppose he has some purpose besides the horrible death of innocent people."

"You were not an innocent person to the Major, Clay." And as he made a wry face at her, "Benny's Sea Food House doesn't call for a big dress up."

"It's my stomach, Awful. I thought it could stand most anything. Now, you—thick glasses, hair drawn back and parted in the middle, that little nose of yours that can be an asset now standing up as a liability."

The man behind the counter pushed a waiter aside and came to Clay's table. "Hello, Benny," Clay said. "Oyster stew for me." After Awful had ordered, he told her everything that had happened, finished with: "Personal enemies may have been on the planes, of course, but it's beginning to make air travelers shy. The Major will probably be at the Walden tonight."

"And just what do you intend to do?"

"Hell, Awful, I don't know. But I'm going to see him."

"You can't simply walk into the Walden Grill and shoot him to death."

"It's a temptation, Awful. There were women on that plane, and a kid, too."

"The law won't protect you. Those two big men can't protect you. It'll just be a case of Clay Holt shooting a respectable visitor to death. It'll be murder, and they'll roast you for it. You've thought other things out. There must be some other way."

Clay Holt shook his head. "The side of my office blown in this morning; a plane blasted to pieces in mid-air. Hoff's afraid of me, Awful, and he has cause to be while I'm alive. He isn't a man to wait or care how it's done. So why should I care? Don't you see, Awful, it's for a hundred and thirty million people. What do I amount to? Who needs me alive?"

"I do," she said.

"Against one hundred and thirty million? You're not that important, Awful. Ah, Benny, that looks great!" He sipped from the bowl with his spoon.

Benny gone, Awful said, "If you can ship him on that mystery plane—"

"That Colonel Esmond Stone looked half cocked. There's a mystery about the guy who is backing him—some big banker, or something. And this Major means business. Judge Van Eden and Carlton Wilburt are ready to blow up. I'm their last chance. What of the Major then if he knocks me over?"

Agatha laid her bag on the table, drew the zipper. A gun showed. She said, "He'd never suspect me, Clay. If you don't come out on top, why I'll walk straight up to him in the Walden and empty it into his chest."

"Awful! I believe you mean it!"

"I do," she told him solemnly. "When you talk as if you have to die to win, it turns things over way down inside of me."

Clay looked at her. "I talk like a nut, Awful, and you, too. If I should meet the Major up a dark alley some night I'd forget the high ideal you've inspired in me." He grinned boyishly. "But down to work. There's Una, the lady in white. Then there's Muriel Van Eden."

"The weak girl."

"Weak, nothing; she's the Judge's daughter. I got a hint from Wilburt to protect her. He had a nerve to put the Judge's daughter into the thing. If the Major ever suspected—"

"Maybe Wilburt didn't put her in."

"Good Lord, Awful, her own father wouldn't do that. It's incredible. Though the Judge did seem almost fanatic about it. You think Wilburt, through one of his agents, discovered that Muriel Van Eden was a secret agent of her father—so hinted to me to take care of her."

Awful moved her expressive shoulders, said: "I've been busy, Clay. I got Jimmy Hudson, one of the Government boys, and saw a picture of the Woman in White. The lady is Una Duncan. No country has ever pinned anything on her, but they've pushed her out many times. She's supposed to be one of the cleverest international spys in Europe. And the highest paid."

"International, eh? Works for the best money. It would be like the Major

to hire her. He'd know of her, of course. And Muriel Van Eden." Clay suddenly straightened. "Why, that woman would make a monkey out of the Van Eden girl. I hadn't thought of that. Of course Muriel Van Eden is simply a dupe."

"Or a dope." Agatha came to her feet with Clay. "Don't you see, Clay? It's impossible to believe that the Major doesn't know who's behind the whole thing and he must suspect Van Eden's daughter and plays her along."

"You do all the thinking, Awful." Clay threw down a bill and led her to the street.

"And you do all the action, Clay," she said.

"Come on, I'll do some action now. I'm going to the Walden Grill and see the Major."

"You're not going to do anything foolish, Clay?"

"No," Clay told her, "I'm just going to ask the Major a question. I'm thinking of the plane, of other planes. Of the Judge's kid trying to be helpful to her country, of her chances in the hands of that experienced woman, in the hands of the Major. Yeah, I'm going to ask the Major one question. I'm going to ask him how he'd like to be blown apart."

Clay stopped the taxi and left Awful at her apartment. She said: "I want to go with you, Clay."

Clay shook his head, closed his eyes, leaned down quickly and kissed her. "Some day," he said, "I'll go blind and be crazy about you."

**H**OLT swung into the Walden Grill. Major Ernest Hoff was sitting at a table in the center of the room. A bull-necked man sat beside him. He was talking and the Major was nodding and smiling. At a table close to the wall sat the tall, good looking Mr. Davis with two men and a woman. His eyes were constantly on the Major.



A man suddenly crossed the room from the bar entrance, beat Clay to the Major's table, slipped a card into the Major's hand. The Major was reading it when Clay steamed up, snatched the white bit of paste-board from his hand, read quickly: "The lad has been properly taken care of."

The bull-necked man turned his head and stared at Clay. There was not much expression in his eyes. But the Major's colorless little eyes snapped, veins darkened on his face. He had difficulty in getting the words out. "Holt!" he said. "This ends my patience. I have only to raise a hand to have you—"

Clay slammed his words in. "If there's to be melodrama I'm going to provide it. Come on, Major, order this lug away from the table, or this time I'll pick the table up and fling it on your chest."

Clay was surprised at the power of the man. He would have smacked a man down any place who made that threat to him. The Major's anger subsided. The muscles that bulged in his neck receded. He took the hand of the man who stood beside him, said calmly: "It was very kind of you to come and speak to me. I welcome all those who take an interest in my accomplishments in cementing the friendship of two great countries. You'll excuse me, of course."

The bull-necked man looked slightly bewildered, bowed stiffly, turned and left the table.

"Now!" The Major tapped the table. "You surprised me, Mr. Holt. Actually you are the first man who ever surprised me." He paused a long time, letting his little eyes fasten directly on Clay's angry blue ones. "I thought that you had died in the plane wreck. In studying you, Mr. Holt, I know that it was simply, do you Americans say, dumb luck that you are alive."

"Major," Clay said slowly, "you had better turn on your best manner. You will cause me to break a promise to a young lady."

"And that promise, Mr. Holt?"

"That I would not shoot you to death in cold blood at this table tonight."

"Really." The Major's voice was light, but his eyes were troubled. "Cold blood, eh? You snatched that note from my hand, called my visitor a lug. You wished to excite me to anger, cause a common brawl, then shoot me in hot blood. Was that it, Mr. Holt?"

"Perhaps," said Clay. "Don't tempt me, Major. I would be unable to resist."

"Well put, indeed, Mr. Holt. It's a pity you can't be bought."

"You recognize that fact?"

"Certainly. Stupid and conceited men are that way. You have probably unconsciously discovered my one weakness. Having no background, you would probably not understand. A man of my culture would naturally abhor common brawls."

"You'd rather blow a plane to pieces, kill innocent women and children."

"Of a certainty, Mr. Holt." The Major slid his chair back suddenly as Clay's face flushed and his right hand moved up beneath his jacket. "There, there, Mr. Holt, I am not placing temptation in your way. I rather admire you."

"And fear me?"

"Let us use the word annoy in place of fear. Your predecessors have been many." The Major laughed pleasantly. "One, slinking behind a palm in the lounge. One, a steward on my yacht. Another a 'wealthy' business man who wished to invest money in one of my enterprises. But enough about them. Never in my many years of diplomatic accomplishments have I had an adversary big or small who pounded upon the table, shouted me down, threatened to throw a table into my chest. "Amusing, perhaps, except for the fact that back, far back in your eyes, is a lust that I have recognized. You call it temper, or perhaps with pride point it out as a reckless courage. To me it is the lust to kill."

Clay's impulse was to lean suddenly across that table and clutch the Major by his thick neck and close strong fingers

upon it until no life remained in his body. But the Major was right. Clay thought of the innocent victims of that plane. Maybe not the lust to kill was there, but certainly the desire to kill.

"Major," Clay said slowly, "do you ever visit high buildings?"

The Major laughed. "Come, come, my boy. You are into a business far above your intelligence. Shooting bandits on the street is your business. This is a world game, great powers against great powers, far too big for you. Your country and my country. But tell me why you came. You have a message to deliver, a threat perhaps?"

"Perhaps." Clay's blue eyes knitted. "You're right, Major, one country against another country. The game's too big for me to play." And when the Major nodded his satisfaction: "So let's forget that and bring the game down to my size—one man against one man. If your next attempt to kill me fails, I'll shoot you down like any common thug, anywhere, any time, any place."

"You mean that?"

"Mean it? Take a look into my eyes now, and if that great brain of yours can't turn the trick, you'll have to die to find out."

It was a full minute before the Major spoke. "Very well, Mr. Holt. I believe you. There's a chance yet to save your life. There's Judge Van Eden. You remember meeting his daughter with me only this afternoon?"

"What of her?"

"What of her?" The Major's eyelid contracted. "Like you, Clay Holt, she might die at any moment." There was no softness in the Major's voice. "If anything happens to me, Muriel Van Eden dies."



AVIS and his table mate moved from their seats and the bull-necked man, and another were walking leisurely toward him. He knew that the Major's eyes watched his, and he didn't

know what the Major saw there. But he knew what he saw in the Major's face, and he wondered, did the other men see it, too?

He saw fear in those little, round eyes. Yes, even terror. The Major seemed to shrink down in his seat as Clay's hand snapped under his arm and clutched at his gun.

Yes, the Major feared one thing. He feared death. Death that was about to strike. A death that neither the Major nor Clay Holt could control. It was beyond Clay now. A bursting plane in mid-air, women and children, other planes, other women, other children. They were bursting in Clay's head—a kaleidoscope of twisting, turning bodies, and twisting and turning with them were the contorted, horrible features of the Major.

Time, place were forgotten. The consequences not even thought of. Four men approaching—a split second, and there might never be another opportunity.

And a voice called out: "Mr. Holt, paging Mr. Holt."

Clay raised his eyes, and they rested fully upon a pair of sandy eyes behind glasses, unpleasantly old fashioned and stiffly arranged hair.

Clay Holt spun around and nearly knocked down Mr. Davis. "Out of my way, heel," he said as he walked straight toward Agatha, whose reflection he had seen so plainly in the long mirror as the page boy called his name.

Clay Holt strode out, Agatha Cummings hanging to his arm.

"All right, Clay," Agatha said when they reached the street, "bawl me out."

He leaned over and patted the hand that clung to his arm. "No, kid," he said. "I'd have killed him, shot him to death. Let's go across the street and have a drink."

At the table in the little place across the street Agatha said, "He got you, Clay. I saw your face. I had the page boy by the door ready."

"It would have been murder, I suppose." Clay's hand was trembling when

he put down his glass. "I never understood it before. He talked about seeing things in my eyes." He gripped Awful's hand. "It isn't just rot, kid, for I saw things in his eyes. I saw his dirty, rotten soul. I could have killed him like that."

"That would have been some floor show," Agatha said lightly.

"Damn it, kid, I'm mad like he is." Clay tossed off the rest of his drink and told Agatha what had happened. "He's holding Muriel Van Eden prisoner. I can't let him go through with it. And I can't—"

"You can't stop him," she finished. "She's cute and she's young, but she's weak. He'll use her to trap you. Let us go to your apartment and wait there for word from the Major."

"But he might keep us waiting while—"

Clay stopped talking. He and Agatha both looked up together. The Woman in White was now in black. She said, "I don't admire your taste in women tonight, Mr. Holt. May I sit down? And will you dismiss your country cousin?"

Clay made a motion with his thumb. Agatha came to her feet. She was about to speak, but Clay spoke first. "On your way," he said. "Sit down, Lady Una."

Una turned, watched the girl leave the restaurant, ordered a liquor, then said to Clay: "Lady Una—are you facetious or have you been looking up my pedigree?"

"Twelve people were killed today," Clay said bluntly.

"I was in the Walden." The woman raised her eyes. "I was surprised it was not thirteen."

"You saw?"

"No—heard. You are quite a young man, Mr. Holt. I have known the Major on and off for five years. It was his first fright."

"You think nothing of those deaths?"

"You should have said, Mr. Holt, that I show nothing of what I think. Soldiers and doctors and nurses see worse every day. The ordinary person reads them without emotion in the

papers. You know my profession, you must know I shut my mind to certain things. You forget that I asked you to see me safely from the dining room, that I might leave without hindrance from the Major. Does that tell you anything?"

"Plenty," Clay nodded. "It tells me first that the Major wanted you to worm your way into my confidence. Why not begin?"

"You disappoint me, Mr. Holt. I saw in you the honest, fearless he-man, who fights only with the most feared weapon to all criminals and spies alike—physical force, violence, and sudden death. Surely you are not suddenly going to produce brains. All the others have that, but so few have a reckless physical courage. If you had wished to practice the fine arts you should have pretended to believe me, lead me on. You have that something women fall for to a remarkable degree. It's the boyish honesty in your face."

"You're an eye-ful yourself," Clay admitted. "But it's the filthiest piece of business I have ever been in, and I've been mixed up in some pretty dirty work. Tonight I nearly murdered a man. I don't wish to invite a beautiful woman to my apartment and knock her around in the hope of gaining information."

"There are countries," she said, "where men and governments are not so considerate. I have been knocked around." She came to her feet. "I have brought you a message. You are to wait in your apartment for a call—about Muriel Van Eden."

"A trap of course."

"Of course."

"And you think I'll fall for that?"

"I don't know if you'll fall, but I think you'll come. You're built that way."

"I'll come," Clay told her.

"How interesting," she smiled at him. "Gun play, and all that."

"And all that," he said.

The woman looked at his hard, cold, determined face. The sparkle went out of her eyes. Very carefully she removed

her glove and extended her hand. "If you'll forget the filth," she said, "I'd like to shake hands with you."

Clay extended his hand. The woman gripped it once tightly, then drew her fingers slowly away.

"Good-by," Clay said.

"Good night," said the woman. "I hope, just good night."



LAY went straight to his apartment, slammed the door, and stood rigid in the hall. The hair bristled on the back of his neck like an animal's.

His gun was in his hand as a voice called: "Don't mess up your own apartment with loose gunplay, Clay. I'm waiting for you."

Clay stalked in and looked at Awful. She was reclining on his couch, just replacing her glasses. He told her of his conversation with the woman, Una, then finally said: "I should have killed Hoff. If you had rushed in as the Princess, pointed him out as the man who ruined your young life, we would have had a case." He stared at her. "Come on, Awful, turn on the brains."

"There are no brains to turn on. You are simply to wait for a call."

"Funny about this Una. She came right out and told me it would be a trap."

"Naturally." Agatha moved her shoulders. "You wouldn't expect the Major to ask you for tea—that is, without poisoning the tea."

"Wait until when? I put fear into the Major. I should follow it up at once. I mustn't let him think I give a damn about the girl, Muriel Van Eden."

"You won't be able to find him." Both swung as the phone rang. Awful smiled. "That will be the Major now."

Clay lifted the phone. His voice was not pleasant. Before any voice came over the wire to him he said: "I don't give a damn about any girl. Now what do you want?"

Agatha nodded her approval. She listened attentively. Clay's voice had changed. She could only hear his words. He was saying: "I didn't know it was you. How could I guess? Yeah, I know exactly how you feel. You can't get in touch with her." And after a long pause this time, "Why, you should know that better than I do. You didn't. It was Carlton Wilburt then. All right, Judge, I do know. Be prepared for a shock. I believe she is a prisoner. I believe the Major suspected her all along, and I most certainly do know that your daughter has been working against the Major and has been in his company. Yes, yes—" Clay clicked the phone. "Judge—Judge Van Eden, I—I—"

Clay Holt smacked the instrument back in its cradle, turned to Awful.

"The Major called the Judge at his private number in Washington. And the price of her life is—my death. Broken and aged and desperate, thrown deeper into the depths of despair by the horrible death promised his only child, he called me, Awful. Called me to warn me that my life was in danger. Wilburt was a fool and a despicable friend to work a game like that."

"I can't believe it," Agatha said. "I can't believe a man of Carlton Wilburt's standing, his character, his high position, would do such a thing."

"The Judge didn't do it. No one else could have—unless—the flyer, Colonel Esmond Stone. But he never leaves his plane—just that once to see me. But he's mad, Awful. Even the papers have quit writing about his six-hour flight to London. He hasn't made even an attempt to start."

The phone rang again. This time Clay beckoned Agatha to listen in. He said, "Hello," and recognized the soft purring of the Major's voice.

"You and I acted like a couple of spoiled children, Holt. Perhaps I, too, tried to dramatize our positions in life. Let us be real business men. You do not approve of my actions in your so

great democracy. You don't approve of my freedom of speech and action."

"And you, Major, don't approve of my method of ending your freedom. You fear death."

"Don't we all, Mr. Holt? Now I am ready to call off hostilities. I ask but six weeks to arrange my personal affairs for my departure. You will, therefore, forget me for six weeks. Am I clear?"

"And you offer just what in return?"

"Your life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness. Also that a young lady will be able to join her father."

Clay said, "I'll think it over."

"How long?"

"Oh, a day or so."

"Dead men don't think, Mr. Holt. I'm not trying to frighten you. You are too conceited to admit of personal danger. You must think of another—a distracted father who has paid you money, a young girl whose death may be very slow and painful."

"Major," Clay snarled, "only a miracle saved you tonight. But from now on your number's up."

"And you have no interest in a distracted father, a desperate, horror-stricken girl?"

Clay set his teeth grimly as the lie crossed his lips. "None whatever!"

This time he replaced the phone himself. There was a grim determination in his face when he turned to Agatha. "I had to do it. Had to say it. It would be my death and her death. The man is without a conscience, without a soul. . . . Poor little kid."

Awful said: "Besides the trouble it would cause, what good could the Major's death do? Someone else would take his place."

"No." Clay turned and faced her. "Wilburt and the Judge assured me that the whole structure would topple with him. I believe them. No country will ever produce such a man again, and if there was such a man, twenty years could not equip him as the Major is equipped. He was spawned in hell and—"

"Clay," she cut in, "no histrionics. We

have a cold, calculating man. We must be cold and calculating, too. The girl's death will mean nothing to him. You have given him something new. You have given him fear."

"I'll give him a bellyful of lead," Clay said viciously. "I'm going straight to the Walden, straight to the Major's suite. Damn it, Awful, don't argue with me. I know it's foolhardy. I know it's crazy as hell, but I've made my reputation by doing things crazy as hell. I'm no government. I'm no diplomat. Don't you see, the Major can't harm anyone if he's dead."

"Wait." Agatha tried to push him back on the couch. "You must be here, near the phone. The Judge, Wilburt, the Major, or the Woman in White might call. Don't you see, Clay, there will be something, some trap? Force the Major's hand. He's forcing yours by making you move first."

"All right! Telephone the Walden."

One quick stride, one grasp of the phone—and a few minutes later the crash of it as he pronged it back viciously.

"The Major's gone," he said.

They talked. Once Clay told Agatha that she had better go home, and quickly added: "You can't, of course. There must be killers in the street."

One, two, three o'clock came and passed—and at three o'clock exactly the phone rang.

Clay scooped it up in his hand. And this time when he looked at Agatha his eyes smiled. She knew what those eyes were saying to her, as she slipped toward the phone and listened. They were saying, "You're always right, always."

The voice in the ear piece was very low. A girl was talking. She was saying: "Don't speak, Clay. Don't question me. This is Muriel Van Eden. I am a prisoner in Newark, 194 Elmford Lane. I am not supposed to know I am a prisoner yet but I overheard the talk. It is terrible, Clay. The Major is going to take me into a room in the cellar and kill me, and then dispose of my body.

There is a window in that little room. I will be tied, but you can get in."

Then came a detailed description of the grounds and the little window. "There is a house on the left, but it is unoccupied, so enter the empty lots on the right as you face the house. One man will stand guard by the stone wall. You can dispose of him. And you must come alone!"

"How many in the house?"

"The Major and a woman. They call her Una. I am not supposed to even suspect yet. This will make things clear to you! I have a friend who—Clay, come! I must hang up."

Agatha was trying to get a word in as Clay flung his arms into his topcoat and, thrusting an extra gun into the pocket, jammed on his hat.

"You're wrong once, kid," he said. "Every word clear and concise, no fear in her voice. Just a trust and a faith in me. No, that girl isn't weak." Clay took Agatha by the shoulders, shook her playfully, said: "Our troubles are over. Oh, I know you're thinking about men hiding across the street. But I'll use this apartment for the reason I hired it—two floors to the roof, over the apartment to the corner, and exit on the side street. Watch for a call. And good-by."

"Clay, Clay!" She cried out as she heard the entrance door close. But no shot came and she heard his feet beating a light tattoo to the roof. She shook her head as she locked the door.

What worried her so? She had heard that girl's voice once before. She was an expert on voices. Indeed, she had trained herself in every detail necessary in Clay's work. She felt she had helped to make him. Felt that she would yet make his name the best known in the entire country.

Fear? Yes. Somehow she was struck with fear. A fear she couldn't understand. She had been wrong about the character, the weakness in Muriel Van

Eden's face. Why, the girl's voice didn't even tremble. And yet—Agatha shook her head. Muriel Van Eden must have known that she was helpless in the hands of a butcher, a man who would blow women and children to pieces.

The phone rang again. "Clay," she thought. But it couldn't be Clay. He could hardly have reached the street, and it was not yet four o'clock. She lifted the phone.

A minute later all subterfuge had changed. Agatha was begging, pleading for the man on the telephone to tell her the message he had for Clay. "I'm Agatha Cummings, Mr. Holt's secretary, Mr. Wilburt," she pleaded. "He's gone to Muriel Van Eden's aid now. You must trust me. It may mean—Oh, God—you didn't send her in the beginning to spy on the Major, and the Judge didn't send her to the Major?"

Agatha dropped the phone, heard the click. She ran to the door, flung it open, was on the roof calling, crying out to Clay. She clenched her hands then, looked wildly about her. No one had heard. She returned quickly to the apartment, found her coat, her bag. She opened her bag, took out the gun in it, examined it carefully and replaced it.

Then she was out the door again, up the roof, following in Clay's steps.

Yes, the message she had received from Mr. Wilburt had been a terrible one, a horrible one. Muriel Van Eden had not been sent to help destroy the Major. One of Carlton Wilburt's spies had reported the truth to him. A truth Wilburt dare not tell the Judge, dare not tell Clay, though he had hinted that Clay was to protect Muriel. Agatha had been correct about the girl's weakness. Muriel Van Eden was working *for* the Major. Muriel Van Eden was working against her own country, against her own father. Muriel Van Eden was the wife of Arnold Davis—and now she had trapped Clay to his death.

For once in her life Agatha understood the feeling—the desire to kill.



**M**AJOR ERNEST HOFF sat behind the black table which he was using as a desk. He clasped his pudgy hands together, he looked toward the wide, folding doors of the old house, at the thick curtain before them. Finally he said to the tall, lean, broad-shouldered man who stood almost at military attention:

"Davis, I wish to commend you for all that you've done. You remind me very much of another man—of Clay Holt. I mean your attractiveness to women. It must have been hard for you to marry this brainless Van Eden girl."

Davis pulled at his little mustache. He was rather flattered at the Major's compliments, but he also took advantage of them.

"It's been hard making love to her. It has been hard convincing her that her interests are mine, and that you, Major, are doing a great good. I must turn her pretty head with talks of romance, of my imaginary estates abroad."

"And this Clay Holt? You listened to her telephone call to him. These American women, my boy—at any minute they renounce their convictions, betray the trust of their husbands."

"I know," Davis agreed emphatically. "But Muriel suspects nothing of the plane crashes. Understand, Major, I am not trying to get rid of her before you wish. But something is on her mind. She believes that we are to hold Clay Holt a prisoner here. She made me swear that I would not harm him."

The Major smiled. "You won't harm Clay Holt, my boy. I will take care of him. Muriel Van Eden is tied up in the cellar under a dim light. The two men are in the dark. Clay will see her from the window, drop in—and that is all. Close the steel shutters by the windows, Davis. No sound must go outside this room. And, Davis, after tonight you may take your delayed honeymoon. Your wife is young and healthy. I might

suggest the Italian Alps. Even the young and the strong could not survive a thousand-foot drop."

Davis pulled over the shutters, turned and looked at the Major. "No sound outside, eh? I was right about Lady Una Duncan. I got a lot of information from my wife, things she didn't realize. This Una asked her enough questions. Yet, I could not believe Una would betray you because of her fear of retribution."

The Major shook his head. "An international spy of such standing as Lady Una Duncan has no fear of retribution."

"But her record has been never to betray those who first hired her. Was that you?"

"No, not me. She is not betraying her trust, Davis. She is the most clever of all espionage workers in the world. It was natural that I seek her, but I see now how she arranged for me to seek her out. No, she did not betray her trust. Carlton Wilburt hired her first."

"And—"

The Major said simply: "She is very clever. I bear her no malice. She will be here in a minute, Davis." He lowered his voice. "You will stand with your back to the curtains before the door after she comes in."

"What do you intend to do?"

"Nothing terrible, my dear boy. She has no information that I wish." He opened the table drawer, took out a long-barreled revolver and laid it on the table. "She might have information that others would want. She started in business at the age of seventeen. Ten years is a long time to live as a free-lance. I think she will understand. I want you by the door, though I do not think she will run screaming from the room. I am going to shoot her to death."

"And Clay Holt?"

"One body or two, what difference does it make?"

"And me?"

"You will wait until it is over. Your passport, visé, steamship tickets are all ready for you. After you have finished

with your honeymoon, go to Paris. You have a way with women, Davis. You will meet Francine Le Seur. Money is no object. She must come to me."

"And you?"

"My work is not finished, but Van Eden and Wilburt's work is finished. There will be no more money for them, and this great democracy which I love so dearly must put up with me. In my own country—" He paused, listened, and when the gentle knock was repeated, called softly, "Come in."

The door opened silently. The curtains parted. Lady Una stood there a moment, then came into the room. Her eyes raised slightly as she saw Davis walk to the door, turn and stand there almost beside her. Her eyes turned to the Major, lowered and fastened upon the table, the long-nosed revolver that lay there. She took three quick steps backward, her shoulders pressed against the wall.

Arnold Davis' mouth hung open as he stood before those curtains. To his right was the Major, the gun steady in his hand. To his left the woman, charming, beautiful, poised, even now, but for the fact that her left hand stretched back flat against the wall. Davis could have taken a step and been between them, but he didn't move.

The Major said, "It had to come, Una. You knew it had to come. In any other country but this they would take me and hang me." Then, his voice growing hard: "Don't move! Don't speak. I am under ordinary conditions a fair shot."

His gun jerked up. The woman tightened her back against the wall. The fingers of her right hand clawed convulsively against the wall paper. There was the single roar of the gun. The splash of flame and a sudden cry from the Major. Arnold Davis had crashed suddenly forward, directly in the path of the Major's bullet! Plainly the Major saw the tiny blue mark in the side of Davis' face, saw it widening and grow-

ing red before Davis sank slowly to the floor.

For the first time in his life the Major knew panic. For the first time in his life the muscles of his arms and hands did not respond to the orders of his brain. He cried out and saved his life. For the next moment six feet of muscle sprang from behind those curtains.

The Major fired again. At least he thought that he did. Then the gun fell from his hand as something thudded upon his head. His little eyes grew dim. But he spoke before he slid from the chair.

"Holt! Clay Holt," was all that he said before he fell unconscious.

Clay stood, legs far apart, above the unconscious man. Then he pulled handcuffs from his pocket, jerked the Major's arms behind his back, and snapped the irons upon his wrists. One look at Davis—and he turned to Una. "Davis is dead," he said. "And you, in a way, I suppose, helped save my life. He was going to kill you. Why?"

"I work for Wilburt." She shrugged her shoulders. "I could like you, Clay. I would have telephoned Wilburt, but I knew the Major suspected me."

"These men here in this room made my entrance through the second-story window possible. I thrust Davis forward just in time to save you."

She nodded. "They were here to take my life. I am most deeply grateful for your saving me—by accident or design. As for me, I work for my living. I have been close to death before, but never so close as this time." And suddenly, "But you were to come by the basement. Muriel Van Eden was to trap you there."

"I know. But I imagined Muriel was forced to make the call, so I didn't come as she told me. Her instructions were too precise."

"She's worse than you think, Clay. You will forgive her and let her go free because she is a woman and weak. I will forgive her and let her go free because it will please those who hire me. But the men below, the two who were to over-

power or kill you, must have heard the Major's shot. I am in authority now. They know nothing of the Major's suspicion of me. I will order them to leave. Listen! There are voices beyond the dining-room. Stay here."

But Clay did not stay there. He kept back in darkness and heard her speak to the men. They mumbled back to her from cellar steps but he heard her clearly.

She was saying: "You say a woman came instead of a man. But it doesn't matter. Your orders are to leave. Clay Holt has been disposed of. Good night. Leave the girl as she is."

Three minutes later Clay, gun in hand, followed Una to the cellar. They crossed in the dim light of his pocket flash to a plain wooden door. Una opened the door, said: "Look."

In the corner was Muriel Van Eden. She was tied in a chair. Una whispered: "Muriel was to tear a hand free and grab you when you leaned over to free her. Then those men were to overpower you."

Muriel cried out: "No, Clay! No. They're going to kill you."

"I wonder," said Una, "if her change of heart is an honest change or does she—but, no, she's not bright enough for that."

But Clay wasn't paying any attention. His pocket-flash had swept about that little store room. In the dimness of a corner another girl was strapped in a chair—a girl with a gag in her mouth.

"Awful!" Clay was across the room, jerked free the gag. "You suspected and came for me!"

Agatha gasped as Clay cut loose the ropes. "Suspect? I knew and I came. They grabbed me and bound me, but not before I told Muriel Van Eden they intended to kill you. Don't you see, Clay? She's just weak."

Clay cut the Van Eden girl loose. He didn't let her finish her speech. She got just as far as:

"I never suspected the whole truth. I'm married to Davis and my father—"

"Get out!" Clay jerked her to her feet and led her to the door above. "It

would kill your father if he knew. Don't tell him." And when she turned and put beseeching eyes upon him, "Get a regular guy to fall in love with. Widows are attractive, you know. That's right. Your husband, Arnold Davis, is dead."

The girl tottered by the door. Agatha started toward her. But Una stepped between them, said:

"She doesn't fully understand. I think I'll take her home and talk with her." She came back to Clay, whispered: "You don't have to worry about Davis' body. But what of the Major?"

Clay's lips broadened. "I'm in business as you are, Una. When you report to Wilburt, tell him I want that check. It's for ten thousand dollars."

"You're going to kill him, there on the floor?"

Clay stared at her. "Your job is finished. We work separately and alone. Just tell him that the Major is returning home and to send the check."

He watched Una out the door, turned and looked at Agatha. Her hair was disheveled, her glasses hung down over her nose, her coat was torn; and suddenly her glasses fell to the floor. Clay's eyes widened as she stood and faced him.

It was a minute later that he heard the groaning. Agatha's feet hit the floor with a thud. Her whole body jarred. She picked up her glasses and followed Clay up into the living room. The Major was struggling to his feet. She stretched a hand toward Clay's fist, drew it back, said nothing, even when the Major sank unconscious to the floor again.

Clay returned his gun to its holster, said as he reached over the table and lifted the phone: "The Major must have fainted, Awful. Yeah, Central," and he gave a Jersey phone number. A minute later he said into the mouth-piece: "Clay Holt talking, Colonel Stone. You sound wide awake. Can you make your flight this morning—now, at dawn. Good! Major Ernest Hoff will be your passenger. Hell, man, I'm not mad. Can I reach the hangar by car without being seen?"



MAJOR HOFF lay well hidden in the back of the car as the young mechanic stood on the running-board and guided Clay Holt across to the hangar. It was still dark. Colonel Esmond Stone stood in the open doorway. He helped Clay lift the Major from the car and carry him to the plane—a small cabin job for such a trip, Clay thought. But when they had stowed the Major away in the long tail, Clay asked:

"I'm not much on planes, Colonel, but it looks like an ordinary plane, no extra gas tank. I was wondering how it could fly the ocean."

The Colonel laughed—a queer sort of laugh. He said, "The Major always wanted to know that. That's why I've called it the Mystery Plane. I've guarded quite a few secrets for the government, things the Major would have liked to know. He used to threaten me." He was waving a lantern down the field now. "I sent the boys away until you brought our passenger. They know I'm going to have a passenger, but not how he'd come aboard."

Clay watched the men come, wheel the machine out, push it to the runway. Dawn was just appearing as the field lights went on. A man said to Clay:

"Ordinarily you wouldn't think he could get over a thousand miles with that gas tank. It's hard for an old-timer like me to believe that he has some magic chemical or something. If it wasn't Colonel Esmond Stone, he'd never have gotten a permit. Yep, he knows his stuff; crossed the ocean twice already. And there he goes."

The plane had taxied up the field, turned, and was roaring down toward Clay. Once, twice, the wheels left the ground. Then it was in the air.

A dozen or more white cards flickered from the cabin. Men ran wildly to get them. One landed at Clay's feet. He held it beneath his flash. It read:

#### THE MYSTERY PLANE

Six hours to Europe. This flight is made possible by America's good friend, Major Ernest Hoff, my mystery passenger and backer.

—Colonel Esmond Stone

Clay avoided the reporters, which was not difficult. He got his car, pulled Awful into the seat beside him. Silently they drove from the field. At the entrance they stopped. It was Una. She squeezed into the front seat beside them.

She said, "No one will know anything about Muriel Van Eden. You're quite a man, Clay Holt."

"Yes." Clay yawned. "If I were half a man, I would have killed him. I don't understand the play. The only luck we could hope for—well, that Stone doesn't make it. And that's tough on Stone. The Major will be back."

"So you don't know, then?"

"Don't know what?"

"That the Major offered Esmond Stone thousands of dollars for certain aviation information."

"And didn't get it?"

"No." Una moved back in the seat. "The Major didn't get it. The Colonel laughed at his threats. He has never laughed since. His wife and child died in his summer cabin at Maine. . . ."

"And the plane *doesn't* have enough gas? Won't go five hundred miles an hour and—"

Una lowered her head, gravely said: "Yes. The plane will go five hundred miles an hour in a power dive from a great height. First one wing will rip off, then another. Then the fuselage—"

"God, how terrible!" Agatha Cummings gasped.

"Terrible?" There was a question in Una's voice and then a sudden viciousness. "Colonel Stone will talk to the Major, I suppose, and maybe he'll laugh again. But he'll talk to him—talk about his wife and child until the gas gives out. No, you don't have to worry, Clay. Major Hoff isn't coming back, isn't ever coming back."

# BARE FACTS

By H. RANDOLPH PEACOCK

A shamus—a runaway girl—and a nudist camp!

Mr. Lester Barnes,  
Clam Shell Hotel,  
Laguna Beach, Calif.

Dear Les:

The worst has happened! Remember me telling you about old man Youngblood? He's the rich old banker who loaned me the five hundred bucks I needed to start my agency three years ago. I told him at that time if he ever needed a detective for anything that he could call on me and that I would do the job free-gratis.

Well, he telephoned from San Diego

your honeymoon for a few days and drive down there to see what he wants.

San Diego is only another seventy miles from where you two are. Tell Mary how it is. She'll probably be as sore as a strip-tease dancer with a stuck



today and wants me to come down there right away for something that he wouldn't discuss over the phone, but you know I'm all tied up here in court on the Jensen case. I can't get away for ten days, so I'm asking you to postpone

zipper because I'm interrupting your honeymoon, especially since you were only hitched yesterday, but if it wasn't for the dough Youngblood loaned me you wouldn't be working now. We can't let him down. We may need some more dough sometime.

Give Mary my love and get going for San Diego right away. You'll find Youngblood at his bank. I told him you would handle the case and would be on the job sooner than soon. That should be soon enough. Which is why I'm sending this airmail.

You can pick up with your honeymoon where you leave off after the job is done.

Regretfully,  
Jim.

P. S. How do you kids like married life?

---

Jim Handmore,  
Red Star Detective Agency,  
San Francisco, Calif.

Dear Jim:

If I'd read your letter before I opened it, I'd have torn it up. How do we like married life? That's a laugh. Give us a chance! Mary says that Youngblood has his nerve wanting me to come down there. Didn't you tell him that we just got married?

We were just going to take a swim in the ocean when your letter came, but after Mary read it I got all the water I wanted in the tears Mary cried down my back. She's all right now, though, and is going to stay here at the Clam Shell while I make a hurried trip to San Diego.

I'd take her with me, but I paid the hotel bill here for two weeks in advance and the hotel won't kick back with the dough. Some joint, huh? I figure that I can take care of Youngblood in a day or two, at the most. So then I can come

back here and really make up to Mary for lost time.

Your faithful employee,  
Les.

P. S. I'll write you from San Diego and let you know what it's all about.

Dear Jim:

I am writing you from San Diego now as you can probably tell by the fact that I'm using some of Youngblood's bank stationery. Youngblood is an old crab. Why did you have to borrow money from him in the first place? I told him about Mary waiting for me at Laguna Beach, and he didn't even hear me.

His daughter, Priscilla, has him sweating under his collar so bad that he doesn't know whether he's coming or going. If I had my way about it, he'd be coming and I'd be going back to Mary, but Priscilla wants to marry some sailor on one of the battleships anchored down here in the harbor.

From what I can find out, this gob is an officer or something. At least he's got a rank in the Navy, but old Crab-face won't have anything to do with him. Crab-face says the guy's got a rank all right, but that it smells like rotten barnacles off the bottom of his boat.

I haven't seen the gob, so how can I tell? Anyway, my job is to drive Priscilla to her aunt's place in San Francisco. Crab-face is sending her there to get her away from her Barnacle Bill, and he isn't trusting her to go alone. He's afraid she'll elope with Barnacles and maybe raise a family of rowboats.

He says he's going to break up the romance if he has to do it with an act of Congress getting Barnacles thrown in irons!

I can't see why he's so up in arms about it though, because I've known some pretty darn decent Navy men. I'm not arguing with Crab-face, though, to let love take its course. I want to get it over with and get back to Mary. Maybe I'll stop in and see her on my drive to 'Frisco.

If you can't read this letter, blame it on these damn bank pens. They're worse than the ones you find in a post-office. I could do better with a paint brush.

Hurriedly,  
Les.

P. S. Priscilla just came into the bank with her mother. I guess they aren't letting the kid out of their sight. She's some looker too! Priscilla, I mean. Not her mother. I don't think I'll stop in to see Mary like I said. You know how jealous she is. If she gets a look at Priscilla, the war would be on. I don't even think we'd better let Mary know what my job is. I'll write her and tell her I have to deliver some bonds or something, but I hope this Priscilla dame doesn't give me any trouble on the trip. She's got fire in her eyes—and how!

---

Dearest darling wife:

Gee, Mary, it seems like I've been gone from you for a whole year. I can't wait until I get back to Laguna. Youngblood wants me to take some bonds to San Francisco. He doesn't want to send them by mail because he is afraid that something might happen to them.

I wanted to fly up, but he wants me to drive it in my car because I have to stop at a ranch near San Bernardino and pick up a mortgage from some guy.

I won't be able to come back by way of Laguna either because this ranch is near the desert and to come by Laguna would be way out of my way. Not that I wouldn't drive a thousand miles out of the way to see you, kitten, but I want to get to San Francisco and back to you as soon as possible.

Your loving husband,  
Les.

P. S. I know this is a dreadful thing to have to do on our honeymoon, but, baby, it's better than being on relief.

Jim Handmore,  
Red Star Detective Agency,  
San Francisco, Calif.

Dear Jim:

Well, here I am—the lonesome bride. I'm writing this letter just to keep my mind occupied because I feel like cutting someone's throat. Yours would do fine.

I suppose Les wrote you about the bonds. They must be awfully important, but guess who I bumped into here at this Clam Shell Hotel right after Les left? Daisy Brittenet. Remember her? You should! She's that redhead you were ga-ga about last summer, but it's a good thing you broke off with her.

Guess where she's spending her time down here? At a nudist camp back in the hills on the desert side! Happy Valley Nature Club is the name of the place, and Daisy tried to get me to go over there for a few days while Les is away.

Daisy says it's very refined and that the desert sun does wonders for you.

Tell Les to hurry back because there's a good looking life guard on the beach here who is making eyes in my direction. A girl can't hold out forever.

Love,  
Mary.

---

WESTERN UNION  
JIM HANDMORE,  
RED STAR DETECTIVE AGENCY,  
SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA  
PRISCILLA IS TOO SMART FOR  
HER OWN GOOD. SHE SHOWED ME  
A SHORT CUT TO FRISCO VIA THE  
DESERT. THEN SHE HAD ME STOP  
AT HAPPY VALLEY JUNCTION FOR  
LUNCH. NUDIST CAMP HERE. PRIS-  
CILLA ON THE INSIDE. I AM ON  
THE OUTSIDE. PLEASE ADVISE.  
LESTER BARNES.

---

WESTERN UNION  
LESTER BARNES,  
HAPPY VALLEY JUNCTION,  
CALIFORNIA  
GET HER OUT. KEEP THE MATTER  
QUIET. REASON WITH HER IF YOU  
HAVE TO BECOME A TARZAN TO DO  
IT.

JIM HANDMORE.

Dear Jim:

I hope you appreciate what I'm doing for you and old Crab-face. If you hadn't saved my life when Rocco Petroni had me in a bad spot, I'd tell you to go to hell and take my job with you. Then I'd still be on the outside of the high board fence that surrounds this nudist camp, but I'm on the inside—outside my clothes! There just wasn't any other way.

The guy who runs this place is a friend of Priscilla's. She has been here before, and I can see now that she planned the whole thing ahead of time. What a sucker I am! I should have brought her down with a flying tackle when she bolted away from the car and made for the gate. At the time, I hammered on the gate and yelled, "Come out of there before I come after you."

She yelled back, "Come in and get me! You'll have to strip first though because no one with clothes on is allowed in here. That's a camp rule!"

Well, Jim, I told the guy who runs the camp to open up because I was coming in and that I wasn't going to strip. He stalled me for about five minutes and then let me inside the gate, but Priscilla wasn't anywhere in sight. I figured she was in one of the locker houses where you leave your clothes before going into the inner sanctons of the camp proper.

"Listen, mugg," I told the owner. "I'm responsible for that girl and you've got to get her back here with her clothes on."

Now, Jim. This guy was big enough to be the whole backfield in a football team all by himself. He just smiled and doubled up his fist where it was hooked into the top of the shorts he was wearing. I found out later he just wears the shorts when he answers the gate.

"Priscilla is of age, young man," he said. "If you want her, get her father to swear out a warrant. It'll take a court order to get her out of here, unless you want to go see her yourself and try to persuade her to leave by her own free will."

He grinned and added, "Our rates are six dollars a day for room and board.

You leave your clothes over there in the locker house. And don't start anything rough, or you'll end up in jail. This is a refined camp catering to only the best people who want to build themselves up with the helpful aid of Mother Nature."

I went back over to my car and asked the guy in the roadside restaurant about the camp.

He told me there was another gate around at the back of the place and that if I didn't want Priscilla to get away, I'd better go inside where I could keep an eye on her. So here I am feeling like a ripe tomato blushing all over.

I'm sticking around the locker house because I caught one glimpse of Priscilla down by her tent and know that she isn't going to leave by the other gate without her clothes. They're in the locker house because the owner let me take a look for myself.

I haven't had a talk with Priscilla yet, because I'm waiting until we have dinner tonight. Everyone wears shorts at that time. That's one camp rule I'm in favor of.

I don't know whether I'll be able to persuade her to leave. She's holding all the aces in the deck and knows it! You better wire her father to come and get her, because I can't stay here watching her forever.

What will Mary say if she finds out? Good night! You know how jealous she is. She won't even give me a chance to explain. I'll be in a divorce court before we've even had our honeymoon. That's why I'm sending this airmail special delivery. Do something—fast! Why did you have to borrow that dough from old Crab-face anyway?

Your worried Tarzan,  
Les.

P. S. I'm enclosing a copy of a letter I have written to Mary. The guy at the roadside restaurant is sending it on a bakery truck to San Bernardino to be mailed so Mary won't get wise by the postmark that I'm at Happy Valley Junction. She might hear about the nud-

ist camp here and begin to get ideas. If Mary writes to you, for the love of mike back up what I've written to her.

---

Dearest darling wife:

I'm in a jam, but don't worry. You know that rancher I was supposed to pick up the mortgage from? Well, I stopped at his place and had to wait a couple of hours for him to get home from San Bernardino. He'd gone into town for supplies.

Then when he did come and I got the mortgage, my car wouldn't start. I worked on it the rest of the day trying to find out the trouble because there isn't a mechanic for miles.

It got dark and I still couldn't locate the trouble, so the rancher, a guy by the name of Gray, invited me to stay all night. I did just that. And the next morning I found out someone had lifted the bonds I was carrying to Frisco.

It's all very funny business because I just found out that the ignition wires had been cut on the car. There's three guys working here on the ranch and one of them looks like an ex-con. I'm just biding my time and waiting for one of them to make a move, then I'll make a pinch.

Now, don't worry about it. The rancher is in the know and is going to help me, but if something doesn't break today or tomorrow, I'll call in the sheriff from San Bernardino and we'll work the guys over with a rubber hose. I'd call the sheriff now, but then it would hit the newspapers and old man Youngblood might not like the way I've handled his money.

I've wired Jim and he says I'm doing the right thing, because Youngblood might have me arrested for the theft, saying I just figured to go south with 'em. If I was in jail, I'd have a fat chance of getting the bonds back.

Love and kisses,

Les.

P. S. Don't worry. I just saw the guy who looks like an ex-con acting very

mysterious. He just went down behind the barn. Maybe he has the bonds ditched there.

---

Jim Handmore,  
Red Star Detective Agency,  
San Francisco, Calif.

Dear Jim:

I'm worried about my darling husband. He didn't give me any address where I can reach him. Do you suppose he'll get the bonds back? How much are they worth? Aren't they insured? I can't figure out how the ex-con could know that Les was carrying the bonds. It's not like Les to go around advertising the fact.

I feel certain that the rancher is in it too. Maybe Mr. Youngblood framed the whole thing. Suppose he'd been gambling with the bank's money and decided to cover his losses by sending some phony bonds for Les to have stolen. That way, he could cover up and poor Les will take the rap.

I'm so worried I can't sleep nights. Please let me hear from you right away.

Anxious,

Mary.

---

Mrs. Lester Barnes,  
Clam Shell Hotel,  
Laguna Beach, Calif.

Dear Mary:

Don't worry. Les know what he's doing and has all the bare facts right at his fingertips. I'm working on it too from this end checking up on the muggs at the ranch. As soon as this Jenson case is out of court, I'll hop down there if things aren't straightened out by then.

Youngblood is above suspicion, and by all means don't write to him. We don't want him to know about it if we can help it. I feel certain that the bonds are insured so don't worry on that score.

Is Daisy Brittenet still at Laguna? I hope so. That is, I still have a soft

spot for her in my heart and would like to see her. If she's still there, keep her with you until Les gets back and tell her that I will come with him. Maybe I'll be able to break away from court here sooner than I expected.

Yours,  
Jim.

P. S. By all means keep Daisy with you if you can because I've been thinking a lot about her since you wrote me that she was there. Tell her to keep away from that nudist camp.

---

WESTERN UNION  
JIM HANDMORE,  
RED STAR DETECTIVE AGENCY,  
SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA  
TALKED WITH PRISCILLA AT DINNER. SHE REFUSES TO BUDGE.  
HAVE YOU WIRED HER FATHER?  
LESTER BARNES.

---

WESTERN UNION  
LESTER BARNES,  
HAPPY VALLEY NUDIST CLUB,  
HAPPY VALLEY JUNCTION,  
CALIFORNIA  
HER FATHER MUST NOT KNOW.  
TRY AND FIGURE A WAY OUT.  
JIM HANDMORE.

Dear Jim:

Try and figure a way out! Why do I have to do all the brain work? Right now I know how a hot dog feels, only I've got sunburn lotion on instead of mustard. The simplest way out is to notify her father. I suppose I could set the camp on fire and maybe smoke her out, but there's a hundred other people here besides Priscilla.

I never knew till now how popular a place like this is. Some more people came in last night. Guess who one of them was? Daisy Brittenet! The redhead you were daffy about. I spotted her when she came in, but she didn't recognize me without my clothes on. I ducked because I didn't want her to take a second look. You never can tell when

she might run into Mary. That would be all I need to fix things up swell.

A young guy and a fellow who looked like his father came in right after Daisy, so you can see that the camp is doing a rushing business.

I saw Daisy again this morning but she didn't see me. Boy, I think you were a sucker for giving her up. And I oughta know!

Has Mary written to you? I bet the poor kid is worried stiff about the phony bond story I've been telling her. If she ever finds out, well—I hate to think what might happen.

Priscilla is still here. I saw her a few minutes ago talking to the young guy who came in last night. They act like they've known each other for a long time. Maybe it's her Barnacle Bill. What do I do then if it is? Old Crab-face ought to let love alone and stick to his banking. The way it is now, he's making four people miserable. Priscilla, Barnacle Bill, Mary and myself. I don't know about you. You're probably laughing up your sleeve. Me! I haven't got a sleeve to laugh up . . . and couldn't if I did.

Have you ever been sunburned *all* over? I put my bed in front of the lockers last night just so Priscilla couldn't get her clothes and pull a sneak on me, but hell! I couldn't even stand to have the bed against my back, so I spent part of the night in the creek that runs through the camp, splashing around like a polliwog and cussing Crab-face. The creek was the only way I could get any relief without waking up the camp for some lotion.

I was a sucker for not staying in the shade yesterday, but I was so worried about Mary finding all this out that I didn't stop to think about the sun.

I'm thinking seriously of packing up and going back to Laguna. Why did you have to stop Rocco Petroni from bumping me? You get all the breaks!

If you haven't got me out of this mess by tomorrow, I'm walking out. Crab-face or no Crab-face. So get your brain

to working in high gear and think of something.

Tired of playing Tarzan,  
Les.

---

WESTERN UNION

MR. JIM HANDMORE,  
RED STAR DETECTIVE AGENCY,  
SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA

MY SISTER ADVISES THAT PRISCILLA HAS NOT BEEN DELIVERED INTO HER CUSTODY. YOUR MAN SHOULD HAVE BEEN THERE THIS MORNING. I AM HOLDING YOU RESPONSIBLE FOR MY DAUGHTER'S SAFE ARRIVAL. PLEASE ADVISE.

O. O. YOUNGBLOOD.

---

WESTERN UNION

MR. O. O. YOUNGBLOOD,  
YOUNGBLOOD BANK,  
SAN DIEGO, CALIF.

PRISCILLA TRICKED MY MAN. THEY ARE AT HAPPY VALLEY NUDIST CLUB. MY MAN WILL KEEP HER THERE UNTIL YOU ARRIVE.

JIM HANDMORE.

---

WESTERN UNION

LESTER BARNES,  
HAPPY VALLEY NUDIST CLUB,  
HAPPY VALLEY JUNCTION,  
CALIFORNIA

CRAB-FACE KNOWS ALL. WAIT FOR HIS ARRIVAL. DO NOT TELL PRISCILLA. YOU CAN LEAVE WHEN SHE IS IN HIS CUSTODY.

JIM HANDMORE.

---

Dear Jim:

Was I glad to see old Crab-face! He came storming into camp a couple of hours after I got your wire. I met him at the gate. He took one look at my sunburn and bellowed like a wild elephant. For a minute I thought I was Tarzan and looked around expecting to see monkeys swinging in the trees.

Crab-face looked for his daughter. "Where's my daughter?" He bellowed twice as loud as the first time, then he shook his fist in my face and changed his bellow to a scream. "You'll make a decent woman of her, young man. You're going to marry her this morning!"

You see, Crab-face kinda figured the

place wasn't quite as decent as it should be. He didn't know what a nice place it really is.

"Like hell!" I bellowed back at him. "I'm a married man now! Besides your precious Priscilla married her Barnacle Bill about a half-hour ago!"

Well, you should have seen his crab-face when I told him the bad news, but in a few minutes he thought it was good news. I guess he figured as long as his daughter had a husband that things wouldn't be so bad.

Remember the young guy that came in with the fellow I thought was his father last night? Well, the old guy wasn't his father at all. He was a justice of the peace that Barnacle Bill brought along to tie the knot. That's what happened a little while ago. The young guy was Priscilla's boy friend. She must have telephoned him to come down to the camp for the wedding.

Anyway, I'm glad it's all over. Now I can go back to Mary and keep this secret from her the rest of my life—I hope!

My sunburn is a lot better now. The owner of the camp gave me some suntan preparation that he makes himself. It sure took the sting out and I think I'm going to have a nice tan to remember the camp by. Not that I need it. I'll never be able to forget!

Your relieved Tarzan,

Les.

P. S. Daisy Brittenet left in a hurry this morning even before the wedding. I was sure glad that she went because I'm pretty certain that she didn't recognize me and won't have to worry about her bumping into Mary. Youngblood won't do any talking either. He'd die if the newspapers ever got wind of what happened. I'm sending a wire to Mary and I'm enclosing a copy of it. Back me up.

---

WESTERN UNION

MRS. LESTER BARNES,  
CLAM SHELL HOTEL,  
LAGUNA BEACH, CALIF.

BONDS RECOVERED. FLYING TO  
FRISCO AND BACK THIS AFTER-

NOON IN CHARTERED PLANE. WILL  
SEE YOU LATE TONIGHT. LOVE.

LES.

WESTERN UNION

JIM HANDMORE,  
RED STAR DETECTIVE AGENCY,  
SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA

DAISY BRITTLINET INSISTS SHE  
SAW LES AT NUDIST CAMP THIS  
MORNING. WHAT IS HE DOING? I  
WANT THE TRUTH.

MARY.

WESTERN UNION

MRS. LESTER BARNES,  
CLAM SHELL HOTEL,  
LAGUNA BEACH, CALIF.

DAISY IS NUTS. ANYONE WHO  
GOES TO A NUDIST CAMP IS NUTS.  
SHE SAW SOMEONE ELSE. LES JUST  
LEFT THE OFFICE HERE TO FLY TO  
YOU. HAPPY HONEYMOON.

JIM.

Dear Jim:

Well, I'm back with Mary. I'm writing this letter on the sneak. Mary just put me through a third-degree. I had to call Daisy Brittlinet a liar to her face when she insisted that she saw me and no one else! She's gone back to the nudist camp and I hope she falls into a bunch of cactus.

When I told Mary how I'd nearly lost my life recovering the bonds from the ex-con, she opened up with tears and was sure glad that I was all in one piece. I guess I'm a pretty smooth liar because it looks like a happy honeymoon ahead.

Priscilla and her husband have gone back to San Diego and I hope they stay there. Your telegram telling Mary that Daisy was nuts to go to a nudist camp cinched the argument for me. Mary is positive that Daisy is screwy, but I still think you were a sucker to give her up.

Relieved,

Les.

P. S. Don't disturb us for the next two weeks.

WESTERN UNION

JIM HANDMORE,  
RED STAR DETECTIVE AGENCY,  
SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA

MARY IS WISE. MY COMPLETE  
TARZAN TAN PUT ME ON THE SPOT  
TONIGHT. SHE SAID I DIDN'T HAVE  
IT WHEN I WENT AWAY. I TOLD  
HER THE TRUTH. DOESN'T BELIEVE  
ME. DO SOMETHING QUICK. SHE  
HAS TAKEN ANOTHER ROOM AND  
KEEPS IT LOCKED.

LES.

Dear Jim:

Thanks for getting Priscilla and her husband to come down here to Laguna. They brought the justice of the peace with them and old Crab-face too.

After the way he explained things to Mary, I guess I was wrong about him. He took all the blame and said that he was an old fool for meddling in affairs of the heart. He's going to stick to banking and told me if we ever need a loan to let him know.

Mary is happy now, but she told me that if I ever lied to her again it would be Reno for her. She can't get over the idea of those two kids having a nudist wedding. Mary laughed after they'd gone and cracked, "It's like peeking at your Christmas presents before Christmas morning."

Love from us both,

Mary and Les.

P. S. I'm writing a letter of apology to Daisy Brittlinet at the nudist camp. I had to call her a liar at the time and I'm sorry that I hoped she'd fall into a bunch of cactus, but I still think you were a sucker to give her up.

Dear Mary and Les:

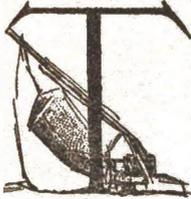
I'm glad Mary got down to the bare facts and that everything is O. K. now. Happy honeymoon.

Best,

Jim.

P. S. As soon as I get finished with the Jenson case, I'm going to drop down to the Happy Valley Nudist Club and see Daisy. I always was the sort of a guy who couldn't wait to open his presents on Christmas morning.

# DEATH FOR SALE



TOWARD evening Paul Tyler was pretty weary. But there was ten minutes to go before five o'clock, and he thought he might as well finish canvassing the house. He lugged the heavy cleaner down the hall, peered at the name plate alongside the door. It said: *Michael Groh*.

## An energetic young man demonstrates how not to sell vacuum cleaners

with antiquated implements? Now I represent the Easy-Way Vacuum Cleaner Company. I should like to demonstrate to you how efficiently the New Improved Easy-Way 1939 Streamlined Efficiency Cleaner will do your work



Paul put his finger on the bell, rang it once, and waited. From force of habit he straightened his tie as he had done two hundred times or more today. He put on his mechanical smile and, when the door opened, he said to the woman in the doorway, "How do you do, Mrs. Groh? Nice day, isn't it?"

Then, with his eyes studying the reactions of the stoutish Mrs. Groh, he swung smoothly into the patter that the sales manager had taught him.

"Isn't it a shame, Mrs. Groh, that cultured, delicate women like yourself should be compelled to wear themselves out performing their household tasks

with only half the effort, and help you to preserve your radiant youthfulness."

Pursuant to Paragraph Three of the Easy-Way Company's "Manual for House to House Canvassers," Paul started to enter Mrs. Groh's apartment, carrying the vacuum cleaner in his right hand, removing his hat with the left, and retaining the fixed smile on his lips, while at the same time keeping his eyes fixed directly upon the eyes of the prospect.

Mrs. Groh was beetle-browed, portly, with folds of fat showing along the creases of her house dress. Her double chin wagged to the right and to the left

## By EMILE C. TEPPERMAN

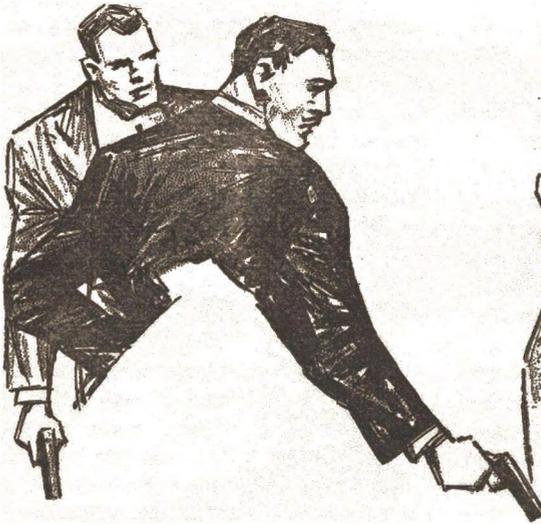
in vigorous and intolerant negative.

"I don't want no vacuum cleaners," she said.

Paul, still smiling, took another step across the threshold. Grudgingly, Mrs. Groh made way for him, though she continued to wag her chins.

Paul's stomach was doing curious contortions because he hadn't eaten since breakfast, but his voice was pleasant.

"All I want is a chance to demonstrate, Mrs. Groh. Have you a rug that I can clean for you? If you could only see this new 1939 Easy-Way drag up the dust!"



He was almost inside when a voice from one of the inner rooms bellowed "Whoozat, Mamie? If it's the girl, bring her in quick."

Mrs. Groh threw a troubled glance at Paul Tyler, and replied to the bellowing voice. "It ain't the girl, Mike. It's a canvasser. He's selling vacuum cleaners. I thought maybe as long as we're goin' to have some money—"

"T'hell wit' him. T'row him out!"

Heavy footsteps sounded, and a huge man appeared in the long hall which led down into the kitchen at the rear of the

apartment. This man was in his undershirt. His face was ruddy, and his fists were knotted. He glared at Paul.

Paul Tyler knew that if he didn't make a sale, he wouldn't eat. He had put down his last ten dollars as a deposit for the Easy-Way Cleaner, and he had no more



money. If he could sign these people up, the crew manager would let him draw two or three dollars advance commission. And the Sales Manual said that a belligerent prospect was the easiest one to sell once you overcame his resistance.

So Paul persevered.

"I'm sorry you feel that way, Mr. Groh. I was trying to help your wife. I'm sure you want to make things as easy as possible for her."

Mr. Groh rumbled deep in his throat, and he suddenly reached out a heavy hand. He gripped the handle of the vacuum cleaner, and snatched it up.

Paul said, "Here!"

"I'll show you!" the big man roared.

He stepped back, raised the cleaner in the air, and brought it down in a smashing blow, swinging it with both hands. The heavy mechanism of the cleaner crashed sickeningly into the floor. There was a crunching, grinding sound, and the nice shiny streamlined 1939 Easy-Way Vacuum Cleaner lay there—dented, smashed and twisted.

Paul Tyler stood stock-still, gazing down at the wreck of the machine for which he had deposited his last ten dollars.

Mrs. Groh gasped, and her chins shook. "You shouldn't ought to've done that, Mike."

But Mr. Groh wasn't through. "Now git!" he ordered. He stepped over the shattered cleaner, and launched a huge fist at Paul's face.

Paul Tyler had spent four years at college, during which period he had *not* learned how to make a living. But he had learned how to dribble a basketball, how to sprint and high-jump, and how to box. At this point in his career he found a use for the education he had acquired in the halls of higher learning. He moved his head an inch to the right, and the ham-like fist of Mr. Groh merely grazed his cheek. At the same time Paul Tyler brought up his own fist to meet the onrushing jaw of Mr. Groh.

There was a very sharp *crack*, and simultaneously with it there was also another and louder sound, like the report of a gun or backfire from an automobile. Mr. Michael Groh's head snapped back with Paul's blow. A deep grunt escaped from somewhere within him, and then blood flecked his lips. His jaw popped over at a crooked angle, and he fell forward, crumpling on the floor.

Paul had put into that blow all of the sudden bitter anger welling up within him at sight of the ruined cleaner. Now

he bent and picked it up, examining it ruefully.

But he had only a moment for this examination. A set of vicious, clawing fingernails flailed at him, and only his instinctive leap backward saved his cheek from being raked.

It was Mrs. Groh. She had sprung silently, but now she shrieked, "You've killed him! You've killed Mike! You—"

Paul waited for no more. He eluded her next attempt to rake his face, and backed precipitately into the outer hall, lugging the ruined vacuum cleaner. He snatched at the doorknob, pulling the door shut in Mrs. Groh's face.

He was on the ground floor of the apartment house, for it was prescribed in the Easy-Way Sales Manual that canvassers should start at the top of a house and work down. So he didn't have far to go to reach the street. He stumbled out into the open air, and realized that his hat was still in the Groh apartment.

At the same instant Mrs. Groh appeared at the street door.

"Stop!" she screamed. "You murderer!"



HE HOUSE was in the middle of the block, between Eighth and Ninth Avenues. There were quite a few people on both sides of the street, and they turned to stare at the screaming fat woman. Then their stares switched to Paul Tyler.

Paul suddenly felt lost in a hostile world. He was almost certain that his blow had not been sufficient to kill the porcine Mr. Groh. Yet he seemed to sense the accusation all about him now.

Mrs. Groh was coming at him with blazing eyes, and he was seized by panic. She changed her refrain from, "Stop, murderer!" to "Grab him, grab him!"

But Paul was already running, with the ruined cleaner slung across his shoulder. People stepped out of his way. Mrs. Groh waddled after him.

Paul sprinted blindly toward the corner of Ninth Avenue. A man lunged at him, but Paul straight-armed the man, and kept going.

A police whistle was shrilling loudly somewhere. Behind him, down near the Groh house, a revolver roared, and some one yelled, "Stop—in the name of the law!"

Paul threw a quick look over his shoulder and saw that a man in plain clothes had fired the shot, aiming in the air. That would be a detective. He wondered fleetingly how it was that a detective should have been around in that neighborhood at just that moment. The plain-clothes man must have been taken by surprise, for he was several hundred feet behind the rest of the pursuit.

There were a dozen men savagely chasing Paul Tyler now, with Mrs. Groh puffing in the rear. But Paul, instinctively using the long, ground-eating pace that he had learned to employ in the 440-yard dash in college, easily outdistanced them in spite of the fact that he had the cleaner over his shoulder.

He reached the corner, swung around it, and looked about desperately for the crew manager's truck of the Easy-Way Vacuum Cleaner Company, from which he had been working. He spotted the truck, half-way down the block in Ninth Avenue. He saw the seven or eight members of the canvassing crew gathered about the tailboard of the truck, turning in their orders and their machines, and getting back the deposits which they had put up.

Paul paused at the corner for only a fraction of a second. But in that infinitesimal space of time he realized bitterly that he stood no earthly chance of recovering his deposit for the ruined vacuum cleaner. And he also realized that if he lingered here another instant, the bloodthirsty mob behind him would have him by the heels.

He was bewildered by the quick turn of events which had transformed him from a starving canvasser into a fugitive murderer. But so adaptable are human

instincts that he now thought and reacted only as a fugitive. His hunted glance switched from the Easy-Way truck over toward the Ninth Avenue Elevated structure. There was a station at this corner, and he heard the rumble of an El train, approaching overhead.

That rumble, aided by the shouting pursuit that was bearing down on him, stimulated him to further flight. He launched himself up the stairs toward the station above, still hugging the useless vacuum cleaner.

As he went up the stairs he saw the detective, still several hundred feet away, stop and take careful aim at him. He bent over almost double, and the shot clanged against the metal framework of the El station, only a few feet away.

It was a dreadful feeling to be shot at, but Paul had no time to think about it, for his pursuers were already coming up the stairs, and the first of them was almost within reach of him. He could see their maddened, angry expressions, and he could read in their eyes the intention to lynch him if they got their hands on him.

Mrs. Groh, at the foot of the stairs was shrieking, "He killed my poor husband! In cold blood!"

Paul's pulse raced wildly in competition with his flying feet as he sprinted to the top of the stairway. He heard the train pulling into the station, but he knew he could never make it with these people so close behind. He swung around, lifted the vacuum cleaner from his shoulder, and hurled it down at the mass of faces below. He saw men duck and leap out of the way of the hurtling mechanism. Then he turned and lunged through the station.

Now, for the first time, it occurred to him that he had no nickel to get through the turnstile. The train was in. He could see its automatic doors open. They would close in another moment, and the train would go on. His escape would be cut off.

The lack of the nickel broke his stride, because he was still thinking along con-

ventional lines. He couldn't get through without a nickel.

But the hoarse shouts from behind came floating up in a wave of hatred. And he uttered a wild laugh. He was wanted for murder now, and here he was hesitating about a nickel. With the laugh still in his throat he took a running leap and vaulted the turnstile.

The cashier in the booth yelled, "Hey!" But Paul was already across the platform and through the slowly closing door of the middle car of the train. Just as he got in, the door slid shut behind him.

It was a six-car train, and there was only one guard at the last coupling. The doors were operated by a switch at that coupling which closed them all at once, and at the same time released the power that sent the train on.

It started with a lurch as the door closed, and Paul put his face to the glass in time to see the first of the crowd streaming out on to the station platform, with the plain-clothes detective fuming behind them and waving his gun. Their figures disappeared from view as the train gathered momentum.

Paul was breathing hard. He turned to see if anyone inside the car had noticed his escape. But there'd been no one on the platform, and he realized with a sigh of relief that if any of the passengers had seen him running for the train they must have thought he was merely another New Yorker in a hurry.

He took several deep breaths to quiet the pounding of his heart, and took stock of the situation. The train was a north-bound local, and there was another station, seven blocks away. He would have to get off there, because that would be the only place where he could hope to evade the police cars which would be dispatched after him. Luckily, the detective would have to take the time to run downstairs and find a phone, and that might be the margin of time between freedom and arrest.

Freedom? What sort of freedom would it be? He was now wanted for murder.

The Easy-Way crew manager would give the police all the information they would need. He dared not even go to his furnished room to pick up his belongings. He was one against society, without even a nickel in his pocket.

He could still not bring himself to believe that he had killed that man. Perhaps Mrs. Groh was mistaken. Perhaps Mike Groh was not dead. In that case, Paul Tyler would still be wanted for assault and battery. He could never convince a jury that he had struck in self-defense. The facts, as well as public opinion, would be against him.

There had recently been several cases where house-to-house salesmen had been arrested for attacks upon householders. The case of the People vs. Paul Tyler would climax them. He'd be convicted and sent to jail for a number of years. And if Groh was dead? The electric chair. Or maybe only life imprisonment.

That was as far as he got by the time the train reached the next station. He slipped out, went hurriedly down the stairs, peering over the railing to see if there were any police cars downstairs. There were none, but he thought he heard a siren in the distance. He sped down to the street level and walked quickly east.

His thoughts were jumbled, and he hadn't the faintest notion of what to do next. His indecision however, was settled for him almost at once. A small coupé drew abreast of him along the curb at his right, and its horn sounded three times, insistently.

A girl was at the wheel. Paul got a swift glimpse of reddish hair under one of those modish pancake hats, hanging on at a precarious angle over a small, pink ear. He saw a pert little face with an uptilted nose and a few freckles; a pair of very blue eyes and a nicely shaped mouth. The general impression of all these features might have been very pleasant indeed, except for the fact that at this moment the blue eyes were very cold and very hard, and the mouth was compressed into a thin, determined line.

And the girl's cold glance was directed very definitely at him.

"Get in here!" she said. And to make it clear that she wasn't fooling, she showed him the muzzle of a small pistol just over the edge of the window.



AUL stared at her, uncomprehending. The police car siren was screeching very loudly now, around the corner on Ninth Avenue. The girl kept the gun pointed at Paul.

"I followed the train," she said swiftly. "I'm only about three minutes ahead of the police. Maybe you'd like me to turn you over to them!"

"I don't know what you're talking about!" Paul began.

Her mouth tightened a bit. The gun moved suggestively forward. "Maybe I ought just to kill you," she said reflectively. "I'd be within my rights. I saw you come out of Groh's house. I was on the street, coming to see him. I swung into Ninth Avenue, guessing that you'd get out at the next station. Don't try to deny that you're the man who killed Groh. I could shoot you dead and the police would thank me."

Paul's eyes narrowed. He remembered now that Groh had asked his wife if it was "the girl" at the door. And he began to be angry. Angry and reckless. It didn't matter anyway. This was a mess he could never get out of.

"All right," he snapped at her. "Shoot me!"

The girl's lips parted in surprise. But only for a moment.

"I'll do better than that!" she said savagely. "I'll give you to the police!" She kept the gun pointing at him, and with her free hand she pressed down on the horn button. The raucous blast of her horn sounded in maddening crescendo above the swiftly approaching screech of the police car siren.

Paul glanced about desperately. Maybe the girl didn't have the nerve to shoot him in cold blood. But she certainly

wouldn't hesitate to fire if he started to run. And anyway, where could he run to? That police car would be around the corner in a minute, and guided by the girl they would overtake him at once. There was only one thing to do.

"O. K.," he gasped. "I'll come along."

The girl smiled triumphantly. She opened the door, and slid over in the seat. "Get behind the wheel. Can you drive?"

He nodded. In the rear vision mirror he saw the police car swinging around the corner. One of the cops was leaning out and talking to the newsdealer at the corner, and the newsdealer was pointing toward the girl's car and shouting back to the cop.

The girl alongside Paul had the gun in her lap, pointing at him, but covered by her handbag. "Better get started," she told him.

Paul threw the car in gear and let up the clutch. He pulled away from the curb, watching the street behind him in the rear vision glass. With sinking heart he saw the police car racing after them, pulling alongside. "It's no use!" he muttered.

But the girl at his side had different ideas. "Keep still and don't say a word. I'll handle this!"

The cop in the police car was waving at him to stop, and Paul pulled up. The cop got out of the car, leaving his partner at the wheel. He had his hand on the holstered gun at his side, his eyes fixed on Paul.

"Don't try nothin'—"

He stopped short, his eyes widening, fixed on the girl. Abruptly his tone changed. "Why, good day, Miss Hastings. I—I didn't know this was your car."

"How do you do, officer," she said with a wealth of suddenly acquired sweetness. "Is anything wrong?"

"Why, no, I guess not. We're lookin' for a guy that just shot a man and escaped on the El. We figured he would get off at this station, and the newsdealer at the corner said such a man just

came down, and then went in this car. We figured he stole a car and was lamming."

The girl's tinkling laugh interrupted. "How funny! This is my chauffeur, Brown."

"And he's been with you all the time? He didn't just get in the car?"

"You don't think I'd send my chauffeur around shooting people, do you?"

"Well, uh, I guess not. Well, we better start searching the block. Maybe the newsdealer was mistaken about where the guy went, but it's pretty certain he was the one got off the El. If you see your father, Miss Hastings, tell him I didn't mean nothin' by stopping you. Just doing my duty, is all. Officer Woods is the name."

"Of course, Mr. Woods. I understand." Then to Paul, "You may go on, Brown."

Paul called to the cop, who was already turning away, "Say, Mr. Woods, did you say this man *shot* someone?"

The cop turned, raised his eyebrows at the idea of a chauffeur talking up like that. But he replied, "Yeah. We didn't get much—only a snatch over the short wave while we were coming up Ninth Avenue. Shot him to death right in his apartment. Nobody knows anything much yet. We haven't even got the description. But we'll get that in a couple of minutes. It seems there was a plain-clothes man right at the scene, and he's phoning in the stuff and they're relaying it over the radio. My partner is getting it right now."

"Thanks!" Paul said hastily, and started the coupé forward. In a minute he was out of the block and swinging north into Central Park West.

The girl had the gun out once more, and was covering him with it.

"Drive through the park," she said. "We're going up Fifth Avenue."

Paul glanced at her sideways. "I know who you are now," he told her. "You're Helen Hastings, the District Attorney's daughter. Your picture was in the paper last week, but I didn't place you at first.

Your father is in some sort of trouble. A night club singer was murdered the other night, and it was discovered that your father had been coming to see her. The opposition papers are playing it up big, and your dad refused to resign, saying he wouldn't quit under a cloud. I followed that story very closely. It looks bad for your father, but I don't think there's any evidence to prove he killed the girl."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," Helen Hastings said. Her little mouth was still tight. "As if you didn't know all along who I was! You knew I was coming to see Groh, and you killed him before I could get there!"

Paul's perplexity grew as he swung the car into the transverse across Central Park. "What I can't understand is if you're the D. A.'s daughter, why did you save me from the police?"

"You know very well why I saved you from the police. I want that gun. Better give it to me now."

"Look here, Miss Hastings, I swear to you, I didn't shoot that man, Groh. I just hit him on the button. I was trying to sell his wife a vacuum cleaner."

Helen Hastings uttered a short, brittle laugh. "You were just waiting for a street car!"

She fiddled with the radio on the dash-board, using her left hand while she kept the gun steadily pointed at him with her right. The voice of a news announcer emanated from the speaker, uttering quick staccato sentences in highly excited tones.

"... murder in the heart of the city! Less than ten minutes ago, Michael Groh, a chauffeur, was shot down in cold blood in his own home by a killer posing as a vacuum cleaner salesman.

"Groh, until last week in the employ of Lawrence Cleverly, boss of the East End Election District, was killed by a bullet in the base of his brain. Police are laying a dragnet around the city.

"The murderer's description is as follows: Five feet ten or eleven; black, curly hair; clean-shaven; was wearing a

blue serge suit and a blue-striped tie when last seen, making his escape on Ninth Avenue Elevated. This man appears young and innocent, but is really very dangerous. Citizens are advised to use caution if they should see him, as this description tallies with that of 'Baby Face' Matt Squeer. . . ."

The girl stared at him with vindictive eyes as the announcer continued his broadcast. "I was almost beginning to believe that story of yours!" she whispered. "No wonder they say you're so dangerous. You could fool anybody. I—I could almost *like* you if you weren't 'Baby Face' Matt Squeer." She shuddered, and raised the gun a trifle. "Remember, I can shoot. I want that gun."

"But I tell you, I didn't shoot him. Come to think of it, just as I hit Groh, there was a loud noise. I didn't pay much attention to it, except to think it was backfire from a car outside but I bet it was that gun. I bet someone shot him from down the end of the hall—"

"Never mind that," she broke in quietly. "You can explain it to Father. Here we are. Stop right in front of that door there. I'm going to keep this gun pointed at you, and if you make the slightest move that I don't like, I'm going to empty it into you. Don't think I'm fooling—not since I know you're Matt Squeer!"

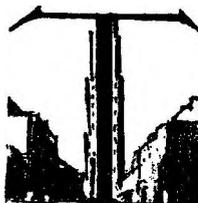
The announcer's voice was still droning on, and Paul sat still for a moment, listening, in defiance of her gun.

"The murder of Groh may tear the city wide open. It is well known that District Attorney Hastings has been moving heaven and earth to secure an indictment of Lawrence Cleverly, Groh's former employer. The question is being asked: 'Does Groh's murder have any bearing on this war between political boss and fighting District Attorney?'"

"It will be recalled that Matt Squeer, before he became a fugitive from justice, was part of Frenchy Peck's gambling mob, and that Lawrence Cleverly was accused by District Attorney Hastings of selling protection to Frenchy.

"If it was really Matt Squeer who shot Groh. . . ."

The girl thrust her gun into Paul Tyler's side. "Never mind the broadcast. Just get out of the car and go in that house!"



THEY WERE parked before one of the more modern apartment houses facing the Park. Paul assumed this was the residence of District Attorney Hastings. He might have made an effort to take the gun away from the girl, but he noted that there were two or three men lounging across the street near the park, and that there was a police radio car cruising down near the other end of the block. A tussle now would surely result in his apprehension. And though he could, of course, not be mistaken for 'Baby Face' Matt Squeer, he was still wanted for the killing of Michael Groh.

He decided that the frying pan would be better than the fire in this case. District Attorney Hastings could do no more to him than the police; and the very fact that Helen Hastings did not want him to be arrested afforded him a dim ray of hope. So he got out of the car and went under the broad canopy, into the tiled entrance of the apartment house.

Helen Hastings was close beside him, holding the gun underneath her pocket-book in such a way that the doorman could not see it. They were swiftly whisked up to the fourteenth floor. There were only two apartments on each floor, and the girl indicated the door of 14A.

"Ring the bell!" she ordered.

They were admitted, not by a butler or maid, but by a square-jawed man in civilian clothes. This man's coat was open, and Paul could see the gold shield pinned on his vest, and the edge of the shoulder holster under his left armpit.

The man got the idea of the situation at once apparently, for he drew his gun and gripped Paul by the sleeve.

"What happened, Miss Hastings?" he

demanded anxiously. "Fillmore just phoned us that Groh was shot and that he chased the killer up the El stairs and then lost him."

"This is the killer!" she said breathlessly. "I caught him!"

The detective scowled at Paul. "Tough guy, huh? And caught by a girl! Come on!"

He poked the muzzle of his revolver into Paul's back, and shoved him down the hall toward an open door. The girl followed.

As they went down the hall Paul could hear someone had a radio going in the room they were approaching. It was not the same station as the one that Helen had tuned in on in the car. The announcer was saying:

"It has now been learned that the killer planned Groh's murder very carefully. This morning he obtained a job as a canvasser with a vacuum cleaner crew, giving the name of Paul Tyler. He apparently worked on Groh's street all day, awaiting an opportune moment to commit his crime."

As they got to the door of the living-room some one inside turned down the radio and called out, "Fowler! Who's that? Is it Helen?"

"It's Miss Hastings all right, sir!" the detective answered, tightening his grip on Paul's sleeve. "And she's brought something home with her!"

They entered the living-room, and Detective Fowler thrust Paul into a chair. Paul looked across the room to a small desk where District Attorney Thomas Hastings was sitting. It was he who had been manipulating the dial of the radio. He turned it off now and sprang up, as his daughter came into the room after Paul and the detective.

"What happened, Helen?" he demanded. His glance rested for a moment on Paul Tyler, then switched to her. "Who is this man?"

Helen Hastings' eyes were bright. "He's the man who shot Groh, Dad! I followed him—and caught him!"

Hastings' eyes narrowed. "The police don't know about this yet?"

"No, Dad. But they may suspect."

"All right. All right. We only need a few minutes."

He swung to face Paul Tyler. He was a tall man, with a great shock of white hair, and a bristling white mustache. He had made quite a record as a public prosecutor, and his name was being prominently mentioned for governor. But there were dark lines under his eyes, which Paul was sure had come there within the last few days, as a result of the "night club murder scandal," as the opposition papers had tagged it.

Hastings waved Fowler back and came and stood directly in front of Paul. "What's your name?" he barked.

Paul looked up at him, glanced sideways at the girl, then said, "Paul Tyler. And I don't understand what this is all about."

*Smack!*

Detective Fowler, who had moved to a spot directly behind the chair, brought his open hand around in a cruel slap to the side of Paul's face.

Helen uttered a little gasp. Paul was almost thrown from the chair.

"Just to show him we're not fooling!" Fowler growled. "I know how to make these rats talk, Mr. Hastings!"

District Attorney Hastings frowned. "I don't like it much. But we have so little time." He dropped his glance to Paul. "Well? What is your name?"

Paul said, "I tell you, my name is Paul Tyler. I'm a vacuum cleaner salesman. There are people in this city who can identify me. I don't know anything about Groh's murder, except that when I hit him, someone must have shot him in the back at the same—"

*Smack!*

Detective Fowler repeated the blow to Paul's face. This time Paul was thrown sideways off the chair. He landed on the floor on his knees, rested there for an instant, his head ringing from the slap.

He got slowly to his feet. His right eye, where Fowler had slapped him, was

watering. He saw the blurred figure of the girl, eyes wide with outrage, protesting to Fowler.

Fowler growled, "It's the only way to handle rats, Miss Hastings. You watch him talk!" He took a step toward Paul. "Well, rat? You ready to spill?"

Paul said slowly, "Yeah. I'm ready!" And he leaped at Fowler. Both fists pistoning in and out with furious speed, he was all over the big detective, smashing blows to his face and stomach. Fowler, with the gun in his hand, was nevertheless forced backward, trying ineffectually to cover up.

Paul landed a haymaker on the detective's jaw, but he only weighed a hundred and sixty, whereas Fowler tipped the scales at about two ten. Nevertheless, the blow rocked the big detective for a moment.

Paul dropped his fists, breathing hard. "Now if you'll listen to me for a minute—"

He wasn't prepared for what Fowler did next. The detective appeared to stagger forward, and Paul instinctively put a hand to prop him up. But Fowler raised his gun hand in a lightning motion, brought the barrel down in a chopping blow against Paul's temple.

The room began to dance around in front of Paul, and Fowler's thick-jowled face advanced and receded, and lights and shadows flickered before his eyes. He mumbled, "Who's a rat now?" and bored in weakly, but he could barely raise his arms.

Fowler grinned wickedly and raised the gun and brought it down again.

Paul heard Helen's voice, seemingly at a great distance, saying, "That's cruel, Fowler!"

And he also heard Hastings. "Stop it, Fowler! Stop it! Don't knock him out. He's got to talk!"

Slowly, Paul sank down to his knees, fighting against the nauseous darkness that was enveloping him. He felt blood in his eyes, and the taste of it in his mouth. And then a hand was helping him up and into a chair. The hand was

soft and warm, and he forced his eyes open and saw that it was Helen Hastings. He smiled wanly.

She produced a small handkerchief from some mysterious recess of her clothes, and dabbed at the cuts in his temple. Over her shoulder she said, "You're a brute, Fowler!"

District Attorney Hastings came and stood in front of him, watching his daughter treat the cuts.

"Young man," he said, "I'm sorry. Fowler shouldn't have done that to you."

Helen broke in indignantly, "He was trying to knock him out. He wouldn't have been able to talk at all!"

The D. A. waved a hand. "I've sent him out. Now that we're alone, I'm going to handle this my way." He looked down at Paul. "Young man, I *must* know what happened to that gun. Did you get it? Believe me, it's vitally important. I can help you—"

Paul said weakly, "How in God's name can I have a gun when I didn't shoot Groh?"

"It's not *that* gun I want!" Hastings snapped impatiently. "I want the gun that killed Renee Townlee. Nobody has accused me, openly yet, of killing her. But there are ugly whispers. I'll never get the nomination for governor unless I uncover the real murderer. Someone killed Renee Townlee the night I visited her. She was dickering to give me information about Lawrence Cleverly that would have enabled me to indict him. Cleverly killed her. Didn't he?"

Paul looked up at him, annoyed. "Are you asking me or telling me?"

Hastings swore under his breath. He started to turn away, then swung back as if to make one more effort.

"That man, Michael Groh," he said, "used to be Cleverly's chauffeur, and was fired. Somehow or other he got hold of the gun with which Cleverly killed Renee Townlee. That was his story over the phone when he talked to Helen. He offered to sell it to her for five thousand dollars, but only if she came alone. As a precaution, I had one plain-clothes man

posted in the block, but he woke up too late to catch you."

Hastings pointed an accusing finger at Paul. "You were sent there either by Cleverly, or by his gangster friend, Frenchy Peck, to kill Groh and get that gun before Helen arrived."

"I wish I could convince you," Paul said earnestly, "that I'm not in Cleverly's pay, or in Frenchy Peck's pay—and that I didn't kill Groh. Someone shot him from the back window at the very moment that I punched him in the jaw. I swear to you that I was only trying to sell them a vacuum cleaner! If you'll let me get to the telephone, I can have someone up here to identify me."

He saw father and daughter exchanging significant looks.

"You know, Dad," Helen said softly, "his story is just far-fetched enough to be true. I'm half inclined to believe him."

There was the sound of the doorbell, and she stopped. They heard Fowler's footsteps going to answer the bell, and in a moment the square-jowled detective poked his head in the room.

"It's Murray Gisling, the shyster mouthpiece!" he announced. "He claims you have Matt Squeer here."

District Attorney Hastings uttered an ejaculation. Helen looked at Paul, and Paul saw all the doubt coming back into her eyes.

Hastings said, "Gisling is the lawyer for all the mobs. Frenchy Peck must have sent him. That means that you *are* Matt Squeer!"

Fowler said from the doorway, "Lemme take his prints and check 'em."

From behind Fowler came a suave voice. "Ah, my dear Hastings. I see that I was well informed!"



**MURRAY** GISLING gently pushed Fowler out of the way, and came into the room. He threw one quick look at Paul Tyler, and raised his eyebrows. "Just as I thought, Squeer.

They've been giving you the works, eh? Blood all over. Tch, tch. The judge will not like that when he sees it."

"What judge?" demanded Hastings.

Lawyer Gisling smiled thinly. He was a heavily built man, but sleekly and extravagantly outfitted. Brown spats matched his brown shirt and tie, and the brown handkerchief in the breast pocket of his snugly fitting Chesterfield. His brown-gloved right hand twirled a gold-tipped cane dexterously.

"Well?" Hastings demanded.

"What judge? Judge Connaught, my dear Hastings." He dipped his gloved hand into his breast pocket and drew out a legal paper which he unfolded and handed to Hastings. "I was informed that you were holding Matt Squeer here, unlawfully. So I immediately proceeded to secure a writ of *habeas corpus* from Judge Connaught. You will notice, my dear Hastings, that the writ commands you to produce the body of the defendant, forthwith—at the Judge's chambers."

Hastings glanced over the document, and grunted. "You always have a blank writ ready, and just fill it in, don't you?"

The lawyer shrugged, his black eyes inscrutable. "I am not here to defend my actions. It is you, my dear Hastings, who must now prepare a good story. In holding Squeer in this place and third-degreeing him brutally, you have violated the law. Judge Connaught will require an adequate explanation."

"How do you know that this man is Squeer?" Helen Hastings demanded. "Are you personally acquainted with him?"

Gisling threw another quick glance at Paul Tyler. "No, I've never had the pleasure of meeting Mr. Squeer. But it will be a real pleasure to defend him. I understand that he is wanted on a number of charges."

"Who retained you to defend him?" Hastings asked.

Murray Gisling raised his eyebrows. "That, my dear Hastings, is a professional secret. Now I must demand that you

immediately bring this man before the judge."

Hastings sighed. "All right." He motioned to Fowler. "Get your hat and coat. Take the prisoner down town to Judge Connaught's chambers. I'll follow in a few minutes."

Fowler went out to get his hat and coat, and Gisling said, "I suppose you will not object to my having a few moments talk with my client in private?"

Hastings nodded. He and Helen moved over to the far side of the room, out of earshot. Murray Gisling stepped close to Paul, dropped his voice to a whisper.

"Here. Take this, quick!"

Out of the glove on his left hand he slipped a small white paper containing some sort of powder, which he thrust at Paul.

"It's a deck of coke, you fool!" he said impatiently, when Paul looked at it blankly. "Frenchy says you'll need it, that your last sniff must be worn off by this time. He was afraid you'd break down without it."

Paul took the paper.

"And here. Take this, too."

Gisling had unbuttoned the top button of his Chesterfield. From the inside pocket he took a small, compact, black automatic. "Put it in your pocket!"

Paul obeyed. "What—what am I supposed to do with it?"

Gisling snorted. "All you hopheads are the same! As soon as the stuff begins to wear off, you get to be dumb clucks! What's a gun for, sap? What do you think I brought that writ for? You think it's going to do you any good to be arraigned before a judge? Connaught can't set you free. Even if you could beat this Groh rap, you're wanted in two States, as well as by the Feds. Frenchy was a dope to use you at all!"

Paul Tyler saw that Hastings and his daughter were conversing near the window, scrupulously refraining from any attempt to overhear what was being said.

"All right, all right," he said to Gisling, almost unconsciously falling into

the tones he assumed a hood like Baby Face Matt Squeer would use. "So tell me what I'm supposed to do with the gun. You want me to take it out and start shooting right now?"

"No, you sap. But you've got to make a break. That's your only chance if you don't want to fry. Wait till you get downstairs with Fowler. Then let him have it in the back, and scam outside. Two of Frenchy's boys will be waiting for you in a car at the curb. Get in and they'll take you to a hide-out. Give Frenchy the gun you got from Groh, and then Frenchy will take care of getting you out of the country. Or better still, slip me the gun now, before Fowler comes back, and I'll take care of it."

"You mean the gun I killed Groh with?" Paul asked innocently.

"No!" Gisling replied with rising viciousness. "I mean the gun you got from Groh. You know damn well what gun I mean. I was a fool to promise Frenchy I'd come here. I should have known enough to keep out of it the minute he told me you were a snow bird! I mean the gun you killed Groh for. Did they frisk you? Did they get it from you? Or did you stash it?"

Paul Tyler was growing wiser by the minute in the ways that are devious. "They didn't get it," he said.

Just then Fowler came back in, and Hastings and Helen came over from the other side of the room. Fowler put a pair of handcuffs on Paul's wrists and said, "Come along. And I only hope you try to make a break for it!"

Murray Gisling said, "I'd like to talk to you for a few minutes, Mr. Hastings. Then we can go down to Judge Connaught's chambers together."

Paul understood why Gisling wanted to remain behind. The mouth-piece didn't want to be downstairs when the prisoner made his break.

Fowler took Paul by the arm and growled, "Come on, rat!"

They started for the door, and Helen Hastings called out, "Wait. I'm coming along. I'll take you in my coupé, and

Father and Mr. Gisling can follow in his."

Paul said urgently, "Don't bother, Miss Hastings. You—"

The words were practically rammed down his throat by Fowler's fist. The big detective hit him in the mouth, and Paul felt his teeth cutting through his upper lip.

Fowler snapped, "Nobody asked you for advice. And remember, I got to take the blame for marking you up, so I might as well have a little more fun. Better not give me any more reason to smack you around!"

He dragged Paul out, and called back to Helen Hastings, "I'm sorry, Miss Hastings, but I won't take him if you go along. There's the chance that Frenchy's mob may try to spring him, and I don't want you in danger!"

Helen glared at Fowler, but she didn't argue with him. She watched them get into one of the two self-service elevators that served the building, and Paul's last glimpse of her showed him a queer, calculating light in her eyes.



IN THE way out to the elevator, Paul had managed to slip one of his two handcuffed hands into his side pocket and extract the automatic, which he held palmed in his right hand.

Fowler was looking at him peculiarly as the cage slid downward. When the cage was at the eighth floor, the big detective put his finger on the stop button, and the elevator came to rest between the seventh and eighth.

"Now!" he barked. "Maybe I couldn't work you over right up there, with Hastings and that dizzy daughter of his watching. But no one's here to stop me now!"

He gripped his heavy service revolver by the butt, raising the barrel in the air over Paul's head. "You talk, mugg, or I'm gonna slice your pretty face to rib-

bons. Where did you cache the gun you took from Groh?"

"I tell you, I didn't get any gun!" Paul protested.

Fowler grinned wickedly. "You didn't kill Groh for nothing. I know you're not Matt Squeer. You're some new hood working for Frenchy Peck. Frenchy sent you up there to knock off Groh and get the gun. All right, I want it. Talk!"

Paul said quietly, "Better not hit me with that gun, Fowler. It might be the last smack you'll ever take at anyone."

As he said it he slipped off the safety catch of the automatic.

Fowler heard the *snick*, and he started visibly, glanced downward, and saw the ugly black muzzle of the little automatic pointing at his belly.

He grew pale. Slowly and carefully, he lowered his own gun hand, being careful not to appear to be trying to point the revolver at Paul.

Paul Tyler enjoyed that moment. He knew now how it felt to be a feared and dangerous gunman. Fowler had no doubt that Paul would shoot him in the guts if he made the slightest wrong move.

Paul grinned, and reached out his left hand, dragging the right along with it by the handcuffs, and took the revolver from Fowler. He now had two guns.

"Turn around," he said.

Fowler was green around the gills. "You—you're not gonna knock me off?"

"Don't worry," Paul assured him.

Fowler was all the way around now, and Paul clubbed the heavy service revolver, struck the detective once behind the ear. Fowler's breath escaped in a quick gasp, and he folded over, slid down to the floor of the cage.

Paul bent over him, dug into his pockets until he found the key to the handcuffs, unlocked them and threw them off. Then he pocketed Fowler's revolver and sent the cage down to the ground floor. He was remembering what Gisling had told him about two of Frenchy Peck's boys waiting for him in a getaway car.

He could, at that moment, have walked out of the apartment house, ducked down the street, and escaped. But he realized that he would still be Paul Tyler, ex-vacuum cleaner salesman, wanted for murder. Lawrence Cleverly had been able to frame a man like District Attorney Hastings for murder. Why couldn't Frenchy Peck arrange to leave him, Paul Tyler, likewise framed for a murder? Paul Tyler would become a fugitive from justice for the rest of his life. The real killer of Groh—Matt Squeer—would bring the all-important gun to Frenchy Peck, who would no doubt turn it over to Lawrence Cleverly. District Attorney Hastings would never be able to prove his innocence. And Helen—Helen with the pert little face and the red hair—would become the daughter of a disgraced official.

All that would follow if Paul Tyler ran out of the picture now. Instead of running out, he was going to try fighting it out. His brain, rendered subtle and keener by his last hour of life as a hunted criminal, had already evolved a course of action which he immediately proceeded to carry out. He bent down and took Fowler's hat, and put it on his own head, pulling the brim down as low over his face as he could.

He opened the door of the cage, and at the same time raised his automatic in the air and fired two quick shots at the ceiling. Then he started to run for the front entrance. He heard the door of the second elevator cage opening behind him, but he didn't turn. He saw the doorman looking at him with distended eyes. He waved the gun, and the doorman dropped flat on the floor.

Then Paul was out in the street. Sure enough, just as Gisling had said, there was a black sedan in front of the door with motor running, pulled up just in front of Helen Hastings' coupé. There were two men in the rear of that car, and a driver behind the wheel.

Paul hesitated for a second. He had counted on only two men altogether. Then he shrugged. What were the odds?

He leaped across the sidewalk, still with his hat-brim pulled low, and the door of the sedan opened swiftly.

He leaped into the car, and the driver gave it gas. Almost before he was altogether in, the sedan was ten feet away from the house. And before he got into the seat between the two men in the rear, they were around the corner.

Paul got only a single backward glimpse of the front of the apartment building, and of Helen Hastings, coming out after him and getting into her coupé. Then they were racing eastward. It was after six o'clock now, and pretty dark, but he would have recognized that boyish young figure of hers anywhere.

He could feel the closeness of the two men on either side of him, and he could see the back of the driver's head, with a pair of enormous ears that stood out almost at right angles, under a tilted derby that squashed them downwards. Big Ears could certainly handle a car.

And then the man at the left was talking to him. "Did you knock off the dick, Baby Face?"

It was hard to see the features of either of his companions, for the driver did not even have a dashboard light on. Paul kept his hat low over his face, and merely grunted. He still had the automatic in his hand, and he wished that he were on the end instead of in the middle.

The one at the right crowded him a little. "What happened when you knocked off Groh? How come you ran for it? The boss had that other apartment upstairs in the next house, all fixed for a hide-out—gun and all. You'd of had plenty of time to get back to it if you knocked off the dame too. Instead you had to mess it all up!"

Paul's eyes were glittering. If he could only maintain silence for a while longer, these men would spill the whole story.

"It's a cinch now," the man at his left said. "I don't hear no police sirens. We must have made a clean getaway. I—"

With sudden, disconcerting swiftness, he swept up his right arm and brushed

the hat from Paul's head. At the same time he reached across and pinioned Paul's gun hand.

"Look, Fatty!" he said to the man at Paul's right. "This ain't Baby Face!"

Fatty said, "Well, ain't that funny!" He turned in his seat, and a gun appeared magically in his paw. He thrust it into Paul's side. "O. K., sucker, you can drop the rod."

Paul let go of the automatic and it clattered to the floor of the car.

Fatty peered closely at Paul. "Looks like I made a mistake. When I seen the girl go in there with this guy, I would of swore it was Baby Face. But that was because I didn't get a good look at his face. The boss will like to hear about this."

The man at Paul's left said to the chauffeur, "Pull up some place, Tony. I got to phone the boss."

They were far over on the east side, near the river, and Tony drove for two blocks before coming to a Bar and Grille. Fatty said, "Don't be long, Gaga. We can't take no chances with this bird. Maybe he's even a dick."

Gaga got out and went in to the Bar and Grille. Fatty kept the gun at Paul's side, and continued to look at him silently. Paul fidgetted.

Tony turned around and studied him. "You know, Fatty, I think this is the guy that really knocked off Groh. The alarm covers him. I bet he got the gun."

Fatty shrugged. "If he has, the boss will get it out of him."

Paul couldn't think of anything to say. But out of the corner of his eye he caught a glimpse of a small coupé that passed them very slowly. And he barely repressed a gasp. For the driver of that coupé was Helen Hastings. She had somehow managed to follow them.

Neither Fatty nor Tony paid any attention to the coupé. They were both certain that they had lost any possible pursuit. Fatty said, "Whatsamatter, sucker? Getting nervous?"

Just then Gaga came out of the Bar and Grille. He got in the car. "The boss

wants us we should bring this guy up to the joint, Tony."

Tony nodded, and got the sedan going. They drove north for almost a mile, then cut across town toward Riverside Drive. Twice they passed traffic policemen, and each time Fatty pressed the gun a little closer against Paul's ribs, but said nothing. Paul understood.

He had seen Helen's coupé once more, when they passed her, and he knew she was following them again. She couldn't know that he was a prisoner. She must be thinking that he had shot Fowler, for she certainly hadn't taken the time to stop and examine the detective. She believed now that he was part of Frenchy Peck's gang. She was waiting to see where they went. Would she call the police then? Or would she attempt some reckless move on her own hook?

There was a pitying look in Fatty's eyes now. "Some sucker!" he said. "What did you think it would get you—messing around in Frenchy's business?"

Paul said, "Listen, you guys. I'm only a vacuum cleaner salesman. I don't know a thing about Frenchy or his business—"

Tony, in the driver's seat, gurgled with pleasure. "Haw! A vacuum cleaner salesman! Tie that, Gaga!"

Gaga was extremely tall, and very thin. His face was a little crooked, as if it had grown too much on the left side, and not enough on the right. Where he had acquired the name Gaga, Paul couldn't fathom. He laughed, too.

"The boss will think it is a very good joke!"

They stopped in front of an apartment house, on Riverside Drive. "O. K.," said Gaga. "Out!"

Fatty got out first, and stood with his gun close at his side. Gaga got a gun out too, and pushed Paul out to the curb. Then he followed.

"Maybe you wanna try to make a break?" he asked hopefully.

Tony called out from behind the wheel, "Hey, Gaga! Don't look now. But there's a small coupé with a dame in it.

It's going by now. See? She's slowing up at the corner. I think she's been behind us for a while."

Gaga threw a quick side glance down the street. "Maybe she's tailed us. Maybe not. Watch her, Tony. If she looks like she's interested in us, bring her up!"

Then they pushed Paul between them, and headed into the house. There was only one self-service elevator here, and they took it up to the ninth floor. Gaga had a key to one of the doors on the ninth floor, and they entered a vacant apartment.

Paul looked about him, not understanding. There wasn't a stick of furniture in the place. Fatty saw his look of bewilderment, and giggled.

Gaga led them through a bedroom, and into a large closet. He fiddled with something at the back of the closet, and suddenly a door opened in the back wall, revealing a narrow staircase which led upward.

Gaga led the way, Paul followed, with Fatty's gun touching his spine.



THE STAIRCASE brought them into a similar closet on the tenth floor, and they emerged into another bedroom. This one was completely furnished. There were twin beds, and a cot against one wall, and carpets on the floor.

"Frenchy owns this house," Fatty explained to him. "He wouldn't tell us to bring you through that closet if he thought you was going to stay alive much longer." He shook his head in commiseration. "Too bad. Such a nice looking guy, too!"

The bedroom was fairly dark, for there were shutters on all the windows, and Paul could see that they were fastened on the inside with padlocks. He guessed that he was not the first prisoner that had been brought to this place.

Fatty saw his glance, and grinned. "The people what live here is supposed

to be in Florida for the winter. Nice set-up, huh?"

They went through a short hall, and into a kitchen. The kitchen windows were likewise shuttered. There was a litter of dishes in the sink, and a pile of opened cans in a carton on the floor. Paul guessed that this had been used as Baby Face Matt Squeer's hideout, while the police and the Federal Agents searched for him all over the country.

What especially attracted Paul's glance was a nice shiny vacuum cleaner in one corner of the kitchen. His eyes lighted with professional interest when he saw the brass name-plate on the machine: Easy-Way Vacuum Cleaner.

Although he had only been in the vacuum cleaner business for one day, he still experienced the reaction of pride at finding a product of his firm in such an unlooked-for place. He saw that the bag was bulging with accumulated dust, and through his mind there started to run the patter he had learned out of the manual.

*"Now, madam, a vacuum cleaner is like an automobile. It requires frequent cleaning and constant care. . . ."*

He was rudely snapped out of it by Fatty, who gave him a shove that sent him staggering into the next room. Before he could regain his balance, Fatty was in after him, and gripped him by the arm, pushing him up against the wall.

Gaga came in after them, and spoke to one of the two men who were in the room.

"Look what we won, boss! We were outside Hastings' house, like you told us, expecting Baby Face to come out shooting'. And what do we get, but this!"

Paul recognized the bigger man of the two, as the much-photographed Lawrence Cleverly.

Cleverly, the political boss, was a well set-up man in his middle fifties, with iron-gray hair, and a square, determined jaw.

Frenchy Peck was small, thin, with black hair oiled back in a flat pompadour, and a small turned-up mustache. He

looked like a visiting foreign count, but there was a ruthless glitter in those coal-black eyes of his.

Frenchy had prospered greatly in the last five years, since Lawrence Cleverly began to give his mob protection. Throughout the gambling fraternity it was an accepted fact that you couldn't buck or compete with any gambling house that Frenchy opened, because Cleverly was on his payroll. And Frenchy reciprocated by doing any odd little jobs that Lawrence Cleverly needed done to maintain his political leadership.

Paul Tyler knew all this from having read the editorial pages of the evening newspapers. But he had never expected to come into such close contact with the vicious set-up.

Frenchy Peck came across the room and said coldly to Gaga and Fatty, "All right, boys. Frisk him."

They went through Paul's pockets and took away Fowler's service revolver. Frenchy snatched the gun eagerly and turned to Cleverly.

"Is this the gat, Larry?"

Cleverly frowned. "No. I told you it was a pearl-handled pistol."

"O. K., O. K." He swung back to Paul. "What about it, guy? Did you knock off Groh? Or did Matt Squeer get him?"

"Squeer got him," Paul replied. "I was only in there trying to sell a vacuum cleaner."

Fatty snickered. "That's his story, boss, and he sticks to it. Personally, I think he's a dick working for the D. A."

Lawrence Cleverly snorted. "Would he have shot Fowler then?"

Frenchy's eyes narrowed. "We don't even know that he *did* shoot Fowler when he escaped. Maybe they framed it to make it look like he made a break—"

Just then there was the sound of a buzzer.

"That'll be Tony," said Gaga. "He stuck around downstairs to look over a dame that might of been tailing us."

They heard the creaking of the secret

door in the closet, at the other end of the apartment, and in a moment there were steps in the kitchen. The door opened, and Tony appeared there, grinning contentedly, and pushing Helen Hastings in front of him.

Her coat was ripped across the front, and the little hat was hanging down the side of her head, and she was flushed and angry.

Tony had a glaring red scratch across the left side of his face, and another one down the length of his nose. But he didn't seem to mind.

"Boy, is she a hell cat, boss! I grabbed her comin' right in after Gaga and Fatty. She didn't know there was me in the car, layin' for her!"

Frenchy's face was purple with rage. "You sap. So you brought her up here! And through the closet!"

Tony looked bewildered, hurt that his valiant deed should be so unappreciated. "What did I do wrong, boss?"

"Nothing!" Frenchy Peck told him sweetly. "Only now we have to knock her off, so she can't talk. I put ten grand into this hide-out, and I'm not throwing it away!"

Lawrence Cleverly came up behind Frenchy. "That's Hastings' daughter!" he said.

Helen Hastings glared at him, breathing hard. "Yes. And you're Lawrence Cleverly, and I find you right here in a secret meeting place, with Frenchy Peck and his gang. And with that—that—" she pointed dramatically at Paul Tyler, "*murderer!*"

Frenchy Peck smiled. "She thinks the dope here killed Groh!"

"Maybe he did," Cleverly said. "Why haven't you heard from Matt Squeer?"

"He must be hiding out till the heat dies down on the block."

Helen's eyes widened. "Didn't *he* kill Groh?" looking at Paul.

Frenchy said, "Hell, he's only the fall guy. The dope really *is* a vacuum cleaner salesman, I bet! And will he make a perfect fall guy!"

Helen started to struggle in Tony's

grip. She raised her voice and began to shout. "Help! Murder! Police!"

Frenchy Peck sprang to her side and slapped her hard, sending her back into Tony's arms, who grinned, and squeezed her, forcing the breath out of her body.

Paul Tyler yelled, "Let her go!" and sprang at Tony.

Fatty hit Paul a glancing blow on the side of the head, and Gaga püt out a foot and tripped him. He fell flat on his face on the floor, and Fatty kicked him hard in the ribs twice, then when he still tried to get up, once more in the head.

Paul groaned and lay flat on his face, gasping for breath. He tried to push himself up, and felt a heavy foot on his back, pressing him down against the floor.

"This guy likes to take it!" he heard Fatty say.

And then behind Fatty's voice he heard Cleverly speaking to Helen.

"I'm sorry, Miss Hastings, but it's either your skin or mine. There's no other way but to let Frenchy take care of you and that young fellow. It would be the same as signing my own death warrant if you went free, with what you know now."

The foot came off of Paul's back, but he didn't try to rise for a moment. Frenchy was giving orders to Gaga and Fatty and Tony, telling Tony to go around to the back of the house and get the "Laundry wagon" and bring it to the basement entrance.

But before Frenchy finished his instructions, the buzzer sounded again, and the closet door at the other end of the apartment creaked once more. There were footsteps, and someone came into the room.

Frenchy Peck exclaimed, "Baby Face! Where the hell have you been?"

Paul raised his head, which was swimming in a sea of pain, and saw that the man who had just come in was young, about his size and build, with curly black hair like his own. But there the resemblance ended. Though Baby Face Matt

Squeer looked as young as Paul, there was a sort of white hardness about his eyes that branded him a killer. His lips were twitching.

"I got Groh, all right," he said jauntily. "But some sap of a canvasser gummed up the works. I couldn't get the old dame. But when she ran out after the canvasser, I went in the kitchen and grabbed the gun off the table where Groh had it all wrapped up. And then I holed up in the apartment in the next house. I went back the way I came, over the fire escapes, and I was just in time, because there's been cops all over that block ever since. Gawd, do I need a powder!"

He pushed a package into Frenchy Peck's hands, and rushed across the room to a desk. He opened a drawer and took out a little folded paper similar to the one which Gisling had given to Paul.

Frenchy Peck was carefully unwrapping the package, from which he took a small, pearl-handled gun. He held it up gingerly by the barrel, so as not to disturb the finger-prints on the stock.

"This your gun, Larry?" he demanded of Cleverly.

Cleverly took a step forward, reaching for it. "That's it!"

Frenchy Peck danced out of his reach. He was laughing. "So this is the little gun that you killed Renee Townlee with! And it has your prints all over it, eh?"

Cleverly looked at him sharply. "I guess so, if Groh didn't wipe them off."

"I guess he wouldn't have wiped them off," said Frenchy. "Not if he had it wrapped up in waxed paper like this. 'Yep, I guess your prints are still on it, Larry. I can see them plain, even without a glass.'"

"What are you getting at, Frenchy?" Cleverly asked, in suddenly clipped tones.

"Nothing much," Frenchy Peck smirked. "Only did you think I sent Baby Face out to pull that kill, and take them chances, just to help you out of a murder rap? You've been dragging down sixty per cent of my take for the last five years, Larry. And this is the

first time I ever got a chance to get something on you. So I keep this little pistol with the pearl handle, see? I keep it, and from now on you got to take a cut in wages. Twenty per cent is your cut from now on, Mr. Cleverly. And you're gonna like it!"

Lawrence Cleverly looked at Frenchy Peck with narrowed eyes. "Be careful, Frenchy. Better men than you have tried to tie me up in a knot. Most of them are dead. Those that aren't are rotting in jail."

"I'll take the chance, Larry," Peck smirked. "Look at it my way. Not only do I snatch the fat out of the fire by getting this pistol back for you, but now I got to kill this kid here, and the girl. It looks to me like I contribute the big share to this racket, and from now on I draw down the big share!"

That was as far as he got. Paul Tyler had been lying on the floor, his muscles tense, waiting for a chance when every one's attention would be focussed elsewhere. He decided that he'd never have a better moment.

He came to his feet with a leap, and lunged through the open kitchen door, almost before any of them knew he was on the move.

Frenchy yelled, "Hey, get him!" and Fatty fired a single shot that almost singed his right leg.

Then Paul was in the kitchen, and had kicked the door shut. He slipped the latch over, locking it, and leaped out of the way just as another shot came through the door, splintering the wood. Two more shots followed it, but Paul was already across the kitchen, with both hands fumbling at that shiny new Easy-Way Vacuum Cleaner.



HE HAD memorized reams of words about the Easy-Way Vacuum Cleaner, and they had all come back to him as he lay on the floor with Fatty's heel in his spine. And he had an

idea. It was a desperate idea, and one that he surely would have laughed at in his calmer moments.

This was not one of those moments, however. There were more shots coming through the door, and some of them were coming perilously close to him where he worked at the vacuum cleaner. Helen Hastings was in that other room, and it was a hundred to one that neither he nor Helen would ever get out of this place alive unless he did something—crazy or not.

He could hear Frenchy Peck shouting to his boys above the reverberations of the gunshots. "Never mind, keep on shooting. It's too late. The cops will be here right away. Get that guy!"

Someone fired four shots into the lock, and the door splintered around the knob and sagged open.

Paul was ready. Desperate, tight-lipped, he stood with the vacuum cleaner at his side, like some knight of old in shining armor with a glittering lance poised. Only his lance was a vacuum cleaner, with ten feet of electric cord. He had stuck the plug into an electric socket, and he had his finger on the switch. He had removed the sliding top from the dust bag, leaving the aperture open. He now held that aperture facing toward the door, spreading it out with the fingers of his left hand, keeping his right on the switch.

The door came open under a kick from the other room, and Gaga appeared in the doorway, gun in hand. He saw Paul and raised the gun for a quick shot.

And Paul clicked the vacuum cleaner switch.

The machine rumbled, whizzed and buzzed. And a great, devastating cloud of dust and dirt poured out of that dust bag in a blinding enveloping spray of blackness that sent Gaga staggering backward, screaming, with both hands at his eyes.

Paul came after him inexorably, deliberately, following him as far as the electric cord would allow, until he stood

in the doorway. He had shut off the switch after that first quick spray, and now he flicked it on again, directing the spray at Fatty and Tony, who had been crowding in behind Gaga.

Blinded, they yelled in pain, and leaped backward.

The vacuum cleaner sputtered its last bit of dust and dirt, and wheezed on, emptily. Paul let it drop to the floor without even turning off the switch. He swooped down and recovered the gun that Fatty had dropped, and raised it in front of him, with his hand stretched out straight before him, like the pictures he had seen of G-Men, practicing on the target range.

He pulled the trigger again and again, firing blindly into the swirling dust that enveloped the living-room. There was only one thing he was sure of—that Helen Hastings was not in the line of fire, for he saw her, pressing up against the wall alongside the door. Everybody else in that room was an enemy, and he didn't care whom he hit.

He emptied the gun, but he didn't know it until it clicked on an empty cylinder. Then he threw it away and dived blindly into the room, flailing with his fists. He saw two shapes huddled at the far side of the room, shooting at him, and he started to dive toward them and tripped over a prone body on the floor. He fell to his knees, and his hand touched a gun, and he gripped it and got to his feet.

The two men at the other end of the room had evidently emptied their guns, for when Paul stood up with the weapon in his hand, they raised their hands above their heads and screamed above the thundering echoes of the gunshots, "Don't shoot! We quit!"

Paul advanced toward them through the swirling dust, and saw they were Frenchy Peck and Lawrence Cleverly. He kept them covered, and looked around the room. There were two bodies near the kitchen door that didn't move at all, and another dead man near one of the windows. In the center of the room

a man groaned and squirmed, clawing at the floor and bleeding from the throat. It was Baby Face Matt Squeer. Fatty and Gaga and Tony were dead.

Helen Hastings was picking up the pearl-handled gun from the floor where Frenchy Peck had dropped it, and someone was hammering vociferously at the front door and demanding that it be opened in the name of the law.

Paul kept his eyes on Cleverly and Peck, and backed to the door and unlocked it.

"Come on in!" he yelled.

The door was thrust open and a gigantic cop stormed in, police positive in front of him. The cop took one look at the room and gasped.

"Here, you," he shouted to Paul. "Gimme that gun!"

Paul handed it over with a sigh of relief. "Arrest those two men! They are murderers!"

"Sure, sure," said the cop. "We'll arrest everyone that needs arrestin'." He came into the middle of the room, and said, "Well, for the love of mud! This is Baby Face Squeer!" He looked at Paul. "Did you get him? There's about fifteen grand reward for him!"

Paul wasn't listening. He was looking across to where Helen Hastings was busy at the telephone. "Come over here quick, Dad!" she was gasping into the phone. "It's all cleared up. That—that young vacuum cleaner salesman cleaned it up!"

Paul picked his way across the room and came and stood in front of her and looked into her eyes. She looked back into his and said, "You were marvelous!"

He blushed. "It wasn't much. You've got to remember it was an Easy-Way Vacuum Cleaner. It even says in the sales manual that an Easy-Way can be adapted to a lot of uses that people don't think of ordinarily."

There were other cops in the room now, and there were handcuffs on Cleverly and Peck, and a plain-clothes detective was examining the pistol with the pearl handle, while another was taking

a dying statement from Baby Face Matt Squeer.

The cop who had come in first had broken open the revolver which he had taken from Paul Tyler, and he was looking at it with a stunned expression.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he said to the detective sergeant who had come in to take charge. "This gun is empty. The kid must've kept Cleverly and Peck cowed with an empty gun!"

"Well, we'll both be damned!" said the sergeant. "Wait'll I go and ask the kid if he knew the gun was empty."

He crossed the room and came up be-

hind Paul, who was still looking into Helen's eyes and talking to her earnestly. He put out a hand to tap him on the shoulder, then drew it back and listened to what Paul was saying to Helen. A baffled look came into the sergeant's eyes.

He turned away and came back to the cop without speaking to Paul. "I didn't want to interrupt them," he told the cop. "Guess what the kid was talking to her about!"

"I give up."

"He was trying," the sergeant exploded, "to sell her a vacuum cleaner!"

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You'll find these yarns and many others that make detective fiction history in the June

**BLACK  
MASK**

# PRISON BREAK

By K. WEBSTER



HE stamping machines groaned at No. 7544's side, and the floor trembled. His nostrils flared at the odors of leather-paint and hides, and his narrow eyes appraised the weighted cane hooked over the arm of a uniformed man.

"Damn you, Sholes!" muttered No. 1029, a blue-shirted old man at his elbow. "If you don't work faster, that screw'll crack down on both of us. Easy, he's watchin' now."

"Phooey!" snarled 7544, his jaw muscles turning his face rocky. "I'm going to wake up this dead stir, the worst I've been in. Watch."

With a full-armed sweep he pushed



Stir-crazy convicts loot a gun cache

a shoe case off the table. It crashed to the floor, one corner collapsing.

The machines stopped as if giant fingers had grabbed their drive shafts. A whistle shrilled and the guard, looking bored, came over. Lips pursed, he stared at 7544's blond hair as if wondering

where to part it with his cane.

"Say something, screw," taunted 7544. "Or are you yellow?"

There was an appreciative roar from the other cons, but it died quickly. Three more guards had appeared, one with an automatic rifle under his arm.

"Why, you—you screwball!" sputtered the guard with the cane.

No. 7544, watching the cane dart toward him and swing above his head, dodged quickly and leaped to the table for a kick at the guard's wrist. The cane harmlessly drummed the floor as he came down on the guard's side of the table. And then he was driving the guard back with short punches to a well rounded belly. The guard turned greenish white and sagged like a comic dancer.

With a triumphant cry No. 7544 put his heel on the guard's outflung hand, laughed at the scream of pain that followed.

"Pretty hard, aren't you?" said the rifleman. "But we'll soften you up plenty in the next twenty years. Back up, quick!"

The leveled rifle carried plenty of authority, and No. 7544 moved away from his retching victim. A cane whistled behind him and its shadow streaked across the floor. Something exploded at his head and he drifted away in red fog, the words, "Guess that'll teach him," trailing along.

**D**URING a week of solitary confinement Hugh Baxter—listed in the pen as Hank Sholes, No. 7544—had enough time to think about the crazy scheme that had brought him to fog-wrapped Sattley Prison.

Jack Baxter, Hugh's brother, had been a guard at Sattley for ten years. Though popular with officials and cons, he was the one who got a tin shiv through the ribs, from behind—the one who laid down his life for the discovery of a bundle of loaded revolvers buried in the exercise yard.

Hugh Baxter, ace undercover agent, wasted no time. He told Governor Warner he was going into Sattley, under faked commitment papers, to find those responsible.

"Suicide," the governor pointed out. "Those desperate killers will slit your throat in a hurry if they find you out.

Besides, we can't spare you. You've done too much good work in our cities."

"I want Jack's killer, and you want the prison cleaned up. Or don't you?"

The conference lasted a long time, but finally Warner agreed. After that Baxter personally investigated the whole Sattley staff—and found one man with a perfect record, Guard Captain Donald McCall. The governor himself gave McCall detailed instructions, and Baxter, praying there would be no leaks, was brought to Sattley in irons . . . .

Baxter's eyes were swollen; they had strained too hard to pick out the dim light that somehow caused oblique shadows on the corridor floor. His ears still rang with the dead silence, and his nostrils fought the stench of old sweat.

When they called for him, he stumbled out of his cell and mumbled his thanks. His eyes had a bleary focus, but they picked out the insignia on the coat sleeve of a gray-haired man with a barrel-shaped body and loose jowls—Deputy Warden Bill Gardner.

Gardner's watery eyes, full of mockery, held Baxter's. "Still tough?"

"No," said Baxter meekly.

"Sir!" Gardner prompted, his jaw muscles working.

"No, sir."

"You'll find us plenty tough, Sholes. Move!"

Their feet clumped hollowly on the way to ground level, and then they were outside, blinking in fog whose bleakness matched that of the turrets on the spiked walls. Baxter shivered.

A one-story stone building housed the furniture shop, with its rows of drill presses, saws and planers. At the single exit were two steel-lined rooms in which the men changed clothes before leaving in pairs. A maze of pipes hung from the ceiling.

"We don't take chances here," said one of the guards. "If trouble comes, we just turn a little valve, like this, and gas shoots down on you. Remember that."

A beefy man with corded forearm

muscles was working industriously at a bench. He looked up quickly, and Baxter had a glimpse of his eyes—wide, colorless, wild. His cheeks were puffed, but his lips were thin and pale. And his hair was as curly and heavy as a girl's.

"From now on, Sholes," Gardner was saying, "you work here. Convict 7233 will tell you what to do when the inspector is at the other end of the shop. Carry on!"

During the whole afternoon No. 7233 spoke only to give curt orders. He muttered to himself continually, keeping his eyes focused on Baxter.

At six o'clock Baxter changed clothes, found his numerical place in the yard line-up and lock-walked to the mess hall. He was putting his point over. Who would suspect such a tough mean prisoner of being an undercover man?

One hour later he and the others were moving in unbroken lines to the cell houses. Baxter's group went to Cell House 3, and his division climbed a steel staircase. Baxter stood at the last cell, waiting for the clank of the door-opening mechanism.

No cell faced his on Tier B level, and the next one was separated from it by solid steel plates. Evidently the guards were trying to isolate him—exactly what he wanted. A cellmate would only prevent conversation with McCall, who would signal him during the third inspection round.

After a while the lights went out and Baxter pulled his coarse blankets over him. He was tossing restlessly when the night guard's flash-light put a halo around his head. Then he fell asleep, but a dream of his dead brother's good-natured face tortured him.

Three faint taps, coming with another flash of light, brought him to his feet. The flash-light was turned off now, and he could see only a shadow.

"Baxter?" came a faint whisper.

"Yes. You, McCall?"

"Yup. Anything turn up?"

"Not yet."

"All right. See you this time tomorrow."



EXT morning No. 7233 managed to stay close to Baxter, who again felt the scrutiny of those wild eyes. Just before noon he began talking:

"What's your name?"

"Hank Sholes."

"Jolt?"

"Twenty years."

"For what?"

"Safe blowing and assault, if it's anything to you."

"It is—plenty. And don't use that attitude with me."

Baxter snorted. "All right, wise guy. What's your name and what are you doing time for?"

No. 7233's eyes rolled loosely, but he didn't move his head. "I'm Al Steward, a lifer. I shot my wife because she stood in my way." His forearm muscles twitched. "She wouldn't give me a divorce."

Baxter remembered Al Steward, who, because of his seven-figure wealth, had made national news during his entire trial. A high-priced battery of lawyers had tried to have him committed to an asylum, but the State's alienists had convinced the jury of his sanity. So the lawyers had concentrated on saving him from the chair.

Baxter knew, too, from remarks made by his brother, that Steward was suspected of buying privileges by giving some guard coded orders for cash, payable by the attorney in charge of the Steward estate. His prison record was studded with offenses—fighting, insubordination, conspiracy. But he hadn't spent much time in the hole, had never involved his "connection," if there was one.

"Sholes," Stewart said, "you want to know why you're here?"

"Sure, you sap. For blowing a safe. I told you that before."

Steward turned, quick rage running across his face. Baxter was beginning to understand some of the impulses that had turned this man, educated and probably well bred, into a killer.

Steward was fingering a hammer. "I'm warning you, Sholes, for the last time. You know damn well I mean this shop, not the stir."

Baxter's face hardened and he stepped up to Steward. A guard yelled, "Hey, you two! Break it up!"

Baxter moved back with apparent reluctance, and Steward mumbled:

"Damn screw! Anyway, Sholes, you're here because I want you here. You may think you were transferred because you bopped a screw in the shoe factory, but that isn't it. Or maybe it is. If you hadn't slugged him, I wouldn't have heard about you."

"You're talking in circles, Steward," snapped Baxter. But there was one thing that made Steward's story ring true, the prison rule that trouble-makers should never be put together. "Don't play me for a fool. You're only another con."

Steward shrugged slightly. Watching the guards, he muttered: "I know how to use my money, and I've got plenty."

"All right," said Baxter wearily. "You had me transferred. Why?"

"I need guys like you, tough guys with guts and muscles."

"Why?"

"I'm going to crush out, and so are you."

"Yeah? You probably want a fall guy."

This time, instead of getting angry, Steward showed a warped grin. "You're so suspicious you wouldn't trust anybody. And that suits me fine." He fell into deep silence, apparently concentrating on a mortise, then added: "Think it over, Sholes."

Baxter grunted. Steward, who mixed good English with prison jargon and whose dangerous hair-trigger temper could be controlled, must have some

power, or the prison would have robbed him of all delusions years ago.

Later in the day Baxter handed Steward a chair spindle. "Think we ought to send this back to the turners?" Then he whispered: "I'm in on that job with you, pal."

"Good!" said Steward.

"Hey!" yelled a guard. "Come over here, you two."

Baxter and Steward laid down their tools and went to the entrance, where a floor guard stood with Deputy Warden Gardner, whose watery eyes were laughing. Baxter, grim-faced, came to attention.

"No. 7233," said Gardner to Steward, "you're a pretty good man with tools. You and No. 7544 will go to the warden's home with an escort and repair a few doors that stick. Fall in!"

They fell in between a couple of armed guards, with Gardner carrying a small tool kit in the rear. As they crossed the bleak prison yard, Steward muttered, "Keep your eyes open, Sholes."

There was a spattering sound, followed by a quick groan from Steward. And then Steward was on the ground, his right hand clapped to a bloody spot behind his ear. Gardner stood above him with a police positive, gloating.

"For Gawd's sake!" screamed Steward. "What have I done?"

"Plenty!" snapped Gardner. "You said something to No. 7544. Talking isn't allowed, except at prescribed times."

The five men passed through a little door in the wall to get into Warden Dodge's back yard. The house, simple and attractive, stood on prison property, but outside the walls. There were rolling lawns, broken only by walks and driveway strips from the garage to the street.

Steward, still holding his head, staggered into the house. Baxter, prodded forward by a guard, saw a gleaming kitchen. He was wondering why convicts should be allowed in the warden's house, even to make repairs. If Steward had

arranged this trip, he must have strong influence.

Gardner set down the tool kit and gestured toward a door, and Steward pulled it open.

Baxter, looking through a dining-room, saw a girl with a warm tan skin and mellow eyes. Her legs, crossed, showed a pleasing expanse of silk that ended in high-heeled pumps. Her black dress had sheen enough to match her hair, appealingly piled on her head. She looked up, startled, and moved out of Baxter's sight. But her fleeting smile stayed in his memory.

A moment later she came through the dining-room, and Baxter had an uneasy feeling that she was going to parade her social position. But she smiled at him and spoke in a soothing voice:

"Will you be finished soon?"

Gardner glared as if he resented her friendly attitude.

"Yes, Miss Dodge," said Baxter quickly. "You're the warden's daughter, aren't you?"

"Silence!" commanded Gardner.

"Yes, I am," said the girl, still smiling. "My friends know me as Joan Dodge . . . Mr. Gardner, I'm a human being. I can't be rule-conscious and hard—like you."

Happiness surged through Baxter, and he noticed that even Steward was smiling a little. That girl was worth plenty—to humanity, to her father, to the man who would become her husband . . .

An hour later, back in the furniture shop, Steward cursed profanely and gave Gardner a few gutter names.

"He's a heel," Baxter agreed. "A guy I'll take apart first chance I get."

Steward stopped cursing and glared. "You only think so, Sholes. He's plenty tough and bad medicine."

Baxter shrugged.

"You notice the arrangement of the house and the garage?" Steward asked nervously.

Baxter nodded.

"Swell! When we get out of the little wall door, which Dodge always uses,

we'll snatch the girl and run across to the garage for the car."

"You want a hostage, huh?"

"That's right. But we've got to take the chance she'll be there when we crush out. Without her we'll have more trouble."

"And we'll time our break so we catch Dodge just when he's ready to go home, huh?"

"Say," said Steward admiringly, "you catch on quick. Here's the rest of the plan: There's a ventilating shaft in the wall near your cell. It's got a grilled plate in front, but there aren't any screws holding it. The screw heads at the corners are just screw heads—nothing more."

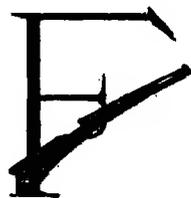
"Well, I'll be damned! How'd you manage that?"

Anger flared in Steward's eyes again. "How I get things done in this stir is my business. Anyway, the shaft goes in two feet and then angles toward the tier above. The angle isn't very sharp, and it'll hold a package." He shook his head. "The screws—they're watching!"

A little later he began talking again. "The package I was telling you about has six one-grand revolvers in it, all loaded."

"You mean," said Baxter incredulously, "they cost you a thousand bucks apiece?"

"Right. And I'm letting you in for what you've got guts enough to do. When you see a con on your tier stumble and fall down, you'll know I'm ready. Then you'll pull out the plate, start shooting and wait for me."



OR hours that evening, Baxter lay tossing, thoughts surging fitfully through his head. Six loaded revolvers in the wrong hands meant endless suffering—and death. And Joan Dodge, if she became a hostage, would never really smile again, alive or dead. For Steward and the rest, woman-hungry for years, would turn into slobbering beasts.

Something more poignant than pain filled his throat and caused an involuntary groan.

Protection for the living was more important, suddenly, than getting his brother's killer. But it was likely that by exposing the leaders of this uprising he would find the one whose gun smuggling had resulted in Jack's death.

What the hell could he do? Certainly he'd have to prevent either the break or its success. But if the break didn't occur now, why couldn't the crooked prison official—whoever he was—plan something else? He'd sold out a couple of times, and he'd do it again. And if he had another chance, Baxter might not be here to stop him. No, the break would have to come—even at great cost to the innocent.

Baxter heard the tramp of a night guard making the first inspection round and saw a spot of light on one cell wall. When the spot shifted toward him, he closed his eyes.

After that, cold sweat came to his forehead. He knew what he was going to do, but if things went wrong he'd be plagued the rest of his life—if he had one to live.

The night guard came back, and Baxter trembled involuntarily. He kept trembling until it was time for Round 3, McCall's. Light flashed then, and Baxter rolled out of his bunk, half crazy with fear and uncertainty. He couldn't let Guard Captain McCall know that; he must be casual, competent.

The guard captain's flash-light swung jerkily, and reflections showed a lean body and a hard bony face with a flat nose and a loose mouth.

"Baxter," came a faint whisper.

"Here," Baxter whispered back. "Got something this time, McCall."

"Yeah?" There was eagerness in the muffled voice, and Baxter could see the man straining forward. "What is it?"

"They've got some loaded revolvers planted in the ventilating shaft on this level."

"My Gawd, man! Are you sure?"

"No," admitted Baxter. "I want you to find out. If they're there, check their caliber and get some blanks for them. But, for Gawd's sake, get the loaded cartridges out!"

"I'll get rid of the guns, if I find 'em."

"No," snapped Baxter testily. "I want this break to come, so I can find out who's involved."

"The governor gave you full charge here," said McCall. "So I'll follow orders. But if it was me working this out, I'd get rid of the guns."

"Get started," ordered Baxter, "before somebody hears us."

McCall nodded and went down the corridor. The ventilating shaft was out of Baxter's line of vision, but he could hear McCall's heels clump away. A moment later muted sounds, like those of a man walking on his toes, passed through the sheet-metal wall, which felt refreshingly cool against Baxter's hot cheek.

McCall padded back to Baxter's cell and whispered through the bars: "I found 'em, all six. Thirty-two's. Should I report to the warden?"

"No. He might even be the man we want. We don't know. Protect yourself by notifying the governor. You can send a registered letter." Baxter paused, then added tensely: "Get those blanks in, pronto!"

**B**XASTER himself was hardly prepared when, at cell line-up next evening, a ratty little man stumbled on Tier B and went down with a cry. Glancing quickly at the guard, who was watching the little con, Baxter broke away from the end and raced to the ventilator shaft.

He got two fingers into the plate and wiggled it. Then it was free, and the shaft yawned. His hand darted into it and his fingernails scraped rough cardboard beyond the bend. A box without a cover slid down.

There was a grunt behind him, and hot breath struck his turned cheek. A hard forearm closed on his neck, choking off his air supply. Blood pounded in his temples as he kicked back to break the

stranglehold. A knotty fist ground into the hollow behind his ear and he began falling to the left, his eyes giving him a blurred picture of stamping, chanting cons and fear-crazed guards.

His shoulder broke his fall, and he immediately curled upward. Standing above him, the box under one arm, was Steward. His face was a tight mask, and there was revolver in his right hand.

"Dirty copper!" he snarled. "You're getting it, right now, just like your brother did."

A gun roared from another balcony, and lead screamed on steel a foot from Steward's head. Steward ripped out a full-throated curse and whipped the revolver muzzle toward a guard on a Tier B runway. Baxter kicked at Steward just as the revolver crashed.

The revolver wasn't loaded with blanks! Baxter, incredulous in spite of what he'd learned, saw the guard spin and fall.

Five more convicts, gray faces full of desperate hope, were clamoring for guns—and getting them. Steward, apparently forgetting Baxter, began running.

Baxter was dimly conscious of the high-pitched wail of the prison siren, the occasional smash of a bullet, the uneasy shuffling of the men not taking part, and the groans of the wounded guard. Looking over the railing, he saw Steward and the others coming out of the spiral staircase, twelve feet down. With a prayer in his throat he vaulted the rail and dived.

His legs went over the shoulders of the fourth man. There was a loud snap, and Baxter, hurtling clear, knew he had broken the man's neck. He snatched up the revolver and fired at Steward, who was fumbling with a dead guard's keys.

Steward snapped back the bolt, paused to return a shot. But his aim was hurried, and the bullet brought a scream from somebody at the far end of the cell house.

Baxter raced after Steward and a dozen others, most of them unarmed. Giant search-lights traced weird patterns

across the prison yard, and a machine-gun on a wall began vomiting sudden death. Three convicts went down screaming.

Then Baxter saw something else on the wall—a rifle barrel glinting in a stray beam of light. It was aimed, not at the cons scattered in the yard, but at the guard with the machine-gun.

Flame leaped from its muzzle and the vicious slap of a bullet merged with other sounds. The machine-gunner flung his hands upward as if for an invisible support, and his gun fell outside the wall. He pitched forward, lost a hold on a spike, dropped twenty feet.

A dim, thick figure lumbered toward a watch tower. With a harsh sob of rage, Baxter lifted his revolver and fired twice. The rifleman stopped short, sagging awkwardly.

"Why in hell did you do that?" grunted a huge man beside Baxter. "He saved us."

"Let's go," snapped Baxter, pushing him toward the side gate, where Steward was firing at a lone guard. The big fellow broke into a run, and Baxter, leaping forward, slashed at his head with the revolver barrel. The running man missed a step and came to his knees. Baxter, not slowing down much, scooped up the other revolver and sprinted for the side door, now open.



RING of keys hung at the door's lock. Next to the door lay Warden Dodge, face twisted.

Dodge painfully crawled to the opening, but Baxter got away from his clawing fingers. Smoke was coiling from the windows of the warden's house, and Baxter cursed violently. Rats, all of them! They'd added arson to murder just to give the law more trouble.

The garage door hung open, and Dodge's car was backing out fast enough to throw its passengers forward. Baxter recklessly opened fire. The car sagged,

a rear tire badly shredded by a bullet.

Lead slugs were coming back now; Baxter could hear their hum of death. He flattened out on the ground, aimed carefully at a figure in the car. His revolver kicked and roared, and a man in the car yelled.

A gun crashed somewhere behind him and a bullet smacked the ground near his head. He rolled over and over, wildly, until his eyes were aligned with the house. Silhouetted against crackling flames from a kitchen window were Steward and the girl.

She was kicking and screaming so much that Steward couldn't aim at Baxter. But Baxter couldn't shoot Steward, either, without endangering Joan.

A guard's machine-gun began pounding out its song of death. Baxter, turning his head, could see Steward's three surviving partners in a shaft of light, helpless. The machine-gunner found his range, and they all folded into inert heaps.

Baxter got up, ran toward Steward and Joan. Steward flung the girl aside and fired.

Lead tore into Baxter's thigh, stopped him short. He flopped forward, his cheek grinding into cool sod. Pain burned through him, but he lifted his revolver.

Steward, driven completely mad, was running toward the blazing house when Baxter saved him for the State with a bullet. Steward's revolver left his hand and fell ten feet away.

A search-light stabbed the dark lawn, finally picked out Baxter. The girl ran to him with a little sob and bent over him.

"Oh, I'm so glad you aren't dead," she murmured. "Stopping those men was the most courageous thing I ever saw. I—I'll have my father take up your case with the State Board of Pardons."

Baxter tried to grin. "Unnecessary, Miss Dodge. I'm not a convict at all, just a State investigator."

"Oh!" Then the girl's full lips drooped, and Baxter knew she was thinking of her father.

"Is—is my father dead?" she cried suddenly.

"Don't worry," said a calm voice behind her. "I'm here, wounded a little but all right otherwise."

Warden Dodge, looking dignified despite the support of two guards, stepped into the light. "No. 7544," he said coldly, "you have some explaining to do."

"He's not a convict, Father," the girl broke in.

"Nonsense," Dodge snapped.

Baxter tried to get up, but pain held him.

"He saved me," protested the girl.

"Call the governor," said Baxter. "He'll tell you my job here is done, if you say your deputy was wounded or killed for trying to help the cons crush out."

"Deputy Warden Gardner?" said the warden incredulously. "You're out of your mind!" He turned to a third guard, who stood at one side. "Get some men and stretchers out here. And bring Gardner."

"I don't think he'll come," said Baxter. "I brought him down."

"What! You shot him?"

Baxter nodded shakily. "I recognized his gait and shape when he ran toward a watch tower after shooting a guard who had a machine-gun. But I'd have shot anybody for that."

Dodge shook his head.

"All right, don't believe me," said Baxter. "But I'll give you the facts." Briefly, then, he told about the unwarranted slugging of Steward by Gardner; about the loaded revolvers and McCall's job of changing cartridges.

"McCall," he added, "couldn't have been Steward's inside man because I'm still alive. He couldn't have risked letting me live to say he didn't follow orders."

"Do you know what you're saying?" demanded Dodge.

"Yes. I got suspicious of Gardner when I figured he probably slugged Steward to cover his friendly connections with him. And I was pretty sure of it

when Steward, after cussing about him, tried to talk me out of beating him up. Maybe Steward thought I'd kill Gardner—something that might have wrecked the whole scheme."

Half a dozen guards came. When they laid down their stretchers, McCall's bony face appeared. There was a purple bruise on his jaw, with a red cut running away from it.

"All accounted for, Warden," McCall reported, his voice slightly blurred. "We'll take you two to the hospital now."

"Did you send a letter to the governor?" Baxter asked.

"I phoned him last night. Why?"

Baxter looked at Dodge. "That's something we can easily check. It's going to prove McCall wasn't worried about getting involved in an investigation."

McCall said, "Gardner double-crossed me and everybody else by getting rid of my blanks and putting back some loaded cartridges."

"How did Gardner know about your plan, if I didn't?" the warden asked icily.

"It looks now like he was keeping an eye on the ventilating shaft where the guns were planted. He wasn't even supposed to be on that floor when I started substituting blanks for bullets, but he

saw me and came over." McCall wiped his moist face. "Anyway, I was so sure he was all right that I told him everything and asked for his help. I got it, all right—in the neck! Because no one else could have swapped the cartridges."

"And then Gardner told Steward that I was in on it," Baxter said.

"Is Gardner dead?" Dodge asked.

"That dirty lug is in hell, where he belongs!" McCall grunted savagely. "When I caught him sneaking toward the machine-gunner, he knocked me out with his rifle. And I'm pretty sure he was coming back to kill me when somebody shot him down. He and Steward must have figured on killing Baxter and me."

"I shot him. . . . He'll never use any more of Steward's dough. Why didn't you shoot him yourself?" Baxter asked.

"I was awake, but I couldn't move. Paralyzed, sort of."

Nausea and weakness hit Baxter then, and his eyes dimmed. With a little sigh he passed out. . . .

When he came to, everything seemed worth while. For Joan Dodge was sitting near his bed in a clean white room that looked and smelled like part of a hospital. And the soft expression in her liquid eyes, combined with a shy smile, told him she was waiting for him to get well.

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## THE AGE OF CRIME

The most recent "Uniform Crime Reports," published quarterly by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, shows that:

There were more arrests in 1938 throughout the country of persons aged twenty-one than of any other single age group. During 1937, age twenty-two showed the largest number of arrests.

During the period between 1932 to the middle of 1935, age nineteen was the group in which arrests most frequently occurred, but since then more arrests of

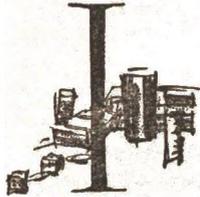
persons aged twenty-one and twenty-two have occurred. An additional change in the record for 1938 is that there were more arrests for age eighteen than for age nineteen.

One-half of all crimes against property (robbery, burglary, larceny, auto theft, embezzlement, fraud, forgery, counterfeiting, arson and receiving stolen property) during 1938 were committed by persons under twenty-five years of age.

# STRICTLY for SUCKERS

By STEWART STERLING

Murder's no practical joke—even to Broadway's toughest crowd



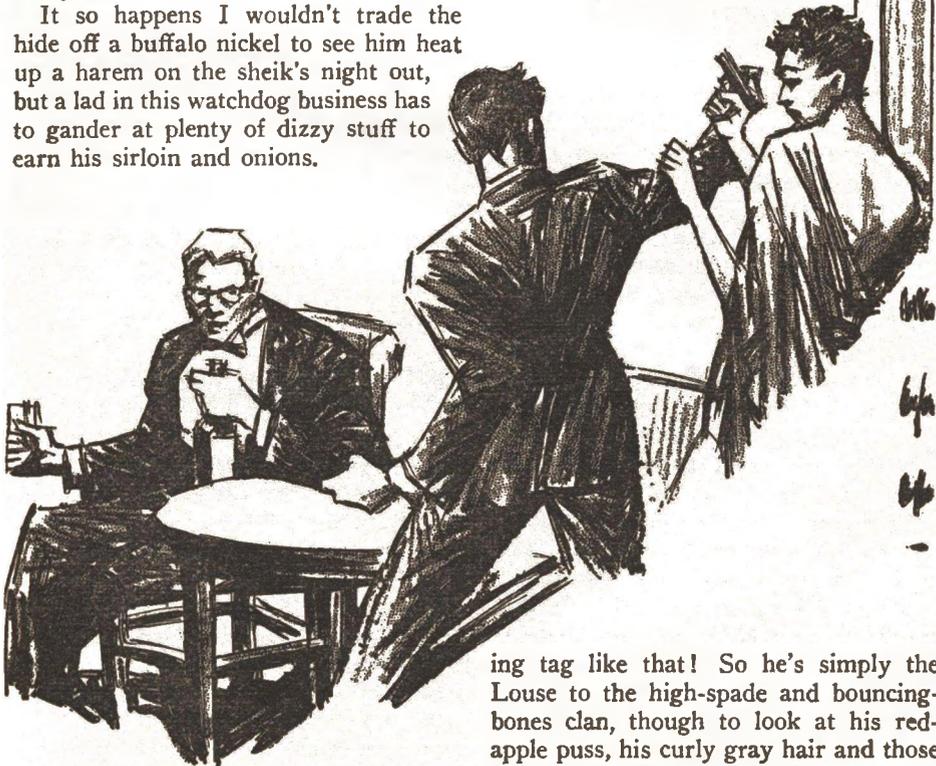
IN A WAY, it's a belly laugh—if you care for your humor laid out cold on a slab. Only last week, ten thousand people put coin on the line to see this glamour guy dish out his super sex-appeal. And last night he plays his final performance to an audience of one. Me.

But what a show! Right out of his Romeo routine to climax a curdler! At that, I got paid to watch him die; otherwise he'd have staged that last act absolutely alone.

It so happens I wouldn't trade the hide off a buffalo nickel to see him heat up a harem on the sheik's night out, but a lad in this watchdog business has to gander at plenty of dizzy stuff to earn his sirloin and onions.

Which was why I was sitting alone in room 804 of the Metropole Hotel about two-thirty this ayem, nursing along a beaker of brew, a pocketful of panatellas and a loaded Police Positive.

I am watch-dogging it for the Louse and the Louie. I am definitely a right guy. His real name is Stanislaus Kraddakapalous; show me the gambler who'd risk his gilt fillings on a jaw-break-



ing tag like that! So he's simply the Louse to the high-spade and bouncing-bones clan, though to look at his red-apple puss, his curly gray hair and those soft brown peepers behind their horn-

rim windshields, you'd never guess he runs the biggest crap game in town. In that black string tie and starched collar he looks more like a professional undertaker's mourner.

Now the Louse may not keep books exactly the way the revenue lugs would like; but he always keeps his nose clean. No cap-weights or geared dice, no house dough on the back line with a miss-out artist shooting against the customers. Of course, he is a floater; he has to shift his game every night to make it tough for stick-up heisters to locate him.

To make it still tougher, he lists me, for a hundred cookies per, to see everybody gets away from the game with whatever they win, if any. I don't rate the century on account of I am a Sherlock or a Philo or even a regular licensed eye. I never could make any sense out of chemistry or locate a killer by the places he dumps his cigarette ashes, and the only deductions I am good at have to do with these income tax blanks. The Louse gives me shirt-and-sock money because I am a practical guy who knows some of the angles and because I have a rep for not getting nervous when I smell powder burning.

By all right and reason, I shouldn't have had any serious trouble last night. It is not an open game, merely a group of top-billing show people celebrating the hundredth performance of "*All The World Loves—*"

From where I was sitting, across the corridor in 804, with my door open a couple of inches, I could hear a little laughing and horsing around once in a while, but nothing you could call out of line until this gunshot brings me up on my toes.

I am out in the hall before the echo stops, and though I put my ear against the door to 803, I can't hear a murmur. There is no one in the corridor and none of the doors along the line are opening, so I figure no outsiders have been alarmed. It is only a matter of seconds before I drag out the duplicate key to

803 the Louse gave me and get the door open.

The room is dark, but with the light behind me I can see someone sidling along the wall at my left. I reach for the light switch and somebody smashes a chair over my head. I duck just in time to save a fractured skull; with the same movement I take a flying tackle into the dark.

I crash into this punk I can't see, but I feel him, take my say-so. We hit the floor together with the busted pieces of the chair. I whale away at him with the muzzle of my gun instead of pulling the trigger, because there is always a chance in mix-ups like this that the lad who boffs me thinks I am a hijacker instead of a guard.

Anyhow, my sock doesn't do him much damage because he slugs me over the head again—this time a glancing blow with a beer bottle. That makes me sore. I yank his feet out from underneath him, pin him against the wall and hook a solid left to where his chin ought to be. It must have been his mouth, because I cut three knuckles and feel some teeth give; I am getting ready to send in my Sunday punch when something clips me behind the ear like a hammer and I fall flat on my face.

I am not quite out, because I can hear dim sounds way off in the distance and I sort of sense someone using me for a doormat and doing a fast exit. When my ears quit ringing and the fireworks stop exploding in my brain, I stumble to my feet and put the lights on.



**T**HE ROOM looks like something a bomb has been dropped on; table overturned, glasses smashed, bottles broken, chairs wrecked and two corpses stretched out stiff on the floor.

At least I think they are both dead, but a quick once-over shows me that my boss is unconscious but alive and that the other guy is conscious but nearly

checked out. I have never seen this Larry Del Grave before, though he is the biggest drawing card on Broadway and his profile is familiar enough to me, from the newspaper pictures.

Maybe he is supposed to be handsome in the rôle of the Great Seducer, but he isn't much to peer at now lying all twisted up on his side and groaning his guts out. The slick blond hair is all unstuck and the effect of the toothpaste teeth in the suntanned face is sort of spoiled by his contorted features.

He looks as if he is grinning, but I figure he can't feel so ha-ha on account of the bullet hole that had torn open the knot of his fancy four-in-hand and made his breathing sound like a cross between a kid blowing soap bubbles and a peanut-vendor's whistle.

I am wrong, though. He is laughing like crazy at some terrific gag. He looks up at me with his eyes kind of squinting as if he is trying hard to understand something that puzzles him. I lift him up, not that it is going to do him any good.

"Huh, ha," he burbles. "You can . . . tell 'em . . . the old one—" he gasps and whistles for air.

"What old one?" I ask him, feeling a bit queer playing straight-man to a dying actor.

He chuckles again, as if he is giggling and gargling at the same time. "The old one, you remember." It's a wrench for him to finish. "I didn't . . . know it . . . was loaded."

Let me wise you, there's nothing funny about watching a man laugh himself to death!

The final spasm leaves him with a grimace like that clown that sings the solo while his heart is breaking. Blood is drooling, drop by drop, from the corner of his mouth, and it is the only thing that moves in all of room 803.

I pull myself together after making sure his breath doesn't leave any moisture on the back of my watch. The first thing I naturally look for is a gun, but

the only one on the premises is in my own hand.

On the floor, in a corner where they had fallen when the table had tipped over, are a couple of leopard cubes, but there is positively no currency in sight anywhere.

Now the Louse does not operate a game without plenty of folding money on the cloth, so I figure there is something screwy. A kill like Del Grave's, with everybody taking a powder in a hurry, does not seem like a legitimate hold-up, if you can call it that.

I take a quick gander in the closet to make sure no one is lurking about to hang another clout on top of the headache I already have; then I grab the phone and ask for Mike Rubin.

Mike is the snoop-shoe who keeps the Metropole's good name untarnished by demanding to see the license after the bellhop reports a couple have checked in with a suit-case full of old phone books. He is no Einstein, but smart enough.

"Mike," I say. "This is Vince Mallie in 803."

"What goes on, pal?" he growls back, hoping nothing has happened to break up his three ayem nap on the mezzanine.

"Nothing to call out the reserves for. You might put a collar on any cluck who seems anxious to get out of the hotel minus his benny or topper. Just do that and don't run a fever and I'll tell you all about it later."

I'd seen the polo coats and chester-fields still hanging in the closet, as well as a shelf full of assorted felts and shinies; it was a cold night and anybody trying to scam out in a tuxedo would look a little silly.

I go in the bathroom and try the connecting door to 801; it's locked on the other side. I click the light switch and get a load of myself in the mirror. My left eye is a trifle purple around the edges, but otherwise I am intact. Except there is an ugly smear right in the middle of my green and gray plaid cravat. If there is anything that burns me up more than a spot on a new tie, I

don't want to hear about it. I look at it close, though, and it isn't blood. It's red ink or something.

It must have got on the tie when I was holding Del Grave up from the floor. Sure enough, there is a blob of scarlet in the stiff's left hand. It's liquid paint, the sort actors use when they have a call for prop-gore on the stage. I found the capsule under the table.

Exactly what a gent who has just spilled a gallon or so of his own blood would want with a fistful of make-believe corpuscles I can't dope out.

By now, the Louse is beginning to moan like a guy coming out of ether; someone has laid a turkey egg on top of his gray dome and his face is the color of stale oysters. A pitcher of ice water down the back of his neck, a half-tumbler of rye down his throat, plus a little slapping around and he sits up, spitting fire.

He has some trouble focussing his glims on the coffin candidate; when he gets the picture clear, he gulps like he is going to be sick to his stomach.

"Who . . . did that, Vince?"

"Don't give me any double-talk, boss. You were here when it happened."

He started to shake his head, put both hands up to make sure he still had his hair:

"I wasn't, Vince. I'd just gone to see a man about a pup when I heard the shot. When I opened the lavatory door to get back in here, somebody dropped the ceiling on me. I didn't see anybody."

I made him sit down in a chair where he couldn't see the body; it gave him the hiccoughs or something.

"How many were bucking their luck when all this happened? Beside you and Del Grave?"

"Three," says the Louse. "Roy Zara, Meyer Levinson and Hipper Dipper."

I know all of them. Zara is pit-leader for the "*All The World Loves—*" orchestra; Levinson is the composer who writes the hits and Harry Frinkey, billed as Hipper Dipper, is the most comical cluck in the world, in my private

opinion. Now which one started the argument?

"I didn't hear any argument, Vince. Zara was heavy loser, maybe two or three gees, but he wasn't beefing about it. Levinson was making six and seven passes in a row and letting it ride; he had a nice stack of bills piled up, but he acted as if it hurt him to win. This one," he indicates Del Grave with a thumb over his shoulder, "was working up to a swell snootful, but nothing nasty about it."

I tell him what I run into when I unlock 803. He is more concerned with the loss of the shekels than with Del Grave's death.

"I can understand a fellow shooting another, Vince. There are things that might make any man blow his top and turn killer. But I would bet my last ten years of life that none of those men is a thief."

"You would lose, boss. Somebody snatched that lettuce; if you think he'll tear it up and throw it out of the window to welcome the King and Queen, you're slipping. I'm looking for a lad with a pocketful of engravings and I got a hunch he is not far away."

The Louse sighs and reaches for the only quart of rye that hasn't been shattered in the mêlée, and starts to tilt the bottle when a girl screeches loud enough so you could hear her in Newark.

She stands there in the doorway, staring down at the dead man as if she is seeing a ghost; maybe she is at that.

I recognize her even out of make-up; which doesn't exactly rate me as sensational, because she is generally admitted to be the best-looking frill on Neon Alley. Claire Marsh, the dancing darling of "*All The World Loves—*". Black hair, sloe eyes and curves that keep the speculators doing O.K. with the first six rows. Fire on two feet, or money refunded.

She opens a rhinestone handbag and comes up with a pearl-handled hammerless, one of those damned things that are too small to be any real good but

too big to overlook. She points it at the Louse, very calmly.

"You shot him," she whispers. "You killed my husband."

The boss doesn't even drop the whiskey bottle when she pulls the trigger.



NE REASON is the Louse is too paralyzed to dodge; the other is I slam Claire's hand up so the slug knicks plaster from the ceiling.

"Give the toy to papa," I say, getting a grip on her wrist. "Give nicely, or papa will break your beautiful white arm."

She lets loose of the gadget; I break it and find one empty in the chamber. I put the cartridges in my watch pocket, just in case. The pearl-handled shooter couldn't have blasted that big hole in Del Grave's throat, of course, but I hate to have loaded pacifiers around where someone might get excited.

"You got a rush of wrong notions to the brain, Miss Marsh," I tell her. "Mister Kraddakapalous here didn't bump your boy friend."

"Then you killed him, you filthy big bruiser," she starts to yell even louder than before.

Now I am fifty pounds under the heavyweight class; I have no mashed potato for a schnozzle and no cauliflower on my ears; also, I take a Turkish as often as the next lad, so there is no call for the dame to get abusive. But I don't cuff her around until she starts to claw my eyes out with those needle-pointed crimson fingernails. Even then I am loath to clip her on that lovely chin but neither do I feel like posing for a skin-grafting job on my smush.

She is wearing one of those brushed-up hair-dos with a mop of jet curls on top of her head. I reach out and grab a fistful; try to hold her off at arm's length.

We wrestle around in a clinch that gives me accidentally a hand-hold on

parts of her anatomy which no gentleman should clutch without special permission; also a deep drag on some very persuasive perfume, the sort they advertise with a picture of a hammock, a full moon and a name like "Night of Naughtiness" or something. There is positively no doubt that what it is she has got nearly gets me.

She is whining now, for sympathy; but she offsets this tender appeal by kicking me in the shins with those blunt instruments they call Cuban heels. After collecting two jabs that nearly splinter the bone, I jerk sudden on her top-knot and really start the tears streaming from her eyes.

"Calm down, babe," I warn her. "Or you'll need a wig in your next show."

She puts her hands over her face and shakes with convulsive sobs. I let go of her hair. She throws herself on the floor beside the dead man.

"Larry," she moans. "Larry, darling, why did they do it? I'd have given them all the money they wanted, Larry, if they'd only have let you live!"

"Listen, sister," I close the door and put my back against it, wondering why the John Laws have not busted in on our little party before this—we are making more noise than a hurricane—"neither of us murdered your husband, if he was your husband."

"We were secretly married in Atlantic City last summer," she whimpers.

"You don't have to prove it to me, Miss Marsh. I just want you to get straight on this shooting business. I'm Vince Mallie; it's my job to see this sort of thing don't happen at Mister Kraddakapalous's affairs."

"I'm terribly sorry. Seeing Larry like this—"

"Sure, sure. That's what I want to know about. How come you show up here, anyway? This was supposed to be an invitation meet, for men only."

She stops blubbering and wipes the mascara out of the corner of her lamps.

"Larry told me. Just a few hours ago. He said I was to come to this room after

half-past two and I would be in on the—" there is a little catch in her voice, "the biggest joke of the year."

That throws me; in the first place it had to be true, because up to an hour before the game began, no one knew where the get-together was to be. Not even me. She had to get the address from Larry or one of the "*All The World Loves*—" crowd.

In the second place, this Joe-Miller joke talk checked with Del Grave's dying words. Imagine a cluck with a sense of comedy like that; wanting his wife to pop in to see him turned into an order for the embalmer. Because if she had got there five minutes earlier, she would have been in time to watch him take the Big Dive. And what sort of screwball set-up is it when the victim knows the time-table for his own demise?

All this time, the Louse is trying to make some sense out of this, too, but he gives up and goes to work on the rye without benefit of ice or fizzy. The canary is leaning against the wall, her eyes closed as if she is suffering great pain. She is sort of careless about her clothes and her disclose, if you follow me, but this is certainly no time for a gentleman to be straining his optics, and besides I have a job of work to do.

Somewhere in the Metropole, unless Mike Rubin has slipped up, which I am pretty certain he hasn't, is a murderer. And two other guys who know who this killer is. They made too tricky a get-away not to have planned it in advance; so I figure they have not gone very far.

Add that all up, multiply it by Del Grave's dying words, and the prop blood on the corpse's hand and then subtract five or six thousand seeds that must have been lying around on the table—and what did I get? What I had got so far was a punch in the eye, a smack on the head and an armful of tiger woman.

I am clamping down on the accelerator to my gray matter when there is a knock at the door. A very mean voice calls, "What's wrong in there? Open up!"



WHATEVER I do, I get marked for an error. If this inquisitive lad turns out to be a Little Boy Blue, and I let him in, we are all sunk. The Louse loses a lot of clients who won't play with a gambler who lands on page one; the frill collects some smelly publicity and I will rate a smudge on the precinct blotter which is pure poison to my business, where I have to kid along the coppers every now and again.

On the other hand, if I stall too long, somebody will be sending the riot squad around. So I whisper to the boss:

"Play stinko, quick. You're as stewed as the spuds in a Dublin dinner. Holler at me; gimme the Bronx razzo, but make it sound as if you meant it and keep it going."

The Louse nods that he understands. He has been coming through the rye pretty fast anyway and that helps. He begins to bawl me out in very untidy language. He calls a spade a dirty so-and-so of a shovel, with mud on it.

Then I grab the stiff by the shoulders and drag him into the bathroom and leave him there with his head propped up against a porcelain pedestal. I pull the dancing dollie up on her feet:

"Get this, sister. If the lug outside that door sniffs any real trouble in here, you are in a very blue spot. Your husband has been shot; no one knows who did it. You have a gun; you're up here at a stag party where you've no business to be. Think what a Sunday supplement editor could do with that!"

She is scared, all right. I can see the whites of her eyes all around the pupils while I am firing this at her. I don't stop to explain that I am more concerned about putting the cuffs on Del Grave's murderer than in saving his widow from a scandal, but I am pressed for time. The guy outside the door is doing everything but use a battering ram.

"What'll I do? Hide?" She starts for the closet.

"No-no-no," I say, very soft so no one could hear me above the Louse's fine, steady stream of cursing. "Go into your song and dance. You didn't mean to stir up a rumpus between us; you didn't know the Louse was so jealous; you think I'm not worth his little finger. Spread it on thick. But keep buzzing around the Louse. Let me handle the visiting fireman."

I put on my Dempsey scowl, unlock the door, open it and snarl, "Whatsa idea alla racket out here?"

The dapper little man at the threshold is about to have kittens; his mustache is quivering with rage and his beady little eyes are hot with indignation.

"We've had complaints of shooting," he squeaks.

"You've had complaints!" I plant my dukes on my hips and stand straddle-legged in the doorway, blocking him from seeing too much of the shambles. "You oughta be thankful if that's all you had. I'm coming down with a bad case of leaping meemies, trying to keep them from setting fire to the joint. Those two are cuckoo."

Behind me Miss Marsh and the Louse are laying it on thick and fast; he is working back to my distant ancestry and she is alternately pleading with him to forget everyone but her and explaining that I got her up there under false pretenses!

"We don't allow this sort of thing." The little man stands on tiptoe to look over my shoulder.

"That's a niftie, mister! I wouldn't allow it, either, if I could get rid of the kilkenney cats. Who are you?"

He produces a pasteboard saying he is Milton J. Amend, assistant manager, Hotel Metropole. I read it, reach out and pump his hand.

"You may be a manager to your own-ers," I clap him on the back as if I was a shill at a street pitch, "but you're a life-saver to me. Help me stagger the unkdray into his room."

He is still trying to twist his neck in

a knot so he can see into 803 while I am giving him the bum's rush to 801.

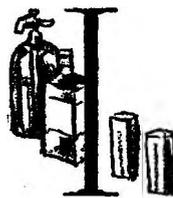
I have been honing to get in the adjoining room of the suite ever since I find the bathroom door locked on the 801 side. Because it is a cinch that somebody left, through that bathroom, after Del Grave got burned down. Otherwise the light in the lavatory would have been on, when I crashed in the room. The Louse certainly left it on when he came out and one will get you fifty if he put it out as he was going down for the count.

So I figure someone is still in 801; there is a chance all three of the missing are using it for a hide-out. Except for a couple of minutes after the canary got hysterical, I could have seen anybody who tried to get out of 801.

"You have a pass key, Mister Amend? That's the ticket! Open her up and I'll toss this slap-happy in bed and let him doze it off."

The manager isn't quite sure about it but I am keeping up a line of chatter and standing close behind him so he can't get back to 803.

He is expecting 801 to be dark and empty; he must get quite a jolt when he gets the door open. There is a man in his shirt-sleeves, crouching on the window ledge, getting ready to take off on an eight-story jump and I don't notice any parachute strapped to his back.



AM too far away to take him and I have a limited experience with people who like to go against the law of gravity. But I don't have to be a brain to realize that the only way to stop this suicide is to get his mind off himself long enough to let one of us put the clamps on him. So I holler, "Del Grave, Del Grave!" as loud as I can.

The lad on the sill swivels his head around; it is Meyer Levinson. How he managed to get his six-feet-three skeleton out on that narrow ledge I cannot

figure, but the desperate grimness of his big, ugly mouth and the frantic light in his sad, blue eyes tells me he is not pulling a phony. His bald head is shining with sweat and his big bat-ears and that cerise scarf he has on makes him look like a scarecrow in a cornfield. He is way off balance, now; only the grip of his bony hands on the sill keep him from joining the obituaries.

Amend, the hotel manager, makes a rush for the window; I stick out a shoe and trip him so he takes a header.

"Leave him alone," I growl. "Mister Levinson knows what he is doing."

Levinson squints at me suspiciously. "Larry," he says, and has to wet his lips with his tongue before he can say anymore, "Larry's gone."

"Not yet," I stretch a point. "You ought to see him, before he goes." I couldn't be sure if he had been key-holing on 803 and knew Del Grave was cold meat. "Unless you're afraid."

"Afraid?" He looks blank for a second. "Yes. I'm afraid. But not of that." He indicates the hundred foot drop an inch behind his heels.

"Of course not," I mutter. It gives me queer sensation in the middle of my appetite just to think about that dizzy drop, but I have to stooge for him, don't I? Here is one of the greatest musical geniuses in the land and a very popular person, too, getting ready to smear himself over the sidewalk. "You ought to be careful about who's below. You wouldn't want to hurt anybody."

"No," he agrees and turns to look down. I am waiting for this and I take a sprint start and lunge for his scrawny neck. He hears me coming and nearly topples off trying to wriggle out of my reach. But I hook my fingers onto that wacky cerise necktie and brace myself. Levinson waves his arms around like a windmill; I make a stab and hang onto a wrist.

He comes in off the sill, flopping like a fish on a river bank. And a forty-five automatic spills out of his hip-pocket to the carpet.

I pick it up by the smoky end, use my handkerchief to cover the butt while I investigate. There is one empty case in the magazine; by the smell of the muzzle, the heater has been used within an hour. Unless I am badly off center, this is what the newspapers will term "the lethal weapon."

Levinson picks himself up, wearily; goes over to the bed and sits on it. Amend is twittering around like a damned sparrow, wanting to know why Levinson tries to give his hotel a bad reputation, where Del Grave is; so on and forth.

I wrap the automatic up for Exhibit A.

"Yours?" I don't have to ask; I can see the answer in the composer's eyes.

"Mine. And it's the one Larry was shot with."

"Oh. You didn't jerk the trigger?"

He shakes his head.

"Who did?"

He does a ditto on the headshake. Amend is getting white around the gills as he realizes there is a murdered man practically under his nose.

"The killer's finger-prints will be on it, Mister Levinson. It's only a matter of hours before we know. Might as well take it the easy way."

"Mine," he mumbles. "My prints. They'll be on it. That's all."

"If someone else had this forty-five in his hand, his prints will be on it, too. Under yours in spots, naturally. But good enough to take off, in other places. You might save a lot of trouble if you put a name to him."

The muscles of Levinson's jaw are all knotted up; his lips are bloodless, he is pressing them together so hard.

"You'll have to be held as an accessory," I get up and motion him to go out in the hall. "And we'll pick up Zara in an hour or so."

"It wasn't—" he snaps out and then thinks better of it.

"Oh, then it was Hipper Dipper, huh?"

The musician marches into 803 with-

out another word. He keeps his eyes away from the corner where Del Grave was lying before I lugged him into the lavatory. Miss Marsh is as astonished to see him as he is to find her there, but they do not say anything to each other.

I go over to the Louse, who looks as if he has been sleeping on a junk pile for a week. I hand him my Police Positive. "Keep an eye on this bird, boss. Don't let him get close to a window; he might fly away. I'm going hunting for Harry Frinkey."

"Frinkey?" The manager was hopping up and down with rage at the condition of 803, but even more excited at the thought of harboring a homicide suspect. "Did you say Frinkey? I checked in a Mister Frinkey tonight. In 705."

"No fooling." Imagine a stupe who has the most humorous man in the world in his hotel and does not even recognize him! "Let's truck down to the seventh floor."

Before I depart, I frisk Levinson. The heavy winner has no important money on him, anywhere.

When Amend and I get to the door, the dancer chirps:

"If you feel like jumping out the window, Meyer, I'll be glad to open it for you."



**A**MEND and I take the stairs three at a time; the manager muttering to himself like a straight-jacket subject; me with a very crummy taste on my tongue. Because, if it turns out the Hipper Dipper gave Del Grave a dose of lead medicine, the comedian will crisp in the chair or maybe, if he gets the breaks, he will merely go nuts playing stir solitaire. In either case, a large group of guys who take their laughing straight from the stomach, will miss him like hell. Harry Frinkey can dish out the old chuckleberries like nobody; I hate to be the

mugg who shoves him out of circulation. . . .

But business is business and a watchdog can't be choosy about who he puts the bite on. So I march in 705, Amend creeping along behind me like a quarter-back behind his interference.

The room is as empty as Mother Hubbard's frigidaire. A gladstone bag is open on the bed; some black pajamas and bed slippers say the Hipper Dipper planned to sleep off his bout with the bones.

There is no liquor in sight, and only a couple of cigarette stubs. But on the night table by the head of the bed there is a pack of flat paper matches all burned out together. None of the matches has been torn from the pack. That gives me a memory nudge. I peer around on the table and on the carpet but draw blank.

Then I spot the little drawer where they tuck those Gideon Bibles. In the drawer, I find what I am after—a spoon. With a little brown stain in the hollow of the bowl. I don't need to sniff at it to catch that peculiar odor, but I do, anyway.

"Snow," I explain to Amend. "Used this to melt up a mix for his joy needle."

"Cocaine?" he squeals, astonished.

"Right, dope." I don't mind which way he takes my reply. "The spoon's still warm. That means Frinkey was in here, taking a ski-ride, in the last three-four minutes."

I go to the open window and look up. 705 is close enough under 801 so Frinkey probably heard Levinson doing his ledge juggling and got the jeebies for fear it is his turn next.

Amend has a brain-wave. "He couldn't have used the elevators; they're being watched. P'raps he sneaked into one of the service closets."

It was worth a look-see. We comb the cleaning closet, the broom-alcove and the linen-room in that order. We find nothing except a heap of soiled sheets and pillowslips on the floor of the linen-room. The manager hisses he will fire

every maid on the floor for leaving this stuff out of the laundry. It seems to be a rule that all dirty linen must be in the hamper before employees go off duty in the evening.

"Where do they keep this hamper?" I inquire.

"Why," he seems startled, "out by the service elevator. You don't imagine—"

I tell him imagination is strictly for suckers; I have a hard-rock diploma and a yen for solid facts.

We locate the green-enameled metal hamper. It is about five feet tall, three feet square and open on top; it stands on a low-wheeled trolley ready to roll on the down-car. I tilt it up on one side.

"Somebody must of dumped the plates and knives in with the dirty table cloths, fella. This thing feels like it is packed with pig-iron." I put my shoulder to it and heave. It topples off the trolley and hits the cement floor with a smack that must have jarred the janitor in the sub-basement.

A heap of rumpled cloth spills out; inside the mound of sheets and towels gleams a pair of bright and frightened eyes.

I peel off the coverings and am I sorry for that Hipper Dipper! He is higher than an altitude record; the drug has dilated his pupils and made the muscles in his roly-poly face twitch like a frog on a stove-lid. His red hair is all stringing down over his face; his snappy yellow and red butterfly bow is untied and he has a set of shakes that puts Brother Vitus in the also-ran class.

"What were you doing in there?" Amend is backed up against the elevator, scared there is going to be shooting. "How did you get in there?"

"The maid just gathered him up and threw him away, dummy. How do you think he got there?"

The manager puts on an injured air and sulks in the background.

Frinkey doesn't offer any argument; he is so flabby and limp when I lead him up the stairs to the eighth, that I feel like

the warden lugging a condemned man to the cooker.

"You shot Del Grave?" I ask as a matter of form.

"Yuh. I shot him." His voice quavers, uncertainly.

"I'm no flatfoot floogie, Mister Frinkey. I'm just a hired hand the Louse pays to guard the game. So if there's anything I can do to make it easier—"

Tears are streaming down his face, but he is staring straight in front of him, his cheek muscles jumping and jerking.

"I see you on the stage, many's the time," I add, figuring he will know I am pulling for him. "To me, you rate."

"I shot him," he goes on, as if he is in a trance. "But it wasn't my fault." He turns to me as if he doesn't expect to be believed. "I didn't know it was a real bullet."

I remember Del Grave's curtain line and the crack the girl made about the biggest jest of the year. "What were you doing? Playing cops and robbers?"

"Yes. It was a practical joke, that's all."

"Your lawyers will have a very tough time finding twelve good men who will split their sides over it."

"It's the truth. We all thought the thing was full of blanks. Larry was in on the frame-up. We were going to scare the pants off Meyer Levinson who gets deathly sick when he sees blood." He shivers all over, though it's over seventy in the stairwell.

"We arranged to fake a quarrel. Larry was to claim I'd been cheating, and I was supposed to resent it and fire at him point-blank. Larry planned to fall across the table and splash some red across his shirt front. Then Zara and I were to beat it into 801 and leave Meyer with Larry." He laced his fingers together to keep them from quivering. "It didn't—come out that way. Larry is dead and I'm going to get mine."

The elevator door interrupts him; it clangs open and the house dick, Mike Rubin, stamps out, dragging another lug with him.

"Here," he hollers, "here's your run-away buddy."



MIKE'S FACE is the color of raw beef; his tie is a little on the soiled side, but you should get a close-up of Roy Zara.

He must of been run through a mangle. He has a cut on one of his thin cheeks; his nose is swollen and he needs a couple of new chewers in the front row. His coat collar is torn and that silk shirt with the freak long-collar points is just something for the ashcan.

"I catch him trying to run to the nearest exit," growls Mike. "I hadda teach him to walk, like the sign says. He had a wad of dough on him big as a house."

Up to now, the only thing I had against Roy Zara is those black drapes they call Windsor ties, which label him a phony from scratch. A crook can have his map altered as easy as Europe these days, so it's no bargain being a camera eye. Me, I play a different system. I never forget a tie or the neck it's on. And right now, I remember brushing against something soft and silky when I take that nose dive a ways back. It must of been Zara's arty neck piece.

No doubt about it; this mussed-up musician put the dot on my eye. Those teeth he lacks match the cuts on my dukes. The dough-ray-me Mike took off him was probably the ducats he picked up off the table when Del Grave was shot. Zara'd been big loser; probably he figured this was a chance to get it back.

I shove Hipper Dipper ahead of me into 803 and Mike drags the orchestra leader after us.

The Louse is sitting on the sofa with the quart in one clutch, my gun in the other. The gun is pointed at Levinson, who is sitting with his elbows on his knees, studying his shoe-tips. He glances up when we come in, but goes right back to inspecting his shoes.

The frill stares at Zara's mashed-up face and goes two shades paler under the new make-up she's put on. She shrinks away from Hipper Dipper as if he had smallpox. The comedian doesn't even know she's in the room; and Zara is too bug-eyed, trying to see where Del Grave's body has been put, to pay her any attention.

I point to the bathroom. "Peek in there on the tile, Mike."

The big gumshoe gets a glimful and turns green around the gills. "I better call the wagon and put away the dog who done that."

"Keep your shorts on, fella. The Medical Examiner would only mark him dead on arrival and that's no scoop. The homicide squad would just tie us all in tanglefoot and mumble in their long gray beards about expecting to make an arrest within twenty-four hours."

"Can you do better, Vince?"

"I can take a crack at it." I produce the automatic. "Now this is the heater that croaked Del Grave. It belongs to the long drink of water acting moody over there on the couch. Name is Meyer Levinson."

"Did Levinson shoot him?" Mike asks.

"According to Mister Frinkey, here," I give Hipper Dipper a dig in the ribs, "he is the bright boy who held the shooter in Del Grave's puss and tickled the trigger. Mister Frinkey says it's all a mistake; he thought the gun was stuffed with blanks."

"Anyone who would point a pistol at a pal, press the button and call it accidental," puts in the Louse, who by this time is plastered right up to the ceiling, "would stab you in the back and claim he was only sharpening his knife."

Hipper Dipper clears his throat, nervously. "It was a gag. We were ribbing Levinson."

Mike snorts disgustedly, so I fill in some of the details for him:

"It seems Levinson gets crawly when he sees blood; the boys figured he'd do

nip-ups if the gun went boom and Del Grave fell down and spilled a lot of red paint on his shirt-front."

"Didn't you ever hear of a practical joke before?" snarls Zara, nasty-like.

"They got one up-river," Mike comes back. "Gives you the hot-foot in a great big way."

"What I am getting at," I keep right on, "is this: How come one cartridge in this automatic had the sting left in it?"

"The gun was in Levinson's overcoat." Zara swears at Mike, who is giving him the old knuckles-in-the-neck treatment. "We knew Meyer kept one there for fear of a hold-up. So I went to the closet, while Mister Kraddakapalous was rolling the dice. I took the loaded cartridges out of the gun and put them in my overcoat pocket."

"Sure you got 'em all?" I ask.

"Every single one. Then I filled the magazine with a clip of blanks I brought with me."

"Took the gun with you and slipped it to Frinkey, huh?" I am trying to punch a hole in his story.

"No. I put it back in Levinson's coat. Then I gave the high-sign to Frinkey that everything was set."

"Which pocket did you put it back in, Zara?"

"Same one I took it out of. The left."

I punch Frinkey again; he is all over the twitches now but is getting glassy-eyed. I don't want him to fall apart, just yet.

"How about it, Hipper Dipper? You went and got the gun out of Levinson's coat when you were ready to spring this frame-up?"

"Yes." The funny man sounds as if he is very sleepy. "That was how it was."

"Remember which pocket you found it in?"

"Right hand."

Zara curses him but Mike gives the musician the elbow twist and rumbles: "So far as I can make out this wacky talk, all these guys is guilty, Vince.

They conspire to do a deed which results fatal—"

"No." It is Levinson. He gets to his feet slowly and he is breathing as if he is suffering a lot. "There was no conspiracy. Neither Frinkey nor Zara had anything to do with it. I overheard them talking about the joke. I slipped in the closet and put back one of the loaded cartridges that Zara'd taken out."

It sounds screwy to me. "Why'd you do it?" I inquire.

Levinson swings around to face Miss Marsh. She gives him the stony glare.

"Claire knows," the composer says, coolly. "I—I was in love with her."

He staggers as if he is blind drunk; puts out a hand as if to steady himself on the Louse's shoulder. Instead he snatches the gun away from the boss. Before I can get to him, Levinson opens his mouth, sticks the muzzle between his teeth and fires!



HAT tears it.

Amend rushes out of the room, screaming for the cops; the Louse chases after him to see can he keep the manager quiet. I lock the door. Mike throws a coat over Levinson's body. The frill is whimpering in a corner, like a whipped puppy.

"That winds up the wake," says Mike.

"Like hell it does." I go over to the closet. "Levinson was lying, except maybe about falling for the dame. He didn't switch those cartridges." I am still holding the automatic. "This model is an eight-shot. If you took eight loaded shells out, Zara, and put eight duds in, then there ought to be eight slugs in your overcoat now. Which is your ben-ny?"

"Polo-coat." The orchestra leader is panicky, now.

I feel in the pocket of the camel-hair. Seven shells, all with steel-jacketed bullets.

"One missing," I announce. The room

is quiet as a morgue. "It's my idea," I go on, "that the person who substituted that missing cartridge for a blank, is hanging onto the extra blank."

"Let's frisk 'em," snarls Mike.

"Let's," I agree.

Mike starts to turn Zara's pockets inside out and Frinkey waits for me to give him the touch system; so the only person who is expecting my next move is the frill.

I snatch her handbag, tear it open. It takes two seconds for me to come up with that dummy shell. The babe makes a grab for it, but I shove her away and I am not so polite about it as I might be.

"You were the wisey who switched the slug for the blank," I tell her. "You were hiding behind the overcoats in that closet, all the time this monkey business about the cartridges was going on."

"You're a liar," she screams. "I've never been near the closet." She yanks a diamond bar-pin off her dress, jabs at my eyes with the point. I twist her wrist until she drops the pin on the floor. Mike, Zara and Frinkey are too flabbergasted to do anything but stare.

"I might believe you, Miss Marsh, if you hadn't left such a trail of perfume in there. First time I open the closet door, I sniff it, but it took me a while to get around to wondering why the place should smell like a boudoir when there were only men's coats in there. That was before you were supposed to have shown up here, at all."

I get the skirt quieted down; she sees the rough stuff won't get her anywhere, so she turns on the weepers.

"You fooled me at first," I explain to her, "when you put on that wailing-wall act, after you saw Del Grave lying there on the floor. Then it bothered me that you were so certain he was forever past the Pearlies, even before you got close to him."

"You must be crazy," she hangs her head and sobs like her heart is breaking, "accusing me of murdering my husband, when—when Meyer Levinson's already confessed he did it."

"I'll tell you why Levinson claimed he did it." I put a fist under her chin, make her look at me. Her eyes are dry; also they are blazing with hate. "Levinson did love you. And he knew you'd done the double-crossing with the cartridges. He was afraid you'd be found out; decided the best thing he could do would be to take the rap himself. He tried it once before, by jumping out the window."

"Maybe Levinson saw her hiding behind them coats," suggests Mike. "But why didn't Zara and Frinkey see her? And how does she get in and out of the closet without everybody getting wise?"

Zara doesn't speak up and Frinkey, the world's greatest comedian, is standing there with his eyes shut and tears streaming down his face, but not making a sound.

"Zara was probably too busy fixing the gun, to notice anything. I wouldn't be surprised if Frinkey did spot her, Mike. She came in through 801, the room Larry had taken next door when the gag was planned. She must have waited in the little boys' room, while Larry was having a drink with the Louse in 801 before the others got here. And she came out of the closet after I'd busted into the room. Zara'd turned out the light; he and I were doing a rough-and-tumble on the floor."

I rubbed a bump on my head. "Just to make sure I wouldn't fix Zara's wagon and come chasing after her, she beamed me with a beer bottle. Then I figure she had the gall to hide in 804, my room, right across the hall, until she heard me talking to the Louse. Then she rushes in, as if she'd just stepped off the elevator."

Mike let go of Zara. The musician walked over to the frill.

"He's telling the truth, Claire. You meant Larry to die! You've been trying to get rid of him for months so you could get your hooks into Hipper Dipper. Another thing, Larry told me about your urging him to take out that big insurance—"

She slapped at him, viciously. "You leave Harry Frinkey out of this, you scabby little—"

Frinkey stops her. He doesn't open his eyes and he doesn't stop crying, but says, very quiet:

"It doesn't make any difference, Claire." He has a hard time finishing. "It's all over, anyway."

Mike is bewildered. "Can you tie that, Vince? All this just because the dame is nuts about one guy and married to another!"

"Oh, no," I say. "She could have gotten a divorce, but easy, if she wanted it that way. But then she'd have no share in Del Grave's big insurance."

Zara spits out: "Are you right! She's the gold-diggingest little — that ever broke a decent man's heart. It was the insurance she was after, all right. Larry sure had plenty of it."

That makes sense, all around, but I am having a little difficulty looking at it from a strictly reasonable angle. The babe is trying a new tack.

She throws her arms around my neck and sobs:

"Don't let them hurt me, please don't let them." She even gives me a little of the suggestive knee. I might have relented, because I am a sucker for the old flesh appeal and, anyway, it is going to be tough to convict her of first degree, but the bulls are banging at the door and Mike is letting them in. . . .

So I push her away and say: "Save that leg-art for the prosecutor, kid. Even in court, the show has to go on. You'll need all the pretty pink things you've got if you're going to keep that cute figure out of a numbered uniform."

Then the cops came in. It is about time.

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## F. B. I. REPORTS ON 1938

There was a decrease in the number of murders, manslaughters, rapes and other felonious assaults in 1938 compared with 1937. However, the 1938 rape figure is higher than for all preceding years of this decade, except 1937. Counter-balancing that figure, though, is this datum: The criminal homicide figure for 1938 is the lowest of the past ten years.

The number of offenses of burglary during 1938 was lower than any year in the F.B.I. table with the exception of 1936.

Murder occurs more frequently during the month of July, and yet the average number of aggravated assault cases is highest during the month of August. These facts are based on a compilation made of reports received from ninety-three cities with more than one hundred thousand inhabitants.

The F.B.I. estimates that there are twenty murders a day in the United States; one hundred twenty-two cases of aggravated assault; twenty-three cases of rape and twelve cases of negligent manslaughter.

The official report says about women and crime:

"Women were represented by 37,780 (6.8 percent) of the 554,376 arrest records examined. The remaining 516,596 (93.2 percent) represented men. The number of men arrested was larger than the number of women arrested for all types of crimes except commercialized vice. However, a comparison of the figures representing an average group of 1,000 men arrested with those for an average group of 1,000 women arrested indicates that there were more women than men charged with murder, assault, and the use of narcotic drugs."

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