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IN THE  
OPEN"**

By  
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JOHN  
DALY**

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**RACE WILLIAMS**  
story



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JOSEPH T. SHAW, Editor

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OCT., 1933

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# BLACK MASK

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We never consider we are immodest in speaking of **BLACK MASK** stories and our own honest conviction that they are the best stories of their kind to be found anywhere, any time, at any price.

You see, in so doing we are speaking, not of ourselves, but of the works of **BLACK MASK** writers, men who have identified their names with **BLACK MASK**, and the magazine with themselves.

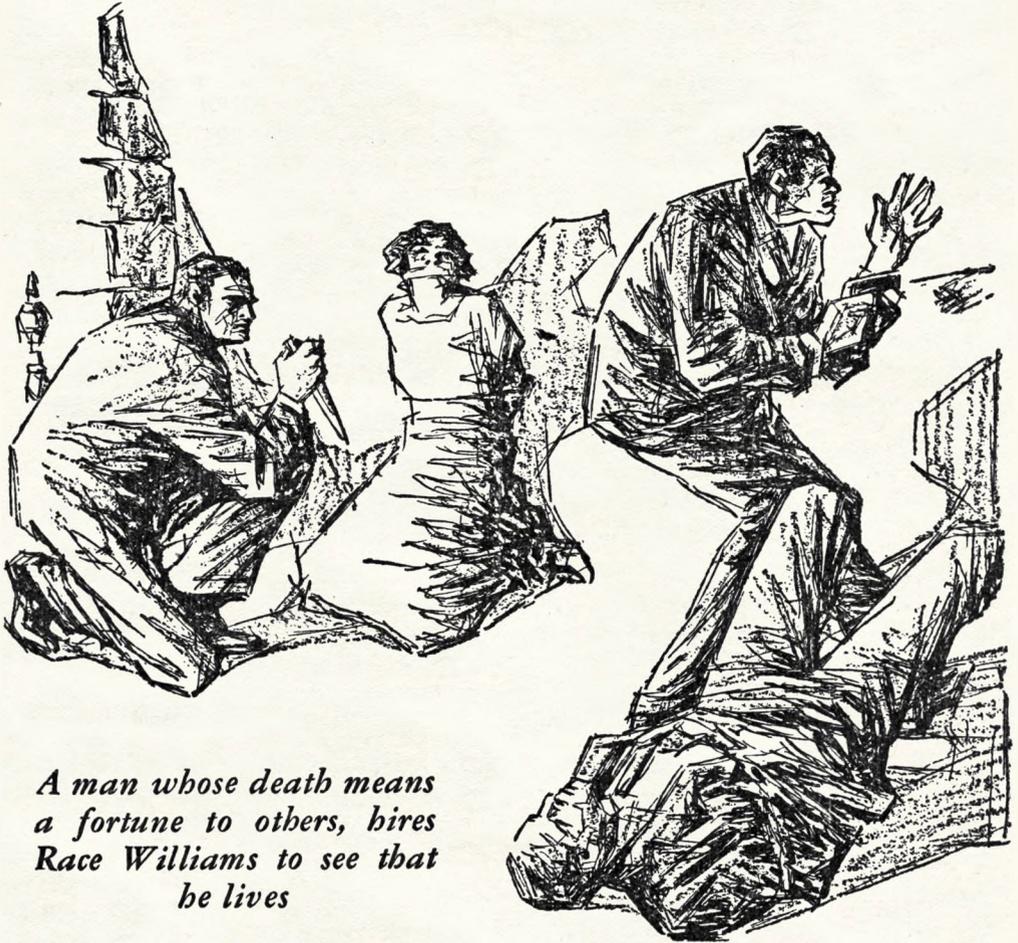
They are the men who are setting the standards of the magazine and who have brought into being an altogether new type and style of detective story writing.

Naturally, we are enthusiastic, and naturally, we are bound to say something about it.

But it is very pleasing to observe the recognition that is now being given these writers, not only for themselves alone, but also in their association with **BLACK MASK**.

*The Editor*

# Murder in the Open



*A man whose death means a fortune to others, hires Race Williams to see that he lives*



HE man sat close to the fire and glared into it, though the room was hotter than hell. Then he'd turn his huge head with its thick, coarse features and stare at me with unblinking cold eyes. They were not keen, appraising eyes; more, hateful, burning and brownish yellow.

Occasionally he'd stretch out a great ham-like hand, hold it before him and flex the knotted fingers until the hand

turned into a fist. He'd watch me then and nod his head.

Outside, the wind whistled; inside, the great logs crackled and sputtered like a distant machine-gun as the sparks shot into the room.

There was no doubt of this bozo's thoughts. Before he built up an idea the leathery skin of his face got to work on it. His eyes either widened with surprise at his own cleverness, or they narrowed and his lips set grimly in his determination to annihilate someone. Since I was the only one in that room with him, I guessed I was the victim of his

By CARROLL JOHN DALY



assassination of thoughts. This bird was mentally tearing me to pieces. Also from those venomous, or what he thought were venomous, glances he was trying to scare me to death.

One especially malignant look, and I took a laugh. I couldn't help it.

His body turned now from the waist up and he stared straight at me. Then he came very slowly to his feet. I'll admit I was a bit surprised at that. He stood well over six-feet-six, which is a lot of standing, you've got to admit. And he was broad. One look was enough; there was no doubt the man was a giant of strength.

He walked over and stood before me, his legs spread far apart, his long arms hanging at his sides. For the first time he spoke. It was a low, even voice; far down in his chest, with a whang to it like a low note on a cheap radio.

"You're Williams," he said. "Race Williams—a private detective; a detective from New York City."

Since my name was right outside on the hotel register, that wasn't such a hot

deduction on his part. But I simply said:

"That's right. You know all the answers."

He didn't smile and he wasn't insulted. He nodded his head very gravely and agreed.

"That's right; I do." And suddenly pointing a finger over my shoulder—a finger that looked like the trunk of a young tree, he asked:

"Do you know that young lady?"

And I was startled. I thought we two were alone in that room. I turned my head, and she was there; sunk far back in a chair in the darkness. Just the white blotch of face; shadows in the chair that might have been a human figure and, plainly, silk-clad legs above small gray shoes.

"No," I said, "I don't know her. At least I don't think that I do."

"Hmm!" he said. "You're not telling me that you're not here in her interest."

"As a matter of fact," I told him plainly, "I'm not telling you anything."

He stood staring down at me with those unblinking eyes. Finally he moved

his great shoulders, turned and walked to the fireplace. Very carefully and methodically he picked up the poker and as slowly returned, to stand before me again.

He held the poker out before him, gripped it at either end. Then his lips tightened, his face grew red; his great fingers bunched into hard knots. He didn't use his knee as a brace; just those two hands stretched out before him. And with those two hands he bent that heavy bit of iron until his hands met. That's strength; real strength. There were no two ways about that.

"Well—?" He tossed the bent rod over before the fire, where it fell with a dull clang.

"Fine!" I nodded but kept my eyes on his. "Do you know any card tricks?"

He wasn't one who went in for light humor. He said, looking half at me and half at the girl in the dimness:

"How, Mr. Williams, would you like to feel those two hands upon your throat? They'd snap that neck of yours as if it were a straw."

"Really?" I put my eyes on him.

"Really—" he said slowly. "I'd twist your neck like a chicken's."

He turned and started towards the door. But I was on my feet and followed him, swung him around and despite those huge hands, half raised, stood my ground, looking up at him.

"Listen, Big Boy." I spoke my piece as I shot a finger hard against his middle. "You've been foolish but you've been honest. I'll meet you halfway and let you know now how I feel about your threat. I wouldn't be hired unless there was a villain. So I'll put you down as the 'heavy' in this drama. I can't double up iron rods and I can't wring people's necks for them. But here's what's on my chest. You lay those trained hands of yours on my neck, and when they pick you up they'll think you're wearing porous-knit underwear."

Thick eyebrows came together as his eyes knitted. He wasn't quick on brain work.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"I mean," I told him, "that there will be no misunderstanding when they bury you. This chicken is toting a gun—two of them for that matter; and the moment you stick your fingers about my throat I'll empty one of them into that carcass of yours. After all," I said slowly, "you wouldn't be hard to hit."

He rubbed his chin, did tricks with his pan and rolled his eyes a bit, denoting heavy thinking.

"That's a threat," he said at length. "A threat to kill me."

"A threat?" I took another laugh. "Brother, that's a death warrant; signed and sealed. If your insurance company knew about it they'd cancel your policy."

He hesitated a long moment. Twice his hands raised and his fingers closed slightly. There is little doubt he was calmly and coolly calculating the possibilities of twisting my neck for me then and there. It wasn't as if he weighed the possibilities of getting away with it. It was just—by God! it was as if he figured the necessity of it.



LONELY hotel far up in the mountains, and I was working alone; had not yet even met my client. So far as I knew the place might be lousy with enemies. Here's a bad one, if he got the chance to creep up behind you in the dark. His hands were itching for my throat. He just couldn't make up his mind about it, that was all. I'd try to convince him that I spoke the truth; and if I couldn't convince him, I'd goad him into action and start one up on the boys who must be against me.

"Brother." I let the finger dig into his chest again and was quite aware of the hardness of that chest. "If you don't believe me, you've got those two hands and I've got a neck. Why not have a try at it now?"

Bravado? A desire to eliminate him

from the picture early? No, I don't think I was chucking a front or felt particularly like killing a man. I just wanted to make sure he knew where he stood and where I stood. Also it might save his life later. Sort of forcing him to make good or back out! And he did neither.

"No," he shook his head very seriously, "I couldn't do that. Not yet. I couldn't sleep nights lest I was sure it was the right thing to do." He looked at me sort of sadly and shook his head. "Maybe it's best to see if Robinson comes." Then he turned on his heel and walked from the room, his great shoulders nearly filling the doorway, his shaggy head bending to avoid cracking it. And I remembered the girl.

She was walking cat-like across the room when I reached out a hand and grabbed her arm. Just a delicate slip of a thing!

She faced me now and smiled. Very young, very pretty, and very certain of herself in a defiant sort of way. But she didn't speak. Big black eyes watched me steadily.

"You know the man who was here?" I asked. "And what he said was true?"

"Yes, I know him. And you mean about your being here in my interest?"

"That's right," I said, and let it go at that.

"Well," she said slowly, "you will be paid to protect me from being killed. You had nerve to come."

I shrugged my shoulders.

"Not nerve. Just curiosity—and business. I don't know anything yet."

"Well, then, nerve—or rather, 'guts,' to stay on; if you're going to stay on."

"Oh, I'll stick around. Who wants to kill you? The big lad, the villain in the case? She wasn't the sort of dame you'd comfort, nor was she the sort you'd expect to find off here in the mountains. At least she hit me as marked: New York—the underpart.

"Don't be so certain in sizing up Big John as the villain," she said. "He might turn out the hero, you know."

And after a moment's thought: "I just came over from Italy. Been living at Lake Como."

I looked at her. Certainly she was dark, certainly she might be Italian. But since she was shoving out her information in dribs and drabs and sort of conundrums, I tried:

"Nice bathing there."

And she chucked back an answer that was a beaut.

"You're telling me?" she said. "How would you like to swim for a couple of hours in it, after getting a rope and stone off your legs and neck?"

Startled? Sure, I was.

"Why not sit down and talk it over?"

I put on the voice with the smile. But truth is truth; this dame was throwing me.

"There's little to talk about." She shrugged slim shoulders. "They took me out in a boat, hung the weights on me and shoved me over." Jet black eyes regarded me. "I hope you're not one for the harrowing details."

And it happened. The roar of a gun—one, two, three, in quick succession. The glass of a picture cracked, and the girl hit the floor in a nose dive. As for me, I turned and put a couple of slugs through the window that was slightly behind me and to the right.

No, I didn't go dashing out into the night; the blackness of the mountains; the wind and rain. Maybe it's heroic to fling open French windows and stand framed in the light before dashing in pursuit of a lad who interrupts your conversation with gunfire. But then, I'm all business and don't play to the gallery—especially when the gallery is flat on the floor. Besides, I had heard the dull, faint thud of footsteps running away.

But the girl! Was she dead, was she—? And she was coming to her feet, moving steadily on hands and knees towards the wall, out of the range of fire.

Then she came erect and faced me. Her knees gave slightly and her face

was white, but her lips parted and her teeth showed, and— Damn it! She tried to smile.

"You're not—hit?"

"No." She shook her head. "Not this time."

"They—someone has tried to kill you before, since you've been here?"

"No." She jerked suddenly. "But I've been told I'm going to 'get it' with a knife. A knife!" She shuddered slightly. "I'm no coward, Race Williams—but I'd hate to take it that way. I saw a man once with a knife in—" She stopped and looked at me. "You're to prevent that, and you've let him go."

"I couldn't do you any good by getting the top of my head blown off. Now, where's my client, and where do you fit into the picture?"

"You'll see him." She nodded quickly but her eyes were on the window. "As for me! An empty stomach, the promise of a few luxuries and a bit of cash brought me here."

"You've got money to—" I started, but she cut in.

"Forget it! Let—" she paused a moment and her lips curled into a sneer. "Let Uncle Ned tell you the story. Then we'll eat—and drink."

"But the others? The shot! They didn't hear it?"

"They heard it—of course. They're neither deaf, nor so dumb." And suddenly, grabbing me by both shoulders: "You're used to criminals; the underworld; men who beat their women and shoot their enemies in the back, and you call it murder. Wait until you live with it. Beasts, who call themselves men! Those who would tear a woman to pieces, or let her be torn to pieces. That's what you're to protect me from. Can you do it?"

She was terribly in earnest, and of course the whole show had a peculiar smell. She wasn't acting; she didn't need to. Those bullets, smacking into the wall, had sounded like real business.

Black eyes watched me. She moved close to me, her little body touched

mine, those arms on my shoulders crept about my neck. She was cute tricks; no two ways about that, and under other circumstances— I looked down at that hard, beautiful face. There was nothing of evil in her eyes. Deep back in them was a fear, maybe a hope. And she spoke again.

"I need you so much—someone like you, so much. Only outside I'm—" And suddenly again: "Can you protect me?"

And I told her the truth.

"Things look rough," I said. "The boys seem bad—and I don't know yet how much is in it for me."

"You won't stay; you won't stay when you find out."

"Oh, I'll stay if there's enough in it," I told her and meant it.

"No, no." She clung to me now like a drunk to a lamp-post. "They'll talk to you—threaten you. They'll talk you into leaving."

I smiled at that one.

"They'll have to do more than talk." I put my hands on her shoulders. Soft, warm bodies, alluring perfumes of the East—or East Side, don't move me. At least, not when giant hands are longing for my neck and stray bullets snap through windows. And I got a surprise. I looked straight into her eyes as I would have pushed her away. And, damn it! she was not making a play for me; trying to charm me. No. There was fear now in her eyes; a deadly terror even—and then a hope, a confidence. The hardness had gone out of her face. She was just a kid; a frightened kid, asking for help.

I held her off, my hands on both her shoulders, and looked down at her.

"I'll take care of you, kid," I told her, and meant it. Then, maybe spoiling the sentiment in my voice: "If the price is right."

"It's got to be right—got to be right," she said. "I'll take you to—to Uncle Ned."

She did an act then. Pulled herself

erect, jerked up her head, produced a vanity case, like a stage magician, and dabbed at her face.

"Come!" she said abruptly.

We walked towards the closed door leading from the little parlor. She flung it open and two men stepped back. Had they been listening? One was tall and thin, with sunken eyes; somber of face. The other was small, stout and florid, and he smiled at me; smiled sort of knowingly, made some apology and stood back for us to pass.

## II



HERE was no bell-boy, just a clerk. And despite the roaring fire in the big open grate the lobby was cold and damp. Upstairs in the rooms—

But I didn't want to think of that. A small summer hotel in early April, especially in the mountains, is not everything to be desired.

Why was it open? Probably for the same reason that things were happening there. And that reason? I shrugged my shoulders as I walked towards the desk and the sharp-featured man behind it.

"Did you hear any noise?" I asked him.

He looked up quickly and said at once:

"If you mean the shots—yes. Yes, I heard them."

"And you didn't investigate them. Why?"

He pulled a pencil from his vest pocket and pointed it at me.

"I know of you, Mr. Williams. I've been in New York. I'm warning you as I warned Mr. Knowles. I'm willing to keep my mouth shut unless— Well, if there's trouble; real trouble, and I'm put on the stand, I'll talk."

"So that's it?" I nodded just as if I understood.

"That's some of it," he said. "I take

no part in what goes on here. But I'm armed, and I'll protect myself."

"Maybe a man was hurt tonight. Might be outside the parlor window."

"They've been out," the clerk said, "and there wasn't any. At least they said there wasn't anyone hurt." And suddenly looking over my shoulder: "She shouldn't be here. That's flat. Mr. Knowles will see you now."

I turned as he came from behind the desk. The girl was gone. There were the stairs, the hall we had come down, and another hall. Well, she should know her business and know the ropes. I followed the clerk up the stairs, along a damp hall to the front of the house. Dull electric lamps glowed in the cold draft, though there were no windows. Only doors—closed doors, on either side.

The boards creaked dimly; the floor was thick with dust, but a damp dust that held its ground, yet was unpleasant in your nostrils. At the end of the hall the clerk tapped on a door. The confidence went out of his voice; he coughed before he answered the rumbling sound from within. Then he said:

"Mr. Williams. You said—at eight o'clock, you know. He's here."

Twice the clerk had to repeat his message. Then a key turned, a chain snapped, and the door opened.

"Come in. Come in!" said an irritable, querulous voice. And I walked into the room, heard the door close behind me, and jerked out my gun as my left hand clutched at the man's wrist.

There we stood. My right hand jamming my gun against his chest, my left turning his wrist until his gun fell with a thud on the thick rug, and my eyes glued on the white frightened face before me. The man was big and had been husky. Now—not so good. Dissipation or fear, or maybe both had laid premature lines in his face, grayed his hair and put a nervous twitching into the left corner of his mouth.

"You are Williams. Yes, you are

Race Williams." Color crept back into his cheeks, the corner of his mouth settled down to periodic rather than steady twitching, and although the terror went out of his eyes the fear remained there.

"I could have killed you. I could have shot you," he said, as if trying to convince himself that if I had been another he could have protected himself. "Why—why did you—? Put the gun away."

I did put it away and I did watch him pick up his and place it down beside the cushion in a big chair. This room was class. A little stuffy, of course, for boards covered both the windows and an oil heater was working overtime. But there was a thick rug, three or four easychairs, a long desk and a huge couch that might have been used for a bed but probably wasn't, for a closed door to the left led into another room.

I didn't tell him that if he hadn't been my client and that I needed his jack I would have shot him to death before he closed a finger on the trigger. He seemed to have enough on his mind. I said simply, as I flopped into a chair he pointed out:

"I don't like guns pointing at me. It's dangerous." And to let him know where he stood, "More dangerous for the other fellow than for me. So you're Mr. Knowles—Ned Knowles. Well, I got your letter, cashed your check—and here I am."

"And you'll take the case?"

"If it's straight, and enough in it."

"Would you consider it straight to protect the life of a young girl, no matter what you may hear later as to the past character of the man who pays you for that protection?"

I thought that one out.

"It sounds good," I told him.

"And how much must I tell you?"

"I don't know. Enough to let me know why the girl needs protection. As for yourself!" And I thought a moment. If stuff turned up later it might be just as well that I didn't know too

much. They say a little knowledge is a dangerous thing, but too much knowledge is sometimes disastrous. So I let the rest of that sentence ride.

"Well," he said, "I'll tell you what my lawyers can verify for you. Some years back, in a partnership arrangement, I inherited the income on a great deal of money. The details do not matter. I have only the income, the principal of which goes to my niece, Verna Driscoll, at my death. That is, of course, if she survives me. If she does not, it goes to the son of another partner—that partner long since dead. The son's name is Robert Rawley. That was the will. Am I clear?"

"Clear—yes. But a peculiar will. It—"

"There were reasons. I am not giving those. What I have just told you are facts, and the law. If my niece were dead, at my death, this young man, Rawley, would receive an immense fortune." Knowles leaned forward. "He would like that, of course."

"Who wouldn't?" was the best I could do for him there.

"Vicious minds are behind this young man. I have never met him. Some years ago my niece, then a very small child, was—well, there was an attempt made on her life."

"And you didn't go to the police?"

Knowles wet his lips.

"I did not go to the police then for the same reason I do not go now. There are things in my past that I would not like brought forward today. So I must bear with my enemies—and hire you." His eyes brightened. "But, Mr. Williams, if I cannot afford to face the past, neither can they. Already there has been another attempt on my niece's life. I sent her abroad to escape such dangers. In Italy she was almost drowned. In fact, they thought she was drowned. But you see, while my niece lives there can be no money for this Robert Rawley, and so no money for these men who would control his fortune."

And I did see, and told him so plainly.

"In protecting her life, then, I must protect yours."

"That," he said, "is quite true."

"These men are here in the hotel now—stopping here?"

"Yes, some of them are here. They found me out here. I own this hotel. I must feed them and lodge them and meet them as friends. It all dates back, Mr. Williams, to a time when we were young and venturesome men. The big man, John Bates, has been with me for years. I give him money. Now, his mind is not so keen. It is a very peculiar relationship. And there is one more man to come; any day, any hour even." His face paled to a deadly white. "Then I will slip away again, and you will take my niece to safety."

"But why the hell did you bring her here—here where men want to kill her, you say?"

He gulped twice, coughed once, and regarded me with those sunken gray eyes.

"They believed her dead. I wished to convince them otherwise."

"And you brought her here to—to—" I stopped and looked at him. And I saw it all. They had cornered him in his own hotel. His past was such that he could not appeal to the police. They ate and drank together, and they looked at him and planned his death. And Knowles brought the girl here, knowing that while she lived he was safe. And— But I didn't tell him what I thought of him. I just said:

"I'll protect the girl at a price. I hope you've told me the truth. One part sounds bad. As soon as the girl dies and you die, Robert Rawley will inherit the money. And right there the police step in. He'll have a motive for the crime, and—"

"Mr. Williams," he cut in on me, "I have not gone into great detail; I do not care to go into it. After all, I am paying you money to protect the girl, which protects me. After this other man comes, you must be responsible for taking her away." And with a peculiar,

half-cynical smile, "If the police immediately suspected Robert Rawley, arrested him, convicted him, electrocuted him and these other men, what good would that do me if I were dead?"

There was logic in that, I had to admit. So I shrugged my shoulders, moved my hands far apart and started to talk price. Guys with pasts; guys who want to hide out, should pay in advance. And I wanted ten thousand iron men for the job. And I wanted it then, and I told him so.

Mean? Sure, he was mean. He squawked that his securities had shrunk. Where they would eventually return to somewhere near their normal value, the dividends were small. Later, perhaps, if things were satisfactory, he could pay more.

I don't like to haggle over a price, especially when a young girl's life hangs in the balance. But, after all, business is business. Yet I did think of the fear in the girl's eyes and was about to suggest a cut to seven thousand, five hundred. Then when he got snooty and talked about Big John Bates, with his big hands, being enough protection, I got up on my hind legs and made a turn for the door. I'd tell the girl to—

And I didn't have to tell her anything. That door to the left burst open and she was in the room. She wasn't any frightened, timid creature now, and it was hard to believe she had spent the best part of her life on quiet Lake Como. She opened up on Uncle Ned like a young cyclone.

"You pay him," she finally said. "You pay him what he asks, or I'll walk out."

He tried to quiet her but it was useless. He tried to tell her she couldn't walk out; she'd be dead before she reached the bend in the road to the hotel.

"Then I'll tell *him*," she said. "I'll tell Bates, and—"

Uncle Ned was on his feet. Both his hands were on her shoulders. He was talking soft and low, pushing her

across the room. Some of it I got, some of it I didn't. But he quieted her. That is, all but the insistence that he pay. She wasn't out to have her throat cut, and I was the only one who could prevent it.

Finally he turned to me and started in to beat down the price, and this time I cut in on him.

"I tell you," I gave it to him in a loud voice so that the girl would be in on it; she was a good sales agent for me, "ten thousand or nothing. Cash on the head—now. If the girl gets—" and I toned it down there. "I'll return the full ten if anything happens to her."

He smiled at me.

"But then what of me? I would not—" He paused, smacked his hands together as he looked from me to the girl. "If she is killed," he said very slowly, "you return the money and stick to me until I'm away from this place. Ten thousand now!"

I didn't like him; this hiding behind a woman. But I didn't hesitate. Ten minutes later I had it. Twenty five-hundred-dollar bills in cold cash. Brand new money. This bird was dough heavy and prepared for sudden flight.

So we left him, the girl on my arm now. She said as we went down the hall:

"Ned'll be madder than hell about my busting in, but he gave me a key to slip into the room in case of trouble. And there *was* trouble." She laughed. It was the first time I had heard her laugh. It was good and clear—and young. "He told you everything?"

"I guess so," I said. "There's something fishy about the whole thing. Murder in the open is something new to me." And as we turned down the stairs: "And girls with a line like yours don't come from finishing schools in Italy."

"I didn't go to any finishing school." She talked as we hit the stairs. "Italy or no Italy, it was I who insisted that you come here. Do you know why I have to stay here?"

"Yes," I told her. "Just for one

more man to see. He must be a bird."

"He must be." She clung tightly to my arm. "But I'm not afraid any more." And as we hit the bottom step she threw up her head. "I'll let them know how I feel about them all tonight." And glancing up at me to see how I took that: "Can I?"

"Why not?" I told her. I was beginning to like the kid. Maybe, too, I like flattery. And if this was a house of creeping death, it might be a good thing to bring it out in the open. Anyway, at dinner I could size up the situation and see what was what—or what have you?

### III



We hit the dining-room. It was a fair-size room with a long table over close to the windows and little tables scattered about. The big table was the only one set for service. Four men were already seated at it. The clerk I had seen at the desk, the tall and the short man who had been outside the parlor door, and Big John Bates.

They all looked up as we entered. Only the short man nodded his head and smiled as the waiter pulled out two chairs for us. There was nothing sinister about the waiter; that is, as to his dress. He wore a white coat and dark trousers, but his movements, his every action was Eastern. He was brown skinned. I couldn't spot his nationality. East Indian, Hindu, or maybe even Arab. And the girl spoke to him.

"Mr. Williams and I are dining alone; one of the small tables across the room." And when the man's eyebrows went up and his jaw sort of tightened: "I'm to have what I want—what I want."

Only the small man looked at us and smiled, the others ate on. The waiter turned, and finally appealed to the clerk.

"That's right." The clerk's voice was querulous. "That's the orders. There's nothing strange about it. I wouldn't eat here myself if I could help it." And as the waiter still stood there, the clerk raised his head and looked from the dark-skinned man to the smiling one down the table. "Well—" he demanded almost viciously, "what are you grinning at? What's the harm of it?"

The small man shrugged his shoulders and kept smiling.

"Maybe Robinson wouldn't approve of it," he said slowly, opened his mouth as if to speak again then changed his mind and tackled his soup.

The clerk jumped to his feet, ground his napkin into a ball and pounded it on the table.

"God!" he said, "I can't stand it! Give the girl her table. Robinson. Robinson! Robinson! Waiting. Just waiting for someone to be murdered. Don't tell me. Don't—" He stopped suddenly. The little man was looking at him and he wasn't smiling now. The clerk ran a hand across his mouth, said "God!" again, and pushing back his chair, left the room.

Big John made sounds in his throat; the tall, thin man raised his head and for the first time spoke. His voice was husky and there was a squeak in it. He talked like a man who wasn't used to hearing his own voice.

"The clerk don't fit into the picture at all. I don't see why Ned brought him here. He looks like—"

Big John jerked up his head.

"He looks like a witness for the State," he said hollowly.

Then a dead silence, and the brown waiter led us to a small table across the room. At least he was quiet and efficient. The cloth was laid, the service set, and the girl and I opposite each other.

The girl said:

"They're terrible men; all of them. They sit and talk of nothing but death, when they do talk; and they seem to

think I have a secret. Something they want to know; something they think Ned brought me here to tell me. But let us forget that tonight. I've had over a week of this hell."

"Just one thing, though. Who is Robinson?"

"I don't know. They all fear him, and they act as if his coming will end things; at least, end them for me. He—"

"You have never seen any of these men before; know nothing of them?"

She looked at me steadily a moment, started to say something, moved her shoulders; then:

"My uncle sent me away when I was very young. I had never seen any of these men. I just know they all hate me, want to kill me; yet not until Robinson comes, or until they learn something."

"But there have been attempts on your life."

"Yes. If they were really attempts here, or just to frighten me into talking."

And the dinner was surprising. Cocktails, caviar, ripe olives, odd, peculiar luxuries, and champagne.

She was a funny bit of goods; that was certain.

"It's all mine," she told me as she made a particularly wry face over the caviar. "I hate the stuff. How long will it take me to like it?"

"What do you want to like it for?" I asked.

"I never had it; never had luxuries. I wouldn't come unless that was in the contract. I brought them all in the car with me."

"But I thought you were brought up to luxuries. In Italy, with—"

"I wasn't." She cut in quickly. "I was denied everything all my life." And as she sipped the champagne: "I like the tingle of it. It makes you soft and warm, not hard and cold. It makes you fear things less, and sort of defiant. Another bottle!" she called to the Hindu, if he was a Hindu, in a loud

voice. "It's mine; every bottle of it mine."

"You'd better go easy on it, kid," I told her, for her eyes were getting bright.

"Oh, I won't get drunk. I know the ropes. I like it because it costs so much. I know liquor; real hard liquor. This won't get me."

She was interesting all right. Puzzling.

"How old are you?" I asked.

"Guess!" She leaned on the table, bright eyes fastened on me. "Or better still, don't guess. Let us just talk. Not about me; about you. You're like me. You'd go a long way for money—face death. That's what I'm doing. At first Ned wouldn't have you. Big John was to be enough. And I held out. Ten thousand dollars for you to keep me alive! That's more than I'm getting to keep myself alive, and—and—"

She paused and I looked up. Ned Knowles had entered the room. The men at the long table all stopped eating, looked at him, watched every movement as he crossed the room. The dark-skinned waiter seemed more alert as he pulled out the chair at the head of the table and Knowles sat wearily down in it. He looked over at me once, and at the girl. Just looked at us. Not even a nod of his head.

A dead silence for a moment, then the man with the smile spoke.

"You look the part tonight, Ned," he said, and paused. You could have heard a tomato hit the floor. You did hear the steady ticking of the big clock in the back. Then he went on. "Yes, the part of one condemned to die. Robinson was generally punctual." He looked at the clock.

Ned Knowles followed his eyes to the clock. He said, as if thinking aloud:

"It's almost nine o'clock now. He won't come."

"He was late once before," said the man with the smile, and the smile disappeared and his lips curled. "He was

late years ago, Ned. Late, and the boy's father died."

Ned Knowles jerked back in his chair. He rubbed a hand across his forehead, then let it run down over his face; on to his chest, where it hesitated very close to his left armpit. He said, and his voice was steady:

"You eat my food and use my house, and threaten—my niece. But I guess you always were a sponge, Harry."

The smile came back to the round face. Harry said:

"That's no way to talk to a guest." And the smile broadened now, but it wasn't a nice smile. "Your number's up, Ned, and you know it. We all know it. Robinson knows it."

The two men glared at each other, and Big John looked down at Knowles as he cut himself a piece of roast beef.

They talked a bit at the table across the room after that, but not loud enough for me to understand. I lit a butt, leaned back and enjoyed black coffee. I looked at the clock, too, and wondered about Robinson. He must be quite a guy; everything seemed to wait on him—even death. I must have frowned, for the girl said:

"Why, I always understood that you—you killed with a smile." And when I said nothing: "You would kill for me; to protect me, wouldn't you?"

"For you and ten thousand dollars." I grinned across at her.



ND the clock struck nine. The talk, or what talk there was at the long table, stopped. So did ours. We looked at the clock; everyone sat erect, listening. It was a big moment; a tense moment. As if it had been rehearsed by high-class actors for weeks. Drama! Sure, there was drama in it. Real or prepared, I don't know. For the last stroke of nine had hardly died away when the clerk was in the door-

way. His face was chalk white and his lines good ones.

"He's here," he almost cried out, looking directly at Ned Knowles. "He's in the lobby now. He's— It's Robinson!"

Maybe it was an accident; maybe this bird, Robinson, had waited outside, looking at his watch, and timed it right. Anyway, he was there, the water from his raincoat dripping upon the floor. Not too tall, not too heavy. A well-built man. Nothing of dissipation in his face and nothing of age to show him mixed up with these men back some years ago. Thirty, forty, fifty maybe. You couldn't lay a date on him.

For a full minute he stood in that doorway, taking advantage of his dramatic entrance. Then he flung off his soaking raincoat and tossed it over the shoulder of the clerk. With two quick movements he removed the heavy, high overshoes and straightened again.

And he looked the actor, just emerging from the dressing-room to play a part. Striped gray suit, brightly polished shoes. Yes, damn it! he even sported a white flower in his lapel. I know men. Robinson had something on the others in that room. An assurance; a determination. Smooth, smiling, perhaps even debonair. Yet I knew that I was looking at a killer. Not a desperate, gun-toting racketeer or bad-man; not a sneering, threatening gangster. Just a relentless, merciless killer. Don't ask me how I know. I *do* know. At least, almost unconsciously I felt of the gun in my shoulder-holster. This bird gave me the impression that I was going to need it; need it bad, and that I was going to earn my ten thousand dollars. For the first time I looked at the girl and wondered. Not only wondered, but decided to suggest to Knowles that now that Robinson had come and seen her, it was time to shove out.

And Robinson spoke. Spoke as he crossed the room and stood before Knowles.

"By gad!" he said, "I've been misinformed. Coming all this distance to see an old friend before he died." He laughed, patted Knowles on the shoulder, and before greeting each of the others in turn, got this bit of wisdom off his chest. "Now—you don't look like a man with one foot in the grave." And very slowly and deliberately, as if he spoke a simple truth rather than a melodramatic piece: "But you have, haven't you, Ned? What a pleasant gathering after the years. Harry!"

And the smiling man came to his feet and walked towards him. For a moment they stood whispering together, amid an otherwise dead silence. Once Robinson looked over at the girl and nodded his head. A minute later he looked over at me, and this time though he still whispered, it was a stage whisper. Not louder perhaps, but with more carrying power than a natural tone.

"Hard. Bad!" he said, and laughed. It was not a forced laugh but a natural one. "Why, Harry, we're all bad—or think we are." He shrugged his shoulders. "We'll settle him at once."

He spun easily on his heel and slowly crossed the room towards us. He did it well too; ignored me completely as he came close to the girl and stood beside her. The two men with their backs to me had swung in their chairs, the others raised their heads and stared. The waiter had stopped by the swinging door to the kitchen and the clerk was leaning against the door from the lobby. He was staring at us, and when Robinson's feet stopped moving I could hear the clerk's heavy breathing; the only sound in the room.

Robinson liked it. He stood looking at the girl, to let the silence sink in; his presence sink in. It was a big moment and he took advantage of it. At length he leaned down suddenly and stuck his hand under the girl's chin, jarring her head up, looking straight into her eyes.

"So you're the girl," he said. "Verna Driscoll." A moment's pause, while he

looked steadily at her. Then; "You have the eyes. Hidden, perhaps, but the cruelty is there." And suddenly, and in a voice that rang with command: "Get to your feet when I talk to you. I'm Robinson."

Now his face changed. Nothing sneering or tough or cheap villainy about it. Perhaps a deadly determined look, neither mean nor malignant. Just the face of a man who knows what he wants, and gets it. It would be easy to fear this man. I watched him closely.

And the girl came erect, her black eyes on his burning green ones. Mechanically, maybe even unconsciously she got slowly to her feet, gripping the back of the chair; leaning on it. Robinson nodded and smiled his approval. Smiled? Well, at least his mouth opened, showing even white teeth.

"That's the ticket," Robinson said. "I'll want to talk to you. Go to your room and wait." And when she stood there and looked at him: "Listen, my girl," he shot his head forward and his lips were tight, "I'm used to having my orders obeyed—promptly. Better for you that you take my word for that now, than have to find it out for yourself most unpleasantly later. Now, go to your room!"

The girl's right foot raised, then settled back on the floor again. Slowly her eyes turned towards me, as if it were a considerable effort to take her eyes off Robinson's. She spoke, her words hardly a whisper:

"Do I—must I go, Race?"

I winked at her and shook my head. Her lips parted, she tried to smile. She was frightened and no mistake, but I liked the smile. The show-down was coming. I was watching Robinson.

Just as slowly the girl turned her head back and faced Robinson.

"I'm not going to my room," she said. "I don't have to." And the defiance she had started going out of her voice and panic creeping in: "I don't have to. Race Williams said I didn't have to."

And the man laughed. None of this ten-twenty-thirty radio laugh, understand. He just laughed and moved his right hand quickly. He was fast; deadly fast. That hand fastened on the girl's shoulder close to her neck. In fact, the thumb of his hand bit into her throat. Her eyes seemed to bulge suddenly, her whole body to give, her knees to start to bend. And I did it.

I just came to my feet, took one step and jerked my right hand from under my left armpit. It was sudden, and Mr. Robinson let out a squawk he couldn't control. I didn't blame him. The nose of my gun had crashed down on the knuckles of the hand that was on her shoulder, moving towards her throat.

Surprised? Sure, he was surprised. His hand jumped from her shoulder and went to his mouth.

His face turned white, then red—a livid red. His hand dropped to the table, his mouth opened and closed, green eyes glared at me. Passion? Yes, for the moment he was mad with passion. The hand shot to his chest, close to the lapel of his jacket. I didn't speak; that is, aloud. But I said to myself: "Good-bye, Mr. Robinson!" I made up my mind then that he wasn't the sort of man I'd fool around with.

And he recovered. That is, he saved his life. A dangerous man! Just a second or two and he had control over that temper; that is, to a certain extent. For when he spoke this time his voice trembled slightly with anger.

"So you're Williams, the wise city dick." He looked straight at me. "I might very easily have killed you for that; very easily." He said it loud enough for all in that room to hear. "Now—the girl got her orders. She didn't obey them." He paused and looked about that room. To the clerk, to the waiter by the swinging door which he held half open, disclosing the white hat of the chef; to the table where four men had all come to their feet. Then he went on.

"Now I'll drag her to her room and listen to her talk." His eyes narrowed. "Listen to things she'll be glad to tell me. You meant to help the girl, Mr. Williams," he looked at the knuckles of his right hand, "and the help you gave her will mean a welt across that pretty, evil face of hers for every mark upon my fingers."

He paused, glared at me, and when I didn't speak looked around the room again. Then:

"There are men in this room who'd tear you to pieces at my suggestion."

That was true. I was looking the crowd over too, taking in each face. Enemies or friends? The clerk; Big John; the two servants; the smiling man and the tall thin one; Knowles himself. Which was which? Which were with Robinson; which were with Knowles? And I didn't know. Knowles hadn't told me. The girl hadn't told me. The men themselves hadn't told me. Why? And I thought that I knew why. No one knew; exactly; knew for sure.

"Now—" Robinson's voice was very methodical, very clear and without a tremor as he threw the star line of his act, which was meant to bring down the house. "Now we start where we left off. My hand upon her shoulder before I drag her to her room."

The line was a good one and he liked it. He put his soul into it. Just his soul, mind you—not his hand. Oh, he raised his hand and moved it towards the girl's shoulder. And I spoke to him for the first time.

"You put your hand on that girl's shoulder," I said, "and I'll shoot it off at the wrist."

#### IV



His hand stopped in mid-air, hesitated and started to move towards the girl's shoulder once more.

I didn't speak again. I'm not a lad who

talks to hear his own voice. I'd spoken

my piece. If he thought it was just wind—well, here was his chance to find out.

For a moment I thought he was going to make good, or that he was going to do what he thought was making good. Then he turned his head and looked at me. I don't know what he saw but it decided him. His mouth opened to let forth a torrent of abuse, but he didn't. He did a few tricks with his pan, then he dropped his hand to his side and threw back his head and laughed.

"Quite a man. Quite a man!" he chuckled, and though the words were easy and his laugh fairly natural, his green eyes gave him away. They were hateful, burning things that only I could see. He started to go on with it. Something about having his little joke, to see if Ned did the right thing by his niece; then gave it up, swung on his heel and started towards the door. But he didn't reach it. As the clerk stepped aside, he spun again and walked to the long table, pulled out a chair and flopped into it.

"We can't quarrel or joke or even talk on an empty stomach," he said. And to the waiter: "Serve me from the beginning. I'm Mr. Robinson."

Robinson, of course, was a dangerous man. He had made a mistake. He recognized it after he had made it and was doing the best now to rectify it. But why go into that? I knew this bird was bad. Before, he felt indifference towards me; now, perhaps a hate, maybe a fear; a fear that he would try quickly to eliminate. Yep, my single thought as I turned to the girl, was—I wish Robinson had put that hand upon her shoulder. For a bit, anyway, we'd 've had peace and quiet at the Old Mountain House, on Paradise Mountain.

The girl and I left the room together. It wasn't a pleasant walk while I took her by the arm and crossed to the hall door. I didn't like it. But as I looked down at the bright flashing

eyes of the girl; the admiration in them, and also stuck my hand in my pocket and wrapped my fingers around the roll of five-hundred dollar bills, things didn't seem so bad. Not by a jugful they didn't.

The clerk was back behind the desk, smoking a huge cigar and staring at the wall. The windows rattled and the wide front doors shook, and the fire crackled. Cozy and nice it should have been. Well, maybe it should, but it wasn't.

The clerk jerked the cigar out of his mouth and made motions with his face and head that he wanted to talk to me.

"Sit by the fire, kid," I told the girl, and when she grabbed my hand, "I'll be keeping an eye on you, and if you see anything that frightens you, sing out. Don't be scared."

"You'd—you'd have shot him?" She fairly breathed the words.

"I'd 've shot him all right," I told her. A funny thing to tell a kid, to ease her mind, isn't it? But it did ease her mind. You could see that in her face.

"You'd have shot him—for me?" She evidently wanted to go into detail and make the thing personal.

"I'd 've shot him," I told her again. And then with a grin, "So what do you care why?"

And since the clerk was in danger of ripping his face wide open and jerking his neck out of shape I pushed her into a chair and walked over to the desk and leaned on it.

The clerk said, and his voice was low but very eager:

"You've got guts. You've got guts! I'm with you. I'm going to trust you. You'll treat me white. I'm in a spot; a tough spot. I'm wanted for robbery; only Knowles knows that. He pays me well, but I wouldn't 've stayed here otherwise. I've been to jail before; they'll ride me plenty this time if they get me."

"Hell!" I said, "why pick me for a confession. An hour or two ago you were squawking all over your face that

you'd tell the truth on the witness stand. Why the sudden change?"

"I've got to let you know I'm not with them. When things break I'd like you to be standing behind me. I see you've got guts. I'm not with this troop. I'm just—"

"Sure." I nodded. "A victim of circumstances. Is that all?"

"No," he said, "that's not all." And his voice lowered to a dead whisper. "Come in the little room behind the desk. I've got something to show you."

I looked him straight in the eyes. Then I looked over towards the girl.

"Better spill it here."

"I can't," he said. "I've got to show it to you from there. Don't you trust me? You're not afraid? You think I'd trap you?"

I laughed as I looked at his white face.

"Trap me? You! I'd spatter you all over the office before you got your trap started. As for trusting you!" I looked at his twisted, crooked face. "I'd place my life in your hands, but it's Miss Driscoll. I can't leave her there alone." And with a sudden thought, "I'll bring her with us."

"No, no. You—" And suddenly, "Yes. Yes! Bring her. Call her. She's not safe." He shuddered. "The little devil; the one with the smile. He told me; smiles and tells me she will die first—die first. It'll be tonight. Both the servants will grab their bags and leave for the station. They had them packed, ready."

The girl came over and we passed into the little office room behind the desk. The clerk took me directly to the window and tapped on the tightly drawn shade.

"I've got to put out the lights for you to see it," he said. He looked at me sharply. "Okey?"

Now, I'm not of a nervous type. Never was; hope never to be. But you've got to admit the idea of being alone in the dark with one of this strange pack was not everything de-

sirable. The clerk thought so too, for he hesitated, his hand on the chain below the lamp.

I looked the room over. No place to hide a cat there, let alone swing one.

"Do your stuff," I told him and jerked a gun into my hand. I made no apologies and he expected none. Maybe he moved his body slightly when he felt the nose of my rod against his side, but otherwise he took it all right.

Up went the shade and the wind and rain pounded against the window. Outside of that, nothing. Perhaps vague shadows that might be trees or the waving green of the mountain side—what green was there.

I didn't like it and twice looked back towards the light behind, that shone in the outer office.

"Do your stuff, brother," I finally said. "What am I looking for?"

"The lodge," he said in a husky voice. "Straight ahead; a little, maybe, to the left. There's a light in it. When the trees blow you can just see it, as if a shade blew or there was a broken slat in the wood before the window and—" His fingers bit into my arm and I jammed the gun harder into his side. "There it is now. See. See!"

And I did see it. Distant in the night, a single light that seemed to flicker, waver, hold steady for perhaps ten seconds, then disappear entirely.

"Well—" I shrugged my shoulders, "what's the significance of that? Except that we have neighbors near enough to cause trouble, if trouble starts here."

"There are no neighbors. The lodge is supposed to be deserted. Mr. Knowles owns that too. And the significance," the clerk was "getting it" too, for he put the atmosphere of the whole place into his words. "That's where Robinson came from tonight. He left others behind, or why the light? Robinson has been there tonight, so it might easily have been Robinson who shot through the little parlor window."

I shook my head, forgetting that he couldn't see it in the dark, and said:

"No. Not that I doubt Robinson's desire to do a little killing, but I don't think he'd 've missed." And after a thought, "Unless he wanted to miss."

"But it means danger to the girl because—" He stopped, straightened, was feeling for the light. The girl had "shsd" sharply behind us.

The light snapped on, we turned together. And Robinson stood in the doorway. There was no anger in his face now. He even smiled as he saw my gun slip easily into its holster.

He sort of waved his hand as he looked at me; a gesture of dismissing my worries. At least I took it for that after he spoke.

"Don't mind the clerk," he said. "He's not one of the party; not of the right people, I should say."

"Well—" I fell into his spirit of light banter. "It's hard to tell who's who here, who likes who, or—"

"A detective must study his suspects." He cut in on me pleasantly. "But I can set your mind at rest there. Our little party is congenial only on the surface. Beneath, we all hate one another. Fires are burning deeply in human breasts here tonight; fires that have smoldered for years. Don't you be the spark that sets them off."

"I'm not here to bring death, but to save a life. The young lady—Miss Driscoll," I told him, and watched him now.

"How droll!" he said. "You might as well go home. That is impossible." He looked at the girl. "She is condemned to die."

The girl turned white, leaned against the wall. I stretched out a hand and fastened it upon his jacket, crushing the flower.

"None of that," I told him. "You're not going to work that mental terror on her. And the girl's life is not in danger while I'm here. You can take that as gospel, if I have to—" And I paused. "If you have to kill me to prevent it. That's it, Mr. Williams?"

"That," I said, "is exactly it."

So we faced each other. Perhaps he was calmer than I, because I was mad—and just a bit worried. If the girl broke; went to pieces under the continued hints, attempts on her life, threats of violence—well, she'd be hard to handle and harder still to protect.

"I would like to talk to you alone, Mr. Williams," he said, and seeing at once what was on my mind: "Oh, I'm not as crude as that. The girl can sit in the outer office, where you can see her through the door. I won't say that you will enjoy our little talk, but I know you will find it interesting—and enlightening."

I nodded to the girl and watched the clerk lead her out the door and pull up a chair for her behind the desk, where I could see her plainly.

"All right," I said to Robinson. "Make it short and snappy."

He grinned evilly.

"Very well," he said slowly. "Short and snappy, and shocking. The little lady with the bright childish eyes, whom you are so keen to protect, is wanted for murder."

He paused and looked at me sharply.

"I don't believe it," I said. But it was several moments before I spoke. This lad had a convincing way of putting things.

"No?" He sort of drew in his lips. "The man's name was Baldwin—Joe Baldwin. He used to work for a New York detective agency; a rather well-known one. Ah! I see that you know the name."

And I did. I knew also that he was found dead in Italy, on the shores of Lake Como; shot twice through the head. But I said nothing.

"Interesting case." Green eyes brightened as he offered me a cigarette, and when I refused it, lit one for himself. "I took him away from his job and gave him quite a steady one; hunting for the girl. Poor fellow! He found the girl, she resented the discovery and shot him to death. Fortunately for her, Baldwin never knew my real name and any notes

or confidences he might have made do not help the authorities."

"If this is true, why didn't you turn her up for the crime?"

He smiled at me broadly.

"We are all outside the law. Two men who equally participate in a murder do not talk of each other's crime to the authorities; nor do a dozen men." He leaned forward now and spoke very seriously. "Knowles, of course, has told you little. I will tell you more, but not much more. Some years ago a number of men banded together and made money; let us say, not exactly honest money. Death preceded and followed that money. And one man walked out with a fortune; a fortune belonging to all these men.

"We were young and we were hard, and we tracked him. Ned Knowles, which was not his name as we knew him, helped this man to escape; helped him by not only betraying his friends but by murdering one of them. But Knowles could not get the money or lacked the spine to get it. This other man turned a small fortune into a huge one, took Knowles and Knowles' niece to live with him and made a will. A peculiar will, in which conscience played a part; or perhaps fear, for the man could not have had a conscience. Knowles gets the income while he lives, then the niece. And the final joker. If the niece dies before Knowles, the entire estate goes to the son of the man Knowles murdered. A boy—a man now. Robert Rawley, who knew nothing of this whole business. Knowles told you some of that, so you see why you are protecting the girl."

"Yes, I know all that," I told him.

"And you know what would happen to the girl if I disclosed to the authorities that I sent Baldwin to find her whereabouts. Now you see how simple it all is. The wrongs of youth are not forgotten. None of us will talk, but all of us will act. What do you say to protecting this charming young lady now?"

I did know Baldwin and I did know

that he was a good hard worker and as straight as—well, straighter than most private detectives, which you can take any way you like. But I said to Robinson:

"I have accepted money to protect the girl and I don't see why I should believe what you tell me."

"Well—" he shrugged his shoulders. "The New York police may be looking for her."

"You've given them a hint?"

"Me?" He looked surprised. "My dear Williams, I am not a fool. They do not have capital punishment in Italy. The girl would still live. I am interested in righting a wrong; seeing that the son of my murdered friend gets the money, but I am interested mostly in vengeance. But," and his finger pointed at me, "if you should by any stroke of luck kill me in protecting the girl, then I have left a letter that will convict her."

"It looks as if you're aiming straight for death; for the hot seat, without any help from me."

"No," he said, "I think not. I think that the fates will work things out very nicely. If you were a young man, like this Robert Rawley, and discovered the name of the man who killed your father, and that crime would be hard to prove, what would you do?"

"But Knowles had another name then. Besides, you said this Robert Rawley knew nothing of all this—the murder of his father."

"He didn't. But he knows now." Robinson nodded his head.

"You see, I told him."

And turning, he left the room.

## V



R. ROBINSON had said a mouthful, there were no two ways about that. I came to my feet and followed him to the door, then I saw the phone in the corner of the room. I hesitated, went to the door and called in the

girl. She tried to smile at me as I kicked the door shut, but she was worried. Was it because of what Robinson might have told me? Maybe. But then, she had enough to worry about without that.

"Sit down," I told her, and when she dropped into a chair I put a hand under her chin and lifted up her head. She didn't speak. Not a word while I looked straight into those black eyes. Then I said: "Verna, did you ever kill a man?"

She hesitated a long moment; then: "No, no. He told you that?"

"That's right," I said, "he told me that. The man's name was Baldwin. He was a detective sent to find you. He was found on the shores of Lake Como. Then you disappeared."

"I never did it. I never did it!" she almost cried out. "Believe me, Race. Believe me. You've all I got between life and death—violent death."

Did I believe her? I thought so. Had black, honest eyes convinced me; or did the feel of that thick roll of bills in my pocket make me want to believe her? Anyway, I didn't press the subject then. The door jarred open. Big John Bates stood framed in the opening, tightly framed too, like a huge picture in a setting too small for it.

"You!" That great index finger of his shot out. "I'll want to be talking to you."

I smiled over at him. Certainly business was picking up. First, the clerk, then Robinson, and now Big John. Confessions or threats! I looked again at Big John. He sure didn't look like a guy who'd go in for confessions, so I could expect a threat.

"Shoot!" I finally told him, and when he looked at the girl and Verna herself suggested that she go to her room, I got her in a corner and we talked.

There was a heavy lock on her door. There was a room next to hers with a connecting door. That was my room. She'd be perfectly safe. I could hear her scream even downstairs in the lobby, while Big John talked to me. After that

I'd be in the next room. Nothing could happen to her.

"I want to be alone," she said. "I can lie in bed and adjust my mind; dismiss everything and sleep. Sleep; that's what I want. I want to forget for a bit."

It seemed all right. I told Big John he could talk his head off to me in a couple of minutes. Then I went upstairs with Verna. There was nothing classy about her room. A little white, iron bed; or supposedly iron, a rocker that was good for three or four more rocks, one straight-backed chair and a basin and pitcher. There was a single electric light. Beneath the window, curled upon the floor, was a thick rope. The end of this rope was attached to the sill by a rusted bit of iron loop. A faded and hardly readable sign read: In Case of Fire. Just one of those summer hotels that expect every guest to be a circus acrobat.

The girl said:

"Go and talk to Big John. He's on our side, so far. When you come back to your room don't disturb me. I'll be asleep. Unless I scream, don't bother me."

"All right." I nodded, and then: "What do you mean, 'Big John's on our side—so far'?"

"Well, I should have said 'my side.' Not 'ours.' And 'so far' means until he finds out that I—I— Well, until I make a mistake."

That was confusing, you've got to admit; but then, everything had been confusing. So confusion was just a natural condition. Then she looked down at her wrist and the little watch on it and moved towards the door, holding it open for me.

"Knowles—Uncle Ned is at the end of the hall. Remember; after your talk with Big John don't disturb me unless I call you."

She seemed nervous, anxious; even glad to get rid of me. Rid of me! That was funny, after she had put up such a fight to see that Knowles met my price.

But I shrugged my shoulders, took another look at the door, spotted an

ordinary hotel lock and the added attraction of a heavy chain and bolt, and passed down the musty hall to the stairs.

Big John was waiting for me. Maybe I didn't think much of his conversation, but I had to admit that he wasn't a lad to waste words. He came right to the point.

"What did Robinson tell you?" And when I didn't answer: "I mean—about the girl."

"Robinson?" I gave him the lifted eyebrows and the heavy surprise. "Why, from our last talk I thought you rather fancied Robinson—and feared him."

"Feared him!" he said. "Why, I couldn't do that. I never feared anything—anyone. You see, he sort of threatened Verna, there in the dining-room."

"Sort of!" It was my turn for the exclamation.

"I didn't mind that." Big John nodded his huge head. "Maybe she knows things Robinson has a right to know. But he talked with you afterward." A long pause, and then: "I work for Ned Knowles, but that don't mean anything. He pays me money—fair money, but that don't mean anything. He has to. But the girl, now. Nothing must happen to her."

"Hell!" I said, "none of you guys know where you stand. A few hours ago you were thinking of wringing my neck because I had an interest in the girl, and then you decided to let Robinson turn the trick."

"Well," he said, "I'll tell you. Your interest is in how money comes into your pocket. You'd drop the girl for a few hundred of squeal money. Verna Driscoll has a peculiar meaning to me. When she was four, nearly five, I bounced her on my knees. That's right! I gave her candy too, and she thought Big John the greatest man in the world. I ain't seen her since then till now, but I can't forget that. If you, Robinson or anyone else was to hang the rap for murder on her—then, just like *that*," big hands came out; great fingers bit

into hairy palms, "I'd kill you." A full minute of reflection; then, "And that goes for Robinson or anyone else."

"That's very noble," I told him. But I was thinking of something. Just one thing—*murder*. After all, I was paid to protect the girl, and somehow in that protection I saw a chunk of lead slipping in between the eyes of Robinson, and that bullet bringing forth the murder charge against the girl.

And I decided to have a talk with Ned Knowles.

I left John Bates, got tipped off by the clerk that Knowles was in his room and went above.

Knowles let me in. The German Luger lay across his knees, the fine thick rug was covered with cigarette butts he had ground in with his heels.

"Well," I told him, "this hard guy, Robinson, has seen your niece. How about getting her away from here?"

"Net yet. Not yet!" he said. "You've been paid. I'll slip away first. You did very well tonight, Williams, very well indeed. But you made a deadly enemy."

"You think Robinson intends to kill the girl?" I asked him.

"Without doubt." Knowles nodded vigorously. "And Robinson and Harry and Curlew, the tall somber man, labor under the delusion that the girl has information. They think I have put away a great deal of cash and brought the girl here to tell her where it is if anything happened to me. That, of course, is not so." And suddenly: "You think the girl will—will make good?"

"Do you mean, has she got guts?" And when he bobbed his head: "Sure, she has guts; but suppose they put a murder rap on her?"

His eyes seemed to sink farther back in his head. He sort of sucked at his lips before he spoke. Then:

"You heard that? Was it Robinson?" And with a half sigh, "The death of Robinson would eliminate a lot of trouble. He intends to kill you, Williams."

"You'd like to see me get him, eh?"

"I would," he said slowly. "It's a lonely spot. Those here will never talk. Yes, if you killed Robinson I would consider it a great favor, a very great favor." And leaning forward: "I always pay for great favors."

"I don't make a business of murder," I told him. "Besides, the girl would get in a jam. He's left a note behind, about her."

"He has?" Knowles stroked his chin and smiled. "This much I can assure you. If Robinson should die, there would be no danger to Verna—to the girl. Besides, you don't fully appreciate the man. One of you must die now. Why not have it Robinson and get paid for it?"

I left the room without answering him. And I had to stick my hand in my pocket and wrap my fingers around the roll of bills to keep from going back and telling him exactly where he got off.

I went straight downstairs. Not that I wanted to look the hotel over to see if the doors and windows were locked against possible enemies. The enemies were already there, eating Knowles' food, sleeping in his rooms and not paying a cent. No, I had something else on my mind. That telephone in the private office behind the desk. I wanted to take a crack at it. I wanted to get some information.

Harry was in the lobby reading a last summer's magazine. I don't know if it was a funny story or not, but he was still smiling. Robinson was over by the fireplace smoking a cigar. Neither of them looked at me. The clerk behind the desk smiled, at least he parted his lips and made a funny face. Big John Bates was not present. Nor was the somber, lanky bird called Curlew.

"The phone." I went straight to the clerk. "Can I get New York on that, and is there an extension where anyone can listen in?"

"No extension," he said. "And you can get London on it, though no one ever did."

It took me the best part of thirty minutes to get hold of Detective Sergeant

O'Rourke, in New York. Then I said: "You remember the Baldwin killing—Italy—Lake Como?"

"Sure, sure." He snapped right into life. "Shot smack through the back of his head. You working on that case? It's tricky."

"Not exactly on it," I told him. "But I was wondering if you suspected anyone, and if you could give the man's name."

"Man's name! Well, it did look like a man's job. But we're looking for a woman; a woman he was sent to find and who disappeared right after the shooting. There's a rumor she was drowned in the lake but they didn't find the body. There's another rumor she's an American and got across the pond."

"They just want to question her, eh?"

"They did." O'Rourke chuckled. "But it seems they want her for murder now."

"And her name?"

There was some silence. O'Rourke turned his head from the phone and I heard him say:

"That dame from Italy—Lake Como—the Baldwin murder! What was her name, Frank?" Then a long silence, and the voice of O'Rourke. "Verna Driscoll. D as in dumb, R as in rum, I as in—"

But I didn't get any more. I thanked him and hung up the receiver. The little lady with the black eyes and childish smile had lied to me. And what's more, she had shot a guy to death.



**T**HOUGHT it over as I passed into the lobby. I'm not high minded; that is, high minded enough to go upstairs, dump that load of five-hundred-dollar bills into Knowles' hands and tell him I was through. After all, I had looked the boys over, and maybe they needed shooting to death. But this was a dick; a fairly straight dick too. This Joe Baldwin, who passed away on the shores of Lake Como.

Harry was still smiling and reading

when I passed through the lobby. He didn't look up. But Robinson did; or perhaps I looked at him first. The scrape of steel against stone attracted my attention unpleasantly. I paused and watched him sharpening a huge hunting knife on the stone side of the fireplace.

"I like a knife better than a gun," he said pleasantly enough. "No bad news on the phone, I hope."

"No," I said. "Not bad for me, if that's what you mean."

He hesitated, and then:

"I'm not sure that's what I meant. Going to bed or going to keep an eye on the little lady?"

"Maybe both." I eyed him and looked again at the knife that he held now before the flickering firelight; and regarded it critically.

He shook his head.

"You're in a tough spot, Williams; a very tough spot. You wouldn't shoot a man in the back, would you?"

"I never had to," I told him.

"And wouldn't." He nodded. "But anyone here would shoot you in the back—would and will."

"Sort of murder in the open." I grinned at him.

"Sort of?" His eyebrows went up. "Exactly. Good night." And he went back to sharpening the knife.

Nice place; nice boys; nice girl, I thought as I went up those stairs. But the girl! Yep, she bothered me. Black eyes, eh? Well, I'd have a look at those eyes again. It's one thing to shoot a man to death. I've done it often. But this Baldwin took the bullets right through the back of his head.

At the girl's door I paused. Then I tried the knob gently, turned it and pushed. The door was locked all right. I half raised my hand to knock, and didn't. A huge figure was moving along the dimly lit hall. I straightened. It was Big John Bates.

"What you want at her door?" He spoke before I had a chance to question him.

"Just seeing if it's locked."

"It is," he said. "I tried it." And that huge finger coming out again as my right hand sunk into my jacket pocket: "They can say what they want; Harry can smile; Robinson can sneer, but this is the night. He wouldn't 've come otherwise. Them two servants sensed it and left. Robinson never waits—never waits the clock around. I'll stay by the door."

I nodded and watched his hands. Was I afraid of him? No, not a bit. But I had seen his poker trick and had respect for those two mitts.

He looked down and his lips parted and his eyes squinted.

"A gun wouldn't do you no good when I'm this close," he said very seriously, and as if he gave it considerable thought, "Robinson knows that; Robinson knows everything." And again: "I'll be by the door. I don't know how it'll happen."

"All right, Big Boy," I told him. "Be by the door; outside the door though. I'm interested in the girl's neck and my neck; not particularly interested in what you think of Robinson's neck."

"You think," he said slowly as he stroked his chin, "the right thing to do would be to wring his, eh? You think that's the thing to do."

"That's up to you, brother. If you must do your tricks—why, his neck might be as good as another."

"You think so. You think so." And he stood looking vacantly at me as I went to the next door, pushed it open and walked into my own room.

Just a click of the chain that hung from the single light in the middle of the room and I didn't have to look for hidden enemies. There was no place to hide.

I jerked off my jacket and started to undress, then I thought better of it and kicked my suitcase back under the bed and flopped on to that bed.

Black eyes. Black, honest eyes! And I shook my head. Much of her story held the unmistakable smell of fish—bad fish. Weights on her neck and feet and a drop

in the lake. Yet she came up smiling!

I came to my feet and threw on my jacket. I wanted another look at the girl. I know killers when I see them; I've seen enough of them. It's stamped upon their faces. Oh, I don't mean lads who kill suddenly, in passion. But I do mean lads, or dames either, who can deliberately raise a gun and pop a guy through the back of the coco. And I hadn't seen that in this girl's face.

Gently I closed my hand around the knob of that door, gently I pushed it—and it was locked. I didn't like that. She must have been reading the latest best sellers. Twice I tapped gently, and the third time louder. Queer? Sure, it was queer. Just a scratch of my fingers across that door should have brought her smack upright in bed. People who live close to danger, to death, form a habit of waking at the first sound. And Verna! Well, her life wouldn't give you the idea that she'd curl up at night and sleep like a baby.

I got my flash, put it on the keyhole and spotted the end of the key in the lock. There was no chain on this door, like the hall one. I just lifted a pair of tweezers from my suitcase; long, strong pliers, and inserted them in the keyhole and gripped the barrel of the key tightly and gave it one turn. Hardly a dull click and my hand was on the knob again. Very gently I opened the door.

Darkness. Then my quick: "Hush!" and I flashed my light. The "Hush" was unnecessary. The thin circle of light lit almost at once on the bed—an empty bed.

## VI



**I** FOUND the light and snapped the chain. Just a single look was enough. Nothing there; no one there. The door to the hall was

locked, the heavy chain was across it. The girl was gone. And I saw it.

The coiled rope was gone from the floor. It had been thrown out the half-open window. I thrust the window up and stuck out my head. Certainly the girl had gone that way. Did she leave herself, or—

I straightened and listened. There was a soft tap on the door. I thrust my hand in my pocket and waited, then the tap came again. A voice mumbled something, and all hell broke loose suddenly outside that door; on that door.

The knob turned, wood cracked, the chain snapped out, carrying its bolt with it. Talk about breaking down a door! It couldn't have been more sudden and more effective if someone had backed a ten ton truck up against it.

It all happened in a second. Just the turning of the knob, then the crash of the door. One thing was certain, Big John Bates had not lied about his strength. He stood there now, facing me; facing my gun, too, that had jerked into my hand. I didn't like the look in his eyes and I didn't like the look of that door.

I said as he stood there uncertainly:

"Don't come any closer or I'll let you have it. I mean it."

He looked at me, looked at the bed, then back to me again. Then he shook his head.

"You couldn't stop me now, Mister. Not at this distance, if I had a mind to harm you."

I looked down at my .44 and grinned.

"I could put a few holes in you that you'd have hard work explaining to the undertaker," I told him.

"Where's the girl?" was all he said.

"She's gone."

"They've got her; Robinson's got her. So that's it."

"Robinson was downstairs when I came up, so was the lad with the smile. You were outside the door all the time. What made you suddenly decide to bust in, if you wanted to protect the girl?"

His brownish yellowish eyes fastened on me. There was something of the

animal in them. A huge hand stroked his chin. Finally he said:

"That's a fair question. I was listening, 'cause I knew it would be tonight. I thought I heard Verna moving around and I thought I heard the window go up. But I did see the light; saw it smack under the door. So I come in."

I looked at the door again. Yep, as he said, he "come in." There was no two ways about that.

But I couldn't stand there the rest of the night and chin with this guy. I looked out the window again; wind driven rain bit into my face. I liked the girl. Besides, somewhere out in that storm ten grand of mine was running loose—running loose with death. She had to live for me to win.

Big John Bates was scratching his head when I went down those stairs.

Things hadn't changed any in the lobby. I got the dull scraping of the knife as I came down the stairs even before I saw Robinson. As for Harry! He still looked at the magazine and still smiled. The clerk was behind the counter looking at—well, not looking at anything—just staring into space.

Robinson grinned and said:

"You look as though you'd lost something."

I stopped and faced him.

"The girl's gone," I said.

"Sure, sure." He nodded. "She took a run out on you."

"She wouldn't do that." I eyed him.

"No. Why not? After what I told you; what you found out yourself? What you probably said to her? Well—" his shoulders shrugged, "it's a bad night; a bad country. She'll save a lot of trouble if she hops off a cliff."

"You're not going to look for her?"

"Me?" His eyebrows went up. "On a night like this?" He came to his feet and yawned. "I'm going to bed. I get premonitions. I've got one now. It's that I have no need to worry about this girl."

"Why?"

He walked to the stairs, went slowly

up the three steps to the landing, and turned.

"My premonition is that she's dead. Good night."

I watched him a minute, then walked across to the clerk. I don't know why I swung, halfway to the desk. But I did swing, and I did reach for my gun. Robinson still stood on the stairs; the knife was no longer in his hand. But I thought for a moment that I saw the black surface of an automatic disappear beneath his left arm. Had he been about to take a shot at my back? Maybe, maybe not; I couldn't be sure.

This time I faced the stairs until I saw him pass up them and disappear. Even then, when I approached the clerk, I didn't show my back to the stairs, nor did I show it to the smiling Harry who seemed interested in nothing but his reading.

The clerk saw me then for the first time. His eyes widened as he looked into mine. Then he whispered:

"The girl! She's gone—and she's dead." It wasn't exactly a statement and it wasn't exactly a question.

I went back of the desk, pushed him into the little room behind it and fastened my fingers on his jacket.

"What do you mean—she's gone and she's dead?"

"I don't know." He shook his head. "But if she's gone, she's dead. I heard the shot."

"What shot? When?" My fingers tightened.

"Ten minutes ago; fifteen. Maybe less, maybe longer. After you went upstairs. She—" And suddenly, both his hands resting on my shoulders; "She's done it before; dropped from her window and gone outside. I caught her one night coming in. Then I saw her one afternoon up by the lodge."

"Why didn't you tell me? Who did you tell? Did she say why she went out?"

"I didn't tell anyone. She said she wanted to be in the open, under the stars."

"You didn't believe that. Knowles pays you; you knew the girl was in danger. Why didn't you tell him or me, tonight?"

He shrugged his shoulders and told the truth, I guess. At least it was simple enough to sound like it.

"She gave me some money for not telling." And suddenly: "I gave you a hint tonight; gave her a hint—a hint not to go to the lodge. I didn't think she'd go. I'd seen that light in the lodge before; it's some sort of a signal. Now I believe it was a signal to the girl; a signal to come to her death. The tall lanky man, Curlew—the one that seldom talks—took a rifle and went out some time ago."

"How many shots did you hear?"

"Just one. Only one."

"He missed or she's lying out there; lying—" And I spotted a heavy raincoat and a big hat. "I'm going to have a look outside. Is it far to the lodge?"

"Not so far, if you know the way. But it's rough going for a stranger. You'd never find it alone."

"But I'm not going alone," I told him softly. "You're going with me."

"Me! Me? No. No! I won't go; I can't go."

But no more of that. His stomach was soft and my gun was hard. Even while he said "no" he was getting a slicker out of a small closet and slipping into it.

The smiling man looked up when we reached the wide front doors.

"Don't get wet," he said, addressing the clerk. "It's a night to catch your death out there in the storm. Your death!" he repeated, and smirked and nodded. Nice boys, all of them. But if he wanted his line to frighten the clerk he hadn't wasted it. He had trouble swinging open the doors, his hand trembled on the knob, his knees gave; then the wind and rain smashed in on us.

The smiling man shivered as I pushed the clerk across the porch. To hell with the front door! If smiling Harry didn't

like it, let him close it. It wasn't my worry.

The clerk and I searched out there in the darkness. Under the girl's window I spent plenty of time. No, I wasn't looking for footprints; the rain just ran in little rivers. I was looking for the girl—or, I thought with a gulp, for the body of the girl. We tried calling too, between the gusts of wind. There was no thunder and no lightning; just wind and rain and the whistling in the trees.

Then we gave our attention to the clearing around the hotel—or rather, my attention, for the clerk just stood around and shook. The wind was bad and the wind was loud. If the girl had been hit we'd find her some place, unless—and I didn't like that "unless"—her body had been dragged into the thickness of the bush, which was plenty thick.

Then another thought. The girl knew something that Robinson wanted to get from her? Under those circumstances she might be still alive; alive, to be tortured for information. Perhaps we had wasted half an hour hunting around the hotel already. What good could I do the girl if she were dead?

I grasped the clerk's arm.

"Come on!" I told him. "We'll start for the lodge."

And we did. The clerk was right. I'd 've had a tough time finding it alone. Once or twice we made out a dim, distant light, and once or twice the clerk got us off the narrow, winding, root-covered path over which we stumbled. Then we'd find it again and plod on.

Finally we got off the path altogether; nearly went over a cliff, and then it came to a show-down, where I had to drag the thoroughly frightened clerk to his feet and force him to go on.

We got a break; must have skirted clean around and come on the lodge from the other side. Plainly, from a rise in the ground which let us look over some thick bush, we spotted the light in

the lodge. That looked good. The hour was late. Someone must be stirring there. Had the somber gentleman taken the girl a prisoner, and was he waiting for the coming of Robinson?

We made our way into the thick wet bush.

The light! It was in strips; eight or ten wide strips, with darkness in between. I nodded. A heavy shutter, with the slats open, was before that lighted window.

As we pushed through to the end of that bush and were about to break into the open and cross the stretch of clearing for a look-see in the window, the light dimmed; brightened; made a peculiar shadow. I drew up sharp, grasping the clerk's arm tightly. Plainly I saw the white blotch of a man's face; the shadow of shoulders as they seemed to waver outside that window. Someone else was having a look-see.

I pushed the clerk back and moved cautiously forward. The wind and rain, that had bothered me, was on my side now. It killed the fall of my feet and the fall of the clerk's feet, which I felt rather than heard following me.

The shadow at the window grew steadier as I came near him. I spotted him, too. It was the lanky guy with the somber face and few words. I could get the meanness of his left eye and the narrowness of his face. I bent slightly and got a peek of my own through the window.

Surprised? Yes, I was surprised and I damn' near whistled back in my throat. The girl was there. And she was a prisoner, if you want to put it that way. At least, a man whose face I couldn't see held Verna Driscoll in his arms.

I took another step forward, looked at that still form by the window, the side of a sunken eye, the stiffness of a curved arm. Then he straightened his body, moved one foot backward, and for the first time I saw the gun; the long barrel of a rifle, the nose of which disappeared between two slats of the

shutter. I had come just in time, or had I? Was a finger already squeezing that trigger?

Just a single step and my gun pounded against his left side, where a lad is supposed to wear his heart.

"Don't do it, Bozo," I husked. "Race Williams speaking."

Conceit, that—the Race Williams part? I don't know. But it works wonders in the big city. Gunmen know I mean business; that I don't bluff. Now, this guy would understand; know the rules. The man with the gun talks and the other listens and obeys! That's life. That's death. That's truth! That's—

And maybe I was taken off my guard. This man did not know the rules or he was a fool, or— Anyway, he swung suddenly; drew in his rifle. I don't know if we fired together, if he fired first or if I did. But I know that the cold wet barrel struck against my face, that there was a terrific roar and the feeling that the whole side of my head had been blown away. But I knew too that my own finger had tightened. Not that I heard my gun talk, not that I was mentally conscious that my finger closed. I just *knew* that it would close at a time like that. It always does. And it did now.

## VII



**D**AZED, vision blurred, a thousand electric drills going inside my head, I still saw figures moving inside that window, and I did see Curlew, the somber gent, stretched on the grass. Even as I staggered to the side of that window, for I didn't know if the man inside was friend or enemy, I flashed my torch, still in my left hand, down upon Curlew's face. I nodded like a drunken sailor and sort of muttered to myself: "Then he did have a heart, after all."

Glassy eyes looked up at me. Curlew was dead; quite dead, indeed. Well, after

all it wasn't such difficult shooting. The gun was smack against his heart to begin with. It wasn't to my credit; just his own fault. Mr. Somber, Silent Curlew had done as many other men have done. He made an error of judgment and paid for it with his life.

As for the clerk! And I raised my gun.

Shutters had crashed open, a man stood framed between French windows. There was a wild look in his eyes and a rifle in his hands. I shook my head a couple of times, until I saw only one of him.

"Don't move—and drop the rifle," I said. Then I saw the girl.

"Race. Race Williams." She had stepped over the sill and down onto the grass. "What happened? This is my friend; my—I love him. What happened?"

I said:

"Never mind the baloney. Who's the boy friend?"

"I'm—" the man started, and the girl stopped him.

"Don't, Bob—don't," she cried. "Not yet."

But the young man would talk.

"Race Williams, the detective. I've heard of him. He's straight. No, no, Jean. I'm not going to be secret any more." And turning and facing me: "I'm Robert Rawley, and I'm here to find the murderer of my father. As for Miss Haskell, she wants me to—to run away."

Now that was some speech, you've got to admit. Here was the lad who'd get the money if the girl died. He had held her in his arms. Certainly things were getting complicated. This man called the girl, Jean; he called her Miss—Haskell. As if he believed it, too. Things were—

The girl screamed. She was looking down at the body of Curlew.

"Is he dead?" She barely whispered the words as Robert Rawley came and stood beside her. "It must have been he who fired at me when I left the

house. But what brought you here, how did you know?"

"He's dead enough to satisfy anyone," I told her. "I came because the clerk said—" The clerk! I paused. Where was the clerk? Had he taken a run-out powder when the shots came? It would be like him. And I saw the clerk, and stepped before the body.

"Take the girl inside," I told Rawley. "I'll be in directly."

From her intake of breath and the gasp in the man's throat I knew that both of them had seen the body. As for me! I looked at the clerk's body again, then turned away. I had thought it was my head that was blown off, but the shot meant for me had crashed him.

I must have stood there a good couple of minutes shaking the stupor out of my head, then I followed the man and the girl through the open window.

The girl was alone when I entered the rustic room. She said:

"I sent Bob to lock all the doors, to be sure. That man intended to kill me—kill me and put the blame on Bob."

"Bob!" I started to give her a big laugh, but I pulled it. "Doesn't he know who you really are? Doesn't—"

"No, no," she cried. "And you mustn't tell him. I met him ten days ago, on my way up here. I stopped at the station for directions, when he got off the train. He's been staying here at the lodge; Robinson arranged that. He wants him to kill Knowles. He wants the blame to fall on him. I couldn't tell him all I knew. At first I just came, to get him to leave. Then he—one night— He loves me. He told me about himself. He thinks I'm Jean Haskell, he doesn't even know that Knowles is over at the hotel. Robinson has kept him here until he could come." She was shaking me now. "Don't you see? Bob will be the one who will benefit by Knowles' death and he'll be blamed for it."

"He doesn't benefit if you live," I told her as I turned from the waving

curtains through which Rawley must have passed.

"It doesn't matter about me. It'll all clear up soon."

"Clear up!" And I stopped. Put it down to the girl's black eyes if you want to; put it down to the fact that I thought she was on my side; put it down to anything you want. But I'll always put it down to my head and the explosion of that rifle alongside my face, that still seemed to ring in my ears.

But the truth is that hands pinned my arms to my sides from behind, the girl stuck a revolver against my chest, and I—I guess I just thought of another dick and Lake Como. When I turned my head I saw the boyish face of Robert Rawley and the rifle against the wall behind him. There was a sad sort of look in his eyes; a determined one, too.

"I'm sorry," the girl said, and if she meant it or not, it didn't do me a hell of a lot of good. "I guess you saved my life tonight, or Bob's—it doesn't matter. We're running away. I was afraid you wouldn't let us go."

Robert Rawley was binding my hands behind me, then my feet. Things weren't clear. I remember saying:

"So that's gratitude. Beat it and leave me here to be butchered by Robinson!"

"No." She shook her head as the man tightened a clothes line about my feet. "The ropes will not be tight. Ten—fifteen minutes, and you'll be free. In the meantime, if they should come, you'll be hidden where they won't find you. But they won't look for you; I'm leaving a note that we've gone."

Robert Rawley was strong. He lifted me and carried me like I was a trussed-up pig. He said:

"I'm sorry for this, old man—terribly sorry. But Jean thinks it's best. I'm getting out of here."

Now, no guy likes to get beaten by an amateur, tied up and carted away. But I think what hurt the most were

the apologies. I set my lips grimly but didn't talk—couldn't talk.

There was some sort of a storeroom back of the room we left, though we had to go through the hall to reach it. There, among some logs, old burlap, and what have you, I was tossed. Sacks were chucked over me, and just before the last sack, the crowning indignity of all. Yep—I tell it, though I hate to. The girl leaned down and kissed me full upon the lips.

"You've got your guns and you've got the ten grand," she said. "But most of all, Race, I'll remember you as a good sport. Even at such a time you didn't tell Bob the truth about me. I'll tell him all, of course. But that was big of you—damn' big."

The burlap went over my head and the lights went out. And what did I think? That I was a good sport? No. I thought—why hadn't I told that big fathead that he was running away with a murderess? But, after all, maybe, from the little lady's point of view, she was treating me pretty well. The last private detective she got her hands on she shot through the back of the head.

And she was right about those cords. They shouldn't be hard to work loose. I thought of Robinson, smiling Harry, their dead friend outside the lodge. And fumbling, I went to work on those cords. My life might, maybe would, depend on speed.

Speed! And in the beginning I had plenty of that. Frantic, twisting speed. All physical, nothing mental. Then I took a grip on myself. Got my head working, and my body began to respond to the orders from my brain. After that things were better. It was a little slow, but encouraging; the ropes were loosening.

Then a door slammed and I thought there was the distant rumble of voices. Verna and Rawley had gone then. But hadn't they gone before? Why would they wait around so long? Then I heard footsteps, the jar of a heavy body against the wall close to me. And there

was a flash of light; a long sliver of horizontal light running beside my head.

I nodded my understanding at that. Someone had entered the lodge, was in that long rustic living-room. I heard a man's curse, just as if he were in the room with me. And I knew that voice; recognized the speaker as smiling Harry, from the words that followed.

Smiling Harry said:

"I tell you, Robinson, that Curlew is deader than hell, and the damn' clerk, too. Curlew must have shot off the top of his head, but he got him first, I guess." And in answer to something Robinson said: "Hell! I didn't perform a post mortem. The girl and Rawley came out the front door then and you called me, and I came around."

This time when Robinson spoke, I heard him clearly.

"Curlew either got Williams some place in the woods or Williams walked off the cliff." Then he chuckled. "If he went back to the hotel he'll find a sight for sore eyes. But my guess is that he walked over the cliff. It would be easy tonight."

I was sitting up, trying to peer through that crack. At first I saw nothing, then a man's legs as he walked across the floor. Then I saw Robert Rawley. He was lying on the floor, his hands and feet bound. There was a welt on his forehead and blood ran down his face. His head rolled once but his eyes were closed. Did I get any satisfaction out of that? Peculiarly, I didn't. Yet I'd 've gladly knocked him for a loop myself, any day, any place.

I was on my knees now, working carefully at my hands, my face close against the rough logs, my eye glued to that narrow slit. And I saw Robinson. He bent suddenly and I could see his face and shoulders and most of his arms. From his action he was dragging something across the floor; then I saw his hands and the thing his hands held. It was a human body; a woman. It was Verna.

She was fully conscious and her face

was white with terror, her eyes wide in horror, and she was trying to say something; making queer movements with her head. But no words came, for across her mouth was a tightly wound towel, the bulge suggesting that a gag had been shoved into her mouth first.

Her arms bound behind her, her legs tightly strapped together, Robinson brutally dragged her across that room. He talked, too, to smiling Harry.

"Things will be all right now," he said. "If Williams is in the woods Big John will find him. He knows every inch of it. We'll give it to the girl, then shove Rawley over the cliff. It'll be a natural, according to the will, that he killed both Knowles and the girl. Whether he lost his way afterward or committed suicide, the law can't worry about. Anyway, I planted the typewritten sheets about Knowles killing his father in his pocket. All the police ever want is a fall guy, anyway. They don't care if he's dead or alive."

"Knowles was a fool," said smiling Harry. "I think he actually believed that Rawley was in with us and all we wanted was the money under the will. I don't think he really suspected you were sure about the money he planted."

Robinson laughed as he jerked the girl to a sitting position and shoved her back against the wall close to the blazing fire.

"He believed it half an hour ago when I stuck the knife against his throat. And he talked, too; told me where the money was."

"Maybe he lied to you."

"Not him. He tried to at first, but I slashed him a bit. Then I promised to split it with him; I gave him my word I wouldn't harm him if he told."

"And then?"

Robinson shrugged his shoulders before he came to his feet.

"Then I cut his throat for him. I don't think the girl ever knew his secret."

"You don't need the girl then," smil-

ing Harry said. "Better let her have it."

"I do need her," Robinson said viciously. "She's going to pay for that knuckle rapping Williams gave me. Aren't you, sister?" He must have turned to the girl, for I saw her chin go up and her eyes sort of plead with him, as if she wanted to talk, though what she could say that would help her I didn't know.

"You're a hard man, Robinson," smiling Harry said, but there was more of admiration than condemnation in his words.

"You'll see." And I saw Robinson's face again, contorted now in hate as he knelt beside the girl. And I saw the knife, too; the huge hunting knife that he had been sharpening on the stones in the hotel. I almost cried out but didn't, I made one frantic jerk at those ropes, and my hands were free, my gun in my hand. I jarred to my feet, stumbled, nearly fell against the side of the wall, then toppled back on to the burlap. Why the sudden panic? Well, I discovered that I couldn't do any shooting—any worth-while shooting, through that narrow crack.

But I'd have to, even if I only alarmed them. I couldn't let them butcher the girl like that. I couldn't—

I didn't shoot through that crack. And I knew why they hadn't heard me stagger to my feet and fall back again. The front door had opened and closed, heavy feet had crossed the floor, a gruff voice spoke. It was Big John Bates.

"He ain't around, and I come back." And suddenly: "What the hell are you doing to the girl?"

As for me, I wasn't looking now. I had found my penknife, opened it and was cutting the ropes from my feet.

Big John was still talking, half to himself.

"You tell me where that money is, Verna. You know it's rightly ours anyway. He's got to do it if you don't." A pause and a suck in of breath. "Good

God! Robinson, she can't talk. You've got her gagged."

The ropes were gone and I was on my feet, feeling my way, searching for the door.

And Robinson said in an easy voice:

"Keep out of it, John, and don't worry about her talking. Knowles told me where the money is. This is not business, it's pleasure. I don't like the girl."

"But why?" And in a voice of thunder, "Stop!"

And I found the door, pushed up the small iron catch just as Robinson said:

"Stick that gun of yours in John's belly, Harry. The girl asked for it and she's going to get it."

And that was all of that. I stumbled out into a narrow hall, a bigger room with a light in it, a small room to the left that was dark. Then I saw a light between thick curtains, the curtains that I had seen dividing this room from the living-room a short while before.

And I was at those curtains and looking through them just in time to see the whole show. And it was a show; a terrible show

## VIII



ROBINSON knelt on the floor, his knife close to the girl's throat. There were several tiny pricks and pin-points of blood on the whiteness of her neck. I raised my gun to give it to him, when the shot came.

As I turned my head I saw Big John stagger slightly, turn and face smiling Harry. Face him, yes—and raise those huge hands towards his neck. And Harry fired again; fired with the gun almost against Big John's chest. Big John stood still, shook for a second like a giant tree in a gale, then both his hands suddenly shot out.

Smiling Harry didn't press the trigger again. Smiling Harry didn't even

take a backward step; in fact, he didn't even lose his smile. Both Big John's hands fastened on his throat at once. Harry's feet left the floor, there was a sudden sickening smack, his eyes bulged, his tongue— But why go into that? I'll just say that his smile turned suddenly into a grimace; a horrible death grimace. Then Big John flung him aside and moved straight towards the kneeling Robinson.

I guess I was too fascinated even to hide my face, for Robinson saw me as he came to his feet. He shouted to me; cried out in fear.

"Give it to him, Williams. He's mad."

I just looked at Robinson and did nothing. I guess Robinson saw it in my face, for his fear turned to terror and then to a deadly horror. I don't think I ever saw such an expression on a man's face.

Both those huge knotted hands stretched forth until those ten vise-like fingers neared Robinson's throat. And Robinson struck; raised that knife in his right hand and with all the force of a desperate man and all the skill of a man used to knives, buried that hunting knife to the hilt in the left side of Big John's chest.

And that was all of that. For Big John, you think? No! Those hands reached Robinson's throat. A cry that started died at once, bones snapped again, and this time I didn't look. I just heard the body strike the floor.

Dumb ox, murderer, brute this Big John may have been. But one thing was certain. He was no liar. Certainly he hadn't exaggerated the truth about those hands. Fascinated, I watched Big John sway there, his brownish yellowish eyes now dull and uncertain. Then he turned, walked very slowly, with a falling motion, to a huge leather chair and flopped into it.

No, he wasn't dead. He just sat there, his chin down on his chest, his eyes staring straight before him. Sightless? Don't ask me. But out of his

chest still stuck the handle of the knife.

As for me! I freed the girl and Robert Rawley. He wasn't a bad lad either. He had come there only at the request of Robinson, to find the man who killed his father. He had guts, too, for he tore down both those curtains and laid them over the bodies on the floor. That he shivered a bit was due to the way he was built, I guess. To my way of thinking, they were two of the most deserving stiffes I ever saw.

And the girl! She leaned against the wall, then against Rawley, when he came to her. Her mouth opened and closed. She pointed her finger at Big John; at the knife, and finally said:

"Can't you do something for him?"

But Big John shook his head and rolled his eyes.

"Leave it be," he said, after tugging at the handle once himself. "It's easier to die like this. I got it this time."

"It's all over now." Rawley had an arm around the girl. "She's safe, and we'll be married."

I didn't like to do it and I gave the girl her chance. I put it so she could explain. I said:

"A detective named Joe Baldwin was shot through the back of the head at Lake Como, Italy. The police are looking for a certain party. Robinson left a note that will—"

"You don't know, then," Rawley cut in. "Tell him, Jean."

And she did tell me a mouthful.

"I thought, Race Williams," she tried to smile, "you might have suspected something when you heard I was tossed into the lake with weights on both my feet and neck. But then, the others didn't, at least after they saw me. Well, Verna Driscol did shoot that detective; at least, I think she did. But she never came out of Lake Como. She stayed put." And when I must have looked pretty blank, "Understand, she stayed put."

"Then you—you—"

"No, I'm not Verna Driscol. I'm Jean Haskell. I've lived my life in

New York; you might call it the underworld. Poor but honest, or fairly honest. At least," and she raised her head, "clean. Ned Knowles found me there; no money, no food, and a fairly good picture of what these men might expect the child, Verna Driscol, to grow up to look like. So I came here posing as Verna Driscol. That's how I knew of you, and wanted you to protect me. As for Bob! That was something that just happened."

"So—" I started and stopped.

Someone else had echoed that "so." It was Big John Bates.

"So," he said, "you're not Verna Driscol. She's dead, then. You're not the child I bounced on my knees. You're not the little girl who said she'd always love me—me—me." Feebly he raised a hand and feebly he struck it against his chest. "And I killed them for you. My friends! Killed them so they wouldn't hurt you. You—a dirty, double-crossing little gutter rat. You—"

Great hands knotted and gripped the sides of the chair. His huge head straightened, his mouth twisted; there was agony in every line of his face. And, damn it! with two bullets in his side and the handle of the knife still sticking from his chest, he came to his feet. Yep—he just held the arms of the chair and forced himself erect, let go of the chair and stood for a moment swaying, his eyes dull, mud-colored balls. Then he turned, faced the girl and stretched out both his hands, tottered slightly and took a step forward.

"What the hell!" The words just popped out of me as I stepped in front of him. The man was half dead. A push in the chest was all he needed to keel him over for keeps, or so I thought.

Robert Rawley was before him, too, beside me. He said hoarsely:

"Sit down. What do you intend to do?"

Big John licked at his lips. His Adam's apple went up and down. Queer sounds came in his throat. I didn't think he could talk. Then I knew that he

could, for his words were bellowed out and fairly shook the room.

"Her throat!" he cried. "Her throat! The same as theirs."

And he didn't only talk. I never saw anything like it before and I'll never see anything like it again. Both his hands shot out sidewise. I didn't know at that moment what happened to Rawley but I did know what happened to me. If the swinging arm of a derrick had smacked me I don't think I'd of gone down any harder. Anyway, truth is truth. I hit the floor like a thousand of brick, rolled over once, struck the table, and switched my body quickly.

Just one thought. Maybe two thoughts, but rolled into one. Those hands and the girl's throat.

Yes, I rolled over, and before I had fairly crashed against the table I had my gun up and was drawing a bead right behind his ear. Not at his body. I had seen the effect of bullets in that lad's body.

The girl didn't move, she couldn't move. She was frozen to the spot. Although her mouth was open she didn't cry out, she couldn't. And those hands—those hands that clutched and killed with the rapidity of a bullet, were reaching for her throat; were almost on—

My finger tightened upon the trigger;

then loosened again. Big John's hands dropped to his sides, he spun once, like a top. Then without even bending his knees, crashed full length upon the floor. Just the single thud of his dead body and I was across to the girl and holding her limp form in my arms. Rawley was slow in getting to his feet.

**S**HE had the stuff and the storm had cleared, still we had trouble getting back to the hotel. For Verna—or rather, Jean—was the only one who knew the path. But we made it and busted in the door in time to chuck another log on the fire.

I left them downstairs while I went above. Ned Knowles' door was open and he was in the room. One look was enough. It certainly would keep you from feeling sorry about the sudden and unfortunate passing of one who called himself Robinson. There was a humidior on the side table. I lifted the lid and smelled of a cigar. Then I put a handful in my pocket and went below. The girl was asleep in Rawley's arms.

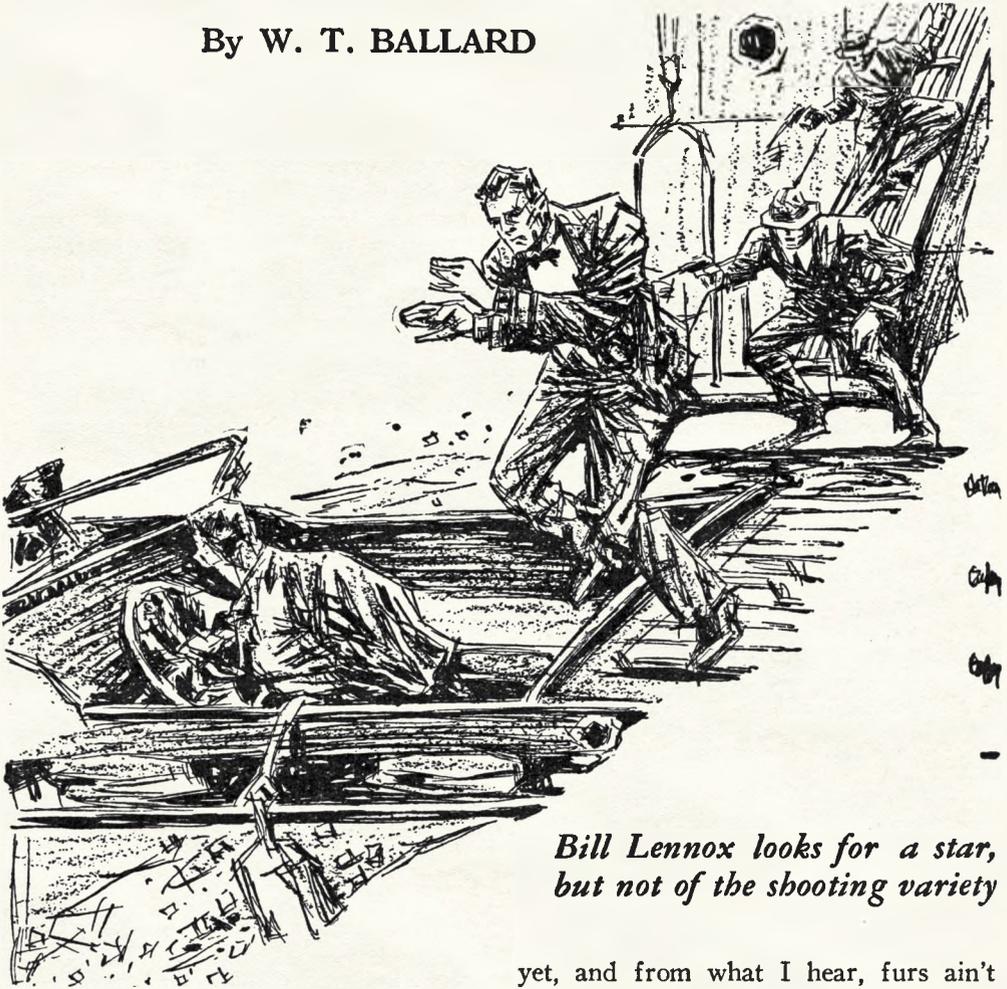
I grinned at him and walked into the little office behind the desk. As I lifted the receiver I caught the suggestion on the little blue telephone book. Maybe I grinned when I gave my message.

"I want a policeman," I said.



# A Million-Dollar Tramp

By W. T. BALLARD



*Bill Lennox looks for a star, but not of the shooting variety*



**B**ILL LENNOX, trouble-shooter for the General Consolidated studio, sat in the dark projection room and watched the rushes of their latest picture. When the lights came up he dropped his cigarette to the floor, stepped on it, and yawned.

Sol Spurck, boss of the West Coast studio, looked around his large cigar at Lennox. "I tell yuh, Bill, we got something. If that ain't an extra special feature, I'll go back to the fur business

yet, and from what I hear, furs ain't what they once was, you understand."

Lennox yawned again. "Why shouldn't it be a good picture? If that back-stage story has been made once, it's been made a hundred times. MacNutt did the script. Arthur the dialogue, and Hendrix the music. Buzzy staged the routine, and you spent enough to buy the Chicago Fair."

Spurck ignored this. "Jean Hammond will wow them," he predicted. "I tell you, Bill, that girl is hot."

"She's been hot too long," Lennox said, as he rose, "but there's a bet in the picture at that; the little girl with the big eyes that steps out of the chorus

and sings a number in the last reel. Who is she?%

Spurck shrugged. "Am I the casting director?" he wanted to know. "Always you are chasing girls with no reputation yet, no box office draw."

Lennox did not argue. As he left the projection room, he passed Carlson, the director. Carlson was big with bushy hair and heavy eyebrows. He said, "How'd it look, Bill?"

"Lousy; but it's box office. The exhibitors will probably send you an orchid. By the way, who's the lassie with the big eyes and the educated puppies that sang the number in the last reel?"

Carlson hesitated, then shrugged. "Just an extra. Billy Walters was slated for that, but her tonsils got tangled up with a knife and this kid begged me so that I gave her a chance. Not so hot, huh?"

Lennox did not bother to answer. He went along the passage to his own office and shoved open the door, violently. A girl seated at his desk looked up with wide eyes. "My gawd—Bill! Save the hinges."

He said: "Hello, Nance! What brings a fan writer out this way?"

She shrugged. "I came out for a bit of news, and then stopped to say howdy. I was hoping for decent company, but your mood doesn't seem to be right. Has someone been spoiling your temper again?"

He lifted her bodily from the chair, sat her on the corner of the desk, and took the place vacated. "They make me mad," he complained. "Here is a kid with looks, a voice, and educated feet. Add a little sex, and it spells wow, and neither Sol nor that dumb kluck Carlson can see her."

Nancy Hobbs looked at him with narrowed eyes. "I know the signs," she said, half to herself. "You're about to pick out some unknown tramp and educate her for pictures. I thought that you'd sworn off that pipe dream. Haven't you been burned enough?"

"But this kid has class. I tell you, Nance, the trouble with pictures is—"

She said, wearily. "I've been writing for fan magazines for three years, and you try to tell me the trouble with pictures—"

He scowled at her. "You always were a smart brat. You should have been a gag man."

"You give me enough laughs without that," she said, sliding from the desk.

"But seriously now, Nance," he said, and his voice was enthusiastic, "this looks like real money, and I'll cut you in. I've some preliminary work to do first; get her lined up, put a stop on her thinking for herself and leave that to me. Then when I'm ready you can write a swell gag on her. How about it?"

Nancy Hobbs laughed, not nastily, but nicely, with a suggestion of sympathetic pity.

"Poor old Bill," she said. "When this bum throws you down, come around and cry on mama's shoulder."

He swore at her as he watched her go, waited until she closed the door then picked up the phone.

## 2



HE girl with the big eyes was named Irene Schultz. Bill shrugged at the name, but that was easy. Hollywood was no respecter of names. He hung up the phone and went out through the main gate on to Sunset. For a moment he hesitated, then turned and walked west. At the corner he flagged a cab and gave the driver the address. The Schultz girl, according to the casting bureau, lived on North Windsor.

Lennox paid off the taxi and looked around. The address he had was the second door in a bungalow court. He rang the bell and waited. He waited a long time, then pushed the bell again. Steps clicked across wood and the door

opened two inches, held in place by the night chain.

Through the aperture Lennox saw her, and his eyes quickened. Without makeup, she was prettier than she had been in the film. There was a troubled something in the depths of her eyes that made his smile widen. That appealing look was worth a million to General, if Lennox knew his box office, and there was no one in the colony that knew it better.

He said: "I'm Bill Lennox, from General Consolidated. I want to talk to you a moment, Miss Schultz."

Recognition came into her eyes and Bill saw the pulse in the white throat quicken. "Oh—Mr. Lennox! I didn't recognize you."

Bill said: "That's all right, Kid. Open the door. I never was good at talking through cracks."

She hesitated, then slowly the door closed, he heard the chain unlatched and it opened again. The girl was in a wrinkled wash dress. Her brown hair was mussed, and she wore no stockings. "I wasn't expecting visitors," she told him, and he thought she said it kind of shyly.

Bill said: "Never mind that. I've seen them in worse and next to nothing. Grab that chair over there and listen; but first, how much common sense have you?"

She said, uncertainly: "I don't get you."

He shrugged. "How long you been out here?"

"Nine months. I was in vaudeville for two seasons."

"So that's where you learned to pick them up and lay them down. Listen, bum! You've got something, see? You didn't look so bad in that *Footlights* piece, but you're no world-beater. If you'll listen to papa, you can go over. If you go getting ideas of your own, you'll be just another pretty girl, dealing them off the arm in a dairy lunch. What about it?"

She said: "Please, could you come

back sometime, or could I see you in your office?"

Quick suspicion leaped into his eyes. "Who's been talking to you, Kid? Has some other studio—"

She said hurriedly: "It isn't that; it's something—something else. Honest, Mr. Lennox, I won't talk to anyone else about pictures till I see you, but you gotta go now. You gotta."

She was going to cry. Tears were not far behind those big eyes.

Bill said, suddenly: "What's the matter, punk? Hungry?" He found a crumpled bill in his vest, but she shook her head violently.

"I worked four days last week. I've got plenty, but please go."

He rose with a shrug. "You're the doctor, Kid. Come to see me when you're ready to talk."

He turned towards the door. Half-way across the room, he stopped and swore softly. The curtain which divided the room they were in from another room had blown aside slightly, exposing a man's foot. Lennox stared at it with narrowed eyes, then he took two quick steps forward.

The girl got in his way, trying to hold him back. There was fear in her eyes, more than fear, terror. "Please, oh please!"

Lennox pushed past, reached the curtains and parted them. The man lay on his back, his arms outstretched, his face distorted. Lennox knew that he was dead before he saw the knife wound in the side, just beneath the heart. The body was rigid and it was evident that the man had been dead some time.

Lennox straightened and swung on the girl. She wasn't looking at him, but at the body. Her shoulders drooped, and her head hung forward helplessly. "I didn't kill him, so help me—I didn't!" she babbled.

Lennox said, his voice brittle: "Who is he?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. I don't—"

He seized her wrist, drawing her

towards him. "Stop lying. Who is he?"

She said: "Bert Rose, but I didn't kill him. I don't know who did, I found him, there."

Lennox dropped her wrist and stepped back. Suddenly he was tired, very tired. A burning sensation of anger crept through him, anger against the girl, against fate. He said:

"Let's have the story; not that it matters. The thing for you to do is call the cops if you haven't already. With a face like yours, and those legs, you're a cinch with any jury."

Desperation stopped her sobs. She moved forward and caught his arm. "But I didn't kill Bert. You've got to help me—why should I kill him?"

Lennox shrugged. "Lots of reasons, sweetheart; but then, women don't need reasons for killing. Sometimes they just do it."

"But I didn't, I tell you. He was here, dead when I came in. I wasn't home last night, I spent the night at a girl's apartment."

She was crying again, not loudly, but hopelessly. In spite of himself Lennox studied her. Either she was a swell actress or this was on the level. Either way, it didn't matter. Again anger burned through him. A million-dollar bet, shot to hell because this Rose had gotten himself killed in her apartment. Lennox stared down at the man's body. The dead face seemed to grin up at him sardonically, adding to his anger.

He found a cigarette, loose in his coat pocket, and lit it. For two minutes he smoked furiously. The girl had turned away. He watched her back with thoughtful eyes, noted the way the hair curled away from her neck, the carriage, the—"Why not?" He was talking to himself not her, yet she turned.

The man on the floor meant nothing to him. The fact that he was dead meant less. All Lennox saw was the girl, her appeal, not to his emotions but to the box office. He may have weighed the consequences of his act, but it did not

stop him. It was a gamble—everything was a gamble, for that matter, if you wanted to do anything big; but he thought he could make it a safe gamble. He crossed the room and grabbed up the phone, dialing a number.

"Let me talk to Jake."

The girl was watching him now; hope struggling with fear in her eyes. Lennox's voice was harsh. "Jake, this is Bill. Listen, grab a truck, better make it a van, and an empty piano box. Get over here as soon as you can," he gave the street and apartment number. "Yeah, that's right. No, come alone and for gawd's sake, don't give your right name when you rent the truck."

He hung up and swung to the girl. All the lethargy had gone from his movements.

She said, wide eyed: "So you're going to help; but is it safe, having someone else know?"

He grinned without mirth. "Jake's okey. He'd do a stretch, if I said the word. But get this now: I'm not doing it to help you, I'm doing it because when I start something, I finish it. I started out to make you a star and by Judas Priest I'll make you one if I have to conceal evidence in a dozen killings. Get your things together. As soon as Jake comes, we're leaving and you're not coming back—here. First we'll go down to the studio and get your name on a contract, then we'll find a place for you to stay, but you've got to understand this: From now on, you don't have a thought of your own, you don't open your mouth until I give the okey. Is that a promise?"

## 3



OME hours later, Bill Lennox turned in at *Sardi's*, found a table, and ordered, then opened the evening paper and looked at it casually. A quarter-column item in the lower right-hand

corner caught his eye. "Gambler's body found in San Fernando Valley."

He read it through with pursed lips. A dead man, identified as Bert Rose, dealer on one of the Long Beach gambling barges, had been picked up that afternoon on a side road a mile and a half from Sennett City. Rose, who, the paper stated, had served two years in San Quentin for attempted robbery, had been stabbed. The police surgeon stated that the man had been killed sometime during the night, and it was thought that he was the victim of a gang killing.

Lennox folded his paper and tasted his soup. From the paper, he judged that Jake had done his work well. Jake wouldn't talk, that much Lennox knew. It seemed that Bert Rose was a closed incident.

A group of younger film players came in noisily and passed Lennox's table. He nodded to them half-consciously, comparing them with the girl whom he had put under contract that afternoon. They didn't compare, and he smiled to himself. Irene Schultz was a thing of the past. Lennox grinned as he thought of her new name, Marian Delaine. The name sounded phoney, but then, most Hollywood names sounded phoney and most of them were.

He'd gotten her an apartment in a quiet house, just off Franklyn, and she had orders not to communicate with any of her former friends. Lennox wasn't taking chances. He rose, and moved towards the door. On the Boulevard he stood for a moment, his hat shoved well back, a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth. Lights were on, but he stood in a shaded spot.

"Lavender Lane, hell!" he muttered, "Just Main Street with mascara and rouge."

He moved to the curb. A taxi swerved in close to him, its rear door open. From behind, a hand between Bill's shoulders pushed him forward and he went to his knees on the cab floor. The door slammed and they moved away from the curb, fast.

Bill said, "What the hell?" and struggled to the seat. A man at his side pressed a round, hard circle against his ribs.

"Take it easy, Lennox."

Lennox took it easy. The cab went right at Highland, swung along the curved street past the entrance to the Bowl, and on over Cahuenga Pass. Beyond Universal City, the cab turned right on Tuluca Road.

Lennox said: "I like the country, but I wasn't planning on a ride tonight."

The man at his side chuckled without mirth. "Getting sensible, are you? Rather thought that you would."

Lennox squinted into the darkness. "Maybe if you'd tell me what it's all about I'd get a general idea. Surely no one supposes that Sol would pay money to get *me* back?"

The man at his side laughed. "I never met Spurck, but from what I've heard, he isn't good at paying out dough. All we want is a little information." The voice hardened. "What did you do with that Schultz broad?"

Lennox's eyes narrowed into the darkness. He wished that he could see the other's face, wished that he had some idea who it was, but all he knew was that the gun was pressing harder into his side.

"Never heard of her."

The gun pressed harder. The husky voice said: "Don't lie, Lennox. You're not in such a good spot yourself. We know that she worked in that *Footlights Revue* that General is releasing next month."

Lennox said: "For — sake, you don't expect me to know every extra that works on our lot? Hell, I can't even remember my girl's birthday."

The man said, softly: "But you know Schultz. You were at her house this morning. A man came with a truck and an empty piano box. I wonder what he took away?"

"You seem to know everything."

"Almost everything—except where the dame is and what happened to the twen-

ty grand that Bert Rose had. It might interest you to know that the money belonged to me."

Lennox hid his surprise. "If Rose had twenty grand, the cops must have got it. Do you think that I'd roll a stiff?"

"What you'd do doesn't interest me." The voice had an edge now. "I want to know where that dame is. My men trailed her to the General gate this afternoon. She didn't come out."

Lennox grinned in spite of the gun against his side. Marian Delaine had gone to her new home in a town car, borrowed from Spurck for the occasion. The shadow hadn't expected that, had not looked closely at the car, evidently.

"I'll tell you," he said, with apparent candor. "I did go to Schultz' place this morning, but I didn't get a slant at anyone's twenty grand, and if the girl isn't around, she must have blown town. You can rod me, of course, but I can't see the percentage."

The man said: "Hell!" under his breath.

Lennox sensed that he was hesitating. The car swayed left into a side road, graveled and rough. They bumped across a wash and ground to a sliding stop. Lennox peered through the gloom and saw a shack, a crazy, tumbled down affair. The gun prodded him harder.

"Get out!"

He got the door open and obeyed. The driver was on the ground to receive him. The driver said: "In there," and pushed him towards the broken wooden porch. Lennox swung for the man's chin and missed. Something hard crashed into the side of his head, and he went down.



ONSCIOUSNESS came back slowly. He lay where he was for several minutes without moving, aware of the open door through which light came faintly, of the stale smoke-laden air, and the mussed, dirty bed. Then

he swung his feet to the floor and started gingerly towards the door.

There was a man in the other room, seated in a chair, tilted against the opposite wall. A kerosene lamp burned smokily upon a rickety table. Lennox recognized the man as the cab-driver, not from his face, but from the semi-uniform that he wore. The man held a newspaper in his hands, but he wasn't reading it! He was staring at the door. "Awake, huh?"

Lennox stepped through into the other room, feeling the side of his head tenderly. The driver grinned, showing stained teeth. "Little boys shouldn't go round, striking at people."

Lennox said: "How long do I stay here?"

"That depends on you," the driver told him, tossing the newspaper to the floor. "When you get ready to talk, then we'll think about that. The boss is coming back at noon. You should have a swell story by that time."

Lennox shrugged and sat down. There was a whiskey bottle and a soiled glass on the table beside the lamp. He picked up the bottle, ignoring the glass, and took a long drink. It was lousy, but it sent warm fingers through his chilled body.

The driver said: "No use shoving over the lamp. We're four miles from the nearest place, and I'd find you in the dark. I'm like a cat."

Lennox didn't say anything. He returned the bottle to the table, found a cigarette, and lit it. The driver seemed to want to talk. "This is a hell of a hole to be stuck in," he said. "I had a date tonight."

Lennox said: "I'm sobbing for you," and stared moodily at his cigarette.

The driver grinned. "Better save your sobs for yourself. The boss likes to hear them squawk. He'll probably heat your feet if you don't spring the dope on that broad. He'd as soon lose twenty grand as his right eye."

Lennox looked at the man and started to say something, then he stopped, for

the door at the driver's side had moved ever so slightly. The taxi man took no notice. "I don't see why you couldn't have kept out of this," he complained. "We had things coming our way when you stuck your schnozzle into the play. What the hell do you want with that broad, anyway? A guy with your job should be able to pick and choose."

"That's what you think," Lennox said, watching the door from the corner of his eye. "Besides, I haven't said that I know where she is." He was talking to cover any sound from the door, saying things at random. The crack was wider now. Air came through it, blowing against the lamp. The taxi man turned in his chair. The door came wide. He said: "What the—" and grabbed for his pocket; then stopped. There was a man in the doorway, a man with a gun.

"Go easy." The voice sounded excited, not certain. The newcomer stepped into the room.

Lennox called: "Keep back. Don't get too close to him."

The other's eyes wavered, went towards Bill. Lennox swore. He saw the taxi man move sidewise in his chair, his hand clawing at his coat pocket. Even as he saw—he sprang forward. His fingers closed on the man's wrist, forcing him backward, holding the hand. The chair went over sidewise with a splintering crash, and they went to the floor, Lennox on top. They rolled over twice, legs thrashing, fighting for control of the gun.

Lennox knew that it was only a matter of time. The other was too strong. His free hand was at Lennox's throat, forcing Bill's head back, slowly backwards. Then the newcomer moved. He had stood as one paralyzed for a minute, gaping at the twisted bodies. Now he stepped in and slammed the barrel of his gun against the taxi-man's head.

The fingers at Lennox's throat relaxed suddenly, the man went back on to the floor. Lennox rolled free and came slowly to his feet. For a moment

he shook his head to clear it, then he got the gun from the unconscious man's pocket and dropped it into his own. His rescuer said:

"Don't try anything, Lennox."

Bill swung about to see the gun level with his belt. He said: "You too? What is this? Open season on me?"

The other had black hair and eyes. He was very young and not too sure of himself. He said: "I want to know where Irene is?"

Lennox swore softly. Ignoring the gun, he walked to the table and took another drink. It burned his throat but cleared his head; then he looked at the black-haired one. "What's the idea, Kid? Where do you come into this?"

The man with the gun said, hoarsely: "Where's Irene? Don't try to stall me, Mister, I mean to find out."

"Try guessing." There was an edge of contempt in Lennox's voice. He stared at the unmoving figure on the floor, then muttered: "I suppose I've got a long walk ahead—" Suddenly an idea hit him. He looked at the black-haired boy. "Say, punk. How'd you happen to blow in here?"

He said: "I followed you, Lennox. I was parked in a car half a block from the restaurant when you came out. I followed you there, then I followed your cab. My car's down the road a ways."

Lennox laughed softly. "Maybe you'll tell me why you're trailing me."

The boy said, angrily: "I have told you. I saw Irene leave her house this morning and go with you to the studio. She didn't come out. I asked the gate-man, but he wouldn't tell me anything. Then I went looking for you. I saw you on the Boulevard, followed you until you went into *Sardi's*; then I went back and got the car and parked it where I wouldn't miss you when you came out. Lucky thing for me that I did, or I'd have lost you when you got into that cab."

"Lucky thing for me," Lennox told him, without humor. "Let's get your

car and get out of here before Oswald's friends come back." He looked at the unconscious man on the floor.

The boy threatened: "I'm going to drive you straight to the police station unless you tell me where Irene is. Don't think that I don't know how your type turns girls' heads." He sounded very young. Lennox shrugged, his brows drawing together in a frown.

"Listen, you! You've got the wrong angle, but I can't have you gumming things up. Gimme your name and telephone number and I'll have Irene call you as soon as I can get in touch with her."

They eyed each other in silence for a moment. The boy uncertain, Lennox impatient. "What's the name?"

"Rose, Wilbur Rose. Irene knows my number, but I don't—"

Lennox stared at him with lidded eyes. "Rose? Any relation to Bert Rose?"

Surprise showed in the boy's face. "I've a brother named Bert."

"Have you seen tonight's papers?"

"No—What are you talking about?"

Lennox said, soberly: "He's dead. They found him in a ditch this morning."

The black-haired one seemed stunned. "Why—I— saw him last night. He—he was all right then."

Lennox's voice sharpened with interest. "Where'd you see him? What time?"

Rose's eyes were suspicion laden. "What's it to you?"

Lennox shrugged. "Nothing, except the cops are trying to learn who put him on the spot. I thought you might know something."

Rose said, hoarsely: "If I did, I wouldn't tell you. Bert and I weren't very close. He's done things that weren't so nice, but I'd like to find out who killed him."

Lennox looked at the quiet taxi-driver, started to say something, shrugged, and changed his mind. After all, he couldn't accuse anyone without having questions asked, questions which

he did not care to answer. "Let's go to town," he grunted.

4



T was fifteen after twelve when they reached the corner of Hollywood Boulevard and Highland. Lennox unlatched the door on his side and stepped to the pavement.

"Go on home, Kid, and stick by the phone. I'll have Schultz call you in a couple of hours and tell you that she hasn't been manhandled, but I'm warning you; try to see the Kid and you'll gum things up for her plenty."

He slammed the door on the threat which Rose uttered, and strode across the intersection with the light. On the other corner he took a cab and gave the driver an address. They rode five minutes, then the taxi pulled to the curb and Lennox got out. He paid the driver and watched him pull away, then turned around and looked at the building. A large sign across the front said, "Boy-ton Tile Company." Lennox grinned.

The windows were dark, as was the front door, but he paid no attention to that. He went around the corner, stepped between the building and a sign-board, crossed a parking lot half-filled with cars, and knocked twice at the side door. The door opened, held in place by a short chain. The door closed, the chain rattled. Then it opened again and a black-browed, one-eyed man said: "Hello, Bill! Long time, no see."

Lennox grinned. "Hello, One-eye. How's things?"

"Not good, not bad." The one-eyed man shut the door and refastened the chain. Lennox watched him with amusement. "What's the big idea of all the caution? The cops aren't bothering with liquor now, and the Feds are too busy clearing their dockets to make more arrests."

The one-eyed man grinned. "Gotta

give the customers some thrills." He winked his single optic. "If we didn't, they'd go down to the nearest barbecue joint and buy beer."

Lennox nodded and went on into a large room. A long bar extended the full length of the far wall, five bartenders working busily. The room was crowded with the after-theatre gathering. Lennox swept the place with his eyes, nodded to Ham Robbins and Duke Smith, and then went into a phone booth. He dropped a nickel and called the number of the girl's apartment house. "Miss Delaine, eight-o-two," he told the switchboard operator.

A sleepy voice said, uncertainly: "Who is it, please?"

"Lennox," Bill told her. "Listen, Kid! I just met a friend of yours, Wilbur Rose. Know him?"

He heard her draw her breath sharply, then: "Well?" She tried to make her voice sound normal and failed.

"He's hot and bothered," Lennox told her. "Got the idea that I'm a wolf and that your name is Red Riding Hood. I told him that I'd have you call him up and assure him that my intentions are honorable."

She said, uncertainly: "All right. Should I call him now?"

Lennox's tone sharpened. "Listen, Kid! How well do you know this Rose?"

"Not so well."

"Stop lying." His voice was cold. "He knows you plenty."

"Well," her voice was stubborn, resentful, "we grew up in the same town."

Lennox swore under his breath. "What's the punk doing out here?"

"He isn't a punk."

"I didn't ask you what he was. What's he doing out here?"

"I don't know. Nothing, I guess. He's—he's just out here on a trip, or something."

"Or something—" Lennox repeated, in disgust. "So you lied to me this morning when you said that you didn't know Bert Rose very well."

"But I don't." Her voice had taken on a note of fear. "He was older. I don't know how he came to be—"

Lennox's voice rasped: "Shut up, you little fool! Someone may be listening. Now you get this: Call up Wilbur; tell him that you are okey. Tell him anything you like, but don't tell him where you are, what you're doing, or anything about his brother. Get me?"

She said: "Yes," in a very weak voice.

"And further. Get him to scam, to go back home, anywhere. We can't have him hanging about, recognizing Marion Delaine as Irene Schultz. Use your head, Kid. You'll never get another break like this."

He hung up, giving her no time to answer, and walked towards the bar.

Duke Smith turned around and waved a glass at him. Lennox said: "What's new in the Fourth Estate?"

Duke shrugged, "I wouldn't know," he countered. "I'm only a leg-man."

Lennox said, idly: "Anything new on that killing up in the valley, Ross or something like that?"

"Bert Rose, you mean?"

"Yeah, that's the one. Did the cops get anything?"

Smith shrugged. "Not much, and Rose wasn't much loss, but there are funny rumors going around town."

"What kind of rumors?"

"Well—I don't know. Rose wasn't such a nice boy. He'd done a stretch, and then he'd been working on one of the gambling barges at Long Beach. I heard downtown tonight there was some movie extra in the picture, but we haven't got hold of her yet."

Lennox swore to himself. "Know which boat Rose was working on?"

Smith raised an eyebrow. "You're curious as the devil."

Lennox shrugged. "Thought maybe there might be a story in it. Which barge was he on?"

"The *Palace*. Speed boats leave from Seventh Street. I think I'll go with you."

Lennox stared at him; then he

laughed suddenly and looked at his watch. "Almost one. We can drive it in an hour. Is that too late?"

The newspaper man said: "It's never too late until it's morning. My car's outside."

They went out and crawled into a Chevy coupé. Smith said, as he stepped on the starter: "Wouldn't want to tell me what it's all about?"

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

He lit a cigarette and watched the speedometer climb past sixty. A cop swung in beside them and Smith brought the coupé to the side of the road. He listened in a bored fashion to the other's angry questions, found his press card, and passed it over. The cop looked at it, then went on with his lecture. "You newspaper guys think you own the world."

He passed back the card and climbed on to his machine. "The next time, I take you in," and he whirled away.

Lennox grunted: "The power of the press! Come on, fella. We're wasting time."

The coupé went on, cutting through the darkness. They came into Pedro, went through Wilmington, and along Harbor Boulevard. Ten minutes later they were cutting across the dark water in a speedboat.

Somewhere, muffled by intervening doors or distance, an orchestra still played as Lennox went up the swaying ladder to the deck above. Smith joined him a moment later, and they stood looking about.

"Nice layout," Bill commented.

The newspaper man said: "Swell, There's Harry Rossi. He runs the joint."

Lennox looked and saw a short, heavy-featured man standing beneath one of the deck lamps. He was talking to two women in white and they were laughing at something that the gambler had said. Smith grinned.

"Harry's quite a ladies' man. That's Madge Edmonds and Sally Barbeur. Wonder what they're doing this far

south. Santa Barbara is their hangout."

As he spoke, two men in evening clothes appeared, their white shirts gleaming beneath the light. They nodded to Rossi and moved towards Lennox. Bill stepped back and waited while they descended into the bobbing speedboat. Rossi turned towards them, and Smith said: "Want you to meet a friend of mine, Harry. Bill Lennox, of General-Consolidated."

Bill felt the man's fingers close about his hand, heard Rossi say: "This is an honor, Mr. Lennox," in a voice that he knew. It was the voice that he had heard earlier in the cab. There was no surprise on Rossi's face, nothing. His heavy lips smiled faintly as he took Bill's arm, led him towards the companionway. "We've got a nice play here, Mr. Lennox. I've been hoping for some time that you'd pay us a visit."

Bill, conscious of Smith at his heels, smiled also. "That's swell, Rossi. I suppose that dealer of yours getting killed last night will hurt business. That kind of publicity won't help you."

The gambler smiled faintly. "I think you're wrong there, Lennox. Of course, we don't seek that type of publicity, but since it came—well, we have a bigger crowd here tonight than we've had in months."

He led the way into a crowded room. Three roulette wheels occupied the middle, while two crap layouts and black-jack tables were ranged about the sides. At one end, a spacious bar served beer.

Rossi said: "We don't serve anything but beer at the bar, but if you care to come into my private office—"

Smith said: "We sure do. I haven't had a good drink since the last time I was on this barge."

Rossi's white teeth flashed in his dark face. "Thanks, my friend. You are very kind."

He led the way down a short companionway and opened a white door, stepping aside for them to enter. The office was heavy with massive furniture. Smith and Lennox found seats on

a cushioned locker at the right. Rossi opened a small barette and produced bottles and glasses. He looked inquiringly at his visitors.

Smith said: "The scotch is too good to spoil it with outside ingredients. I'll take mine straight, thanks."

Rossi looked inquiringly at Lennox, and Bill nodded. The gambler filled the short glasses, poured some water into tall tumblers, and carried the small metal tray to the locker; then he shot some soda into his own glass and raised it. "You'll pardon me, but I never drink during working hours."

Smith tossed off his drink. "With whiskey like that, I'd pardon you anything—even murder."

The full lids drooped slightly above the gambler's black eyes. His glance went to Lennox's face, but Bill gave no sign that he had heard. He raised his glass and drank it slowly. "You're spoiled," he told the reporter. "That's no way to drink good liquor."

The tension in the room lessened. Rossi said: "How's the picture business, Mr. Lennox? I hear that General has a good musical ready to release?"

Bill nodded. "As good as most," he said, indifferently. "Think I'll take a shot at your wheels."

Rossi smiled. "We expect that, of course. We hardly run this as a sight-seeing station; yet I do not want you to feel obligated simply because I have given you a drink."

"And what a drink!" Smith's voice was hopeful. "Think I'll hang around down here a while if you don't mind, Harry. I want some dope on that dealer of yours that they found in the valley."



LENNOX went up the passage to the gambling-room. He regretted having brought Smith. He wanted to see Rossi, to see him alone. For perhaps five minutes he watched one of the wheels, then put a dollar on seventeen

and lost. Then Smith came up to him, stopped at his side and stared at the board. "Any luck?"

Lennox shook his head. "None. Think I'll try black-jack." He moved away and saw the reporter slide into the place which he had vacated. He paused at a black-jack table and lost five dollars, then moved around the room, keeping an eye on Smith. The reporter was winning and seemed engrossed in the game. Rossi was nowhere in sight.

Lennox went along the companionway and knocked at the office door. The gambler's voice bade him enter, and he pushed open the door. Rossi looked up from the desk, a faint trace of smile curving the thick lips. "Thought you'd be down."

Lennox closed the door and hunted for a cigarette. His hand touched the cold metal of the gun which he had taken from the taxi-driver. It gave him assurance. He found a cigarette and held his lighter to the tip, then put the lighter back into his pocket and looked at the gambler.

"Let's put our cards on the table, Rossi."

The other's only answer was a shrug and a gesture of his hands. Lennox took it for acceptance. "I know that you killed Rose," he stated, flatly. "Oh, I can't prove it," as the man at the desk started to speak, "but I can have some unpleasant questions asked."

Rossi said: "Has it occurred to you that you might have to answer some yourself? Some mouthpiece once told me that it wasn't strictly according to law to move a stiff before the cops got to look at it."

Lennox smiled thinly. "Okey, Rossi. You can't prove that I did that, either. You know it, but you can't prove it. So far we're even. Let's stay that way. I'll forget that I knew anything about a killing and you'll forget that a certain girl used to live at a certain number."

The man at the desk said: "But my twenty grand?"

Lennox shrugged. "I don't know anything about that dough and neither does the broad."

The gambler's eyes were very narrow. "How do you know that she doesn't?"

"Because she wasn't there when Rose was knifed. She spent the night with another girl. I checked that, and you can be sure that I know. She didn't find the body until a few minutes before I got there. Your men were watching the house. They can tell you that she hadn't been there long."

"What does that prove?" Lennox thought that Rossi sounded uncertain, but he couldn't be sure.

"It proves plenty," Lennox said, with disgust. "Didn't your hoods frisk Rose after they knifed him?"

"I haven't admitted," Rossi began, but Lennox cut him short.

"Leave that. You know that they did, that they didn't find the dough. How would the girl find it?"

Rossi said, stubbornly: "Maybe he hid it somewhere, somewhere where she would look."

"You're screwy. She went out with me. She didn't have it with her and she hasn't been back to that dump since. What's more, she's not going back. Get this, wop, and get it straight. Lay off that girl. Search the house all you please, but stay clear of her. I've written out a statement of what I know and planted it with a friend. If anything happens to me, you'll burn." He pushed out the cigarette in the metal ash-tray and, stepping forward, leaned across the desk. "I'm not trying to act tough, but better guys than you have tried to buck me in this town and they aren't here any more. Think it over."

Rossi said, slowly: "If I lay off the girl, what?"

Lennox shrugged. "I'm not a cop. As I see it, Rose wasn't such a swell citizen that I should waste tears on him. I never saw him alive and I'm not bowed down by grief, but so help me, if so much as a whisper about the Schultz broad

gets out, you're going to move and move fast."

Hate looked at him from the dark eyes; hate, and a trace of fear. Rossi started to speak, stopped, took a long breath, then said: "It's a deal." He extended his long-fingered hand. Lennox ignored it, and looked at the gambler's face, which was darkening with gathered blood.

"I don't like you, Rossi. I'm not shaking hands."

The man at the desk managed a laugh, a choking sound, as he rose. "Okey, Lennox, if that's the way you want it."

"That's exactly—"

A white light winked on the corner of Rossi's desk. The gambler's oath was a startled sound. The blood drained from his face, leaving the skin sallow, almost yellow looking. Heavy feet came along the companionway. Lennox swung about as the door opened and men seemed to pour into the room. He saw Smith in the background, a sobered, curious Smith. The man in the lead swept Lennox with his eyes, then looked at Rossi.

"Hello, Harry!"

Rossi said, tonelessly: "Hello, Hampton. What's the idea?"

Hampton said: "This is a pinch; a rap that you won't beat, Harry. It's murder."

The man behind the desk did not move. He said, tonelessly: "You're screwy. Besides, you haven't any jurisdiction here."

The man laughed. "We thought of that, too. We've got a Federal man with us and a deputy from Orange. One of us has jurisdiction. We don't care which so long as we take you in."

Rossi smiled. "Who am I supposed to have killed?"

"Rose, Bert Rose. Get your hands out." He shook the cuffs so that they rattled.

Rossi's eyes flamed. "You rat," he stared across at Lennox. "You double-crossing rat. So you'd make a deal with me you—"

Lennox said: "Shut up, you fool! I

don't know what this is all about."

Hampton snapped the cuffs on Rossi and looked at Lennox. "Guess I'll take you along, too."

Lennox said: "Try it."

A man came up behind him and ran quick hands over his coat. "He's got a rod, Chief."

"And a permit." Bill's voice was unhurried, serene, but his mind was busy and he cursed silently. This was a tough break, a break he hadn't expected. Smith was at his elbow, grinning at the deputy from the sheriff's office.

"This is Bill Lennox of General films," he explained. "He isn't going to run anywhere."

The deputy looked at Lennox uncertainly, then at Rossi. "You'll have to come over to the sub-station and do some explaining," he said, finally.

Bill nodded, a trifle wearily. "Mind telling me how you happened to pick up Rossi?"

The man shrugged. "Sheriff's office got a call from someone who said that he was Rose's brother."

"Rose's brother?"

"Yeah. He told us to go out into the valley and pick up a taxi-driver; said that the driver knew something about his brother's death. We sent out the flash to the radio cars and they picked this guy up in a shack out there. Someone had bumped his head plenty, and he wasn't feeling so hot. The boys got him to talk and he named Rossi. That's all I know."

Bill said: "Thanks," and swore to himself.

If the cabman had talked, the chances were that he had spilled the whole works. Bill felt very tired, but, he wasn't beaten yet. If he could get to the man in time— He stepped aside as they led Rossi past. The gambler's black eyes glowed like coals as he looked at Lennox. Bill thought for a moment that he was going to speak, then he went on.

They walked up the short companionway and through the gambling room. The place was already deserted. Lennox

smiled. A lot of people in that crowd didn't want publicity. They were there with wives, but not with their own. The attendants were grouped forward on the deck, held back by two officers. Rossi's eyes swept the crowd; then, with a slight shrug, he moved towards the ladder.

The police boat was alongside the float, but at the far end was one of the water-taxis. Rossi went down first, using his manacled hands to steady himself. Suddenly, as if from a pre-arranged signal, the engine of the water-taxi raced. Rossi leaped across the float and jumped into the boat. It was already in motion, cutting away from the barge in a wide circle. Guns spat from the rail of the gambling ship. The police boat went forward and Lennox, standing beside Smith, saw Rossi stagger suddenly, then plunge headlong from the water-taxi into the dark sea.

## 5



SMITH said: "Come on, Bill. Gimme the story."

Lennox looked at him. "Honest, fella, I would if there was any to give. Rossi's dead. He was dead when he hit the water. The cops are going to ask questions that I can't answer, and I've got to make a phone call. It's up to you to help."

The reporter grinned. "Just a pal. You drag me all over Southern California and then don't spill the dope. Supposing I print that Bill Lennox was mixed up with Rossi in the killing. What do you think that would get me?"

"A swell libel suit," Lennox told him. "You know these guys. Get them to let me ride into town with you. I'll show up at the sheriff's office and spin them a yarn when we get in."

Smith said: "Do I get the real story?"

"Listen," Lennox's voice was harsh. "If you hadn't been with me, you'd have

missed all this. See your friend the deputy; then call your paper."

Smith nodded. "Okey. But when I get washed up with the City Editor, you give me a job in the General publicity department."

Lennox said: "I'll give you the whole damn' studio. Come on! Snap it up!"

Ten minutes later he was in a telephone booth of an all-night drug-store. He called Sam Marx and waited impatiently until the lawyer answered.

Marx said: "This is a hell of an hour to get a man out of bed. What kind of jam are you in now?"

Lennox grinned without mirth. "Listen, Shyster! The sheriff's office is holding a cab-driver named Krouch, Ed Krouch. He's being held as a material witness on that Rose killing."

Marx's voice sharpened. "What about it?"

"He accused Harry Rossi, of the *Palace* gambling ship, of the killing. Rossi is dead, killed half an hour ago, trying to escape. Now get this: I want you to get to Krouch, find out how much he's talked and get him to keep quiet. Get him out on bail as soon as you can. Then tell him to jump it. With Rossi dead, the cops aren't going to care much."

Marx said: "What's the idea? Tell me what's up?"

"No time. Every minute counts. Krouch might spill something that would gum the works. You get him out and I'll stand the bail."

"Just a big-hearted boy." The lawyer's voice was mocking.

"Sure, but for — sake, get the lead out of your pants and move. I'm in Long Beach now. As soon as I get back to town I'll go to your place and wait until you show up."

He replaced the receiver and left the booth. Smith was still talking on another phone. Lennox bought a coke and sat down at the fountain. The reporter came out of his booth and sat down at his side. He eyed the coke with disgust and ordered beer.

"What did Marx have to say?"

Lennox swore. "I've known noseys guys that got their schnozzles busted."

"You shouldn't talk so loud," the reporter told him. "Those booth walls aren't too thick."

He finished his beer and they went out to the car. The street looked pale, dirty in the uncertain light. In the east, a streak of crimson gave promise of a hot day. Lennox yawned as he climbed into the car.

"Sheriff's station, James."

Smith grunted and put the Chevy into gear. They went out Atlantic and swung towards town.

After his session with the sheriff they started on again.

At the corner of Broadway and Ninth Lennox got out of the coupé. There was a red-top in the cab rack. Lennox shook the driver awake and gave him Marx's address, then he climbed in. He was very tired, his head felt woozy and his mouth tasted of too many cigarettes. Half an hour later they pulled up before the lawyer's house. Lennox paid the man and, going up the walk, rang the bell.

Marx himself answered. He shut the door and led the way into his study. "You need sleep."

Lennox grinned wryly. "You're telling me. I thought I'd never get away from the sheriff's office. Did you see Krouch?"

"Yeah. He's over at Lincoln Heights. They haven't booked him yet, so I can't bail him out until after sunrise court. I've got a man over there, waiting. It'll be a couple of hours before they get here. Do you want to wait?"

"If you've got a spare bed."

For answer Marx led him upstairs and into a room with yellow bed covers. Lennox looked at the covers, grinned. "Shame to sleep in those alone." Marx went out without answering and, three minutes later, Lennox was asleep.

He was awakened by Marx's Chinese boy, who indicated a dressing-gown. "Boss, he say, you come."

Lennox shrugged himself awake, put

on the gown, and followed the boy down the stairs. Three men were in Marx's study. Krouch, standing beside the window, looked around as Lennox entered. The taxi-man was hollow-eyed; his clothes were mussed, and a thick, dirty stubble covered his chin. He looked nervous, uncertain. Marx was talking to a big man who, Lennox judged, was the one that had attended to Krouch's bail.

The taxi-man said: "Marx told me you want to see me."

Lennox said: "Yeah! How much did you spill to the cops last night?"

The man said: "I told them that Harry Rossi did it. I hear he's dead."

Lennox said: "He is."

The man seemed relieved by the words. "I wouldn't have spilled that much, but they were sweating me."

"You didn't—say anything about where the body was—I mean at first?"

Krouch shook his head. "Why should I?"

Lennox's relief did not show in his face. He said: "How well do you like this town?"

The man shrugged. "I've seen ones that I liked as well."

"Then my advice is for you to scram."

"You mean for me to jump bail?"

"That shouldn't worry you. It isn't your dough."

Krouch's eyes got crafty. "Want tuh get rid of me pretty bad, don't you? Well, Mister, I'm not in any hurry. The cops haven't got a thing on me. I'll hang around until you make it worth my while. I didn't move any bodies—"

Lennox rasped: "Ever hear of a kidnaping rap? Think I've forgotten that you dragged me out into the valley? I figured you for sense." He swung about and looked at Marx. "You guys heard him try to blackmail me?"

Marx nodded, as did the big man at his side. Krouch looked at them uncertainly. "Trying to frame me, huh?"

Lennox said: "You framed yourself. Take him back and throw him in the can, Sam. I'm washed up. Then see the

D.A. and tell him about the snatching and the little blackmail."

Krouch said, hurriedly: "I didn't mean anything. Honest, I didn't mean a thing. I'll scram, but I ain't got a dime. Gimme enough to eat on till I get located."

Marx looked at Lennox, who apparently had not heard. "Okey!" he said, suddenly. "Get a confession signed by him, Sam; then get him out of town. If he ever lands in this State again, give the confession to the D.A."

"Do I get dough to eat on?" Krouch's voice was a whine.

"Give him fifty," Lennox said. "I'll settle with you when I settle the bail. Now get him out of here."

He watched while the big man led the taxi-man into the next room, followed by Marx. In fifteen minutes, the lawyer returned to find Lennox asleep in the chair. He was about to tiptoe out when Bill suddenly opened his eyes. "Is Krouch gone?"

Marx nodded. "My man's riding him as far as San Berdoo. He'll get a rattler there."

Lennox yawned, stretched, and asked what time it was.

"Almost nine," Marx told him. "You want to sleep some more?"

Bill shook his head and reached for the phone. He called Nancy Hobbs' number and after a little wait, said:

"Hello, Nance! How's the brat this morning? Listen! Wantta do something for me? You don't?" He grinned. "Well do it anyway. I want you to interview a newcomer, and, boy! is she a comer? . . . Now, listen! She has a bit in *The Footlights Revue*—name, Marian Delaine. Yeah. I know you never heard of her, but I'll have that name in lights yet. Listen, Kid! You're going up there with me, then you're going to get your boss to run it. I'll get you some pictures this afternoon. Where are you? . . . Swell! I'll pick you up there in three-quarters of an hour."

He hung up and looked at Marx. "Let

me borrow your razor and a shirt," he said; "then call me a cab."

6



COLD shower drove the sleep from Lennox's eyes. As he rode across town in the cab, his active mind was already framing the inter-

view which Marian Delaine was to give Nancy Hobbs. "A convent?" He considered the idea and discarded it as being trite, overdone. "I've got it," he said, so loudly that the driver turned to look at him. "She traveled with her father. He was—a—a mining engineer. Swell! He was killed—in China, by bandits. Yeah, that ought to go."

The cab swung towards the curb before Nancy's house, and he saw her smiling at him from the sidewalk.

"You look swell," he told her, as the cab started again.

"And you look like the devil," she said, frankly. "Give me the low-down, Bill. Tell me who this Delaine really is."

He grinned at her. "Wait until you see her, sweetheart." The cab went down Franklyn and turned right, stopping before the apartment house.

Nancy said: "Some class. Is she spending her own dough?"

Bill didn't bother to answer. He went in and asked at the desk for Miss Delaine. The switchboard operator rang her apartment, rang again. "Miss Delaine does not answer," she said.

Bill swore softly. "I told her not to leave the joint," he muttered to Nancy. "Come on up and we'll have a look."

They rode up in the automatic elevator and walked along the heavy rug of the corridor. Before the apartment door, Lennox paused and drew a key from his pocket. Nancy Hobbs watched him with amused eyes. He caught the look and flushed slightly. "Don't go getting ideas, Brat. This is business."

He fitted the key into the lock and opened the door, then swore. The apartment was in disorder. Drawers were half open, doors swung ajar. Lennox went through the rooms rapidly, then returned to the front. Nancy Hobbs stood beside a small end table, fingering a large square envelope.

"This is for you, Bill."

He took it, read his name in a large, feminine hand, and tore it open. Looking across his shoulder, Nancy read:

*Dear Mr. Lennox:*

*Sorry to run out on you this way, but Wilbur and I are going to be married; then we're going back to Topeka, Kansas. We have loved each other a long time, but did not have money to marry. Last night, Wilbur got a letter from his brother, one that Bert mailed before he was killed. There was twenty thousand dollars in it. Think of it—twenty thousand.*

*It was swell of you to want to help me, but Wilbur says that he does not want me to be an actress, as he thinks that actresses aren't very nice, so you just get another girl in my place. If you should ever come to Topeka, be sure and come to see us.*

*Your friend,*

*Irene Schultz (Rose pretty soon).*

Bill dropped the letter and looked at Nancy. She was laughing, laughing so that her eyes were wet. He started to swear, stopped, and grinned a bit wryly. Slowly he drew an envelope from his pocket.

"Ever see anyone tear up a million-dollar bill, honey?"

She said, still laughing: "You're silly. They don't make them that large."

Solemnly he took from his billfold an oblong-folded paper and put it with letter and envelope, then put the halves together and tore them. The contract, signed by Marian Delaine, dropped to the carpet.

# Money Talk

By RAOUL WHITFIELD



HERE was one painting in the large display window of the Strathelm Gallery and I didn't think much of it.

A couple of nudes on a South Sea beach, sprawled around looking brown and fat, with a lot of green and white background color. The lighting was very good, but so far as I was concerned good lighting only made the paint job worse. I tossed away what was left of

my cigarette, opened the door and entered the gallery.

A tall, pallid man with only a few hairs on his head, came over and bowed. I nodded and looked past him at a portrait of a woman with a cat on her lap.

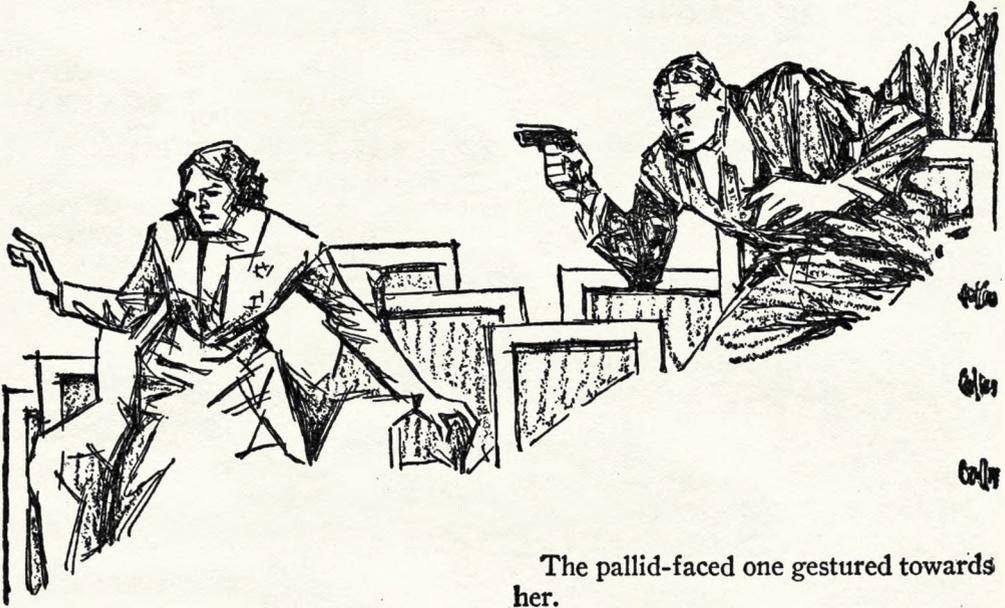
"I'm Davies—Dion Davies," I told the bald one, with my eyes still on the painted cat. "A Miss Strathelm requested me to come up."

The pallid one bowed again, his face suddenly serious.

"It's terrible," he muttered. "Terrible! I'll tell Ella you are here."

He vanished beyond a rich, black cur-

*Dion Davies sees talk of money  
end in a triple tragedy*



tain at the rear of the gallery and I heard the murmur of voices. I went over to the portrait and decided that someone by the name of Schmidhausen, Smidhassen, Schidhassen or Siidhissen had painted it. A feminine voice said distantly:

"Show him in here—"

After that there was some whispering. When the pallid one returned he shook his long head from side to side, extended a hand.

"I am John Strathelm," he said. "Miss Ella Strathelm will see you in the office."

He led the way beyond the black curtain. The office had no door. It had a desk, a divan and two chairs, all large and rather ornate. There were a lot of canvasses around, the unpainted sides facing the room. The walls were mere curtains, nothing hanging on them. Ella stood near the desk. She was slender and brown skinned, with a small, oval face. Her lips were very red, her features good. Her eyes were dark and she smoked a cigarette nervously.

The pallid-faced one gestured towards her.

"My sister, Miss Ella Strathelm," he said. "Ella—this is Dion Davies."

She nodded and before I could speak she said:

"It's terrible, Mr. Davies—terrible. My brother—Cass Strathelm—"

She shivered and her voice went away into a half moan. I said:

"I read in the papers he'd vanished."

She held her cigarette at her side, with right-hand fingers, ran left-hand fingers across her forehead and down the left side of her face.

"I need—advice," she said after a few seconds. "I—we don't know what to do—"

She broke off, looked appealingly at John Strathelm. He said thinly:

"Mr. Davies—we know of the reputation of Dancer and Davies, Limited. We knew of you when you got back that stolen Matisse. So Ella felt you were the one—"

He gestured with both hands, looked at his sister. She tapped out the cigarette glow in a small tray, stood erect. More guts got into her voice.

"Be sure no one is outside, John,"

she said. Her dark eyes narrowed on mine, looked mine over and then went around my face. "Our talk is absolutely confidential?"

"Absolutely," I said, as John Strathelm went away towards the black curtain.

She nodded. "This is my brother's gallery. Casswell Strathelm. He's been rated as a wealthy man. He introduced Pinewest, the famous etcher, to this country. His collection of moderns is very fine."

She stopped and I said: "I know. I priced one a few months ago and liked everything about it but his price."

Ella frowned. Then she said: "Mr. Davies—Cass Strathelm has been kidnaped!"

There was silence except for a few Fifty-seventh Street sounds that got back to the office. I couldn't think of anything to say, so I didn't say anything. Ella Strathelm tapped a palm against the material of her white sport dress and said:

"I'm trying to be calm, but it's very difficult. I want to tell you—"

The pallid-faced one interrupted her from the curtain.

"I'll stay outside, Ella—and warn you if anyone arrives."

She said: "Yes, do." Her voice was very low and calm now. Her eyes were on mine. "I live with my brother—Cass—on Gracie Square. Yesterday morning he went to see some paintings an Italian had brought from Italy. Paintings by a very young artist. I came to the gallery at nine-thirty. Cass was to be here about one. At one-fifteen I happened to be standing at the front of the gallery, near the door. I looked out and saw Cass. He was standing near the curb talking to a man whose back was to me. The man was tall and had wide shoulders. Cass was smiling. The telephone rang and I answered it. When I went back to the door Cass was not outside. I haven't seen him—since—"

She lowered her head, shook it a little.

"Who was on the other end of the wire—when you answered the call?"

She lifted her head. "It was a mistake—someone wanted the Stratford Gallery. It often happens."

I said: "Okey—go on. Last night you got worried and notified the police that your brother was unaccountably missing."

She nodded. "Yes—that brought the reporters to me. The Missing Persons Bureau has found no trace of Cass. An hour ago—"



HE drew a deep breath, opened a drawer of the desk and took from it a small slip of paper. I moved near her and she handed it to me. The writing was in a childish scrawl, the letters small. I read slowly and aloud:

*"Casswell Strathelm is in our hands and he is not hurt but he will be unless you do as you are told. You will need fifty thousand dollars in cash by tomorrow night and the bills must be mixed into twenties and tens and fifties and hundreds. No big ones and not new money. You will be told how to fix the money and what to do with it and if you don't your brother will be murdered. If the police are told he will be killed right away."*

I read the note a second time, to myself. Then I handed it back to her.

"You got the money?" I asked.

She nodded. "John and I talked it over, and he got the money. It's here in the gallery, in the safe. It's John's money. He had a lot of trouble getting it the way they want it, but it's here."

I said: "Good. And you haven't notified the police—not about the note?"

She shook her head. "Just about Cass being missing, and I did that before I got the note, of course."

I offered her a cigarette, lighted it, lighted one of my own.

"How'd you get the note?" I asked.

She looked puzzled. "The telephone rang and a man's voice said there was a note just inside the gallery door. Then he hung up. I went outside and found the note—just the slip of paper, folded."

I said: "Easy for anyone to shove it under the door, or open the door. If the person was seen while he was coming in he or she could hand it to another person, after making an excuse here. And it could be tried again."

Ella Strathelm nodded.

I said: "Then you talked with your brother John. He got the money and you called my office."

She nodded and bit her lower lip. "Poor Cass!" she muttered.

I said: "Yeah—it's epidemic. Two successful kidnaping jobs out West. They got a hundred and a quarter grand. One unsuccessful job in Chicago. They didn't get the money so they killed the man."

Ella shivered. "You don't think—"

I shook my head. "They haven't told you what to do with the money yet. Anyone hate Cass Strathelm?"

She said calmly: "Yes—perhaps two or three people hated him."

"Who—and why, roughly?" I asked.

She shrugged. "One painter who feels my brother has cheated him. Another—because my brother can't sell his paintings and refused him more advance money. A man named Wiley—Cass knocked his child down last summer, while driving, and the child died."

"He sued—and lost?" I asked.

She nodded. "The child ran in front of the car, and we proved it."

I said: "How much did this fellow sue for?"

She half closed her eyes. "Fifty thousand dollars."

My cigarette tasted badly so I squashed it and tried another.

"Can you think of anyone else hating your brother pretty hard?"

She said: "Perhaps a woman named Rosenquist. He bought a Renoir from her when she thought it was just some-

thing with color on it. When he sold it for a high price she came in and demanded money. He gave her a few thousands, but she's been in since."

I said: "Let's call it a day and say he had a few enemies."

She dabbed a handkerchief around her lips, leaned against the desk.

"What can we do?" she breathed.

I shrugged. "Stick around for the next note of instructions, and when you get it—call my office. I'll check up on some of the people you've mentioned—you can save time by giving me the addresses, if you have them."

She said: "And the police—"

"It's like painting," I said. "There are two schools of thought on kidnaping. One hands over the money, gets the kidnaped person back—and *then* lets the police in on it. Sometimes that works better. The other calls in the police right away and takes their advice. Sometimes the advice is good and sometimes it isn't. Once in a while the kidnapers get worried and sore—and they act nasty."

Ella said: "We won't notify the police."

John Strathelm came around the curtain and said:

"I've locked the entrance door—you've told Mr. Davies?"

She nodded. The brother said: "And your advice is—"

His voice faded. "You've acted wisely," I told him. "You've got the money ready. You've been told that Casswell Strathelm is all right and that you'll hear from the kidnapers. Sit tight and wait. I'll check up as much as I can."

He said: "But *how* was he kidnaped? Ella saw him right outside?"

I wrote down a phone number on a slip of paper.

"He might have been tricked into going somewhere, or a pleasant gentleman might have convinced him that he had a gun in his pocket that would work. In either case your brother would have gone somewhere."

John said: "Oh, God—"

"That's my private number—it gets me or my secretary, Julie Ryan," I told Ella Strathelm. "Call when you want to. Take it easy and—"

The pallid-faced one interrupted me indignantly.

"Take it easy! You mean to tell me—"

"What *else* are you going to do?" I asked. I looked at Ella Strathelm. "Call me the minute you hear anything."

Her eyes held tears. "Yes," she said. "Of course."

I nodded to both of them, started towards the black curtain. Near it I stopped and turned.

"In kidnaping cases the firm's fees are apt to be a bit high," I suggested. "Naturally—the danger—"

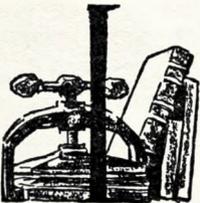
John Strathelm waved an arm angrily. "Damn the fees!" he said. "What we want is Cass back with us, uninjured."

"Agreed," I said. "I know that, and so do the kidnapers. But—"

Ella Strathelm said steadily: "Please do all you can, Mr. Davies. Please!"

I smiled a little. "All I can," I said and went around the black curtain and past the portrait of the woman with the cat. Near the door of the gallery I saw a folded slip of paper. Behind me there were distant voices. I leaned down and picked up the folded paper, slipped it in my pocket, went out to Fifty-seventh Street. It was a warm September afternoon, and when I reached Fifth Avenue most of the buses were crowded. I got a taxi right away and gave the driver the office address.

## 2



SAT down behind my desk, pressed a button and Julie came in. She looked cool and lovely, and her dark eyes held a faint smile. Lifting her notebook

she said in her nice voice:

"Reggie Fiske called from East

Hampton and said to be sure two of our men got down there Wednesday—he's marrying his brat to a railroad president's brat. A Miss Charlotte Dean called. There is something she wants done in Cannes, France. Through our associates there. A Miss Ella Strathelm called about five minutes ago. She said you'd asked for some names and addresses, and had forgotten to get them. I have them here. She said to tell you that nothing had happened, that is, not since you left."

I got the slip of paper I'd picked up from the gallery floor, laid it on the desk.

"A hell of a lot has happened," I said, "only Ella doesn't know it."

Julie said severely: "You shouldn't get the habit of forgetting things you ask for, Dee."

I winked at her. "Notice anything peculiar about Ella's voice, over the phone?" I asked.

Julie said: "She seemed to be under a great strain. Why?"

I looked down at the folded slip of paper. "I wanted you to hear her voice," I said. "It's nice and emotional. One minute it shivers—the next it's hard as nails. Notice that?"

Julie said: "Yes—what's she afraid about, Dee?"

I shrugged. "Cass Strathelm, her brother, has been kidnaped. Fifty thousand ransom money. Sit down, Sweet Cheese, and listen."

She swore at me, pulled a chair near my left side and sat down.

"Have we got the case, Dee?"

I said: "Yeah—to the hilt. Unless Mr. Dancer is scared to handle it."

She swore at me again, using a different swear word.

"Since I walked in on your dull agency down on Sixth, tossed in my coin and said that you should let me play the senior partner, Mr. Dancer, on the quiet—and your secretary in front of the others—I haven't been scared of much, have I, Dee?"

"Practically nothing—except letting me in on more of our past," I replied.

"Not only that, but you've put the agency on the New York dick map. I'm not kicking, Love o' My Life."

She swore for the third time. "Talk of the job. Who grabbed this Cass Strathelm?"

I groaned. "Think you mayhap 'twas Santa Claus?" I asked. "Here's how it goes."

I told her how it went. When I got through she whistled most of the theme song from "Farewell, Ladies." Then she said:

"And the slip of paper you picked up on the way out of the Strathelm Gallery?"

I unfolded it. "Same scrawl as the other," I told her. "*When we said to keep away from the police we meant it and we mean the same thing for a private detective agency. You call Dion Davies off this business deal or your brother will be killed right away. And the ransom money is now sixty thousand dollars and not fifty thousand. Instructions will follow.*"

Julie tapped a small shoe on the rung near my desk. Her nice chin was tilted and her dark eyes half closed.

"So the kidnapers know you—saw you go into the gallery. Now we're off the case and it's costing the Strathelms ten grand more."

I shook my head. "I disagree with Mr. Dancer," I said. "The kidnapers might not have seen me go in. They might have been tipped in some other way—the telephone call here, maybe. We're not off the case."

Julie frowned. "Just as soon as you read that note to Ella Strathelm—we will be. And she'll raise the other ten thousand, too."

I lighted a cigarette and flicked the match so that it landed on the rug. Julie frowned at it.

"I haven't read Ella the second note," I said cheerfully.

She lifted a finger and wagged it at me. "This isn't Sixth Avenue, and you're not doing a solo in this agency, Dee. I'm the senior partner, even if

you're the only one that knows it. And we don't get a man killed to grab a fee."

I shrugged. "Our job is to get Cass Strathelm back to his sister and brother safely—then to grab off the kidnapers. What Ella and John don't know—won't hurt them."

Julie's eyes stayed narrowed on mine. After a few seconds she said calmly:

"If you don't tip Ella Strathelm to the note—she won't dig up the other ten thousand. Then where are you?"

I grinned at her. "They got the fifty thousand easy like. They can raise ten more in the same way. Benny can copy this scrawl. They've changed their minds, and have raised the ante to sixty thousand. But Benny can forget about why they're stepping the price up."

Julie shook her head. "I don't like it that way."

I said: "Hell, Julie—we've got more chance of freeing Cass Strathelm than the police have. We'll play in the background—won't give the kidnapers any reason to think we're on the case."

She frowned at me. "Suppose there's a slip-up. They find out we're on it. They blame the brother and sister—and Cass gets the works."

"It's bluff," I told her. "They intended to raise the ante, anyway. They just used me as a pusher. We'll get Benny to scrawl another note, give it to the Strathelms that way and advise them to get another ten grand ready. Then we'll play carefully and get the boys."

Julie stood up. "Why didn't they ask for sixty at the start, Dee?"

I rapped a pencil on the desk surface. "Fifty's easier to get together than sixty. They didn't want to scare Ella out. Once she got the fifty—"

"How'd they know she got the fifty?" Julie asked.

I shrugged. "They didn't. But they figured she had it, and was getting all worked up. So ten grand more wouldn't scare her out."

Julie drew a deep breath. I said: "The first half of a kidnaping job means just one thing—money talk. We're on

the first half. It's a big case. Don't let's be scared out."

She said grimly: "Money talk—okey, Shall I call Benny in?"

I nodded. "Yeah. And when Ella gets the new note and tells me about it, I'll advise her to dig up the extra ten."

Julie started for the office door. "Suppose they drop a third note at the gallery, telling Ella she was warned once. That puts us in a spot, Dec."

I grinned at her. "We've been in spots before. We'll call 'em liars, and it's ten to one they won't walk in to defend themselves."

She stood near the office door, looking very calm and thoughtful. I liked her when she looked that way.

"They'll do in Cass Strathelm, maybe."

"With sixty thousand ready for them," I said softly. "I'll lay twenty to one that they don't."

Julie said: "Poor devil—he's probably tied up somewhere, scared as hell—"

She broke off. "Probably is," I agreed. "And what of it?"

She tapped white teeth with a fingernail. "Has he got any enemies?"

I nodded. "About a half dozen, Sweet."

"What made them enemies?" she asked.

I threw the pencil onto the desk. "Money," I told her. "What makes *most* people enemies?"

She went out and closed the door and after a few minutes Benny Todd came in.

I told him what I wanted and Benny said: "Money talk, eh?"

I said: "Yeah, money talk."

He went away and I sat back and decided that wherever the kidnaped dealer was, he wasn't in a spot at the gallery where he had to look at the portrait of the woman with the cat. And that was something.

When Benny had finished the job, we put it in the mail for John Strathelm, letting Benny do the addressing.

3



At six o'clock Ella Strathelm's voice came excitedly over the telephone. She said:

"John got it, and it's in the safe."

I said: "Okey—you're alone there?" "John's here—no one else."

I said: "Good. Don't mention any names over the phone."

She said: "I'll be careful—but what do you think—"

"Stay where you are, and wait until something happens," I interrupted.

Her voice was shaky. "Stay here—all night?" she asked.

I thought that over. "I think I would," I said. "It will make it easier for them to get to you—if they plan to make the delivery tonight. You've got a comfortable place, in back there. Put out the front lights—leave the place the way it's usually left. Then wait."

She said: "John can stay with me—there's always that light on the painting in the window."

I said: "Yeah, and take a look around the door once in a while. Not too often."

Her voice was steadier. "I'll call you the minute anything happens."

"But be careful how you do it—better go outside to a booth the next time you call," I said. "I'll stick around here until midnight. And call me at ten, in any case."

She said that she would, and hung up. I buzzed for Julie. When she came into the office her dark eyes held a questioning expression.

"John Strathelm got the extra ten thousand," I told her. "The sixty is in the gallery safe. Ella and John are sticking around. No new notes. She's going to call me as soon as anything breaks. Or at ten, if nothing breaks. I'll be around here until twelve. Better run out and eat."

Julie shook her head. "I'll stick along.

Got a hunch they'll try to pick up the money and deliver Cass Strathelm tonight. And you might need me. I'll phone out for some dinner."

I said: "Nice idea. Get something with onions in it."

She groaned and went to the door. "Stew or salad?"

"Stew," I replied. "More sustaining. This may be a tough evening."

Julie turned and frowned in my direction. "Do you think the agency should mix up in a kidnap job, Dee?" she asked slowly.

I grinned at her. "Sure. Why not?"

She didn't smile. "I bought into your agency for some adventure and a chance to do some good, but—"

I grinned more broadly. "You'll get the adventure, and if we see Cass Strathelm free and get a crack at his kidnapers—that'll be doing some good."

"You might get hurt," Julie said.

I put my feet on the desk surface. "You might get out," I suggested cheerfully. "And order in the stew—with onions."

AT ten-thirty-five I said to Julie: "You stick close to the phones. I'm going up to Fifty-seventh Street and see why Ella didn't phone me at ten."

Julie said: "Call me back, Dee."

I got my soft hat from the rack in a corner, opened a low drawer in the desk and slipped a .45 into my right coat pocket.

"If I need you I'll give you the meet spot. Otherwise I'll come on back and sit around until twelve."

She said: "Won't *that* be fun!"

I went to the door and opened it. "I'll think up a game like post office, only maybe it'll be better."

Julie's voice was still more sarcastic. "Won't *that* be fun!"

I went through her small office, into the outer office of the agency, got to the corridor of the building and rode down the night elevator. The elevator man talked about a body the police had found in a trunk.

"It was all cut up, in pieces," he said.

"It's the cross-word puzzle craze," I told him, and went to the street.

I got out of the taxi at Fifty-seventh and Fifth and took a little time before I walked down towards the gallery. There were only five or six people on the street. I kept my head low and when I passed the gallery turned it sidewise. The light was on the painting in the window, and there was faint light beyond the entrance door. At the next corner I turned and strolled back towards the gallery.

When I got near it there wasn't anyone within fifty yards of me. I went to the door, turned the knob. The door opened and I walked in, shutting it behind me. There was no slip of paper on the floor.

I called softly: "Miss Strathelm?"

There was no answer. The only sound came from the traffic, and that didn't get into the gallery much. I walked back towards the black curtain, passing the portrait of the woman with the cat. There wasn't much light on it, and it looked better. Near the black curtain I stopped and called sharply: "Miss Strathelm!"

There was no reply, and I figured she might be out telephoning. Then I stopped worrying about that and went around behind the curtain.

John Strathelm was lying on his back, arms outstretched. There was dim light from a floor lamp. He was lying near a row of slanted canvasses, and his eyes were half opened. When I got over close to him I said softly:

"Yeah—dead."

A lot of fire apparatus went past, along with a lot of racket. I leaned down, turned him over slightly and saw that the back of his head was caved in. There didn't seem to be any other wounds, and there didn't seem to need to be any others.

I straightened up, and got fingers on the grip of my automatic. Near the desk something gleamed a silver gray. I stepped over the body of John Strathelm and went closer to the safe. It

was a fairly small one, and had been covered by a red hunk of drapery. I'd noticed the drapery before. Now it had been tossed to one side. The safe was open and in a half-opened drawer there was nothing. I breathed:

"Got the sixty grand—"

I stood near the safe and looked around. Nothing else within the wall of curtains was out of place. Everything was as I had seen it before except the safe, the tossed aside, red drapery—and the body of John Strathelm.

Walking away from the safe, I leaned over and made certain that he was dead. As I straightened up there was a clicking sound. After a couple of seconds there was the sound of the gallery entrance door closing.

I moved silently across the floor and slid my body behind the fold I made in the hanging black material, leaving a slit for my eyes. There were the sounds of light footfalls and Ella Strathelm came into the office arrangement. She was hatless and held a paper bag in her left-hand fingers.

Her body went suddenly rigid. The paper bag fell from her fingers as she stared at her brother's body. Then she screamed. It was a long, wailing scream. She took one or two steps towards him, started to fall. Her back was to me and as she slumped to the carpet I moved towards her.

When I reached her side she was in a dead faint. I turned her over, went back to the paper bag and opened it. There was a chicken sandwich inside, so I placed it on the carpet again. As I turned towards her she moaned and sat up. She shivered. After a few seconds of effort she said dully:

"Is he—dead?"

I nodded. She moaned and covered her face with her hands. When she took them away there was pain in her eyes.

"I shouldn't have left him here alone—he didn't—"

Her words died; she rolled over on her stomach, pillowed her head in her arms and sobbed. I went to the phone

and called the police. I gave them the gallery name and address and said it was murder.

A husky voice at the other end said in a rising tone:

"Murder?"

I said: "Yeah—unless you figure a good way of committing suicide is by smashing in the back of your own head."

4



LIEUTENANT of Detectives Jed Foley was short, thickset, gray haired and long nosed. He had small, blue eyes and they moved around a lot. He stood near the chair in which Ella Strathelm slumped, and talked jerkily.

"—and you didn't report the kidnaping of Casswell Strathelm to the police. You called in Davies, here. I don't suppose he advised your reporting what really had happened."

He snapped his blue eyes in my direction. I said:

"I didn't *prevent* her from reporting what had happened, and she had reported his absence to the Missing Persons Bureau."

Foley grunted. He looked down at the two slips of paper he was holding.

"You got these two notes. First they wanted you to have fifty thousand on hand—then sixty. You followed instructions. Davies sat in his office and waited. You sat in here. You weren't hungry, but around ten-forty-five you decided to get a sandwich for your brother, and to telephone Davies, who expected a call from you earlier. So you went out and over to Madison Avenue, got the sandwich. In the meantime Davies got worried because you hadn't called and came up here. He walked in and found your brother's head crushed, the safe open and empty. Then you came in with the sandwich. Right?"

Ella Strathelm nodded her head. Her eyes held a dull expression. Foley

looked steadily at her, then glanced at me.

"Correct?" he snapped.

I nodded. "The gallery entrance door wasn't locked," I said.

Ella spoke in a toneless voice. "John was here—there didn't seem to be any reason for locking it."

Foley grunted again. "There was sixty thousand dollars in the safe," he muttered.

I said: "Sixty thousand that they wanted to get rid of, Lieutenant."

Foley swore softly. "Well, they got rid of it," he said grimly. "The kidnapers got it—and they've still got Casswell Strathelm."

Ella spoke in a shaken tone. "Perhaps—they've let—him go—now—"

Foley spoke to the uniformed officer who stood near the desk.

"Stick around, Ben. Davies—take a walk with me, will you?"

I said: "It's a pleasure." We went out past the black curtain that separated the office from the major portion of the gallery. Foley frowned in the direction of the portrait of the lady with the cat.

"The face is all wrong," he stated.

"He didn't care about the face," I told Foley. "It was design he was after—and color."

We went outside. Foley muttered something I didn't catch and we went towards Fifth Avenue, slowly. My wrist watch showed eleven-thirty, and the night seemed cooler.

"It's a messy one, Davies," Foley said jerkily. "Can't see that your firm comes off too brilliantly in it."

I shrugged as we moved along. "She called us in—I didn't urge her not to notify the police. But I wanted to get Casswell Strathelm back first."

The lieutenant of detectives swore. "You messed it up," he muttered. "Now they've got the ransom money and their man. He knows what they look like, so in a couple of days we'll hook him out of the river somewhere. They've got to finish him off."

I didn't say anything. Foley looked

sharply at me. His eyes were puzzled.

"You've been working on this longer than I have—got any ideas?"

I said: "The sixty thousand was ready for them. Why didn't they go through with the deal without murdering John Strathelm?"

Foley grunted. "They didn't intend to murder him. The door was open—they figured the money was inside. They walked in—maybe only one of 'em. Stuck on a mask and planned to knock John Strathelm out, or tie him up. He put up a fight, and they hit him too hard."

I said: "It's an idea, but his body doesn't show any signs of fight. The head wound is all the damage."

We were walking down Fifth towards Fifty-sixth. Foley said:

"His lips are cut."

I nodded. "Slightly—from the fall."

The lieutenant of detectives looked at me sharply.

"Thought you said he was lying on his back when you found him."

"I did," I told him. "But he might have landed on his face and rolled over."

We lighted cigarettes and Foley thought out loud about how his men were already after the names that Ella Strathelm had given him.

"All art dealers have enemies," I said. "But hard-up painters don't often go in for kidnaping. This job looks smooth—too smooth for amateur stuff."

Foley blew smoke straight ahead. "Julie Ryan still with you?" he asked.

"On her way to the gallery now," I told him.

"Bright girl," he commented.

He stopped and said: "Let's go back—the air helped a little. Not holding anything back on me, are you, Davies?"

I grinned. "Why would I?"

He swore softly. "You messed things up—it would help matters if you grabbed the kidnapers, and not the police."

I shook my head. "Didn't mess things up. Told them to do as instructed."

We walked along and turned on Fifty-seventh. Foley said:

"You knew they had the money there—might have put a man around to watch it."

I disagreed. "That would have made them suspicious. I wanted them to hand over the money—but I wanted to know how it was going to be done."

Foley frowned. "You found out," he breathed grimly. "Inside of twenty-four hours we'll have the other brother—dead."

When we went into the gallery Julie stood near the portrait of the woman with the cat. Foley said:

"Hello, Miss Ryan—how's business?"

Julie smiled. "Picking up, Lieutenant."

He grinned and went past her. "Yeah? Inside—it's laying down."

When he was out of sight I said: "I walked in and found John Strathelm dead with the back of his head crushed. He'd been hit hard with something hard. The safe was opened—not much of a job. No money inside. Ella was out getting her brother a sandwich."

Julie narrowed her dark eyes. She looked nice and slim in her sport dress.

"Why didn't she call you at ten?" she asked in a low voice.

"She was talking with her brother—then when she got to the drug-store where she bought the sandwich both booths were busy. She waited a few minutes and was getting nervous about being away from the gallery. She intended to call me when she got back."

Julie got a cigarette from her case and I lighted it.

"Levy's taking the calls at the office—he came in just before you called me. Dee—how about the second note—the one Benny did?"

I turned my back to the portrait. "It went over as the real thing. Benny does good work."

Julie frowned. "You don't think they murdered John Strathelm because you—"

I said: "Bunk—I hadn't been near the place. I was off the case so far as they knew."

Julie inhaled deeply. "Ella called you

on the phone to tell you her brother had the money."

I smiled at her. "You think of everything—but that wasn't why John Strathelm was murdered."

She tapped ashes from her cigarette. "They've got the sixty thousand. John Strathelm's dead—and they've still got his brother."

I said: "That does it—and Lieutenant Foley thinks Cass Strathelm will be dumped somewhere, dead, within twenty-four hours."

Julie shivered a little.



STARVED looking, sandy-haired man came from behind the curtain, reached my side.

"Mr. Davies?" he asked.

I said: "Yeah," and he said he was from the *A.P.* and anything I had to say would be appreciated.

"Looks as though Cass Strathelm was kidnaped," I told him. "Looks as though the kidnapers made sure the money was pulled in here, then grabbed it, murdering his brother. Looks as though Cass will be next to get the works, which would cover them up pretty well. A tough, smooth job."

The *A.P.* man nodded. "I got all that from Foley. Anything else?"

I widened my eyes. "Of course not. Foley thinks of everything."

He grinned and went on his way. Julie watched me with narrowed eyes.

"Want me to wake up some of the boys, Dee?"

I said: "Yeah—get Andy Teller and Rufe Mund. John Strathelm got the money from the Broadway Bank—it's open at night. He got the first fifty and the second ten there. Have Rufe check on that. Get Andy up here so that we'll have someone around when we leave."

Julie said: "We're going to leave?" "Maybe," I told her. "The ways of men and mice—"

A press photographer came out from the office arrangement and took a flash of the place. He grinned at us.

"Swell story!" he said.

I nodded. "Beautiful," I agreed. "Kidnaping, murder and robbery all in one slam. And a good-looking gal still alive."

The photographer went outside and flashed a couple of the nudes on the South Sea beach. I could hear voices from behind the black curtain. Julie said softly:

"Think the money was in the safe, Dee?"

I swore at her. "Why not?"

Her eyes were narrowed. "I didn't see it there. You didn't see it there. Foley didn't see it there."

I grinned. "John Strathelm saw it there."

Julie said: "Sure. But he can't tell us about it."

I looked towards the black curtain. "Ella can."

Julie said very softly: "She's damn' good looking. Let's believe her money talk."

Foley came out from behind the curtain, frowning. He gave orders to a couple of plain-clothesmen who left the gallery. Then he came over and looked narrowly at Julie. After a few seconds his eyes moved to mine.

"Dancer and Davies—still on the case, eh?"

I said: "Yeah—unless Miss Strathelm wants us off."

He shook his head. "I think she's got more confidence in your outfit than in the police. She's a pretty sick woman right now. Her maid's coming over to take her home. I'll have a couple of men here."

I said: "Good idea—in case the kidnapers want to get a message through."

The detective lieutenant kept his eyes on mine.

"Why would they want to get a message through?" he asked tonelessly.

I shrugged. "They might want to give directions for the exchange—the

sixty thousand for Cass Strathelm."

Foley whistled thinly. "You mean you don't think the kidnapers did this steal job?"

"I haven't any proof that they did," I said. "All I know is that there is supposed to have been sixty thousand in a safe and that it wasn't there when I came in. And that John Strathelm has been murdered."

Foley snapped right-hand fingers nervously. "I thought of that," he breathed. "I got a man checking on the bank payover to John Strathelm."

"So have I," I said. "But that will only prove the money was paid over."

Foley grunted. "Sure—sure. Tomorrow we'll be able to talk at Miss Strathelm more. Tonight she's too sick. Pretty tough. Her brother murdered; the money gone. The other brother kidnaped."

Julie said: "If this robbery and murder weren't committed by the kidnapers—it'll make it tough for Cass Strathelm. The papers have the whole story now, and they're going to be scared off."

I looked at Foley. "Better ask her if she can get her hands on another sixty thousand, in case we get a demand—and the kidnapers didn't do this job."

Foley said: "She told me John Strathelm told her he only had twenty thousand more he could get his hands on. And Cass Strathelm is broke. Not that she could make the kidnapers believe that."

A tall man came out from behind the curtain and said:

"Telephone, Lieutenant."

Foley went away and Julie said: "I thought Cass Strathelm was worth a lot. He's rated that way."

I nodded. "The kidnapers thought so, too."

The entrance door of the gallery opened and a small, faded-looking woman came in. She was crying. She went past us towards the black curtain as though she knew where she was going. Julie said:

"Ella's maid—yes?"

I nodded, and Foley came out. For a few seconds he stood near the curtain, looking back at the woman who passed. From the office, Ella's voice sounded shakily: "Mary—isn't it terrible?"

Foley said that his man had checked on the money. It had been paid over to John Strathelm—first fifty and later ten. Small bills.

Foley lighted a small cigar and frowned somewhere past me.

"These deals are lousy," he muttered. "You can't go blundering in—with a guy kidnaped. What did this John Strathelm do, Davies?"

"Nothing much," I told him. "He had money. Interested in painting. Dug up painters for Casswell Strathelm. Went abroad a lot. That's all I've found out so far."

Foley nodded. "Well, my men have instructions—I'm off to check up on some fellows who didn't like Strathelm too much. See you later."

He left the gallery. Julie said: "Anything we might ask Ella, before she goes home with her maid?"

I nodded. "Plenty, but we won't do it. My men have instructions, Miss Ryan—let's scam."

She looked surprised, but followed along to Fifty-seventh. A cab was outside the studio entrance, with the engine running. We went along the sidewalk, past it, to the rear. After about fifty feet I hailed a cab, got Julie inside. I said to the driver:

"Take it easy until that cab in front of the art gallery there starts moving. Then tail along, but don't catch up."

He nodded, then looked around, his eyes suspicious.

"Nothing wrong, is there?" he asked.

"Nothing," I replied. "It's a whimsy of mine."

"Oh, yeah," he replied. "Sure."

After a minute or so Julie got her head close to mine and asked:

"Why do we tag Ella? Just a hunch of yours, or something?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "God

knows," I replied simply. "It just happens to be the easiest thing to do—right now."

## 5



RAIN sprinkled down on Gracie Square, and the East River boat whistles sounded muffled. The cab was parked a short distance from the entrance of the apartment into which Ella Strathelm and her maid had vanished. Julie stirred restlessly and breathed:

"Hope you've got enough cash to pay the fare."

I said: "I hope so. Twenty minutes waiting won't break me."

Julie said: "Wonder what's happening back at the gallery?"

I grinned at her. "Let's both wonder—it won't help any."

Julie scowled at me. "Please remember, Mr. Dion Davies, that I'm a partner in this firm. I'm—"

"You're supposed to be a *silent partner*," I cut in. "But that would be asking too much of a—"

I stopped, straightened in the seat. Julie followed my gaze. I muttered:

"Uh-huh—Ella!"

Julie said: "Damn—you had a hunch—or maybe she's been called back to the gallery."

"Maybe," I agreed. Leaning forward I spoke to the driver. "Get behind that cab—and stay there."

I pointed it out as Ella got inside. She wore a dark coat with a high collar, turned up. Her hat slanted low over her face, but I wasn't mistaken. It was Ella.

Both cabs got under way, and when we reached Fifth Avenue Ella's cab turned uptown. Julie breathed: "Not the gallery, Dee!"

I said: "Not unless it's moved uptown."

We rolled on up Fifth to One Hundred and Tenth, then up Lexington.

Crossing the river at One Hundred and Thirty-fifth we turned north again and went past the Yankee Stadium. I got my Colt from a pocket, held it low and looked it over. Julie said:

"Anything for me to get scared about, Dee?"

I put the Colt away and said: "Sure—a dead man and sixty thousand. A kidnaped man, and a sick woman chasing around in the rain pretty late at night."

Julie smiled grimly. "I packed my .38. Mind?"

I shook my head. "No—but if the shooting starts in the park—remember, a tree is a tree."

Julie said: "What park?"

I shrugged. "Bronx Parkway has quiet spots—on a night like this."

We rolled on uptown, passed straggling frame houses and towering apartments. Julie said softly:

"What made you think Ella might be taking a cab ride like this one, Dee?"

I shook my head. "Just a hunch, maybe."

Julie said: "Yeah—maybe. But I wasn't asking you for maybes. I wanted to know."

I thought a few seconds. "It's like this. Ella called me on the job. Ella was there when I reached the gallery. Ella did the talking. Ella came in after John Strathelm was murdered. So when Ella left the gallery I just thought I'd like to be around, near her."

Julie swore. "That gives me just an idea. You don't think that Ella murdered—"

"I don't," I cut in. "She's not that good an actress. I was behind the curtain when she came in with the sandwich. Her expression, scream and faint—they were all too good. Ella got a jolt."

Julie said: "Maybe she got a message, after she got to the apartment. She was in there more than twenty minutes."

I nodded. "Maybe."

The cab swung to the left, ran along past Woodlawn Cemetery. Julie looked at the edge of it and said slowly:

"I don't like this kind of a case. Kidnaping's a lousy racket."

"That's why it would be nice to smash in on a few of them," I told her.

The cab followed the other to the right, dropped down a slope into the one-way entrance of Bronx Parkway. The rain was falling harder. We tagged along behind the other cab, passing the signs of a couple of towns off to the right. We didn't talk. Finally one showed up that read Scarsdale. . . . .

Julie breathed: "That's the place where Harley was murdered. Remember?"

I nodded. "It's supposed to be a nice, quiet suburban town."

The cab ahead swung to the right, off the main road. It was a one-way road we were on now, leading around a slight slope. Julie said:

"Looks as though—"

She stopped talking and things started to happen. The cab ahead skidded to the left, then to the right. Through the rain, as our cab slowed down, I saw a closed, black car, just starting forward. It moved jerkily. As it picked up speed a door opened. The cab ahead had almost stopped, on the right of the one-way slope.

As the figure pitched out from the car ahead of it, to the middle of the road, Julie cried out in a smothered voice. Our driver swore and the cab jerked to a stop. I shoved open the left rear door, got to the road. My right-hand fingers got my Colt out of a pocket and up.

I fired twice at the black, closed car that was picking up speed. The car was almost out of sight around the sloping curve when I fired twice more. Then it was out of sight and Ella Strathelm was in the middle of the road, kneeling beside the figure that had pitched down.

Julie was behind me as I ran forward. Her cab driver stood near the cab, muttering to himself. When I reached Ella Strathelm's side she was pawing at the figure and crying over and over: "Cass—Cass!"

I said: "Take it easy, Miss Strathelm," and pulled her from her knees to her feet.

Julie came up and I told her to take care of Ella. Then I rolled Cass Strathelm over on his back. His head was cut and some skin was off the side of his face. He moaned and opened his eyes, staring at me. I said:

"It's all right—were you hurt before they threw you out?"

He moved his head from side to side and muttered thickly:

"They threw—me—they opened the door and—"

I said: "I know that." His arms were in a twisted position. I called the cab drivers after I touched the steel cuffs, behind him. I hadn't seen them as I turned him over. When they reached my side I said:

"Let's get him in the nearest cab. Don't think he's badly hurt. Julie—you take our cab and get to a phone. Get headquarters in the city. A black, closed car—headed for White Plains, out of Bronx Parkway. We'll give a better description when he can talk."

The three of us carried him to the cab Ella had used. She got in behind him. Julie said:

"Where'll you be, Dee?"

"At the nearest hospital to this point. We'll find out where it is when we get out of the Parkway. Get going!"

I slammed the door and the driver got the cab moving. Looking behind I saw Julie and the other driver running back towards the other cab. Ella was pawing at her brother again, as he lay slumped in the rear seat, between us.

"Cass! Are you hurt—where are you hurt?" she kept repeating.

His head was pretty badly cut and I held a handkerchief against the banded up spot. He muttered thickly:

"There were—three—of them—"

The cab came out of the Parkway and turned towards a group of store lights on the left. The station seemed to be in the same direction. I looked ahead

and didn't see anything of the closed black car.

A uniformed cop we picked up on a corner took a look inside and stood on the running-board as he gave us directions to the hospital. As we pulled up to it I said to Ella Strathelm:

"You got a phone call that brought you up here?"

She said shakily: "Yes—just after I reached the apartment. The man said there would be a car waiting for me on the first road that wound to the right, after the Scarsdale sign. He said that if I told the police or anyone, he would know, and when I got there Cass would be dead. If I came alone my brother would be unhurt. If you hadn't followed—"

Her voice broke. We turned a corner and the cop stuck his head in a window.

"Here we are," he stated. "What was it—an automobile accident?"

"Yeah," I told him as I slid out. "Only the automobile wasn't hurt any."

## 6



LIEUTENANT FOLEY shook his head slowly from side to side. He rolled his new cigar between stubby fingers.

"What beats me was—you had the car right in front of you—the kidnapers' car. Instead of going after it—you worry about Strathelm."

I said: "I didn't know how badly he was hurt. The chances of catching what looked like a fast car with a taxi—they weren't good. And I wanted to hear anything Strathelm had to say."

Foley made sniffing sound. "Well, you heard it, on the way down. Except for the man who stopped him outside the gallery—he didn't get a look at a face. They were all well masked. And the man outside, who told him that his sister was in a cab down Fifty-seventh

Street and wanted to see him, was just a big, jovial guy. Probably had no police record—and after he shoved Strathelm into a sedan and showed him a gun—Strathelm never saw him again. And neither will we. And Strathelm didn't get a look at the chauffeur's face, was blindfolded somewhere uptown and never knew where he was held prisoner."

I said: "Yeah. Someone told him they had the money, and he was to be turned over to his sister. He was cuffed and taken along to Bronx Parkway from some place that took time. Then he was shoved out of the car. The next thing he knew we were picking him up."

Foley said: "They pulled a smooth one—didn't wait for the money transfer. Didn't take a chance. Figured the money was at the gallery. Probably followed John Strathelm to the bank and back. Watched, and when Ella Strathelm went out for the sandwich—they jumped in for the money. John put up a fight and got the works. They got the money and didn't want a *double* murder rap; and they figured Ella was scared enough to come alone. They were in the clear with Casswell, with the one man he'd seen out of town, fifty to one. So they tossed Cass Strathelm out of the car, got away from you—and now what?"

I looked at Julie, who was frowning. She looked at her wrist watch and said: "Almost two, Dee."

I nodded. Foley said sharply: "I've got every man I can spare—working on this job. I'm working on it myself. But I suppose you're going to turn in?"

"Sure," I told him. "We've got Cass Strathelm back, and with nothing more than a hurt head and some skin off his face and arms. You've got the police looking for a big, jovial-faced man with broad shoulders and a deep voice."

Foley swore. He pointed beyond the window of the detective car, parked near the gallery.

"And Cass Strathelm is in there with

a bad headache, dodging reporters and knowing that the very men who talked to him murdered his brother."

I said: "It's an idea."

Foley's eyes were very small. "But you don't like it?"

I looked towards the gallery window. "It's lousy," I said simply.

The lieutenant of detectives said coldly: "How about playing fair, Davies? You're a good agency. We've given you breaks now and then, when people came to us with matters that weren't in our exact line. How about coming through?"

I lighted a cigarette. "Coming through—with what?"

"With something you know—that I don't know."

I shook my head. "It isn't because I know something you don't know that I say your idea's lousy. It's just that I don't like the way you figure."

Foley swore again. "Nerts," he said grimly. "You knew about the kidnap job before we did."

"What of it?" I asked.

He didn't have any answer for that one. "You let that car get away from you," he muttered.

Julie said: "I'm tired as hell."

I opened a door of the car and slid to the sidewalk. Julie followed. Foley got out and said he was going inside to see if everything was all right. When he had gone in, Julie touched my arm.

"I could go for a drink in a big way."

"That's a better idea than Foley's," I said. "But let's wait a little."

We waited a little, walking back and forth past the gallery in a drizzling rain. Foley came out and stood looking at us.

"Thought you were tired as hell," he said to Julie. "Does walking rest you?"

Julie said: "The boss told me to stick."

Foley looked at me. "What for? Ella Strathelm is half asleep on the chair in there, and her brother is stretched on the divan. They're going to stay where they are tonight."

I said: "Sure—and John's going to stay where he is tonight."

Foley bit off a hunk of cigar. "No use leaving a man around. The kidnap job was worked smooth, with a murder thrown in. Cass has said all he has to say, which doesn't help us much. The boys will pull in a lot of guys tonight, and all of them will be the wrong ones. I'm hitting the hay."

I said: "How about those fellows who hated Cass—the ones you were looking up?"

Foley swore. "I got to two of them. All they did was hate him. Neither of them knew Cass had been kidnaped."

He nodded to Julie, waved a hand to me and walked towards Fifth Avenue. Julie and I walked the other way.

Julie said: "That safe wasn't smashed open—the combination had been worked."

I nodded. "A gun on John Strathelm would make him give the combination. Or open it himself."

Julie said: "Then what was he smashed over the head for?"

I groaned. "I don't know what I'd do without you, Mr. Dancer," I told her. "John was cracked over the head because that made less racket than a gun shot."

Julie said: "Fine, Mr. Davies—but why did they have to crack him over the head?"

"Because he'd got a look at them," I said softly.

Julie shook her head. "Why did he get a look at them, Dee? The kidnapers of Cass Strathelm were masked—he never saw them. Why should John have seen them?"

"Might have been different men—not mixed up with the kidnapers at all."

Julie made sniffing sound. "It would have been a much smoother job if they'd got away with the money *without* murdering John Strathelm. Then they could have dumped Cass. They had the sixty grand. Then they could have jumped this section of the country."



HE turned back towards the gallery. "Maybe John handed over the money, and then started to fight," I suggested. "Someone slugged him with something. He wasn't such a young man and he was slugged too hard. Or maybe he was slugged first, and then the safe was worked open by an expert. It isn't much of a safe."

Julie snapped a cigarette from her case and stuck it between her lips.

"By the way—are we still on the case?"

I said: "I wonder—let's go in and find out."

The door was open, and we went in. As it closed, the voice of Ella Strathelm said wearily and faintly from the rear of the gallery:

"Who is it—now?"

I walked along towards the black curtain, ahead of Julie. There was only a faint light behind it, when we got there. I said cheerfully:

"It's Davies—my secretary, Miss Ryan, is with me."

Cass Strathelm was lying on the divan near the desk. His head and face were bandaged and he looked pretty sick. He had the nose and mouth of his brother, but his eyes were deep and very dark. He didn't move, but lay on his right side looking at me.

Ella Strathelm was stretched in one of the rather ornamental chairs. She dabbed at her forehead and lips with a wet handkerchief. She was very pale, and her lips weren't so red as they had been.

"It's all been—so terrible," she murmured. "I can barely—move. The doctor said Cass must be very quiet—so we decided—"

She broke off. Julie went past her and seated herself in a chair facing me. I stood with my back to a section of black curtain.

"It's been pretty bad," I agreed. "Robbery—and murder—"

Ella shivered and pressed her handkerchief to her lips. Cass Strathelm's eyes held little expression, but stayed on mine.

Ella said brokenly: "Robbery—and death—and the terrible experience of Cass—"

I looked with narrowed eyes at Ella. "What terrible experience of Cass?" I said very slowly.

Ella Strathelm's body stiffened just a little, then relaxed. She got the handkerchief to her lips again and said in a smothered tone:

"The terrible—kidnaping—"

I smiled a little. "What terrible kidnaping?"

My eyes flickered to the dark eyes of Julie, which were staring at me. Cass Strathelm pulled himself up to a sitting position, on the divan.

Ella said: "What do—you mean—"

I looked at Cass. "You've lost an awful lot of money in this gallery during the last year. Fifty-seventh Street rent is high. Times have been pretty bad. You lost a lot the year before. But things are looking a little better now. Quite a bit better."

His eyes were sunk and dark and they stayed on mine. I tried to smile pleasantly.

"In a few months you might have been able to pull out. What you needed most was—money."

Ella Strathelm sat up straight in her chair, staring at me. I stopped smiling.

"Sixty thousand dollars can help you a lot, Mr. Strathelm!"

He leaned forward from the divan; the head bandages were white against the black curtain behind him.

"What is it—you are getting at, Davies?" he said huskily.

I kept my eyes on his. "I'm not giving you credit for attempting a perfect murder, Mr. Strathelm. What you were after was a perfect kidnaping. But something happened that you hadn't counted on—and your perfect kidnaping became a murder."

He was breathing heavily. Ella Strathelm uttered a low moan. I said:

"I think that you needed fifty thousand dollars very badly. I think that your brother refused it to you. I couldn't quite see why *you* should be kidnaped, when the kidnapers, with a little effort, could have discovered you were broke."

Ella said softly, moaningly: "Cass—Cass!"

I kept my eyes narrowed on Casswell Strathelm.

"But while your brother wouldn't give you or lend you the money—he couldn't sit quietly by and hold back ransom, with the chance of you being murdered. You knew that he wouldn't do that—"

Ella lowered her head and breathed: "Oh, my God—"

Cass Strathelm said tightly: "You lie, Davies."

I shrugged. "Perhaps," I agreed. "But it's an interesting lie. You had men with you. Perhaps only one man. You let yourself be seen in front of the gallery—then you vanished. Your companion scrawled a note, which was shoved under the door of the gallery. But I don't think you were far away. You remember me—you talked with me, when Carter called me in on that missing Matisse. So when you saw *me* come in here you worked fast. Even while I was here—a second note was placed inside the studio. And that note mentioned me by name and said that I was to be called off the case or Casswell Strathelm would be instantly killed. It also raised the ransom money from fifty to sixty thousand dollars."

Ella Strathelm was staring at me. "But I saw the note. Nothing was there—about you being called off—"

I looked at her. "You *didn't* see the note. It was pretty much of a tip-off to me that something was wrong—that it wasn't just a straight kidnap job. So I had one of my men copy the note, all except the sentence that warned you to call me off. He left that out."

Ella Strathelm covered her face with her hands and swayed a little in her chair. I looked at Cass Strathelm.

"You were sure your brother and sister wouldn't call in the police, but you didn't want me on the job, either. And you wanted *me* to see that note. I think you had the idea that as a matter of honor—I'd drop out. But I was too suspicious. So I stayed in."

Cass Strathelm's eyes never wavered from mine. They held dull expression.

"John Strathelm went out, and came in later with the second ten thousand. Either you or your companion followed him to the bank. Perhaps he had been followed the first time he went to the bank, too. So you knew the sixty thousand was in here. Naturally it would be in the same place. And that was fine—because *you* knew the combination of the safe."

Ella was half crying: "Cass—no, no—"

I said quietly: "So when Miss Strathelm went out of here you knew your brother was alone. You came in and went for the safe. He discovered you—and you struck him—"

Cass Strathelm cried out hoarsely and staggered to his feet. He mouthed words as the gun in his right hand caught light from the lamps.

"Lies—lies! All lies—"

I ripped my own automatic loose, brought it up. And then Julie was close to Cass Strathelm; her right hand struck at his right wrist, both hands gripped the wrist.

I shouted at her: "For God's sake—get clear! Julie!"

But she didn't get clear. Strathelm was swinging her about and mouthing hoarse words, trying to rip his right hand free from her two-handed grip. Her slim body swung with his and I swore at her, with my gun held ready for the shot that would make him quiet—and not being able to use it.

Ella sprang from her chair and threw herself on her brother, trying to grab

the hand Julie was hanging on to and making my job all the tougher.

I tilted my gun up and sent a bullet through the ceiling, and on top of the crash there was a second one as Strathelm squeezed the trigger of his gun.

Ella screamed and her body jerked; then she slumped to the floor and was still. I went towards Julie and Strathelm, and there was a second, crashing shot from his weapon as I got in close, the bullet going over my head.

I clubbed at him with my automatic; he swung around and battered Julie against me, knocking me off balance. As I went to my knees I saw him throw Julie clear, to the divan. Then he was running wildly past me, gun in hand. I got to my feet, followed. He was at the gallery entrance door, ripping it open, when I shouted weakly:

"Stop—I'll shoot!"

He didn't stop. I shot and saw wood spurt from the framework of the door. He was outside, and I ran out. When I reached the sidewalk there was the squealing of brakes and a hoarse cry. The truck was moving fast, and Strathelm went down and under.

When I reached him the gun lay several feet away. I picked it up and shoved it in a pocket, got mine out of sight. The truck driver and I carried him into the gallery, back to the divan. Julie stood near Ella Strathelm, looking very pale. We set Cass Strathelm down, stretched him out.

Julie said: "I think she's dead, Dee—the bullet from—his gun."

The truck driver kept saying: "—he run right in front of me! I never had a chance—"

I told him to keep quiet, that maybe the man wanted to talk. I told Julie to call an ambulance. She got back to me by the time Cass Strathelm stirred and opened his eyes—we leaned over him.

He said very softly and calmly:

"I'm dying—just as well. I needed—the money and John—wouldn't loan it. Said I was a fool. I didn't mean to kill him. I came up behind him—struck him

with a blackjack I bought. Must have—hit him too hard. You know the rest—”

I said: “Who worked with you—”

He shook his head weakly. “He didn’t do—anything but put the handcuffs on me in the cab—talk over the phone—to Ella. I did—the rest.”

His voice was almost gone. I bent lower.

“I must have been—insane. My own brother—the money—bag in room under name of Charles Dean—at *Robinson’s Hotel* on Sixty-third. A cheap boarding house—”

He closed his eyes and I thought he was gone. But he spoke without opening them.

“The last—two years. Always this—money talk—my own brother—always—money talk—”

He moved his head slightly, shivered. After a few seconds I got hold of his wrist. There was no pulse. The truck driver muttered shakily:

“Dead?”

I said: “Yeah.” I turned to Julie, who was leaning against the desk.

“Hurt?” I asked.

She shook her head. “I don’t bruise easily,” she replied. “He came through, Dee.”

I nodded. “He came through—and went out.”

When I leaned over Ella Strathelm I didn’t have to try her pulse. She was dead.

Julie said: “I called the ambulance—and the police. Lord, but I need a drink.”

The truck driver said: “Me—I need one, too. What happened in here?”

I said: “For the last two years there’s been talk. Money talk. This is the result. Not your fault about the man. I saw him run under the truck.”

There were voices beyond the curtain. The truck driver reached in a hip pocket and handed me a pint flask filled with something almost colorless.

“Here—I don’t want this on me—not when the police get here. Even if I am sober.”

I took it, got the cork out and handed it to Julie. She took a nice swig, shivered. I said: “We want it on us.” I took one that was just as good.

Julie drew a deep breath, sighed. I said: “Why the devil did you fight with him? I had a gun.”

She smiled a little. “You didn’t have the goods on him, Dee—you needed a confession. I didn’t want you to kill him before you got it.”

When the ambulance doctor came in he took a quick look around.

“Which one needs me most?” he asked.

I said: “It’s even up. They’re both dead.”

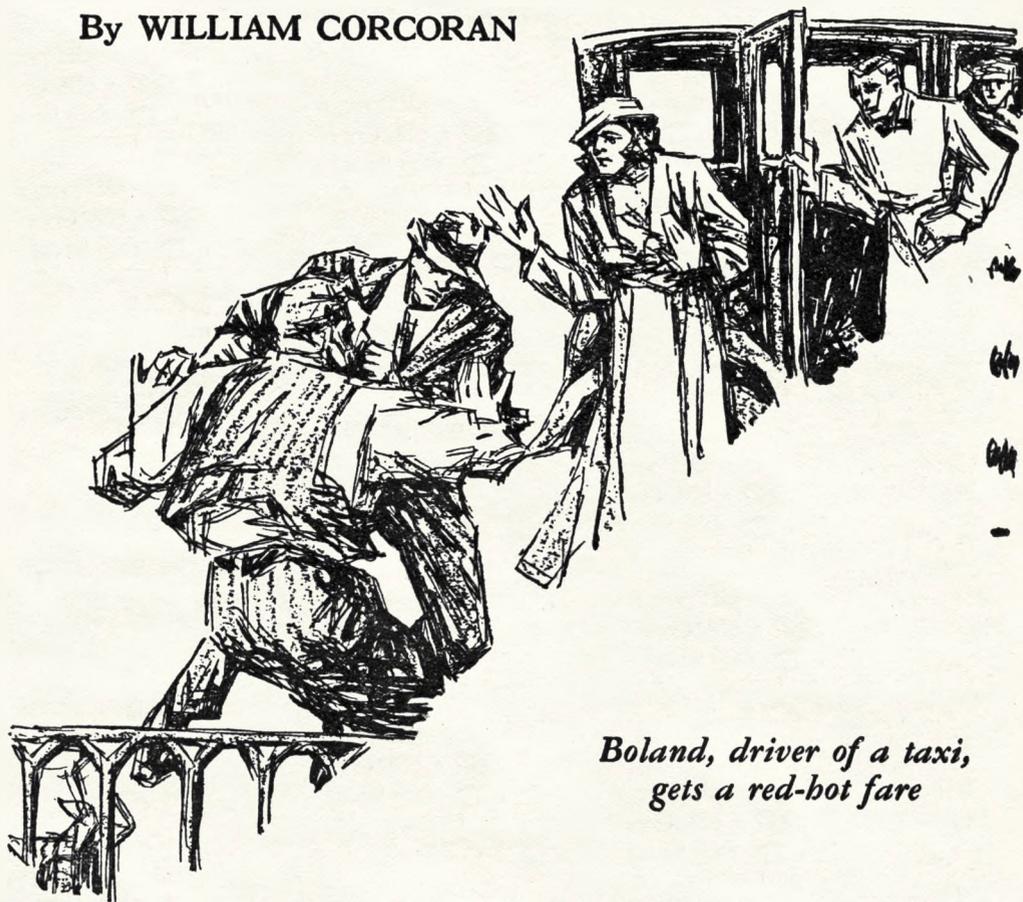
He whistled and looked wise. “One of *those* things, eh? Not much of a job for the police, either.”

I smiled at Julie. “No job at all for them,” I said wearily. “Not after we give them the report and confession and tell them where to dig up the sixty grand. No job at all.”



# Manhattan Midnight

By WILLIAM CORCORAN



*Boland, driver of a taxi,  
gets a red-hot fare*

**B**OLAND stopped his taxicab very suddenly in the middle of the block as a shrill whistle from the sidewalk pierced the quiet. It was a Manhattan summer midnight, evil and hot, breathlessly hot even after hours of unavailing darkness. On such a night the feverish city stirs, sleepless, restless, roaming. On such a sinister night anything can happen. . . .

Boland, driver of the taxi, saw there were four people on the sidewalk. One was the speakeasy waiter who had whis-

tled. One was a girl about eighteen, expressionless, silent, easy to look at. The other two were big, mature men who faced each other inimically in the middle of the sidewalk.

"So we're quits, huh?" said one. He was rather handsome in a hard, animal-like way, flashily dressed, glassy of eye, more than a little drunk. "I made 'em and I broke 'em; and I made you—and you say we're quits?"

"I said nothing like that." The other was beetle-browed, with small concentrated gaze and heavy face; he wore pink damp shirt-sleeves and there was a big diamond in his tie. He was angry,

defiant, but he was worried and wary. Probably the guy that owned the joint in the old brownstone front, Boland thought.

"Then what are you trying to put over?" snarled the first.

"Just that it's a tough night, Jack," the man protested, sweating. "My God, a shooting inside would ruin trade and lose me a spot. You shouldn't go around reckless like this."

"It's the spot that worries you—not me, eh?" The snarl intensified. "Why, you cheap, two-timing. . . ."

The big man spun suddenly. His left fist struck the man in shirt-sleeves hard on the point of the jaw. The man reeled, and abruptly and absurdly vanished over the low railing of the areaway.

The suddenness of it was stunning. The other two watched, frozen. The big man glanced once into the areaway, laughed, and turned a contemptuous back. "I've been thinking about that a long time. Let's go."

Boland looked quickly at the girl. She was slender, with a firm, nicely rounded little body, fair hair and gentle intelligent mouth; her white mannish jacket and cocky white hat were cheap but pretty. It was her eyes that held him; he saw, in the wide blue eyes, a naked fear. She looked pert, charming, good-humored, and self-reliant and brave enough, yet she stood there, silent, haunted by an abiding dread.

The waiter cringed under the big man's gaze and sprang to open the taxi door. In the areaway the stricken man picked himself up and staggered into the basement entrance of the place. The man and the girl climbed into the cab.

"Where to, sir?" fawned the waiter. "You wanna go home?"

The man laughed. "Home? Me? Hell, no! Hey, mugg—start the cab. Up Broadway."

The girl spoke suddenly. Her voice was forced; the swift beat of her heart was in it. "Jack . . . please don't go any more places."

"No?" he said with challenge. "Why?"

Boland imagined her deferential, nervous smile. "It's really too dangerous tonight. You know that. And you've had a lot to drink."

It was the wrong thing to have said. The man pushed the waiter away, slammed the door, and ordered Boland on. "You don't know me real well yet, babe. Nobody ever saw me with too much of a load or too leery to circulate. Never mind—I ain't hard to know. We're going to get better acquainted."

There was a pause. She said: "I guess so, only. . . ." Then, quickly, "Jack, please don't. . . ."

"I thought you liked me, babe?"

"Oh . . . I do. But . . ."

The man laughed.

Boland drove them up Broadway. Boland, on his way home after a grueling day, had not wanted this ride; the sudden stop was instinctive. Now Boland rather wanted this ride, uncertainly and of instinct. He had a wish to see where it led.

Boland was thinking. They were such thoughts as a man cannot readily quell. A full, whole sort of man, that is, who goes his way as unsentimentally as possible in life with a hardness and a strength, and yet also a queer irresistible compassion for those less endowed. He was all of that, this Frank Boland, twenty-five, tall, lean muscled, quick, crisp of speech and gray of eye.

And Boland thought, remembering the look in the eyes of the girl. They were nice eyes. . . .

Nice eyes—in company with a lad like that! They did not belong. The girl was not his kind. His kind were enameled and armored, well able to handle him. This kid was soft, gentle, so young. Her strength was a different kind, fortitude, loyalty, willing, loving sacrifice. The man himself was well aware, and full of a hard ruthless relish.



HEY left Times Square behind them, where the white radiance of myriad lights rose with the sheen, beautiful and unbearable, of molten copper. Their destination proved to be a converted brownstone house in the Seventies where the basement entrance was discreetly gay with soft-colored lights and a diminutive awning.

The man staggered a little as he got out, talking vaingloriously to the girl. He tossed Boland a five-dollar bill and steered her by the arm into the place.

Boland watched them go, the girl silently protesting by the stiffness of her shrinking, lovely young body. Boland's lean, tanned face wore a small unpleasant look, and his gray eyes were hard for all their sullen uncertain wonder.

A single empty taxi waited before the door. Boland sized it up, and then parked his own rig just beyond the door. The other driver was watching him with an unnatural amount of inscrutable interest. Boland joined him.

"This is my ride for the night, pal," he said. "I'll stick till they come out again."

The man hesitated. Then he said, "Know who that is, son?"

"No."

"Care to know?"

"Certainly."

"That's Jack Grimes."

Boland stared. "That lad's Jack. . . . Killer Jack Grimes?"

"None other."

"Who's the girl?" Boland demanded.

The man looked at him. "I dunno. Why?"

Boland looked away. "Just wondered."

"Don't," drawled the driver in a dry, hard tone. "Scram, buddy. He's drunk or he wouldn't be around. It's suicide. If he lives till morning, roaming the town tonight, it'll be because the cops found him first and locked him up."

Boland's glance narrowed. "If I

scram, you'll get him. . . . So what?"

"Oh, no!" The driver started his motor. "I just waited to see. I wouldn't ride that guy for a dollar a mile. You can suit yourself." And blandly, with a city hackman's hard acceptance of things as they are, he pulled away from the curb and vanished around the corner.

Boland's heart was beating with more force than regularity as he returned to his cab. He knew this Jack Grimes; the man was very well known through the town. He had been a big shot in his day, but another day unaccountably had come. In that day, full of immunity and omnipotence in the town, he had lived by ruthless terror and a lavish scattering of money. Now for three weeks he had been in hiding, while the police sought him, a horde of enemies sought him, and the newspapers printed a thousand theories as to his whereabouts. His friends, in and out of power, fled him now. His day was done . . . and he did not know it.

Now this Frank Boland was no philosopher, but he knew the city, he knew something of what was happening in the world just now. Swiftly the world changed before a man's eyes; all of life was in flux, deceptive, shifting, devouring suddenly the inept and the unwary. A man must be better than good to get by. Jack Grimes was mistaken in his self-estimate. Yet he would be, till the last breath, as dangerous as dynamite.

It was no mess for Boland to meddle into. It was Frank Boland's cue to scam, fast and far.

But Frankie Boland, standing there on the sidewalk at midnight, was remembering the mystery in the eyes of that girl—young, very young eyes filled with dread that met his gaze so nakedly for an instant.

Abruptly and unexpectedly Grimes and the girl appeared in the doorway of the night-club, followed by a stout man in dinner coat. The stout man was perspiring and protesting in evident appre-

hension.

"I am delighted you come, Mr. Grimes," he persisted. "You know that always. But just tonight; much better you go home, stay under cover. You know that is true. No more I wish to tell you than this."

Grimes made a raucous sound. "You're a — damn' liar. You're yellow. You got a streak up your back as wide and yellow as a road across Arkansas in a rainstorm. I go where the hell I like, and *that* for Lou Carmine. The hell with you. I know a better joint."

"You must come again, Mr. Grimes," pleaded the man, sweating. "Better some night when Lou Carmine is not expected."

"Yeah. In five or ten years. C'mon, Renée."

But, clutching the girl's arm, Grimes stopped dead, to stare balefully at Boland. His right hand edged under one coat lapel. "Where have I seen you before, mugg?"

"Right where you see me now." Boland's tone was adequately hard for the occasion. "I've been waiting."

Grimes made a quick, chagrined, amused gesture. "My pal. If it ain't my pal!"

Inscrutably Boland shrugged.

Grimes said: "Let's go. Back downtown. We'll crash the *Carnival Club*."

"Oh . . . said the girl. She balked, dismayed, desperate to the point of rebellion. "No, no . . . Jack not there, please not there."

He looked at her, cold, his moods shifting chameleonlike. "Why not?"

"You know Carmine hangs out there."

"That's why I want to go there. What do you think of that?"

She stared at him, saying nothing. Something held her fast, deprived of all volition.

He laughed. "You leave everything to me, baby. You know what you want. . . . I know what I want. In the cab."

As they climbed inside, the man in the

dinner coat watched them, and there came into his dark eyes, to replace the apprehension, a look of sudden gloating evil. Boland saw the look.

Throughout the town the jackals waited, smiling like that, sure of what was coming. The sun was setting, a man's day was done, which to the town was a thing for big, if brittle, laughter.

The town neither noticed nor cared a fig about an unknown and very young girl. . . .



HE *Carnival Club* was a glittering place on a side street off Times Square, a speakeasy which had grown up and become a night-club. Jack Grimes had

a new whim to indulge when they arrived.

"Put up the rig and come on inside," he ordered Boland.

The tiny muscles around Boland's eyes tightened. "Oh, yeah?"

"When I make a pal I make a pal," Grimes asserted flatly. "You're coming along."

Boland looked at the girl. The blue eyes seemed to plead, to urge him. Boland poked his cap forward a little, made a wry face, and drawled: "I could stand a little drink."

He parked the cab, tossed his driver's cap inside, and together they entered the club.

In the subtle way of the city, they made a sensation. An emotion ran through the place like a current, silent and explicit. The waiters stiffened, cringed a little, and their eyes were hot with calculation. A floor show was noisily in progress, but at every table eyes watched the newcomers seat themselves at a table near the door.

Grimes gazed all about with an air of drunken triumph. He ordered drinks, giving specific directions. "Where's Dan Logue?" he asked the waiter.

"In the office, sir. You wish me to

call him?" The man eyed him nervously.

Grimes got a little rockily to his feet. "I know the way."

When the broad back of the big shot disappeared through a door, Boland asked the girl: "Who's Dan Logue?"

She was covertly studying him. "He owns the place. . . . Listen. Will you do me a favor?"

Boland's reply was a reserved, husky drawl. "Anything you say, sister."

"If anything happens tonight, will you deliver a message for me?"

"Shoot."

She gave him a name and address. "You go there and tell them. Tell them all that happened. I can't break away. I think they'll understand."

"That gives them an edge on me. Suppose you let me in on it."

The blue eyes studied him gravely, then dropped.

He persisted: "Why don't you chuck him? He's washed up—what do you expect to get out of it?"

Still she did not speak, staring at her hands. Then suddenly she turned away, and Boland saw that she was crying, quietly, hopelessly.

Boland gripped her elbow hard. "Now, sister . . . snap out of it. That don't go here."

"I can't help it."

"What's the trouble? It's time you talked."

It was time to talk, and she could not resist. "It's my brother. I gave you his name. Jack Grimes is going to kill him."

Boland whistled. "I see."

She flashed a look at him, saw he understood in full, and nodded miserably.

"Why?" he asked.

"For breaking up his arson racket. My brother's in an insurance office and he smashed up Grimes' last big money income."

"How did he go about it?"

"He made a list of every case Grimes was interested in, and told the companies to refuse to pay. The cases would have to go to court, and Grimes can't do that. They're too much alike

and he's too well known. He invented a perfect way to commit arson without trace. They light a candle on the floor of a basement, and then disconnect a gas pipe. When the gas fills the place and settles down to the candle flame, it blows up and sets fire to everything—and there's never a scrap of evidence left."

"Your brother doesn't know you're here tonight, eh?"

"He'd never even guess. I made up to Jack Grimes to try and talk him out of killing my brother. He says he'll think about it. That's all he'll say. You know what that means. I can't do anything. . . . But if Bob must learn I was with Jack Grimes tonight, I want him to know why it was." She clutched his hand. "You'll do that for me?"

"Huh," said Boland, frowning. He thought an instant, looking at her. Then his eyes shot suddenly across the room. He drawled: "I'll do it. Let it ride. Here comes the menace."

The girl dried her eyes and was waiting when Grimes dropped into his chair. The big man was in an ugly mood.

"The big bum! He don't want *me* taking a rap in his place. Imagine that. *His* place. Jeeze, it was me set him up!"

Boland saw a man standing against the wall across the room looking their way. The man caught Boland's eye and made signals. Boland stared a second, then curtly murmured an excuse and left the table. He walked to a doorway where the little sign said: "Gentlemen's Lounge." The other man crossed the room diagonally to join him. He was a tall, sardonic creature in an extreme tailored white flannel suit.

In the wash-room he buttonholed Boland. "Look here, you're with that guy. Got any influence?"

Boland was expressionless. "A little."

"Well, use it. You're fond of eating, aren't you?"

"Why eating?"

"You've ate your last meal if you don't. Get him out of here."

Boland's eyebrows arched noncom-

mittally. "He's not doing anybody any harm."

"He's done his share already. Listen, pal. Lou Carmine is scouring the town. The rackets are rocking, and Lou's desperate, and he's going to wipe out Grimes. He'll be here any minute. My orchestra never learned any sad music. It won't be pretty."

Boland reflected judiciously. He cocked a calmly reasonable eye at the man. "I'll tell you what. You do me a favor, and I'll get him out of here."

"What do you want?"

"You're acquainted with Grimes' organization. Such as it was. You were part of it."

"So what?"

Boland drawled: "There's a guy named Robert de Witt. He works with Empire Indemnity. He's in bad with Grimes' bunch. Jack says he'll get him. Or the bunch will get him. You call off whatever's left of that mob, if you have any influence—and I'll see how much I can swing with Jack."

"I got nothing whatever to do with that arson mob," declared the man.

Boland nodded indifferently. "O. K. I like the show. I think we'll stay."

The man grabbed his coat lapel. "For God's sake, you'll ruin the joint! I can't stand a shooting. . . . Wait a minute."

The man looked around. Only the attendant was near. There was a telephone booth in one corner. The man made for it and swiftly dialed a number.

"Scarvitch? . . . Well, put him on, dammit! . . . Hello, Jake? How's things? This is Dan Logue. Listen to this. It's important. You got the pencil on a guy named Robert de Witt. I'm asking you to take it off." He listened an instant, then his face flushed. "Then, by — I'm *telling* you to take it off. Get me? You're washed up and I know it and you'll do as I say."

There was a moment's silence while Logue listened. It ended with Logue muttering in a mollified tone: "That's

better. Come around and talk business any time. Bring the boys. You know your soap, I guess. And leave de Witt alone."

He sprang from the instrument. "It's fixed. That bunch of chiselers is licked and running anyway. Now I don't care why or how or who—get him out of here!"

"Give me three minutes," snapped Boland, and made for the door.

Jack Grimes was drinking hard tonight, and he wasted no time here. His drinks were double drinks, and the waiter was quick to serve him.

"Have one of these," Grimes urged strongly. "An Uppercut Cocktail. One round, you get knocked out of the ring—if you're a nance. . . . The Uppercut Cocktail, I invented it—and boy, can I take it!" He drained his glass.

Boland leaned closer. "Say, Grimes—what's the set-up? Are you looking for Lou Carmine tonight, or is he chasing you?"

Grimes stared at him, shocked, then indignant. "Carmine chase me? Me? Why, I made that palooka take a dive in the river to get out of my way. A year ago over on Exterior Street. And I can do the same again."

Boland nodded. "I was just wondering. I heard them talking in the lounge."

"About what?"

"You and Carmine."

"Yeah? So what did they say?"

"They said nobody'd better tip you. They know where he is."

"Right now?"

"They just came from there."

Grimes gazed at him. The eyes were distinctly glassy. He moistened his lips. "Where, you monkey?" A big hand crushed Boland's arm. "Out with it. Come on!"

Boland looked scared. "You don't mean to go there, do you? You don't think . . ."

"Where is the —" roared Grimes above the din.

Boland looked at him and surrendered. "At the *Back Yard Bar*. He's

loading up with liquor," they said.

"You know why? He's yellow. He's a ten-minute egg—hard in the shell and yellow in the middle. He's drinking because he's that way, see? Come on. We're going to the *Back Yard*."

Renée de Witt was watching Boland in incredulity and horror. "Oh, how could you . . . how could you . . ."

"How could he?" challenged Grimes. "I made him, didn't I?"

And Boland, looking over Grimes' shoulder, impassively winked once, and got up.

Grimes staggered a little as they made for the door. He had the girl's arm again in his grip. Boland trailed them, watchful. He could read intense relief in every face they passed.



HE taxicab was parked to the right of the door. On the other side was parked a long string of cars. A newcomer, a big, dark, eight-cylindered car, was just edging into place a number of doors away. Men were easing out of it to the sidewalk.

Boland took one glance at the men and grasped Grimes' arm, urging him. "Let's go. He might be gone. Man, he might be gone."

Grimes grunted his inarticulate contempt. He got hold of the cab door and hung on while Renée climbed inside. There were two patches of heightened color on the girl's pale cheeks, and her eyes were feverishly bright, fastening on Boland, questioning, probing.

Boland got Grimes inside and the door closed. He leaped behind the wheel. The motor raced full throttle at first spark, and the car jerked into motion. It performed no elaborate maneuver, but climbed the sidewalk curbing and raced down the sidewalk between the building walls and the line of cars along the curb.

There were men running out in the middle of the street, where a taxicab

might be expected to turn out. There was another motor raging back beyond the night-club entrance, an eight-cylinder motor, jockeying furiously to free itself. The men in the street yelled. They were cut off from the taxicab by the line of cars. They did not pursue; they waited for the big car to pick them up.

The sidewalks were empty. Boland held his hand on the horn as they neared the corner. They took it full speed, bounding off the curbstone on to the avenue. A street car droning along clanged wildly and put on all brakes. Boland swerved around the forward end and turned north on the avenue. He thrust the throttle to the floor.

The taxicab was almost three blocks away when the big black eight-cylinder car spun around the corner on two wheels and raced grimly on the trail.

Inside the cab Renée had screamed once. Grimes recovered himself, cursed, and yelled: "Hey, bonehead! Where you going?"

"Look behind you!" Boland shouted.

There was a silence inside. Then a shattering of glass as Grimes smashed the window with his gun. The gun barked.

Grimes was cursing, vehemently, almost in exultation. "Come on, you half-breed apes! I got what it takes. Come and get it, you motherless monkeys!"

There was a sound, a sharp, deliberate, fast staccato, like drum taps in the wind, somewhere behind . . . ominous, laden with death.

Apart from the shouting and the bark of Grimes' gun, there was no sound within the cab. A silence. . . . Boland thought he could feel it, stricken, dumb, agonized. He pictured the girl. . . .

But a small hand gripped his shoulder—hard. From the corner of his eyes he glimpsed the white jacket as the girl leaned through the window alongside.

"Keep going," Renée cried in his ear. Her voice sounded shaken, but firmly under control. "Don't look back. I'll tell you if they gain."

"You all right?"

"Never mind me. Go on—faster!"

He went on, faster, faster as the taxi gained momentum.

The cross streets loomed dark and empty ahead. At Fifty-second a patrolman ran out into the avenue, brandishing his gun; then ran back again, impotent, to telephone an alarm.

"They're gaining," said Renée.

"Hang on for a turn," he told her.

Boland aimed at Fifty-fourth Street. He jammed the brakes to the floor, cut the wheel, released the brakes. The taxicab slewed, slithered, and shot into the side street with squealing tires. Boland gave it full throttle. It picked up full speed, flying like a projectile between the dark buildings.

The big black car roared around the corner right after them.

"Speed, more speed, you dope!" yelled Grimes. "Want them to run you down?"

Boland cut loose with the last notch of power in the powerful six-cylinder motor. The taxicab crossed Sixth Avenue like a crazed thing, ricocheting from the car tracks. A blast of night wind, and then Fifth. Another taxicab hastily mounted the sidewalk to avert collision.

At Park Avenue, Boland executed another turn—northward. He sped for several blocks, then eastward again. The black car crept upon them.

Boland's jaw ached with the pressure of clenched teeth. First Avenue was now his aim. The margin was slender. Could he only cross First. . . .

Beyond First a large building glowed with the dimmed night-lights of a large garage. It was Boland's home garage. The entrance was a rising ramp, difficult to negotiate at speed.

The crossing of First Avenue was the most dangerous yet. It teemed with enormous produce trucks speeding tons of cargo. The taxi flew out of the cross street on to the avenue. It was a blur of light, and one sudden looming shadow. Boland got the taxi past the huge crushing prow of a truck with one crumpled

fender. Then they were across, by a hair.

The big car in the rear screamed with scorching brakes and tires, lost a split second, then cut around the rear of another speeding truck, and came on.

Boland's plan was reckless. Another minute, and the big car would be alongside. Machine-guns would deal bloody execution. No police rescue had developed.

Just before the garage ramp, Boland acted. Brakes on, wheel cut hard . . . and a prayer, profanely. The taxicab went insane. It skidded about in a complete circle, and then another full half circle before it paused, partly on the sidewalk.

The motor abruptly roared. The clutch caught and jerked the car from a standstill and flung it at the steep concrete incline. The taxi mounted the ramp.

On the street the big car flew by, its rear swinging madly as it made a furious, unexpected halt.



leaped out.

"Jump—both of you!"

The girl sprang from the door. "Are you all right?"

"Fine. Get him out."

Grimes emerged awkwardly. The liquor had undone him. He could not speak beyond cursing hoarsely, drunkenly, over and over. Boland seized him, rushed him to the nearest of a line of taxicabs close by. They were offshift, empty and ready. He shoved him in the cab and leaped for the wheel as the girl sprang after Grimes.

A trio of washers working across the spacious floor stopped to stare dumbstruck.

Even as Boland started the new taxi,

the gunmen's car roared up the ramp in blind pursuit of the quarry that had skilfully outwitted them. The cab blocking the passage atop the ramp was utterly unexpected. The big car struck the taxi cornerwise with a shattering of glass.

But Boland was gone. The new taxi gathered speed across the garage floor. It was a big garage, running through from one street to the other. The taxi roared forth into the farther street and turned west.

Boland stepped into full speed. No death car roared behind them. He fled on, swearing, hoping.

The death car never found them. It was hopelessly entangled back on the glass strewn ramp. The taxi was lost in the multitudinous streets of Manhattan. . . .

The station-house where Boland finally halted the taxicab was one where he was known and, after the fashion between cops and taxi-drivers, respected to an ample degree for all needs. He sat still for an instant, like a runner catching his breath. Then he got out deliberately and opened the door.

Renée looked out at him. She was white but composed. "You'll have to help. He's dead drunk."

Jack Grimes, big shot, sat limp on the floor. He did not even curse.

"Sister," said Boland quickly, "before we take him in, I want you to know I'd never have done that without your help."

"What would I ever have done without yours?"

"You mustn't worry," he said. "I fixed it for your brother. Dan Logue called off the mob. Grimes is finished. You needn't fear any more."

"I care very much for my brother," she said simply. "I guess I owe you more than I know how to repay."

"There may be ways. . . ." Boland hesitated, then said quickly, "Will it be all right with you, sister—if I come around some time and try to show you?"

She smiled. Against the pallor it was a soft smile, a gentle smile, but a brave smile, with a peculiar strength in it all its own. "I guess I could learn," she said. "I'll try."

"Good," he said abruptly brusque. "Let's get him inside."

They made a sensation in the station-house. Strong hands relieved them of the inert, liquor sodden figure of the big shot. It was stretched out on a bench while they told their story.

The sergeant who had examined Grimes grunted when Boland was done. His gray cold eyes were inscrutable. "Your story's wrong in its most important detail."

Boland stared. "What detail?"

"You say he drank himself drunk?"

"He certainly is drunk!"

"He is not."

"What then?"

The sergeant said grimly: "He's dead."

A small hand alongside Boland crept into his own and clung. It was cold with the close, stunning chill of death's presence, so fortuitous, so casual, so unexpected.

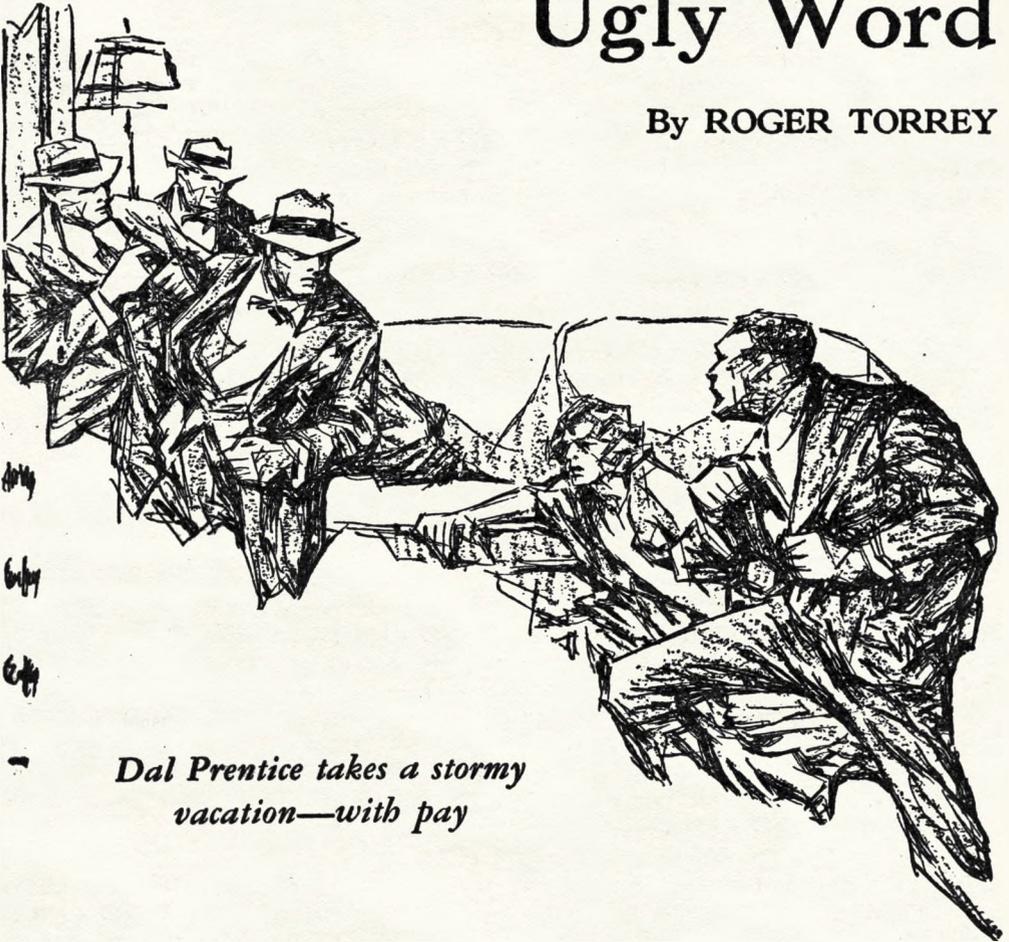
The sergeant said: "One bullet struck him. One blind shot. He must have bled internally." Then he chuckled, hard and wise. He looked at them, and the corners of the cold eyes smiled. "I guess there's no one will be very sorry. You two need scarcely worry. There's nothing in your story to question seriously, and the killing only brings an incorrigible criminal to a finish more convenient than we hoped."

The small cold hand in Boland's own grew perceptibly warmer. He could feel it, for it lent him its warmth. He looked at her, and the blue eyes were clear and unclouded. The fear was gone. He squeezed the hand, and she gave him a small, grave smile.

A man's day was ended, and the city jeered. But a new day was dawning . . . and tomorrow the city again could smile.

# Blackmail Is an Ugly Word

By ROGER TORREY



*Dal Prentice takes a stormy vacation—with pay*



AL PRENTICE snorted skeptically. He snapped: "And she didn't know this Danvers? Never seen him! And him found dead in her house!"

Captain Hallahan said slowly, patiently: "No, Dal. She knows his brother Henry Danvers, the department store man, but not Joe. Everybody in town knows Henry or of him, but Joe's been away and just got back."

Prentice insisted: "But before he went away?"

"She couldn't. Joe hasn't been here for at least ten years and she hasn't been here that long. That's out." Hallahan slewed his chair around, spoke to the man across the desk. "Ain't that right, Commissioner?"

Police Commissioner Richards was small, slight. His thin face looked worn and tired. He told Prentice: "My sister has no idea who the man was." His voice sounded worried and he kept rubbing his hand over the sparse white stubble on his chin.

Prentice narrowed his eyes, looked sullen. "Now listen! Her story is that

she opened the closet door and this strange guy fell out at her, deader than hell. And that she doesn't know him. Or never did. It's phoney, I tell you. Who parked him there? Why? How does *she* rate a stiff?"

Hallahan broke in: "My Gawd! If we knew! You're supposed to be a smart copper, you tell us. He must've been planted there. That's all I can figure."

"Planted! They'd have dumped him on the street or a side road. I want to know, why plant a stiff on her?"

Hallahan shrugged.

Prentice said stubbornly: "Listen, Richards! I'm supposed to be taken off the detail and work on this. I'm supposed to hush-hush what I dig up. When this heel is found in your sister's house you kept it quiet and you can keep it covered from here on. I know that. Now why am I supposed to go on with it? What's the angle? Why not leave it drop? The papers have it the body was found in an alley, a block from there. She's in the clear, so why the quiet stuff? Is this a secret?"

The Commissioner avoided Prentice's eyes. He said weakly: "It's murder. We have a duty. I only thought it would do no harm to move the body and save myself . . . e-r-r . . . my sister, the unpleasantness."

"It didn't. He wasn't killed there or there'd been more blood. But why wasn't he left where he was killed?"

"I don't know." Richards added almost with a whine: "I was up all night seeing that it was kept quiet."

Hallahan grunted: "Me too!" The look he gave Richards was faintly derisive.

Prentice said: "Oh hell!" in a disgusted voice. "Put it another way. Unless you open up, what've I got to go on? This?" He leaned to the desk, tapped a blunt finger on a telegram. "All this says is that Joe Danvers served three years for burglary while armed, in Folsom, and that he lives in San Francisco. Or lived. I'm supposed to go up there and find out why he was put

in your sister's house after he got knocked off. I don't even know whether this sanctimonious brother of his knew whether he was in the racket. Not that it probably has a damn' thing to do with it."

Hallahan commented: "Now Dal! It's hardly likely he did. He'd know we'd dig up Joe's record if he had one. He'd be acting worried instead of so almighty righteous. When he identified the body he acted surprised because we didn't have the killers in jail."

"Maybe." Prentice looked doubtful. "And maybe he figures people would talk about him if he didn't make a fuss. He's that way. It's a break he ain't wise where the body *was* found."

Richards said in a worried voice: "Now Lieutenant, with the help my letters will give you, I am depending on you to keep this matter secret. That is, whatever you discover that might link my sister with this man. As far as the other men in your department are concerned, you are just having a vacation."

Prentice scowled, got to his feet. "It'll be a honey of a vacation."

Hallahan glanced at Richards' compressed lips, said soothingly: "The Commissioner's paying your expenses out of his own pocket and sending you up there. Go ahead and do the best you can. You ought to feel flattered that you're the man he picked."

Prentice snapped: "Flattered hell!" and stormed out of the office.



**H**ENRY DANVERS owned Magna City's leading department store . . . was probably the leading man . . . and was noted for his lavish contributions to prohibition funds, and for a lack of these same contributions to more charitable organizations. He was cordially disliked by his fellow citizens. His secretary was cast in the same mold and had the same apparent dislike of Prentice, which bothered the detective not in

the least, as he entered the reception room, sailed his shabby hat negligently along the hard bench, reserved for those with the courage to wait for Danvers, and inquired: "Is the big man in? You ask him, honey."

Honey was at least fifty. She knew Prentice from his having solicited money for the Police Widows and Orphans Fund and sniffed audibly. "Mr. Danvers is in conference but I'll take your name in, Mr. e-r-r. . . ."

"Prentice is the name, baby. You know it just as well as I do. What you doing tonight?"

Miss Clark sailed majestically past the chuckling Prentice and into Danvers' office, to return in a moment and admit that Mr. Danvers would see Lieutenant Prentice. Her manner implied that Mr. Danvers was making an error.

Danvers' office was as spare and dry as he was himself. A plain desk, kept scrupulously clean and almost bare, and three straight-backed chairs, served to remind the visitor that it was a business office . . . strictly business. Prentice was as business-like.

"I've found, Mr. Danvers, that your brother Joe has spent the last several years in San Francisco. I'm in charge of the investigation into his death. I've called to ask you if you have any information that might be of help to me on this."

Danvers looked up from his desk in apparent surprise; then his pale eyes flickered away. "San Francisco! Are you sure? Joe had never led me to believe he had lived there."

"Where did he say he lived?"

Danvers' thin cheeks flushed . . . his voice was evasive. "My brother, Lieutenant, was a very—" he hesitated—"a very secretive man. To be frank, he never mentioned where he had lived before this visit to me."

Prentice said bluntly: "Well, that's where he lived and that's where I'm going tonight. He hadn't been here long enough to get anybody mad enough at

him to knock him off. Only two weeks, wasn't it?"

"Yes. Almost exactly." Danvers drummed on his desk with nervous fingers and looked out the window to avoid Prentice's stare. "Lieutenant, I have a feeling that possibly Joe was mixed with a bad element up there." He coughed, seemed to hunt for words. "He was always . . . wild. I would appreciate it . . . in case anything is discovered . . . if you would . . . well. . . ." He coughed again and added quickly: "I mean of course if it has no bearing on the case."

Prentice caught his glance, stared at him with hard eyes. He said: "You mean hush things up? Why should I?" in a raspy voice.

Danvers stammered: "Well . . . e-r-r I would be willing to . . . u-h-h . . . that is . . . a nominal sum. To represent me. You know."

"How much?"

"A hundred dollars."

Prentice stood up and Danvers said hastily: "Two hundred."

Prentice took a step to the desk. A big man, he had tremendous shoulders and the slender Danvers flinched as he leaned over, pounding the desk for emphasis. "Listen you! Keep your lousy two hundred dollars. Two hundred dollars!" He made a derisive exclamation. "If I find out anything about this brother of yours I'll broadcast it. See!" He walked away from the desk, away from the cowering Danvers, wheeled and came back. "This brother of yours had been three years in stir. In Folsom. It's worth more than two C's for me to forget *that*."

Danvers raised an arm in front of his face. From this cover he stuttered: "Lieutenant! It . . . it isn't that. I didn't mean. . . ."

Prentice snapped out: "To hell with you!"

He started out, but turned back when Danvers called to him.

Danvers wore a placating smile. He said hurriedly: "You misunderstood me,

Lieutenant. I didn't mean that I wanted to buy your silence. I want to retain you."

"I'm no private shamus. Hire one."

"Would you be interested in making a thousand dollars and that without interfering with your duty?"

The smile that Danvers meant to be ingratiating was a grimace.

"No. There's a stinger in it or you wouldn't be so big-hearted. Nerts to you."

Prentice turned his back again.

"And I'll pay a reasonable sum for your expenses."

Prentice swung around and Danvers jerked back in his chair. Prentice grunted: "I won't bite you! What's all this about?"

"Joe was my brother and I feel very bitter about his death. I want you to avenge his murder."

"I'm no avenger, I'm a policeman." He stared sourly at Danvers. "Go on with the yarn. What's the grand and expenses for? Make it a good one while you're at it. . . . I'm not going to listen long."

"Really, Lieutenant, I want you to find the men that killed Joe."

"I'm working on it. What's the grand for? Spit it out."

"Call it a bonus." Danvers hesitated. "And of course, to look out for my interests." He seemed to take courage, went on. "It just happens that I know Joe had money. As I am the sole heir I am interested in this and . . . well . . . Joe had no money in the local banks and I think it likely you may discover where this is. I believe this will be cash and I would like any personal property of his."

"If he didn't leave a will this will have to go through the courts."

Danvers coughed. "Well . . . e-r-r . . . I thought. . ."

"I get you. Hand it to you and save time." Prentice blinked his eyes, flung out: "Why in hell don't you come right out and say it? You want me to find his dough . . . not his killer. And what

I find turn over to you instead of the D. A. Isn't that it?"

Danvers tried hard to match Prentice's straight stare, but failed. His glance dropped, and he fumbled with a paper on the desk.

"You'll look into this for me then, Lieutenant?"

Prentice grinned. "Oh sure! I'll do it. Keep an eye out for the dough. Sure!"

Danvers had regained his composure. He said coldly: "That's only incidental of course. You understand, the main thing is to find the men that robbed him of life. I feel that with your police connections you will do this before any private detective I might hire could function."

"And find the dough quicker. You're not kidding me, if you are yourself. Okey! You've hired a boy."

Prentice's eyes were hard as he stalked past the crusty Miss Clark without a glance at her. Greed was a fault with which he was very familiar, but greed about money left by a murdered brother was too far over the border-line for his approval.



**I**N San Francisco, Prentice made immediate contact with Larry Sullivan of the Homicide Squad. Sullivan was red-faced, beefy, with as many years of police work behind him as had Prentice. Both men reversed the principle of a suspect being innocent until proved guilty. Both men honestly believed a rubber hose, judiciously wielded, would insure a confession in shorter time than any later method; and both backed conviction with action. Neither held any brief for criminals, yet were not averse to profiting from them in any way that did not involve the covering of any serious crime. They were fast friends.

Prentice met him in the Central Station, said: "Lo, Larry! I came to

see you. I'd buy a drink if you knew a place."

"Big-hearted, huh!"

"It's business."

Sullivan said: "Come on!" and led the way to a nearby speake. Once seated at a table, he asked: "What's the beef?"

"Danvers. The yegg that got himself killed in my town."

Sullivan pursed his lips.

"All I want to know is, Sully, who he run around with and the rest of it. You knew him?"

"Too well."

"Yeah!"

"He's been working for a grease-ball named Cicco here. He was one of many."

"Who's Cicco?"

"He owns the *Club Italiano* here. Bad boy."

"Got a tough bunch, huh?"

"Just this tough," Sullivan said slowly. "We've had 'em up half a dozen times and we couldn't get a witness to appear against 'em. There was one, and we picked him out of the bay the same day he was supposed to crack to the grand jury. Tough isn't a strong enough word for these boys." He picked his words carefully. "If you get into a jam, shoot first. The department'll back you up." He added with sudden heat: "Yes, and by — they'll give you a medal if you shoot straight."

"Nice pipples, I can see that. What I want to know most is what gal did this Danvers go for most of the time. She might be sore enough to talk a little and that'll do for a start."

"I can tell you that. The one that got the most play, the only one that'd know a damn' thing, works for Cicco in this *Club*. They'll spot you before you get within ten feet of the door as a copper, so that won't do you no good."

"If you can get me a card I can tell 'em I'm selling insurance or some stall like that."

Sullivan said: "Nerts!" derisively. "What about them flat feet? You spell

six feet of copper to anybody that looks at you."

"You get me the card. I got an idea."

"What?"

"Wait and see if it works." Prentice grinned. "If I look that fly I may get over."



HE *Club Italiano* made a specialty of Italian dinners and the drinking that usually accompanied them. A little dance-floor always jammed; a floor show always risqué; and a crew of waiters apparently recruited from murderers' row at the State Prison, made it a good place from which to stay away. It was very popular. Cicco was the owner, though not the nominal one.

Prentice sat by himself at one of the little tables against the wall, well away from the dance-floor, drinking Scotch he had thoughtfully brought with him and paying the waiter two dollars a bottle for twenty-cent ginger ale. The floor show closed with a flash; the girls bowed off and were shortly circulating through the crowd in their dual roles of hostesses. Dal was civil but inattentive to a very pretty blonde, but brightened when an older, tougher looking red-head honored him with her presence. The red-head nodded at the blonde who had flounced away to a table where her efforts at friendliness were meeting with a warmer reception, asked: "What's the matter with Alice? Did she get fresh with you?"

"That was the trouble." Prentice smiled genially. "She didn't. I'm no gentleman and blondes don't click, sister."

"How are you on carrot-tops?" The red-head smiled nicely. Prentice was spending money and a girl on percentage couldn't pick and choose.

"My weakness. Sit down, honey, and I'll buy a drink."

"Make it short. I gotta work tiil two and that's four hours yet."

"And then what? Do I meet you?"

"Say! You work too fast." She looked at him suspiciously. "What's the idea?"

Prentice covered. He hiccupped and said: "I told you red-heads were my weakness, honey. Didn't mean no harm. I'm a stranger in town and you know how it is. Gets lonesome when you don't know anybody."

She considered. He looked like a free spender and they were scarce, yet he had an indefinable air of knowing more than he should that made her vaguely suspicious. She beckoned the waiter, whispered out of the side of her mouth: "Give me my checks on two bottles of fizz. D'ya know this guy?"

The waiter cast an eye at Prentice who was shakingly pouring a drink. "He's a stranger to me. I pick him as a copper, but the boss let him in."

"Well, if it was a tip-over this bird wouldn't be in here spending dough." She spoke to Prentice: "Listen, honey, I got to go and put on an act. Be back as soon as it's over."

Prentice agreed effusively. "That's great, Red! It's you and me for it. We'll get along."

She hurried back to the dressing-room and there stopped to put in a call for the waiter on Prentice's table. She told him: "Listen, Angelo. There's something fly about the ump-chay. Ask the big man to check up," and hurried into her costume.

Prentice had not missed the interchange between the girl and the waiter and was not surprised when a suave dark man, dressed in tux and patent leathers, dropped into the chair vacated by the girl. The stranger looked Prentice over, noting the wrinkled gray business suit, the bulge in the left arm-pit. He asked casually: "Y' havin' a good time?"

Prentice seemed quite drunk. He answered in a thick voice. "Swell! Good music, good dinner, and bad girls." His wink was suggestive.

The suave man's smile was congenial. "That's good. We've a pretty good bunch here, all right. Service okey?"

Prentice winked elaborately again, had trouble getting his face back to normal. "So far. I brought my own but it ain' goin' t' las'."

"The waiter can fix you up all right. You're a copper, ain'tcha?"

"How ja know?"

The dark man smiled thinly, shrugged.

"You won' tell nobody I was here, will ya?"

"Hell, man, I don't even know who you are. All I know is, you had a card from Jerry Watkins and he gives us a play."

"Y' see, I met this Watkins this af'er-noon with a frien' o' mine an' he gimme this card. *He* knows who I am, all right."

"I don't."

Prentice leaned over the table, spoke confidentially. "If I tell you, will you keep it quiet? I won' make no trouble for you."

"Don't be silly! We're protected."

Prentice nodded sagely and during this nod his elbow slipped and he barely saved his face from the table. "Tha's th' way *I* work it. W'en a place pays off I leave 'em 'lone. Tha's jus' my way."

"That right?"

"Uh-huh!" He leaned closer, dropped his voice even lower. "Didja ever hear o' Mill Valley?"

"Some place in Oregon, ain't it?"

"Bes' little town in state. Sawmill town. We got twent' thousan' now, or damn' near. An' I'm . . ." He paused dramatically. "I'm Chief Police. See!"

"Is . . . that . . . right!" The dark man's voice held awe.

"Abs'lutely. Y' see why I don't wan' nobody t' know I'm here."

"I can see."

"Y' know how 'tis. Now we got a good open town. . . ." Another labored wink. ". . . *You* know . . . th' joints payin' off an' me gettin' mine

but I'm not supposed t' get out like this. You know."

"I know. You guys are all the same. All knocking down."

"S good for me. I'm makin' mine." Very confidentially. "Y' know if th' council knew 'bout me steppin' like this I'd get fired jus' like that." He made an unsuccessful attempt to snap his fingers.

"I don't doubt it. I won't give you away. What you down here for?"

"Af'er a pris'ner. This guy he . . ."

"It don't make any difference. You're here."

Prentice was acting faithfully the part of a small-town police chief he had met while going after a prisoner. He was thankful his memory was good. He said expansively: "These little towns are place t' make dough. Jus' look at me. Now I got five kids. Tha' cos's money right there. An' I'm married. See!"

"I figured you were. With the five kids."

Prentice looked injured.

"No rib. There's dough in the little towns all right. If you got a good spot, that is."

"I gotta house tha' cos' me twent' thousan', I got me nice car, an' . . ." He winked again. ". . . I got dough, too. If I keep goin' for another two years I got her made. How's 'at for money? An' I made it outta two-fifty a month."

"That's pretty good all right." The dark man dropped the subject.

Prentice stared at the floor show. "Say, ain't that red-head a honey? Wha's her name?"

"Doris Case. Nice kid." The dark man turned, glanced at the show. The red-head had just broken into her specialty dance. "I'll introduce you, Mr. e-r-r . . ."

"Daw. Chief Daw. I already met her. Will she step?"

The dark man grinned: "I wouldn't know," and Prentice, almost falling off his chair, shoved him playfully on the

shoulder, tittered: "Naw! You would'n' know. You know how it is w'en y' get out. You're . . ."

"Arlo. Johnny Arlo, Mr. Daw." He stood up. "You go ahead and have a good time. If you need more liquor, the waiter'll fix you up with some good stuff."

"Appreciate it, Mr. Arley. That's th' name, ain' it? Y' know I thought mebbe 'cause I was a law off'cer I might not be welcome in here."

"Glad to have you."

Arlo left to tell the red-head: "Your big shot's oke. He's law all right but just a dumb yokel that's on the make. If you play it right he's made to order for some dough."

"Johnny, you sure? I'd hate to get rapped."

"Forget it. His name's Daw but it ought to be John J. Sap. He broke down and told all. Take your best shot."

She nodded, said: "Well . . . a live one . . ." and shrugged into her costume for her next act.



HE *Club Italiano* floor show broke at two-twenty. At two-forty, Prentice and the red-head were in a taxi, headed up Balboa Street to her apartment. If Doris had been as wary as when she started inquiries, she might have noticed Prentice was strangely sober and oddly enough, not over amorous . . . and that he had dropped the mantle of small-town police chief. She noticed nothing, for which Prentice was duly thankful . . . the characterization having been quite a strain.

In the apartment, she said: "Wait here till I go change. Then we can step out," and retired into the dressing-room giving the wide-awake Prentice a chance to examine the fire-escape running past the window and the lock on the door.

His hunch that trouble was near at hand was confirmed when, almost simul-

taneous with her appearance knuckles rapped on the door and someone said: "Doris! Open up!"

She looked at Prentice questioningly.

He nodded, and she obeyed and Arlo walked in, flanked by two other men. Prentice, at the same time the girl opened the door, stepped sidewise until the trio at the door were at his left and possibly ten feet in front.

Arlo stopped just inside the door, reached back without turning and closed it. He said: "Jerry come in right after you left."

Prentice said questioningly: "Jerry!" and with a rising inflection: "Jerry who?" He seemed puzzled, spoke in a thick voice.

Arlo had a thin smile on his face. He said: "Don't stall! Jerry Watkins, the fella you had a card from. He knew you, he said."

"Oh, sure. Th' guy I met this afternoon." Prentice cursed himself for not telling Watkins and Sullivan his plan—for not telling Watkins to keep quiet about him being from Magna City. But that was Prentice all over. He had thought his plan would work, and that seemed enough to him.

"Yeah! The heel that give this dick Sullivan and you his card. On the Danvers' rub-out, are you?"

Prentice's hand was inside his coat. He dropped his drunken manner, said: "What if I am!" and cleared the gun from the clip-holster under his arm.

Both of the men with Arlo were watching the hidden hand, and the girl slipped down until she crouched, white-faced, on the floor by the davenport. The man on Arlo's right dropped his hand towards his coat pocket and Prentice rapped out: "You! Easy there! You're Bull Keegan and that mugg with you is your lousy half-brother. I seen your pictures in the gallery this afternoon. You make a break and . . ."

Keegan grabbed for the gun in his pocket and Prentice shot him in the chest. The heavy bullet spun him around and, as he fell, Prentice shouted: "You,

Arlo! Get them hands up!" Arlo started to obey and the third man seized what looked like an opening and dived at Prentice's knees and Prentice side-stepped nimbly, leaned over and struck at his head, as he sprawled, with the barrel of his gun.

Arlo, overlooked for the moment, whipped a gun from under his coat and fired point-blank at Prentice just as Prentice half-stooped over the man on the floor. He missed. From this position Prentice shot back and Arlo dropped the gun, clutched at his throat with both hands, and fell on his face. His feet drummed on the floor and he made clawing motions with his hands.

Prentice struck the man on the floor a second time with the gun barrel and straightened with the gun covering the screaming girl. He walked to her, slapped her on the cheek, said: "Cut that! There's been enough noise without you going screwy. Where's your phone?"

Shocked into silence, she pointed towards the hall leading into the kitchen, and he grabbed her wrists and drew her with him, growling: "You ain't going to take a powder. Not now, you ain't."

He called Police Headquarters, laconically gave the address, said: "Best send the ambulance with the fast wagon. There's two stiffs and maybe three. And drag Sullivan out and bring him along. Yeah, Larry Sullivan." He hung up the phone and turned to the girl.

She said slowly, distinctly: "Why . . . that's . . . murder."

Prentice's voice was grim. "Yeah! And you change those clothes to something soberer and watch your step or you'll be in it. Hustle, you tramp."

Ignoring the frantic pounding on the apartment door, he followed her into the bedroom and, despite her protests, watched her stolidly while she donned a quiet dress and slipped into street shoes instead of the satin mules she was wearing. They went back into the front room just in time to open the door for the first of the police who crowded past

the excited inmates of the apartment house clustered in the hall.

Sullivan came shortly afterward, followed by a red-faced, hulking man he introduced to Prentice as Hayes, captain of the Homicide Squad. This last looked with approval at the bodies of Arlo and Keegan and not so approvingly at the second Keegan, who was beginning to regain consciousness. He grunted: "Nice work, Prentice! Sullivan was telling me you was good. Course they started it."

"Sure! Of course they did."

"What happened?"

Prentice glanced at the girl. "Well, it was like this. We was sitting here when they come in and started to rough me up. I told 'em to lay off and the big guy"—he pointed at Keegan—"pulled a gun and we started brawling. I had to shoot him and this guy." He pointed at Arlo.

"And what of this heel?"

The last of the trio was feebly trying to sit erect.

"Well, I knocked him out to keep him from shooting me." Prentice looked virtuous. "I was trying to keep the peace."

"Yeah! How you were. We can stick him on assault with intent, anyway." Hayes turned to the girl. "How about the twist? She the come-on?"

Prentice winked at him. "Hell, no. She's oke. Didn't have a thing to do with it."

Hayes spoke to the girl. "Was that the way it happened?"

She nodded, not looking at him. Her face was white and she stared straight in front of her. A thin trickle of blood coming from a bitten lip contrasted with her color.

Hayes turned back to Prentice. "Two down and one to go. You ain't got no authority in this man's town, either. I don't know what I ought to do."

Sullivan said: "I'll see he turns up at the inquest, Hayes. How's that?"

Hayes scratched his head. "Well, I guess it'll be all right." He stepped close to Prentice, whispered: "For—sake! Either get that twist primed with

the same story or lose her before the inquest. She acts like she don't believe you."

"Then you don't want to hold me?"

"Hell, no! Just be there at the inquest." He laughed. "Keep in touch with Sullivan and I'll give you the names of some more of these — when you feel like brawling again."

Prentice shook the girl by the shoulder. "Listen! Le's go. I want a drink and I want to talk to you." She assented mechanically and they pushed through the crowd in the hall and downstairs. He flagged a cab, asked the girl: "Where'll we go?" and when she made a suggestion, told the driver: "Up to the eleven hundred block on Post. We'll walk from there."



HE speakie was small and modest. Prentice stopped at the little bar, told the bartender: "Two highballs! Scotch!" and led the way to a booth.

The red-head sat down. Her voice trembled. She asked: "What was the idea in starting the shooting? It was you that started it."

"I finished it. That big heel started it when he went for a gun. Listen! I hate a hood and I don't figure to give one an even break. If it hadn't started there they'd have sanded me out on the street where I wouldn't have a chance. This Arlo was bad."

Doris said: "I wasn't married to him." Her lips quivered.

"Hell, Kid. I know you're not. You're the twist that played around with Joe Danvers. I know."

Her eyes widened. "How did you know? Did you know Joe?"

In answer he showed her his identification card.

"So *that's* why you picked me."

"Yeah! I'm after the guy that knocked off your boy friend."

"You got one, I think. Arlo was out of town, just got back today. I don't

know for sure, though. How did you know who I was?"

"Oh, hell, Red! I been all afternoon at the station, looking at pictures. I knew the Keegans, Arlo, and you and a lot more. How come you worked for Arlo if you thought he bumped your sweetie? You going to give me the dope on what that rumble was?"

The shock of seeing two men killed in front of her was beginning to tell. She started to cry, at first softly, then with big tearing sobs. The waiter came back with the drinks, looked at them curiously, and as he left the booth Prentice reached across the table, lifted the girl's head from her arms and slapped her sharply on each cheek. He snapped: "All right, tramp! You going to go dramatic on me? Wake up or I'll slap you so hard you'll wobble." He cuffed her again as she looked up at him.

She said meekly: "I got thinking about the way Arlo grabbed his neck when he fell. I'll never forget that."

"You that way about Arlo?"

"I hated him. I had to work for him because I didn't dare quit. Arlo worked for Cicco."

"So did Joe Danvers. Why did Joe get spotted?"

"I'm not sure I know."

She reached for her glass, drained it in two big gulps, and Prentice called the waiter, said: "Again on the drinks."

The waiter was nervous. He said: "Listen, Cap! We're hot here. This gal ain't goin' t' make a fuss, is she? It looks to me like a crying jag."

Prentice said nastily: "Who cares what it looks like to you? When I order a drink I want it. She's oke."

Doris made peace. "I'm all right. I'm just nervous . . . not drunk."

The waiter went dubiously back to the bar . . . kept watching them.

"All right, Kid. Start in. Why did they spot Joe?"

"I'm afraid to tell."

"Of who? Quit stalling."

"You know who. Arlo isn't the big man."

"Cicco is. I know that and all about it. It's okey by me, baby, if you don't want to talk." His voice turned ugly. "You'll go down and see if you can stand the rap on this rub-out at your spot. I'm clear. With the record those hoods have got and you being mixed with 'em, you'll get the rap. Didn't I wash you clean up there? I try and play ball with you and you start to throw curves at me. Finish that drink and we'll go to the station."

"Please! I'd tell you if I was sure it was safe. We can't talk here."

"All right then. Let's go some place else. My hotel."

A man strolled past the booth and the short hairs on Prentice's neck bristled. He whispered: "Don't look for a minute. Ain't that Cicco?"

Without turning her head Doris looked, stammered: "Gawd! That's Cicco! Oh, Gawd!"

"I thought I remembered his picture."

"Gawd! My number's up."

"Would he know about the shooting yet?"

"I know he would. He probably sent Arlo up."

Her face was dirty white, make-up standing out on her cheeks in red blotches. She was biting her lip again, stopped this and picked up the highball glass, tried to drink and the rim rattled against her teeth. She set it down empty, added: "He must've been outside my place and seen us go and tailed us."

Prentice took the gun from under his arm, broke it and filled the two empty chambers, then held the gun on his lap.

"We'd better scam then. He's looking for us, it's a cinch. Some of those people in the apartment house must've told him what happened and he'll figure you put his red-hots on the spot for me."

The waiter went by and he signaled him, asked: "You got a back way out o' this bucket?"

The waiter said: "What's the idea?" in an uneasy voice. "You could go through the kitchen, I guess."

"We don't want to see a guy is all."

"What guy? Maybe I know him. Jus' what's the angle?"

"What do *you* care? You going to show me the way out?"

"Say listen, guy! The boss is out and I'm lookin' after th' joint. Ix-nay on this running around. It looks like a rumble and we're burning up now. I'm sorry, but no dice."

He turned to go and Prentice snarled: "You ——!" and his hand, holding the gun, came up over the table. "You go out in the kitchen with us. I don't want you spilling your guts too soon. You been arguing ever since I been in here and I'm sick of it. Get me, you!"

The man looked at the steady muzzle of the big gun, gulped, stammered: "Why . . . why sure! Yes, sir! I wouldn't tell!"

"I know damn' well you won't. Now listen. I'm putting this in my pocket but it's pointed at you. You walk ahead of us to the kitchen and through it and don't look around. Get going."

They were luckily in the back booth and their passage through the kitchen was made with no disturbance, the frightened waiter leading the way until they were half-way down the alley that led to the street, where Prentice let him go. He and the girl went on and as they stepped on the sidewalk he saw a car start in front of the speake and towards them. He caught at the girl's wrist and tried to throw her to the ground but she pulled free and Prentice dropped to the ground himself, just as the machine-gun in the car turned loose.

The girl screamed shrilly once, sagged and fell in a shapeless heap, and Prentice fired twice at the speeding car. He realized his chances of a hit were nil and ran to the girl. She coughed, mumbled: "Cicco, he . . ." coughed again and was still.

Prentice heard the shrill of a police whistle, then the running steps of a patrolman, gun out and excited. Prentice was cursing, still held his gun in his hand. The uniformed man shouted: "Drop it! You're under arrest!"

Prentice stopped swearing. "Sure! I would be! A bunch of hoods gun out the gal and you arrest *me*."

"Didn't you shoot? What's the gun for? Drop it, I say."

"I shot at the car."

"Car!"

"Hell . . . yes . . . car! It passed you! You blind?"

"I saw it. Did they do the shooting?"

"Yeah! There must be half a dozen slugs in the gal here and I only shot twice at the car. Get smart."

A siren wailed at the intersection below, rubber squealed, and a squad car pulled to a halt in front of the speake. Prentice identified himself with some little trouble; the body of the girl was loaded into a following ambulance, the crowd was dispersed, and the gloomy Prentice went to his hotel to figure out another angle of approach. With Cicco knowing him, and one possible source of information closed by the death of the red-head, he figured the only thing he could do would be to wait and see what a police third-degree would sweat out of the remaining Keegan brother, but he had little hope of any result from this. Cicco's cure for talking out of turn would be too fresh in Keegan's mind. What hurt was he felt himself directly responsible for the reminder . . . namely the death of the girl.



HE had wired Commissioner Richards the hotel where he was staying and the morning brought a wire from him. It read: *New developments Stop sister arrives San Francisco in morning Stop meet your hotel.*

He had breakfast in his room, puzzled over his problem.

His first caller was Sullivan. He came up without being announced, looked at Prentice critically, and commented: "You get action, I'll say that. What really happened last night? I'm sick about that girl getting it."

"So'm I," Prentice said gloomily. "She seemed like a pretty good kid even if she was so hardboiled and mixed with that mob. Sit down and I'll buy a drink. That Cicco is a red hot for fair."

"He is that. Keegan won't say a word and we'll have to postpone the inquest on the others because he's all marked up arguing about it. A smart lawyer'd raise a lot of hell over the shape he's in."

"To hell with him! I know damn' well I could make him talk."

Sullivan's voice was regretful. "Yeah! So could I, Dal, if they'd give me a chance, but you can't give a man the works now the way you used to. The boys'll keep working on him, though, I'll say that."

Prentice lifted his glass. "Here's to crime. Going to have company this morning."

"Who?"

"Police Commissioner's sister. The one that lives where the stiff was found. I ain't seen her yet because she was sick in bed over this deal when I left. Nervous breakdown."

"How come she's coming?"

"Dunno." He tossed Sullivan the wire.

Sullivan read it thoughtfully, said: "H'm-m. New developments. If I was you I'd sit tight and wait for her."

"I am. I have to . . . nothing to go on with the girl killed. I never felt so bad in my life as I do over that girl getting the business. If I'd worked it different it might have come out all right. Give me that glass and I'll fill it."

"That's enough. It's morning, Dal, and I don't hit it before noon. Tell me, what happened last night?"

"They got wise I was phoney and figured I'd pump the gal. Will there be trouble about it?"

"Hell, no!" Sullivan laughed. "The inquest will kill the whole thing. That Arlo had more priors than he was years old, and Keegan was damn' near as bad. —! I don't blame you for feeling

tough about the gal. It gets me too."

"Cicco might even have figured she was with me on the shooting. That tommy was meant for me, too."

"He's jerry, all right. He's a smart — Well, be seein' you."

Sullivan had not been gone more than five minutes when there was another knock. Prentice, in shirtsleeves, glass in hand and expecting to see Sullivan again, went to the door . . . saw a very small, meek-looking lady who looked at him in some confusion. She asked: "You're Lieutenant Prentice?" in a voice that matched her appearance. She gave the impression that she would be more at home in the age of bustles. Her modish clothes were worn with a frightened air that confessed she didn't entirely approve of them . . . her hair, bobbed and waved, she wore as she might have worn a wig.

On Prentice admitting his identity she confessed: "I'm Miss Richards. May I talk with you?" She seemed a little embarrassed, and Prentice's appearance was excuse enough for the feeling.

Prentice came to her rescue. "Won't you come in, Miss Richards? It's perfectly all right," in a voice that was sober enough.

Plainly a little frightened at her own daring, Miss Richards entered the room and accepted the chair that Prentice tendered. He struggled into his coat, put the bottle of Scotch out of sight, and she smiled faintly at this last, said: "It's really all right. I don't disapprove of liquor. My own father . . ." She coughed.

Relieved, Prentice asked: "What has happened, Miss Richards? I got your brother's wire."

She ignored his question.

"Tell me, Lieutenant, have you made any progress?"

"Well, yes and no. Would you mind telling me just what happened? You know I wasn't able to see you and all I know is what your brother told me, and second-hand information is not so good. Have I got this straight? You opened

this closet door and he was inside?"

Her voice was very careful. "I came home late from a bridge party. Emil, the chauffeur, let me out in front of the house and took the car around to the garage in the back and I opened the door with my latchkey. I had told my maid not to wait up for me as I knew I would be late. I took off my wrap and started to hang it in the hall closet. As I opened the door the man fell out. He almost touched me as he fell. I screamed and fainted." Her voice sounded to Prentice faintly monotonous . . . as if she were reciting a story she had memorized.

He shook his head, got up from his chair and went to the window. He said absently: "And then . . ."

"Then I called Mr. Richards and he called Captain Hallahan and the captain called the officer that walks around that district and they took the body away. To some alley, I believe."

Prentice shook his head discontentedly. He asked: "Mind if I smoke?" and lit a cigarette absent-mindedly at her nod. He argued: "It don't make sense, Miss Richards. Here's a gang killing for sure. This man was a known gangster and was shot three times in the stomach. That's typical of this kind of killing. He wasn't killed in your house or there'd have been more blood. Hallahan told me that much. He was brought there, it's a cinch. Now why? Why not tell me what you're holding back?" His voice was fretful and he scowled at her.

Miss Richards stared back at him steadily. "Please tell me what has happened here."

"Plenty! And all of it bad." He told her everything that had happened, glossing over the shooting of Arlo and Keegan but enlarging broadly on the killing of the girl, Doris Case.

The recital of the girl's death moved Miss Richards greatly. Her faded eyes flashed. "You want me to understand that this girl was deliberately killed because she might possibly have given you information about Danvers?"

"Yes. And about the men who killed

him. This bunch is bad. B-a-d. The girl was really an innocent party, that's what hurts me so much."

"Why, this is atrocious! I don't see how such things can be allowed. The best thing I can do is tell you the whole story. My brother tried to shield me but I can see that will be impossible." She opened her purse and handed him a letter without further comment. It was formed from letters cut from a newspaper and pasted on cheap stationery and the envelope was unaddressed. Prentice read it curiously.

*If you want your letters back watch personals in Examiner come to San Francisco and you will be told what to do remember Danvers we mean business.*

He asked: "How did you get this?"

"It was put in my mail box, night before last."

"What's this about letters? What you were holding out on me?"

She said desperately: "Lieutenant, two years ago I went to Del Monte to spend a couple of months. I met a man there and, not even thinking of the difference in our ages, consented to marry him. I must have been out of my mind. I can't explain it, even to myself. I knew nothing of him . . . nothing."

Prentice puzzled: "I still don't see. There's no harm falling for a man if he is younger than you."

She flushed warmly.

"In my infatuation I wrote him things I shouldn't have written. A woman came to me and said she was his wife. I asked him and he admitted it and I gave them money. I really had to do it. . . ." She faltered, continued: "We were to be married and I was desperately in love and . . ." Her voice trailed away miserably, her face was crimson.

Prentice looked at the wall, away from her, thought of Commissioner Richards and whistled. He said: "We never know. I judge you wrote things in those letters you wouldn't want the world to know."

Miss Richards was twisting her hand-

kerchief and staring down at the floor. Her voice was almost inaudible as she answered: "I'm afraid I did. I was crazy."

"I begin to see a little light. Danvers was the man, huh?"

She nodded mutely.

"Did you give him the money?"

"First to Mrs. Danvers. She was a terrible woman, all hard and painted. Then to him. Then to an Italian that showed me one of the letters . . . from your description, this man Arlo. Then to Danvers again."

"What did this Mrs. Danvers look like? What color hair?"

"Red. Henna rinse."

Prentice whistled again, said: "Our Doris," under his breath. "Then you knew Danvers all the time? Why didn't your brother tell me?" He started to walk back and forth the length of the little room.

"He thought he could keep me out of it. I'm so ashamed. A married man."

"I can set your mind at rest on that. He wasn't married. This girl that was killed last night is the one that pretended to be Mrs. Danvers, I think. Though that doesn't make her death any easier to take. Did she tell you she'd sue you for stealing her husband?"

"Yes. And use my letters as evidence."

Prentice stopped in front of her.

"You say Danvers was the last to ask you for money. How much? How much had you paid before?"

"Before this last time, I had paid altogether, eight thousand. He asked for twenty thousand more and I gave him half of that the night he was killed. He gave me some of my letters."

"That's where you were instead of this bridge game, huh?"

"Yes. I met him on a road out of town. He had rented a car and I left him there and dropped in to make apologies at the party and stayed for a rubber."

"Then it was probably an hour after you left him before you got home?"

"At least two. We chatted a while at the party before I went home."

"I see. You say you gave him some ten thousand dollars for part of your letters. Why only part?"

"He said he was going to give me all of them but that he had trouble getting them and could only get part of them at a time. He said that was why he wanted the money . . . the man that had the letters suspected he was trying to return them to me . . . and that he was afraid."

Prentice said wearily: "I wish your brother had told me. Cicco had the letters, it's a cinch, and Danvers stole them back and put the slug on you for himself. Cicco rubbed him out and took the rest of them back along with the ten grand. He put him in your closet to show he wasn't fooling."

"Mr. Danvers was trying to get them back for me so I wouldn't be harmed. He had reformed and was sorry about what he had done." Miss Richards was very dignified.

Prentice looked at her in amazement.

"My Gawd! And did you believe that stuff?"

Her lips trembled. "Well . . . I . . . I wanted to." She suddenly put her head down and began sobbing and her voice was muffled by her hands. "That's why I want you to find out who killed him and punish them. He . . . he was the only man that ever . . ." She cried brokenly.

"There . . . there now. It'll be all right." He awkwardly patted her shoulder, staring over her head the while, then went into the bathroom and soaked a towel with cold water and gave it to her. "Put this over your eyes. . . . You'll feel better." He poured her a small drink, commanded: "Take this. It's medicine. It'll brace you up and we've got to plan this together."

She fumbled the whiskey glass, drank . . . and gagged. He encouraged: "That's it! You'll feel a lot better in a minute. D'you suppose Henry Danvers knew anything about this?"

She quavered: "I hope not. Maybe he did. Joe always said he had nothing to do with his brother."

"That probably means he did. When you went to Del Monte did Henry know anything of it? Could he have tipped off Joe?"

"He might have known of it. My brother and I knew him slightly."

"Did Joe come to Del Monte after you were there or was he there when you got there?"

"After. I remember that."

"Then there's your answer. Henry told Joe you had money and to make a play for you. It works out all the way around."

"I was an awful fool, I know. I should have thought of something like that."

"You were and should," Prentice said dryly. "Indeed you were a fool. And I'm a bigger one to try and get your letters back. I'll be honest and tell you that if it wasn't that I think I might get my Sunday cut at this girl-killing Cicco, I'd drop the thing here. I've had no help from you or your brother."

"I'll do anything you say. Mr. Richards and I talked it over and he said I could rely on you absolutely."

"Nice of him. Now listen! They'll have to get in touch with you through the personals in the paper and till then we'll sit tight. I can't do any good angling around because they know I'm a copper. We'll work it this way." Prentice paced the floor, planned, and gave her instructions while she sat silent except for an occasional snuffle. He ended with: "And you go downstairs and register here. When we get action we don't want to run all over town after each other and I don't think they know I'm here. All plain?"

She nodded, repeated his instructions plainly, and left.

**H**E called Sullivan at the station and when he came told him all that Miss Richards had told him and what he had decided about Henry Danvers'

connection with the case. "He was lying to me when he hired me, you can see that. Henry knew about this ten grand and thought I might get a line on it. What he wanted more than anything else was that. He didn't care who killed his brother. And Richards! He tells me nothing except to keep quiet anything I find out. He says he wants me to investigate this murder and what he wants is the letters his sister is being blackmailed with. He wouldn't come right out and say it, though."

Sullivan said: "He wanted it to be a secret," and laughed.

"And Miss Richards is worse. I honestly think she'd rather have me find the guys that killed him than get back these letters she's scared sick about. She's sure a kick. She's nuts about the — yet. In spite of him putting the slug on her for eighteen grand she's still screwy about him. She is, without question, the world's prize sap and I'm chump enough to go to bat with her against this team." He then told Sullivan about his plan which, when analyzed, was simple. When Cicco, after getting in touch with Miss Richards, went to meet her and collect the money he would demand, Prentice planned to break into Cicco's apartment and search it for the letters. If he found them he planned to wait until Cicco's return and regain the money Miss Richards would have paid him. If the letters were not found he intended to force Cicco to disclose their whereabouts.

Sullivan flatly disapproved and pointed out the various reasonable objections to the entire plan. But Prentice was obdurate. Like many big men, who are not afraid of getting hurt, he had fought or blundered his way through many difficult situations where the odds were all against him. His experience had given him confidence. Besides, once he had gone to the mental effort of thinking up a plan, he refused to be bothered further about it.

"I tell you, Sullivan," he said, to close the argument, "I've got the whole thing

lined out. I can't miss. It's a cinch."

Sullivan's smile was wintry. "Yeah! A cinch for trouble. You got more guts than I got. Ix-nay for me, starting a rumble with a red hot like this Cicco and have no more of an edge than you're figuring on. No dice. He's bad."

"I know it. It's me for it."

"Yeah! I'll be down the street in a prowler car. As long as it's just two in a car like a regular patrol, they won't get wise. I'll keep at least half a block away."

"Okey by me as long as you don't butt in and spoil my play. You'll hear the shooting if it don't work out."

"Well, I'll stand by. You phone me when the blow-off comes." He left, leaving Prentice with nothing to do except wait for the personal in the paper.



THREE days passed—days that Prentice spent teaching Miss Richards two-handed pinochle, and she consistently beat him after the first day.

He had decided the less he was on the street the safer he was and he grew genuinely fond of the little maiden lady during the enforced seclusion.

The personal, when it finally appeared, was plain. *Rich phone Capitol 2040 three Thursday*, and Prentice was at her shoulder when she called. She quavered: "This is Miss Richards. What do you want?" There was a moment's delay, then an answering voice: "Call Sutter 4927." She called this number and repeated: "This is Miss Richards." A voice said: "Yes, Miss Richards," and she asked: "What do you want?"

The answer was terse. "Money! Ten thousand in small bills. We'll give you until tomorrow at three to raise the money, then phone Capitol 2040 again. That plain?"

"Yes."

"What hotel are you in?"

"The *Stewart*, on Powell Street."

"I know where it is. You phone to-

morrow at three. And have the money ready." The phone clicked.

Prentice, as a matter of routine, had both phone numbers checked, finding the Capitol number to be a small Italian fruit stand, and the Sutter number a pay telephone in a drug-store. Cicco's tactics were plain—he would call the fruit store shortly before three and leave a number for Miss Richards to call and it would be useless to have the place watched. Miss Richards, following Prentice's instructions, got the money the next morning, and at three called the Capitol number again and was given a number on the Mission exchange to call. The orders given her were explicit. "Go out of your hotel and walk down Powell to Market. Cross to Market to the right-hand side of the street and walk towards the Ferry building. When a car stops for you, get in. Leave your hotel at exactly four. Got it?"

Her tiny voice quavered: "Yes."

"Go alone. Don't have a policeman with you or following you or the letters will go to the tabloid that's fighting the bunch that appointed your brother. With the excitement over Danvers, they'll print 'em. Remember Danvers if you don't feel like doing what you're told. Is it clear?"

She said "Yes!" again.

Prentice prompted: "Ask about the letters?"

"Will you bring the letters?"

"We'll do our part. You bring the money." The phone clicked silent.

Prentice was jubilant. "We get action at last. When you get in the car, notice the men closely—not their clothes, their faces. They'll follow you from the hotel, probably on foot, and when they see everything's all right they'll signal the pick-up car. You won't be hurt—they'll let you out as soon as they see they're not followed. Are you scared?"

"A little bit." Her chin quivered.

"I'm afraid to have you take this risk. Maybe it would be better to—"

Prentice interrupted firmly. "Now see here. It's all figured out. You do

your part and I'll do mine and don't you worry. Did that voice sound to you like it had an accent?"

"Maybe a little. It's hard to tell over a phone."

"They must have seen you at the time they killed Danvers. You notice they didn't ask you to wear a white rose or any nonsense like that." He told her again about trying to remember the men in the car, reasoning that if she were occupied in memorizing faces and voices she would not be so apt to give way to her fear. Sullivan was notified of the hour set by Cicco and Prentice edged out the side door of the hotel.

At four, he confidently rang the bell of Cicco's North Beach apartment. There was no answering click—he expected none—and after waiting a minute he rang other apartments until someone freed the automatic door release. He walked to the second floor, opened the door of Cicco's apartment with a pass key with no difficulty and stepped inside, locking the door after him.

The apartment was gaudily furnished but badly in need of a thorough cleaning. Empty glasses on a littered table, dust everywhere, and dirty clothes on the chairs and the floor. Dirty dishes in the sink completed a picture that disgusted Prentice, and he had the usual masculine indifference to disorder. The air was foul with the windows tightly closed.

He prowled through the rooms, methodically searching for the letters but keeping a wary ear cocked for the return of the rightful occupants. He was looking through the kitchen when he heard footsteps in the hall—then the sound of a key in the door. He stepped behind the door leading into the front room, gun out and ready, heard the front door open and close and a smooth voice say: "The old gal's got guts at that. She never made a whimper when I told her I'd give her the letters some other time. She must be simple, thinking she was going t' get 'em back."

Another voice, slightly accented, an-

swered: "How could we sell 'em to her again if we gave 'em back now? It don't make sense. Is there a drink left?"

The smooth voice again. "Yeah! Ice-box. But we're not going to stay. You go on home and I'll go down to the joint. We'll split the take now. You know—she might have a tail on us at that—it seems funny she never made a squawk. That looked like a police car down the street."

"We wasn't tailed. Angelo's drove cab long enough to lose any copper in the world and I was watching back all the time. We're not hot."

"Maybe not, but I want to play it safe. We'll split now."

"Okey! I'm going to get that drink."

As the man stepped into the kitchen, Prentice came clear of the door and hit him on the jaw with the barrel of his gun. He heard the crunch that meant a broken jaw . . . knew the man was out for a long time . . . and eased him to the floor as he slumped. The man in the front room heard the sound of the blow, cried out: "What's that?"

Prentice stepped into the doorway, snapped: "Only me! Don't try it!" as the man grabbed for the gun under his coat. The man slowly raised his hands to shoulder height.

"You Cicco?"

The dark man nodded sullenly. "Yeah! What's the idea?"

"Oh, just fooling around." Prentice's voice was careless. "I knew that you'd want to give me the letters you and that — on the floor out there were talking about, so I come up to give you a chance."

"What—"

Prentice hit him in the face with the gun, the muzzle striking a glancing blow on his mouth. The dark man started to slip to the floor, caught himself with an effort, and spit out blood and teeth. He mumbled something and Prentice hit him again, and he went to the floor, falling on his face. Prentice jerked him over on his back, took an automatic from the holster under his arm and sat

down to wait for his recovery, knowing the man in the kitchen would be safe for some time. The man on the floor sat up with an effort, mumbled: "——! What's the idea?" His words were indistinct, had a slight lisp from loss of front teeth.

Prentice's eyes looked like agate. "I hate arguments and it looked like you was giving me one. I want those letters."

Cicco, still sitting on the floor, considered. He said as if making a discovery: "Why, you're the heel that was with that tramp Doris. Why, sure you are."

"Right! I'm the guy that gave Arlo and that hot that was with him the works. How'd ya feel about this letter business now? I was with Doris when she got it, and *that* don't rest easy. Do I get the letters? I'd just as soon fix you right up, don't think I wouldn't."

Cicco said hastily: "——! I ain't got 'em."

"But you can get 'em."

"I swear I can't."

Prentice raised the gun.

Cicco's eyes widened. He looked past Prentice for a second and as he did, someone reached past Prentice's shoulder and struck his hand, the hand holding the gun, with a blackjack. As his paralyzed right hand loosed the gun, Prentice made a desperate grab for it with his left. He caught it, but as he spun around the sap landed solidly back of his ear, and he slumped in his chair, balanced a moment, then sagged to the floor on his side, motionless.

Cicco was still sitting down. He said: "Nice, Angelo, nice. I didn't hear the kitchen door open at all."

Angelo was short and swarthy. His nose had been broken and badly set, both ears had the formless appearance that typifies the ham fighter. He growled: "There's a prowler car parked halfway down the block and as I put the car away I seen it. I figured something was phoney and come in quiet. Who's this?"

"It's the heel that did up Arlo and

the Keegans so pretty. He's all washed up now. But we can't do him in here. Get some rope or something to tie him. When he snaps out of it, we'll walk him to the car and ride him for the bump-off. We oughta hurry."

"He must've hit Andy mighty hard. I stepped on his hand when I come in and he never made a peep. I waited on this guy the night he made the play for Doris."

"I heard him hit Andy. Then he come in and backed me up." Cicco felt of his mouth. "I never said a word to him and I los' the front of my teeth."

Angelo looked at Prentice curiously. "He's a tough-looking baby."

"He *is*, too. He's through now." Cicco got to his feet, staggered, and hurriedly sat down. "The —— hit me twice and I can't walk yet. Get that rope, will you?"

Angelo looked in the kitchen for something to tie Prentice up with and came back in the front room. His voice was complaining. "There ain't nothing here. We'll have to just watch him."

"I'll watch him all right." Cicco retrieved his gun from Prentice's pocket. "You go out and see if you can get Andy to snap out of it."

Prentice was lying on his side, knees drawn up into his stomach. Cicco leaned over and slapped him in the face. Prentice groaned slightly, drew his knees up more, and Angelo, in the kitchen, called: "Is there a drink in the place? If I can get a drink down Andy, I think he'll snap out of it."

Cicco answered: "In the ice-box," reached down and slapped Prentice again and Prentice jerked over on his back and kicked out with both feet, catching Cicco squarely in the belly. Almost with the same motion he was on his feet and reaching for his own gun on the floor. Cicco was knocked out by the force of the blow and crashed into the littered table and from there to the floor.

Angelo heard the commotion and came running in, whiskey bottle in one hand and tugging at his gun with the

other. Prentice, his back to him and stooping for the gun, heard him coming and turned and fired in one movement, but, off balance and still partially dazed by the sap, missed him and hit the whiskey bottle, spraying glass and whiskey all over the wall.

He steadied himself and lining the gun on Angelo's stomach fired again and Angelo wavered and sat down, both hands gripping his middle. Prentice took the gun from Cicco's lax hand, searched Angelo and took another from him, wobbled in the kitchen and dragged Andy into the front room. Andy was still out. He went back in the kitchen, walking steadier now, found another bottle of whiskey in the ice-box and brought this and a glass of water in the front room, sat down, took a big drink out of the bottle and looked at Angelo. He said: "All right, egg! Curtains for you unless you get to a doctor. Going to tell me things?"

Angelo groaned: "Oh ——! I got it this time."

Prentice's voice was calm. "You got a chance if you get to a hospital and get patched right now. You're going to talk or die right there on the floor with me watching you. It's your dice. You say what you want. —— sake, mugg, I put that slug high enough and far enough to one side so you *could* talk."

Angelo groaned again and muttered in Italian.

"And talk English, you heel. I didn't get that last crack."

Angelo looked at him with pain-filled eyes. "What you want to know? Get a doctor!"

"You tell me where this guy keeps his letters and you'll have a doctor in five minutes. You don't, and your number's up."

"Oh ——! Please! I talk! He's got a cache in the *Italiano*. There's a safe in the wall besides the one on the floor. All the stuff is there. Get a doctor."

"You sure?" Prentice was suspicious. "What about the combination?"

"He's got combination in—book—

pocket. Please—please get me—doc—"

Prentice went to Cicco, searched and found a leather-backed notebook. He looked through this, held it where Angelo could see. "This it?"

Angelo moaned and nodded.

Prentice said viciously: "Then I'll tell you. You got it right in the gut from a .45. You ain't got a chance. What in hell did you think I was shooting at—the moon? —— you, you'll work this blackmail and girl killing, will you!"

Angelo started mumbling in Italian. Prentice watched him sourly, listened to the mumble die in intensity, took another drink and walked to the phone on the wall. He lifted the receiver, said: "Police Station," heard footsteps in the hall, then a pounding on the door, and reached over with one hand and unlocked it, still holding the phone.

Sullivan walked in, followed by another man in plain-clothes and Prentice grunted: "Where were you when the fireworks started?" and into the phone: "Just a minute." He gave the phone to Sullivan. "It's the station. I was just going to call for the ambulance. I gave up looking for you."

Sullivan looked at the three men on the floor, spoke briefly into the phone and turned to Prentice. "Another Arlo, huh! We started as soon as the shooting did but had one hell of a time getting into the joint. Everybody was afraid to open their door. Are they dead or just playing dead?"

"Just playing." Prentice pointed at Angelo. "This grease-ball here won't be playing very long, though." He walked to where the packet of money Miss Richards had given Cicco was lying in the wreckage of the table. "I know where the letters are and I'll bet there'll be more **than** the bunch I'm looking for there. Ain't you curious?"

"Where?"

"This *Club Italiano* spot that Mr. b—— owns. I suppose we'll have to get a warrant?"

An ambulance siren sounded outside

and a police surgeon and two internes came in. The surgeon knelt by Angelo, shook his head. "Not a chance. He won't last three hours and I doubt if he comes to. What happened?"

"He played too rough and I didn't want to play."

"He won't play any more."

Angelo and the others were still unconscious as they were loaded into the ambulance and sent to the emergency hospital, with the man that was with Sullivan riding along as guard. Prentice and Sullivan watched the ambulance drive away and Sullivan suggested: "Le's go. It'll take about ten minutes for the warrant after we get to the station. Judge Thomas won't ask any questions if I tell him there's a blackmail angle . . . he's been paying off himself, unless I'm out."



MISS RICHARDS' letters were found in the wall safe at the *Club Italiano*, along with many others, all neatly enveloped and filed.

There was an odd lot of jewelry from a Market Street stick-up that Cicco had never been suspected of having had a hand in, and thirty-odd thousand dollars, in large bills. Prentice, alone with Sullivan in the office, calmly proceeded to count out eighteen thousand of this, hesitated a moment, then added another thousand. Sullivan watched him curiously but came to life with a violent: "Hey! What's the idea?" when Prentice pocketed this.

"It's for Miss Richards. She's paid this bunch of boys eighteen grand and her brother's paying the nut on this trip of mine. That's what the extra's for. I'm not trying to chise it . . . you can be with me when I give it to her."

"But man! You can't do that! That'll have to be prorated among the people that've paid off. You just can't take it like this."

Prentice faced him with a snarl. "I can't do it! By God, I *am* doing

it! Now listen! I break the damn' case and I'm going to see the old girl gets out alive on it. What the hell! Who knows about the dough but you and me and if it hadn't been for the old gal you'd still have this bunch in your hair."

Sullivan considered, slowly grinned. "Well, there's something in that. What about the beef Cicco'll put up?"

"To hell with him! I'm the one to beef. You coming in before I had a chance to work him over. You're going to put me in the cell with him and give me a break before I leave town. To hell with him! Who'll believe him?"

"I could pretend I never saw this."

"You never saw a thing then. Let's see if there's anything but letters in the old gal's envelope. I'll give 'em to her. and I bet she goes screwy."

The first letter in the packet proved to be from Henry Danvers to Joe Danvers and advised Joe that a certain Miss Richards would be at the *Del Monte Hotel* and that she was the one they had talked of. It was dated approximately a month before the first of Miss Richards' letters to Joe. Sullivan looked at it and whistled. "He was in on the frame and they kept this for proof so's they could keep him in line."

Prentice's face was grim. "I've had him picked as a wrong one all the time. He's going to pay me that grand for looking after his interests, as he puts it, and then I'm going to give this letter to Richards and see what he'll do with it."

"He won't do one damn' thing. They never do. He'll shut up and thank heaven his sister's out of it. You see."

"Well, it makes me a cinch to collect the grand he promised me. I can blackmail on my own side, now."

"You can, all right." Sullivan grinned. "And you will, I'll bet. More power to you."

They left, to take the money and letters to Miss Richards. She was very grateful. After Sullivan left she turned to Prentice.

"They—my brother told me that you were a very hard man, Mr. Prentice, and I can't see how you could be otherwise, with the work you have to do and the terrible men you have to deal with; and you certainly give such an impression. But I have discovered something which I do not believe they even suspect. That hardness, which is very real in trouble, is only a surface hardness over a very noble, self-sacrificing, generous heart. At least, it has been that way to a helpless little old lady who has been sorely in need of just that sort of friend."

Dal blushed all over the place, until he managed to think of an excuse to leave and stumbled out the door.

**P**RENTICE was back in Magna City a month later, being forced to wait and testify in the state's case against Cicco, Keegan, and the broken-jawed Andy. All three men got long sentences, though the killing of the girl, Doris Case, could not be proven. The stolen jewelry on top of the conclusive evidence of blackmail was sufficient to put them away for almost as long a time as even the vindictive Prentice thought proper. Cicco complained bitterly about the shortage of money found in the safe, but having no proof as to the actual amount this had amounted to nothing.

After reporting to the Commissioner, Prentice went to Danvers' office and was announced by the acidulous Miss Clark. Danvers rose to meet him, said: "I trust, Lieutenant, you have carried your quest to a successful conclusion."

Prentice grunted and sat down. "Well, that depends on what you call success. I got the hoods that killed your brother all right. I killed three of them and the other three got twenty years. How's that?"

"Then of course you found the money my unfortunate brother left?"

Prentice looked at him blankly. "I'm sorry, Mr. Danvers, to have to be the one to tell you this. Your brother was a

blackmailer, and any money he had was obtained in that way."

Danvers coughed. "Blackmail's an ugly word. Joe may have done things . . . things he shouldn't have done, but the money he left had nothing to do with that."

"I don't agree. The people he robbed have a moral right to every dime."

"But not a legal right. If they care to make a claim and the court upholds them, of course I'll have nothing more to say."

"You knowing they wouldn't do a thing on account of scandal. That's a good stall." He added bluntly: "I don't make a damn' bit of difference anyway. I didn't find any dough but I found his killers and I'm after my money. The agreement was a thousand dollars an' expenses and I spent another two hundred."

"Can you prove that you got the killers?"

"The men now in jail testified that a man named Arlo did the actual shooting. And that Arlo was accompanied by a man named Keegan. I killed them both in self-defense.

"And this man Arlo was the man that killed poor Joe?"

"I said so, didn't I? Arlo held the gun but Joe committed suicide when he put the cross on the heels he was with. He was a dirty blackmailer and he got just what was coming to him." He stood up. "Now that you know that, what about my dough?"

"We had a tacit understanding, Lieutenant, that you were to recover the money that Joe left. I must refuse to pay you unless that money is found. You have nothing to show there was any agreement between us."

Prentice said slowly: "Then you refuse to pay me?"

"I certainly do."

Prentice took a step towards the desk and Danvers pressed the bell for his secretary. He glared back at Prentice and when she came in, said: "Please stay here for a moment, Miss Clark. I

want you for a witness in case this man gets violent." To Prentice. "You come in here with a wild story about my poor dead brother and expect money for it. I will not pay you a cent."

Prentice walked to the door, turned back and faced Danvers and Miss Clark. He said: "Okey by me! You do as you think best and so will I. I'll be seeing you."

He reached in his pocket and got the letter Henry had written Joe about Miss Richards. Holding it so Danvers could see and identify it, he asked: "Did you have the girl friend there write this or was it personal? I found a bunch of stuff like this but I forgot to tell you."

"Why—what's—what's that?"

"A letter. I thought the D. A. might be interested so I saved it out." He turned again.

Danvers' face paled. He cried out: "Wait! Miss Clark, I won't need you." Prentice stood to one side as she left the room and Danvers asked: "Where'd that—"

"I held it out, I said. I had a hunch you wouldn't pay off."

Danvers' face was white and sweating. He said: "Why this is blackmail," in a sick voice.

Prentice mimicked: "Blackmail's an ugly word." He waved the letter. "I bet the D. A.'ll think so too. I want my money."

"There's nothing I can do but pay it. I can't have a scandal." He pressed the button again, told Miss Clark: "Make Lieutenant Prentice a check for a thousand dollars and bring it to me to sign."

Prentice said: "Twelve hundred," softly.

"I mean twelve hundred, Miss Clark."

She brought the check in, Danvers signed it, but Prentice waved it back. He said: "And I want it certified. I like to be a nuisance."

He waited in silence for the half hour she was gone, studied the check when it came and slipped it into his vest pocket. Danvers said: "That'll all, then!" Prentice jerked his thumb at the door, said: "Send the gal out," and Danvers said: "That's all, Miss Clark." He watched her leave, said nervously: "May I have the letter now?"

Prentice stood up, crossed to the desk. He put his hand in his pocket, Danvers extended his own hand across the desk for the letter, and Prentice jerked him by the lapel of his coat half across the desk. He brought his fist up from his pocket viciously, then twice more. Danvers slipped down on the desk, blood running from a broken nose, and Prentice looked down at him, said softly: "That is the only sort of medicine that will do a blackmailer any good," and went out.

Miss Clark was at her desk. She looked up and he stopped by her, blowing on his knuckles. He reached in his pocket, took out the letter, told her: "Tell Mr. Danvers that I'll return this note he wrote me the next time I come up for a donation to the Widows and Orphans Fund. Tell him he'd better hold out a nice bit for them, too." He went to the door, threw back over his shoulder: "You'd best wait until he's back to work, though. He'll be home for a few days, he was telling me."

He ambled towards the elevator, said under his breath: "Until they patch up that schnozzle of his anyway." He looked very happy.

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# The Murder Push

By ERLE STANLEY GARDNER



*Murder drives Ed Jenkins,  
The Phantom Crook,  
again into the open*



I CRUMPLED the newspaper and slammed it to the floor of the office.

It was a hell of a write-up.

Afternoon sun streamed through the windows and made long splotches of golden color on the carpet. The noise of the traffic rumbled in through the open windows and filtered through the door on which was stenciled *Bob Sabin—Private Detective*.

If the police had ever taken my fingerprints they'd have found that Bob

Sabin was really Ed Jenkins, The Phantom Crook, wanted by the police of a dozen States. They thought they had the fingerprints of Bob Sabin on file—they didn't have. They had a set that I'd switched on them by a clever substitution.

After a few minutes, I reached over and picked up the crumpled newspaper. I smoothed it out on the desk. There was no use getting sore about it. I might as well see the details whatever they were.

Headlines screamed: *PHANTOM CROOK MAKES RICH HAUL*. Down below, in slightly smaller head-

lines: *Rich Banker Gives Life Seeking to Save Prized Gems.*

There were a flock of pictures, a diagram with the usual black maltese cross marking the spot where the body was found. There were dotted lines showing the course taken by the escaped murderer.

It was just another one of those things.

The police are human, just the same as anyone else. They like to have a fall guy to pass the buck to. As a fall guy, I was their best bet.

Years ago I had been wanted by the police of a dozen States and I had earned the nickname of "The Phantom Crook." Then I reformed. I paid the score. Influential friends managed to make restitutions, secure pardons, get prosecutions dismissed. My record was clean. I married the girl I loved, and thought that I could settle down to live as any other citizen lived.

I was mistaken. The underworld reached up with its slimy tentacles to engulf me. The police watched me with passive hostility. Slowly, a bit at a time, I was forced back into the shadows. My wife went with me. Then gangsters gunned her out when they were trying to get me. After that I didn't care.

I was duck soup for the police. Whenever a crime was committed, and the police couldn't find a clue, they blamed me for it. Up at Police Headquarters they've got a file marked "Mode of Operation." In that file are listed the modes of operation of every known crook who has worked the city. My own distinctive method of working was that I left no clues behind, and slipped through the fingers of the police whenever the net tightened. Therefore, according to the police, whenever a criminal left no clues, and made an escape, the crime must have been committed by Ed Jenkins, The Phantom Crook.

They had been trying to catch me for years. Every day that passed added to

the list of crimes that they had placed to my credit.

So far as I was concerned, I didn't give a damn.

I had gradually built up this secondary character of Bob Sabin, the private detective. I had a few clients. They were invariably astounded by my knowledge of the underworld and the results that I got for them. I didn't look like Ed Jenkins, The Phantom Crook. The police had files showing my photographs, measurements and fingerprints. The measurements weren't sufficiently startling to attract attention. The fingerprints were my one weak point.

Don't ever let anyone kid you a disguise won't work. Every once in a while some police official comes out and claims it won't. He's talking through his hat, and he knows it.

Of course, if a man puts on a bunch of false whiskers and makes himself look conspicuous, trying to change his appearance, he's going to get caught. But if a man does the little things, like changing the color of his hair, consciously holding one eye in a perpetual squint, changing the lines of his face by holding his chin and his mouth at a slightly different angle, and, above all, keeps his walk from being too distinctive, he's going to fool almost anyone.

More men are recognized because of some peculiarity of their walk or some habitual gesture with their hands, than for any other reason. I could write a book about disguises, and about the psychology of recognition. Most people are startlingly unobservant. There's not one man in a thousand who remembers all of his friend's features. Instead of that, his mind follows the course of least resistance, and picks out the most distinctive thing about the appearance of his various friends as something to tie to.

If a man's got a long, pointed nose his friends never even see the rest of his features. Get a plastic surgeon to change that nose and then see if they

recognize him. If a man's got a peculiar way of holding his head a little on one side, the subconscious minds of all of his acquaintances register recollection when they see a head that's carried in that particular way.

I'm not a professor of psychology; I'm a crook, and a good one. I've studied in the hard school of experience.

My record's clean now. So far as any actual crime is concerned, I've got a clean slate. So far as the police record is concerned, I've got a list of crimes for which I'm wanted that's as long as your arm. That's okey by me. I simply don't care.



UT this murder rap was a different thing.

I spread the newspaper out and read the account in detail.

There was the usual bunch of hooey; the usual editorial about the flagrant criminal activities; the usual backhanded slam at the police department that permitted murderers to roam the city at will.

I skipped all that stuff and tried to concentrate on facts.

Frank Pemberton was a millionaire banker. He had a collection of emeralds that he valued very highly. He had a few diamonds and one string of pearls, but the emeralds were the pride of his collection. He was a widower. His married sister, Elizabeth Ann Black, who was very wealthy in her own name, lived with him. There was also a niece, the daughter of another sister. This niece was, apparently, about twenty-five years of age and took a good picture. She had pretty legs, and the newspaper had figured the legs would look good on the front page. All the newspapers had put her there.

The captions varied from: *Ethel May, Niece of the Murdered Man, Sobbing Out Her Grief*, to *Niece of Murdered Man Gives Times Reporter Version of Shooting*.

There was a picture in every paper; they all showed legs.

Reading the newspaper accounts, I gathered that Ethel May was engaged to a young chap by the name of Sidney Porter. Porter had been to a show with Ethel May. They had returned and were seated in a car in the garage when they heard someone prowling about the upper floor. Ethel May had thought it was her aunt, Elizabeth Ann Black, and had gone up to see if there was something the older woman had wanted. She had found a window that had been jimmied open, and caught a glimpse of a strange man, with a flashlight, tiptoeing down the corridor.

She had telephoned the police, doing it quietly, so that the intruder didn't know the alarm had been sent in. The police had broadcast the alarm. A radio car had picked it up and made a quick run to the house. Ethel May had gone back to the car where Sidney Porter was sitting, and told him what she had done. Porter immediately wanted to show his prowess and courage. He had taken a wrench, climbed out of the car and started up the stairs. Ethel May had been ordered to remain in the automobile, but she had followed along behind.

If Porter hadn't started on his amateur sleuthing the police would probably have caught the murderer red-handed. As it was, Porter made some noise on the stairs. The burglar had become alarmed. There was the sound of a shot, then a figure running down the stairs. The figure wore a mask. Porter had tried to stop the man and taken a swing with his wrench. He'd missed, and the man had punched him in the eye, giving him a beautiful "shanty." Elizabeth Ann Black, coming to the door of her bedroom, had seen the man as he ran along the lower corridor.

By that time the police had jumped from the radio car. One man went to the front of the house, one to the back. They tried to sew the place up. Porter was running down the stairs, scream-

ing for the police. Ethel May was in the kitchen at the head of the stairs that went down to the garage. Elizabeth Ann Black was rushing down the dimly lit corridor, shouting for the man to stop.

And he vanished in thin air—just like that!

Somehow, he managed to slip out of the house and disappear. He eluded everyone. The police came in and found Frank Pemberton shot once through the head. The man had died instantly. There was a gun lying on the floor by his side. There were no fingerprints on the gun. The man who had used the gun had worn gloves.

The safe where Pemberton kept his jewels was open and the jewels gone. Evidently Pemberton had opened the safe himself. The police figured the murderer had pushed the gun up against Pemberton's head and made him open the safe, on threat of death. Then, when the burglar heard the sound of someone coming up the stairs, he had lost his head and pulled the trigger.

So far there wasn't a great deal to fasten the crime on Ed Jenkins, The Phantom Crook; only the fact that the crook seemed to have had that peculiar knack, which had been attributed to Ed Jenkins, of vanishing into thin air when the net tightened around him.

But leave it to the police.

Elizabeth Ann Black had positively identified photographs of Edward Jenkins, The Phantom Crook, as being those of the man she had seen in the corridor.

Get that! It's typical.

The police want to make out a case. They take some hysterical woman who got a vague glimpse of a man's figure, show her photographs, tell her that the photographs are those of the man she saw, and get her to believe it. Then they announce a positive identification to the press. They keep showing the woman the photographs, keep "stiffening" her in her identification. By the time the man is captured, they take her to view

him in a cell. By that time she knows him, just as though he had been an old friend. She's seen his photograph once or twice a day—a photograph that's taken from both front view and profile.

The man wore a mask when the crime was committed. The police show her the man first without a mask, then they put a mask on him and have him stand in the same posture as the criminal stood when the crime was committed. They ask the woman if it's the same man.

Naturally she says yes.

Then the district attorney's office takes it over. By the time the case comes up for trial, a couple of cagey deputy district attorneys have played on the woman's vanity.

"Now listen, Mrs. So-and-so," they say, "when you get on the witness stand, a brow-beating criminal attorney who is in cahoots with the criminal class is going to try to make you appear ridiculous in front of the jury and the newspapers. You're not going to let him get away with it, are you?"

Naturally, she says that of course he isn't going to get away with it.

Then the deputy district attorney tells her about all of the questions the attorney for the defense will ask, the manner in which he will try to break down her identification, and intimate to her that if she backs up the least bit it will be considered as an indication of intellectual weakness on her part, and will expose her to ridicule.

Important, puffy dowagers don't like to be exposed to ridicule.

That was what I was up against. I knew it. The other cases the police had against me were cases that might be licked, because they weren't murders. During all of the time I'd operated, either as a private detective or as a crook, I'd never carried a gun. I figure that a gun is a dangerous weapon. Not dangerous to the man who's in front of it so much as to the man who carries it. Therefore, in the old days the police had never linked my name with crimes

of violence. But now there was a gun in this case, and it was murder.

I sat there in the office listening to the rumbling undertone of the traffic and trying to figure out what I'd do.

I opened a drawer in the desk and took out a set of photographs showing front view and profile. There were fingerprints underneath them.

These were photographs of Ed Jenkins, The Phantom Crook. Every so often the police issued a bulletin on him. I had them mailed to me, because, as a private detective, I was on the police mailing list, under an arrangement which had recently been made through the Citizens' Committee.

I took the pictures and went over to the mirror.

I didn't look very much like them.

I twisted my mouth down, put on a black wig, darkened my eyelids and lashes. I didn't bring out my natural face. I merely worked over my Sabin appearance to look like the pictures.

I was Edward Gordon Jenkins once more, The Phantom Crook, wanted for hundreds of crimes; and now to those crimes had been added the crime of murder.

I crossed to the office door, locked it, sat in a chair, smoked, and waited for it to get dark.

I had an idea that I might be able to beat the police to it. It was a crazy thing to do and a desperate thing to do, but it looked like the only way. I knew that Elizabeth Ann Black was sincere. That is, she couldn't be bribed. She was wealthy in her own name.

The newspapers didn't feature her picture as much as they did the picture of Ethel May. The reason for that was that she was fat and didn't have legs that were worth looking at. One of the papers published her face, however, and I studied it. I gathered she was just a puffy, important dowager who would be as putty in the hands of the police, once they turned the works loose on her.

I didn't like that murder rap idea.

I opened a package of cigarettes, tilted back in the chair and waited for it to get dark.



THE house where Frank Pemberton had been killed was one of those gloomy affairs of staid respectability. It was a rambling structure three stories high, with a garage on one side that was built in as part of the house.

The police had done their stuff and cleared out. Pemberton's funeral was to be held from a downtown undertaking parlor. The newspapers had gathered the material for follow-ups. They already had sufficient photographs. The bereaved family was, therefore, being left comparatively alone in its grief.

I decided on a window near the back of the house. The shadows were more intense there, and I wanted to be away from the prying eyes of any curious watchman.

The window was a cinch.

Inside was warm darkness; darkness that held the smell of human occupancy. There was, moreover, that peculiar musty odor which comes when windows are closed and people tiptoe around with hushed voices and drawn faces. In short, the house reeked of death.

I took a flashlight from my pocket and padded gently down the corridor.

I knew what I was up against if I got caught; I didn't propose to get cornered.

There was light coming from under a door on the lower floor, to the left of a flight of wide stairs that swept upward in a graceful arc of broad banisters. The house had been well and carefully designed.

I listened at the door for a moment, waiting to hear the sound of voices.

There were no voices.

I turned the knob of the door with my gloved hand and entered the room.

It was a library. Two women were

seated in huge overstuffed chairs, with footstools in front of them. The older woman had been crying .

I coughed, and they looked up.

The eyes of Elizabeth Ann Black were red-rimmed. Her face was swollen with grief. Her lips twisted in flabby contortions of sorrow, even as she stared at me without comprehension or recognition.

The other woman was Ethel May.

I recognized her from her legs. She stared at me with eyes that showed no trace of grief, but indicated a quick, intelligent mind, and a personality which was always poised. She was the type of woman who wouldn't let anything rattle her; neither would she let anyone dominate her character. If it became necessary, she would resort to falsehoods, and when she did, she would make a good job of it.

I took off my hat, being careful not to dislodge the wig, and smiled at them.

"Pardon me if I seem to intrude," I said.

Elizabeth Ann Black brought her feet to the floor and stared at me in incredulous dismay.

"Well, I never," she said, "heard of such unmitigated impertinence! I presume that you're another newspaper reporter. . . ."

I shook my head.

"Pardon me," I said. "I am not a newspaper reporter. I have intruded upon your grief because the visit is important."

I took pains, in speaking, to make my voice high and nervous, holding my vocal cords tightly contracted so as to make my voice sound strained and artificial.

"What is it you want?" asked Ethel May.

"I simply wanted Mrs. Black to look at me," I said.

The red-rimmed eyes stared at me in incredulous wonder.

"I don't know what is the meaning of this," she said, "but I am going to call the police."

I took a step towards her and stopped.

"I can assure you, madame," I said, "it won't be necessary. Don't you recognize me?"

"I never saw you in my life," she said. "And what's more, I don't care to have you . . ."

I walked forward, to the library table. She ceased talking as she saw the fixed purpose in my motions.

"That," I said, "is all I wanted you to say. It happens that I am Edward Jenkins, the person whom you falsely accused of murder. In order that there may be no doubt, I am leaving my fingerprints. You can show them to the police and tell them, if you will please, that you were mistaken in your identification."

I took a piece of paper from my pocket, also an inked pad. I touched my fingertips to the pad and placed them on the paper.

I heard Ethel May gasp.

That should have disposed of the matter. I had beaten the police to it. The woman had said I was a stranger to her and that she'd never seen me before in her life. My fingerprints would prove that I was, in reality, the man whom the police sought. The morning newspapers could contain a proper explanation. It was, of course, highly dramatic, but then The Phantom Crook had always been highly dramatic.

I was unprepared for that which followed.

The red-rimmed eyes of the dowager fastened upon me with sparkling suspicion.

"Oh," she said, "so *that's* who you are, is it? I realize now that you're speaking the truth."

I turned towards her.

"Yes," she said, "you're the one—the man who murdered my brother."

"Madame," I said, "you have never seen me before in your life. You admitted as much but a few seconds ago."

"I was excited," she said. "Now that I see your face more clearly it looks familiar."

I'll say this much for Ethel May—she was fair.

"Look here, Aunt Black," she said, "you mustn't make statements like that. I don't think this man is the one you saw. His shoulders are less heavy, more clean-cut. He hasn't the complexion, and . . ."

"I tell you," screamed Elizabeth Ann Black, "he's the murderer! I recognize him now, positively."

"No, you don't, aunty; you recognize him because the police showed you photographs of him, and he looks like the photographs. But if you'll think back you'll remember that the man who murdered Uncle Frank didn't look like him at all, and . . ."

The woman jumped to her feet and stood staring at me, big-eyed, big-breasted, big-hipped, flabby-jowled. Her face was dead white, her lips were twitching.

She opened her lips until I could see the pink gullet, and started to scream. "Help! Murder!! Police!!!" she screamed.

There have been two times in my life when I wanted to strike a woman. This was one of the times. I stared at her for a minute, then turned on my heel and stalked from the room.

The woman was still screaming. Ethel May was staring at me with puzzled speculation. As I put my gloved hand on the door, I heard running steps in the corridor. As I opened the door, a man almost ran into my arms. He was about my own size and build, dark in complexion, well-knit in body. His right eye was bulging with startled surprise. His left had been almost closed by a terrific blow. It was swollen and discolored. The skin about it was turning that peculiar bluish-green which is characteristic of the after effects of a punch delivered with terrific force and going straight to its mark.

"I take it," I told him, "that you're Sidney Porter."

He stood staring at me, nodding and

gulping, his eye wide and startled.

Back of me, the woman was screaming at the top of her lungs, "Help! Police!! It's The Phantom Crook! It's the murderer!! It's Ed Jenkins!"

There was no need to carry on any conversation, no use to try and get a fair deal. The woman was bellowing her identification at the top of her lungs.

The man was in my way.

I hit him on the chin.

Both women were screaming as I jumped over the man's body and ran down the corridor. I slipped out of the window, down into the patch of shadows, and melted into the background of night.

My trip had been a failure. I was as bad off as when I started.

At the greatest speed consistent with the care necessary to be certain that I wasn't observed or followed, I made my way back to my office and resumed the appearance and role of Bob Sabin, private detective.



RANG up Carl Ladue, the local manager of the detective agency that represented most of the insurance companies.

"Bob Sabin speaking," I told him.

"What can I do for you, Sabin?"

"You folks handling the insurance on the Pemberton stuff?"

"Yes."

"Going to get it back?"

He laughed.

"We always get things back," he said. "We give our clients a one hundred per cent service."

"All right," I told him. "I might be of some assistance."

His voice became hard and wary at once.

"Just how do you mean?" he asked.

"I've got a theory," I told him.

I could hear him breathing over the telephone while he hesitated. Then he

spoke slowly, as though he were deliberating the words carefully.

"Look here, Bob," he said, "you've got a reputation for uncanny accuracy when it comes to getting the low-down on what's going on in the underworld."

"Thanks," I told him.

"Now," he said, "if you've got anything, and are willing to give us a tip. I can probably tuck you in somewhere along the line with the insurance company."

"It isn't that," I told him. "It isn't a tip I can give; it's something I've got to work on."

"What do you want?"

"I want to team up with you."

"That isn't going to be so easy."

"Okay," I told him, "if you don't want to get the gems back that's all right."

I could hear the sound of his breathing once more.

"Suppose I call you back?" he said.

"Okay by me."

"What do you want in the line of expenses?"

"Nothing. I'll stand my own expenses. I want a reward if we get the gems back."

"What sort of reward?"

"That's up to you. How much is in it for you?"

"The gems," he said, "were insured for thirty-five thousand dollars."

"That much?" I asked.

"That much," he told me.

"Isn't that rather high?"

"I think it is. The insurance was taken out a while ago."

I waited, to see what else he had to say.

"Perhaps the company will replace the stones," he said. "They've got good descriptions and there's no reason why they couldn't be replaced at considerably less than the amount of the insurance."

I still kept silent.

Abruptly, he said: "Come on over and we'll work it out some way."

"Not some way," I told him. "We're

going to work it out right here and now."

"Suppose you take twenty-five per cent of whatever reward we get, if the stones are recovered?"

"Make it fifty," I said, "and we'll start working right now."

He thought for a moment and then started wheedling.

"Come on, Bob, be a sport. Tell us what you know, and . . ."

"Fifty per cent," I said.

"I'll call you back," he told me, and hung up.

I had my cigarette about half smoked when the telephone rang and I heard Ladue's voice. "All right, Bob," he said, "you've made a sale. When do we start?"

I looked at my watch.

"How about running over to the house right now?"

"You mean Pemberton's house?"

"Yes."

"Got something lined up over there?"

"I may have, but I want to look over the ground pretty carefully."

"All right," he said, "let's go. I'll drive by for you."

"No," I told him, "I'll drive by for you. If anybody walks home, it'll be you."

I hung up the telephone, got in my roadster, drove past Ladue's office and picked him up.

He tried to pump me all the way out to the house, trying to find out what I had in mind.

Of course, I was taking chances. I'd gone back into the character of Bob Sabin, the private detective. I'd taken off my wig, and my hair was bleached, so that I was a blond instead of dark. I'd manipulated my face so that I had the characteristic squint of the right eye which made people instinctively figure "Bob Sabin," whenever they saw the squint. Moreover, I was holding my head differently, the chin a little farther forward, the head tilted back.

But the main thing I wanted was to have Ladue introduce me as one of the

detectives who was working with him on the case. I figured that Ladue must have gone over the ground pretty thoroughly before this, and they'd accept him as a matter of course. After all the detectives and newspaper reporters they'd been seeing in the last day or two, an extra detective wouldn't attract very much attention.

We drove up to the house, and I hung back until Ladue walked up and pushed against the doorbell.

Elizabeth Ann Black let us in, and Ladue made a perfunctory introduction. She paid about as much attention to it or to me as she would have to a hatless youth soliciting her subscription to one of the women's magazines, so that he could "work his way through college."

"Mr. Sabin is working with me on the case," said Ladue. "We want to take a look at the room where the tragedy occurred."

"It's high time that you detectives did *something* about it," she said. "I was never so mortified, terrified and humiliated in my life as when that crook had the audacity to break into the house and try to threaten me."

"He threatened you, did he?" asked Ladue.

"Yes. He intimated that if I didn't change my testimony to the police I'd be found dead in my bed."

"He's a desperate man," Ladue told her, without interest, trying to terminate the conversation so we could get to work.

She followed us up the stairs, talking as she wheezed along behind us. Ladue knew the ground pretty thoroughly by this time and took me into the room where the shooting had occurred.

I looked the place over. It was a room that Pemberton had used as a den.

There was an easy chair, a table that had quite a few papers littered about on it, a waste basket, some ashtrays, a couch, a small table with a portable typewriter, some trophies on the wall, golf clubs in the corner, a couple of

tennis rackets in presses, and a bookcase filled with de luxe editions.

There was a wall safe, and it was open.

"That the place where he kept the stones?" I asked.

Ladue nodded.

I looked down at the carpet, which was stained with red, a red which had dried into a stiff encrustation on the cloth.

"Hasn't been cleaned up at all, eh?" I asked.

"No. The police have ordered them to keep it exactly the way it is for a while."

"They've made photographs?"

"Of course."

I looked at the places where white and black powder had been dusted over various articles of furniture.

"Find any fingerprints?" I asked.

"Nothing strange."

"None on the gun?"

"None on the gun. He used gloves."

"They think that Pemberton himself opened the safe?"

"Yes, it looked that way."

"They say that Jenkins is pretty clever with boxes," I ventured. "Is there a possibility that he could have done it?"

"I don't think so," Ladue said. "It was a pretty good box, and the whole hook-up looks as though Pemberton had opened it."

I looked over on the desk at the litter of papers.

"They've gone through all these?"

"Oh, I suppose so," he said casually.

"There's nothing in them that's going to make any difference. You know how those things are. The police go through everything as a matter of routine, but you know, and I know, what happened. Somebody knew about those gems and wanted them. He held a gun on Pemberton and forced Pemberton to open the safe. After that, he either heard the radio car coming, or heard Sidney Porter coming up the stairs and knew he was going to have to smoke his

way out. He smoked his way out. That's all there is to it."

"Jenkins never carried a gun, did he?" I asked.

"Never so far," he said. "But this looks like a dead open-and-shut case. And believe you me, my boy, the cops are going to get him *this* time."

"Well, how about the gems?"

"That's a different story," said Ladue. "You know the reputation Jenkins has got, as well as I do. They may get him, but they're going to have a hard time getting those stones. They've got to out-think him."

I kept staring down at the desk. With my forefinger nail I traced a burnt shallow groove in the desk.

"Cigarette," Ladue said.

"Naturally," I told him. "But it's the only burn on the desk."

"Yes," he said. "The cigarette was there when the police came in."

"What happened to it?" I asked.

"Oh," he said, "it's around here some place. It was just the end of a cigarette."

"Evidently he was smoking, then, at the time of the murder."

"Sure, it's the only scar on the desk, and I doubt if he did it carelessly. Probably he was pretty much excited. He simply set it down here on the desk."

I opened drawers and found a carton of Marlboro cigarettes, the kind that had dead-white ivory tips. I looked again at the burn.

"About two-thirds the length of a cigarette," I said.

"Yes."

"He must have just started to smoke, then, when the murderer came in."



SHADOW crossed the floor, and I looked up to see Ethel May standing in the door of the room, looking at us.

"Miss May, may I present Mr. Sabin, who is working with me on the case?" said Ladue.

I kept my head down while I muttered the usual formula.

She simply glanced at me, then turned her eyes to Ladue and kept them there.

"Just what is it you're after?" she said.

"Just looking around," said Ladue easily, "in order to make sure that there's nothing we've overlooked."

"It's about your fifth trip," she reminded him.

"I may be here several times again," he told her directly, and without any attempt to explain or apologize.

She bit her lip for a moment, and then said: "I don't think it was Jenkins—the man that did the murder."

"Why not?" asked Ladue, glancing significantly at me, then turning to stare steadily at her.

"I don't know," she said. "It's just a hunch."

"Perhaps, Ladue," I said, "I might ask a few questions."

She seemed to pay no attention to the interruption, but kept her eyes fastened on Ladue.

"Did your uncle," I asked, "smoke Marlboro cigarettes. The kind with these white tips of stiff paper?"

"Yes, the ivory-tipped ones. He liked those."

"I see," I said. "He never smoked anything else?"

"No. That is, he never bought anything else. Sometimes, he'd smoke another cigarette if someone gave him one, but he never smoked any other brand. That is, he never smoked any other brand for five years, to my knowledge."

"Can you tell me," I asked, "just where you were when the murder was committed?"

"That was all in the papers," she said in a low monotone, "but I don't mind telling it again. Mr. Porter and I had been out to a show. We returned and were sitting in the car in the garage, talking. I heard someone moving around upstairs and thought that it was

aunty. I went up to see. It wasn't she. I just got a glimpse of a figure going down the corridor. I thought I could see the outline of a mask over the upper part of the head."

"You saw the man's face, then?" I asked.

"No," she said, "only his back."

"Did he have a flashlight?"

"Yes. Then I telephoned to the radio police. That is, I telephoned to the police and they notified the radio car."

"And then?" I asked.

"Then," she said, "I went back and sat down in the automobile with Sidney."

"You told him what you'd seen?"

"Naturally. I was excited. I wanted him to keep down out of the way."

"What did he do?"

"He took a piece of iron—a wrench, I think—and said that he was going up to protect my uncle. He said that the police would be here any minute, but that if there was a burglar in the house almost anything might happen."

"You pleaded with him not to go?"

"Yes, but he went anyway, and I followed along behind as far as the kitchen and then waited there."

"Do you know where your aunt was at the time?"

"Yes, down in her room on the lower floor. It's a sort of sitting-room."

"All right, what happened?"

"She heard steps, opened the door and came out and she saw a masked man going up the stairs."

"Did she have a good look at him?"

"I'm sure I don't know. She thinks she did. Then she went back into the room, took down her extension telephone and rang Police Headquarters."

"Then what happened?"

"Then there was a shot and aunty ran out."

"What did she see?"

"She heard steps coming down the stairs, I think. I don't think she saw the man who did the shooting that time. She was pretty much excited. I think

she has a hazy recollection of someone coming down the stairs in a hurry. She screamed and lost her head. I think she went back in the room and opened the window and screamed. Then she ran out and came down the corridor."

"Where was Sidney Porter at that time?"

"He was coming down the corridor, too. Or had already gone down the corridor, chasing the man who had fired the shot, but he didn't see him after he struck the lower floor. He ran into me in the kitchen."

I looked over at Ladue.

"I'd like very much to find out what happened to the cigarette that was on the table," I told him.

"Nothing," he said.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"There was just a pile of ashes there, that's all. I got in here shortly after the police did. The insurance company had me on the job at once. The body was still there on the floor. The cigarette had burned all the way through. The ashes were lying there at the time in a light cylinder. But just the air currents that were made by people moving around the room caused them to collapse."

I looked over at Ethel May.

"I think," I said, "that I'd like to ask Sidney Porter a few questions. Do you know where I can find him?"

"He's here in the house," she said.

"Could you take me to him?"

She hesitated.

"He's answered lots of questions already," she said.

"I know that," I told her, "but one more won't make any difference."

"Very well," she said coldly.

"Want me to go with you?" asked Ladue.

"Sure," I told him, "I'd like to have you perform the introduction."

I didn't tell him just how much I wanted him to perform the introduction. I wanted to make certain that everyone who met me, met me under such circumstances that they wouldn't

question my identity, nor the reason for my being in the house.



SIDNEY PORTER was sitting in the living-room. Ladue made the introductions.

I shook hands and looked at the man's left eye. It was a stove-pipe black, mixed in with that peculiar greenish shade which is characteristic of bad eyes. The eye itself was completely bloodshot.

"I want to ask you a few questions," I told him.

I saw his right eye suddenly glitter with some emotion; I couldn't be certain what it was. For a moment I thought that it was, perhaps, recollection. I saw that he was looking at me with a scowl, the perplexed scowl that one gets when he is trying to recall some circumstance which is just on the borderline of his memory.

"I've just been talking with Ethel May about what happened," I said. "You know her story, I presume?"

"I've heard her tell it on several occasions," he said, "and read it in the newspaper. What was it you wanted to know about it, Mr. Sabin?"

"I wanted to know," I told him, "if it checks with your recollection of what happened."

"Absolutely," he said.

"Even to the smallest detail?"

"Even to the smallest detail."

I turned to Ethel May.

"Was there anyone else in the house," I asked, "besides the three of you?"

"That's all," she said. "Just the three of us, and Uncle Frank."

"According to the newspaper," I told her, "you're the beneficiary under his will."

She stared at me with steady-eyed appraisal for what must have been two or three seconds, and then nodded her head.

"Yes," she said. "Does it make any difference?"

"I don't know," I told her, "whether it does or not—yet."

She said nothing, but stood there, waiting.

"As I understand it," I said, "you were seated in the car—talking?"

She lowered her eyes.

"Well," she said, "talking and . . . er . . . sitting there."

"And you heard steps above you in the kitchen, thought it was your aunt and went upstairs to find out?"

"Yes."

"Did you make any particular noise going upstairs?"

"I don't think so. No more than usual."

"Did you try to be more quiet than usual?"

"No."

"You went upstairs in just the ordinary manner, opened the door in the kitchen, saw the figure of the masked man, telephoned the police and then went back down to the garage?"

"Yes."

"Why don't you tell the truth?" I asked.

She stood staring at me with a face that was drained of color. Sidney Porter gave a quick exclamation and took two swift steps towards me, but stopped when he caught the expression in my eyes.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Yesterday night," I said, "Ed Jenkins, The Phantom Crook, is reported to have come here and tried to shake your aunt's identification."

"Yes," she said, in a thin, tremulous voice.

"And couldn't do so."

"That's right."

"You don't think that your aunt's identification amounts to much?"

"I didn't say that."

"You did say that you didn't think the man who called last night was the man you had seen in the house."

"That my aunt had seen," she corrected.

"That you had seen," I told her.

She bit her lip.

"Now," I said, "if Jenkins had come in that window and had crossed the kitchen, and you had telephoned when he was in the corridor, and by the time the police came, he was up in your uncle's den and had forced your uncle to open the safe, it would have meant that he didn't waste any time, wouldn't it?"

"Yes."

"All right," I said. "Now, in view of the fact that he worked with such swift rapidity, it's apparent that he knew exactly where he was going and what he was going to do. So, from the time he climbed in the window on the side of the kitchen and crossed the kitchen to the corridor, it would have taken him only a few seconds."

She said nothing.

"But," I said, "if you had heard steps in the kitchen and had taken the time to get out of the automobile, go up the steps from the garage, and open the door of the kitchen, it would have taken you a lot longer than it would have taken the man who got in the window to have crossed the kitchen and disappear in the corridor."

She still remained silent.

"Moreover," I said, "under those circumstances you couldn't have been positive that it wasn't Jenkins you saw."

She bit her lip and looked about her like a trapped animal.

Sidney Porter started to say something.

"Keep out of this," I said.

Ethel May suddenly started talking in a thin, toneless voice.

"You're right," she said, "we weren't in the car. Sidney was in my room. I didn't want aunty to know it. We are engaged. Aunty had gone to bed. Sidney drove into the garage with me and then came through the kitchen and into my bedroom. He stayed for half an hour or so. We had a drink. Then he went upstairs to see my uncle. He wanted to get my uncle's consent to an immediate marriage. Uncle had in-

sisted we wait for at least a year. As Sidney started up the stairs he heard the shot in uncle's den. He ran towards the den and met the masked figure coming out. The man struck him. Sidney tried to hold him, but couldn't."

"And you saw the masked figure running down the stairs?" I asked. "That's true, isn't it?"

"Yes," she said, "I came face to face with him in the corridor. He struck me. I think I was unconscious for a little while—just a minute. Sidney says I was lying on the floor as he ran past, chasing the man. But the man vanished somehow."

I looked over at Ladue.

"Now," I said, "we're getting somewhere. I think you'd better get the police out and go into this thing again."

Ladue gave a low whistle.

"Come on," I said, and took him by the arm.

He was frowning thoughtfully.

Midway down the corridor he turned to me.

"Look here," he said, "it only affects the good name of a woman; it doesn't change the circumstances a damn' bit."

"It makes a little difference about the escape business," I said.

"No," he said, "not a bit. The radio officers were at the front and back doors. Jenkins slipped through their fingers."

I laughed at him.

"Go ahead and call the police," I told him.

I looked at my wrist-watch. It was six minutes past eleven o'clock. Ladue went to the telephone.



**B**EFORE an open door, Ethel May was talking in a rapid tone of voice to her aunt, Elizabeth Ann Black. The dowager was having hysterics about the good name of the family being smeared in the tabloid press, and a lot of that stuff.

I went back towards the room where we had left Sidney Porter.

There were telephone lines from an extension telephone running along the molding over the door. I took out my knife and cut the wires. Then I walked in.

I looked at my wrist-watch. It was just seven and one-half minutes past eleven.

Porter looked at me with anguish on his face, with his good eye showing lugubrious concern.

"I wish we could fix this thing up in some way," he said.

"Perhaps we can," I told him.

He inched over closer towards me.

"I didn't get the name when Ladue made the introduction," he said.

"Sabin," I told him—"Bob Sabin."

"A private detective?" he asked.

"Yes," I told him.

"Got one of your cards?"

I handed him one of my cards.

"I know it's unusual," he told me, "but I'd like to look at your credentials."

I showed him my badge, my permit, and glanced at my watch again. It was then nine minutes past eleven.

"I still think we could fix this up some way," he said.

"All right," I told him. "What are your ideas?"

"You know what it would mean to Ethel," he said. "No one gives a girl the breaks these days. She'd be pilloried by the press. They'd smear her name all over the front page of the tabloids."

"Just because you were in her room?" I asked.

"You know what I mean," he said.

"Just because I was in her room."

I waited.

He turned and faced me abruptly.

"All right," he said. "You've got me in a corner. I've got you in a corner. It happens that I have rather an uncanny memory for faces. I'm just wondering if it's occurred to you that if I should let the police know that Bob Sa-

bin, the private detective, was in reality Ed Jenkins, The Phantom Crook, you'd find yourself in one hell of a hole."

"I've even beat you to it on that one," I said. "I thought I saw recognition in your eye when I came in."

"All right," he told me. "You know what you've got to do. You've got five minutes for a headstart. At the end of that time I'm going to notify the police. I'm going to give you that much of a break. I wasn't going to do this, but you've forced my hand."

I smiled and shook my head.

He took down the receiver from the telephone.

"Police headquarters," he said.

He waited a minute and then frowned as he jiggled the hook back and forth.

"It does not matter," I told him.

"I've already had them called. They'll be here any minute."

I heard steps coming down the corridor.

I looked at my wrist-watch. It was thirteen minutes past eleven.

I turned my back on Porter and walked from the room.

Carl Ladue was coming down the corridor. The dowager was hanging on his arm, pleading with him with flabby lips, her glassy eyes staring up into his face.

Ladue saw me and beckoned to me.

"Let's go into a huddle on this thing, Sabin," he said. "There's something about it I don't like."

"Okey," I told him. "Where do we talk?"

"Any place," he said.

"All right," I said. "Let's go up to the room where Pemberton was killed."

Ladue looked at me curiously, but I was already walking up the stairs. I was the first into the room. Ladue and Mrs. Black followed me. Ethel May remained downstairs.

"Now," said Ladue, "let's get down to brass tacks on this thing, Sabin. This is a family with an established social position. We're not going to do any good if we simply stir up a scandal. The

girl got panic-stricken and told a lie. She should have told the truth. It wouldn't have been so bad. However, having once told her story, if she now backs up and changes it, it's going to look like hell."

"That's all right," I told him, "there's nothing you can do about it. The facts have got to come out."

"Why?" he said. "It doesn't seem to me that they affect the situation very much."

I grinned at him.

"It does," I told him, "when you figure that Sidney Porter was the one who murdered Frank Pemberton."

He stared at me as though I had gone suddenly crazy.

"You mean he murdered him for his jewels?"

"Well," I said, "he was going to marry Ethel May. She was the sole heiress of Frank Pemberton. Pemberton wouldn't let his niece get married before a year. By killing Pemberton he fixed it so Ethel May would get the property right away, and he could marry her right away. It would help him out of his financial jam."

Ladue stared at me. Mrs. Black was staring at me, open mouth, too flabbergasted to say a word.

"What the devil are you talking about?" he asked.

"Figure it out," I said. "You've never stopped to put two and two together. Sidney Porter was in a jam for money. He knew that Pemberton had a valuable jewel collection. He decided that he would rob Pemberton. He told Ethel May he was going up to talk with her uncle and try and get her uncle's consent to an early marriage. What he intended to do was to put on a mask, go up and hold the uncle up, take the gems, then raise a commotion, sock himself in the eye as though he'd been in a struggle, put the mask in his pocket, raise an alarm and claim that the culprit had slipped through his fingers and gone out of a window."

"He left Ethel May, telling her that

he was going up to see her uncle. He adjusted his mask in the corridor and took a flashlight. It happened that Mrs. Black chanced to see him. He knew that he'd been seen and that Mrs. Black was notifying the police. He may have even arranged things so that she did see him, figuring that he wanted the police to know there was an intruder in the house.

"He ran up the stairs to Pemberton's study. Just before he went in, he slipped off the mask and put it in his pocket. He walked into the study. Pemberton had the safe open, just as Porter thought he might. Porter gave Pemberton a cigarette, and lit one himself. When the cigarettes were going, Porter suddenly whipped out a gun, stepped over to the safe and pulled out the stones. Pemberton was thunderstruck. The cigarette dropped from his fingers to the table. Porter turned around, blew off the top of Pemberton's head, stuck the stones in his pocket, socked himself in the eye, adjusted the mask, ran down the stairs, so as to register with the women, knocked out Ethel May, ran to the window, put his mask in his pocket, and started making a hullo about the crook who had escaped."

Ladue stared at me as though I had gone crazy.

"Where's your proof?" he asked.

"There was no one else in the house," I said. "It's a cinch that Pemberton wouldn't have smoked a cigarette that was given to him by a masked man. The fact that he lit a cigarette and started to smoke it shows that the person who had given him the cigarette was someone with whom he was friendly. The fact that it wasn't a Marlboro ivory-tipped cigarette shows that it was one that had been given him from the case of some friend who had called on him. The only person that could have done that was Sidney Porter."

"How do you know he wasn't smoking a Marlboro cigarette?" asked Ladue.

"Because that cigarette would have burned to the ivory tip and then gone out.

"The fact that the cigarette burned itself entirely up shows that there wasn't any tip on it. Therefore, it must have been another brand."

Ladue stared at me.

"And Sidney Porter wanted those gems bad enough to commit a murder for them?" he asked incredulously.

I laughed.

"Be your age," I told him. "Frank Pemberton wouldn't let his niece marry Porter for at least a year. Moreover, the niece was Pemberton's sole beneficiary. By killing Pemberton, Porter made it so he could marry Ethel May at once, and his wife would then be the heiress to the huge Pemberton fortune.

"There's another thing," I told him. "I have a dim recollection of Porter having been mixed-up in some affair, not so many years ago. I haven't checked on this, and of course there's been no reason before why you should have. You might do it now."

Ladue blinked his eyes.

"By ——!" he said, "there may be something to it! I'm going down and see Porter."

Elizabeth Ann Black came suddenly awake and clung to his arm.

"Lies!" she screamed. "A pack of lies! They're going to get the good name of the family . . ."

He pushed her to one side and ran down the stairs. I looked at my watch.

The police had had time to get there.

There was a shot from the lower floor, another shot, then I heard the sound of running feet in the corridor. A police whistle shrilled from the front of the house. A door crashed open. There were three rapid shots, and then the roar of a riot gun. A body fell to the floor with a thud.

I looked over at Elizabeth Ann Black.

"Madame," I said, "the next time you make a mistake in identity don't be so damned positive about it."

I ran to the door and started down the stairs.

There were police in the hall, milling around something that lay on the floor. Carl Ladue was halfway up the stairs. His face was drained of color. There was blood welling from a wound in his shoulder. In his left hand he held a chamois-skin bag.

"By ——! Sabin!" he said, "you called the turn. Called it from soup to nuts!"

I remained up at the head of the stairs. I could either run down the corridor and out the back door, or go on down the stairs and mingle with the police.

"What happened to Porter?" I asked.

"He took a shot at me, when I tried to stop him, and then went crazy, I guess. He's shot," said Ladue, and swayed slightly.

"Dead?" I asked.

"Dead," he said.

I walked on towards him, then, down the steps towards the police.



# The Wrong Face

By H. SHENVALE

Story  
From  
Our



“Narrowest  
Escape”  
Contest

*“I swear and affirm that this story is true in every particular, excepting that the names of the parties involved have been changed.”*

Signed H. SHENVALE.

**A**LTHOUGH my home is in Virginia, I am not a stranger to the Windy City. I lived there for many years and know it “blindfolded” as they say. And I hasten to assert that it is not my desire to re-open the thing or to throw suspicion upon anyone; so far as I am concerned the affair is ended and no one has anything to fear from me.

It happened in 1925. State Street was crowded with Christmas shoppers about five p. m. as I left the telegraph office where I worked and headed for the *Harmony Café*, on State, for supper. I was in no hurry, for it was Thursday night and every Thursday night I attended the vaudeville show at the Rialto, which is located at the corner of State and Van Buren, with a small space for a United Cigar Store at the actual corner itself. So I took my time

and when I walked down the steps into the *Harmony* it was nearly six p. m.

Shortly after seven o'clock I entered the Rialto and left about 9:30 p. m. I lived east of Michigan Avenue on Ontario Street, but after buying some cigarettes at the United, I walked west on Van Buren, intending to drop into the telegraph office before going home, and was on the north side of the street. Reaching about the middle of the block, I stepped out to the edge of the sidewalk to avoid a group of noisy young men outside a poolroom entrance.

Automobiles were parked end to end along the curb. One had the front side door open and in passing I almost had to touch it. I was about to go on when a voice hailed me quietly.

“’Lo there!”

I turned and looked into the car, which was a touring car with all cur-

tains closely drawn, and saw a young fellow sitting behind the wheel. He grinned. I looked as surprised as I felt, for I did not know him. He said something in a low voice, still smiling, and not understanding him, I leaned inside the car for him to repeat it. The next moment I was frozen! In the rear seat sat three others and one leaned quickly forward with an automatic pointed at my head.

"Step lively!" he snapped. "Hop in!"

All sorts of thoughts rushed into my mind and I was terrified. I had not the slightest idea what it was all about, I was a perfectly law-abiding citizen. Was it a joke? I looked hard at the men in the rear seat but could not make them out, and they became impatient. With all my fear, I managed a calm appearance and stood there leaning inside the car wondering what to do next. Almost touching me were people rushing by bound homeward, yet I dared make no outcry with that pistol at my head. What did I do? I got in, of course, and the car backed away from the curb and went west on Van Buren until it made a turn south somewhere west of the Loop.

The men in the car said little while the car made many turns until I gave up trying to figure what direction we were going. Finally, one of the men in the rear seat barked at the young driver:

"Nix, Jim. Head for Steve's."

"Aw, hell!" growled the driver. "Let's hit it for the sticks an' get it over with. We got him, ain't we?"

One of the men in the rear seat backed him up, saying we should hit it for the "sticks." An argument followed, the car slowed up, the man with the gun poked in my back insisted that we head for Steve's.

By this time it had dawned on me that the twisting and turning of the car was not to fool me at all, but to fool any followers! The fact that they spoke names freely, argued about where they were going, was proof to me that

I was supposed to know them. I realized in a hazy way that I was in real danger and the talk of hitting it for the sticks evidently meant nothing less than taking me for a ride!

"Listen," I started.

"Shut up!" snapped the man with the gun. "Now, guys, we're goin' to Steve's. Steve wants to know something . . . an' this guy can spill it."

I refrain from giving details as to what they wanted to know for it might be too specific. Anyway, he won out and the car headed in a new direction, evidently for Steve's.

By this time I was pretty sure I was in the hands of killers and my fear increased. Finally we stopped in a wide, dark alley and I was forced along until we entered what appeared to be a dark warehouse but I was amazed at what it contained; thirty or more men in a well-lighted large room, smoking and lounging around, taking no heed whatever of us as we hurried on through them to a door which opened into a small, comfortably furnished office where sat the man referred to as Steve.

The man with the gun spoke.

"Jim and Jake wanted to take this guy right out an' croak him, Steve. We better get goin'. Got to be down in — by mornin'."

Then followed fifteen minutes of terror for me. Steve demanded certain dope, as he called it, and I couldn't give it because I did not know it. I asked who I was supposed to be, but they laughed at me, and I was struck over the head several times with the barrel of a gun. The pain made me lose my head, but I was quickly subdued and listened, panting, to Steve's orders.

"Take him over to Mary's. She'll get the dope! She's mad fit to kill. Go ahead; show her this mugg."

They half carried me out to the car and we were off again, with Jim cursing impatiently at the wheel. His venom was taken out on me, for to me he turned as he spat out his oaths and promised a painful execution out in the

sticks after Mary got through with me.

My senses cleared somewhat on this ride and I guessed we were going north, but was not sure. The man with the gun said little, seemed detached, but the other three talked freely with lurid oaths discussing the foolishness of delaying my ride when it could have been already finished and they could have been on their way to — a town south of Chicago.

We pulled up in front of a fine apartment house, and warning me to try no funny business, they pushed me out. Jim went ahead, one man on each side of me and one bringing up the rear. We entered the vestibule of the apartment house and Jim pushed a button and held his ear to the speaking tube. A faint voice answered, and he put his mouth to the tube and said briefly: "The boys." The door was opened from above and we entered and walked up to a third-floor apartment where we were greeted by a young good-looking woman who stared at me curiously but with no sympathy.

"Where's Mary?"

"Not home yet," answered the girl.

"Hell! Will she be here tonight?"

"Sure. I'm waiting up for her."

After much growling we sat and waited, with all keeping strict watch over me. I asked for a drink and they handed me liquor and laughed when I said weakly I wanted water. The girl finally weakened and got me some ice water which I feverishly drank. I felt like a man doomed. I figured that I was mistaken for someone else and that if my appearance had deceived Steve and his henchmen, then I could consider myself a dead loss. I saw, in my mind, the headlines of tomorrow. "Body found, riddled with bullets, on country road. Another gangster killing." Yet there I was, an innocent man, not a lawbreaker. Clearly a case of mistaken identity.

I opened the conversation, appealed to them to listen and to admit of the possibility of mistaken identity, but they scornfully laughed at me. The girl said

she had seen me several times herself right in this very room. I finally gave up.

An hour dragged by and Mary had not shown up. The man with the automatic looked for the fiftieth time or more at his watch and rumbled an oath. Jim, the driver, stood up.

"Can't wait," snapped the leader. "We're behind time now. Any place to keep this guy safe?"

"Yeah," growled Jim. "Out in the sticks!"

"Sure," said another. "We can't leave him here. Explain to Steve that Mary didn't come in and what else could we do?"

I protested but in vain, as they roughly forced me down the stairs and into the car. I wanted an excuse, any at all, to put off that last fatal ride. The car started. Another car shot around the corner and came to a shrieking halt at the curb, and our car stopped.

One of the men growled:

"There she is!"

He stepped from our car and went over to the other. A short talk followed and a woman's voice came to my ears. She was angry.

"You're damned right I want to see him! Take him upstairs!"

It was a respite, but for how long? The car backed up, the other car dimmed its lights and the woman alighted and went ahead of us up to the apartment. Soon we were again in the room we had just left, and Mary had gone into another room, for her angry voice came to me. It dawned on me that in her vicious hands I was even worse off. I could hear her suggesting to someone all manner of torture for me to make me talk.

She came like a hurricane from her room, eyes filled with hate. She stood and glared at me. I rose to my feet and started to speak, to say I was not the right man. She suddenly screamed:

"You damned fools! This is not the man!"

For a moment they were stunned. I

felt a surge of relief flood over me but could not say a word. Then Jim made a decision.

"That settles it!" he snarled. "Right man or not, he knows too much. Let's hit for the sticks."

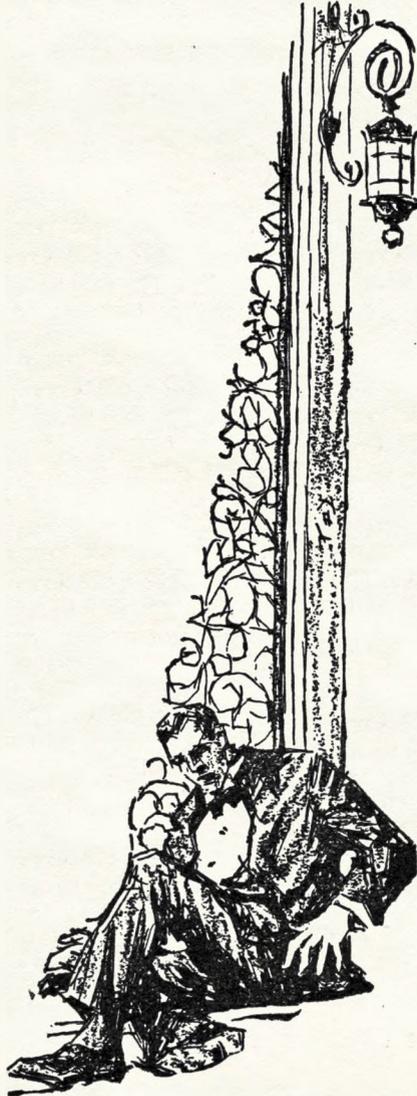
The men seemed to agree with him. The two girls hesitated. The argument started. I turned to Mary.

"Believe me, Miss, I am not a gangster. I do not know you or any of your friends. Furthermore, I will be only too glad to get out of this and will not meddle or make trouble. Here is my card. It shows where I am employed.

Surely you are not afraid of me. It would be a simple matter to get me if I made trouble."

"Give him a chance," finally ordered Mary.

They took me for another ride, twisted and turned, this time to lose me so I would not locate the apartment, and then they turned me loose south of the city. I told of my experience to a well known reporter in confidence (he has since been killed) and he earnestly advised me to keep my mouth shut and make no official complaint. That was what I intended doing and I did.



# BLACK <sup>ASK</sup> MYSTERY No. 6

*Set-up this month—solution next month*

Solution to last month's mystery—No. 5

*[[ The fact that the rising sun and the setting full moon cannot shine squarely in the same window told K. O. that Mrs. Felix was lying. Also he could not believe that she would remain in a faint for three hours. ]]*

## DAL PRENTICE THINKS IT OUT

By ROGER TORREY

**F**OUR men were in the one-room cabin, Lieutenant Dal Prentice, a medical examiner, a fingerprint expert, and Jones, the man whose call had brought the officers. Or rather five men, counting the dead man in the chair in front of the fireplace.

Prentice, staring soberly down at the body, noted that the man's head rested on the back of the chair, that both arms were hanging lax and that a revolver was lying on the floor directly below the right hand. He saw a blue hole in the right temple. He asked: "This was Albright?"

Jones' voice was steady. "Yes. J. C. Albright. He lived by himself here. I was his only friend, so far as I know."

Prentice waved at the body, at the gun. He said: "I'd like to know the time of death and I'd like the gun printed, boys." He turned back to Jones. "You say you found him?"

"Yes, I was on my way into town and was within a few feet of the door when I heard the shot. I was so close, that's why I came in and found he'd shot himself."

"Nobody could've run past you then, huh?"

"I don't see how they could."

Prentice examined the back door and found it bolted. The two windows also were fastened on the inside. He asked: "You been anywhere since you called?"

"No. I thought I ought to stay right by the phone, until you came. I'd like to go now though, as I am late for my appointment."

Prentice nodded: "In a minute!" and walked to the police doctor who whispered: "It's either murder or suicide. Probably murder, as there are no powder burns." He added: "Dead about half an hour. Death was instantaneous. If that helps you any."

The burly detective looked at his watch, said: "That checks with the time he called in," turned to the print man who was studying the gun under a glass. The man looked up from this, said: "The gun's bare, Dal. No prints at all."

Prentice turned to Jones.

"Thought you were pretty smart, guy, didn't you? Thought your best bet was to stay right here and fool us, eh?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean you've sewed yourself right up with this kill in two different directions. You've proved it was murder and you've proved you did it. You're under arrest."

What were Dal's two points?

**Mail your solution on or before October 1st**

# NOVEMBER BLACK MASK A HEADLINER

(One of the readers for **BLACK MASK**, reporting on the selection for November, said: "These are the best stories I've seen for many months. I didn't read them just because I had to: I read them because I had to finish them." And that's an opinion from a pretty hardboiled source.)

---

## "STAG PARTY" - - - by Charles G. Booth

The theatre is dark, deserted; but a door is unlocked. The man who wants to be governor, now in the District Attorney's office, has a secret assignment at this unsuspecting place, a rendezvous to obtain damning evidence against an unscrupulous political foe. A short while after he enters the building, he staggers, mortally wounded, along the black aisle, from the stage to the lobby where he falls. Clutched in his hand are five one-thousand-dollar bills. His murderers are not to be found; in a little while even his body disappears; and the city is in a turmoil.

---

## "LAY DOWN THE LAW" - by Frederick Nebel

This is a story of hard-bitten, square Capt. Steve MacBride. It is also a story of the Cap's affection for that pathetically quaint news-hound, Kennedy, the implacable foe of Prohibition, whose careless habits lead to an unexpected outbreak of desperate gangsters.

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## "POSITIVELY THE BEST LIAR" - - - by W. T. Ballard

Bill Lennox, trouble-shooter of a big West Coast studio, turns up a new phase of criminal activities in the seething fleshpots of Hollywood.

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## "PIGEON BLOOD" - - - by Paul Cain

Here's a brand new story, a brand new character by the creator of Gerry Kels, the hero of "Fast One," a popular **BLACK MASK** story now in the films and shortly to appear in book form.

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## "TIP ON THE GALLANT" - - by Thomas Walsh

A fast, powerful story of the ever romantic atmosphere of race-horse gambling.

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These are some of the headliners for  
**NOVEMBER BLACK MASK**  
**ON ALL NEWSSTANDS OCTOBER 12th**

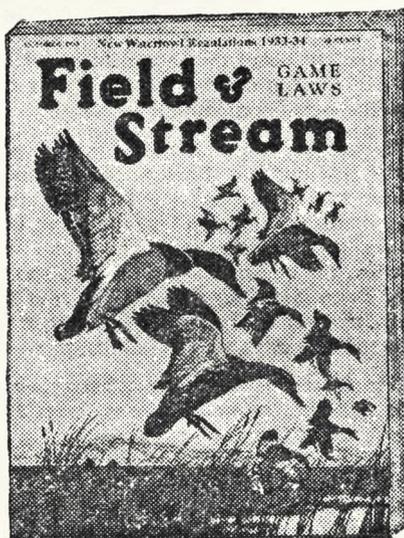
# HUNTING BEGINS SOON!

*Get ready!*

Black Mask readers who live in small towns and in the country probably do a lot of hunting every fall. About all we need to say to them is that the first fall hunting number of *Field & Stream* is now on the stands.

But to those readers who have been living in big cities and maybe haven't thought much about it, we want to say that in all probability there is good hunting of one or more kinds within a short distance of the city limits, and that by not taking advantage of it they are missing one of the greatest pleasures life affords.

We urge them to get a copy of the October issue and see how cheap hunting equipment is today and how easy it is to enjoy the sport.



## Field & Stream

is an encyclopedia for the novice and the Bible of the old-timer—the largest and finest of all magazines of its kind—packed from cover to cover with practical where-when-and-how-to-do-it information about hunting and fishing, guns, fishing tackle, etc. In this October issue you will find a lot of information of direct benefit to you, no matter where you live. Included among its dozen or more articles are:

**GAME LAWS FOR 1933.** Opening and closing dates, special restrictions, etc., for every kind of game in every State, and in every Province in Canada.

### THREE WISE GROUSE

A quail shooter meets grouse for the first time and learns an entirely new type of hunting and philosophy.

### DEATH VALLEY DUCKS

A hunting trip through the marshes in the middle of the most famous and deadly of American deserts.

### WOODCOCK—TAKE HIM LIGHTLY

A tale of woodcock hunting that will gladden the heart of every man who has crossed the path of this doughty little game bird.

### HINTS TO WILDFOWLERS

When this man tells you how—you can depend on it. Here is a really great practical article that every hunter will read and save, and read again.

**9 DEPARTMENTS**, each in charge of an outstanding authority and expert, packed with practical information and advice. These editors will be glad to give you directly by mail, free of charge, any information you want.

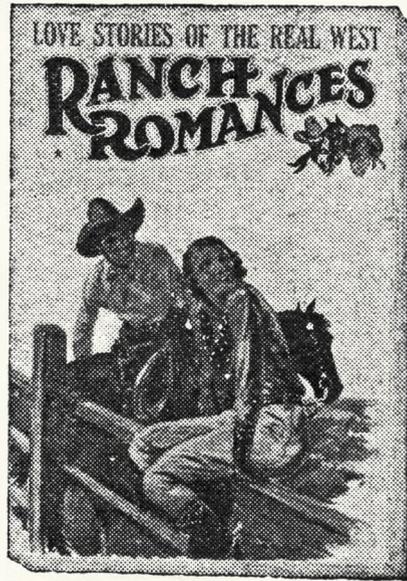
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## “There came the sudden roar of guns”

“The gray that he was riding gave a convulsive leap, and fell, sending him sprawling. Shane had heard the thud of a bullet in its chest. A slug ricocheted off the ring of his saddle-horn, and stung his neck.

“It was the fall of the gray that saved his life. He had just time to detach his foot from the stirrup and roll free beneath the shelter of the ridge on his right hand, before a fusillade scoured the ground where he had fallen, the bullets kicking up little spurts of dust and crackling through the dead twigs of chaparral in the road. Yells broke from the throats of Shane’s assailants.

“He shouted to the Judge to keep back, and opened fire at the streaks of orange that shot out of the darkness, swinging his guns in a wide arc. The firing grew wilder, but the ambushing party had gauged his position, and a stream of lead whipped the branches of the scrub all about him. His hat tilted backward on his head.”



**If you want to read one of the finest western adventure-mystery stories you have ever come across, a story packed with action, excitement and suspense, read *THE WOLF TRAIL*, by Victor Rousseau,**

*in the First October issue of*

## **RANCH ROMANCES**

We think you will enjoy it as you have seldom enjoyed a story of its kind. It is full novelette length, not a short story, and is complete in this issue. There are a dozen other stories in this same issue, every one of which you will enjoy immensely.

Ranch Romances is the finest magazine of its kind published anywhere today. It takes you out into the wide open spaces of our great West, and gives you an intimate description of life on the big ranches and in the cow towns. The writers of these stories know their stuff from long personal experience; and make the life so vivid and their people so real that while you are reading it you have the feeling that you are there yourself taking part in it, adventures and all.

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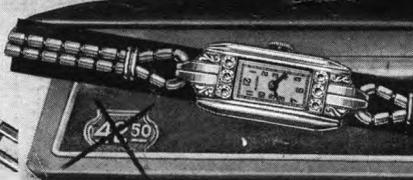
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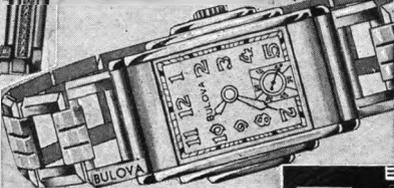
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