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# BLACK MASK\*

SEPT. 1934

**THE  
HEAVENLY  
RAT**

By  
**ERLE  
STANLEY  
GARDNER**

**A  
FLASH  
CASEY  
Story**

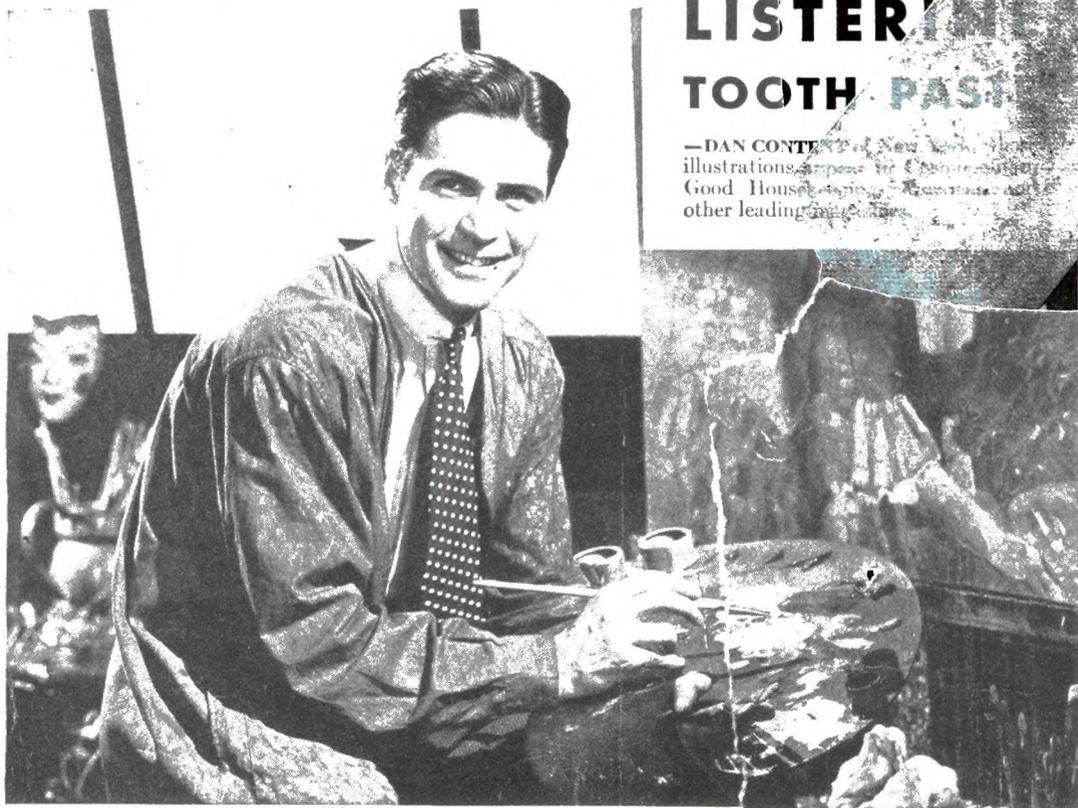
By **GEORGE  
HARMON COXE**



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# BLACK MASK

A MAGAZINE OF GRIPPING; SMASHING DETECTIVE STORIES

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JOSEPH T. SHAW, Editor

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SEPTEMBER, 1934

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Cover painting by Fred Craft

Headings by Arthur Rodman Bowker

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Issued Monthly by PRO-DISTRIBUTORS PUBLISHING COMPANY, Inc., 578 Madison Avenue, New York, New York  
YEARLY SUBSCRIPTION \$1.50 SINGLE COPIES 15 CENTS

Entered as second class mail matter, March 1, 1930, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y.  
under act of March 3, 1879. Printed in U. S. A.

Title registered as Trade Mark in U. S. Patent Office.

Member Newsstand Fiction Unit. For advertising rates address Newsstand Fiction Unit,  
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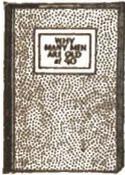
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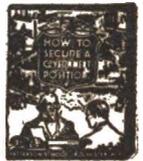
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28x5.25-18	2.55	34x5.00-17	2.75
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28x5.25-20	2.55	34x6.00-15	2.85
31x5.25-18	2.60	36x4.50-16	2.90
28x5.50-19	2.55	36x5.00-15	2.95
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28x5.00-18	2.40	36x6.00-13	3.05
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This is the standard we adopted, and this is the standard we will continue to maintain.

And now that we are assured we will not have to sacrifice quality in reducing the price, your magazine is 15 cents. Will you mind telling a friend?

*The Editor*

# The Heavenly

**He was minus one eye and one leg,  
but he was all there with a knife**



STUDIED his face, and didn't like it. His eyes shifted, and he looked me over, carefully. My coat was threadbare. He saw it. My vest was spotted. His eyes catalogued the spots, one by one. He studied the frayed bottoms of my trousers, the



shoes that were run over at the heels.

He nodded, and his nod was that of approval.

"At nine o'clock," he said, "at the door of *The Yellow Lotus*."

I knew then that he knew his Chinatown. But few people knew of *The Yellow Lotus*. The name, in fact, was contained only in Chinese characters that appeared on a sign which was thrust out over the dark side street.

His eyes held mine. I hesitated. Dare I arouse his suspicions by refusing?

I felt that my disguise was perfect. Perhaps it was too perfect. I felt cer-

# Rat

By ERLE STANLEY GARDNER



tain that the police, for all they wanted me, would never recognize me in the shabby figure that prowled around Chinatown—the figure of a white hanger-on who had been crowded out of the society of his own kind and into the dark poverty which fringes Chinatown.

There was a glitter in his eye as he saw my hesitation.

His thumb flipped back the lapel of his coat, slipped through the arm-hole of his vest and pulled out the elastic strap of a suspender. Pinned to the strap was a gold badge.

“You don’t want to work?” he asked ominously.

“Sure,” I told him. “Sure I want to work, Gov’nor. I’m taking the job all right. It’s just tryin’ to figure things out that was bothering me.”

“Figure what out?” he asked, with belligerent skepticism.

Embarked upon a career of falsehood, I strove to act the part.

“Aw, jeeze!” I told him. “I had a date for tonight.”

His laugh was scornful.

“A date,” he said, and then added with explosive sarcasm, “*You!*”

His thumb remained suggestively beneath the lapel of his coat, hooked about the suspender, which had now been pushed back through the arm-hole of the vest.

“Okey,” he said, “nine o’clock at *The Yellow Lotus*, and if you’re not there I’ll know what it means.”

“Can you tell me what the job is?” I asked.

“There you go,” he told me, “beggars wanting to be choosers. You’re prowling around the streets, apparently without a dime in the world. You haven’t got a job and you have no prospects of getting one, and yet you start being particular about the first job that’s offered.”

I was treading on dangerous ground and knew it. My clothes were the clothes of a man who is down and out, one who has sought the cheapest possible strata of society. But my fingertips were the fingertips of Ed Jenkins, The Phantom Crook.

If this man picked me up as a vagrant, took me to the jail for booking, my fingerprints would be taken, as a matter of routine. I’d be thrown in a cell and the officers would forget about me.

Within twenty-four hours the fingerprints would electrify the whole department. The classification of those fin-

gerprints would scream my real identity.

I'd be dragged from my cell, thrust under bright lights. Questions would be shouted at me. Half a hundred crimes, which had been blamed upon me because the police needed some official fall guy, would be marked as closed. . . .

"I'll be there," I told him.

"See that you are," he said, and turned away.

I started shuffling down the long street lined with store windows in which were displayed the goods of the Orient at prices that were intended to bring money from the tourist, no matter how penurious he might be.

Of course I didn't need to keep that appointment. I could change my mind and not show up at *The Yellow Lotus* at all. But I felt that this contingency had also been prepared for. The man who had offered me the "job" knew what he was doing. He'd planned his stuff in advance. He wasn't a regular officer, nor was he a regular detective, I knew that. The badge that he showed was either one of the "courtesy" badges passed out by various sheriff's offices in the state, or else it was an imitation, pure and simple.

I could, of course, have told more about that badge by a close inspection. But even that wouldn't have helped me much. Whether that badge was real or false, the idea troubled me that somewhere, somehow I had slipped. This man who had just picked me out on the street might be an officer or a crook; but I had the uneasy thought that someone, some stool pigeon or some dope, had pointed me out to him for what I really was.

I shuffled slowly along the pavement, twitching occasionally, as a man twitches who has been denied a drug to which he has grown accustomed, mulling over this unpleasant and highly dangerous possibility. If I kept that appointment, I might find out if there was any truth underlying my fear—a fear that must be ever present with me. If I did not

keep it— But immediately I had the answer to this.

I heard steps approaching from behind, and slowed my pace.

There was a window on my right, displaying jades and ivories. A huge mirror was in the back of the store, a mirror bordered with twisting dragons, squirming about in frozen pursuit of the pearl, the symbology of which is variously interpreted by Chinese sages in order that the true philosophy may ever escape the unbeliever.

This mirror was placed in such a position that I could stand apparently staring into the window, but in reality seeing over my shoulder anyone who who might pass on the sidewalk.

The steps shuffled, hesitated, and a figure paused at my side, to peer through the window at the display of carved ivory.

I shifted my eyes to the mirror and saw that I was staring into the reflected eyes of a gaunt, haggard individual, his own clothes somewhat seedy, his eyes peering out from above shaded half circles, from under bushy brows.

He started to speak the moment my eye caught his in the mirror. His words came in a low, rumbling monotone out of one side of his mouth:

"Listen, Bo, never mind who I am, see? And I don't want to know who you are, see? I'm just handing it to you on the level. You're wearing a tail. The bird you talked with put a finger on you, and the twist is getting your smoke.

"It's none of my business, but I want to see a guy get a square deal. I've been down on my luck, myself, and I know what it's like when they start riding a guy, so I'm just giving you a tip."

I lowered my eyes so that I was staring steadily at the carved ivory.

"A woman?" I asked.

"The twist in the blue coupé," he said. "And she's clever as hell."

I heard his feet drag along the pavement as he moved away with a peculiar

hesitating step, that lagging of the lower limbs which shows a loss of coordination and speaks volumes to the trained eye of a physician.

The dragging steps diminished as he rounded a corner. Fog came swirling in on the wings of the night wind. I casually turned around to take a look at the woman in the blue coupe.

That car was a sporty looking job. The woman was as classy as the car—a neat little figure, a close-fitting hat cocked on one side of her head, hat, eyes and waist all matching the car in color.

I reached an instant decision. There was a cheap hotel about five blocks away. I had a room there. I also had rooms in three other hotels, under three different names. Two of them I'd paid rent on for more than a year.

I slouched along the sidewalk, dropping my neck down into the collar of my shabby coat as the first cool touches of the damp fog stroked my skin with moist fingers.

Apparently the woman in the blue coupe didn't pay any attention to me. She seemed to be having trouble getting her car started. Her head was bent forward and her eyes were fastened on the starter pedal. I could hear the whirr of the mechanism.

I rounded the corner and acted the part of one who doesn't think he is being followed, but wants to take every precaution, just as a matter of habit.



I took me fifteen minutes to get to the hotel. I didn't look behind me and had no means of knowing whether the blue coupe was anywhere in the neighborhood. The hotel clerk spoke to me as I came in. I gave him rather a curt nod. I didn't want him to inspect my shabby clothes too closely. The personality that I'd used in that hotel wasn't one that went well with shabby clothes. On the other hand, it was a

cheap hotel, and if the clerk thought I'd been out on a five-day bat it wouldn't have caused him any undue amount of consternation.

Once inside my room, I climbed up on a chair where I could look through the transom into the corridor, and waited.

I had less than five minutes to wait. The loose-lipped lad who acted both as elevator boy and bellboy came down the corridor with a light bag dangling from his hand, his loose lips twisted in a flabby smile of vacuous amiability.

The woman in blue was walking behind him.

I listened and heard the door of the adjoining room on the east open and close. I could faintly hear the click of light switches through the connecting door. After a while I heard the door close again and the sound of rapid steps in the corridor, after which there was the noise made by the clanging of the elevator door.

I looked at my watch. It was ten minutes before eight.

There was a very faint scratching sound—the sound that might have been made by the teeth of a rat scratching surreptitiously against dry boards. I flattened myself against the wall and inched my way over towards the connecting door between the rooms. I knew where to look and what to look for, and I didn't have long to wait—just a matter of seconds, and the point of a small gimlet protruded from the corner of the panel in the lower half of the door.

The woman in blue was either an expert or had been instructed by an expert. She had drilled the hole neatly in the one place in a door where it is almost impossible to detect it—the upper corner of a lower panel where it would be in shadow.

I held my position and waited a minute. The scratching sound was repeated, and a moment later I saw the point of the gimlet appear in the other upper corner of the door panel. The holes

had been bored on slightly different angles. Between them, they commanded a pretty fair view of my room.

I slid along, keeping flat against the wall until I came to the bathroom. Then I picked up a towel and emerged from the bathroom door, wiping my hands.

I moved around the room casually. Once or twice I looked at my watch ostentatiously. I was more worried than I cared to admit. Someone was taking quite an interest in me. It wasn't someone who thought I was simply a bum hanging around the fringes of Chinatown—Who was this man? Why had he put the woman on my trail? What did he want with me? And who did he think I was?

I made up my mind I was going to interview that girl in blue before the night was very much older.

I walked back towards the bathroom, banged the bathroom door, flattened myself against the wall and moved slowly and cautiously towards the connecting door, keeping so far to one side that I was out of the range of vision of anyone who might be looking through those holes in the door.

Standing almost against it, I bent forward to listen.

The door was a thin, flimsy affair, in keeping with the cheap furnishings of the second-rate hotel. I could plainly hear the sound of breathing through the thin board. Then I heard the sound of surreptitious fingers touching the bolt on the other side of the door. There were two bolts—one on my side, one on hers. I knew she had turned hers and would shortly try to see if the door was open on my side. Thinking I was in the bathroom, she figured she had a clear field.

The knob slowly turned. There was tension on the door. The bolt on my side held.

Abruptly, I heard a gasp, the sound of the outer door in the next room banging shut, then a woman's voice coming from beyond the door: "Sam,

why didn't you let me know you were coming up?"

A man's voice said something I couldn't get. There was a low, throaty laugh, a man's laugh, with a gloating note about it.

I heard the first two or three steps as the woman on the other side of the door moved away from it. Then the conversation was lower and I could get only an occasional word here and there.

I was already standing by the connecting door. I had only to drop to my knees and apply my eye to one of the peep-holes in order to see what was taking place in the room.

The woman had slipped off the coat of her neatly tailored outfit and was attired in waist and skirt. The man was rather tall, with broad shoulders and a peculiar method of moving his arms. I figured that he'd been a pug at some stage of the game. When he moved his feet, I was certain of it. For a moment I had a good glimpse of his face—a battered face that had, nevertheless, something to it—a certain grim determination, a certain indication of mental ability along lines of animal cunning. I could see his lips move and hear the rumble of his voice. His gestures were threatening.

The girl stood up to him, white-faced and defiant. Her lips made futile attempts at speech on three different occasions, and on each occasion the rumble of the man's voice drowned her words.

The man advanced threateningly, his left foot tapping forward in advance, which was followed by his right foot. He was on the balls of his feet. The girl stood her ground for a moment, then took three swift steps backwards. The man thrust his head forward and followed. That put them outside the range of my vision.

I remained crouched by the door, putting my ear against the hole. I could hear the sound of the woman's voice, speaking swiftly. The man's voice said something—a low-voiced, guttural comment. There was a peculiar sound, a

sound that might have been caused by the impact of a fist. I put my eye to the hole in the door again just in time to see the striding legs of the big man as he crossed the room. I heard the bang of the door, then quick, cat-like steps in the corridor, after a few moments the clang of the elevator door.

I remained at my peep-hole, waiting for the woman to come back.

She didn't come back.

After a moment I caught the flicker of motion and stared intently through the little peep-hole. For a moment I was puzzled at what it was that was making the motion. Then I realized it was the tips of her fingers on the carpet, moving with a peculiar clutching motion. A moment later the hand itself crept into view. She seemed to be lying flat on the carpet, pulling herself along, her fingers acting as claws.

I had decided that I was going to talk with her. I could think of no time that was better than the present. I got to my feet and silently twisted the knob on my side of the door. Noiselessly, I opened the door. I could hear the sound of steady, hopeless sobs.



MY feet made no noise on the thin carpet. The woman was stretched at full length on the floor, sobbing as though her heart would break. Once or twice she beat her hands futilely against the carpet, then clawed into the faded, worn cloth with the tips of her long, sensitive fingers.

"Why don't you get up on the bed if you want to bawl?" I asked her.

At the sound of my voice she rolled swiftly to her side, stared at me with incredulous, red-rimmed eyes, then with a lithe motion, got to her knees, and, on her knees, stared up at me.

Her lips were quivering, both with rage and grief. Her face was white as a sheet, save for the round spot on her

cheek-bone, which showed a flaming red, the spot, evidently, where a man's fist had thudded against her flesh, and which accounted for the sound of the blow that I had heard.

"D-d-d-don't think I'm b-b-b-bawling," she said, "I'm c-c-c-crying because I'm m-m-m-m-mad."

That was a good start. I liked it. I leaned forward and placed my hand beneath her elbow.

"All right," I told her, "go ahead and be mad."

She got to her feet. The tips of her fingers explored the sore cheek. She crossed the room to the washstand, which had once been white, and which showed a long streak of yellow, where water had trickled from the leaky faucet. She turned on the cold water, dashed it over her face and into her eyes, groped around for one of the thin, worn towels, with the name of the hotel emblazoned on it in red thread.

"Well," she said, "say something."

"I thought," I began, "I heard the sound of a blow, and. . . ."

She wiped the towel across her eyes and face with a last vigorous motion, wadded it into a ball and flung it down on the bed so hard that it sounded as though she'd thrown a pillow against the wall.

"Oh, I know you," she said. "You're Ed Jenkins, and you out-smarted me. You caught me drilling a hole in your door and trying the bolt on the inside. So you turned the tables, when Sam came in, and spied on me, and then came on through the door."

The words ripped from her lips with the harsh rapidity of sound which comes from tearing cloth.

"Since you know so much," I told her, "you might as well go ahead and tell me the rest."

I was watching her narrowly. The information that I was The Phantom Crook, was something I had flattered myself she couldn't have known. And yet, here she was, blabbing it out as casually as though she had been telling

me that she had seen my picture in the society column of the paper.

"Go on," I told her, "tell me some more."

"There isn't any more to tell. What are you going to do with me?"

"Why should I do anything with you?"

She stood very stiff and very straight, her eyes staring steadily into mine.

"I know," she said, "you're on the lam. I was spying on you. You figure that you've got to rub me out in order to keep your secret."

"Look here," I said, "you've been going to too many movies. You've seen too many gangster pictures."

She shook her head. There was a scornful smile playing about the corners of her lips.

"Don't fool yourself," she said, "I've seen too many gangsters, that's all."

"Who is your boy friend?"

"The one who socked me?"

"Yes."

Her eyes held a scornful glint as she said, "Want me to rat?"

"You're evidently in something of a spot," I told her. "You're not getting along so well with your boy friend, you were put on my tail by a man who probably wasn't a blood relative of yours. You might just as well come through and give me the low-down, as to go out and do what you're intending to do."

"How do you know what I'm intending to do?"

"I'm guessing," I told her.

"What do you want?"

I was studying her as she spoke. The more I saw of her, the better I liked her.

"I might be able to help you," I said.

"Help," she repeated, and there was contempt in her voice. "How long it's been since I heard *that* one."

I didn't say anything, but tried to draw her out by silence, where words had failed.

She stood staring at me for a moment, then her eyes shifted to the door.

I could see that she was quivering, that every nerve, every muscle was tense.

"Frightened?" I asked.

She stared at me with that hard, scornful expression on her face.

"Mad," she said.

"Because he bopped you?" I wanted to know.

"I'm not mad at him at all, I'm mad at myself."

"Go on," I told her.

She was like some animal in a trap, holding herself with every muscle tense, wanting to lunge against the steel, yet, knowing that if she did, she'd simply hurt herself and that she couldn't get away in any event.

"Say, what's *your* game?" she demanded. "You found out I was trailing you. If you'd simply wanted to get away, you'd have ducked out of the door and beat it. The fact that you came in here shows that you're wanting something with me. What is it?"

"I want to find out about the man who put you on my trail and why."

I saw her lips tighten into a firm line. Her eyes shifted from mine, stared at the door as though she might be weighing some course of action in her mind and didn't want her attention distracted. I kept silent.

After a moment she started to speak.

"I've been a fool!" she said. "A damn' little fool! The people that I love have been betrayed by me. I gave everything I had as a sacrifice to what I thought was love."

She broke off and laughed bitterly.

"Love!" she said, and, after a moment added, "*Bah!*"

I kept on waiting. I knew the significance of that peculiar tone in her voice. I'd heard it before. She was more or less thinking out loud. For the moment she'd virtually forgotten me. I was simply someone to talk to, someone to use as a target in throwing the words that she spat bitterly from the end of her tongue.

"Ever hear of Frank Trasker?" she asked abruptly.



HERE was no one in the underworld who hadn't heard of Frank Trasker. Trasker had been killed. A man by the name of George Harris had been arrested, charged with the murder. The police figured they had a perfect case against him. It looked that way. George Harris was a miner who had a quartz mine somewhere up in Nevada. Trasker had induced Harris' daughter to go away with him to San Francisco. Harris had followed and Trasker had been killed.

Trasker had been mixed up in a big bank robbery the day of his death. The identification had been absolutely cinched while the body lay in the morgue. Trasker must have had something like fifty thousand dollars in new, crisp bank notes in his possession when he was killed. His clothes had been ripped open and a money belt had been pulled away from his skin. The police had evidence that the belt was filled with the new bank notes. The money wasn't on Harris and hadn't been found. It might still give a new angle on the killing if it could be turned up.

"Go on," I said, "what about Trasker?"

She wanted to tell me, wanted to talk. I knew that she'd been weighing some course of action in her mind, hesitating between two decisions. Now she'd decided. I couldn't tell why, and I didn't care why, but I knew suddenly that she was going to throw in her lot with me and was going to appeal to me for some sort of help.

"I'm Harris' daughter," she said. "Bernice Harris."

Somehow, I wasn't surprised.

"Go on," I told her.

She walked over to the bed and sat down. She seemed to relax. Her voice still held that dreamy tone that characterizes the voice of one who is making a clean breast of everything—the tone of voice that is so well

known to officers and prosecutors.

"Gawd, how tired I got of that mine!" she said. "It was just a little sun-bleached shack out on the side of a hill, with nothing but sunshine and cactus to look at. The light was so white-hot it burned your eyes. Every day was like every other day. Twice a month we got to town for provisions and mail. I looked at the magazines in order to see what the well-dressed women were wearing. The only clothes I had were a pair of overalls, boots and a faded blue shirt that I wore around the mine. I had one dress to put on for state occasions, when I went to town. 'Town' was half a dozen stores and about five or six shack houses."

I kept absolutely quiet, not even moving a muscle.

Her voice went on:

"There was a Chinese cook, an old, broken-down prize-fighter and a hard rock man who had lost his right hand and wore an iron claw strapped to his wrist. Those three comprised the mining crew. Dad was in charge. There was money in the mine, all right. Dad kept putting more and more money in the bank. He was working it himself. He wouldn't sell out. I got tired of it. I ran away.

"I came here to San Francisco. I had a little money. I had my one baggy, shapeless, old-fashioned dress. I looked like hell."

Once more she paused, and I knew that she wasn't thinking of me, but was conjuring up in her mind the vision of the young girl who had hit the roar and bustle of San Francisco, a girl whose skin was tanned by the desert sun, whose eyes were bulging with surprised appreciation of the life in the city.

"I couldn't tear my eyes away from the windows," she said. "I looked just what I was—an unsophisticated country girl—not so damned unsophisticated, you understand, but I'd been lying dormant for so long I'd forgotten what it was like to live. I met Trasker. He had a glib tongue and that way of easy

assurance that means so much to a girl who is starving for experience. He led me on, and I fell in love with him. I mentioned marriage to him, and he laughed. I'll never forget the sound of his laugh that night."

Her voice was now harsh and bitter.

"That was the night I found out about the gang."

I started to ask a question, but checked myself.

"Father found me. I don't know how he found me. He found Trasker. You know what happened after that."

This time I asked the question:

"Did your father kill Trasker?" I asked.

She hesitated for a moment without even looking at me, her eyes fixed thoughtfully on the wall of the room.

Slowly she shook her head.

"No," she said.

"Who did?"

"I don't know. Oscar Milen knows."

"Who's Milen?"

"The man who put the finger on you."

"The man I met on the street?"

"Yes."

"Who is he?"

"I don't know exactly. He's the big shot in the gang."

"Was he the man who came in here?"

I inquired, knowing that he wasn't, but wanting to see what she would say.

"No, that was Sam Reece."

"Who's Sam Reece?"

"Another one of the gang."

"How much do you know about the gang?"

"Plenty," she said bitterly.

I waited for her to tell me, but she wouldn't explain.

"I presume," I said, "Milen promises to clear your father at the last minute if you'll do exactly as he tells you."

She shook her head and said slowly, "Milen tells me that my father killed Trasker."

"It was your father's gun that did the killing," I told her. "They've got the bullet and fired test bullets from your father's gun. Your father claims

he didn't shoot, but the gun was in his possession and had been fired, and the bullet that killed Trasker came from it. They can show plenty of motive."

She nodded once more, slowly.

"And Milen says your father killed Trasker?" I asked, trying to get her to elaborate the statement.

"Yes, Milen swears to me that's what happened."

"What makes you think that wasn't what happened?"

"Sam Reece says it wasn't."

"Just how does Reece fit into the picture?" I inquired.

"Reece," she said, "is the one who is going to meet you in front of *The Yellow Lotus* at nine o'clock."

"Does he know who I am?"

"You mean about being Ed Jenkins?" she inquired.

"Yes," I said.

She nodded her head slowly.

"Sure," she said, "they both know about it. Oscar Milen told me."

"What does he want with me?"

"He's going to put you in a spot some way. You've got to do something for him; I don't know just what it is."

"And," I said, holding my eyes on her, "I presume Sam Reece dropped in without Milen knowing anything about it, to pay a purely social call."

She looked up at me, and it was then that I read the misery in her eyes.

"They all have tried to make love to me," she said, "ever since Frank Trasker was killed, from Milen on down."

Once more the bitterness was in her voice, once more she clenched her fists in white-faced rage.

"Gawd, how I hate myself!" she said.

"How I hate the selfish little rotter I was! I know now that my father was doing everything for me. He was working that mine because he was trying to put aside a stake, so that I could have money. All the money I wanted! He wanted me to have good clothes, but he wanted me to get them all at once. He was planning to send me to Europe.

And I ran away, and . . . and look what I did to myself. Look what I did to my father!"

"What are you going to do now?" I asked her.

She got slowly to her feet.

"You're Ed Jenkins," she said. "You're a slick crook. I was supposed to get on your tail and keep on your tail until you are on the spot. I thought I'd have to keep working for the gang until I could get something that would clear my father. But that seems hopeless. I'm going to fight. I can't fight alone. The gang is after you. I'm going to play ball with *you!*"

It might or might not have been true. I didn't get too enthusiastic. It might have been a damn' clever build-up.

"Why is the gang after me?" I asked."

"Now that prohibition has gone," she said, "they've switched to dope. There's some kind of big deal on in Chinatown. I don't know just what it is. You're mixed in with *Soo Hoo Duck*, the real head of the Chinese tongs, and they've an idea you might hear about it and block their deal. Some Chinese told them that."

"How did they find out who I was?"

"I don't know."

"What do they want with me?"

"They're sticking up the Gamay Jewelry Company," she said. "They want you for a fall-guy. Your fingerprints are going to be all over the job. They figure that will put you out of the way for the dope deal. I don't know what's going to happen after that."

"The man I was talking with was Oscar Milen?" I asked.

"Yes."

"He stopped me," I said, "and told me that he was a detective; that he had a job for me; that it was a real, legitimate job; that I was to meet his man in front of *The Yellow Lotus* promptly at nine o'clock. He said he knew all about me. I didn't know what that meant."

"You know what it means now."

I stared steadily at her. Her eyes didn't flinch. The red spot on her cheek was turning a purplish hue.

"You have," I told her, "made a damn' good build-up. It's a shame it isn't going to work."

With that, I turned on my heel, walked to the connecting door, banged it shut and slipped the bolt.

I dropped to my knees and put my eye up against the peep-hole. I wanted to see how she was taking it.

She sat there on the bed for a moment, staring steadily at the door through which I had vanished. Then she got to her feet, walked towards the wall telephone. I heard her pick up the receiver and give a number in a low, cautious voice. Then she put her mouth up close against the transmitter, and I couldn't even hear the mumble of conversation. I heard the click of the receiver when she hung it up. She had been talking for four or five minutes.

I had done all I could here, had learned one thing definitely; this gang, that man who had made the appointment for me, knew my real identity. There was no alternative now. I had to keep that appointment, discover what they planned with me.



AN FRANCISCO fog slid silently past the towers of Chinatown, clutching with slimy fingers at the moisture-beaded cornices, swirling in vague eddies to temporary oblivion, only to reappear again in twisting wraiths.

Here on the corner was a Chinese street stand selling dried abalones, salted fish, candied fruit, sugared ginger peel. A drug-store offered dried lizards, horned toads preserved in wine, bits of sliced deer horn, the less expensive grades of ginseng.

Neon signs burnt into the night sky with gaudy brilliance, their colored lights illuminating the fog which seemed to cluster directly above them.

*The Yellow Lotus* had no electric sign. It was a resort of Chinese—of and for Chinese. It catered to no white trade. The nature of the place could be told only by the man who knew his Chinese and his Chinatown. A doorway with Chinese characters scrawled on it, opened upon one of the less popular side streets where darkness seemed to stick to the doorways like soot to the inside of a stove pipe.

The hour was nine o'clock.

I looked up and down the street and saw no one, yet I had the feeling that I was being observed.

I listened to the sound of my steps echoing mournfully against the dark fronts of the buildings which seemed so deserted—buildings which I knew could tell many weird and bizarre tales if they could only talk.

I heard other steps, a peculiar *slap . . . clump . . . slap . . . clump . . . slap . . . clump*. The sounds were not loud, but there was little noise in that dark street.

I heard another vague sound behind me, and turned.

A broad-shouldered man, walking almost noiselessly upon rubber-heeled shoes, was moving swiftly along the sidewalk, coming towards me. He had slipped silently out of a doorway.

I felt that I could recognize that cat-like tread anywhere. The man was big-boned, heavily fleshed, and yet light on his feet. He walked with the tread of a professional pugilist—a man who has strengthened his legs by hours of rope skipping, by miles of road work.

It was the man I had seen in Bernice Harris' room—Sam Reece.

I turned to listen to those other sounds—that peculiar *slap—clump*. They were coming from a wooden passageway between two buildings—a passageway which was masked by a door, so that it appeared to an observer on the street as just another entrance.

I stopped, swung so that my back was towards the street.

The broad-shouldered man veered

towards me. His right hand slipped suggestively to his coat pocket.

"Hello," he said.

"Hello," I answered.

"In about ten seconds," he told me, "there's going to be a machine swing around the corner and pull in close to the curb. When it comes to a stop, you get in it, see?"

There was no further need for disguise. I saw no reason to simulate the whining voice of a street beggar.

"Just why," I asked him coldly, "should I get into the machine?"

"Because," he said, "you're going to get your hide pumped full of lead if you don't."

I hoped the man would come closer. A gun isn't such a deadly weapon as most people think, if the man at whom the gun is pointed gets to close enough quarters, is quick enough with his hands, and knows what to do.

Sam Reece didn't come close, he stood about six feet away. Six feet was too far for what I had in mind.

Headlights danced along the street above.

The door which concealed the passageway banged open. A heavy-set Chinese clumped into view.

For a moment the vague light, diffused through the swirling fog, caught him. I had a weird impression of a dead-white eye, of a high forehead, of thick lips twisted back, of a fleshy face that was not fat; the face of a man who could love and who could hate.

I caught the glitter of light on silk, saw the long gleam of a polished crutch. I realized then that the man was one-eyed and one-legged; a broad shouldered, burly individual, different from most of the slender Chinese who move so unobtrusively about through the shadows. He had banged open the door with aggressive vigor.

His right hand moved. Lights from a distant *Neon* sign slithered along the polished steel of a knife, reflecting as redly as though the metal had been stained with blood.

Reece, whose hand was in his right coat pocket, gave a rasping ejaculation, whirled from the hips. I saw his right shoulder brace itself against recoil.

The Chinese said nothing. His face twisted somewhat into a set expression of grim hatred, and, in that tense moment, I saw the peculiar manner in which he was holding the knife. He had wrapped two fingers of his right hand about the long steel just where the blade joined the handle. His thumb was on the other side. His other two fingers seemed to guide the point with a caressing gesture. The whole touch was indescribably delicate.

The hand and arm flicked into perfectly coordinated motion. The red *Neon* sign glittered in swift reflection as the blade started on its way.

Flame spurted from the right-hand pocket of the coat which covered the broad shoulders of Sam Reece.

It seemed incredible that a knife could travel so fast, yet I feel certain the haft was protruding on one side of the throat, about two inches of the steel point out back of the neck, when the gun roared.

Doubtless, if Sam Reece had fired at me, the bullet would have sped through to its mark.

His bullet didn't strike the Chinese.

It is one thing to shoot at an unarmed man, one thing to shoot at an animated target—quite another thing to shoot at a man who flits knives with the casual ease of a stage magician flipping cards from a deck.

The haft of the knife was pressed so tightly against the skin that the spurting blood from the severed jugular vein sprayed out like water from a garden hose. Sam Reece staggered, groped with his left hand at the foggy darkness as though trying to find something to give him support. Twice more flame spurted from the right pocket of his coat. The bullets were wild.

The thick-set, one-legged Chinese seemed to ignore my presence. His one eye fastened itself upon the dying man.

The red *Neon* light struck against the white emptiness of the bad eye, and gave it a peculiar bloody tinge.

He bowed and mouthed a phrase in Cantonese.

I didn't get it all, but I got the last two words. They were *T'ien Sheuh*, the last word muttered explosively, sounding as though he had started to shout "sugar" and then had violently arrested his voice at the end of the first syllable.

The headlights which had been dancing along the upper street crawled around the building as the automobile slowed and began to turn the corner.

The big Chinese jerked open the door, made a pivoting turn on his crutch, hurtled into the darkness of that passageway as though he had been a pole vaulter springing over the cross bar and into a sawdust pit.

Sam Reece had fallen heavily to the sidewalk. Blood pumped from his arteries, hit the cement and made a spreading pool.

There was but one thing for me to do, and only one thing. I did it. I slipped through the doorway after the one-legged Chinese.

The door was controlled by a powerful spring. It slammed shut behind me. The darkness of the passageway closed me in. I listened to hear the peculiar *slap . . . clump . . . slap . . . clump . . . slap . . . clump* of the one-legged man. I heard nothing, not even the sound of breathing.

From the street behind me came abruptly the scream of brakes, the sudden shout of a man's voice, the banging of an automobile door, then the roar of an accelerating motor, and the sound of a departing car.

Sam Reece had had an appointment with Ed Jenkins. Sam Reece was dead, a knife protruding from his throat. I knew what the gangsters thought. I knew what the police would think—one more murder that would be chalked up against the account of The Phantom Crook.

And what of this man who had thrown the knife? Well as I knew my Chinatown, I had never seen him before. Yet he was a compelling figure. Once seen, he would never be forgotten—this man who had called himself *T'ien Shenk*.

*T'ien Shenk*, literally translated, means "The Rat of Heaven." It is a term of respect which the Chinese use in describing the bat—an animal which slips silently about through the darkness of the night, making no sound, exterminating insects.

I had reason to think of the peculiar significance of that name as I stood in the dark passageway, certain that the one-legged Chinese, moving as he must, with one foot and a crutch, could not move without banging heavily upon the boards.

Yet he had flitted away into the darkness, with no sound that I, almost upon him, could hear.

I took a pocket flashlight from my coat. The beam showed the passageway. It was empty.



**S**TANDING there in the dark passageway, I could feel perspiration oozing from my skin.

Ahead of me lay darkness and I knew not what—The mysteries of a strange house in Chinatown. Back of me lay the sidewalk, with the dead body of a man who had come to keep an appointment with me.

The gangsters had speeded their car into motion and ducked for safety when they realized what had happened. But it wouldn't be long before some passing pedestrian would sound the alarm and the police cars would be rushing to the scene.

Was all this part of the build-up? Was all this a part of the scheme of things? Was it intended that I should walk into the trap in just that manner? That the one-legged, one-eyed Chinese should throw his knife with such deadly

accuracy? And, was it possible that the girl was ready to testify Sam Reece had gone to keep an appointment with me?

Evidently the sound of the shots had been taken for the backfiring of a car coming down the steep hill. Standing close to the door, my ears strained, I could hear no sound of commotion from the sidewalk.

I used my flashlight once more. There was no sign of human habitation in the corridor. It was a long, narrow passageway flanked on either side with the walls of buildings. There were cobwebs festooning the sides. All about it was an air of dry mustiness which seemed to indicate that the passage was but little used.

In my line of work a person must reach quick decisions. Frequently those decisions are wrong. When they're wrong, it's necessary to reach other quick decisions to rectify the initial mistake. There's no time to stop and turn things over in one's mind in order to get the very best possible solution.

I reached a quick decision and put it into immediate execution.

I jerked open the door, propped it open with a piece of loose board. I stepped out to the sidewalk and grabbed the dead body of Sam Reece by the shoulders. I dragged him into the passageway: There was a pool of blood left behind and a long, red tell-tale smear pointing towards the passageway where I'd taken the body, but I couldn't help that. That was one of the chances I had to take. A passing pedestrian would be much less inclined to notice a red stain on the sidewalk than a body slumped on the cold cement.

It was a side street, damp, dark and clammy. Occasionally Chinese customers came to *The Yellow Lotus*, but, for the most part, those customers had come, partaken of their evening meal, and gone. Later on, perhaps, there would be a few old cronies drop in to discuss philosophy over a cup of tea.

Right at present it was a slack time, and the street was deserted.

I kicked out the board from under the swinging door. The door banged shut. I walked rapidly around the corner, found a telephone, and called *Soo Hoo Duck's* private number.

*Soo Hoo Duck* was the uncrowned king of Chinatown. *Ngat T'oy* was his daughter, a highly Americanized product of the Western universities, yet, nevertheless, pure Chinese.

It was *Ngat T'oy* who answered the telephone.

I gave her the address from which I was talking.

"Can you get in your car and bust all speed limits getting here?"

"Will five minutes be soon enough?" she asked.

"Can you make it four?" I inquired.

"I'll try it," she said, and I heard the receiver slam up at the other end of the telephone.

She made it in three minutes and forty seconds—a trim little figure clad in modish clothes that showed off her form. Her eyes were dancing, sparkling and mischievous. Smiles quivered about her lips. She was all alert vivacity—all frivolity.

She knew my real identity. She had seen me in various disguises. She came to me at once without hesitation.

"Something bad?" she asked, and smiled.

"Pretty bad," I told her.

"What can I do?"

"We both know," I said, "how little the Chinese like to have murders committed in Chinatown."

"What do you mean, Ed?"

"I mean that there are bloodstains on the sidewalk around the corner. It may be well to have those bloodstains removed."

The smile faded from her lips as though it had been wiped from her face with some invisible towel. Her eyes became lacquer-black, utterly without expression.

"This is around the corner?" she asked.

"Yes."

I'd telephoned from a Chinese book store. I could see that the proprietor knew *Ngat T'oy*. In fact, everyone in Chinatown knew her. Their manner towards her was that of beaming pride, mingled with reverential deference. As long as I had known the Chinese, I had never really discovered what connection *Soo Hoo Duck* and *Ngat T'oy* had to Chinatown.

It had been said that *Soo Hoo Duck* was the head of the Chinese tongs. Yet the Chinese tongs did not cooperate, and there were times when their interests were distinctly adverse, one to the other. But *Soo Hoo Duck* and his daughter held virtually undisputed sway.

Tourists in the quarter would see a wrinkled old man with bright eyes, his age apparently so great that the young woman at his side might have been his grand-daughter rather than his daughter. They would have seen *Ngat T'oy*, happy, carefree, alert and vivacious, very apparently a Chinese character emerging from the cocoon of Oriental impassivity into a gaudy-colored Occidental butterfly.

To have told the average tourist who passed the pair on the street that these two ruled Chinatown with an iron hand would have provoked a patronizing smile.

Nevertheless, such was the case.

*Ngat T'oy* opened her mouth, and Cantonese sentences spilled forth. The Chinese proprietor of the book store exploded into voluble action. Half a dozen men appeared almost as by magic. There were quick, shuffling steps. Men pushed their way out through the doors into the fog-filled night, and I knew each one had been carefully instructed in just what his mission would be.

Two of the men sauntered to opposite corners, shuffled aimlessly about. No one would have suspected them of being lookouts.

Other men slid into the foggy darkness.

The fog had settled now, until it was thick. The pavement was moist and slimy. But few people were abroad, even on the main streets.

I heard the slosh of water on cement.

*Ngat Toy* led the way towards the back of the store.

"Tell me about it," she said.

"I think," I told her, "I'm being put on the spot. I think it was intended that I should either be framed with murder, or that I should be taken for a ride, and somewhere Chinatown is mixed up in it. Tell me, do you know a heavy-set Chinese who walks with a crutch, and has only one eye?"

She looked at me expressionlessly, then shook her head with grave negation.

"No," she said, "I know no one who is like that. Moreover, if there was a man of that description here in San Francisco, I would know of it."

I nodded.

"It is probable," I said, "that he came recently from China. He was possibly sneaked in in a shipment that contained dope. What his game is, I don't know."

"Why?" she wanted to know.

"He just killed a man," I told her, "and . . ."

I was interrupted by a shrill, monkey-like scream, the sound of pattering feet. A young Chinese lad came to a stop before *Ngat Toy* and started spilling words about a dead man in the passageway.

*Ngat Toy* turned inquiring eyes to me.

"Ask him," I said, "if the stains on the sidewalk are all washed away."

His eyes regarded me with suspicion, but he slowly nodded his head and said, in English, "The stains are all gone."

"I want silk," I told *Ngat Toy*, "some kind of heavy silk cloth that's got a lot of red in it. Can you get it?"

She didn't answer the question directly, but clapped her hands. A man

sprang to do her bidding. She transmitted the order to him.

I turned to the wide-eyed Chinese lad.

"And you," I said, "are going to help me roll up that body and put it on the running-board of *Ngat Toy's* machine."

He answered me in Chinese, mouthing a proverb in a low voice; and added, to *Ngat Toy*:

"The police of the White Ghosts will be angry with me if I do this thing."

She answered him with terse, cutting words:

"My father," she said, "will be angry if you do not do it."

For a moment their eyes locked, then the young Chinese turned without a word and shuffled away.

"Where's he going?" I asked apprehensively.

"He is going to roll the body in silk, as you requested."

"Okey," I told her, "let's go." As we went out I said:

"I want you to get me a live chicken, wait exactly fifteen minutes, ring up the police and report your car as having been stolen. That will put you in the clear, in the event the police should catch me in the car. But after I've left that body where I want to leave it, I'll run the car down pretty well towards the waterfront and leave it. One of the cruising cars will pick it up some time along in the morning."

"What are you going to do, Ed?" she asked.

I faced her lacquer-like eyes.

"Plenty," I told her. "The gang, of which the murdered man was a member, planned to frame me for a crime. I'm going to undo that frame, let it work back on them through this man who can be identified."

"Is it dangerous?"

"Yes."

"Can my father send men to help you?"

I shook my head at her, saw the troubled look come over her face, and grinned.

"Forget it," I told her. "I've got to do it alone. Any other would spoil it. And get that chicken."

Her face was a mask of Oriental calm. Her eyes stared steadily at mine without the faintest flicker of expression. All of the glitter seemed to be on the surface. It was impossible to read what was underneath.

"I go," she said, "to get the chicken," and the words were spoken in Chinese.

Abruptly she turned and moved swiftly away.

I lighted a cigarette and waited.



SLID the car with its gruesome burden into the dark shadows of a particular alley, and thanked my lucky stars that the night was so foggy. Thick fog had settled down like a gray blanket, enveloping the streets with a white mystery, muffling the sounds of night life on pavement.

Ten feet above the stones of the alley was a large circular grille. During the daytime, high-pitched humming sounds came from behind this grille. Now it was silent. I had "spotted" this grille some time before. It was the opening back of a ventilator fan, and the ventilator fan was part of a system by which the Gamay Jewelry Company ventilated its sumptuous showrooms.

I adjusted my thin gloves, climbed to the top of *Ngat T'oy's* little coupé, and set to work on the grille. It was built for ornament rather than strength, and I didn't have much trouble lifting it out, and setting it softly on the pavement. There was hardly room for a man to squeeze between the blades of the fan, but I bent the blades back and crawled along the narrow metal-lined tunnel; the metal creaking and snapping beneath my knees, but holding my weight.

There was another grille on the inside, and through it I could see the vault room of the jewelry company.

I waited for the watchman. As I waited, I took a small glass phial from my pocket, also a section I had cut from an automobile tube. I cut the section of inner tube, tied one end to one side of an opening in the grille, the other end to the other. By putting the little glass phial in the center of the rubber, I improvised myself a powerful little sling shot.

I waited five minutes. The watchman showed up on the opposite side of the room. He was yawning with boredom. I nestled the glass phial into the center of the rubber and pulled well back, taking careful aim.

The watchman turned his key in one of the boxes.

I let go the rubber. The phial whizzed across the room, struck the wall not more than three feet from the watchman's head. I heard the crash of glass, saw the expression of startled surprise come over the features of the watchman as he turned to stare about him in incredulous consternation.

I saw his hand raise to his eyes, saw him swipe the back of his hand across his forehead, then saw him start groping his way along the wall.

I braced myself and kicked against the circular grille-work. It came out and clattered to the floor below.

"Get your hands up," I told him, gruffly. "You're covered by a dozen men."

The tear gas had blinded his eyes. He turned towards the sound of my voice. Tears were streaming down his cheeks. His face was white and frightened. He raised his hands.

I slid down the face of the wall, hanging with my hands until I was within three or four feet from the floor, and then dropping.

"Walk this way," I said, "and keep them up."

The watchman was blinded by gas, staggering about with knees that buckled in fright. I herded him into another room, tied his hands behind his back, took his keys, opened the door which

led to the alley and carried the body of Sam Reece into the vault room, putting it on the floor without sound.

Then I stepped into the room where I'd left the watchman and started a conversation, as if with an accomplice, using a rather shrill, high-pitched voice for one, alternated with a gruff, guttural voice that spoke in a hoarse, half-whisper for the assumed other robber.

The show in my two-character part that I put on for that blinded, helpless watchman, in the next few minutes, would have done credit to the quick change artists in the old vaudeville stunts, or for a comic strip, if it hadn't been so deadly serious to me. I had to provide evidence to which he would later swear, evidence that could reach him only by his ears and that would be logical and convincing with the facts of robbery and a murdered body to be discovered later.

I started an argument between my two assumed characters, moving my position slightly each time I made a change in tone. I announced in my high, thin voice that I would go upstairs and crack the safe, as the vault was too difficult, and for my assumed companion to wait and watch out for things. I made noise going up, and came back immediately, on silent, stockinged feet, to growl a gruff comment of double-cross suspicion and wish to see what the man upstairs was doing.

With my shoes on, I ascended the stairs a second time noisily.

From the top I looked at the watchman. He was too frightened to try to turn in any alarms. He was sitting huddled in a corner, his hands tied behind his back, his knees up under his chin, his eyes streaming tears. It would be an hour before he could see anything.

I went to work on the safe in the upper office and got it open. There wasn't a great deal of stuff in there, about a thousand dollars in currency, and some rather distinctive unset stones.

However, it was all I needed; I didn't

want to let it appear that the robbers had made too good a haul. I left the safe door open.

I came back down the stairs, shuffling my feet on the treads and starting an argument in my change of voices. Gruff voice accused high voice of having opened and looted the safe upstairs. High voice denied it, said it was hard to crack; it would be better to tackle the vault. This went on until I was near the watchman, writhing with the pain in temporarily sightless eyes.

Then, high-pitched, I said:

"Wait. I wanta get some dope from this guy."

I walked over to the watchman. He shuddered and cowered away from me. I rolled him over with ungentle hands, pulled a .38 Smith and Wesson Special from a holster in the vicinity of his hip pocket.

I put in a little time looking over the knots in the rope with which I tied him. While I worked, I talked.

"Listen," I told him, "that vault is a tough one, but my pardner and I can get it open. What time are you supposed to punch your control boxes?"

"I punched one of them," he said, "just before you came in. The other one I punch at quarter past and . . ."

He suddenly realized that he was giving valuable information, and became quiet.

"Quarter past," I said. "My Gawd, it's that now! Where's the box? I'll punch it now."

He clamped his jaw tight:

"Go to hell!" he said.

"You can either tell me where that box is," I shrilled at him in a voice that I strove to make quavering with excitement, "or I'll give you the works right here! You feel this knife?"

I opened my pen knife, let the point press against his throat.

"That knife," I told him, "has got a blade eleven inches long. I'll drive it through your throat and pin you to the wall."

His face was white, the lips were

blue, the eyes, with the funny look about their pupils that comes to eyes that have been gassed, streamed tears down his cheeks.

"Go to hell!" he said, and braced himself for the thrust of the knife.

I quietly stepped back a foot or two and said, in the hoarse voice I'd assumed for the man who was supposed to be acting as my accomplice, "You — damn' liar, quit yer foolin' with that guy. You got that box open and got the stuff out of it. You're holding out on me."

I whirled and screamed in the falsetto, "You damn' lug. I told you I didn't."

"The hell with that line!" I said, making my voice gruff again, but raising it above the whisper. "Kick through with my share of the swag you got from the safe upstairs, or I'll . . ."

I made noises with my feet.

"Keep back," I yelled. "Keep back, damn you, or I'll cut your heart out!"

I jumped, came down on the floor with heavy feet, lunged, grunted, gave a half-scream, and then said in the shrill, falsetto voice, "Damn you! You asked for it, you double-crossing spy. You've got it now, right through the neck."

I stumbled around moaning and groaning, ran with staggering steps from the room. Then I let myself fall to the floor with a heavy thump.

I got the live chicken from the automobile, its wings tied so that it could make no move. I clamped a hand about its neck and shut off its wind, carried it with noiseless steps, into the vault room and made a quick, clean cut with my knife. Blood started to spurt. I held the bleeding body over Sam Reece's body, then let blood drop in a trail to the adjoining room where the watchman sat blinded and in white-faced horror.

"You going to tell me what box to plug in?" I asked him, in the high-pitched tone.

Twice I saw his lips move as he tried to speak. He was too frightened to say anything. He thought the end had

come. But he did manage to roll his head from side to side in mute negation.

I slipped out of the side door, got in the coupé and moved into the foggy darkness.

So far my plans had carried. The trap was laid for Oscar Milen's gang. It was almost certain that when the police identified Sam Reece and heard the watchman's story, they would pick up some of the men known to be working with him. They might not, and probably would not, get Milen, the big shot, and I couldn't wait.

I left the roadster in a deserted place near the waterfront, wrapped the fowl and a loose cobblestone in the red silk cloth and threw them into the water.

Then I went to a phone and called *Soo Hoo Duck*, whose word in Chinatown was law. I told him of the rumor that Milen was engineering a big dope deal and said that I wanted to get in touch with a man who could lead me to someone who might be dealing with him.

*Soo Hoo Duck* gave me an address and a name—*Gow Chek N'Gow*. He said:

"He will be told of your coming; for much danger surrounds him. Except for both eyes and both legs, he looks not unlike the one whose description you gave to *Ngat T'oy*."



*OW, CHEK N'-GOW*" was a nickname, and signified "Nine Oxen," and he was so called because he was reputed to have the strength of nine of the huge oxen that are used for burden bearing in China.

Most of the Chinese who come to this country are the small-boned, wiry individuals who hail from the south of China. But there is a breed in the north of China that travels but little; that is heavily muscled, big-boned, tall and dignified.

*Gow Chek N'gow* had come from the north of China, but he had learned the southern dialect, until he could pass for a native of Canton, or of the *Say Yup* district, where a harsher modification of the Cantonese dialect is spoken.

I conversed in Cantonese with *Gow Chek N'gow* because I was more familiar with it than he was with English.

"Is it possible," I asked, "that a Rat of Heaven could be a brother of Nine Oxen?"

His face stared at me with expressionless scrutiny.

"My ears," he said, "have heard words that my brain cannot understand. Speak more clearly that my own mind may have the bright flash of understanding."

I have always liked that word for understanding used by the Chinese "*meng bat*," which means "a bright flash."

This is, perhaps, as typical of the process of understanding as anything I know of.

"There is," I said, "one who describes himself as *T'ien Sheuh*, a man of one leg and one eye, who is very expert in throwing a knife. He is a big man, broad of shoulder and heavy of bone. Because he is so big and strong I thought perhaps he was your brother."

We were talking in *Gow Chek N'gow's* room. The outside was dingy and dirty. The windows were grimy, but the interior was finished with the lavish hand of luxury. There were thick carpets, expensive tapestries, carved Chinese marble; and a small teakwood shrine, containing a painting of *Gow Chek N'gow's* paternal ancestor, held offerings of bits of choice Chinese food served in bowls of delicate China-ware. On either side of the food offerings were ornate incense burners from which smoke curled lazily upward in twin streams, to blend together in a filmy halo about the top of the picture.

On a table before me was a pot of tea. One of the tiny Chinese bowls

nestled in a circular saucer, with a hole cut in the center to hold the bowl steady. To my right was a plate of dried melon seeds, and on the left was a small dish of dried ginger, candied watermelon peel.

"I have heard of this one," *Gow Chek N'gow* said. "He has come to *Tai Fow* from no one knows where."

It is difficult for the Chinese to say "San Francisco." For that reason, they invariably refer to the city merely as "*Tai Fow*," which means "The large city."

I stared thoughtfully into my tea cup. "How long has he been here?"

"No one knows."

"He has some definite purpose to fulfill?"

"As to that I cannot say."

"How does he keep out of sight?"

*Gow Chek N'gow's* voice was cautious, and I could tell that he was fearful lest he should give information which might later turn out to be inaccurate.

"I do not know," he said. "But this much I do know: The man has friends in Chinatown, and they are powerful friends. He seems to know all that goes on, yet he is never seen. He is hiding somewhere in one of the secret rooms of the tongs. There are those who bring him food and bring him information. He comes forth at times for the purpose of doing that which he desires done. He calls himself 'The Rat of Heaven,' and, as you know, with the Chinese, The Rat of Heaven is entitled to much respect. The bat is a silent animal that flies without noise through the darkness."

I nodded thoughtfully.

"And you, First Born," went on *Gow Chek N'gow*, "know of this one. You have information which but few of the Chinese possess. Could you enlighten my mind as to the means by which you secured this information?"

"I saw the man," I said. "I saw him for a moment, and that was all."

*Gow Chek N'gow's* voice was bland.

"By any chance," he asked, "did you see a knife at the time you saw this Rat of Heaven?"

I answered him after the Chinese fashion, using a language which contains no word for "yes":

"I saw a knife," I said.

There was a moment of silence. I munched a melon seed. *Gow Chek N'gow* sipped tea.

After a moment I went on:

"I search," I said, "for men who have tried to make trouble for me. These men are connected with the opium business. I think they are new to *Tai Fow*; that they have, therefore, tried to get business away from those who already have the business."

*Gow Chek N'gow's* eyes showed the faintest suggestion of a twinkle.

"But there is no opium business in Chinatown."

"My nostrils," I told him, "have smelled the peculiar sweetish smell of opium smoke."

*Gow Chek N'gow* ceased his Oriental indirection.

"You wish," he said, "to find the men who are making trouble in the opium world?"

"I wish to find them."

His eyes surveyed my shabby clothes approvingly.

"My countrymen," he said, "are suspicious of those whom they term the *Bak Gwiee Loe* unless they seem those who wish to woo the smoke of the poppy."

"I will go then," I told him, "as one who wishes to woo the smoke of the poppy."

"It is well," he said.

He pushed the tea cup slightly back, waited for me to arise.

I got to my feet and crossed the room towards the door.

*Gow Chek N'gow* turned out all the lights, save a small one which burned perpetually over the shrine where the spirits of his ancestors were worshipped. My last glimpse of the room showed the smoke seeping upward over

the picture of his paternal ancestor. Then I turned from the room. The door closed behind me. At once I found myself in a narrow passageway, grimy and dirty, the building shabby and ill-kept, the hallways filled with the peculiar odor which is indicative of crowded human occupancy. All about me were the sounds and smells of Chinatown.

Our feet pounded down the creaking boards of the uncarpeted corridor.

*Gow Chek N'gow* led the way—down a flight of stairs, across a strip of fog-filled street, along a narrow sidewalk, pausing before a door, entering a room filled with tobacco smoke, where half a dozen Chinese were playing *Hie Goot Pie* at a table.

The room was a narrow storeroom, and experience had taught me that this narrow storeroom furnished merely an air of respectability to the front of a building which contained many diversified forms of nocturnal activity in the rear.

I had my shoulders hunched forward, my eyes downcast, my fingers twitching, my head jerking. Beady eyes stared at me in uncordial appraisal. *Gow Chek N'gow* vouchsafed but few words, a word of swift greeting, a statement that I was a friend of his. Then he moved towards the green curtained doorway in the rear of the small storeroom.

There was a passage back of the green curtain. At the end of the passage a man sat indolently on a stool. He might have been merely lounging there, passing away the time. I knew him, however, for what he was—watchman for some of the illegal activities that went on behind the closed doors at the rear of the passageway.

The glittering, black eyes of the guard slithered from *Gow Chek N'gow's* countenance to my own.

*Gow Chek N'gow* said something to him that I didn't catch. The guard stood to one side, pulled a string that was cunningly concealed beneath a piece of matting that hung from one side of

the passageway. A spring lock clicked somewhere. A door slid smoothly open. What had seemed to be part of the tongue and groove walls of the passage became an opening.

I followed *Gow Chek N'gow* through the door, down a flight of stairs, along a cement passageway, until we came to an iron door. The door opened. We climbed many stairs to another door.

A bell rang.

After a moment the door opened. I could see no one, nor could I see by what mechanism the door had been opened. We crossed to another door. That too opened. The smell of opium smoke assailed my nostrils.

A small Cantonese with cunning eyes and shriveled countenance sat behind a little table working an abacus with deft fingers. In front of him was a Chinese account book, a camel's-hair brush, and a box containing *mak bit suey*.

*Gow Chek N'gow* motioned me to wait. He moved over to the man who sat behind the desk and talked with him in low-voiced Cantonese.

The man behind the desk ceased working the abacus. He became, apparently, much excited. He waved his hands in quick, nervous gestures, talked volubly. I caught phrases—he knew of no one who dealt in opium with the white men; but he had heard of white men who were trying to make trouble for the regular dealers.

*Gow Chek N'gow* watched him calmly. After a while he interrupted with a few more low-voiced comments.

The excitement of the man back of the desk seemed to subside slightly. He glanced across at me, and I thought I could see a quick flash of shrewd cunning in his eyes.

I tried to look indifferent, staring down the long line of bunks, on many of which lay sleepers, either dead to the world, or lying in a quiescent stupor, their nerves dulled by an overdose of the drug. Here and there, little flickering lights from peanut oil lamps shone

redly through the smoke-filled darkness. A slave girl, attired in silk trousers and embroidered coat, slipped along the aisle, carrying an opium pipe on a tray, and half a dozen *l'oys*, as the small Chinese opium portions are designated.

The man behind the desk stood up. *Gow Chek N'gow* performed the introduction with a single word: "*Ah Wong*," he said.

I nodded to *Ah Wong*. Once more, *Gow Chek N'gow* vouched for me as a friend:

"*Ngoh hoh pang yeu*," he said.

I could see that *Ah Wong* was excited. He shuffled down a long, dark corridor, illuminated here and there with peanut oil lamps. From the darkness came that peculiar deep gurgling sound which marks the inhalation of a pill of opium that has been properly cooked and is held over the flame of a peanut oil lamp, causing it to bubble and sputter.

*Gow Chek N'gow* spoke to me in low-voiced English: "One piecee white woman sell opium," he said. "She make much trouble. Other people make much trouble this woman. You come, you talk. Maybe she what you want."

*Ah Wong* led the way to a door. He tried the knob. It turned, but the door didn't open. He tapped with his knuckles, then scratched lightly with his long fingernails.



WOMAN'S voice said: "Who's there?"

*Ah Wong* answered in a shrill, high-pitched voice: "*Ah Wong*."

There was the sound of a bolt clicking back. The door opened. *Ah Wong* stood to one side and motioned to me. *Gow Chek N'gow* stepped to the other side and stood, watching.

I entered the room. A white woman was sitting on a couch. She looked up at me with sudden apprehension in her

eyes and said: "What the hell do you want?"

She was about twenty-six, with intense black eyes, hair that was plastered down on either side of her forehead, a pale face which she had made no effort to color, and vividly crimsoned lips.

I pushed on into the room. *Ah Wong* and *Gow Chek N'gow* came in behind me.

I saw her look sneeringly at my clothes, then her eyes came to my face, and I saw quick interest in them. I felt certain that it couldn't be recognition.

"I'm interested in dope," I told her.

"Hell!" she said slowly, "we all are. Dope means money, and we're interested in money, aren't we?"

The room was fixed up as a private opium room. There was an opium couch, but it was equipped for an exclusive white trade. There was a mattress on it and a pillow which was not too soiled. A peanut oil lamp flickered on the stand by the side of the bed, and there was a long opium pipe with a large can of opium near the lamp. The dead-white color of the woman's skin, the peculiar look of her eyes, convinced me that she was more or less under the influence of the drug.

I doubted very much that *Ah Wong* knew too much about what I wanted or could give me too much information. He had furnished me with a contact; I decided to find out for myself just what that contact could do for me.

"Know a man by the name of Oscar Milen?" I asked.

Her face seemed to stiffen.

"Asking questions, or just being sociable?" she inquired.

"Both," I told her.

"Look in the back of the book, then, and find the answers."

"Oscar Milen," I told her, watching her narrowly, "stuck up the Gamay Jewelry Company about an hour ago. He got away with a little swag, and had to bump a guy in doing it. I could help him, and in return he might let me in on

that big deal he is swinging. I want to talk with him."

"Who's Oscar Milen?" she asked.

I stared steadily into the somewhat dazed-looking eyes.

"You know the ropes," I said. "You know Oscar Milen. I want to get in touch with him."

She started fumbling under the pillow.

"Big boy," she said slowly, "I've got something to show you."

There are times in my life when I make bad mistakes. This was one of them. I had paid altogether too much attention to the comments of *Ah Wong*. I was banking too heavily on the good faith of a Chinese whom I had never seen before.

My eyes were on the hand which came out from under the pillow. Too late, I realized what it was she intended to show me.

It was the business end of an automatic.

I stared at the black hole in the center of the ring of blue steel and said slowly, "You act impulsively."

"You're damn' right I do," she remarked. "*Ah Wong*, in case you don't know it, is getting his hop from Oscar Milen's gang, and I'm in with the mob. I'm telling you this because it isn't going to make any difference. You want to see Milen and you don't want to do him any good. All right, you're going to see him. Stick your hands behind your back."

She nodded to *Ah Wong*.

"Tie his wrists," she said. She swung the pistol a little to cover *Gow Chek N'gow*, then back to me. "You keep out of this," she told him, "and you won't get hurt."

*Ah Wong's* face was utterly bland and expressionless. He opened a little cupboard, took out a very businesslike looking coil of fish cord.

I hoped she couldn't shoot straight. There was no time to waste on her. *Ah Wong* had the cord. I wasn't certain whether he intended to put it around

my wrists or around my throat. I didn't intend to wait to find out. It was an occasion that called for action.

I went over backwards in the chair. The gun thundered. A bullet crashed into the wall behind me. I grabbed *Ah Wong's* legs. He came down to the floor in a pile. I heard the rat-like squeal of excitement which came from his lips, caught the flash of his hand as he reached for a knife in the front of his blouse.

My fist connected with his chin. It jarred him. My knee caught him in the stomach. I caught his neck in a strangle-hold, and looked up to see what had happened to the girl with the gun.

*Gow Chek N'gow* had lived up to his name. He was supposed to have the strength of nine oxen. He'd picked the girl up as casually as though she had been a feather pillow. He held her under one arm, his right hand clamped about the wrist that held the gun. His left hand slowly twisted the gun loose from her fingers. He dropped it and kicked it under the bed.

"*Ngoh hie m' on leong,*" he said.

I accepted his apology. I was none too happy, myself. It looked as though we had walked into something.

*Ah Wong* gave a couple of last fluttering struggles and lay still. I took the fish cord, tied his wrists and ankles.

*Gow Chek N'gow* started to say something, but he was interrupted by the words that poured forth from the lips of the young woman. They were words that I had heard before. I am not certain that I had heard them in exactly that combination. Her crimson lips seemed to give fire to them, making them sear the ear drums.

*Gow Chek N'gow* casually swung her up in the air, over his shoulder, clamped his hand over her mouth. She tried to bite it. With complete disregard of all customs of chivalry, *Gow Chek N'gow* proceeded to throttle her into insensibility. I sat on the unconscious form of *Ah Wong* and didn't interfere. They, both of them, had it coming.

*Gow Chek N'gow* tossed her on the bed, reached for the fish cord. He tied her up with neatness and precision.

"The Master has orders?" asked *Gow Chek N'gow*.

"I would like," I told him, "to find where *Ah Wong* keeps the supply of black poppy which he sells to his patrons. It would be some place where the police would not be likely to look for it if they should make a hurried raid, and yet somewhere where *Ah Wong* could get to it readily when there is an opportunity to sell it. That might lead to the men I want."

*Gow Chek N'gow* nodded slowly.

"There was a string, a very little string, by the side of the desk," he said. "I noticed it as I entered. My eyes saw, but did not heed."

We carefully closed the door, making certain that the pair were so bound that they could not move. The man who had the strength of nine oxen led the way back to *Ah Wong's* desk.

All about us, the opium house slumbered in drugged tranquillity. The gunshot had not penetrated the heavy walls of the den. Here and there from the darkness came the sounds of the feet of the slave girls *slip-slopping* about, ministering to the wants of the smokers. Occasionally there would be the sound of cash making a silvery tinkle.

*Gow Chek N'gow* moved to the desk, inspected the little string which hung from a small hole in a thin board on the side.

Carefully, he split that board with the blade of a heavy knife. He ripped apart the two pieces, followed the string down to a trap door in the floor, a trap door which was cunningly concealed by the desk itself. *Gow Chek N'gow* raised the trap door and disclosed a peculiarly balanced container held precariously over a black drop.

*Gow Chek N'gow* pointed to the end of the string. It was tied to a trigger-like arrangement holding back a powerful coiled spring. It was but necessary to pull the string to release the trigger

and send the container of opium plunging down into the depths of that black hole.

*Gow Chek N'gow* nodded thoughtfully.

"At the end of that passageway," he said, "which is, perhaps, three buildings away and two floors down, there will be a man waiting always by the base of that chute. He will receive the opium and run with it. In that way, no matter what happens here, the *a peck yen* will be saved."

"If you could find out where this passageway ended," I told him, "and I could pull the string, you would be in a position to follow the man who took the opium. To learn where this man went with the opium, might be of some advantage to us."

His face was without expression, but I could see that he was concentrating, despite the unscowling smoothness of his forehead.

"It would be difficult," he said. "It would not be impossible. There is a store where I have noticed a man who always sits in one position. I have wondered about this man before."

He glanced uneasily around him at the opium den.

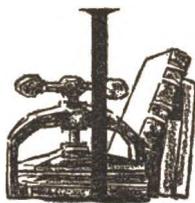
"You could not go to the place where this man sits," he said. "If I go to the place it leaves you alone here with men who are strange to you and who do not like the white men to interfere with their rose-colored dreams. There would, perhaps, be some danger."

"It is a danger which one must take," I answered.

*Gow Chek N'gow* turned towards the door.

"But a few short minutes," he said, "and I will return and report to you. In the meantime, carry on no conversation with the slave girls. Pretend that you do not understand Chinese. They are curious why *Ah Wong* has not returned."

He moved swiftly through the doorway.



STOOD by the desk, waiting, looking over the long, dark corridors between the opium bunks, watching the flicker of the peanut oil lamps, seeing the vague, grotesque shadows cast by the sloe-eyed slave girls as they flitted about, disposing of the sacks of opium which they had previously purchased from *Ah Wong*.

I heard the faint sound of surreptitious conversation in Cantonese from the far end of the room, words that were spoken in the artificially trained, high-pitched voice of a slave girl. There was the guttural tone of a man's answer, then the restless stirring of bodies.

I didn't like it. There was something brewing, a gradual building of tension which became apparent all through the opium den.

I could hear the shuffling of feet, the vague rustling of bodies as they stirred upon the hard board couches. There was no more gurgling of the black opium pills as they sputtered over the peanut oil lamp.

A strange restlessness, a peculiar psychic tension gripped the place.

An opium smoker is inclined to get peculiar ideas. The opium is in the nature of a hypnotic. Ideas which are suggested to the smoker strike his mind with the force of reality. Then there is no telling exactly what an opium eater is going to do.

I heard the sound of a man sliding from a couch to the floor, could hear his feet stagger for a step or two before he secured control of his legs.

A slave girl said something to him in a whining voice. Steps shuffled along the boards into another dark corner. There was the sound of throaty Cantonese, words that were edged with impatience, as though the man was trying to arouse some particularly sound sleeper.

The Chinese, as individuals, are non-aggressive. But let them get touched

with the smoke of opium and with a mob psychology, and there is no telling to what lengths of violence they will go.

I started towards the door which led to the room where *Ah Wong* had taken us.

The dark shadows at the far end of the corridor seemed to swirl into motion. I caught the sound of staggering steps, of grunts, the shrill voice of a slave girl rising in excitement. Then half a dozen men came charging forward in a compact shuffling group. A glint of light played on steel.

I moved hastily across the floor, jerked open the door, stepped inside, slammed the door and shot a heavy iron bolt into place. I noticed, with satisfaction, that the door was heavy, that the bolt would hold it except against a pretty vigorous sort of assault.

I sighed, stepped back, and my foot seemed to stick to the floor. I put it down and pulled it up again, then glanced down to see what had happened.

One glance was sufficient.

I was standing near the edge of a thick, viscid pool, the nature of which there was no mistaking.

I looked over at the opium couch where we had left the woman. It was empty. There was no sign of the woman, nor, on the other hand, was there any sign of the cord which had been used to bind her. Evidently she had been spirited away bodily.

The form of *Ah Wong* lay on the floor. It needed but one glance to tell what had happened to him.

His head was tilted back. The expression on his face was one of terror. His lips had reflexed into a horrible snarl, disclosing the yellow teeth which protruded from his mouth. Below his chin was an area of gaping red horror, where the neck had pulled back from the clean cut which had severed his gullet, cut neatly through his big throat arteries. It was a neat, workmanlike and thoroughly efficient job of throat cutting.

From the other side of the door came

the faint sound of excited voices. Bodies banged against the door.

I stood staring at the floor, thinking.

It was a question of time only before that door would open.

These Chinese were not the type who would appeal to the police. They would, instead, appeal to the hatchet men of their tong. There would be no question in their minds but what I had been the one who had slit the throat of *Ah Wong*. They doubtless figured that *Gow Chek N'gow* had been my accomplice. There was no time to warn *Gow Chek N'gow*, nor was there any opportunity.

The worst of these tong trials is that they take place in the absence of the defendant and there is no opportunity for the defendant to present his side of the case. I was trapped by circumstantial evidence.

The men banged at the door, followed by a moment's lull, while apparently they debated upon some method of getting the door down.

I glanced around the room.

In the distance I heard a peculiar *slap . . . clump . . . slap . . . clump . . . slap*. I frowned, and tried to remember where I had heard that sound before.

Recollection flooded my mind with an illuminating flash. The sounds which I heard were the same as those made by the one-legged Chinese who had been so adroit and deadly in the handling of a knife.

I cocked my head to one side, the better to listen, trying to locate just where the sounds came from.

They seemed to be coming from beyond what appeared to be the blank wall of the room. I ran to the place. It was tongue and groove. That is the construction that the Chinese most strongly favor, since it makes it almost impossible to penetrate the secret of hidden doorways, which can be cunningly concealed.

I had no time to waste in looking for hidden springs. I raised my foot and crashed it against the thin partition.

Board splintered and crashed. I saw the line of the hidden doorway then, worked my fingers in through the crack, pulled out boards, wormed through the hole and found myself in a dark passageway.

Ahead of me I could hear the peculiar *slap . . . clump . . . slap . . . clump*.

I put my head down and ran, heedless of pitfalls which might lie ahead.

I rounded a corner in the passageway, got a glimpse of light at the far end of the passage. The illumination was sufficient to show the form of the broad-shouldered, one-legged Chinese hobbling along on a crutch. Over his right shoulder was thrown what appeared to be a shapeless bundle, but what I knew to be the body of the woman who had been tied on the opium couch.

I called to him.

The figure didn't even turn.

One moment I saw it silhouetted against the illumination at the far end of the passageway, then it slumped sideways, hesitated for a moment and disappeared.

I figured that the fingers of the one-legged Chinese had found a secret spring that manipulated a concealed door.

I ran towards the place, rapidly.

Of a sudden, my feet pounded down, not upon the floor, but upon empty atmosphere. I felt myself hurtling downward. Air whizzed past my ears. My head struck a glancing blow against the side of a chute. Then I went down like a ton of coal being dropped into a basement.

I felt that the chute down which I was speeding was smooth, worn either by the passage of bodies, or cunningly constructed and polished. I was glad that this was so.

The chute went on a sharp slope for perhaps thirty or forty feet, then straightened out into a more gentle incline. It was pitch dark. I tried to claw with my hands and exert sufficient pres-

sure on the sides to arrest my progress. But it was impossible to get sufficient purchase without tearing off the skin of my palms. I held my feet ahead of me, rigid, so that when I struck I could brace myself against the impact.

The chute swung in a well-banked curve, then dropped abruptly. My feet struck something that might have been padded board, something which was worked by a resistance spring, which swung outward and downward. I felt myself shoot through this padded obstacle, and then the foggy night air struck my face. I had a whirling glimpse of red *Neon* lights, of streamers of fog that swirled about the buildings—and my feet banged down upon cement sidewalk.

Above my head, something slammed shut with a muffled thud. Evidently, the padded, hinged obstruction worked by a spring which had been pulled back into place after having dropped me to the sidewalk.

The drop had been none too gentle. My knees hurt. The bottoms of my feet stung. I had bit my tongue where my teeth clicked together under the impact. Aside from that I was unharmed.

All about me was San Francisco's Chinatown. I was on a side street, still breathless from the running, with only a vague idea of direction. I felt as buffeted about as do passengers who have been lurched and jerked through the tunnel of a chute-the-chutes, and I had as confused a sense of direction.

There was only one thing to do.

I started walking off with casual nonchalance.

Yet there are those who will tell you that San Francisco's Chinatown is free of all tunnels, man-traps and secret passages!

I was angry, but that was an emotion I could ill afford, and I sternly repressed it. I had tried to get in touch with Oscar Milen, seen too late that the approach which I had opened would be fatal to me, and even then persisting on that line, had nearly lost my life. And

through me, *Gow Chek N'gow* would find himself in trouble. But I had firm belief that the man with the strength of nine oxen could take care of himself.

My mind switched to the one-legged Chinese, and a sudden thought struck me: Could it be possible that he was on the same quest as myself?

Already, two of Oscar Milen's henchmen had fallen to his knife; one a gang member; the second, Milen's contact man with the Chinese. But it did me no good to puzzle over that riddle. There was only one thing left for me to do. To try to trip Milen in his opium dealing was now closed to me. The murdered body of *Ah Wong* had settled that. But I had still another plan, another trap to lay, and the first steps could be taken through no other than the girl he had set to spy upon me.

**B**ERNICE HARRIS sat on the edge of her bed. Her dress was ripped across the shoulders. She held her hands in front of her face. Blood trickled through the fingers.

A chair had been overturned. A small table lay on its side. Blood had dropped to the worn white spread on the bed.

She took her hands from her face to stare at me with hunted eyes.

"What happened?" I asked.

She beckoned to me with a blood-stained finger.

"Take a look," she said thickly, "and see if my nose is broken."

I crossed over to her, felt of the cartilage. Her nose had been flattened, but the bones were still intact.

"You're all right," I said. "You've had a bad bloody nose. You're going to have an awful black eye, and there are finger marks on your throat."

She tried to grin. Blood squeezed out from a cut in her lip. She quit grinning.

I crossed to the wash-stand, sopped

towels in cold water and went to work on her. The swelling reduced somewhat. I cleaned up most of the mess of blood.

"Who was it?" I asked.

"Harry Crager," she said.

"Who's Crager?"

"Oscar Milen's right-hand man."

"What did he want?"

"They think you killed Sam Reece, or had him killed by one of your Chinese friends, and that in some way I tipped you off," she said, and then started to curse.

There was bitter hatred in her voice. She ripped out words that she must have heard around the mine, husky, he-man curses, without the obscenities which had characterized the gutter talk of the woman in the opium joint.

"Don't do it," I told her. "There's a better way. Is he coming back?"

"No," she said, "but Oscar Milen, himself, is coming."

I sat down on the bed and tried to talk to her. She interrupted me, to mouth more bitter, vindictive curses. I grabbed her by the shoulder and shook her.

"Shut up," I said, "and listen to me. It's important."

"Hell's bells!" she said. "All I've been doing is listening to somebody ever since I hit the damned town! That's the trouble with me—I listen. I listened to Trasker. His voice was like music to the ear drums. That gave me the habit. I've been listening to some mealy-mouthed slicker ever since."

I saw that I couldn't do anything with her by getting rough.

"Do you want to get your father out of jail?" I asked.

That silenced her. She looked at me with her one good eye. The other one was swollen almost shut, giving her face an expression of lopsided humor; although there was, doubtless, nothing funny about it to her.

"Go ahead," she said.

I took out a cloth bundle from underneath my coat, where it had been strapped around my side.

"In this bundle is a gun and some jewelry," I told her.

She looked groggily at me.

"The gun," I said, "came from a watchman at the Gamay Jewelry Company. He thinks that the man who took it was a murderer. The jewelry came from the Gamay Jewelry Company. It can be identified.

"If you listen until you hear Milen at the door, and then pretend that you're trying to make a sneak through my room, he'll grab you, find the bundle and take it away from you. Don't tell him where the stuff came from. He'll figure that you've been double-crossing him."

"And bump me off," she said. "That's what Crager threatened."

"No," I told her. "About that time I'll arrange a little commotion that will distract his attention. You do just what I tell you. Be trying to sneak out through the connecting door just about the time he gets this door open."

"What's the sketch?" she asked.

"He'll take it away from you," I said. "You throw up your hands and scream. I'm going to have an officer here ready to make a pinch. He'll catch Milen with the stolen goods and the revolver in his possession."

"Then what?" she asked, her good eye showing interest.

"Naturally," I said, "Milen is going to find himself in a spot. He's going to get the best lawyer he can get."

"He'll do that, all right," she told me.

"Lawyers cost money."

"Well, he can get the money."

"Yes," I told her, "that's exactly what I'm figuring on. He'll send Harry Crager after the money. The money will probably be in nice, crisp, new bills, bills that can be identified as having been taken from Frank Trasker when he was murdered. They buried those bills somewhere, or hid them in a safety deposit box. They won't use them unless there's an emergency. It's going to be a little difficult for them to pass off that money. A prominent criminal lawyer, however, wouldn't have very

much trouble. Moreover, it's good, hard cash. When Milen gets in a jam and has to have money, he's going to think of that money first. He'll send Crager after it."

"Then what?"

"Then I'll follow Crager, and I'll have someone with me who has authority to act. Crager will spill his guts."

She shook her head.

"No he won't," she said, "Crager's hard."

I laughed at her.

"Any man who would beat up a woman the way you're beat up," I said, "would talk when the officers get to work on him right. I'll see to it that they work on him. Is it a go?"

She stared at me, her lower lip puffed out and split, her left eye almost closed, her right eye glowering.

"It'd be so damn' much better," she said, "for me to use that gun and pump five shots right into Milen's stomach. Then. . . ."

"Then," I finished for her, "you'd be arrested and charged with murder. Your father would still be in jail, charged with murder. The probabilities are you'd both be convicted. This other way Crager talks. He'll blame the Trasker crime on Milen. Your father gets out. You are finished with both of them."

She nodded her head and extended her hand.

"It's a go," she said.

I gave her the package and some more instructions. I went to the end of the corridor, down a half flight and waited in the shadows.

I'd waited nearly half an hour, and was getting plenty tired of it, when the elevator came up. Milen got out and pounded down towards the room occupied by Bernice Harris.

I beat the elevator down.

At the desk I was excited.

"Where's the house detective?" I asked. "I've got to see him right away. There's a robbery taking place in the room next to mine!"

"What room?" asked the clerk.

I told him.

"There's been a hell of a lot of disturbance in there," he said. "I had to telephone them and tell them to keep quiet an hour and a half ago."

"This is something different," I said. "This is robbery."

The clerk pressed a button. A second or two later, a heavy-set man with lots of stomach stared suspiciously at me. I gave him the name I had registered under and the room number, told him there was a robbery going on in the next room, that I distinctly heard the woman scream and a man's voice say, "Stick 'em up!"

The house detective wasn't particularly enthusiastic. He took me by the arm, piloted me to the elevator, and we started up.

Bernice Harris was screaming when we got the elevator door open. The screams got the house dick into action. He pulled his rod and started down the corridor. I turned and sprinted for the stairs. I made it breathlessly down to the desk and flung myself against the partition.

"They're killing the house detective!" I said. "Get the reserves, quick!"

The clerk grabbed up the telephone.

"Police Headquarters!" he said.

I slipped out while his head was turned and soon lost myself in nearby streets. Then I set out to put the bee on Harry Cramer.



ONE-LUNG WILLIE was a stool-pigeon. Virtually everyone knew he was a stool-pigeon. He got away with a lot of petty crimes simply because he turned information in to the cops. He never had any big-time stuff. He was too well known for that.

One-Lung Willie looked at me suspiciously and was seized with a fit of coughing. I waited until he had finished, and was digging at his eyes with the knuckles of his hand.

"I don't know you," he wheezed.

"Sure you don't," I said, "but I know you. The whole damn' town knows you. I'm giving you an opportunity."

"How do I know you are?" he asked.

"Because," I said, "you've got sense, or should have. It's time you snapped out of the small-time racket and got into something worth while. You haven't peddled a piece of information that's been worth a damn in the last six months. They're getting ready to put the lid down on you. That's straight gossip that I got from Headquarters."

"Who the hell are you?"

"To you," I told him, "I'm just Santa Claus, standing on the edge of the chimney with a sack full of Christmas presents. Do you want them or not?"

"What you got?" he asked.

"You tune in on the police broadcasts?" I asked.

"Sure. What about it? Anyone can listen to a radio."

"Did you notice that Oscar Milen was arrested for the robbery of the Gamay Jewelry Company and the murder of Sam Reece?"

"Yeah, I noticed, but that won't mean anything. Oscar Milen is a big shot. He'll get in and he'll get out."

"He's in pretty bad," I told him. "The watchman's testimony against him is deadly as hell."

"May be," he said, "but he's got the best mouthpiece there is in the city."

"That," I said, "is where the catch comes in. The mouthpiece has got to be paid."

"Milen can do it all right."

"Sure he can," I said, "but there's a chance for a wise dick to earn himself a promotion. Think of the nice spot that would leave you in."

One-Lung Willie was getting excited now. I could see his eyes glitter, and he started to breath more rapidly. Any excitement sent his breathing up, and started him coughing, but he'd been like that for years and was good for years more. He was a tough bird.

I waited until he got done with the second fit.

"You know Harry Crager?" I asked.

"No," he said, "I don't."

"Your friend on the detective force will," I assured him. "If he doesn't, he can find out all about him without much trouble."

"Go on," Willie said. "For gawd's sake, spill it. You're getting me all excited, and excitement isn't good for me."

I waited until the interval of silence should make my words impressive.

"This is a straight tip. It's something you can peddle anywhere for the gospel. You don't need to pass on where you got it. Tell your detective friend to put two men on the tail of Harry Crager. Don't let him get away, no matter what happens. He's going to get some money this morning to sweeten the mouthpiece who is going to represent Oscar Milen. It may be in a safety deposit box, but it's stuff that the police want. It's red-hot. If they'll tail Crager they can make the pinch."

"It sounds right," Willie wheezed.

"It is right," I told him. "It may not be right if you keep on arguing about it. Things sometimes happen quickly."

Willie looked at his watch and said, "It's two o'clock in the morning. Nothing's going to happen now."

"The hell it ain't," I told him. "There's more stuff happens after two o'clock in the morning than at any other time."

He wrapped his thin, threadbare coat about him, turned up the collar.

"Cripes!" he said, "I hate to go out in the night air!"

"Perhaps you'd rather let me play Santa Claus to someone else," I told him.

"No, no, no," he said, with excited rapidity, "it's all right. I'm going. Keep your shirt on, brother. Don't get so damned upset."

I let him get out of the joint, and tailed him to the corner. He was looking up and down. I knew that he had his contacts all right. I let him go, and started getting a line on Crager.

That wasn't so easy.

Crager was relatively unknown. The mob hadn't been in operation too long. I wasted more than three-quarters of an hour getting on Crager's tail. When I did, men from Headquarters were already there. That suited me down to the ground. I realized that the police must have had some intimation of what was happening or they wouldn't have fallen so readily for One-Lung Willie's story. It was a sweet chance for some detective to earn himself a promotion.

Crager was in one of the little dumps that keep open all night. He looked haggard and worried. One of the plain-clothesmen was waiting outside in a car. The other one was inside at a table, flirting with one of the girls who rustled drinks for the place on a commission basis.

The plant was good.

I went out and got a taxicab. The cab-driver didn't like the kind of clothes I wore. I had to put up a cash deposit. I sat back against the cushions and smoked. I figured that my work was done, but I just wanted to be in at the finish and it was worth the long wait.

Crager came out shortly before daylight. It was a foggy, clammy dawn. I hoped that One-Lung Willie wasn't abroad. It would have taken a year off his life.

Crager was more careless than any crook I've ever seen. Perhaps it was because he was worried. He got in his car and started out without so much as a backward glance. The dicks took up his trail, and I tailed along behind in the taxicab.

Crager headed out towards the beach, running out on Geary. He was only hitting around thirty miles an hour, which was slow for that time in the morning. The dicks got a little careless, themselves.

Crager's car slowed. He craned his neck out of the side window, apparently looking for a house number. The dicks slid on past, planning to stop in the next block. Crager speeded up and hit the

corner in a screaming turn, his throttle down on the floorboards. He was going fifty miles an hour down the side street before the startled dicks woke up to what had happened. They raced for the next corner.

I tried to speed up the cab and used a lot of fancy language that didn't do any good. Crager had been wise all along. He'd simply laid a trap for the dicks, and the dicks had walked into it. He was out in the clear now, and the whole scheme had gone hay-wire.

I might as well have been sitting home in an armchair as out there in a taxicab, for all the good I could do. I doped out what Crager was going to do, which was something the dicks failed to do, but that was about all the good it did me.

I knew that Crager would turn once more to the left at the next corner, because that would give him just one more block head start on the police car. If he turned to the right, he'd be running right into the cops. If he went straight ahead, he'd only have a block lead. By turning to the left, he made it two blocks.

He turned to the left, and the two blocks start was all he needed.

I tried to do something with the taxicab, but the driver was dumb and he wasn't too enthusiastic, anyway.

I had the cab-driver prowl around a bit, just for luck. It wasn't any good. Once we saw the police car screaming down a side street. They saw our headlights and skidded into a turn, throwing a spotlight on us. When they saw it was a taxicab, they went tearing on by.

Crager had a light eight-cylinder car, with lots of soup under the hood. I figured he was laughing at the whole outfit of us.

I didn't want to stick around in the neighborhood and run into the cops again. I figured that when they saw the taxicab the second time, they might stop and ask questions. Cops are just that dumb. They might try to tail Crager, lose him, get savage, jerk a private citi-

zen out of a taxicab for a shakedown.

"Go on down Presidio Avenue," I told the cab-driver, "and head out through the Presidio."

He was a little suspicious by that time, but he was perfectly willing to get away from there and head towards home. Perhaps his own conscience wasn't any too clear, and he didn't like the cops any better than I did.



WE ran out Presidio Avenue. I wasn't thinking of anything in particular, except the fact that I'd made a fool out of myself trying to work a scheme that made it necessary for me to rely on the cops. I never had got along with them, even when I was trying to work with them.

All of a sudden I snapped to attention.

A car was parked over at the curb. It looked a lot like the car that Crager had gone away in.

"Stop here," I told the cab-driver.

I got out, went over and felt the hood of the car. It was warm. I started back towards the cab.

The cab-driver had taken a deposit from me to cover the cost of the meter. I supposed he recognized the car, the same as I had. The whole thing didn't look good to him. He figured he had his money and there was no use sticking around to get into trouble. He was off before I was half way to him.

I started to yell, and then thought better of it.

The cab went purring down through the Presidio grounds.

I let it go, and began looking around.

A thin daylight was just commencing to filter through the fog. There was no one in sight.

I prowled around the block, and still couldn't find anything. Then I saw a light flash on in one of the houses, and the window became dark once more.

It was just at that stage of dawn when the illumination of an electric light

gives a sickly hue to everything. There was enough fog in the air so that it would be a long time before there was any sunlight.

I started up to take a look at the house.

I thought I heard steps behind me, and turned around.

I got just a glimpse of a cop patrolling around the border of the Presidio grounds. Where the devil he had come from was more than I knew. I didn't have any time to stop and wait. If I was on the trail of what I thought I was, I was going to get some action.

I ran around to the side of the house, where there was a porch. I'd seen enough to know it was the place I wanted. It was a peculiar type of place, ramshackle, run-down, unpainted, seemingly vacant, but the fact the light had switched on in the window showed that someone had signed up for electricity.

It looked as though some Japanese had occupied the place at one time. On the porch was one of the big Japanese drums, the type that were used as an alarm drum in the olden days in Japan.

I climbed up the porch and had just pulled my legs above the gutter when I heard inside the sound of a man's voice screaming some sort of a warning. There was the roar of a shot, then the sound of running feet.

And then I heard the peculiar *slap-clump . . . slap-clump . . . slap-clump* of the Chinese, from somewhere close, inside the house.

Damn that fellow! Was he everywhere?

The door burst open. Harry Crager sprinted across the porch.

I wondered whether he had the stuff on him, or whether the one-eyed Chinese had got to him before he'd pulled the stuff out of the hiding place.

*Slap-clump . . . slap-clump . . . slap-clump.*

The one-legged, one-eyed Chinese came to the edge of the porch. He was just below me. He slipped a knife from beneath his coat, and once more I had

an opportunity to see the peculiar manner in which he held it. He flung his arm around in a complete half-circle, like a discus thrower. The knife slid out into the foggy dawn like some bird of prey, sliding from its perch to swoop down upon an unsuspecting victim.

I watched the progress of that blade with wide-eyed fascination.

Crager was running. He was running fast. It took the knife a part of a second to get there. There was a nice problem of judging speed and distance. The Chinese had judged it perfectly. The knife struck Crager right in the side of the neck. He spun half way around, flung up his hands and tore at the knife, screaming in agony.

The one-eyed Chinese slipped another knife from beneath his coat.

"Stick 'em up!" said a gruff voice.

The officer in uniform swung around the side of the house. A .38 Colt in his right hand held steadily on the stomach of the one-eyed Chinese.

I knew what was going to happen; the officer didn't. The Chinese was going to let that knife fly.

I kicked out from the edge of the porch and jumped.

My feet came down on the cop's shoulders. He went down like a sack of meal. The gun went off once. I kicked it out of his hand. It skidded down a cement walk and rolled over in the fog-moistened grass.

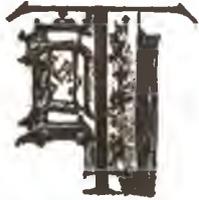
The one-eyed Chinese took a good look at me. He held the knife still in his right hand. His white eye seemed to match up in some subtle way with the glittering eye on the other side of his face, giving his features a peculiar leer. For a long moment he held the knife, then he flipped it back under his coat, turned and started through the house. I heard him go *slap-clump . . . slap-clump . . . slap-clump.*

The officer was out, but not for long. I could feel the quiver of his spasmodic breathing. He began to stir as I started to run.

Harry Crager's car was by the curb.

The ignition keys were in the lock, the motor was warm. The morning was filled with thick fog. I don't know what more any ordinary crook could ask—let alone The Phantom Crook.

I stepped on the starting pedal and jerked in the clutch.



HE newspapers made quite a big thing of it. The officer on the beat was credited with having disrupted a powerful gang which had just come out from Chicago and was planning to operate extensively in the vicinity of San Francisco and the Bay Cities. That line is always eaten up by the home readers. It makes the police force seem so much more efficient than the Chicago cops.

The officer admitted that he had come on two men and the Chinese, engaged in a fight over loot. He had tackled them single-handed. The Chinese had flung a couple of knives at him that had missed. He had shot once and had felt certain that the Chinese was wounded. A third man had sneaked up from behind and hit him a terrific blow with a club. The money that had been taken from Trasker's body was found on the man who had been stabbed, and who was identified as Harry Crager.

He had died in the ambulance, but not until after he had made a complete confession. The confession had implicated Oscar Milen in the murder of Trasker. Because it lacked some of the formalities of a dying statement, officers were inclined to believe they couldn't use it in convicting Oscar Milen of the murder of Trasker, but the testimony of the watchman at the Gamay Jewelry Company was such that the police were satisfied they would have no difficulty in convicting Milen of the murder of Sam Reece, known to be one of his men.

Such are the intricacies of the law.

My telephone rang. *Ngat Toy's* voice came over the wire.

"You know who this is?" she asked.

I told her I did.

"I have found out," she said, "about the Chinese concerning whom you inquired. He is a Chinese cook in a mine in Nevada. He has very powerful friends in Chinatown. He came here on a mission of vengeance. He is a very strong man and his friends are very, very powerful. There was a woman engaged in the opium business. She was known as 'Chicago Mary.' This Chinese got information from her. She says that he tortured her. I guess perhaps he did. Anyway, he got the information that he wanted. He calls himself 'T'ien Sheuh,' 'The Bat.' He is very expert at throwing a knife."

"And he's a cook in a mine in Nevada?" I asked.

"Yes," she said, "he's finished the thing he came here for, and he's going back to Nevada."

"Thanks," I told her. "I got most of the information myself. But tell me, why did he call himself The Bat?"

"It is with the Chinese a symbol of nocturnal cunning. You understand that we do not look down on the rat the way you people do. We look upon him with some respect, and in our country the bat is supposed to be better than the earth rat. It is a heaven rat."

"You Chinese," I said, "have some queer ideas, haven't you?"

That was always good for a rise out of *Ngat Toy*. She snapped back at me, "How about you Americans! You won't walk under a ladder; you won't light three cigarettes from one match; you are afraid of snakes; you eat oysters raw; you think toads give you warts on your hands. . . ."

"You win," I told her. "I haven't got time to argue. I'm going over to Oakland to see the Overland Limited off. There are some friends I want to say good-by to."

I didn't tell her any more than that, but went down to the Ferry Building, crossed the Bay and hung around the Oakland Terminal until the Overland Limited pulled out.

The newspapers were on the job. They got Harris and his daughter on the observation platform, grouped them for photographs.

I hung around on the outskirts of the crowd, watching the flashlights booming.

Bernice Harris had a pretty bad face on her, but the one eye which wasn't bruised and discolored was laughing and happy.

Her father was the type that I'd imagined—a rugged, desert-burned man with a grim, determined jaw, a cold, clear eye, and no more sense of sociability than a rattlesnake.

I didn't stick around there too long. I was afraid Bernice might recognize me. I went on up to the front part of the train and entered the first car, intending to walk back looking the passengers over.

I found him in the first car—a one-legged, one-eyed Chinese bundled up in a long coat, with a felt hat pulled low down over his forehead. How he had eluded police search, was a mystery. But there he was.

I stood by the seat.

He tried to keep his eye averted, but after a while he had to turn and encounter my glance. I noticed that his right hand had slipped surreptitiously up the left sleeve of his coat.

He stared at me for a minute, and then I saw recognition in the one good eye.

I placed my hands in front of my chest, clasped together, Chinese fashion, agitated them gently.

"*Hoh shai kai mah,*" I said.

For a second he hesitated, then I caught the glimpse of sardonic humor.

"*Sup fun hoh shai kai,*" he said—meaning that the world was very good, indeed.

The train bell was clanging. The long line of cars creaked slowly into motion. I pushed a porter to one side, swung wide from the iron steps and let go as the train gathered speed.

I waited until the observation car rolled past. Bernice Harris caught my

eye. She gave a startled, half-scream of recognition, got to her feet.

No more of the city underworld for her. She was going back to the sun-swept silences, the clean, dry air of Nevada.

As for me, I had cast my lot in life. No sun-swept spaces called to me. I was headed back towards the only life that I could live—the foggy, mysterious streets of San Francisco's Chinatown—the underworld, where men were ruled entirely by selfishness, where men double-crossed one another with unceasing regularity.

I pushed my way through the smoke-filled depot, elbowing the crowd which was shifting towards the boat.

I heard a peculiar hacking cough at my side. To my ears there was something familiar about that cough. I turned around and looked into the eyes of One-Lung Willie. He was surprised.

"Willie," I said, "I've got another break for you."

"What is it?" he asked.

"I've got some friends," I said, "who have a mine up in Nevada—up where the air is high and dry. I'm going to write them a letter and tell them that I'm sending you out. They'll take care of you."

One-Lung Willie's eyes got big.

"Cripes!" he said. "Are you stringing me along or are you telling me the truth?"

"I'm telling you the truth," I told him.

One-Lung Willie's shriveled shoulders heaved in a sigh.

"Cripes! Ain't it a good world?"

"Yeah," I told him, and repeated the words of *T'ien Sheuh*.

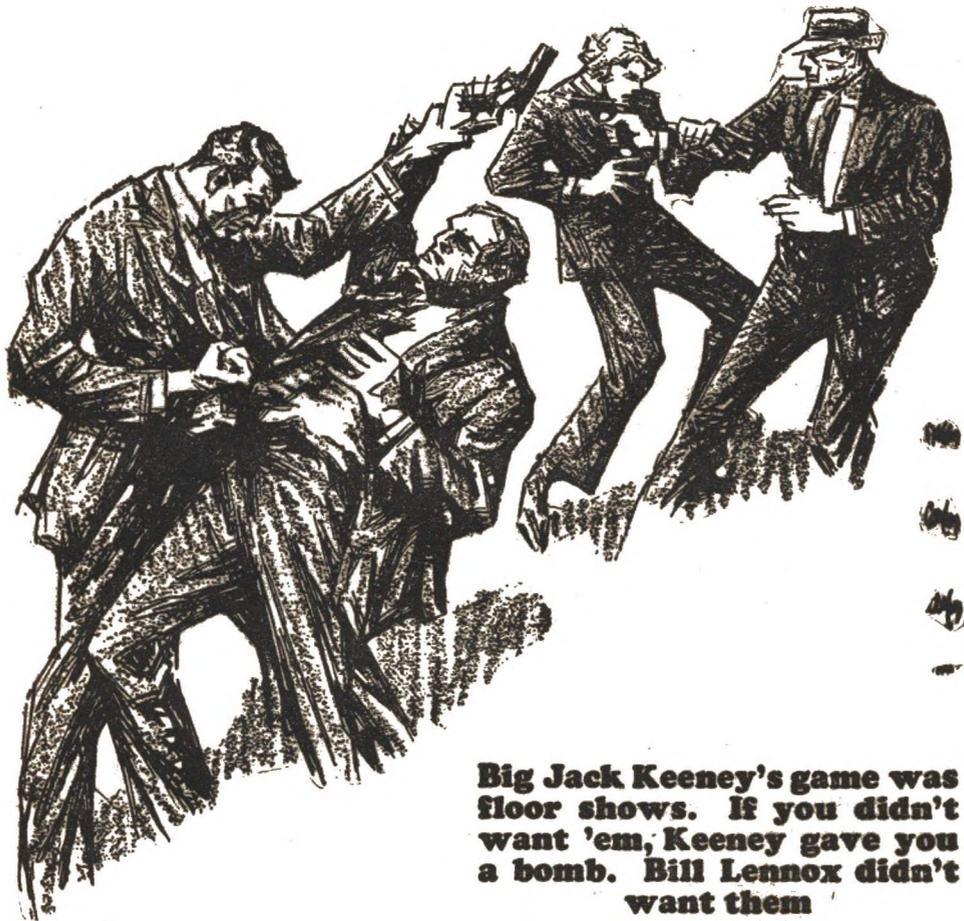
"What's that?" he asked with sudden suspicion.

"It's an expression," I said, "that the Chinese have."

"Aw hell," he remarked, with the contempt of a certain type of white man for everything that isn't American, "the Chinks are crazy anyway. *I'm* handin' it to you on the square—it's a good world."

# Crime's Web

By W. T. BALLARD



**Big Jack Keeney's game was floor shows. If you didn't want 'em, Keeney gave you a bomb. Bill Lennox didn't want them**

**B**

ILL LENNOX, trouble-shooter for General Consolidated Studio, followed the red-cap through LaSalle Street station towards the row of taxis. In the cab, riding down Van Buren towards the hotel, he whistled without tone, broke off, and fumbled for a cigarette. It was hot everywhere. It had been hot the night before in New York, but it was hotter in Chicago. He thought of

Spurck, flying back to Los Angeles; of Nancy Hobbs, vacationing at Tahoe, and cursed under his breath. Then he grinned at the misshapen ears of the cabman, and lit a cigarette.

At the hotel, he paid the driver and followed the small and freckled bellboy towards the desk. He was registering when a voice said: "Bill Lennox! You bum!"

He turned around and saw a tall man in a wrinkled Palm Beach suit. "Hello, Martin!"

Hal Martin had his hand and was working it up and down. "How are you? I haven't seen you since that night at Tony's, twenty-nine, wasn't it? Still doing publicity?"

Lennox said: "I've been demoted. Every time Spurck gets a headache, I have to rub his neck and say soothing words. What are you doing?"

Martin said: "Advertising." He said it apologetically. "We've got our own agency and a couple of accounts get us off the nut. Whatever else we get is velvet, only the velvet has been pretty thin for a while."

Lennox said: "Cheer up. You'll have a code. Come on up to the room and lie to me while I clean up." They crossed the lobby and went into an elevator. In the room, Lennox tossed a quarter to the boy, walked to the window and stared for a moment at the lake, then peeled off his coat and removed his shirt. He said, complainingly: "Every time I hit this town it's either a hundred and twenty above or thirty below."

Martin grinned. "You've been in California too long. They get that way after a couple of years."

"Nerts! I felt the same when I was working on the *News*." Lennox went into the bathroom and turned on the shower. "Call up for some ice, will you? I forgot to tell that kid."

"Anything else?"

"Seltzer, I guess. There's a quart of Scotch in my grip." He disappeared into the stall and made gasping noises behind the curtain, then he came out, using a towel.

Martin said: "If you don't like the town, why do you come?"

Lennox said: "I like it, but not the weather. I had to come this trip."

Martin said: "Why?" without looking at him. The ice had arrived, and he was busy.

Lennox grunted. "Sammy Weinstein is district manager for General Consolidated Theaters Corporation. Sammy's got a lot of relatives and the relatives are theater managers. The theaters

aren't making money, and Spurck and his brother want to know why. They're sending over a couple of expert accountants, and I've got to see that Weinstein doesn't cut their throats." He accepted the glass which the other offered, and drained it. "I needed that."

Martin grinned "Where'd you come from? The Coast?"

Lennox shook his head. "Sol and I've been in New York for the last couple of weeks. Had a stockholders' meeting, and then we looked over the new shows. Spurck wanted a couple of writers. The ones we have are worn in spots." He sat down on the bed and hunted through the Gladstone for socks. "Spurck was looking for a new girl. He didn't find her."

Martin said: "What's the matter? Don't tell me that Hollywood is out of girls. Last time I was on the Coast, I couldn't walk for them."

Lennox shrugged. "This has got to be some unknown, to be discovered. Sol was looking for an actress who could sing and who looked the part. He was planning on taking her out to the Coast and planting her in some beanery or orange-juice stand, then having her discovered there. It would be swell build-up for the picture. The movies need some new faces. It's getting so it's a regular stock-company proposition. But I didn't find any to suit. I'll probably find one at the switchboard when I get back to my apartment."

Martin laughed. "You might try the Fair."

Lennox said: "Take my share and go home. I saw it last year, and the fan dancers drove me nuts. Anyhow, it's too hot. What I need is cold beer."

"We've got that, too," Martin told him. "There are more joints and clubs in this town since repeal, than you can cover in a year. Some of them aren't so bad. We might take in a few."

Lennox looked at him. "No wife?"

The other shook his head. "All my girls seem to love two other fellows; besides, we have a depression."

Lennox grinned. "Same old bum. I've got to hop over to the office and let Weinstein kiss me."

Martin finished his drink. "That won't take you all night. Meet me at the *Palmer House* bar when you get through. We'll grab a couple of cocktails and make an evening."

Lennox was about to refuse. Martin read it in his eyes. "Don't be that way, Bill. I haven't had any fun since you went West. Besides, there's something I want to show you."

Lennox was before the mirror, knotting his tie. "What?"

The advertising man shook his head. "Wait a while. I'll see you about six." He went towards the door. "If you don't come, I'll 'hant' you." He disappeared into the hall, Lennox grinned sourly, slipped into his coat, helped himself to another drink, and rode down in the elevator.

The offices of General Consolidated Theaters Corporation occupied the full twelfth floor of the building. Lennox gave his name to the girl at the switchboard and asked for Weinstein. She looked at him with interest. Lennox paid no attention.

Weinstein appeared in the door of his private room. He was short, heavy set, with brown eyes and too thick lips. Lennox had never liked him. He didn't now. Weinstein said: "Well, Bill," and tried to make his voice sound glad. It didn't. It sounded worried.

Lennox said: "Hello Sam," and followed him in.

Weinstein went around the desk, opened a humidifier, and extended it. Lennox refused, found a cigarette, and stuck it between his lips. Weinstein said: "I meant to meet you, but business—" He moved his hands in a wide gesture.

"Bill said: "That's okey, Sam! The accountants will be here in the morning."

The other looked pained and sat down heavily. "Positively, I can't understand it," he sighed. "Sol and I was like

that, y' understand. We was raised together," he held up two fingers. "Like that, and now he sends me accountants."

Had it been anyone else, Lennox might have felt sorry for him. He couldn't feel sorry for Weinstein, even if he tried, and he wasn't trying, hard. He said: "The theaters aren't making money, Sam."

Weinstein moved his shoulders. "You should tell me. Of course they ain't, but Bill, there are too many theaters. Can I help that? I am only the manager."

It was Lennox' turn to shrug. He said: "Okey, Sam, but it isn't up to me. We'll see what the books show."

Weinstein was smiling again. "Fine. And tonight, I show you a swell time. Honest, Bill, you think Hollywood is wild. I'm telling you that beside this town, Hollywood is a babe which ain't been born."

Lennox shook his head. "Sorry, but I've got a date with a friend which I can't break."

Weinstein's heavy face showed disappointment, then it lightened. "Tomorrow then. I will get tickets for a show which ran forty-three weeks in New York yet, and has the swellest chorus. Two of those girls you should meet." Lennox hesitated. Weinstein leaned across the desk. "I wouldn't take no for an answer," he warned.

Bill nodded: "Okey, Sam; but I'm here to work, not play."

Weinstein grinned. "All work and no play makes Jack a dumb egg. Ain't that right?" He laughed heavily, then sobered. "There is something which I want you should advise me. I am thinking of putting stage shows in some of the theaters, along with the pictures."

Lennox said: "That's up to you. If they draw, okey."

Weinstein played with the desk pen, rolling it between thick fingers. "You don't understand. It ain't that I want stage shows, you understand. It's that I'm told to use them, or else—"

Lennox' eyes got narrow. "Or else what?"

Weinstein's shoulders moved. "Since repeal, the tough boys have organized the entertainers in the cheap clubs. They're getting ideas. They want to put their acts into the theaters."

Lennox said: "Go to the cops."

Weinstein's face lost color. "Honest, Bill, I wouldn't dare. It ain't that there are no honest cops. There are plenty, but also there are some crooks, and how can you tell which is which? In this town a man keeps his mouth shut if he likes to live."

Lennox said: "Nerts! You've been reading stories, Sam. Those things don't happen any more." He rose. "I'll see you in the morning, and if the hard boys come around, let me talk to them."

## 2



MARTIN said: "Did you ever see anything like it?"

They were dining at *Colossimo's*. About them music and gaiety filled the room. Lennox saw a dozen Hollywoodites at various tables. Some of them nodded or waved. One director rose and came over to the table. "We're heading for the *College Inn*, Bill. Better join us. One of the girls has fallen for your long nose."

Lennox looked at Martin. The advertising man shook his head slightly. When the director had gone he said: "It's too early yet, but I want to show you something later, and if we joined that mob, we'd never get away."

Lennox said: "What's all the mystery?" and grinned.

Martin shook his head. "Wait and see."

Bill looked around, yawned slightly. He was very bored. Finally Martin looked at his watch, then rose, and led the way out to a cab. He gave the driver an address on South Wabash, and

settled back on the hard seat. Lennox found a cigarette, lit it, and stared out at the dark buildings as they passed. A hot wind, blowing from the west, hit his face, searing it with the heat of distant Kansas corn lands.

The cab moved fast, swinging far left to pass slower cars. They rode for twenty minutes, then pulled to the curb before a lighted entrance. A doorman opened the cab door and they were on the sidewalk. Lennox stared at the marquee with lighted letters, that said *Mike's*, as Martin paid the driver, then followed the advertising man into the club. As they entered a slight, young man in frayed dinner clothes was pushed unceremoniously past them and thrown into the street. Lennox looked at Martin with raised brows.

His friend said, in a low voice: "Some cheap hooper trying to crash in with his act. When these joints opened following repeal the entertainment was furnished by bushers working for coffee and cakes, and what the crowd pitched their way, but that's all changed now." He stopped and was silent until they reached their table. The place was cheap, tawdry, the air heavy with stale tobacco smoke and the smell of warm bodies. Martin was leaning towards him. "The liquor racket was shot, so some of the wise boys decided to muscle into the entertainment game. They cut themselves in on dancing acts and blues singers, and forced the little clubs to take their entertainment or else—"

Lennox looked at him thoughtfully. After what Weinstein had said that afternoon about the entertainment racket, he was interested. Martin saw the interest and grinned. "It's just too bad if an outsider tries to crash," he said. "He gets hurt, plenty; and so does the club that uses him."

Lennox said: "Nice people," and looked about. The room seemed jammed. Martin ordered a whiskey sour, Lennox beer. The waiter looked at him, hard. At some time the man had been a fighter. His nose slanted towards the

left and one ear was puffed, distorted. Bill said: "What's the matter? Can't you hear?"

The man went away and Martin leaned across the little table. "You're not supposed to order beer in a place like this."

Lennox said: "If the liquor is anything like the junk we get on the Coast, it's plenty smart."

Martin grinned. "It's worse, but still it isn't smart. Mike might get the idea that you were trying to insult him."

Lennox looked around, saw a red-faced man at one end of the long bar. "That Mike?"

Martin nodded and Lennox looked again. The man was beefy, with lumpy shoulders and a flat face. He looked like a one-time wrestler. The waiter came back, bringing two whiskeys. Lennox didn't say anything as he watched Martin pay for the drinks. He made no effort to pick up the glass, no move to drink. Martin downed his, twisting his features as he did so. He said, in a low voice:

"Better drink it. Here comes Mike."

Lennox did not turn. He found a cigarette in his pocket, pulled it out, and rolled it slowly between thumb and index finger. A heavy voice said: "Well, gentlemen?" and Mike stood at their side.

Martin said: "Hello, Mike!" His voice was hurried, as if he feared that Lennox might speak first. "Nice crowd."

The big man said, unemotionally: "We always got a nice crowd. It's a nice place."

Martin said: "It's swell. I like it." He reached for Lennox' glass. Bill's hand closed over his, shoved it back. The big man said:

"You don't like whiskey?"

"I ordered beer." Lennox turned so that he faced the other, their eyes clashing. Mike's were dark, unreadable, lacked depth. He looked at Lennox for a long time, then slowly raised one fat finger. The waiter hurried over.

Mike's heavy voice said: "You made a mistake. The gentleman ordered beer."

Lennox said: "Have something," and kicked out the empty chair. The tension had gone out of his shoulders. He leaned back and grinned at Martin through the smoke. Mike sat down. Martin's breath made a little whistling sound as he released it. The waiter looked at his boss. Mike said:

"Bring three glasses and the bottle from my office." The waiter was gone and Mike puffed out his fat cheeks. Then he looked at Bill. "What are you? Feds?"

Martin started to say something, didn't. Lennox shook his head. "Just seeing the town."

The big man complained: "We gotta be careful these days. Gotta watch our step. Run a nice quiet place." He waved a short-fingered hand, indicating the noisy room. Diamonds sparkled on the hand. Lennox said: "So I see." He didn't grin.

The waiter came back with the bottle. Mike poured the drinks with a steady hand. He said: "Here's to the New Deal," and drank. Then he rose. "Come in any time. We got a nice place, nice show." He was gone, taking the bottle with him.

Martin wiped his sweaty forehead with a white handkerchief. "Gee!" His voice was still breathless. "Mike's a bad egg. His cousin is ward leader and he used to be in with Capone. I thought—" He broke off as the colored orchestra began to play, and added, "I want you to see this." His voice was all enthusiasm now. "They've got a swell show. Big Jack Keeney has the show privileges. At least that's what they say."

He was silent as the chorus appeared. Lennox watched them without much interest. The smoke in the room seemed heavier; the heat was increasing. His eyes strayed away from the entertainers, ranged across the crowd, noted two men seated at a little table beside the wall. They were drinking sparingly, their hard eyes seeming to miss nothing

in the room. He knew what they were without being told, knew that they were gunmen, killers. What they were doing here, he could only guess.

Martin tugged suddenly at his arm. "Bill, this is what I wanted you to see. You say that Spurck is looking for a girl? Well, here she is. Watch."

Lennox' eyes went back to the floor as she danced into view. She was little more than a child, a blonde, a natural blonde, with golden lights in the curly hair. She pivoted, swung about suddenly, and sat down cross-legged on the floor. Her body moving in rhythm with the music, she began to sing. Her voice was sweet and clear, a relief after the blues singers. Lennox' eyes narrowed as he watched. Not that he was much interested, but she might— Her number was finished, and she was dancing off the floor. He frowned as Martin rose and pushed his way through the crowd. What was the fool going to do?

He reached out, intending to catch the other's arm, but the advertising man eluded his grasp. "I'm going to get her, Bill. I want you to talk to her." He was gone. Lennox sat and watched as Martin reached her side, saw her start nervously, saw them argue; then he saw Martin leading her towards the table. He rose as they reached his side and pulled out a chair, heard Martin say: "Mabel, this is Bill Lennox of General Consolidated. Bill, meet Mabel Hamilton."



BILL looked at her as she sat down, noted the dark circles beneath her eyes, not put there by make-up, saw the white circle about the reddened lips which spoke of exhaustion. "I can't stay but a minute. I'm not supposed to—"

Martin said: "Don't be silly, baby. This is your big chance. They're looking for a girl, a girl like you. Aren't you, Bill?"

Bill said: "Well," slowly. He saw that she was only a kid, that she still bore an adolescent look. He knew that Martin was a little tight and cursed him under his breath. Why give this child hopes which probably would not be fulfilled?

Martin leaned towards her. "I'm telling you this is your chance. Bill can give you a test tomorrow at one of the Commercial studios. If you come through that, they'll take you to the Coast, plant you in some restaurant, and have you discovered. Swell, huh?"

She smiled wanly. "If it were true."

He said: "But it is. Bill here is a big shot. That's the reason I brought him here tonight. I hate to see you singing in this dump. I hate to think of Keeney and those muggs cutting in on everything that you make."

Fear leaped into her eyes. "I've—got to—"  
She half rose. Martin shoved her back. "Relax, honey! Nothing's going to happen to you while we're around. I'm telling you that Lennox here is a big shot; that if he says the word, you'll be a star. Just don't forget me, Babe, when that time comes."

The girl looked appealingly at Lennox. "I've got to—"  
She stopped suddenly, one hand raised as if to shield her face. A man in a tight fitting linen suit had stopped beside the table. He ignored both Martin and Lennox. For a moment he stood, looking down at the girl.

"Get up!" His voice had a flat quality, lacked emotion of any kind.

She rose, slowly, fearfully to her feet. He slapped her hard, across the cheek. "How many times must I tell you that you ain't paid to talk with customers?" He slapped her again, his fingers leaving long red marks. She did not try to draw away, seemed to realize that it was hopeless. A low moaning sound came through her parted lips as the man's hand came up for the third time.

Lennox' chair went back with a crash. The man snarled: "Keep out of this."

Martin was staring, bewildered. Bill grinned. His right traveled a dozen inches and caught the other flush on the jaw. The man's eyes crossed, his knees sagged a little, his hand moved uncertainly towards the front of his coat. Lennox hit him again, catching the wrist with his left hand. He hit him a third time before he fell. Then Bill stooped swiftly and caught up the gun from the man's shoulder-holster. He straightened to see the two men who had been seated beside the wall, crowding towards him.

Martin was saying, "For gawd's sake! For gawd's sake!" Lennox shifted the gun to his other hand, shoved the girl into Martin's arms. She had been standing beside the table, staring down at the fallen man with unbelieving eyes. Lennox said, roughly: "Through the rear, through the rear!"

He shoved them ahead of him towards the dressing-rooms, through the excited milling crowd. A woman behind him screamed hysterically, a gun exploded; then he gained the door at the side of the orchestra platform, shoved Martin and the girl through before him, and threw the bolt into place.

The passage was narrow, lighted by a single bulb. The girl was crying, softly, helplessly. Martin seemed to have recovered his wits. He hurried her along towards the outer door, Lennox at their heels. They gained the alley swiftly. Martin said: "This way, this way!"

A shot crashed from the passage they had just left, the bullet striking the brick wall opposite. In the distance a police siren split the hot night with mournful sound. Martin was already running down the alley towards the street. A gun flashed from the rear door of the club. Lennox snapped a shot in return. His bullet was high. He knew it was, and did not care. All he was trying to do was to check pursuit. Then he raced after his companions.

They reached the cab rack, breathless.

The driver of the first one was half asleep. He started to argue. Lennox shoved him over against the meter, climbed in and jumped the motor into life. Someone from the alley fired as they pulled away, the bullet tearing through the cab's top; then they were racing down the avenue in second.

The driver was awake now. He said, "What the hell?" and stared at Lennox.

Bill grinned at him sourly across his shoulder. He said: "You're right. What the hell? If you're awake, come over and pilot this hack."

He opened the door, and slid on to the running-board, steadying the wheel until the driver slipped under it; then he opened the rear door and climbed in back. The girl was still crying. Martin sat in gloomy silence. He was cold sober and very low.

Lennox said: "So what?" He found a cigarette and lit it, then looked back. There seemed to be no pursuit.

Martin said to the girl: "Where do you live?"

She did not stop crying to answer: "I—I don't dare go back there. They'd kill me—now."

He patted her shoulder. "Don't worry, Honey. You can come up to my place. There's a big couch, and in the morning Bill will give you that test. Won't you, Bill?"

Lennox said: "Yeah," without enthusiasm. He didn't think she'd do, but it wasn't worth arguing about now. "Ever have any experience besides at *Mike's*?"

She shook her head. Martin said: "That doesn't matter. She's got something, and you wanted an unknown." His spirits were rising.

"What about your people?" Lennox was not particularly interested, but he was trying to get her mind off her troubles.

She said: "They don't know where I am. They live in Lansing. I ran away."

Lennox nodded. He said to Martin,

ignoring the girl: "The smart thing to do is to buy her a ticket for Lansing. That's where she belongs."

Martin's voice was angry. "You mean that you won't give her a test?"

Lennox' shoulders moved. "Sure, if she wants it, but it won't be so good without proper equipment, and I don't think that she'll be so hot."

The girl was crying again. Martin said: "Look what you've done."

"All right, all right. What's your address?"

Martin gave him a number on Phillips Avenue, and Lennox relayed it to the driver. The cab swung about and went north. For fifteen minutes they rode in silence. The girl had stopped crying and was asleep on Martin's shoulder.

At the apartment, Lennox told the driver to wait, then followed Martin across the carpeted lobby into the automatic elevator. The girl stirred in the advertising man's arms, but did not waken. In the apartment, Lennox took off her shoes while Martin wrapped a blanket about her, then crossed to the table and poured himself a drink. "Does Mike know your name?" Bill asked.

The advertising man shook his head. "I've been in his joint plenty, but I don't think he knows my name."

"Okey, then. I don't believe we were followed." He moved towards the door. "I'll give you a ring about nine."

Martin did not answer. He was pouring another drink. Lennox rode down in the elevator, gave the cabman the name of his hotel, and they went east, then north along the lake.

## 3



ENNOX opened one eye and stared with dislike at the ringing phone, then picked it up and said, hoarsely: "What is it?"

A woman's voice told him: "Eight-thirty."

He said: "Thanks!" replaced the re-

ceiver, and lay for several minutes on his back, staring up at the ceiling, where two flies moved aimlessly. The wind coming in through the window felt fresher, as if it had rained somewhere a long way off. He rose finally, shaved and stepped under the shower. Dressing slowly, he realized that it was after nine, picked up the phone and called Martin's number. A man's voice answered, a heavy voice, not Martin's.

Lennox said: "Is Mr. Martin there?"

There was a moment's silence at the other end of the wire. "Who's calling?"

Something warned Bill, some sixth sense. He said: "If Mr. Martin isn't in, I'll call later."

The voice was insistent. "Who's calling?" It held a peremptory note which angered Lennox. He said: "Who wants to know?"

"Police Department," the voice snapped. "Who are you?" But Lennox had already hung up. For perhaps five minutes he sat where he was, staring out across the blue gray waters of the lake. Then he rose and went down to the dining-room.

He looked through the morning papers, but there was no mention of Martin, no mention of the shooting at *Mike's* the night before. Lennox supposed that whatever had happened at the apartment had been too late for the morning papers. He drank a glass of tomato juice, played with some bacon and toast, and left the dining-room.

For a moment he hesitated in the lobby, then went out, got a cab, and drove to the theater offices. The accountants had already arrived. Lennox pre-empted an office for himself and went to work. He'd been there some twenty minutes when the door opened and Weinstein came through. It was evident that the district manager had something on his mind. His short, fat legs carried him to the window, and he stood staring down at the traffic far below. Then he turned around.

"Listen, Bill. You don't need to stay

here, do you? Those accountants can do the work."

Lennox looked up, his eyes narrowed. "So what?"

Weinstein said: "Maybe nothing, maybe a lot. A man called me up just now and asked questions about you."

"What man?"

The other spread his hands. "A hard guy, Bill. Have you done anything to make the smarties mad with you?"

Bill said: "Either talk sense or don't talk."

Weinstein sighed heavily. "The hell of it is, I can't talk sense."

Lennox rose and faced him. "Let's straighten this out. Who called you and what did he say?"

Weinstein was silent for a moment. "I've said too much already." Something in his manner spoke of fear. "Do me a favor once. Get out of town."

"No."

Weinstein turned and went towards the door. Lennox put a hand on his shoulder. "Listen. You've got to tell me what you—" The door of the room opened and Weinstein's secretary looked in. She said to Lennox: "There's a boy out here to see you."

"A boy? What's his name?"

"He wouldn't say, but he says that it's important, that you promised to see him, that you promised him a film test."

Lennox stared at her. "I—never mind, I'm busy." He turned to Weinstein, but the man had already reached the door.

"Got an appointment," he muttered, and was gone. The secretary was still looking at Lennox.

"What shall I tell him?"

"Who?—Oh, the boy?" He stared after Weinstein, then walked back to the desk. "Tell him I can't see him."

A voice from behind the secretary said: "But you've got to." It was a high voice, shrill with something which might have been hysteria.

Lennox swung about. He saw the secretary turn in surprise, saw the boy crowd past her into the room. Then

his expression changed slightly and he nodded to the secretary. "Okay! You may go."

She went, her face showing her bewilderment. When the door closed, Lennox walked towards the window, then turned around. "All right. You can take the cap off now."

The cap came off and Mabel Hamilton looked at him with large, shadowed eyes. Her short bob was plastered against her small head, giving it a skinned appearance. For an instant Lennox grinned, then his lips tightened and he motioned her to a chair. "What's the idea of those clothes?"

She sank into the chair and for a moment covered her eyes with her hand. "It—they killed Mr. Martin." Her voice was dull, colorless, as if all emotion had been washed from her.

Lennox stared at her. Not that he was surprised. He'd feared something like that after the police had answered Martin's phone. "Tell me about it."

The narrow shoulders moved convulsively, but her voice did not change. "I was asleep. I was so tired, so terribly tired. It waked me partly when they came in the door. Then Alger jerked me off the couch and slapped me."

"Is that the guy that I hit at *Mike's*?"

She nodded, and Lennox said: "Go on!"

"Mr. Martin came to the bedroom door and called for them to stop; then he grabbed at the phone, but they jerked him away. I saw that Alger had a knife." She was silent a moment, as if recalling the picture. "Then I dodged out through the door. I went down the back stairs and cut across between two buildings to the next street. Then I went to the home of a girl who dances in the chorus at *Mike's*. She was afraid to keep me, but she loaned me some of her brother's clothes. I've been trying ever since to get up enough courage to come here."

He said, under his breath: "Poor kid!" Then louder, "Why didn't you phone me?"

"I didn't have a nickel."

He stared at her. "How'd you get down here?"

"Walked. Please, I know that you didn't mean it last night, about that test, but I didn't know who else to come to."

He said grimly: "You came to the right place. I'll take you to the police with your story. Martin was a pretty good friend of mine."

Stark fear again showed in her eyes. "I can't! Please! You won't do that!"

He stared at her. "Why not?"

"Because they'd kill me. I've got to get out of town, get away. I saw Tony Alger kill Martin. Tony knows it. He'll never rest until I'm dead." There was still no feeling in the voice, only the deadly monotone.

"But the police? Surely you'll be safe?"

She shook her head. "You don't know how powerful Big Jack Keeney is. I've heard that he has spies in the department. I'm afraid. I've always been afraid of something; all my life. Won't you help me get away? Send me to Hollywood. I don't expect a job in pictures. I'll do anything if you'll only help me."

He said: "What about sending you home?"

She shook her head. "They know that I come from Lansing. They'd find me there. Please, Mr. Lennox. Help me get to Hollywood. I'll find something. I'll pay you back."

He only half heard her. His mind was busy, planning. Certainly he couldn't leave her here to face death, and yet he did not want to lose track of her. Martin had been his friend, and he did not mean to let the killers get away. He picked up the phone and said to the girl at the desk: "Get me Spurck. If he isn't at the studio, try his house." He hung up and stared from the window, drumming on the desk with his fingertips. It was fifteen minutes before the phone rang, and Lennox

picked up the receiver. The operator said:

"They can't locate Mr. Spurck, but Mrs. Spurck is at home. Will you talk to her?"

He started to say no, then changed his mind. "I'll talk to her."

The voice reached him across the miles of wire. She was shouting into the phone, and he grinned unconsciously. She always shouted, as if in an effort to bridge the distance. He said: "Listen, Rose. I want you to do me a favor."

She said, fondly: "Yes, Bill. Anything."

He said: "I'm sending a boy out to L.A. by plane. I want you to meet him, to keep him there until I arrive or you hear from me. Do you understand?"

"But of course! Honest, Bill, you must think me stupid or something."

He warned: "You're going to be surprised, but you must not ask questions."

Her voice held suspicion. "What are you up to?"

He said: "Nothing. Nothing much; and Rose, I'm counting on you."

She was silent for a moment. "I think you had better come home where I can watch you. That Chicago, it is a bad place."

He said: "Don't worry about me. The boy will wire you from Salt Lake. And remember, meet the plane." He hung up and looked at the girl. "You'll be all right with Rose. She's swell people, the swellest there is. Then when I get out there, we'll see about finding you something to do." He pressed a button on the desk and waited for Weinstein's secretary to appear. "I'm leaving this boy in here for a while," he told her. "I don't want you to let anyone into this office, not even Sam; do you understand?"

The woman nodded, her eyes straying uncertainly to the small, boyish figure in the chair. Lennox said: "I'll be back in fifteen minutes," and followed the secretary into the outer office.

He rode down in the elevator, went around the block to a small clothing store, and bought a complete outfit. He was forced to guess at the size, but knew that the suit would fit better than the makeshift outfit which the girl was wearing; then he returned to the office. The girl was still in the chair where he had left her. He opened the bundles and spread out the contents. "You've got five minutes to change," he told her, and left the room.

When he re-entered it, he stopped just inside the door and stared. The suit fitted very well. The shoulders were a little too wide, the pants a trifle long, but she looked like a slim, handsome boy. Lennox took out his watch and stared at it. "You've got an hour to make the noon plane. I won't go to the airport with you. They may be watching me, so we won't take that chance. Send me a wire from Salt Lake, just a word so I'll know you got there, and wire Mrs. Spurck." He gave her the address and a roll of bills. "Good luck, Kid."

She said: "Thanks," and put out a small hand.

He took it, grinned encouragement, then watched her go.

## 4



**D**RIVING back to the hotel he bought noon editions of the evening papers. Under the heading, *Advertising Man Murdered*, there was a two-column spread. *Harold Martin Stabbed in Own Apartment*. Lennox read it hastily as the cab rolled through traffic.

A Miss Perkins, who occupied the apartment beneath Martin's, had been awakened shortly before five by sounds of a struggle on the floor above. She called the manager who, letting himself in with a pass-key, found Martin on the floor of his living-room with a knife wound just below the heart. A woman's shoe had been found in the apart-

ment, and there was evidence that someone had slept on the couch. The police were tracing Martin's movements of the day before in an effort to learn some clue to her identity.

Lennox folded the paper and stuck it in the crack beside the seat as the cab pulled to a stop. He paid the driver and went to the lobby. As he got his key at the desk, he noted that the clerk looked at him searchingly; then he turned towards the elevator. Two men who had been seated on the leather chairs beside the wall rose and followed him into the cage. He tensed slightly, then relaxed. They were plain-clothesmen. Lennox had seen too many not to recognize them. The car stopped at his floor and he got out, saw that they followed, and went along the corridor to his door. When he got it open, they were just behind him. He glanced across his shoulder, then stepped aside. "All right, gentlemen. You first."

They stared at him; then the bigger man laughed and went through into the room. His partner followed, after a moment's hesitation. Lennox closed the door and faced them. "Well?"

A shield glittered for a moment in the big man's hand. "Kandy, Homicide Squad. This is Pennock."

Lennox nodded. "All right, Lieutenant. What is it?" He decided that he did not like the other. The dark eyes were too close together, and he looked soft from easy living, too easy living for a policeman's pay.

Pennock was wandering around the room. Kandy said: "Ever hear of a guy named Martin, Harold Martin?"

Lennox said: "Certainly I knew him. Have known him for years."

Surprise opened Kandy's mouth. He closed it slowly and looked towards Pennock as if for prompting, but the smaller man was looking inquiringly at Lennox' opened bag. Kandy cleared his throat. "Someone called Martin this morning a little after nine. The call came from this hotel. We checked with the girl at the desk and she said

that the call came from this room. It showed on her slip."

Lennox dropped into a chair, found a cigarette, held a match to its tip, and flipped the burnt stick towards the open bathroom door. "I called Martin a little after nine."

Kandy's heavy voice said: "And I took the call. Why didn't you leave your name? Why did you hang up when I told you that it was the cops calling?" He bent closer, his dark brows drawn together in a threatening scowl.

Lennox had a sudden impulse to laugh. The man was slow-witted and clumsy. He said: "I was surprised when you said that it was the police. I thought Martin must be in a jam."

Kandy's voice said: "You weren't expecting anything to happen to him, were you?"

Lennox let his eyes narrow. "Which means?"

Pennock said, unexpectedly, from the other side of the room: "Mind telling us what you're doing here in Chicago?"

Lennox told him. He produced letters, his Los Angeles police card, and the deputy sheriff's badge which he carried. Pennock looked over the collection thoughtfully. Kandy said, suddenly: "Where's the girl?"

"What girl?"

The plain-clothesman grinned sourly. "The girl in Martin's apartment. Come on, Lennox. You'll save yourself trouble by talking. You can talk here or downtown."

Bill said: "Wait a minute." He was out of the chair and across the room before Kandy could move. He picked up the phone and gave the number of the theater offices.

The big man said: "What the hell?" and started forward.

Lennox fended him off with an elbow. "Get me Weinstein. Lennox talking."

Kandy tried to grab the instrument.

Lennox got his shoulder in the way as Sam's voice reached him. He said: "There's a couple of tough coppers here getting smart, Sam. Do you know anyone who can make them act like gentlemen?"

Weinstein's voice expressed surprise. "What's the matter? Who are they?"

"Kandy and Pennock. A man I know got rubbed out last night. They're being funny."

Weinstein said: "I know Kandy. Let me talk to him."

Lennox held out the phone to the Lieutenant. "Get an earful, sweetheart."

Kandy took it unwillingly, listened, his lips twisting. Lennox saw his expression change gradually, heard him say: "Okey, Mr. Weinstein, I understand. Sorry." Then he extended the phone to Lennox. "He wants to talk to you again."

Lennox grinned as he took the phone. Weinstein's voice reached him, trembling with excitement. "More trouble, Bill. Can you come over here right away?"

"What's the matter?" Bill was conscious that both men were watching him.

"They bombed one of the theaters this morning. Five minutes ago, I heard."

Lennox swore sharply. "I'll be right over. That is, if these flat-feet don't hold me."

Weinstein said: "They won't. Kandy knows me. But hurry. I'm telling you, we are in a jam." He hung up, and Lennox replaced the receiver.

Pennock said to his partner: "So what?"

Kandy shrugged. "That was Sam Weinstein. He's a friend of Merrill's. He says to lay off Lennox."

Pennock's eyes showed dislike. "So we lay off for now?"

Kandy nodded. "We lay off—for now."

Lennox' voice was very dry: "Thanks, fellows. See you around."

## 5



AM WEINSTEIN was telephoning when Lennox walked into his office. He replaced the receiver and leaned back, staring at Bill. "So it's come."

Lennox said: "What's come?"

"Trouble. We'll have to use their acts."

Lennox' voice was hard. "You mean that they bombed the theater to force us to use their acts? That you know who did it?"

Weinstein nodded. "I know who ordered it done, but I can't prove it."

"Go to the cops."

"Sure," the man's voice was heavy with sarcasm, "and have some more houses blasted and probably get blasted myself! I should be so foolish?"

Lennox stared at him. Weinstein said: "It ain't the theaters, y' understand. Insurance we got, and besides, there are too many houses. But the people. There was an audience—five got hurt."

Lennox whistled tonelessly. He'd never liked Weinstein, never pretended to, but he was liking the man better at the moment than he ever had before. "So what do we do?"

"Use their shows."

"Spurck won't stand for that. I think I'll go and have a talk with this Keeney."

Weinstein bounced out of his chair. "You can't do that."

"Why not? Is this whole town scared of Keeney?"

Weinstein shook his head. "You don't understand, Bill. This Keeney is plenty tough. He does things."

Lennox thought of Martin and his lips twisted slightly, but his tone was level when he spoke. "What about Kandy and Pennock? Do you trust them?"

The other spread his hands. "I don't trust nobody, Bill, not on a thing like

this. I'm telling you they'll bomb every General house in the city. They'll cover themselves, too."

Lennox said: "Anyhow, I'm going to see Keeney. Where'll I find him?"

Weinstein moved his shoulders. "If I told you, I would be helping a murder. I won't tell."

Lennox rose. "Okey! I'll find him." He started for the door.

Weinstein moved towards him. "Please, Bill. Where are you going?"

Lennox said: "To a place called *Mike's*, out on South Wabash. Ever hear of it?"

The other moaned, but Bill had already left the room. He got a cab in front of the building, gave the man the address and climbed in. They went south through the Loop and gathered speed as the traffic thinned.

At the club, Lennox paid the man, watched him pull away, then went through the entrance. The place looked cheaper, tawdrier than it had the night before. Chairs were piled on the tables, and two cleaning women were mopping. No one paid any attention to him. He stopped for a moment before the empty bar, then walked to the door at the farther end and went in. The room was empty. He stared at the oak desk and the metal filing-case beside the wall, turned, and started out. The door swung open, and Mike was staring at him. Only his sharp-drawn breath gave indication of the night-club man's surprise.

"Hello!" His voice had no feeling now, no curiosity.

Lennox said: "Hello!" His eyes were on the other's face, watching for a change in expression. "I want to see Keeney, Big Jack Keeney."

"He isn't here. He's never here." Mike did not move from his position in the doorway. His bulk filled the exit, cutting off escape.

Lennox' tone was conversational. "I'm with General Theaters. I want to see him about some shows, stage shows."

Mike's face did not change. "Who told you to come here?"

Lennox said: "No one. I heard that Keeney furnished the entertainment here. I thought that you might tell me where I could reach him."

For what seemed minutes Mike hesitated, then he came into the room, closed the door, and picked up the phone. He dialed a number and waited; then he said, "Is Alger there?" and waited again. "This is Mike, Tony. That guy, Lennox, is here. He wants to see the boss. Yeah, something about shows in theaters . . . Okey!" He hung up and looked at Bill. "Keeney will be over."

Lennox didn't say anything. He found a cigarette, lit it, and stared at the floor. Mike moved about the room, went to the door, opened it, and disappeared. Bill heard the lock drop into place, and his lips twisted grimly. He sat there twenty minutes, maybe twenty-five; then someone made noise at the other side of the door. It came open, and three men came in. He knew two of them, Alger and Mike; he'd never seen the third man, but he guessed that it was Keeney. The racketeer was short, heavy set, with thick lips and piggish eyes. The eyes were round, black, and looked like marbles. He was smiling now, but the smile lacked mirth, was wolfish.

"Hello, Lennox."

Bill said: "How are you, Keeney?" and did not move. Smoke drifted from his nostrils and floated up in the quiet air between them. Mike closed the door, stood with his broad back against it. Alger stood to the right of his chief, both hands in his coat pockets, a bluish mark showing on the right side of his jaw. Lennox saw the mark, grinned. He knew what had put it there, knew that Alger's eyes held hate.

Keeney said: "You wanted to see me?"

Lennox spoke around his cigarette: "One of our houses got bombed. There were five people hurt. I don't like it."

Keeney's smile widened. "I'm sorry

you don't like it." He stressed the words: "Maybe you'd better go to the cops."

Lennox said: "I'd rather come to you. The cops didn't throw that pineapple."

Keeney's face was bland. "I thought maybe they did."

Bill flipped the cigarette into one corner of the room. "I came here to give you some advice, Keeney."

The other's face changed. "Maybe you'd better let me give you a little."

Lennox' face did not change. "I'm listening."

The other took a deep breath. "Maybe one of the customers tossed that bomb; maybe he didn't like the show. It might be smart if you changed it, put in floor shows, good ones."

"Like Mike's?" Lennox grinned slightly.

"There are worse shows," Keeney told him, "and you won't have trouble with that type of entertainment."

Lennox rose slowly, careful not to make a sudden move, a move which might excite Alger; but he could talk better standing. His grin was gone now as he faced Keeney, his eyes were cold, bleak. "All right, you cheap hood, get this. General doesn't want your shows. We don't like that type of entertainment. We're going ahead as we were, and you're not going to do a thing about it."

Keeney's expression did not change. "Wise guy, huh?"

Lennox said: "Sure I'm a wise guy. Do you want me to tell you why you aren't going to do anything?"

"Tell me." Keeney's voice was just above a whisper.

"Okey, I'll tell you. There was a man killed last night, a man named Martin. There was also a witness, a swell witness, the kind juries like to listen to. I've got that witness, got her in a safe place, a place where your killers can't reach her. You may have some cheap cops on your payroll, but the county government is decent. The state's attorney will fight, and I'll give him some-

thing to fight with—" He broke off as the gangster laughed. Alger was laughing; so was Mike. Lennox stared at them.

"So what?"

Keeney said: "You should have been an actor, Lennox. I might even give you a spot in one of my shows. You can play tough."

"Think I'm bluffing?"

The man shook his head. "No. You think you've got the cards, but you haven't. Mabel Hamilton is down at my joint now, and she'll stay there for a while."

Lennox stared at him. "I don't believe it."

"So you don't believe it, huh? Well, wise guy, listen to this. When you bought her that plane ticket and started her for the airport you didn't know one thing. That kid's in love." His voice was conversational. "She's carrying the torch for a cheap hooper that works in one of our shows. We knew that. You gotta know things in this racket. We watched this hooper, see, figuring that the kid would get in touch with him. She did. So now do you use our shows?"

Lennox said: "You don't expect me to take your word." His mind was racing, and there was a sick feeling under his belt. He'd figured that the kid was safe, miles west, headed for the protection of Rose Spurck, and now— A mental picture of her thin, tired face rose before him. Whatever chance she had had of escape he had ruined by his attempted bluff. Keeney's voice lacked interest. He said: "You'll see her. We'll even let you talk to her, Lennox. After that, you play it our way, or else. . . ."

Bill said: "Weinstein knows where I am."

Keeney laughed. "Don't know when you're licked, do you? Let's go— Better frisk him, Tony."

Alger stepped forward and obeyed. He took the gun from Lennox' pocket, stared at it, recognized it. His face

darkened. He put the gun away and slapped Lennox smartly with his free hand. "That's for socking me." He slapped again. Keeney came forward, swiftly for one of his bulk. He caught Alger's shoulder, pulled him back. The small, hard eyes seemed to flame for a moment.

"Stop it."

Alger's face looked stubborn. He started to say something, then didn't. Keeney said: "Save it. I may turn you loose later." He motioned towards Mike. The night-club man opened the door and stepped aside. They went out through the deserted restaurant.

There was a car at the curb; a long black, closed car. A man lounged beneath the wheel. He snapped erect, reached around and opened one of the rear doors. Alger prodded Lennox with the gun. Bill got in. There were people on the other side of the street. He might have called, but he knew that Alger would shoot, knew also that the girl would be left alone, to face the fury of the mob.

The car moved away from the curb, ignored the traffic light at the next corner, and went south, gathering speed. Keeney said, angrily, to the driver: "Watch it, lug! There's no use hunting trouble." The driver did not answer. He bent over the wheel, his narrow shoulders hunched.

## 6



HE building had been a warehouse. Alger unlocked a small door at the side and they went through. Lennox guessed that at one time it had held whiskey, but now the immense floor, shadowed, was empty. They crossed the floor, mounted wooden stairs and reached the second floor. The space had been divided by thin board partitions, flimsy, not sound-proof. They walked along the hall, light sifting through from

dusty, cobwebbed windows. A rat scurried before them, to vanish in the gloom. A man appeared suddenly from one of the doors. Keeney swore at him. "Where's Jake?"

The man answered something which Lennox did not catch, and Keeney swore again. "There's no one downstairs? How's the girl?"

"Okey! I've got her down at the end. She hasn't made a peep."

Keeney nodded and motioned Lennox forward. They continued along to the end of the hall. Here Keeney himself unlocked the door and stood aside. Alger was behind Lennox. He put one hand between Bill's shoulder blades and pushed, hard. Lennox went forward, stumbled, and almost fell into the room. There was a startled gasp, then the door slammed shut.

The dancer was seated on a straight chair in the far corner. She still wore the boy's clothes, but the cap was missing, and her fair hair was ruffled. Lennox saw that her hands were tied behind the chair's back and that her ankles were bound to the legs, but she wasn't gagged. This puzzled him until he peered through the dust-covered window. It opened on a blank brick wall only a couple of feet away. Judging from the noise, the wall surrounded a machine shop. A scream could not have been heard, and there were bars across the window, rusty bars set deep in the wooden frame. He turned back to the girl, stooped, and loosened her bonds.

Anger made it hard to speak, anger that she had missed her chance of escape. He said: "I didn't expect you here."

She did not move from the chair. The small face was streaked with tears, tears and dirt. She said: "I'm sorry. I tried to do what you said, to go to the airport, to get away, but I couldn't leave Pete."

He said: "Pete?" There was disgust in his voice. "I suppose you helped him, by letting them catch you?"

She was crying, softly. "You don't

understand. I couldn't—couldn't walk out. I thought I could. I guess I'm a fool, but I thought—well, Pete never had a chance either. They took every cent he made, kept him, forced him to work, and he was good to me. I thought I could reach him, give him enough of your money to get away. I didn't think that they would be watching—I—" She couldn't speak now, only make a choked sound.

"Hell!" Lennox muttered it under his breath. She might be a fool, but she was game, dead game. She'd been willing to buck the gang, take a chance with death, to give this Pete a break. He turned back to her in a moment, patted the thin shoulder which moved up and down with sobs. "I thought Martin—"

She understood, but couldn't speak for a moment. She shook her head instead. "I didn't do anything—encourage him, I mean. He just came to *Mike's*; used to come, often. If he had ideas, it wasn't my fault."

Lennox said: "Forget it. It doesn't matter."

She said: "But it does matter." She had forgotten to cry in her intensity. "I want you to understand. You've got to understand. Pete and I used to plan how we could run away, what we would do. We were slaves, I tell you, slaves. We didn't dare see each other except at *Mike's*."

Lennox stooped over, was rubbing her wrists, trying to restore the circulation in the little hands. She took no notice, went on talking. "When you said that you'd help me get to California, I thought that my troubles were over. I thought that I'd send money back, back to Pete; then I saw that I had time to go by his place and leave the money. I didn't think the gang would be watching. I didn't know they knew about us."

Lennox said: "What happened to this Pete?"

She said: "I don't know. I didn't see him. There were two men just inside the door. They grabbed me. I never

had a chance. I'm—I'm sorry I got you into this."

He said: "You didn't get me into this, Honey. I got myself in." His voice was bitter. "I thought I could bluff Keeney, bluff him into letting our houses alone until it was safe for you to come back and testify. I—" He stopped as there was a noise on the other side of the door. He heard the key, heard the lock being thrown, saw it open. The girl made a slight gasping sound. Lennox straightened, faced the door as it swung open, saw Keeney come in, followed by Alger. The racketeer smiled, his thick lips parting, showing discolored teeth.

"Believe me now?"

Lennox nodded. "What happens next?"

"Our shows go into General Theaters."

"The company wouldn't stand for that."

The other said: "Sure they would, if you okeyed it."

Lennox hesitated, thought of the girl, sitting there, hopeless, caught in something which was too big for her, a fly in a web of crime. "What about the girl?"

He saw the other's eyes change, then; thought that Keeney felt he had won; knew suddenly that whatever happened, the girl was slated to die. She knew too much, and, by the same token, so did he.

The gangster's voice had an oily sound. "Take her with you. All we want is an order, signed by you, to put our shows into the theaters. You wouldn't want to see this kid die?"

Lennox looked at Alger. The gunman stood just inside the door, both hands in his coat pockets, his eyes eager, watchful, filled with hate; then he looked at Keeney. The man stood there, his short legs braced, insolent, toad-like. Anger flooded up through Lennox, making his throat ache. Not anger because these men were forcing him to do something, but rage that they should live on the earnings of this girl, of a thousand

others, like her, helpless, caught in the web.

No hint of his feelings showed in his voice as he spoke. It was contained, a little strained, perhaps, but nothing more. He said: "Have you got the contract ready? I suppose you have."

Victory flared in the marble-like eyes. Keeney reached into his coat, drew out the paper, and stepped forward with an air of contempt. It was as if he had feared Lennox and, having won, held only contempt for him. He drew out a pen with his other hand, unscrewed the top. "Sign here."

Lennox seemed to hesitate. "How do I know that when I have signed you'll let the girl go?"

Keeney said: "I promised—" and stopped short, as Lennox' hands shot out suddenly, grabbed his shoulders and swung him about, using the heavy body as a shield against Alger.

Keeney's thick lips made a startled sound. He swore, twisting, turning, the pen dropping from his hand as he tried to reach his gun. Alger came forward, crouching like some cat, ready to strike. His right hand had flashed from his pocket, holding a gun. His thin lips were a straight line, his eyes venomous, darting.

Lennox locked his right arm about Keeney's throat, forcing the man's head back, holding him as in a vise. He caught the wrist as Keeney's hand appeared with the gun, twisting it viciously. He was taller than Keeney, had Keeney's feet almost off the floor. The gangster tried to throw himself backward, to carry Lennox to the floor beneath him, failed and twisted, trying to give Alger a shot.

Lennox dragged him back, wrenched the gun free, and cuffed Keeney along the side of the head with it. The other slumped slightly, tried to straighten, but couldn't. Lennox, stooped behind him, failed to see Alger, heard the girl's warning cry. He hit Keeney again, harder this time, and swung about just as a gun roared.

He had a glimpse of Alger, of the girl, hanging to the man, to keep him from firing, heard the gun speak again, and saw her slump. He fired, once, twice, saw a little puff as if of dust from the other's sleeve; fired again, and felt a stinging sensation in his leg; then the gun clicked, and he hurled it at Alger's face, jumping forward as he did so. For an instant the man's startled eyes loomed at him; then they were together, Alger trying to bring up his gun, Lennox' fingers locked about his wrist.

The other was swearing softly, monotonously, his breath coming in short sobs as he tried to free himself. He was strong, but anger made Lennox stronger. The thought of the little girl huddled on the floor filled him. She had held the gunman for an instant, held him at the risk of her own life. Lennox' fingers were steel springs, clamped about the wrist, twisting it. He heard the gun clatter to the uncarpeted floor, let go of the wrist suddenly, and drove his fist into the other's neck. It struck low, just below the Adam's apple.

Alger coughed suddenly. His face went purple, and he let go of Lennox, clawing at his throat. Bill stooped, caught up the gun, and backed away. His eyes for an instant rested on the fallen girl, noted the red splotch spreading across her right shoulder. "Pray God she isn't dead." It wasn't a whisper, scarcely a thought. His eyes went to Alger, his finger on the trigger, ready to tighten, to send quick death at the slightest movement; but there was no movement. The man had had enough.

Lennox sucked warm, stale air into his lungs. He felt light-headed, not steady. He wanted to look at the girl, hardly dared. His voice was hoarse as he said to the gangster: "Against that wall. Move."

Alger backed slowly. Lennox took an uncertain step forward. His leg felt hot, sticky. Then a voice from the door barked at him, made him stop. "Get them up!" The voice quavered slightly with emotional stress. Lennox knew

that voice, knew that Weinstein was behind him. He said:

"Better keep out of this, Sam."

Weinstein's voice steadied. "Don't make me shoot, Bill. Drop that gun."

Lennox obeyed. He felt no feeling of surprise that Weinstein was there, nothing except a great weariness, a surge of hopelessness, not for himself, but for the girl.

Alger was recovering. There was a red spot at the base of his throat, but his face had regained its natural color. He came forward wearily, caught up the gun which had slipped from Lennox' fingers. "Good work, Weinstein. I'll not forget it." He was staring at Lennox, his eyes narrow slits of hate. Suddenly his fist lashed out, caught Bill in the mouth.

Lennox went forward, one step. It was pure muscular reaction, without thought. The gun came up, level. Alger's voice was almost pleading. "Make me shoot, lug. Come on, make me shoot." Bill stopped. Weinstein's voice sounded hurried.

"Not that, Alger! Not that, please, Tony."

The gangster said, with contempt: "You're too soft for this racket, Sam. Why'd you cut in?"

"I couldn't help it." Weinstein's voice told the strain under which he labored. "I couldn't—" He stopped as sound from the floor reached him. Keeney had come to, was trying to sit up.

Weinstein helped him to his feet. Lennox watched, curiously, with a detached feeling, as if he were merely a spectator. Keeney felt the side of his head. He looked at Lennox without anger, and Bill sensed the difference between him and Alger, the self-control which made the squat man leader. Keeney said: "So you didn't intend to sign? You were still bluffing?"

Alger's voice was vicious: "Let me handle it, boss. I'll make the punk sign. Make him like signing."

Keeney said: "In a minute." Weinstein was making little noises.

"I don't like it. I tell you I don't like it."

Keeney said suddenly, savagely: "You're either with us or you ain't. If Lennox hadn't shown up we wouldn't have had trouble. Now we can use him to cover you. Which is it?"

Weinstein was silent. Keeney said, musingly: "We can burn his feet. It's been done. I—" He stopped as there was a noise outside the door and a man burst through. "Cops!"

Keeney swore, savagely. "What the hell?"

The man was breathless. "I saw them from the front window. Three cars. They'll have the door down in a couple of minutes."

Alger showed no surprise, excitement. He said: "The girl goes. I'll not have her talking." His gun swung away from Lennox, towards the still form. Bill saw the gun move, saw murder flame in the man's eyes; dived forward, his body striking Alger just as the man fired, carrying him to the floor. His knee landed on the man's wrist, holding it down. His fingers locked themselves about Alger's throat. Someone was behind him, trying to drag him back. His right hand shot out, caught an ankle, brought the man down, heavily. It was Keeney. The three of them rolled together on the dirty floor, dust choking them. Somewhere, seemingly far off, a gun exploded. There were muffled curses, a scraping of hurried feet, and Lennox felt himself hauled backward, found himself staring up at a broad, unfamiliar face.

7

THE girl said: "This is Pete," proudly. She had one arm, her good one, about the boy's neck. He was young, nineteen, at most, his thin face very white except for the red mark where a blow, in the *mêlée*, had caught him. "Just think! If he hadn't gone to the State's Attorney?"

The boy was embarrassed. "I didn't do nothing." He moved his feet uncertainly. "If Mr. Lennox hadn't jumped that Alger, you'd have been killed." His throat seemed to tighten, make words difficult. "I—I saw them grab you outside my place. I ran out, but they had gone; then I went downtown. I was pretty scared."

One of the plain-clothesmen came in and walked over to the girl. "How do you feel, sister?"

She smiled, wanly. "I'm all right."

He said to Lennox: "Don't see how she happened to get shot."

Lennox told him. He smiled at the girl. She smiled, then was sober. "Could—could you still send us to Hollywood?"

Lennox' smile widened. "I sure could. But listen; pictures are a tough racket."

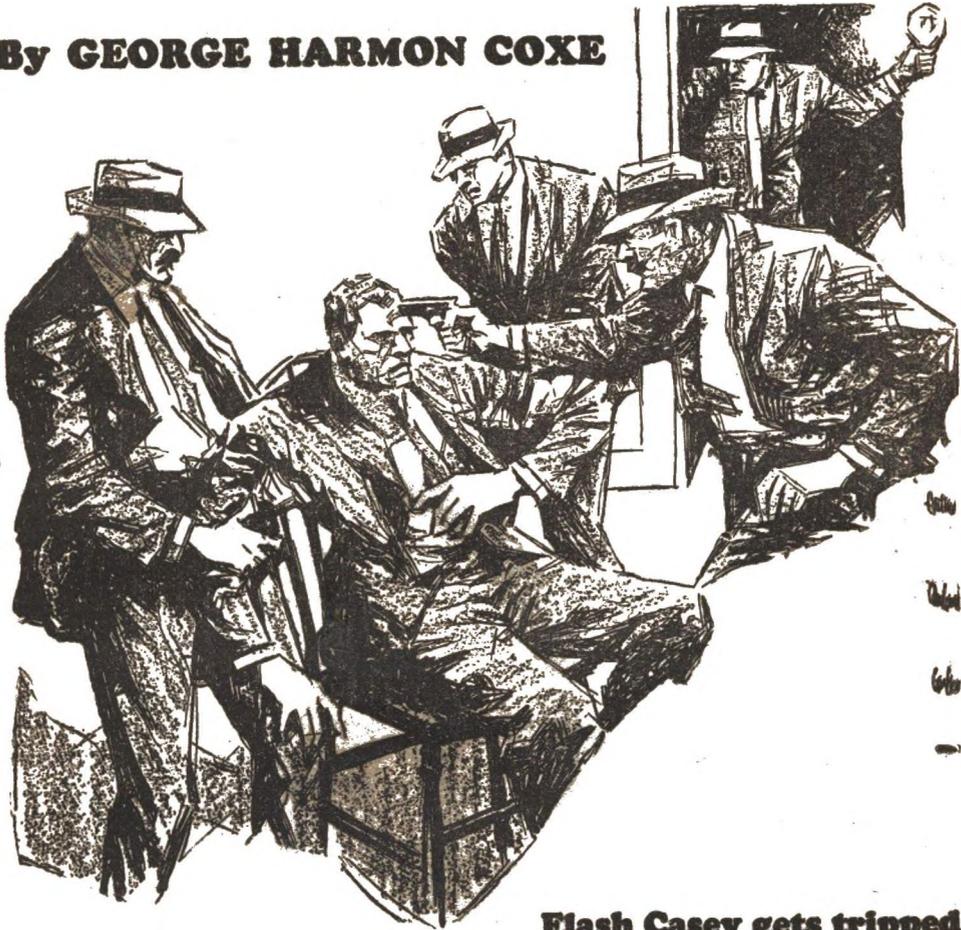
She shook her head. "I don't care about pictures. We'll find something else." Her little mouth looked grim, resolute.

Lennox said: "You'll have to stay here, to testify against Alger; after that—a pal of mine has an orange grove. He needs someone to look after it, someone who will work."

The boy and girl looked at each other, silently. No words were needed. The girl turned to Bill. "We'll work."

# Pinch-Hitters

By GEORGE HARMON COXE



**Flash Casey gets tripped  
by a nose for news**

**T**HE *Senett Hotel* boasts neither a marquee nor a doorman. Its squarish, seven-story stone façade is plain, weather beaten, definitely outmoded.

Many of its guests—mostly male—occupy year-around suites, but it is in no sense a family hotel. Rather the clientele is the sort which likes good food, good liquor, and a management not too fussy about the True-name law.

Casey and Wade, arrayed in dinner jackets and gleaming white shirt fronts,

and looking as unlike newspaper photographers as possible, turned their backs on the grill room at eight o'clock and trudged slowly up the steps to the separate street entrance.

Wade was still sucking his lips when they came out on the sidewalk, and the self-satisfied look on his round, blue-eyed face verged on a grin.

"How'd you know about that tenderloin special? It ain't on the menu."

Casey stopped beside the doorway, fished for a cigarette. "I know it. For old customers. It was good, wasn't it?"

"Hell, yes. I could cut the steak with my fork."

"That's your test, huh?" grunted Casey, amused. "How about the flavor?" He did not wait for an answer. "Blaine says we hadta put on monkey-suits. Okey, we start right."

He lit the cigarette, moved towards a taxi at the curb.

"This dressin' up business is the nuts," said Wade, tagging along. "Not more'n half of 'em dress at the *Club Regis*. And we can take just as good pictures in—"

"Decoys," muttered Casey. "The outfit is supposed to put us above suspicion. Tonight we're gentlemen, get it? We take the pictures on the side."

Casey opened the taxi door, pushed Wade in ahead of him, sat down beside him. He reached forward to close the door, said: "*Globe*." Then, before the driver could flip down the meter flag, he said: "Wait."

The man was passing the main entrance of the hotel when Casey saw him. The yellow glow which bathed the sidewalk threw into sharp relief a tall, stooped figure, a white pinched face; clothing that was a network of wrinkles. He moved forward into the shadows with a weaving, uncertain shuffle as Casey spoke; and Wade, looking up and following Casey's gaze, said:

"Boy, has he got a skinful!"

"Yeah," Casey said softly and opened the door. He crossed the sidewalk to intercept the man who was apparently headed for the alley at the corner of the building, called: "Jim."

The man lurched uncertainly, finally anchored himself with his back against the wall. "Don't bother me," he said, and his voice was thick, husky.

As he approached the man, a thin slab of light from a main floor window seemed to reflect from Casey's shirt-front and slide up to the rugged, somber face under the brim of the battered, incongruous felt. His voice was grimly amused.

"Hokey, my fran'."

"Oh." The man wheezed the word, hesitated. "Hyuh, Flashgun. Didn't know yuh; thought maybe you was a smarty."

Casey took the man by the arm, gently; and his voice was low, steady.

"Got a load, huh?"

"Yeah. And what a load!"

"I'll take you home, Jim. I gotta cab here and—"

"Just come from there."

"Arnold might tie the can to you if he sees—"

"He won't tie the can to Jim Degnan." The fellow attempted a laugh which ended in a cough. "With me testifyin' for him? He won't—"

"No," Casey said. "I guess he won't, at that."

"Who's this kid?" asked Degnan, and Casey saw that Wade, curious as usual, had moved alongside him. He told Degnan about Wade, asked:

"Where you goin'?"

"Gotta see Zella—Zella Elliott. Gotta job to do and—"

Degnan began to cough again and his heels slipped on the sidewalk. Casey held to the one arm, put his right hand on the man's coat, realizing as he helped Degnan steady himself, that the coat-front was moist as though from spilled drink.

Degnan pulled loose, staggered, said: "I gotta get goin', Flash. The back way, kid. Nobody'll see me. Obligated to you, though." He slid along the building, managed to navigate the corner and disappeared into the blackness of the alley.

WHEN the cab pulled out from the curb Wade said: "This Degnan, is he the guy that's testifyin' with Arnold on that snatch?"

"Yeah."

"Well, who is he, anyway?"

Casey looked out the cab window at the kaleidoscopic light and movement of Boylston Street; and the glare of a theater sign flashed through the cab windows, picking out the lines of his rugged

face, accentuating the tan of his skin. He spoke absently.

"Degnan used to be a cop. But he was only a kid, and bootleggin' made for easy money. There was a little trouble, and they chucked him off the force; he got a job as house dick at the *Eastland*. He was hitting the booze pretty heavy, got running with Joe Steiger and—"

"The guy that tried to put the snatch on Arnold?" exploded Wade.

"Yeah. And he got mixed up in some shakedown racket. The *Eastland* threw him out, and I guess Steiger let him lay. Anyway, Arnold picked him out of the gutter about six months ago—don't ask me why."

Casey fell silent a moment as he thought about Sam Arnold. The City's number one gambler. A lone wolf. Hard, shrewd, willing to bet anything on anything. Reputedly a good friend, a tough enemy. He had been in court but once. That time for nearly beating to death a man who welched and double-crossed him.

Joe Steiger was an alley rat who had suffered from growing pains. He was something of a gambler himself, a promoter—of anything that promised monetary rewards. His court record was long, but convictions were few, because he did not travel with a mob; when he needed a job done, he hired outside thugs.

A month previous an attempt had been made to snatch Arnold. But somehow, Degnan had got wind of the plan and tipped off the gambler. The two outsiders who had engineered the attempt were now on trial. Wiseacres about town thought perhaps Steiger was behind the plan.

The shrill of a traffic cop's whistle and Wade's voice jarred Casey back to the moment.

"It was a dumb stunt, trying to snatch a guy like Arnold."

"You think so, huh?" Casey's voice got sardonic. "Well, guess again. Not one snatch in ten ever gets aired. The

best meat of all is guys like Arnold who make their living outside the law. That kind of a snatch never gets to the police. The guy pays up and shuts up, because he knows where a squawk'll put him. Arnold was okey—only Degnan tipped somebody's mitt."

Wade seemed to think over this bit of information for a moment while the cab turned down Savery Street towards the *Globe* entrance. Finally he said:

"Degnan was going to see Zella Elliott, eh? The dame that sings on the radio?"

"Yeah," muttered Casey, sitting up on the seat.

"What for, I wonder. He was pretty crooked to—"

"Forget it, will yuh?" growled Casey. "You're wearin' me down. Degnan works for Arnold—night watchman or guard or something. Arnold owns the *Senett*. Zella has a suite on the same floor with Arnold. I understand it's complimentary. Hell, you know the facts of life, don't you?"

"Aw, nerts. I was just—"

"Then," said Casey, throwing up a hand in a gesture of amused exasperation, "forget Degnan and start thinkin' about the candid camera shots you and I got all dressed up to take."

## II



BLAINE, City Editor of the *Globe*, was working overtime. He was still on duty when Casey and Wade came into the city room, and he looked up as they approached, pushed back his chair.

"I've been waiting for you," he said crisply. "You're late."

"All right," said Casey, "we're late."

Blaine's lip curled. He was a thin man, prematurely gray, with a hatchet face and predatory gray eyes. Immaculately dressed, stiff collar and all, he was a politely sardonic driver and the best desk man in the city. Casey admitted this,

even though Blaine's methods often enraged him.

"You don't look as much like waiters as I thought." Blaine smiled thinly, surveyed Casey and Wade with a cold, searching glance. He grunted, said:

"Now get this. We want these *Club Regis* shots for a Sunday feature. Each of you take one of those little candid cameras. Get separate tables, one on each side of the floor. Get all the shots you can of the dancers, the chorus—and the less clothes they have on when you get them, the better I'll like it."

"Me, too." Casey began to grin.

"And get 'em here by midnight," said Blaine, ignoring the interruption. His eyebrows lifted. "You better not get crooked either, or—"

"You want pictures, don't you?" clipped Casey, his grin fading.

"That's why I'm sending the two of you."

"Then quit beefin'." Casey muttered an oath. "You'll get 'em. But how I get 'em or how many drinks I have is my business."

"If you get one good one between you I'll be lucky," sniffed Blaine. Then his eyes narrowed, his jaw dropped and he swallowed before he spoke. "How'd you cut your hand?"

"Cut whose hand?" Casey looked surprised.

Blaine's voice was sarcastic. "What color's blood?"

Casey lifted his right hand, turned it over. The inside of his fingers were red-stained. He spread the fingers stiffly, flexed them, turned the hand over. Then his eyes widened slowly as he saw there was no cut or abrasion; and he remembered the moist front of Degnan's coat and said, "Jeeze!" softly.

"Well?" Blaine drawled.

"His coat was wet when I propped him up," Casey said. "I thought it was liquor."

"Degnan?" gasped Wade hollowly.

Blaine leaned forward in his chair. "Don't go dumb on me, you big ox. What—"

Casey told him then, told the incident in short, clipped sentences. "And he was going to see Zella Elliott," he finished.

"Said he had a job to do," Wade added.

Blaine glanced quickly about the city room, his sharp, gray eyes touching briefly the slot, the assortment of heads, bent forward at their typewriters or slouched indolently behind desks.

"With that kidnap trial on the fire," he said eagerly, "even Degnan's worth a column. With Elliott mixed up in it—" He broke off as his eyes fastened on a big man at the far side of the room. "*Mallon!*"

"Mallon?" grunted Casey. "Why not Potter or—"

"I don't give out assignments on your recommendation," bristled Blaine.

"I've heard that before," snorted Casey, "only—"

"You don't like Mallon, huh?"

Casey scowled and said nothing. Blaine's lifted brows gave a touch of a sardonic smile to his thin face. He was a reporter at heart, Blaine. A newsman. To him, pictures, photographers, were a necessary evil; it was the story that counted. That his sympathy and primary interest went to the reporter, was natural. This fact was evident in his speech.

"You don't like him because he's a bigger prima donna than you are. Well, get this: Mallon's got a nose for news; he knows story values. You stumbled on to something that looks hot. Mallon'll cover. All you got to do is take pictures and do what he tells you."

"How about me?" broke in Wade eagerly.

"You?" Blaine's tone was impatient. "Down to the *Regis* for you. You're late as it is. And you better bring back a couple shots I can use."

Mallon's voice boomed, "Hi, Flash," and he drew to a stop beside the photographer as Wade turned and shuffled away, a crestfallen and dejected figure.

Casey did not answer; he watched

Blaine with sultry eyes as the city editor told Mallon the story.

They were about the same height, Mallon and Casey; about the same weight. Yet, as they stood there in front of the desk, it was readily apparent that they had but little in common.

Casey, for all his bulging shirt front, thick hands, and lumpy shoulder muscles that threatened to burst the seams of his coat, had about him a definite leanness to his face, to his stomach. Mallon's bulk was sleek, accentuated by his double-breasted gray suit; his face was pink and smooth; his panama was newly cleaned. Even his hair was neatly trimmed, contrasting sharply with Casey's shaggy nape.

Blaine hurried on with his story, and Casey grumbled inwardly. Mallon was good, all right. He could write. But he talked too much, and too loud. A comparatively new man to the *Globe*—from St. Louis—a personality lad. A nose for news, maybe; but a *poseur*, a blusterer. Still, what difference did it make? On a job like this all he, Casey, had to do was take pictures.

"And you, Flash," Blaine was saying, "you stick with Mallon. He'll tell you—"

"Sure," boomed Mallon with a careless wave of a fat hand, "I'll handle it. Get the box, and let's go, Flash."

THE lobby of the *Senett* was quiet and gloomy. The lights were subdued, the furniture was old and heavy. There were a lot of pillars, a half dozen potted palms—and two plain-clothesmen idling about as Casey and Mallon came up the main staircase and turned towards the elevators.

Mallon asked the elevator boy where Zella Elliott's apartment was and they got off on the fifth floor. There was a reporter from the *News* in the hall; a uniformed policeman in front of a door, near the rear of the corridor, and Mallon turned to Casey.

"It broke. Guess we just about got here in time."

The fellow from the *News* called a greeting, and when Casey and Mallon continued on past him he added: "Don't get all lathered up—you can't get in."

"That's what you think," said Mallon and there was no question about his swagger.

The cop stopped them. Casey did not know the fellow and he asked what had happened. The cop shook his head, said: "All I know is no reporters or button pushers go in."

"Who's in there?" asked Casey.

"Lieutenant Stevens—Lieutenant Logan."

Casey smiled in satisfaction and Mallon said: "Tell 'em that Mallon's out here. Mallon of the *Globe*. Tell 'em I've got some dope on Degnan that they oughtta have."

Casey looked at Mallon and scowled at the use of the personal pronoun. The cop hesitated, but Mallon had his personality primed and hitting on all eight. His manner apparently shook the policeman's resolve because he finally said: "Wait," and stepped into the room.

When the door opened again, Lieutenant Logan stood framed in the opening. He was a good friend of Casey's. A tall, smooth-shaven man, well set-up, handsome. His hair and eyes were black. He had an excellent record, the reputation of a square shooter, and there was a quiet hardness about him, sufficiently accepted so that he could wear spats and a derby when, he wanted to—and get away with them.

"What about Degnan, Flash?" he said quietly, ignoring Mallon.

Casey started to speak, but Mallon beat him to it. "Show him your hand," he snapped, and reached down and grabbed Casey's wrist.

He held up the fingers. They were still red-stained and as Logan's eyes narrowed, Mallon said: "That blood is Degnan's."

"You wouldn't kid me, would you?"

"We don't have to," said Mallon.

Logan's brows drew together. He looked at Casey, who nodded slightly.

without speaking. The lieutenant stood back from the door, said: "I guess you'd better come in."

Casey saw Degnan first. He lay in the center of the room, partly on his back, partly on his side; and there was something horribly unfamiliar about the unnatural sprawl of the thin figure, the reddish stain on the vest and coat of the wrinkled blue suit—the blood-clotted hole in front of one ear.

There was nothing new in death—to Casey. He had seen it, photographed it, enough times to get used to it. But this was different. Because he knew now that Degnan was dying when he talked with him a half hour previous. And he had joked about it, and Degnan had played his hand and never let on that the load he carried was lead, not liquor.

The sharp suck of Mallon's breath, jerked up Casey's eyes. They flicked past Lieutenant Stevens and another plain-clothesman, fastened on the other figure at one side of the room. This time the picture of death registered its image on his brain with a distinct shock that stiffened him and stopped his breathing.

Zella Elliott lay on her stomach. One arm was doubled under her; the other outflung. A foot from this outstretched hand was a heavy automatic.

Her artificially blond head was cocked at a peculiar angle, and Casey saw that the plump, rouged face was twisted with anger and something else—fear—hate—even in death. A semi-circle of blood on the rug peered from beneath her flame-colored evening dress.

### III



**L**IEUTENANT STEVENS, a bronzed, lean-faced fellow with gray-white hair and green-gray eyes, scowled at the intrusion and shot a question at Logan. When he got the answer he turned to Casey.

"Let's see the hand."

Casey held it up.

"Where'd you get it?"

Mallon chimed in before Casey could answer: "We'll tell you for a couple pictures and the story."

"You'll tell me anyway," clipped Stevens, who made no attempt to disguise his irritation and dislike of Mallon's cocky attitude.

"Sure," said Mallon easily. "But we don't have to tell you now, and you know it." He turned to Casey. "Come on, Flash. Do something. Get out the box."

Casey did not even look annoyed this time, because he was thinking about Zella Elliott. She was not beautiful, never had been. But she was a regular, had that reputation. An old-times blues singer of the Sophie Tucker school. She had the manner, the voice, something of the build, although she was not quite so heavy.

Casey opened his plate-case and took out his tripod, pulled out the legs and set it up. But it was another moment before he got his mind on his work. Zella's death did not fit the picture; did not make sense. She was a square-shooter, loyal. She probably had as wide an acquaintance among the underworld as the police. Yet her personal affairs had always been on the level. She would not welch, squeal, betray a confidence—then why was she killed?

"Come on, Flash," rapped Mallon irritably.

Casey's face flushed and his fists knotted instinctively. A nose for news, huh? A sliver of grim humor streaked through his brain and his fists relaxed. He took out a flashbulb as Mallon said:

"All we want is a couple shots, Stevens, and—"

"Take 'em," barked the lieutenant, "and quit givin' me the run-around. When we got a look at the set-up, we thought Arnold might've knocked off the two of 'em. We can't find him. He's a hot-headed, jealous egg. If he found them here together and—" He broke

off as Casey's flashbulb went off, cursed once, added: "Speak your piece, Mallon. Because *Globe* or no *Globe* I'm gonna beat it out of you if you don't."

He started for Mallon and for the first time the reporter's bored nonchalance deserted him. He took a step backward, said:

"Degnan was shot before he came up here."

That stopped Stevens, and Mallon went on with his story. Casey was putting away his tripod when the reporter finished.

Stevens said: "Arnold mightta got wise to something, put the slug on Degnan in his room, left him for dead, and then come here to get Zella."

"Degnan," grunted Casey, "didn't have that head wound when I saw him downstairs."

"He didn't have—" Stevens went slack-jawed and his mouth stayed open as realization struck home. There followed a long moment of hushed silence. Then Logan's dark brows knotted and he whistled softly. Stevens' jaws clicked shut and his voice got harsh, angry.

"Why the hell didn't you say so?"

"I wasn't tellin' my story," Casey said wearily. "Mallon was."

"He might've come here to rub out Zella," Mallon said quickly. "You said he had to see her, had a job to do. Maybe he came up here and shot her and—"

"There's only one gun in the place," Logan said flatly. "It's been fired twice." He jingled two empty shells in his hand. "And I think"—he hesitated and one eyebrow cocked—"I think they were both killed with the same gun."

"Joe Steiger wanted Degnan out," Stevens said thoughtfully. "With Arnold and Degnan testifying, those two would-be snatchers would get about ninety-nine years. If they do, they'll probably squawk. Then if Steiger *was* behind it—" He stopped and pulled thoughtfully on his lower lip.

"That might be the angle on Degnan—but Zella—" He growled impatiently. "It don't make sense."

Logan moved towards Casey. He was still jingling the shells in his hand and an enigmatic smile bared his white, even teeth.

"You generally have a piece to speak, Flash," he said easily. "No ideas this time?"

"Me?" Casey's brows lifted in mock surprise. He sniffed, gave Logan a wry glance, then looked at Mallon and his brows drew down. "Hell, no. Mallon's got the ideas. I just take pictures."

Stevens spoke to Logan as Mallon and Casey moved towards the door. "Stick around, Logan. Arnold might come back. I'll get the word out to pick him up—and Steiger, too. He'll probably have an alibi if he's in on it. But I'd like to hear it."

MALLON stopped at the desk in the lobby and Casey went on out to the sidewalk and piled his plate-case and camera in a taxi. While he waited he lit a cigarette and his smoldering thoughts grappled with the double murder. He was still fighting the problem and wondering, with a half guilty sense of neglect, what might have happened if he had insisted on going upstairs with Degnan, when Mallon came out.

Casey said: "*Globe.*"

Mallon stopped with his foot on the running-board, stuck his head in the driver's compartment. "No. 736 Walton Street."

"Why?" Casey's voice was annoyed.

"That's where Degnan lived," said Mallon, dropping down on the seat. "I found out at the desk."

"What about it?"

"He mightta been shot there. I wantta look over his place."

"How about these pictures I just got?"

"They'll keep. We got plenty of time, ain't we?"

"And we got the story," grunted Casey. "We got a couple exclusive shots. What's the idea of—"

"Don't be dumb." Mallon snorted the words and tapped a cigarette on a

gleaming thumbnail. "We give the room the once over before the cops tear it to pieces. We might run on to something that—"

"I never saw a reporter yet that didn't think he could outsmart the whole damn' detective bureau."

"It wouldn't be so hard," said Mallon.

"Boy!" Casey blew out a cloud of smoke that bounced back off the glass partition of the front seat, and shook his head sadly. "What a job!"

"You don't like it, huh?"

"I'm sick of the whole damn' business."

"You can go back," Mallon said curtly. "Only Blaine said—"

"I know—I know. And you'd probably tell him all about it."

The taxi pulled up to the curb, a scant three blocks away from the *Senott*, and Casey finished his thought as he got out. "Some day, I think you might lose some skin on that nose for news."

**S**EVEN THIRTY-SIX was a remodeled brownstone front. There were six worn stone steps, steep ones; a vestibule dimly lighted by yellow rays that filtered through a frosted glass panel from the inner hall; six mail boxes. Under the nearest one, 3-B, was the name Degan.

The carpeted stairs mounting from the inner hall were wide, the banister smooth and worn. Opposite doors gave on the third floor landing and one of these was ajar. Mallon peered at the gilt painted number on the dark panel and pushed on into the room.

It was a plainly and inexpensively furnished living-room, quite in order except for an upset chair, and a parchment shaded lamp which had been tipped over on the oblong center table. An inner hall led from the left wall of the room and Casey moved towards it, peered into its darkness. He slipped his plate-case from his shoulder, leaned indolently back against the wall. He tried to brush

the cigarette ashes from his shirt front, but the effort was clumsy and he left the gleaming whiteness with a one-inch gray smudge.

Mallon looked back and forth across the room, his brown eyes flashing their eager interest. Casey grunted, said:

"Well, do your stuff, Sherlock, and let's get out of here."

Mallon inspected the room carefully, finally went down the hall. Casey picked up the plate-case and followed him through the two bedrooms, the bath, to the kitchen. After five minutes or so, Mallon turned out the kitchen light and started back down the hall. When he reached the threshold of the living-room, he stopped short, stiffened there.

Casey heard the sound a moment later. Footsteps on the landing; men's voices in low tones.

Mallon spun about and pushed Casey ahead of him down the blackness of the inner hall. Casey felt the linoleum covering of the kitchen floor beneath his feet when he heard the living-room door open. He dodged around Mallon, moved quickly back to the kitchen doorway, his eyes fastening on the lighted rectangle at the end of the hall.

Four men moved slowly into his range of vision. Two of them were strangers; one, a thick-set bruiser, the other, tall, thin, swarthy.

The other two men he recognized at once. Sam Arnold was in the center of the group. The plump, dark man with the mustache who stood behind Arnold and held a gun in his back was Joe Steiger. And that meant to Casey just one thing; Steiger must have gunned out Degan and probably Zella as well.

Casey blew out his pent-up breath in a slow, silent blast. For the first time that evening he felt the blood whip through his veins, the definite tingle to his nerve ends. Nose for news—or luck? It didn't matter. Here was something tangible, something to get excited about. He forgot all about Mallon until he heard the whispered words in his ear:

"Let's get the hell out of here!"

"What for?" breathed Casey. "It's what we wanted, ain't it? Stick around and we might get a story that is a story." He grunted softly. "I might even get another picture."

"You're nuts," said Mallon excitedly. "Suppose the heat goes on?"

"If we lay low we'll be okay."

"I know enough about it now. Who's in there anyway? Hoods, ain't they? I saw Arnold and that somebody had a gun on him. I wantta flash the office—we oughtta get the cops."

"The hell with the office," Casey whispered. "But the cops—yeah. Only if we skip now maybe it'll be all over before we get back. One of us oughtta stay. Maybe—" He broke off, knelt in the darkness beside his plate-case. Opening it, he felt around until he found a flashbulb. He put it in his pocket, fastened the case.

"Listen. If you wantta get the cops, okay. Unlock the back door—go out that way. But take my plate-case with you."

"But what're you—"

"Me? I'm not gonna run out on a thing like this. I can keep out of the way—and anything's liable to happen. But be damn' sure you take that plate-case with you. If I have to run I want a head start. And I don't want anything tangling up my legs."

Voices drifted down the hall now, and Casey moved along the wall towards the door of the back bedroom.

#### IV



HAT back bedroom wasn't good enough. Casey could catch a word now and then, but the conversation was low, and he was unable to get the gist of it. So he held his breath, sidled down the hall, past the bathroom to the front bedroom and backed through the open door.

This was more like it. The darkness concealed him, yet the talking was audible; and by keeping close to the door, he could get an occasional glimpse of the occupants of the living-room.

Steiger was speaking.

"I warned you a long time ago, Arnold, so there's no use going into that. If the snatch had worked you'd be better off."

Casey stuck his head into the hall. From this position he had a good view of Arnold. The man stood spread-legged, his hands in his trousers pockets. He appeared to be about forty-five, quietly dressed, with grayish hair under the lightweight felt and a clean, hard line to his smooth-shaven jaw. If he felt fear—any emotion—his mask-like face did not betray him.

"Degnan, the —" Steiger went on. "I don't know how the hell he found out about that snatch, but he mustta thought a lot of you, Arnold, to cross me up."

"Klem and Niska came here tonight. They tried to get Degnan to call you on the phone and get you over here. We might've framed some sort of murder and suicide. Anyway, they could've put you out nice and neat and I'd have my alibi."

"But Degnan wouldn't play. He got tough, made a break for his gun. Niska let him have it. Only you didn't do a very good job, did you, Niska?"

A thin, sharp voice said: "What the hell! He had two in the vest. He didn't move. He looked dead. Who'd think he'd walk three blocks, carryin' that lead."

"But he did," rapped Steiger. "Probably called you at the *Senett* to warn you, Arnold, only you weren't there. So he went to see Zella so he could tell her. He knew you'd see her some time tonight."

Steiger laughed shortly. "We had the same idea. Klem and Niska went to Zella's place to wait for you. Then Degnan busts in and starts to blast."

"When I dropped him," the thin,

sharp voice went on, "what does the fluzie do but grab for his gun and open up on us. She damn' near got me, the tramp. The first slug nicked my coat. I had to let her have it."

"I get it." Arnold turned slowly. Casey could see his face clearly and the only clue to his feelings was the voice.

"Zella thought enough of me, enough of Degnan to play out the string. And you murdered her." Arnold's voice rose, and his movement was lightning fast.

Both hands whipped from his pockets. They were empty, but they were fists when they struck. Casey heard them click against bone, heard a grunt. Then Steiger sagged to the floor in Casey's range of vision and the thick-set bruiser stepped forward and brought his gun down on Arnold's head.

The gambler's hat fell off and he crumpled and pitched forward. The thick-set man and the thin fellow picked up Steiger. They shook him, slapped his face. After a few seconds he came around and staggered to his feet. Klem, the thick-set man, growled:

"Let's cut out the horse play. If we're gonna knock him off what're we waitin' for—the cops?"

Steiger, now standing in full view of Casey, rubbed his jaw, glared down at Arnold, said: "Degnan and the dame both got it from the same heater. Got it, Niska?"

The thin man held out a revolver and Steiger took it. "This'll do it," he said. "Get a chair, prop him up at the table. We'll put a slug through the temple, contact wound. It might kid the cops into thinking he killed the other two and took the suicide. It won't do no harm, anyway."

Casey felt the sweat break out on his forehead. He had the story; he knew Steiger meant what he said, and he knew there was but little time left.

Where the hell was Mallon? How long had he been gone? Not more than a minute or two, probably. It just seemed long. But if he ran the three

blocks to the *Senett* and tipped off Logan— Someone dragged a chair across the room. Niska and Steiger were helping the half-conscious Arnold to his feet.

Sweat, cold sweat, was running down into Casey's eyebrows now. His own safety was assured; he knew that. All he had to do was to stay right where he was—and see murder done.

He thought of Degnan, of Zella Elliott. He'd known Degnan pretty well at one time, and he could not forget the way the fellow had made his sacrifice. He was no friend of Zella's, but he knew her; knew her for the square shooter that she was. And what she had tried to do tonight put an uneasy hollowness in his stomach. Snatching up Degnan's gun—trying to shoot it out with two professionals.

Arnold. A gambler, but at least a straight one. And Steiger—crooked, tricky, merciless. A killer. Casey thought of all this. Perhaps it was some such idea that spurred him to action; probably it was for another reason entirely.

If he saw Arnold murdered, he'd have to tell his story. And when Steiger went on trial, he'd have to testify. He knew that; knew that he would stick to his story. But he also knew what would probably happen to him if he did. He'd photographed witnesses before. Dead ones. So what difference did it make when he took his chance?

A photograph was something that needed no further testimony. Juries liked pictures—and *it might save Arnold's life*. What the hell. He knew the way to the back door, knew it was unlocked.

He screwed the flashbulb into the synchronized flashgun and slid softly into the hall. Arnold was conscious now. Steiger was telling what would happen to him, working himself up.

"I'm in this far enough now," Steiger finished, "so that any chance is worth a whirl. You go out with the same gun that caught Degnan and Zella. I've got

an alibi for that job. Klem and Niska are hot, but they'll be on their way because the cops won't know who to look for. I don't think they can pin it on me."

Casey was three feet from the threshold as Steiger finished. He had the camera open, the shutter adjusted. He could not see any of the men at the moment—the table was to the left—and he was glad of this, because he knew he could not be seen. He moved forward to the edge of the doorway.

He hesitated there a moment until Steiger said: "Hold him, you guys!" Then Casey stepped forward, brought the camera to his shoulder.

The strange tableau imprinted itself on his brain. Arnold held tight in the chair by Klem and Niska. Steiger slightly behind, the blue revolver scarcely an inch from Arnold's gray temple. Then the flashbulb went off, its instantaneous brilliance blanketing the room.

Casey spun back into the hall before anyone else stirred. He had covered half the distance to the kitchen before he heard Steiger shout a curse and an order.

"Get him! Get him, you ——!"

Casey's left foot slapped down on the linoleum of the kitchen. It was a cinch. Caught 'em flat-footed. He chuckled hoarsely, took two long strides; then his toe caught some hard, bulky object.

There was no chance to recover his balance. So great was his speed that he could not even break his fall. It was as though his knees had been cut from under him, and he had just time for one bitter thought: Mallon had left the plate-case behind. Then the floor came up and smacked him.

His face hit first; nose, then forehead. He must have lost consciousness for a moment because when he tried to get up he saw that the lights were on. He turned then, turned and looked up at the snouty muzzle of an automatic which angled down at him two feet from his head.

He sat up, lifted his eyes to the thin, swart, mustached face of Niska, and he saw the lips curl into a leering smile. Not until then did he realize that his nose was bleeding, that large red drops were spreading a weird pattern over his white shirt front.

IT was a long time before Casey felt any fear. And that was because his brain festered with his anger at Mallon. He couldn't think of anything else until Niska said: "Get up, punk!"

Casey said: "Okey, mugg. No argument," and got unsteadily to his feet. He saw Klem, his low forehead crossed in an apparently uncomprehending scowl, come into the kitchen followed by Arnold and Steiger.

Blood still dripped from Casey's nose, and he took out a handkerchief and tried to staunch the crimson flow. There was a dull ache in his head, and exploring fingers found the swelling lump at one side of his forehead. Steiger swore just once, said: "Hello, Flash. This time you really stubbed your toe, huh?"

Casey looked down at the camera. He might as well have thrown it at the floor. It was a mess. His gaze caught the plate-case and he began to curse in a low, bitter monotone. Mallon, and his nose for news. Hot, cancerous anger crowded everything else from his brain until he heard Steiger say:

"Bring the camera, that case, and come on. I guess we'll have to change our plans."

Casey, still holding the handkerchief to his nose, picked up the camera, shouldered the strap of the plate-case. As he turned towards the hall doorway he saw that Arnold had his hands back in his pockets and was watching him with steady gray eyes. There was a thin trickle of blood at the gambler's temple, but his face was a mask.

"I don't know all the answers, but it was a nice idea, Flash. I appreciate it."

"Come on," rapped Steiger. He

jerked Arnold around, but the gambler said: "Seems like a lot of people are tryin' to do me a good turn tonight," as he was pulled into the hall.

## V



HEY went down the front stairs in single file. Niska, Casey, with Klem's gun in his back; Arnold, then Steiger. There was a sedan at the curb, a big, heavy-looking job. Niska got in behind the wheel; the rest crowded into the tonneau. Casey and Arnold sat on the back seat; Steiger and Klem sat facing them on the holding seats.

Niska asked for directions, and Steiger gave him an address on Warren Avenue. Casey's nose had stopped bleeding and he tried to put Mallon out of his mind and think about his predicament.

Arnold said: "How'd you get wise to this, Flash?"

Casey told him how he and Mallon decided to look over the rooms.

"Then," pressed Arnold, "how come you muffed it? You had a good start down the hall. What the hell made you fall over that—"

"A nose for news," said Casey.

Arnold said: "What?"

Casey did not answer. Instead he glanced out of the rear windows. What the hell was keeping Mallon? If the police came now, it might be time enough. He twisted his neck to get a better view. Then he saw Wade.

At first Casey couldn't believe it. Wade was at the *Club Regis*. The sedan pulled out from the curb. But it was Wade. He was hanging out of the taxi window. Casey remembered now. That checkered cab had rolled slowly from the other direction as they came down the steps, and for a moment he thought it was going to stop. It had stopped now, but at the opposite curb, about fifty feet away. Casey breathed

an oath and pressed his face against the glass.

"Sit up, mugg," Klem said. Casey straightened on the seat. "And stay away from that window," added Steiger.

Casey looked out through the windshield and watched Niska turn right into Columbus Avenue. The sedan picked up speed and moved at an even pace through the negro district and its rows of sordid frame and brick buildings.

Casey did not look around again. There was no need for it. Either Wade had seen him, or he hadn't. And if he had, he'd either play it cagey, perhaps pick up a cop or something, or he'd try some crazy stunt that would probably backfire and get his own neck in a jam. In any case, there was nothing Casey could do about it.

The sedan rolled to a stop four or five minutes later. On the sidewalk, with Klem's gun in his back, Casey inspected the house in front of him. It was one of a row, cheap frame tenements. The only light came from the ground floor, and through curtainless windows a bald-headed man in his undershirt was reading a paper, his stockinged feet cocked on a table.

Casey glanced up and down the darkened, deserted street. At the next corner, light from a small drug-store flooded the sidewalk, picked out the checkered body of a taxicab. How long it had been there he did not know. He could not see Wade.

Klem cursed him, and jabbed the gun hard against his spine. "Come on, smarty. On your way."

Casey followed Arnold up the rickety steps, across the wooden porch and into the semi-darkness of a narrow hall that was hot and stuffy, that smelled of dirt and fried food and garbage.

THE tenement Steiger led them to was on the third floor. After he had turned on the lights and shut and locked the door, he dropped into a moldy-looking over-stuffed chair and began to smile.

For the first time, Casey studied the man. Not much over thirty, he thought. Sleek, well-fed—like Mallon; but the stamp of the gutter was still on his face. A waxed mustache; dark eyes that were shining and pitiless now. The mirthless smile, the nonchalant attitude gave the impression that he was no longer in a hurry; and Casey was glad of that, because if Wade had seen him, had followed—

"You two guys"—Steiger nodded at Casey and Arnold—"sit down on that davenport."

Casey looked at Arnold, who shrugged and moved to the threadbare piece near the door.

"And you, Niska, you keep that rod on 'em." He glanced at Klem. "Bring me that camera and case."

Steiger fumbled with the camera for a few seconds before he could get the placeholder from the back. When he finally managed the operation, he tossed the camera on the floor, pulled out the two plates; and, as though that were not enough, placed them on the floor and ground them to minute pieces under his heel.

"To make sure," he said, opening the plate-case, "we'll take care of the rest of 'em."

Which he did, slowly, deliberately. Casey counted the unexposed plates. Fourteen of them. Steiger's contemptuous attitude fanned his smoldering anger, and brought a flush to his face. To hide this, he looked away, noticed the inner hall, wondered if the layout here was like Degnan's place.

"I think maybe this is a better idea after all," Steiger said, glancing at Niska. "If I pay you two guys off tonight, you can lam out of here. You took this dump for a month, didn't you?"

"Yeah," said Niska.

"And the time ain't up for a couple weeks." Steiger went on: "And I guess you don't need to worry about maid service or anybody botherin' you till that month's up. If you put a towel

over the muzzle of your gun, you can rub 'em out nice and quiet and—"

"I don't like it," Niska said, his thin, swart face twisting in a frown. "Knockin' off newspaper guys is tough business. It makes a stink."

"Yeah," chimed in Klem. He picked at a cauliflower ear and his low forehead was corrugated with thought.

"Maybe we oughtta let 'em go," sneered Steiger.

There seemed to be no answer to this. Niska glanced at Klem, back at Steiger. After a moment he shrugged and rubbed the barrel of his automatic against the palm of his left hand. "Okey," he said. "Spill it."

Steiger's eyes gleamed their satisfaction and he stroked his mustache with the thumbnail of his right hand.

"That's more like it. You two were lucky tonight. You picked up Arnold before he got back to the *Senett*. Nobody in town's got a line on you."

Steiger stood up, took a thick fold of bills from his trousers pocket. Casey saw a \$500 note on top. Steiger counted off \$3,000, passed it to Niska, gave a like sum to Klem.

"Now you're set. Put these muggs out—and beat it. The cops're looking for me. I'm goin' down and give myself up—get this questionin' over. It might be two weeks before they find the bodies, and I don't think they can hang the kill on me. Anyway, it's a chance I gotta take."

Steiger started down the inner hall as he finished. Casey saw a light go on, and a half minute later Steiger came back with a thick towel which he tossed to Niska.

"Take 'em one at a time." He glanced at Casey and Arnold. "Stand up."

Casey got to his feet. Gone was his brief reign of sartorial splendor. His hat was crammed down on hair that was sodden and tousled. The tuxedo was red-spotted, the shirt front a bulging, crumpled mess of crimson and white.

His nose was swollen, red-flecked at the nostrils and the lump on his forehead was blue—and sweaty.

He realized that his knees were weak. They weren't shaking but there was no stiffness to them. The palms of his hands were damp; his throat was dry.

Steiger said: "I hate to do it, Flash, but it's the business. It's no fun for me, but you stuck your nose in—and you've been around enough to know how things are."

"Suppose," Casey said thickly, "suppose I promised not to squawk."

"Nope," grunted Steiger. "You're not that kind of a guy. If you was a rat I might take a chance that you'd be afraid to talk. But you ain't. When you had time to think it over, you'd be just crazy enough to tell what you knew, and then I'd have to go through with it anyway."

Casey felt the sweat on his upper lip now. He knew Steiger was not bluffing. There was nothing to bluff about. He knew fear now. He was not panicky. He thought he could make himself stand up and take it, and not grovel at Steiger's feet. But he was afraid, because he did not want to die like a spy against a brick wall, without a chance, without a struggle.

Steiger said something that Casey did not catch. Niska had backed away about three feet and was wrapping the towel over the end of the automatic.

Casey glanced at the door at his right. He had seen Steiger lock it; it would take four long steps to gain the darkness of the inner hall across the room. He'd never make it. Then, as he realized the hopelessness of the predicament, his mind slid back to Mallon, and the plate-case which had caused all the trouble. His hand moved up to the lump on his forehead. If only Mallon had to stand here beside him and take it, it wouldn't be so bad—

Steiger had moved over in front of Arnold and now he spoke. "Anything you want to say?"

Arnold's lips pulled back against his teeth. "Not to you, you ———!"

"Okey." Steiger flushed and turned to Casey. "You got your choice, Flash. You want it first—or last?"

Casey stiffened his legs. He wet his lips and forced them into a grin. He opened his mouth. Then three sharp knocks fell upon the door.

Casey's mouth stayed open as his head jerked around. Steiger breathed a curse. His eyes widened, swiveled back and forth across the room. He took out his automatic, stepped to the door, stopped with his hand on the knob.

"Maybe it's the pay-off," he whispered hoarsely. "You, Niska, Klem—watch 'em!"

The key scratched in the lock. Steiger turned the knob slowly, and Casey watched the door inch open. He tore his gaze back to Niska. The fellow's swart face had paled, but he was watching him like a hawk, and Casey's eyes slid back to the door. It was open two inches now and Steiger's gun was in the opening.

A soft curse slid from someone's lips. Then Steiger opened the door and stepped back.

Wade stood there with his hands on his hips. He was bareheaded, his face as white as his stiff shirt front.

Steiger, his gun level, backed away from the door, said: "Come on in, punk!"

## VI



WADE did not hesitate long. He looked at the gun in Steiger's hand for an instant, then glanced up at Casey. He grinned, then, and stepped across the threshold.

"Oh." Casey found his voice, choked on the first word. "Oh, you cluck. You dumb—"

"How'd you get here?" rapped Stei-

ger, his voice cracking. "How'd you know we—"

"It's a plant," Klem barked, and thrust his bullet head forward from hunched shoulders.

"I saw you come out of Degnan's place," Wade said hurriedly, and started to close the door with a slow, deliberate movement. "I was in a taxi, followed you here. I saw Flash, didn't know just what—"

"You crazy fool," ground out Casey. "Why didn't you—"

"It's a plant!" croaked Klem again.

"Did you tip off the cops?" clipped Steiger. "Because if you did, I'll put you away first if it's the last thing I do."

"The cops?" Wade's eyes widened. His guileless, youthful face looked surprised.

Steiger stepped forward to lock the door. Then it happened.

Casey was not sure of the exact sequence. He did not know whether Wade started it, or whether it was Arnold. He saw the young photographer stiffen, saw his eyes shoot over Steiger's shoulder to the other side of the room. He thought he heard Arnold move beside him. Then Wade yelled: "Drop!"

Casey did not know the significance of the command, but he saw Wade throw himself at Steiger's knees. As Casey spun on Niska, Arnold flashed by him. Someone said: "Up with 'em!"

Casey's head hit Niska in the stomach. He felt the fellow go over backwards. Then Casey was on the floor. He struck on his hands and knees at the same moment a gun roared in his ear.

After that guns roared in salvos. The floor shook under his hands. The cage-like room seemed to rock under the blast which thundered and reverberated from the walls. It took him a second or two to realize that he had not been hit. And he could not understand that until he looked up.

Logan and three plain-clothesmen stood just inside the inner hall at the other side of the room. Casey stared

dumbly at them for an instant, then, without making any attempt to get to his feet, he turned his head and looked around.

Niska was nearest him, and he was flat on his back, gun still in his hand, a bluish, red-rimmed hole in his forehead. Klem was on his knees, his hands stretched high.

Someone was cursing behind him and he heard the thud of a fist. Logan mouthed an oath and started forward, and Casey scrambled to his feet and whirled towards the door.

Steiger was on his back. There was blood on his collar, on his vest. Casey knew the fellow was dead, knew it from sprawled limpness of the body. But Arnold was astride that fallen body.

The expressionless mask of the gambler's face was shattered. His teeth were bared, veins stood out at his temples and sweat bathed his forehead. Both hands were clenched about that lifeless neck in a frenzied, throttling grip. Wade was trying to pull Arnold away, but lacked the strength.

Logan got his hand under Arnold's right arm. He said: "Snap into it!" to Casey, and the two of them hauled the gambler from the prostrate form by sheer force. They pulled him to theavenport, dropped him there. Logan cuffed him, and after a second or two, the familiar mask began to settle over the crimson features.

"He killed Zella and Degnan," Arnold croaked. "You killed him."

"It sure looks that way," said Logan flatly.

"I wish"—Arnold hunched forward and let his hands dangle between his knees—"I wish I could have done that—myself."

"**T**HEY had an early show at the *Regis*," Wade said, while they waited for an ambulance. "When I got out I beat it down to the *Senett*. Logan was there"—Wade glanced at the lieutenant—"and said you'd been, and gone."

"I remembered Degnan said he'd just come from his place. I thought you might be there. I saw you come out, but Mallon wasn't with you, so I figured I'd better pinch-hit for him. I called from the drug-store on the corner, called Logan at the *Senett*—thought it would be quicker than calling Headquarters."

Casey had been inspecting the remains of his camera, pawing through the case to see if Steiger had missed a plate. Now he looked up and his thick face was still moist.

"You can pinch-hit for *me* any day, kid."

"Yeah," chimed in Arnold, lifting his head from his hands, and speaking for the first time. "And you can hit for me, Flash."

Casey flushed, then scowled at Wade. "But you sure scared hell out of me—standing there in the door, alone."

"You weren't scared before, huh?" grunted Logan sardonically.

"Plenty," said Casey. "Only this was different."

"I remembered what you said about our monkey suits being decoys," Wade went on. "So I thought if I was a decoy it would give Logan a chance to get in the back way."

"And it was the kid's idea," Logan said. "He was afraid if we tried to bust in, Steiger might get kill-crazy and iron you out."

"Boy," Casey shook his head in admiration, "was I lucky!"

"Lucky?" said Wade.

"Lucky it was you that followed us here instead of Mallon." Casey spat out a curse. "I don't know where the hell he went, but he left that plate-case behind, and it looked like curtains for Arnold and me. I lost the shot I got in Zella's room, the one I got in Degnan's place.

"And now"—Casey's tone got disgusted—"I ain't even got a plate left to—"

"What of it?" asked Wade. "I still got some shots left in this candid cam-

era." He took the tiny camera from his coat pocket. "We can blow 'em up okey—and you've got flashbulbs, haven't you?"

"Oh"—Casey put his fists on his hips, cocked one eyebrow. "Then you ain't been back to the office with your shots?"

"No. I—"

Casey chuckled, stepped over to his plate-case, took out a flashgun and bulbs. Three minutes later he had four pictures of the room, the dead men on the floor, the manacled Klem, Logan.

After that they went out and stopped in the drug-store at the corner. Casey called Blaine. The city editor's voice was cold, rasping.

"Where the hell you been? Why didn't you do what Mallon said? Do you know you've got half the police force looking for you?"

"At last, huh?" Casey growled. "Well where's Mallon?"

"He's here—now."

"Why didn't he get the cops up to Degnan's place—why didn't he take that plate-case like I told him?"

"I didn't know anything about a plate-case, but when he went out he couldn't find a cop so he got on a phone, called in here and—"

"Called you?" exploded Casey.

"Certainly. And when I got the dope, I got Headquarters and the precinct house. You were gone when they got there. Where the hell you been?"

"I'll bet Mallon took his time and gave you all the details too," Casey said bitterly.

"Listen," said Blaine. "I don't want any argument. I heard Mallon's story and—"

"You ain't heard mine."

"If you'd done what Mallon said—"

"Nerts!" shouted Casey. "I'm comin' in. Steiger hired two torpedoes to knock off Degnan and Arnold. They killed Zella Elliott. Steiger's dead. Wade and I've got the story and pictures. Now crab, damn you, crab!"

"What—"

Casey hung up before Blaine could

get the second word out. Wade was waiting in a taxi. He asked Casey what Blaine had said and Casey told him.

It was less than a ten minute ride to the *Globe* building, and Casey, slumped in his corner of the seat, made no attempt to talk. Wade, seeing the glowering cast of the older man's face, the sultry expression in his eyes, did not press his desire for conversation.

When they got out of the cab, Casey said:

"Take that camera up to Blaine and

tell him what you got. I'll be up after a while."

"What're you—" stammered Wade.

"I got something I want to do—before I change my mind." Casey felt gingerly of the bump on his forehead, and he started through the entrance, a grim smile on his lips.

Wade, tagging behind, said: "Where you going?"

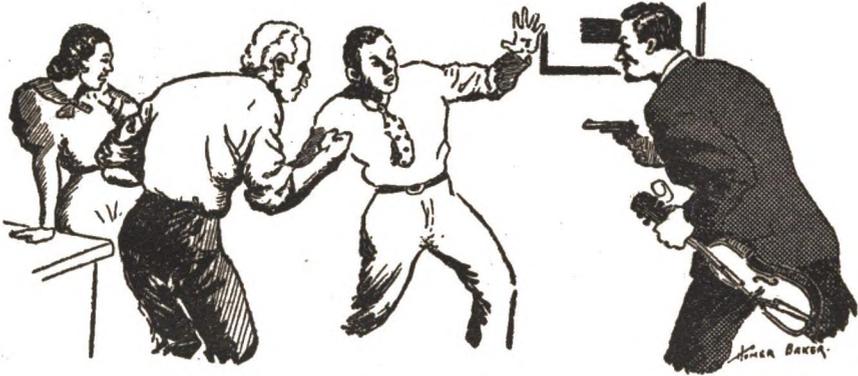
"Me? I'm gonna find a guy by the name of Mallon," growled Casey, "and bust him one on that precious nose for news."



# Take It or Strange Happenings

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## "LIFE" FOR A MISSING STRING



When Charles Urschel, the wealthy Oklahoma oil operator, was held a blindfolded kidnap prisoner in some unknown building, and a long automobile ride from his home, he remained cool and kept his wits about him. Everyone now knows how he guided the subsequent search to the locality by having noted the daily passage of a plane directly overhead at a regular hour which he cleverly obtained from his captors.

That, however, was not enough, and, as sometimes happens, sufficient

identification of the right house and people depended on a homely, almost insignificant incident. Urschel overheard the Shannon boy fretfully complain that "he couldn't play his fiddle with one string gone—and would somebody please get him another."

Later, a Federal officer found pretense to enter the house and while talking with "Boss" Shannon and his wife, saw the violin with but three strings. He dropped his sales argument, drew his gun and bade them to "put 'em up."

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## HE FOOLED 'EM

"I'm helping train them dogs; they'll be here in a minute," explained a breathless negro to a group of Florida farmers as they questioned and then let him pass. A few minutes later the "training dogs" appeared. The guards accompanying them said the negro was a convict and had escaped Miami City Stockade. The trail was lost in the Everglades.



# Leave It in the Field of Crime

## VERY OBLIGING

Col. Calvin, head of Northwestern University's crime detection laboratory, believes a pistol receives much blame for modern crimes for which the motor car should share. "It is the rapid means of escape afforded by the automobile that makes possible much of the modern crime," he says. "A law forbidding any person convicted of a crime of violence from riding in an automobile, under heavy penalty, would help solve the crime problem."



One of innumerable instances illustrates Col. Calvin's point.

To show the public how to combat crime, Massachusetts State Police put on an exhibit of various type machine-guns, shotguns, rifles, revolvers, pistols, tear gas and ammunition at Mechanics Hall, Boston, Mass. Three masked robbers bound and gagged the watchman during the night and stole the show. The trio escaped in a fast automobile, although a state wide radio and teletype alarm went out within twenty minutes after the theft.

## OUT OF THE FRYING-PAN—



Three convicts escaped from an Oklahoma Prison Camp and boarded a passing freight train. They hid in a boxcar and fell asleep. In the morning they emerged to expected freedom but were dismayed to find the car had been shunted inside the walls of the State Penitentiary at Montgomery. There they remained in solitary confinement.

## A CLINCHING ARGUMENT

While a salesman was making a tear gas system demonstration—without, unfortunately, using gas—in the Gloucester City branch of the Camden Safe Deposit Company at Gloucester, N. J., five bandits entered, forced the salesman and four bank employees into the vault and escaped with \$8,500 of the company's money. It is assumed that the salesman made his sale.



# Desert Sentence



**Chip Huard follows relentlessly the tangled trails leading from a hold-up killing**



HIP HUARD, seated close to a window on the top floor of the *Prospector's Rest*, pushed away cards that were under his hand. The O B O puncher tilted his chair, and looked out. "Sounded like that train whistlin', now," he said.

Across a small table Chunky Oakes, marshal of Apache, grunted, and poured himself a drink.

"How far does that desert run?" asked Chip, trying in his mind to dovetail history and geography. From outside there came again the haunting, long drawn whistle of the delayed train.

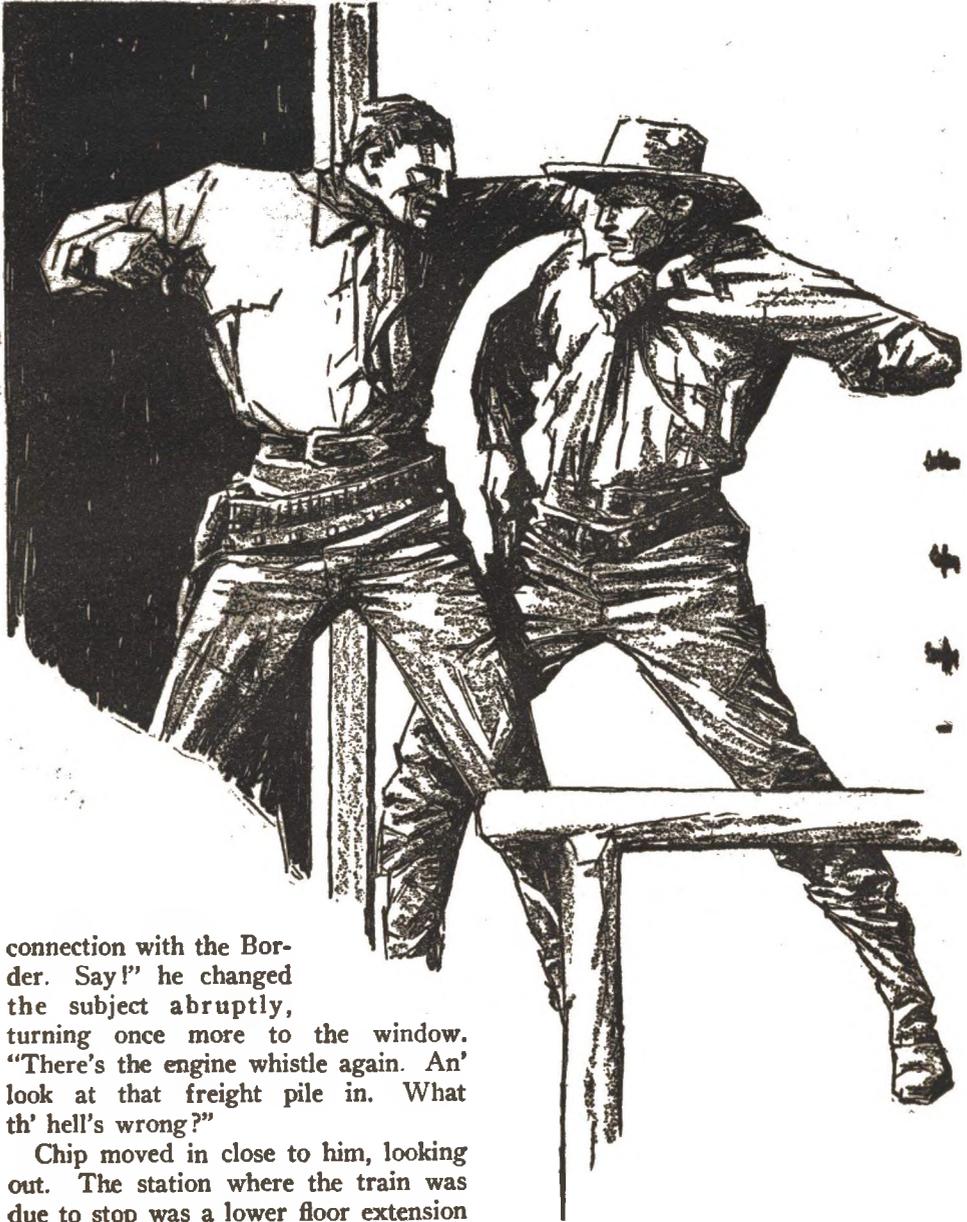
Oakes got up. He pointed. "Them rails run clear to Springerville. Across the Palo Verde sinks. Only one station between—Hobson's Bend. *There's a*

tough section, Huard. Somethin' gone wrong up there, too—" His words broke off. He frowned as the train whistled a third time.

Huard rose. "It's been fine seein' you, Oakes. Talkin' about the ranch an' the Las Palmas section makes me kinda restless to get back. I figgered to take Danny Thompson home, too, but the kid split from me at Yarnell. I reckon he ain't had his fill of wanderin'."

Oakes said half absently: "Yeah. Like cussin', wanderin' sometimes comes to be a habit. Well—" he added, turning from the window and extending his hand—"I sure enjoyed our talk, Huard. I only hear things about yore section oncet in a while. Carlson was here two months ago. He said somethin' about a fight yore outfit had with the Spider Collins bunch across the Line. But outside of things like that, I sure have lost

## By JACK BERTIN



connection with the Border. Say!" he changed the subject abruptly, turning once more to the window. "There's the engine whistle again. An' look at that freight pile in. What th' hell's wrong?"

Chip moved in close to him, looking out. The station where the train was due to stop was a lower floor extension of the hotel, and the engine, behind its flaring headbeam, was already grinding

to slower speed. But the piercing whistle came again. From below the two men came excited shouts.

"Look!" said Oakes, pointing out. "A *hombre* just got out from under one of the cars. See him? An' somebody's shootin'! He's hit! What the hell?"

A man was staggering away from the freight. Into Huard's line of vision there broke a scattering of pursuers. The O B O man was rigid, staring.

"What's the matter?" snapped Oakes as Huard turned swiftly.

The marshal heard the puncher say, "Mebbe I'm *loco*. That *hombre* is *Danny Thompson*!" He reached the door of the room before Oakes' slow curse had died away. The marshal jumped after him, out the door, down the stairs.

In the street Huard sprinted for a group of men that was heading back for the hotel. Supported by these men, hanging limply, his feet dragging, as the group progressed, was a young fellow in a blue, faded shirt. On his face was the imprint of nausea, his senses were slipping. Huard pushed through the group, violently.

"Danny!" he grunted, and lifted the hurt man off the ground. Oakes, arriving, asked questions. He was still asking them inside the station house, ten minutes later, when Huard rose from beside the clothing softened bench upon which he had laid his bunkmate. "I can't make him come to," he said, his face stony. His eyes went over the faces of men around the bench. He bit out his next words, separately, metalically—"If he dies—"



AKES put his hand on the O B O man's arm. "Easy, Huard. Don't do anythin' we'll mebbe all be sorry for. The only man who fired a shot was Donalds, while he was helpin' the fireman, near the engine. He shot because Caswell, the fireman, yelled to him to

shoot. But Donalds says he missed—he saw the dirt spray two feet to one side of Thompson."

A somewhat paunchy, nearsighted and half frightened man, Apache's only doctor, after examining the man on the bench, said: "He'll pull through, I guess. We've got to get him to a bed. He was shot in the back, about five or six hours ago I'd say."

"Five or six hours?" Huard bent to his friend again. When he straightened, some of the stony hardness was gone from his features. "Reckon I wasn't seein' clear for a while," he said slowly. "I figgered Danny was cashin' in. The doc's right. The fresh blood on that wound was made by Danny tryin' to run."

He turned to Oakes. "*Why* did the fireman tell Donalds to shoot? *What's* all this about a hold-up?" He added: "I didn't get it straight—I was too busy with the kid. What happened?"

Oakes' face was serious. "Come with me, Huard," he said. "Thompson'll be all right, I reckon." He explained, as they walked out of the station, and around the building to the front entrance of the hotel: "The whole town's sort of boilin' over. Huard, when that train stopped, Caswell, the fireman came fallin' out. His head was bandaged, but he didn't seem hurt much. Just excited. The engineer, Sykes, an Apache man with a wife an' kids, was in the cab, riddled like a sieve. A hold-up."

Inside the hotel, on the lower floor, Huard heard the rest of the story from angry, loudly talking men. The Lode-stone Mine, from the Springerville district, had shipped twenty thousand dollars in gold on that freight, consigned to the junction of the D & R with the Union Pacific at Carver. In a daring and spectacular hold-up, the train was stopped, the guards killed and the gold stolen. When the murderers had ridden off, the fireman had brought the train in.

Then the O B O puncher heard a charge that set his face. Caswell, fire-

man, a burly man, with head swathed in bandages, repeated it to Huard's sharp question.

"Yeah, one of them fellers was a young *hombre*, wearin' a blue shirt, named Thompson. The feller they got here."

A half hour later, in the stuffy room on the top floor of the *Prospector's Rest*, Danny Thompson tossed and talked. From time to time he spoke names, mentioned places—Linge, the Double R, Loud Mouth—and disconnected fragments of events. Through the fog swirling over his senses he finally heard Huard's even, unhurried, questioning voice, and tried to answer.

"It started an' ended, when I was ridin' with Red," he said thickly. Consciousness was coming back to him. His eyes opened. They stared at the ceiling. "Red an' Loud Mouth. The slug got me from behind." Onlookers in the room crowded closer to the small bed. Danny's eyes shifted to them.

"Red who?" asked Chip. "What is Loud Mouth's real name?"

Danny tried to turn. His voice was a thin whisper. "Red Riordan. I never saw Loud Mouth before. Red knew him—" His searching eyes rested on Huard's face. "*Chip!*" he said sharply, and tried to sit up. He went suddenly limp. As he fell back a thin red trickle showed at the corner of his mouth.

A hand touched Huard's shoulder. The voice of the paunchy doctor said: "His lung's torn. If he talks too much he may go over on us. Maybe in a day or two—"

Huard rose. He pushed past the speaker. Going down to the lower floor of the hotel he met Oakes. He took the marshal to one side.

"Oakes, I want information. Danny'll be all right, I guess. He's tough as whalebone. An' never mind what they're sayin' *here*. You spoke of our fight with the Spider Collins crowd. Perhaps they were running this hold-up. But now give me a check-up on the Hobson's Bend district. I want to know things

about a man named Linge, a ranch called Double R, an' someone nicknamed Loud Mouth. Mebbe other things."

Oakes lacked the answers to some of Huard's queries. He had not been personally in Hobson's Bend in twenty years. But Jed Parker the sheriff there, had written about the unsettled state of affairs and how difficult it was to place the blame where it properly belonged.

Half an hour later, after another visit to Danny Thompson, the marshal watched Huard haze a blaze-faced roan horse out of the livery stable beyond the hotel.

"Remember what I told you—it's a long way round, but the best trail to follow is the one that keeps nearest the sinks, through the Negras. You'll pass Coldbrook Gulch. Or what's left of it. You'll be north and a day away, then, from Hobson's Bend."

Oakes stood watching horse and rider as they moved out of town. "I'm sayin' yo're still as good as yore reputation, Huard," he muttered. "An' you shore stick by yore friends."

**T**HE big roan stallion ran, out where the grass lost its fight with the sand fringe of the Palo Verde sinks. Huard, the roan's rider, arranged facts in his mind, objectively surveying the result.

He knew that frequently rails are patrolled, at night, by line riders. Danny might have taken a job in that section—that's how he might have been right *there*, at the track.

He ran over Thompson's incoherent talk. It had conveyed to Chip the impression that Danny had been idly riding line, with Red Riordan and Loud Mouth. He had mentioned no train, till he saw it, *after* he was plugged, saw it stopped. Reason came to the aid of Chip's faith. A hold-up man wouldn't have crawled on to the rods of the train he had just helped rob.

Chip slept under the open stars and next morning guided the roan along the base of the sheer sided buttes that rose

out of the Palo Verde desert. Fantastic and vari-colored, these baked and wind chiseled foothills of the Negras gave no shelter from a fierce and hostile sun. On this second day Huard saw the track of goats. In the afternoon a herd of them came stringing over a flat, almost across the path of the running horse.

Chip slowed the lathered roan. His hawk eyes picked out the herder's hut, a shack on stilts, on the side of a steep pitch. And above it, another, a bigger structure, half covered with brush.

The O B O man became aware of some scrutiny. He twisted in his saddle. The erect figure of a man was visible a short distance across the flat, outlined against the bare sand. A man who moved abruptly back into brush clumps, which evidently had hid him from view as Chip went by, but Chip had a good look at him before he disappeared.

Wild, lonely figures, these Mexican goatherders were sometimes garrulous, sometimes afraid, like animals. The herder being there in that baked hell was not as surprising a fact as the number of huts. Then, as Chip rode on, the explanation came to him.

"Coldbrook Gulch!" he muttered. The small hills to his left revolved. They opened up. He saw the deserted mining town. Its buildings, hideous in the glare, were straggled along the side of a slope. They were doorless, open to the desert winds.

Chip, riding on, saw on high, reddish slopes behind the gulch, the faint scars of mine mouths. These valleys, the gulch particularly, had once been the scene of lusty life. Men had come here, and grubbed in the ground. They had sung and toiled. And killed one another. Memories of stories came to Chip. Of the *Birdcage Saloon*, of Pecos Craveth and the Bidell boys. Of a town that was once alive and tough.

But now nothing moved. There in the sun the town blistered, empty in the

dry winds, the loneliness of the mountain desert.

Hours of riding, and the hills to right of Huard planned entirely out. He saw, stretching away to the south and east, the bare flatness of the Palo Verde desert. Mesquite on the edge of dry washes. Patches of sand. Through that bare expanse ran the rails of the D & R.



**H**OBSON'S BEND was on the edge of grass. The afternoon of the third day after the train robbery, the town huddled in its curved course, patient and submissive under the blistering sun, as Huard's roan horse loped into its northern extremity. Paralleling the boardwalk, the big, smoothly moving stallion ran in to where the street buckled to a center.

Chip, sitting erect in the saddle, read names on the signs. Seelig's General Store, Farrell's Barber Shop, Bludsoe's Emporium. The feel of a town came to him from things like that. But he could not quite place Hobson's Bend.

At the *Nugget* he stopped. A combination saloon and eating house, he recognized it from Oakes' description. Under a sun shelter of cracked boards, on a wide porch, were gathered little groups of men. Across the street a woman walked, her long dress trailing in the dust.

Chip dismounted. Coming in from the north, he might pass as a stranger from the Colorado country—a wandering puncher. He would have time, that way, to get the feel of things.

The O B O man walked towards the *Nugget's* steps. Some distance apart from the groups on the porch was a solitary, bearded individual, with a white barkeep's apron around his middle. He looked at Huard, at the big horse left at the tie bar, very intently.

Another face suddenly impinged upon Chip's attention, and held it. It was thin and hawk-like, made striking by

sideburns that ran far down the cheeks, by the very black mustache on the upper lip. By the eyes. Eyes that seemed to draw back into themselves, to change as they looked out to Traveler, then flicked back to the O B O man, coming up the steps.

The man was standing with a fair-haired girl. But Chip's attention was abruptly jerked away. His decision to remain for a time an unknown investigator was broken. For a very loud voice was saying, "Mebbe Red was infloenced by this damned longrider. Anyway, he was with Thompson. I been repeatin' that for three days. I'm shoutin' it, now! An' I'm sayin' they oughter string Thompson up in Apache!"

The memory of Danny Thompson, face white with nausea, tossing in agony on the bed in Apache, came to Chip, a quick picture. A picture that moved him by instinct. He pushed through the crowd. He made an attempt to avoid a deliberate charge, to avoid something that would draw attention.

"Lissen," he said. "Talk like that sometimes spreads, mister. It grows to be more'n talk." He watched the face of the big, wide mouthed man harden, the wide mouth twist in a sneer. Chip added: "I heard that kid, Thompson, is plugged pretty bad. Lynchin' wouldn't—"

"*Sa-ay*," said the loud voiced man, his eyes flaming with anger, "what are you—a sky pilot? What's the idea of preachin' to me? I said Thompson oughtta be lynched, an' I'm sayin' it—"

He did not say it again. His voice broke off. Fingers that were steel strong closed over the front of his shirt, close up to his neck, tightening, jerking him forward.

"I'm servin' notice, formal an' polite," Huard's voice was toneless, "if I ever hear you mention Danny Thompson an' Lynchin' again, together, I'll spread you all over this cussed town."

The big man lurched savagely backward. Loosened from Huard's grip, he came in, swinging a huge fist. Chip dropped him with an upslashing hook

that brought a concerted gasp from the onlookers. Striking high up on the big man's face, the blow did not slow him. He rolled over on the boards of the porch, and coming up, he lunged for the Colt at his belt. But he worked against a gun speed that baffled sight. The Colt was shot out of his hand.

So Chip Huard introduced himself to Hobson's Bend.

THREE hours later, darkness had seeped in from the Palo Verde sinks. Darkness that draped over the town, a black blanket pierced by stars. On the porch of the *Eye Opener Saloon* some doleful soul was singing. But the plaintive melody seemed a jarring and uncalled for effort this night. The town was tense. Somebody opened a window across the street from the *Eye Opener*. Without politeness the yearning soul on the saloon's porch was advised to shut up.

In the *Nugget*, Chip Huard was finishing a meal. He had heard some things since his arrival, but they only confused him; one part refused to fit into another. Chip's mind worked almost impatiently at the riddle.

The O B O puncher, leaning back in his chair, was lighting a cigarette, when the doors of the eating house buckled in. A man entered quickly, with a twist of his body. The muzzle of a Colt he held described a quick arc, and froze on Chip.

Huard remained lax in his chair. He said coldly: "What you playin'?" Through a film of rising smoke his gaze shifted down, from a seamed, stern face to a badge on the man's vest. His tone changed. "You Sheriff Parker?"

"Yeah," replied the man with the Colt. He did not relax. "I just got in, an' heard what happened outside the *Nugget* today. Heard you were lookin' for me, Huard." He jerked the gun again. "I'm takin' no chances, with a man they claim can beat any Colt draw in the country. Not when that man has gone bad."

Chip rose. His tone was impatient. "Parker—if I'm what yo're figgerin', why should I come to Hobson's Bend, ridin' open? Lookin' for you?"

At one side of the sheriff, behind a long bar, the same white aproned man who had watched Chip's arrival so intently, a man with thick eyebrows and tense, bearded features said: "You ain't gettin' anywheres this way, Parker." He began to move around the bar.

Parker said gruffly: "Well, Huard, you could have come here bankin' on yore reputation as a straight man, to wipe out part of the evidence against yore friend. You could do it by gettin' into a fight with the man who saw Thompson an' Riordan hold up that train, an' killin' him." His eyes were intent.

"I *could* have plugged Morrison," said Chip. "Parker, like the barkeep here says, yo're on the wrong track. Let me wedge in a couple of questions—questions I was waitin' to ask you. First, where did Morrison say he was when he saw the hold-up?"

"He says he saw it from some bluffs on the Double R, Star Circle Star line. Morrison says he was comin' in from Springerville that night—"

"Question number two. Did anybody ever call this *hombre* Morrison by a nickname? Somethin' that might fit him—like Loud Mouth?"

The barkeep said quickly, as he stepped around the bar end, "That was Red Riordan's pet name for Morrison!" Parker, his seamed face as hard as brown lava, stood watching Chip.

"Morrison lied, Sheriff," said Chip coldly. "He was *ridin'* with Riordan an' Danny that night." His voice grew metallic. "He was ridin' with 'em when somebody shot Danny in the back!"

Parker frowned. The barkeep walked nearer. "I never saw Huard, here, before today," he said, his voice still tense. "But I'm sayin' the trail's blind, this way, Parker. It's blind in all directions but the one Jim Bludsoe an' me told you about. Lissen!" he said, his

voice now almost a whisper in its sharpness. "You know who Jim saw today? Here in town? The man who killed Cliff Bowles!"

The sheriff stiffened a bit. He snapped: "Damn it, Cactus, it's the *hold-up* I'm workin' on! The wires are singin' from Yarnell to Springerville. The whole country's ridin' posse! An' here we got a friend of Danny Thompson's—"

Cactus swore, without politeness.

Chip said: "Parker, let's go down to the station and use the wires. Oakes, at Apache, will clear me. Soon's this town knows I'm workin' with an' not against you, I'll get better answers to my questions than the ones I got the last few hours. Besides, I'm anxious to know how Danny's doin'."

Parker's face showed doubt. But he slowly sheathed his Colt. He backed carefully as Chip walked, letting the O B O man precede him towards the door. Cactus, watching them go out, suddenly unclasped the apron at his waist and threw it away. Cactus Tolliver was a man of strong hunches. He had one now. Something was going to break in Hobson's Bend.



HE feet of the three men sounded hollowly on the board walk as they went downtown. Cactus moved up to the sheriff, and said: "Hell's goin' to crack here, Jed. Right under yore nose. I tell you me an' Jim can *see* things!"

"Too many things, mebbe," growled Parker. "The worst of it is you an' Jim don't see things the way other people do. Now I got respect for yore experience, an' Bludsoe's. So much that I'll mebbe put my depity, Curly, on the case of this killer. But I'm sayin' flat, that when it comes to connectin' some things with this D & R hold-up, like Cliff Bowles' killin', all you two *hombres* are doin' is tanglin' the trail!"

"Waal," said Cactus, "Cliff Bowles'

gettin' killed right now mightn't have anything to do with the hold-up. At the same time Cliff *might* have had a line on the outfit that pulled that very thing. Otherwise there weren't no sense to his bein' killed. That's what Jim Bludsoe an' me figger."

Chip slowed his walk. From down the street, at the station, came the clanging of an engine's bell, the grinding of a stopping train.

"Cactus," said Chip. "I took a walk the wrong way this afternoon, goin' downtown. I might have heard somethin' real interestin' if I had stayed at the *Nugget*, an' talked to you. I still got time to make up for it. Who's Linge around here?" he asked abruptly. "Did a man named Linge hire Danny Thompson?"

"Linge owns the Star Circle Star," answered Cactus quickly. "He hired Thompson right in my place, about two weeks ago. An' if I was you I'd wrap more questions around him. He's got side whiskers. He walks like a gun thrower—he walks like you an' mebbe a few others I've seen in my time—"

"A man with side whiskers was standin' on the *Nugget's* porch this afternoon, near a girl," muttered Chip. "I noticed him because somewhere, it seems I saw that *hombre* before—" His voice grew hard again. "What about the rumor that it's the Spider Collins gang that pulled the hold-up?"

Parker growled. "Better let Linge alone, Cactus! You an' Jim Bludsoe have always had it against that rancher. Why, I don't know." He added: "I reckon it can't be Collins an' yore bunkmate, Thompson, at the same time, Huard. Besides, this whole cussed country's full of rumors. And blind leads."

Cactus asked. "What about that Mex, Jed? Was Jim right about that?"

"Well—a nester *is* missin' from them hills," replied Parker. They were nearing the lighted window of Jim Bludsoe's Emporium. "Me an' my depity brought a kid called Pepito down from the hills this afternoon," continued the sheriff.

"Pepito says his brother's been missin' for a week. Pepito's at the *Trail's End* with Curly now. But we ain't had time to check up by showin' him the dead man we found on the sinks. I tell you—" he was about to continue, but his words broke off.

A scream, high pitched, the scream of a girl cut through the low murmur of the town. Chip Huard, Parker, and Cactus jerked around at the sound. Coming with the instinctive motion of the three men, blending with the girl's cry, a Colt roared in the *Eye Opener's* alley.

The shirt at Chip's shoulder was ripped by the lightning-like scraping of lead. Lead that spatted into the side of the Emporium. The Colt boomed again. But Chip had pivoted.

He went jumping across the dimly lit street, his Colts coming automatically to his hands. He caught one glimpse, as he reached the opposite board walk, of a slim girl, her body taut and straight, standing with a woman a few paces from the *Eye Opener's* alley. Then the shadows of the building closed around him.

From the opposite end of the alley now, an orange red flare split the gloom. Chip's answering guns jarred in his hands. Then the O B O man ran again, a cold rage animating him. Some sixth sense warned him as he doubled around the corner of the building. He dived out and down. He rolled when he struck, and the motion saved his life.

The ambusher had waited. Flare after flare split the gloom close to the wall. The bullets searched after Chip along the ground, like vicious, living things. The O B O man rose, catlike, still partly bent over. The booming of his Colt silenced the gun near the wall.

In a sudden, heavy quiet he heard a low curse. A shadow that seemed a thickening of the gloom moved along the wall towards the low back steps of the saloon. Feet stumbled against the stairs. A gun clattered down, loud on

the wood of the steps, dully against the ground. Chip jumped forward.

Sheathing one of his Colts the O B O man reached out, and swung the groping figure on the stairs around. He pushed the man ahead of him. Light flooded out as they, passed through a door into the *Eye Opener's* interior. From the yard behind them came shouts.

The ambusher was Loud Mouth Morrison. Holding his arm near the elbow, he cursed and dragged back as Chip marched him along the *Eye Opener's* bar. The O B O man yanked him around, and tipped him into a chair.

Men came through the front door by twos and threes. Men who had been playing cards at the tables left them to crowd around Chip and his prisoner. The air was thick with smoke and questions. From behind the partition beyond the bar came the sound of footsteps hurriedly descending stairs. The sheriff came through the back door, followed by Cactus.

"So 'twas Morrison!" he snapped. His seamed face as hard as granite.

Chip, his eyes steely, said: "Parker—I ain't goin' to be charged with plannin' to shoot this polecat, this time. You saw yoreself how it happened—"

A man came pushing through the crowd at the front entrance. He was followed by the slender girl. The girl looked steadily at Chip, shifting her gaze but momentarily to the cursing Morrison in the chair. The individual ahead of her walked forward. He had a hawk nose, and long sideburns. The light made his eyes greenish, peculiar.

"What's happened, Sheriff?" he asked. He looked down at Morrison. "I heard shots from my winder upstairs here. Millie Riordan screamed—"

"Morrison tried to potshoot Chip Huard, here, Linge," said Parker gruffly. He waved his hands. "Back up, you fellers!" He turned towards Morrison.

Chip, standing balanced at one side of Parker said: "This afternoon, while lookin' for you, Sheriff, I was aimin' to

make a charge that one of two men, either Red Riordan or Morrison, shot Danny Thompson. But my mind's changin'—"

He walked across the room. His sombrero came to his hand. "A coupla inches means a man's life, sometimes," he said, standing close to the erect girl. "I reckon I owe you that." The girl had eyes different from any Chip remembered. He could see far into them.

She said: "I was walking with my aunt—I saw that man Morrison standing in the shadows, saw him aim at you; then I screamed."

Her hand made a little gesture towards the O B O man's arm as he began to turn. "My brother Red didn't shoot Danny Thompson!" Her words came clearly.

There was a sureness in the blue eyes that looked up at Chip. The O B O man noticed that her hair was red gold in the lamplight. Then a shadow seemed to cross the girl's features. "It's true that Red has been gone for days. I don't understand—"

Chip said: "Ma'am, there's a trail here somewheres, that leads to yore brother, an' to the man who shot Danny an' to the longriders who stole the Lodestone gold. But that trail is looped an' tangled." He put on his sombrero with an unconscious deference. "Mebbe we'll straighten it, ma'am, soon." He turned.

Cactus, standing near Morrison, was saying: "I'm chargin', Parker, this feller Morrison should be held for more than potshootin' on a grudge. Mebbe now's the time to ask this polecat if he knows anythin' about a man that wears a gun at a slant. The man who killed Cliff Bowles!"

Chip's face grew set and intent. "A man who wears a gun at a slant?" he repeated. But a voice from the doorway, calling to the sheriff interrupted.

"What's the matter, Curly?" asked Sheriff Parker.

Curly, a solid jawed man in a blue shirt and dusty trousers, stopped in the

crowd. He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "It's about that Mex kid, Pepito, and his brother, the nester that Bludsoe said was dead, that Pepito said was missin'. A big, bull necked *hombre's* showed up. Says he's Pepito's brother."

Parker frowned. He cursed. His set stern face reflected a momentary bafflement.

Before he could speak, however, came another interruption. Through the crowd at the doors now came four men, one following the other, pushing through with authoritative roughness. The first to speak wore a black hat. He had a badge displayed prominently on his vest.

"My name's Mason," he announced loudly, looking around him. "Just got in on the train from Apache. I'm a Springerville man. Me an' these three fellers with me were deputized special by the D & R." He turned to sweep the assemblage with his gaze.

"Now we want to know what's been goin' on here. What's all these changin' reports the sheriff's been sendin'? An' another thing—who ripped the wire at the station here, inside the last two hours? Word can't get in, or outta this town!"

**S**HERIFF PARKER'S voice, loud and impatient, subdued the noise that rose and filled the room.

"Just a minnit, Mason," he said. "Curly," he added, "go down to the station an' see what's happened. Help Simson fix the trouble." The sheriff walked into the cleared space and turned. "I'm glad you came, Mason. You can settle somethin' right away. This man," pointing to Chip—"is a friend of Danny Thompson's. He's Chip Huard, of the O B O."

Mason looked at Chip very intently. "Yeah?" he said, slowly, harshly. The crowd sensed some hostility, and came nearer. Millie Riordan was jostled closer to the bar.

"Well," repeated Mason to Parker's next question, "that's right. Oakes told

me Chip Huard was with him in Apache three days ago."

Parker waved his hand. "All right. That bein' settled, I'll answer yore other questions. Soon's we got the news of the hold-up, from Apache, we rode out to the Double R, Star Circle Star line. We found the gold guards dead, three of 'em. An' a trail of about seven riders goin' south into the Palo Verde."

Mason, instead of replying, walked closer to Chip Huard. The Springerville man was scowling. The hawk-nosed man, Linge, from the bar end, watched the scene with his peculiar greenish eyes.

"While Simson was wirin' the towns south," continued Parker, "we followed that trail. Beside it, about fifteen miles into the sinks, we found a dead Mexican. One of the longriders, I figured. It looked like an open an' shut case of ridin' 'em down. But about ten miles further into the desert, past some lava beds, the trail broke. All we found after that was a mark here, another there—damn' queer trails."

Mason, still scowling, turned from Chip. "What of it, Parker?" he snapped. "Think these *hombres* were gonna leave a *road* for you to follow? Well," he added meaningly, looking again at Chip, who was standing lax near the bar, "you lost the main trail, but we picked up the loose ends. What about that Mexican?" he continued. "The other report?"

"We toted the dead Mexican we found on the sinks into town, yesterday. Jim Bludsoe, who owns a store here, sees the *hombre* an' says the Mex is a nester from the hills *east* of the Double R. We just found out that was wrong. The real nester's—"

"You might have known it was wrong!" snapped Mason impatiently. "The trail led south! There's no way *east*!" He turned to Chip. "Eh, Huard?"

Mason walked to the O B O man. "Huard, you left Oakes in Apache, sayin' you was goin' north. You went south.

You went south to Sanderson, an' killed Caswell, the fireman, on the hold-up train, when you found him there."

Noise rose again in the room, and there was a sullen, low note in it. Parker was frowning.

Chip said evenly: "Mason, yo're ridin' too fast. I came through the Negras. By Coldbrook Gulch way."

Morrison's chair scraped, a sudden sound. Chip, balanced, lax, his mind working swiftly, watched the wounded man's face. "Parker!" said Morrison. "Get me to hell out of here! This damn' arm—"

Curly, the deputy, took Morrison out through the now constantly muttering crowd. Mason, still scowling, turned his attention back to the quiet O B O man.

"Caswell left Apache the day after you did, Huard," he said. "Made connection to Carver, then on to Sanderson. The killer was waitin' for him! A man with a lightnin' fast draw! A man who left his hoss behind, makin' his getaway on a Bar B cayuse. The hoss left behind was marked O B O!"

Chip moved away from the bar. Millie Riordan watched him with wide eyes. One of her hands went to the top of her blouse, at her throat, as the crowd's mutter grew louder. It seemed as if all of Hobson's Bend had come into the *Eye Opener*.

"Parker," said Chip tonelessly. "Since I hit this community of your'n I been doin' the fastest thinkin' of my life. I had to do it, for the trail I found here was the worst puzzle any killer ever left behind him in the Southwest. I ain't figgered this puzzle. But I got a growin' idea who's back of it."

Linge, at the bar, said evenly: "It don't look like a puzzle to me. Seems that Mason's got a case—" Chip, turning, looked into eyes that held little quivering pinpoints of light. Mason's loud voice broke a sudden, strange tension.

"Huard," growled Mason, "yo're the man the law wants—"

Chip snapped: "Mason—use yore

head! The man who you say killed Caswell in Sanderson couldn't have left Apache when I did! Not an' be waitin' for Caswell on the second day! *Let me* build up yore case," he added. "Was the hoss left in Sanderson a black, with a white stockin' over his left forefoot?" At Mason's nod Chip said: "That hoss is Danny Thompson's. An' if I'm guessin' anywheres close to some things, that cayuse was left in Sanderson *on purpose!*"

Mason's scowl was now very black. "So yo're guessin', Huard," he growled. "I'd call it something worse. It won't do you any good. Yo're goin' to jail here. An' in Apache they'll mebbe string Thompson—" his voice broke off.

Chip took one quick step forward, and pushed Mason in the face, throwing him staggeringly backward. With the action the O B O man pivoted. He was slouched, hands raised a bit, his manner freezing a growling crowd. Only Linge, at the bar, sneered. But his eyes held no contempt. They were calculating.

Chip snapped: "That kid in Apache is near dyin'! If he's lynched I'm sayin' the cattle country'll never hear the end of this." He swung, slowly, towards Mason. The Springerville man wet his lips.

"Huard," he said, "Oakes told me you was the fastest man with short guns in the cow country. You ain't usin' them guns against the law. You can't beat the law!"

"Wait!" called Parker grimly. He was watching Chip. One word the wrong way would turn the *Eye Opener's* interior into a bedlam. There was a single man facing a crowd, a man whose face had gone stony at the mention of the friend in danger at Apache. A man whose Colt speed was a byword in the Southwest.

Parker made a decision on the strength of a comparison, between time and distance, that crossed his mind. He made it on impulse. "Huard," he said slowly, "the law in Hobson's Bend ain't runnin' against you. What you got to

say about the men who held up the D & R train? Who are they? An' where are they?"

Chip slowly relaxed. "Thanks, Parker," he said shortly. "If I knew the whole answer to yore questions I wouldn't be talkin' here. But I'm gettin' the answer. The sooner I get it, the sooner I can stop the lynchin' fever in Apache from growin'. One thing," he added, "I reckon some of you heard of what happened in Cordobas last spring. If you heard, you know that Thompson couldn't be in a robbery pulled by Spider Collins."

The crowd's mutter changed. A voice whispered. "Somebody said it was the Collins gang. Hell! Spider Collins, here!" Chip took advantage of the stir to move towards the door.

"Mason," he said, "Parker not backin' you, yo're here on yore own hook. Now I got work to do. I'm warnin' you that I'll plug any man, outside of Parker, who tries to block me!"

At the entrance men, doubtfully, half reluctantly, let him pass. Chip looked meaningly at Cactus. "I'm goin' for air," he said, "an' a talk with a man I figger knows things. Mebbe in a couple of hours, Parker, I'll show you didn't make a mistake." He moved out of the door. A storm of talk and criticism broke over Parker's head.



LATER Jim Bludsoe, covered with the dust of a long ride, loped a bay up the street, and stopped the horse at the corner of his Emporium building. He wearily dismounted.

From the other end of the building, Cactus Tolliver, who, with Chip and Millie Riordan, had been waiting his coming, ran to meet him, his feet thudding on the board walk. "Jim!" he called sharply. "Where in hell you been?"

"In the Palo Verde," said Bludsoe. "What's goin' on in town?" he added gruffly. He was an enormously broad

man, stooping a little as he walked towards his stairs.

Cactus said: "Plenty. We got a friend, Jim. Chip Huard, of the O B O. Me an' him been talkin' for near an hour." Bludsoe looked over his friend's shoulder to Chip and the girl standing at the building's end. "I ain't quite sure of a guess Huard made about the trails the longriders left in the Palo Verde," concluded Cactus, "but I know one thing—this Huard is hell on wheels. The old breed, Jim!"

Bludsoe growled: "What did he say about them trails?" At Cactus' reply, Bludsoe nodded. "He guessed damn' close. I followed them tracks myself," he added slowly.

Cactus swore. "You two *hombres* mustta gone to the same school!" He turned. "Come on, Jim. That's Huard there, with Millie Riordan."

At the building end moonlight showed the girl's face, upturned, a face framed in red gold hair, as she talked with Huard.

"My brother Red—" she was saying swiftly. "Since you came—his being away has other meanings. I believed *you*—from the start. But if Danny Thompson was trapped, and nearly killed, then my brother must have been in that same trap!"

Chip looked into the girl's concerned, wide eyes. "Ma'am," he said, "I'm thinkin' that yore brother Red might turn up safe." Something in the even voice quieted the fear in the girl. She felt unreasonably, that Red would turn up safe. "Good night!" she said swiftly, and turned. The shadows of the buildings uptown closed over her figure.

Cactus stepped to Chip's side. "Bludsoe's come back," he said.

Chip listened without comment to Bludsoe's slow explanation of the trail he had followed north, against the general impression that the murderers had gone south.

"That settles the argument I had with Cactus about the tracks in the desert," Chip finally said. "What about the man

who killed Cliff Bowles, Bludsoe? That was Slash Ebbetts, one of Spider Collins' men. Cactus said you saw him here this mornin'. You sure of that?"

"Dead sure," replied Bludsoe. He looked intently at Chip. "Cowpunch—seems like yo're straightenin' a damn' crooked trail. But if Collins put out these decoys—if it's Spider Collins we're buckin', almost anybody would say we're three fools, committin' suicide."

"Yeah," growled Cactus, looking uptown to men converging towards the sheriff's office. "If it's Spider Collins that put out the web around here it ain't hard to figger. There'll be guns waitin' for anyone with an ax that cuts through the tangle. But I reckon that besides the ax *we* got guns too." He looked down at Huard's belts. "Damn' good ones. The funerals won't all be our'n!"

"Talkin' about tangles," growled Bludsoe, "I'm aimin' to go to the *Trail's End*, an' see this *hombre* you say is the nester from back of the Double R. I won't be gone ten minnits. We'll finish our war talk when I get back."

Cactus watched Bludsoe go downtown. "Jim was sure the dead man Parker found in the sinks was the goat rancher," he said. "That's one end that's still loose, Huard—what these Mexicans got to do with Linge an' Collins an' the D & R robbery." Cactus added, as Chip began to walk uptown: "What you gonna do?"

"Mebbe swing that ax you mentioned," replied the O B O man evenly. "Bludsoe can find us uptown. Come on!"

**U**PTOWN, at the door of Parker's office, a crowd was jammed. Cactus and Chip Huard pushed through, but stopped with standing men still in front of them. Inside, the sheriff was saying sharply: "Forget it, forget it, Mason! A desert hawk couldn't have made that distance, let alone a hoss!"

Mason's heavy voice growled: "Suppose Oakes was mistaken, Sheriff, about

the time Huard left Apache? The mistake wouldn't have to be big. That big stallion Huard was ridin' is a runner. Mebbe he made swaps—"

The sheriff swore. His set face was streaked with sweat. He did not see Chip and Cactus enter. "Yo're all pilin' one thing on another!" he said. "Mason, I *know* Chunky Oakes. He don't make mistakes like that. Why didn't I back you, anyway, Mason?" he snapped with a sudden rise of his voice. "I'll tell you why!

"This is *my* country!" he continued "You come in like you was the man who knew everythin', an' could do everythin'. Out here we been ridin' like fools for three days, an' stayin' up nights tryin' to figger the worst cussed tangle I ever come across. You push all that aside, just sayin' I lost the trail. Then you pin everythin' on a man who was with Oakes in Apache when the D & R train is held up!" The sheriff snorted.

Linge's cold voice broke in. "Parker, I ain't questionin' that yo're a good man. But I'm sayin' you been fooled here." He stood against the wall of the crowded room and watched Chip Huard step further from the doorway.

"I tell you that Huard's straight!" snapped Parker, instinctively defending his own verdict. "Soon's I heard he'd been with Oakes in Apache, I knew he was straight. An' I'm backin' him!"

"I'm repeatin'," said Linge. "The law was bluffed, by two low-tied guns, an' a reputation." His eyes glittered as Chip moved towards him. Parker, sensing a sudden tension, turned.

Chip faced the hawk-nosed man. "Linge," he said evenly, "you ever been in Cordobas?"

"No!" snapped Linge. He slouched away from the wall. A sneer was in his eyes. "An' I can prove it! I can prove it by yore own man—by Sheriff Parker!"

Chip frowned. A deadly laxness left his shoulders. "I was aimin' to swing an ax," he said enigmatically. "But

mebbe I ain't set for it, yet." He added: "Linge—Cactus tells me you hired Danny Thompson at seventy a month. The kid's a top hand puncher, but ranchers ain't payin' seventy dollars a month just for punchin' cows."

"Mebbe I hired his Colt," sneered Linge. As Parker frowned, the Star Circle Star owner said: "There's been rustlin' on my west line for some time. It was either the Riordans, or Morrison an' some town men. Anyway, hearin' this Thompson was a friend of Chip Huard, I figgered he could show us somethin'."

Parker said gruffly: "Huard—you been talkin' to Cactus here. An' mebbe Jim Bludsoe. Now these two fellers are all right. But I said I was backin' you because you mentioned the Collins gang, an' you talked like you knew where you was ridin'. You said you were aimin' to speak with somebody who knew things. I thought you had in mind things about the D & R hold-up."

"I did speak to fellers who knew things," said Chip shortly. "I'm sayin' flat, that Bludsoe an' Cactus had the answer all the time."

Linge sneered. "We'll be hearin' about the man who killed Cliff Bowles in a minnit," he said, his eyes glittering. "That's all these two scouts think about, night an' day. Here's Huard's chance to throw more dust over the trail he's ridin'."

"Linge," said Chip evenly, "why can't there be a connection between the D & R hold-up, the way I figger it, an' the man who killed Cliff Bowles? I'm told that man passed hisself off here as a cattle buyer named Proudon. But he was friendly with Morrison. And Cactus, one day, heard a puncher call him Slash. The man wore a gun at a slant. Suppose this man was Slash Ebbetts—Spider Collins' partner?"

Linge's face corded curiously. He half lunged forward. Then he sneered, a remarkable transformation. But the room had gone chill. Parker stepped between a cold-eyed, balanced Chip

Huard and the Star Circle Star man.

The lamplight showed clearer the streaks of sweat on Parker's face. "Huard!" The sheriff's voice was tense. "You realize what you just said? If Proudon was Slash Ebbetts—"

"The Collins gang never made a get-away across the Palo Verde," Chip completed the thought for him. "For Jim Bludsoe saw Slash Ebbetts in town this mornin'!"

Talk sprang up in the room, went outside to the crowd beyond the doors. Chip, with an eye on Linge, said slowly, "Parker, if you back up Linge in sayin' he ain't ever been in Cordobas, some parts of the case I figgered complete are missin'."

Parker swore. Linge said icily. "I'm a Placer man, Huard. I lived in Placer ten years. I closed the deal for the Star Circle Star from Placer."

"Parker," said Chip, keeping his gaze on Linge, "you said you'd back me. Tell Mason to get a posse ready, while we get over to the jail. I want to talk to Morrison. I want Linge along!"

Parker and a puzzled, scowling Mason helped to clear the crowd from the doorway. Chip and Cactus, with Curly, the sheriff's deputy, crossed the street and went uptown a short way to a squat jail of cracked 'dobe. Parker and Linge followed some distance behind.

Curly lit an oil lamp on the wall inside the door. Chip and Cactus followed the deputy in. The shadows of the three men were thrown, long and distorted, along a narrow corridor that ran in front of the cells, ending at a dirty window. Curly, crossing over towards one of the cells, passed in front of Chip.

The window at the end of the corridor sprayed inward. The crash of breaking glass was mingled with the booming of a Colt. Curly stiffened, writhed. He said, harshly—"a-h, hell!" With his fingers hooked terribly at his chest the deputy fell against the bars of one of the cells, and slid down.

The Colt outside boomed again. Chip,

flattened against the wall in the corridor, shot out the light by instinct. He went jumping, in the sudden gloom, towards the window, reaching it in three leaps. A blotch of shadow moved in the darkness of the ugly backyard.

Chip's gun roared with deafening rapidity. Outside, a voice yelled hoarsely. Beyond the shadowy line of a fence something moved—the upbobbing head of a horse. Chip's Colts snapped up, and emptied, their explosions smashing the air inside the jail's 'dobe walls. Then silently the O B O man turned from the window, and ran out.

At the doorway he collided with cursing, questioning men. "Around!" snapped Chip. "Downtown!" He had only the memory of a vague movement beyond the fence to guide him. At the head of a scattering group of men Chip ran downtown, turning through the building line.

He hunted through one yard, another, and in the third found a dead horse. It was at the rear of Bludsoe's Emporium. Beyond the Emporium's yard the town already petered out to the emptiness of the Palo Verde. The moonlight lay like a wan blanket over the yards of the *Eye Opener*, and further south, of the *Trail's End* saloon. Chip suddenly tensed.

Close to the *Trail's End* a figure passed. For a moment it stood revealed in the moonlight. Then the man turned, a quick movement, and disappeared. Something flicked through Chip's mind. He had seen that man before, seen him when he passed through Coldbrook Gulch on his way here. When he ran again his face was set like iron. The tangled trail was straight at last.



THE O B O man went up the stairs of the *Trail's End* in one spring, and pushed through the doors. There was a scattering of men at the bar and tables. Chip's gaze ranged the room, fastening

on the faces of two Mexicans. One was discarded immediately. Chip snapped to a man back of the bar:

"Who's the *hombre* that calls hisself Pepito's brother? The goat rancher that came in today?"

The barkeep pointed to the bull necked, scowling man seated at a table. One of the man's hands was clasped about the neck of a full bottle. "That's him. I thought he was upstairs with Jim Bludsoe!" said the barkeep. "But he just showed up, now, comin' in the back way, an' bought that bottle." He added: "What's torn loose, uptown?"

"Somebody killed the sheriff's deputy," said Chip tonelessly. He walked to the bull necked Mexican at the table. "I figger—"

The Mexican moved like a wild animal, his lips drawn back from his teeth. The bottle glinted as it curved in the air and swept down and out in a vicious throw. It smashed against the bar. The table was thrown forward as if it were made of paper as the Mexican followed up on the dodging O B O man.

Chip, bent low, shot from the hip by instinct, but the spinning table struck his shoulder and arm, and the Mexican came catapulting after it. Down on hands and knees, with one of his assailant's hands at his throat, the O B O man spun himself. He let go his Colts. His steel strong fingers gripped up, fastened on the Mexican's shirt, and jerked the big man around, and down.

The Mexican's sinews cracked in an effort to draw his opponent close. Chip broke away. They came erect in one surge, to their knees, the Mexican's hand going down like a snake's head to his waist. But he did not touch the knife in his belt. Chip's solid fist slashed hard across the man's jaw, and he folded up curiously, head drooping, toppling over to one side.

When Sheriff Parker, too angry to curse, broke into the *Trail's End* a few minutes later, he found the Mexican propped up in a chair. Down from the saloon's upstairs' rooms, men were carry-

ing an unconscious Jim Bludsoe. Bludsoe's face was covered with blood. Other men carried a dead brown-faced boy—Pepito, who had brought to town the story of his brother's disappearance.

A crowd piled into the *Trail's End*, while Parker, his face rigid, listened to Chip's even statement.

"This polecat was one of the men outside the jail. I hit his hoss an' the cayuse dropped on him while he was ridin' south. He figgered to take a chance, comin' in here, bluffin' it out, an' mebbe get another hoss, right out in the street, while we was searchin' the yards."

Parker growled: "I got men ridin' around the town now, an' headin' up along the trails to the ranches. You winged one of the skunks in the jail yard, Huard, an' we got him. This feller makes two. Now we gotta figger how many more of 'em are here in town."

A disturbance was growing outside. Chip passed Bludsoe's limp form, now propped on a chair. The O B O man made his way to Linge, who had come in with Parker, and was standing by the bar. "I thought mebbe *you* might be out on the trails outside town," said Chip tonelessly. "In *front* of the posses. But I reckon I ain't givin' you enough credit."

Linge did not reply. His body was slouched, balanced forward on the balls of his feet. Parker, turning from the dead boy, strode across the room. At the doorway men forced themselves through the crowd. Linge relaxed.

Mason, scowling, pushed into the open space. He was supporting a smaller man, Simson, the station master, who was unsteady on his feet. His eyes were half glazed. A trickle of blood coming down from beneath thin hair, streaked his forehead. Mason snapped above the noise:

"Morrison's broke jail! We was totin' Curly out. Some polecat must have taken the keys from the deputy's pocket, an' passed 'em into the cell and he

mustta slipped out that window. It was dark as hell—"

Parker strode forward in long strides. His voice was almost a shout. "Simson! What happened to *you*?"

Simson, the station master, passed a hand dazedly across his bloody forehead, and smeared the trickle wide. "Apache!" he grunted. "Thompson!"—then his knees buckled.

Mason growled: "I met Simson outside, Parker, bein' led up from the station. He had connections with Apache an' Sanderson, then somebody slugged him!"

Chip moved around, quickly. He went close to Simson, shook him. "What you hear from Apache?" he asked.

Simson rallied. His eyes cleared. He stiffened. "Parker!" His voice was sharp. "When I was slugged news was comin' in from Sanderson!" His voice went higher. "The man who killed Caswell—somebody recognized him—he was Slash Ebbetts!"

Chip's tone was steel striking steel. "Simson—what about Thompson? That news about Ebbetts clears Thompson? Oakes knew—"

Simson, wetting his lips, interrupted. "Apache wired that Oakes has been fightin' a mob off Thompson, for hours. The marshal is tryin' to get a story through town, about Thompson once bein' with the O B O, when the punchers of that outfit broke up Collins' place on the Border." Simson's head shook. "But the message, the way I got it, sounded like Oakes wasn't gettin' his argument across!"

Chip's face corded. "Yo're sayin' they're *lynchin'* Danny Thompson in Apache?" Men moved out of his way as he turned. His face now set, the O B O man walked towards the sneering, deadly Linge.

Parker and Mason, and several other men, sensing the tension as it rose to swift peak, thrust in between. "No gunplay!" warned Parker. "We still got lots to figger, Huard! We're still ridin' blind!"

"No!" snapped Chip. He pushed Mason aside.

Linge snarled to the men in front of him. "Let the fool come through! I'm sayin' he'll lose his reputation along with his life!"

"Simson!" Chip's voice was a whip crack. "Get back to that station an' wire Apache that we got the real killers here! Tell 'em we'll have Ebbetts before next sundown, an' Collins. Tell 'em we'll have the gold! Tell 'em that right now, we got the man who decoyed Danny Thompson into Collins' play!"

The room was full of talk that drowned out Simson's uncertain voice. Talk that went outside, to the porch, to the increasing number of men converging on the saloon.

Linge's voice brought comparative silence. The Star Circle Star owner, still partly covered by Mason's deputies, snapped. "You do some damn' fast explainin', Huard! An' start pronto!"

"I'll repeat the story Oakes is tryin' to tell in Apache, makin' it short. Last Spring the O B O went to Cruces County with a herd. Two of my bunkmates, Danny Thompson an' Shorty Harrison, crossed the line in Cordobas, to a place that some said was run by Spider Collins. They were cheated, an' raised a row. Punchers from another outfit were in the place. The cowmen fought together.

"Spider Collins an' his partner Ebbetts were in Cordobas that night. When the smoke settled, some of the punchers were dead. Shorty Harrison had a smashed arm, an' he got out, some way, draggin' the kid, Thompson, whose head was near smashed. When Shorty got on the American side he was swearin' a blue streak. All the O B O went back with him. It was a hell of a night on the Mexican side of Cordobas."

"What's that got to do with *me*?" snapped Linge. His eyes were cold and glittering.

"The Collins gang left Cruces County. They were reported up this way. They

stuck up the D & R train. They had, all the time, a man working with 'em right here near the Bend. Danny Thompson came driftin' through here. He was hired by the rancher who is in with Collins, hired at seventy a month, as a decoy, an' to pay back a debt Collins owed the kid."

Linge sneered. He worked his way through Mason's deputies. "You ain't got proof!" he said. "You can't connect *me* with Collins an' Ebbetts!"

"It was *yore* puncher who was drunk that day in the *Nugget*!" said Cactus, nearer the doorway. "The man who called Proudon, Slash!"

Chip said: "Parker—I'm askin' you to take Linge's Colt. I want a posse to ride out to the Star Circle Star, to check up on Linge's outfit!"

Linge, his lips curling, pushed fully past Mason. He lunged like a striking puma for his belt.

Mason averted gunplay by jerking his arm out, and blocking the draw of the Star Circle Star man. He took the half-drawn gun. The room was in an uproar now. Chip, his Colts drawn, sheathed them. He threw off Parker's restraining hands. "No, I ain't *guessin'*," he snapped. At sight of the station master near him his face went set and hard. "Simson—I told you—"

"The wires are dead!" rasped Simson, his face gray. "Somebody's ripped 'em somewhere, after sluggin' me! I left a couple of men huntin' for the new break—"

From the doorway a voice cut in: "Simson, the break's way past the station! Some skunk climbed one of the poles!" As the noise of comment died down, a man growled: "What's to prevent the polecats from rippin' the wires anywheres along the way into the Palo Verde?"

Parker's face was corded. Veins showed thick in his throat. "Get a-hoss! Every grown man! Circle the town! Wait!" he snapped. "Some of you get that hand car from the shed below the station. Ride the rails, with Win-

chesters. An' some of you scatter! Search every house in town! For Morrison! Mebbe for Slash Ebbetts! An' Collins hisself!"

Mason, cursing, was holding Linge. "What about this *hombre*?" he asked. "What about ridin' to the Star Circle Star? What we got—a straight trail, or we millin' around? Huard!" he added, "where's the Lodestone gold you mentioned? At the Star Circle Star?"

Linge sneered. "Let me go, you fools!" he snapped. "I'll ride with you to my place. But yo're losin' time. Didn't you hear that Ebbetts went south? Didn't the trails lead south?" He watched Chip. "Huard, mebbe we got no quarrel. Give me a chance to prove it. Let me ride with you into the Palo Verde."

"Simson," said Chip tonelessly. "Soon's we fix that break you wire Apache we're goin' for the Lodestone gold. Tell 'em to connect with Yarnell, an' have posses head down into the Negras." He snapped his answer to Linge's suggestion. "The tracks in the Palo Verde were decoy tracks. The hosses had no riders! The bandits went north!"

"Come on, Simson!" he added. He pulled the half dazed station man towards the door. They crowded after him, outside. Parker ordered Linge down the stairs. Jim Bludsoe, his head bloody, groped out. In the street Chip explained more fully to Mason:

"Ebbetts, packin' a dead man, an' leadin' six riderless hosses, went south into the Palo Verde. He dropped the man out in the Sinks. He let the hosses go, past the lava beds. Then he rode to Sanderson, an' killed Caswell. It don't take much thinkin' to figger why. I'm sayin' Caswell lied when he said Danny Thompson was in the hold-up. That makes Caswell in with Collins. He might have talked, specially on the Thompson end, and they silenced him.

All of Hobson's Bend was in the street now. Men fought horses they had saddled, horses frightened by the

uproar. Linge, sneering, was pushed to one of the animals. The holster of the Star Circle Star man was still empty.

"Huard—you said Collins went north!" growled Parker. "A posse from here circled up that way the first day, an' I went up myself when we came out of the Palo Verde. There was nothin' in those valleys that lead north, past the Double R, except goat tracks!"

"Collins killed a goat rancher in the hills," said Chip evenly. "He was the man Ebbetts later toted out into the Sinks. The longriders took the goats across to them valleys. They ran them over the hoss tracks. The kid, Pepito, might have been away when they raided his brother's place, showin' up here later."

Parker cursed. Jim Bludsoe, groping his way through the crowd, growled, like a wounded bear: "The Mex who came to town claimin' to be Pepito's brother the nester, killed Pepito!"

Chip said: "He was the same man I saw by Coldbrook Gulch, while I was comin' through the Negras. When he stopped, an' turned, in the *Trail's End* yard, I recognized him and the loose ends of this tangle drew together. I knew then which way the longriders had gone—to those old mines in Coldbrook Gulch."

"The Mex was in the room upstairs, with two other men, when I came in," growled Bludsoe. "They slugged me. But what in hell we *standin'* here for?" he added. "We got a straight trail, *now*. Why ain't we ridin' north?"



OR the next half hour the main street of Hobson's Bend held a scene of feverish activity. Riders mounted and left town while the searchers, going from house to house, reported their failure to find Morrison. Mason, two of his deputies, and a half dozen men, surrounding

Linge, left for the Star Circle Star.

The flanking posses, going to cover any possible escape south, were already out of town. Parker, following Chip's hunch, was gathering the group that was to ride past the Double R directly to Coldbrook Gulch. A square-jawed man approached the sheriff.

"I reckon we're all kinda sorry we figgered Huard wrong," he said. "It ain't goin' to be no picnic up in them hills. I got the fastest hoss in the country. Let me ride with you."

"All right, Squint," said Parker gruffly. He turned at the touch on his arm. "Millie!" he muttered. At the girl's request, he added: "I came near forgettin' Red. Sure, I reckon we can drop you at the Double R. Don't know who'll be there, but we won't leave you if it don't look right. Here comes Huard now."

Chip and Cactus stopped in the light from the *Nugget's* windows. Chip watched Millie Riordan's eyes as the girl talked. "If you figger you'll be nearer yore brother that way, ma'am," he answered. "We're startin' now. It'll take too long to fix that wire. I'm leavin' Cactus behind to rush Simson," he explained to the sheriff. "He'll lead the second posse north."

Ten minutes later they were riding out of town. Millie, Riordan and Parker flanked Chip on the left. To his right was Jim Bludsoe and the man Squint, who was mounted on a big, rangy bay. Two set-faced Hobson's Bend men brought up the rear.

They rode under the yellow, winking stars, to where hills broke the plain. Through them the trail wound, sinuously, plunging occasionally into the black gloom that lay in the hollows. A few miles into the tumble, and the trail split, one fork of it going right, to the Star Circle Star.

Chip frowned and turned in his saddle as he swung Traveler into the Coldbrook trail.

"What's the matter?" asked Bludsoe. Chip flicked Traveler with his rein ends.

"Thought I heard a shot. Mebbe a stone, fallin' sheer. This trail sure runs on edges."

Farther on, Millie Riordan's horse slipped on the edge of a slope, and was helped in its frantic pawing for footing by Huard's hard arm. The girl's hand rested lightly, briefly, on the O B O man's shoulder. When the moonlight came again through a split in the hills she looked at him. Then quickly turned away.

Dawn came, like a creeping wedge of light prying up the lid of the sky. They rode through a stretch of plain, beyond the hills that fringed the town they had left behind, while the sun grew high and hostile. Then hills appeared again, going away in a continuous tumble towards the east. In the west and north the mounds began to merge with the dun-colored, bare slopes of the mountain desert.

The trail veered right. Bludsoe and the two town men, mounted on the poorest horses, continued straight north on the Coldbrook Gulch trail, while the others turned off towards the Double R, planning to overtake them later. Men had talked of the Double R. Some said its management was pretty close to Linge's outfit, and the posse, without losing too much time, thought it wise to see who might be there, before moving on to Coldbrook.

A little later, Parker, riding beside Chip, asked: "What you lookin' at?"

"By that mesquite," said Chip, pointing. "Ain't that dust? Looks like some riders were pushing along there."

Parker peered into the glaring world. He shook his head.

"Don't see it. But that mesquite runs to the Double R."

Half an hour later, as they were approaching the small, neat ranch of the Double R, Parker said: "Reckon you work best on a lone trail, Huard. Or with yore friends. You look kinda—"

"It ain't that," interrupted Chip shortly. "I'm thinkin' of that dust I saw an' just wonderin' about some of

the men who rode with Mason. I got a hunch this posse arrangement of our'n was made too fast—"

Back of the low house they were approaching ran the mesquite that came out of the plain to the south, evidently paralleling a creek. The stream went down into a small gorge behind the building. Immediately around, the hills rose rugged.

Parker growled. "Huard—I'm figgerin' you went clean down to the center of everythin' here. If we find Collins in Coldbrook as you figger, he might get away, if he outshoots us, an' outrides us. But it'll be a straight play—"

"It would have been straight if you hadn't known Linge," said Chip. "That's the part I ain't been able to fit into the rest. I figgered Linge in this thing. Did you see his draw, in the *Trail's End*? Did you notice the way the man walked—?"

They were riding into the ranchyard. No one appeared about the place. It seemed strangely deserted.

"Well," said Parker, "I'm admittin' I never figgered Linge the way he showed hisself when you began bearin' down. I handled the deal for the Star Circle Star with him, while he was in Placer, an' got his record from friends. It seemed all right. I didn't know Linge personal. Cliff Bowles did—"

"Hell, Huard," he snapped with change of tone, "Cliff Bowles was killed by Ebbetts a week after Linge got to the Bend! He mustta knowed something."

"Say, Parker," Chip said suddenly. "How did you know this man was Linge—when he came from Placer?"

"Only his say-so," Parker answered queerly, "an' the papers he had."

"Then," said Chip, "there might have been another man, the one Cliff Bowles knew, who *was* Linge."

The horses were pounding into the ranchyard. Dust rose about them in the heated air. Parker, pivoting his animal, was about to speak again—when sud-

denly, from beyond the house, a rifle spanged, wickedly, clearly.

Chip felt Traveler start. But for a moment the scene seemed frozen. Then the big stallion snorted wildly. He plunged with terrible force, pivoting in a heavy surge that threw the other horses into a panic. Deadly and sharp another rifle shot came, and still another. Lead scraped Huard's shoulder. For the first time in years the O B O man's iron strength could not control the stallion he was riding.

Traveler plunged continually, reversing, going away from the house first in the direction from which they had entered the yard, then towards the building's back. There the ground pitched steeply down. Right before Chip it began to fall away in wide steps of earth to the gorge into which the creek fed.

From the mesquite beyond the house, now at his back, stabbed an orange-red flare, pale in the sunlight. Something, glancing, smashed across Huard's head. The jarring, terrible blow threw him off Traveler. He struck on a descent of loose earth, and rolled. But he came, groggily, to his feet. Instinct jerked his Colts into his hands.

His sight blurred, the O B O man began to run. Hit hard, Chip Huard had but one out. He fought the slopes to get to the men who had ambushed him. But he was weaving crazily. He slipped on the loose ground and dropped. For a while he was dazed. Then his vision cleared.

He found himself on a narrow ledge that overhung the gorge. The shifting scene which his eyes conveyed to his brain held huge boulders and brush, down some thirty feet. To his right, above him, men were crashing through the mesquite. He heard shouts.

Stumbling as he moved, the O B O puncher snapped up his Colts. Cursing men dived for shelter on the mesquite covered slope as a hail of lead ripped through foliage. One man, plunging down, yelled hoarsely and finished the descent awkward and limp, raising dust

as he struck the bare ground on the lip of the ledge. Sounds behind Huard caused him to reverse. In plunging around, he stepped off the edge.

He struck some five yards down, on a slope so sheer that it threw him instantly out and down. Lead slapped angrily at the ground where he had struck.

Chip, half sliding, half falling, landed on a boulder almost the size of a house, close under the gorge side. He was unbalanced when he struck and the shock threw him off the rock, down to the gorge floor.

Driving lead splashed the surface of the huge rock, chipped the edge off which Huard had spilled. Harsh curses on the rim above punctuated the vicious, continued rifle fire.

Huard fell into mesquite that grew thick on the gorge floor, and slid down through the brush to jagged stone. One of his Colts had been lost in the fall. His body was numb. He fought the nausea that threatened to sweep over him.

Crawling blindly for an open space, he was torn by cactus hooks. Where the sunlight shone on bare ground, the deadly warning whir of a basking rattler caused him to pull away. Now he heard stones rolling into the gorge. Voices. He fought to stand erect. But for the moment, he was spent. He lay hunched, motionless.

How long he remained in the mesquite he afterward had no clear conception. Men searching for him in the brush started a diamond back that warned with its deadly buzz. He heard a voice snarl—"Look out! Rattler!" A Colt boomed not twenty feet away. Then the sound of the moving men passed him. Once more he heard a voice. "He's deader than hell, I tell you! He went off that stone limp—"

"Come on!" growled another. "We got to make that getaway. No use foolin' round here. If Huard ain't dead he's damn' close to it! I'm sayin' the Cardobas debt is paid, Spider!" Then a

final, cold voice that answered and gave orders.

The tone of this last voice awoke recognition in the huddled, motionless man. It was Linge who spoke—and Linge had answered to the name Spider. Somewhere in Chip's powerful body was vitality that stirred, that beat up like a wave. He moved again. It took him a long time to crawl a few feet.

By the time he was on open ground a heavy silence had closed about him. He rose to his feet, his strength rapidly coming back. Near the huge boulder he found the Colt he had dropped.

Blood was seeping down his face, into his eyes. But brushing it, he could see clearer. His muscles were stiff from the jarring of the fall, but he took the slopes now without having to fight to hold his senses. And as he climbed little knots of sinew gathered along his jaw.

THE silence, utter and unbroken, hung over the Double R. Then Chip heard a threshing in the brush. He whistled, and Traveler came humping along the ground above the gorge's west rim. The stallion favored his left foreleg. He was wild and restless, pivoting constantly. Chip did not swear when he was close enough to examine the wound which was troubling the horse and saw where a bullet had nicked just above the knee.

Millie Riordan, running, sobbing, from the house, stopped her glad cry in its utterance. There was something about Chip that arrested her. Then her relief sounded, breaking through the check of what she saw in his face as she came close to him.

"Chip! I thought—I thought—"

Her face was bruised. Somebody had struck her.

"Who?" questioned Chip harshly. His hand went out to touch her cheek, remained there.

"Linge!" she said, and her blue eyes blazed through the tears in them. "He shot Parker! Chip! Linge is—"

"Spider Collins!" he completed the words for her, harshly. "I heard him, down in the canyon!"

He followed her to the house. By some miracle of strength the slim girl had helped Parker in, and on to a bed in the inner room. The sheriff's voice came in a broken whisper.

"It was Dave Linge! He's Spider Collins, Huard. I heard his men call him that. That dust you saw. They were comin' in to ambush us — — Somethin' must have happened to Mason. I been blind," he added, fighting to keep his voice audible. "Make up for it, Huard. Remember that Collins ain't no grass spider. He's a tarantula—he's got fangs. Only 'one man in the Southwest can get him. Yo're the man."

"What about Squint an' the Springerville deputy?" asked Chip of Millie. Parker lay motionless, breathing hoarsely.

"The deputy was killed," said Millie. "He's behind the house. Squint was shot, too. But only in the arm. Squint fell down towards the gorge. He came out here after I had got Parker on the bed. He took his horse, and chased Collins."

"Huard," groaned Parker, "never mind me. Get Collins. He ain't no better than a rattler. I was on the ground, winged in the shoulder. He came from past the corral, while the girl was tryin' to get my Colt, which had fallen under me. He hit her. Then he swung around an' plugged me. While I was layin' there—" the sheriff cursed slowly, with terrible concentration.

The girl said, with a catch in her voice: "Perhaps something like that happened to my brother Red! Perhaps both Danny Thompson and my brother were shot by this—" Her voice broke.

She sensed a grim, unbreakable purpose in Chip. The strength of the man was like something tangible to her—she went close to him. Chip asked in even tones for bandages. Then he worked swiftly over Parker. The tears left Millie Riordan's eyes. She ran out of the

room—returned with a Winchester.

"I'll stay here, Chip. You find the posses!"

"Rest easy, Parker!" muttered Chip. He straightened, took the girl's face between his hands. "Mebbe we can pull Parker through. An' mebbe we'll find Red, too, Millie. While we're payin' a debt that *ain't* been squared."

"Chip!" she said swiftly, but did not finish the thought. It changed in her. Collins would never kill this man. For an instant she pressed against him, then turned.

Huard went out. There were no horses in the yard. Chip's jaw hardened. He caught Traveler, and mounted the stallion. He leaned over the roan's neck. "Mebbe this'll be our last ride together, Big Ears." His voice was toneless. "Get goin'!"

Traveler ran out over the hot plain, his matchless stride a little broken. But gradually the incessant swing of motion loosened the stiffened muscles that worked the left foreleg. The roan ran easier. Huard cut him north. But where the hills rose out of the plain, he pulled up the stallion and turned to look over his back trail. His hawk eyes pierced distances towards the south.

"One rider," he muttered. "Mebbe Squint. There's a bunch ahead of him!" His thought framed itself in a swift word. "*Collins!* He's headin' back to Hobson's Bend!"



HE sun was red and swollen, hanging over Hobson's Bend. The heat had driven men and dogs to shelter. Horses, tethered in narrowing shade, moved restlessly as the great roan, running belly to earth, came tearing down the street.

Simson, the station man, his head bandaged, was walking towards the *Nugget's* steps. He stopped at sight of the running horse. He cursed, slowly.

Chip pulled up the iron-jawed roan. He jumped clear—he reached Simson. "Collins!" he snapped. "He came *here!* Linge is Spider Collins." Simson cursed in a loud voice now.

"You sure, Huard?" At the reply he looked up and down the street. A man came to the door of the *Trail's End*, far downtown. At the jail, a guard, holding a rifle, was staring curiously. "There ain't been anybody here," said Simson excitedly. "'Less they came in through the buildin' line, below the Bend!"

He added: "I been inside the station the last two hours, workin' that key. Tryin' to argue with them fools in Apache—"

Something in his voice stopped Chip, who was turning to Traveler. The O B O man came back to Simson, gripped his shoulder. "Danny—?" he said, his voice curiously hard.

"Danny Thompson's dead," said Simson, bluntly. "Hell!" he added, and wet his lips. "It's no use takin' it like that, Huard!"

Huard looked at the jagged building line, at the slow haze of heat, out past the station, where the D & R tracks ran into the Palo Verde. Simson said hoarsely: "Huard, he wasn't *lynched!* Yore bunkmate died from his wound!"

His face stony, Chip turned. More men were coming out of the *Trail's End*. Simson, cursing, his face gray under the bandage, moved with the O B O man downtown. "I gotta talk to Oakes," said Chip tonelessly. "I gotta hear what Oakes says—"

"Huard!" a man called in surprise from a building across the street. "What the hell—"

A slow stir of excitement was beating through the heat-stunned town. The man from the *Trail's End*, meeting Chip in midstreet, called questions. It was Simson who explained. Huard walked, stonily, silently, the great roan, reins slack, pacing behind him. He heard one man say:

"Why'd them wolves come back

here? An' how we gonna handle it? There ain't enough of us. The whole town's ridin' posse!"

In the station, Simson worked the key. Ten minutes went by, while outside small knots of men gathered near the jail, and the *Nugget*. Speculations ran in circles. The town was slowly gripped by dread. The sun seemed to share the mood. Sullen, red, it shone through a haze.

Chip turned at sound of footsteps at the station door.

"Huard!" snapped a square-jawed man who entered. The sleeve of his right arm was stained with blood. "I thought they got you at the Double R!"

"Squint!" Chip seemed to wake, slowly, from a daze. He suddenly jumped forward. "Where'd they go?" he snapped.

Squint looked into the steely eyes. He backed towards the door.

"Huard! I ain't got time to talk *now!* Mason's waitin' at the *Eye Opener*. Quick! We ain't got a minnit to lose!"

"Wait here, Simson," Chip called and followed the man Squint out.

Simson stood at the desk. Oakes was asking impatiently for Huard over the tapping wire. But Simson was not listening. He frowned. He rose slowly. After a time he went to the doorway.

Chip and Squint were passing into the *Eye Opener*. Suddenly Simson stiffened. At the far end of town was a small group of riders, racing 'in.

"What the hell?" said Simson, harshly, in surprise. A sudden realization made him snap. "Huard! They tricked—"

His words broke. There was a soft pad of footsteps behind him. Before he could turn a Colt muzzle was jammed into his back.

CHIP followed Squint up narrow stairs to the top floor of the *Eye Opener*. As they were moving, going up, he heard a door slam, heard hurried footsteps, hoarse murmur of voices.

Something scratched at the O B O

man's mind. On the landing above the stairs, Squint reached out, and pushed open a door. "In there," he said.

Chip was past the framing when the thing moving slowly up in his mind became a suspicion that waved, like a flag. Squint had pushed, carelessly, strongly, with his wounded arm! The man had faked his hurt.

Chip did not turn. It was too late to turn. He was walking into a small room. A table in its center held bottles, an overturned glass. Tobacco smoke drifted in layers. Seated at the table was a rangy, cruel-eyed man. He leaned forward, palms on his knees, shifted balance, slowly, lazily, and rose.

"Howdy, Huard," he said. "I sure am glad to meet up with yuh. Have a drink. Yore last."

Chip's face did not change. He heard Squint moving behind him. Moving in a little to block the door. The trap had been perfectly sprung.

"That's how Mason lost out, I reckon," the O B O man said evenly. "Tricked by some of the polecats who rode out with him." His even gaze flicked to the door of an inner room, that was not quite closed.

"No," said the man by the table. "Me an' some of the boys were in the hills, when Mason ran right into us. But the men who rode with the posse helped." His cruel eyes went over Chip. "We figgered you dead, Huard. Ridin' in like you did, you near blocked our last play. Lucky Squint saw you through the winder in that back room."

"I reckon yo're Slash Ebbetts," said Chip evenly. His hand reached out for a glass on the table. "What was yore last play?"

"Havin' Simson wire Yarnell to follow up the posses. They can still be turned east towards the Springerville gap instead of comin' straight through the Negras. Collins figgers we got lots of time, an' place, in them hills, Huard." His eyes glinted as Chip held out the glass. The mask fell from his face. "We got you, this time, you ——"

he snarled. "You might be the devil's own brother, but you can't—" His voice broke off.

Chip was lax. "I just heard that Danny Thompson died, Ebbetts," he said, tonelessly. "I got a debt to pay. Collins not bein' here, I'm glad this little play of your'n fixed it so I can pay you—"

In Ebbett's eyes there came a leap of light, of raging effort. He lunged like a striking rattler, at a slant across his right hip, but stiffened queerly, his muscles freezing.

He began to fall, with his eyes wide and staring. His Colt, not fully raised, spurted once across his body.

The air of the room shuddered to the heavy boom of Huard's gun. Panther-like the O B O man jumped through the smoke, passing the toppling Ebbetts, reversing to face the door.

Squint, his face distorted, was only just ready to shoot, half crouched. A .45 slug ripped through him, seeming to jerk him around and up. He fell against the wall with another bullet in him. Clawing at the door-frame, he slid down slowly.

Chip collided with the wall behind him, and crouched. From outside came sounds of shots, scattered, then multiplying. Inside the small room, beyond the wall, vicious cursing sounded. It ended. The atmosphere was strained.

"He got Ebbetts!" snapped a voice. "An' Squint! He's there, by *this* wall!" The subsequent language was a savage resumé and condemnation of a mistake. "We can't stay here! Somethin's up, out in the street!"

Chip heard the voice of Morrison: "*The posses're back! Mason and Cactus!*"

Then the desperate men broke for it. Chip jumped, forward, sensing the coming of that wild rush. The room exploded with shots again. Men catapulted out of the door, twisting as they came, cutting down with spitting Colts. But Chip was in close, his fire dropping the man nearest the framing. The

O B O man twisted around the entrance, going down as lead slapped heavily at his shoulder. He spun himself, came to his knees, his Colts crashing.

The table in the outer room jarred and slid as a man's heavy body fell against it. Two others dived out, to be met by bullets at the bottom of the stairs.

Chip, with the other man alive in the room, came to his feet, sidestepping with pantherish speed. Morrison's voice said loudly:

"Huard! I can't pull a gun! I ain't done a thing! Since last night I been hunted like a coyote, dodgin' in the backyards!"

The firing in the street was faster. It ran out raggedly to the upper end of town. Chip saw, through a window, riders racing out. One rider on Squint's gray horse. "Collins!" Chip gritted. He pushed a smoking Colt close to Morrison's face. "Who shot Danny Thompson?" he asked. His voice was a whip-crack. "Talk fast!"

Cactus and Mason, running upstairs and into the room, heard the conclusion of Morrison's hurried talk. "Collins got him, from about ten yards, ridin' out as the three of us passed the bluffs. The idea was to pack Thompson out, later, on his own hoss, an' leave him outside of Sanderson for riders to find when they followed Ebbetts."

The hammer of Chip's Colt had raised. Morrison's face was gray. "It's the truth, Huard! Thompson only knew Collins as Linge, his boss. He was sent out to the line house near the buttes, where I met him. Red Riordan happened to be ridin' his line, an' met Thompson. We hadn't figgered on Red. I slugged him, an' the boys toted him away. He's in Coldbrook Gulch now, I reckon."

Cactus put his hand on Chip's arm. "The station's burnin'," he said. "Simson's dyin'. He said somethin' about a message Collins wanted sent—"

Chip snapped: "I know. To turn the

Yarnell posses. Ebbetts bragged about it. Collins' last play!" He broke past Cactus. He ran down the stairs, into the street. A piercing whistle brought Traveler. The great roan's leg had stiffened a little. Cactus, coming out with Mason, swore as he watched the horse and rider head out. "Huard'll kill that hoss! But he'll get Collins!"

Mason had his wounded arm attended to, then joined Cactus to help fight the fire at the station. But they could not rescue the sending instrument in the telegraph room.

Cactus quickly gave it up. "Let's go!" he said. "Huard oughtta have help an' we can't do no good here. Come on, you men; leave it an' get yore hosses."

The fire burned fiercely, unchecked by the efforts of the few active men left in town. By midnight the station was a smoldering mass. An engine and one car came clanging out of the Palo Verde. Out of the car stepped Marshal Oakes of Apache. Oakes listened to the story told, cursed, and ordered horses. The moon looked down on yet another posse that rode out of Hobson's Bend.



IM BLUDSOE and his two companions came close to the Gulch, then waited a night and a day for the men who had gone to the Double R.

Bludsoe, grim and set-faced, became impatient, and as dusk again fell, rode with his men up one of the valleys which led into a higher tumble of hills above Coldbrook. The valley broke into gorges and abrupt rises, boulder strewn. Suddenly rifles spat from behind those frowning rocks, rifles that snapped at the silence in vicious, thin reports.

Bludsoe's horse dropped under him. The two town men were cut down as they raced for the shelter of the slopes. They fell and lay still in the shadow of mesquite which fringed the valley. But Bludsoe made it. Half an hour later, grim, silent-footed, carrying a heavy

Sharps, Bludsoe made his way around the hills.

In his belt was a Colt and a bowie knife. He passed silently under high red cliffs, and headed down into Coldbrook Gulch.

Time dragged through the silence. Some hours later Spider Collins came pounding up one of the valleys connecting with the southern range. Collins was mounted on a big, rangy gray. But a Nemesis was hanging to the long-rider's trail, a pursuer he had not been able to shake off. Behind him was a racing, long-paced roan, slowly gaining on the gray. Where the valley broke to the narrower gorges, on a rising lip of ground, Collins pulled up his horse. The wan moonlight was all about the longrider. The silence of the hills absolute.

Already at the mouth of the valley was his pursuer. Collins' hawk face twisted with hate. He jerked the head of the spent gray and moved on.

Inside the hills, where they split towards the Gulch, Collins ran into three of his own men. He swore coldly at the news they gave. "There ain't much harm done," said one of his men surly. "The *hombre* that got away is probably leggin' it, fast. The other two are dead."

Collins ordered one of the men back to the mining town. He returned with the other two, towards the valley. They climbed a slope that overhung one of the gorges leading to it, and waited for Huard. The pale moonlight glinted from the steel of their rifle barrels.

Chip evaded the trap. Near the valley's end, he pulled the blowing roan up over a rise, down into a coulée where the shadows lay black. Swinging off the horse, Chip waited, his hawk eyes watching the gorges which led north. After a time he caught the glint of moonlight on a rifle barrel.

Slowly, then, he moved on foot. He circled the place where Collins and his two men waited. He went north, passing

around the slopes which fell towards the dry stream bed.

Through rugged notches in the hills he caught glimpses of Coldbrook Gulch. There was something moving to the north of town, on the ledges of red stone that ran to the cliffs at the Gulch end. Ten minutes of dodging run, and another glimpse showed Chip two men near the high walls.

Half an hour later he was under the red cliffs he had passed three days before. The holes of the old mine mouths gaped above him. The silence was profound. Chip could plainly see Coldbrook Gulch now, see the sagging buildings, ghostly in the starlight, only partially splashed by the moon hung low over the cliffs. Then he heard shouts.

Movement appeared in that ghostly town, flitting forms of men. A door slammed. Shouts sounded again. Then horses pounded down the slope to the gulch floor. Chip's Colts came to his hands. He ran, swiftly, dropped down a ledge of rock, another, and hurried along the left slope.

Then voices hailed. Chip, sliding down into a wide, deep slash in the slope, suddenly stopped. A voice above, from the building line, was shouting: "Hey! Card! Slim! Get Collins here! Joe's dead! And the gold's gone."

Chip, looking carefully, saw two men carrying something out of one of the sagging shacks.

"Yeah—Joe's dead!" yelled one of the men carrying the limp object from the shack. "Knifed through the throat. Red Riordan's missin'." Cursing questions came from the riders now directly below Chip. The man above yelled again: "*The gold's gone*, I tell you! Get Collins."

Clearly visible in the moonlight, riders were coming up from the gorges to the south. Three riders. Chip turned at the sound of the mad hoofbeats. "That might be Collins!" he muttered. And an instant later, "Yeah; it's gotta be."

Collins came on, paralleling the high

wall of the left side of the Gulch. Then somewhere under the cliffs to the north, a heavy Sharps roared. One of Collins' companions went off his horse as if he had run into an invisible rope. It was a lucky shot in that tricky light and one inclined to give panic to the men bunched on the Gulch bottom.

Chip jumped out of the earth slash. He had to intercept Collins before the longrider passed down to the Gulch bottom. Huard began to run, his strong teeth gritted, all his energy going into the effort to cover ground. But he was seen almost at once. The air was ripped by shots that followed one another in a ragged, continuous volley.

Lead whispered, venomous, swift, by the O B O man's ears. He swung around as he ran, and emptied one Colt into that milling mass of horses and men below him. From the north the heavy Sharps boomed again. Collins, riding down towards the buildings, was nearly caught under his toppling horse.

Chip saw that, in the midst of his jumping run. A moment later the second man with Collins, still mounted, passed through the building line, sending his animal in suicidal leaps down the slopes.

Chip gained the buildings as the firing from the Gulch bottom suddenly ceased. The riders there, fearful of unknown odds, were heading for the breaks to the west. Chip's hand automatically reloaded his Colt. He moved along the buildings, sure, suddenly, of the man he wanted.

Abruptly a splash of moonlight was full upon a man who circled around one of the sagging, ghostly structures, towards Chip. A man who ran, crouched, somehow malevolent in his motions, a man caught and ready to fight with the viciousness of a trapped wolf. Chip gave him his chance. He stepped out of the shadows of the buildings.

"Collins!" he said. "Yore trail ends here."

One instant while the running man stopped, one moment when his face, with

its long sideburns, twisted in a terrible hate. Then a Colt in his hand jerked like a snake's tongue. The report merged with the crashing of Huard's Colt.

His left arm limp, the O B O man stepped out of the smoke. He went to Collins' sprawled, still form. Looked down at it, and turned away.

Jim Bludsoe and red-headed young Riordan found him walking slowly past the buildings. A heavy hush had fallen over Coldbrook Gulch, an unbroken silence. The insects began to rasp in the growth under the red cliffs.

HOURS later Cactus, with a group from Hobson's Bend, pounding into the Gulch, found a huge fire near the old *Birdcage* saloon. The night air in the desert had a nip to it. As Cactus and the others crowded around, Jim Bludsoe explained slowly without emotion:

"I scouted 'round, saw a fool scratchin' a match inside the old *Birdcage*, an' went in. I got the gold, an' Red here. Red was tied up back of the bar. The gold's hidden in the mesquite. We did some shootin' when Huard came an' scared that crowd outta the bottom.

Before dawn Marshal Oakes, of Apache, reached the Gulch. Cactus did the explaining. "Collins is dead," he finished simply. "An' his last play was beaten by ways as old as these hills. There's the two men who did it—two men who went to the same school, Oakes. Jim Bludsoe, an' I reckon you know the other—Chip Huard. The only slip-up was in Collins' men gettin' away."

"They didn't get away," said Oakes. "Simson, told at the station the longriders could understand the code, figured that Collins was bluffin'. Anyways, under Collins' guns, Simson tapped out that he was bein' held up. The posses from Yarnell weren't turned at all."

Oakes turned to the group of riders that had remained in the shadows. "We left some men with Parker, at the

Double R," he explained, and as Millie Riordan came into the light, "There's yore brother, ma'am. An' Chip."

Half an hour, and the talk around the huge fire began to die down. Red Riordan, his hat tilted over a bump on his skull, spoke evenly:

"An' I lay in there, hogtied, for three days," he concluded. He looked at Chip, seated beside his sister. She had insisted on bandaging the O B O man's arm, his badly creased head. Chip smoked, silently.

"We saved the best news for the last, Huard," said Oakes from across the fire. "Danny Thompson ain't dead. He's comin' around all right." Chip straightened.

"I gave out the news that Thompson had gone under to quiet that mob," added the marshal evenly. "The station man at Apache relayed the news to Simson without my knowing it."

Chip's face had changed. After a moment he said almost casually—"So the kid'll pull through?" But something in his tone caused Millie Riordan to draw nearer.

The fire snapped, beating back the darkness. One by one the men around it lay back to sleep. The hair of the girl, near Chip's shoulder, glistened gold in the flame glow. On top of the red cliffs a coyote mourned, and she drew closer, touching him.



# The Breaks

By **ROGER TORREY**



**Dal Prentice works on a killer's only fear—the hurt that he himself may receive**

**M**URDER — murder without warning; swift and premeditated like others that had preceded it; like the others based on the same logic of lesson by example. It differed only in that legal beer instead of bootleg was the reason for the lesson.

A truck pulled from Selma Avenue into a dark alley but before it had rolled more than ten feet into the obscurity a

shotgun blasted and the driver slumped on his seat. The unguided truck rolled on a few feet, crashed into a parked car and stalled.

Two men, hats pulled down and partially shading their features, ran from the shelter of the alley and through the rapidly gathering crowd, a crowd too startled by the sub-machine-gun the first man openly displayed to do more than back stupidly out of their way. As they reached the car waiting for them at the curb, the traffic policeman at the

intersection came racing up, pistol out and flashing reflected light from the street lamp on the corner. The first man stopped . . . lifted the snub nose of the machine-gun . . . and shot him down as coldly as if he were shooting at a target . . . followed the second man, who still carried a shotgun, into the car and roared away before any of the spectators regained enough presence of mind to notice the numbers on the license plates.

\* \* \*

DETECTIVE Lieutenant Prentice had his lean belly against the bar in Joe Martin's *Hofbrau*. He was staring at the back-bar unseeingly, trying to weave vague thoughts into a concrete idea and one of the thoughts had to do with Joe. He asked the barman casually: "Joe in?"

The bartender jerked a thumb at the back door. "Yeah! Busy."

Prentice nodded, said: "Makes no never mind," turned, then changed his mind a minute later when the back door opened and Martin, followed by a dark, Jewish looking man, came out. The dark man left, ignoring Prentice, and Martin went behind the bar to cast a suspicious eye into the cash register. He looked up from this investigation, caught Prentice's eye and came down the bar. He said: "H'lo, Dal! Long time no see."

Prentice grinned at him. "You been working behind closed doors so long, Joe, you're blind. How's it seem to run legit for a change?"

Martin snorted. "Hell! There's not half the profit and it looks like. . . ." He stopped, shot a quick glance at the door.

"Go on, Joe." Prentice's voice was soft.

"Forget it. You know me. I'm *always* crying."

"Same thing, huh! Same as old times."

Martin said: "Forget it," again. He looked uneasily at Prentice, then at the bat eared man swabbing the bar.

"He can't hear us. That's it, ain't it? I heard the same thing, Joe."

Martin looked glum and kept silent and Prentice finished his beer. He swung away from the bar, turned back and asked: "How much more?"

Martin blurted out: "It ain't that. I gotta use West Side brew and I know it ain't worth a damn. That's the stinger."

"And Aaron Simonson's their leg man." Prentice grinned at Martin's shrug, added: "It's okey, Joe. You didn't tell me a thing." He looked suggestively at his empty glass and Martin called: "Jack! Fill Lieutenant Prentice's glass." He stared past Prentice, said: "Here's your partner. Acts like he's looking for you."

Prentice said: "Prob'ly is." He swung around, called: "Hi, Al! Joe's buying a drink."

Allen was thin, dark. He came over, said: "Must be Christmas. Cap's looking for you." He grinned at Martin, said: "Joe."

Prentice grunted and finished his beer. He growled: "He always is. Well, let's go."

Allen kept his grin on Martin, punched Prentice in the ribs with his elbow and said: "Not till Joe buys that drink."

They went to the Central Station and, passing through the big general room, entered one only slightly smaller marked *Homicide Department*, saw a white-haired man staring out the window, back turned to them, and Prentice coughed first, next moved a chair noisily, finally said: "You wanted me, Cap?"

The white-haired man turned from the window, put hard blue eyes on Prentice, asked: "Have a nice time on your trip?"

"Trip!"

"You been on a trip, ain't you? Gawd knows, you ain't been around the station."

"Now, Cap!" Prentice tried to sound dignified—did make his voice sound

hurt. "I been trying to pick up a lead on that Selma Avenue business."

Captain Hallahan asked Allen: "Found him in a beer joint, didn't you?" At Allen's grin, he told Prentice surly: "Selma Avenue'd be the place to look."

"I gotta lead on it. It's the West Side people."

Hallahan made a disgusted gesture. "Hooley! This ain't prohibition, you damn' fool. Old man Klinker ain't fooling around like that, don't tell me."

Allen looked faintly interested. He said: "Klinker'd never go for that, Dal. He's a fine old man."

"I'm telling you," Prentice said stubbornly. "Aaron Simonson's in it, too."

Allen blinked his eyes, decided: "Simonson *might* be. But Klinker—" He shook his head.

Hallahan was openly skeptical. He asked: "Where'd you get this screwy idea?"

"I got it . . . never mind where. It come straight."

"Well, forget it. The West Side Brewery ain't fooling with that kind of stuff. You and Al are supposed to be working on this Selma Avenue killing and the place to get a lead on it is down there. You worked down there before. Forget this pipe dream and get action." He stared down at his desk, called after Prentice and Allen as they went out the door: "Maybe you birds have forgot one of the dead men was a copper. I ain't."

**S**ELMA AVENUE ran through the heart of the negro district and, with few exceptions, all businesses were conducted by them; Peter Lang's little pool-room being a fair example of the majority of the colored beer parlors with two battered tables, four or five card tables and a shabby bar comprising the fixtures, and all needing repairs. Peter was a retired prize-fighter and as improvident as the majority of his race, class, and former profession. He and Prentice were old acquaintances, Pren-

tice having been the arresting officer on one of Peter's numerous trips to jail.

Prentice and Allen walked in and Prentice said: "H'lo, Peter!"

"Hiya, Mista Prentice. Now jus' what I done?"

Prentice cast a suspicious look at the three or four colored loiterers and Peter took the hint and ordered: "You boys, yo'all take a powda. Me and Mista Prentice and this otha gent'man got business." He complained to Prentice as they left: "Them boys nev' *do* spend no money. They jus' sits here all day long."

Prentice asked without preamble: "What beer you selling now, Pete?"

"That hot shot colored boy that runs the Selma Avenue club, he sells it. Joey Hall. Why, Mista Prentice?"

"West Side?"

"Uh-huh. He says I should buy from him."

"You like it?"

"I ain't got no out. Joey comes ove' and says fo' me to take it or get in a mess o' trouble. I don' wan' no trouble so I takes it."

Prentice's eyes showed a faint glow. "Who delivers it?"

"White man in a truck. He jus' brings it an' I lays it on th' line. I tell Joey when I need it."

"What about the Standard Distributor man that got killed in the alley back here? He was coming here when he got knocked off."

Peter's eyes shifted away. "Mista Prentice, I swears I don' know. He used t' sell me but I wasn't goin' t' get in no trouble. I tol' him so that day an' he say he might drop aroun' an' see if I was out."

"Did you tell the West Side man that?"

"Hones', I don' know. Seems like I did, Mista Prentice. Or maybe it was Joey Hall I tol'. He was aroun' too, I seems t' think."

"He was, huh!" Prentice looked at him sternly. "Best thing you can do from now on is say nothing. If any-

body asks you about anything you don't know a thing. I haven't been talking to you about this at all. Get me?"

"Sure does, Mista Prentice. I won't say a word."

"Okey, Peter! What does this Joey Hall look like? Do I know him?"

"He not been here long, Mista Prentice. He comes f'om Harlem, New Yo'k. He comes in an' lays it on th' line fo' this Selma Avenue club. Cash money. He's a bad nigga, Mista Prentice. Tall and yella . . . talks real smart."

"Well, mind now, Peter. I haven't been talking to you." He explained: "You'd likely get what the truck-driver got that was coming to see you." On the way out to the police car he asked Allen: "D'ya believe this West Side angle now? Don't it tie up?"

Allen argued: "It's just guessing. You don't know a thing. And I'll be damned if I see how you're going to find out."

"Well, it's a cinch this Joey Hall is mixed up in it."

"What does that get us?"

"I'm going to try a bluff. I'm going to this shine and tell him I'm jerry and can tie him up on this killing. We'll see how he talks."

"What do you make by it? You just tip your hand."

"We ain't got a hand, Al. Only a hunch. Let's try it."

Allen shrugged, said: "You're the boss," in a resigned voice.



JOEY HALL'S *Selma Avenue Club* was supposedly private. Situated over a block of shabby stores, the front entrance was a set of narrow steps between two of the dingy shops, the back entrance a rickety wooden stairway sprawling down into the alley and dignified by the title of fire-escape. Both men had been in the place before though never while it was under its present management. They

climbed the narrow stairs, barely wide enough for two men abreast, and knocked.

A small window in the door was opened and a dark face peered out. Then the window closed.

Prentice knocked again and the window opened anew, exposing a different face that inquired: "What you want?"

Prentice answered sharply: "In!"

The face vanished and a third appeared. "Gentlemen, this is a club just for colored people." This voice showed evident culture. Prentice interrupted by reaching his hand in his pocket and producing his badge, and the voice said: "Certainly, gentlemen. Come right in," and the door opened.

Peter Lang had told Prentice that Joey Hall was "tall and yellow" but had not prepared him for the giant that confronted them. Joey was tall . . . several inches over six feet and combined this height with tremendous shoulders. He was dressed in a suit almost the color of his complexion with tie, shirt, socks and shoes of the same shade. He seemed to be under thirty but was totally bald. He said: "I'm Joey Hall, gentlemen, and the place is licensed in my name. Did you wish to see me?"

Prentice twisted his neck and looked up at him, growled: "We did. Hardly expected to see so much of you, at that."

Hall beamed, exuded a faint odor of gin and bay rum, said: "I *am* a pretty good sized man. Will you gentlemen follow me?" He led the way to a table, sat down and motioned them to seats, asked: "Would you gentlemen care for a drink? I've a little hard liquor here though I'm not dealing." He told the waiter that came hurrying over: "Rye highballs for the gentlemen . . . gin rickey for me."

Prentice asked: "How you doing?"

"Not good . . . not bad. If it wasn't for the side angles I take I couldn't get by."

The waiter brought the drinks and

Prentice sipped, said: "You sell good hooch."

The negro smiled at him genially. "I don't sell it. It's just for my friends."

"I see." Prentice's voice was blunt. "You handle West Side beer down here, don't you? Wholesale it, I mean."

Hall, still smiling, said: "In a way. I sell some for a friend of mine. I have a wholesale license of course."

"Simonson?"

"Yes." The smile faded for a second, came back wider, showed gold in both corners of the big mouth.

"We're on this killing that happened over here a couple of blocks. Know anything about it?"

"Not a thing. Of course I heard of it. The one where some men killed a man down an alley and killed a policeman that tried to stop them when they ran away. Is that the one?"

Prentice said: "It is." Watching Hall, he thought he saw him wave his hand at the edge of the table to the barman who went into the small kitchen at the back of the room. The movement stirred an instinctive sense of caution and he dropped his eyelid at Allen who, apparently disinterested, was watching them. Allen slid his hand under his coat and Hall saw the wink and Allen's move and said: "You gentlemen don't have to worry when you're in my place." He slightly stressed the word "in." "You're as safe as if you were in God's pocket."

Prentice said shortly: "We're not worrying. You're the one should be doing that."

The negro looked at him and the waiter came out of the kitchen and said: "You're wanted on the phone, Mr. Hall."

Hall said: "Will you gentlemen excuse me for a moment?" in a polite voice and with a slight bow. He followed the waiter to the back of the room and Allen spoke for the first time. "Is he trying to take a powder? Or is he high?"

"He ain't high and he ain't worried."

The waiter came back, told them Mr. Hall had told him to see they were taken care of. They sipped another highball slowly in the quiet room, a room too quiet to please Prentice. He glanced cautiously at the dozen or more negroes around, complained to Allen: "This has gone sour on us."

Allen shrugged: "You got the same hunch I've got." He held his drink in his left hand, kept the right under his coat.

Hall came back from the kitchen, sensed their nervousness, apologized: "I'm sorry I was detained so long." He added smoothly: "I've got a lot of business, you know," and the covert warning angered Prentice and he snapped out: "D'ya think you can handle it from the jail-house? Can you think of any good reason you shouldn't go down and try?"

"Now you men haven't got a thing on me on this killing. Of course I don't want to leave my business. You couldn't hold me on that and you know it."

"Maybe we could and maybe we could make a nice try at it even if we missed. We could sure as hell get the answer to a few questions. This shooting over here happened in your territory . . . or the territory you're trying to promote."

Hall seemed to be watching the clock above the door. He argued: "But I had nothing to do with it. Because I help a friend peddle some beer and maybe make a few dimes out of it. . . ."

Prentice stood up, ordered: "Tell the barkeep you're going to the station."

"Now listen. I'll be out as soon as my lawyer can get over there." The big negro hesitated, added: "It might be worth something to me not to have to go . . . not that I'd have to stay."

"Yeah!" Prentice's voice was nasty. "How much'd it be worth?"

Hall looked away from the clock, squarely at him. "Half a grand. You'll take that or a beef. And you to keep out of my place and lay off me until you got something to go on. You're not

kidding me, not one damn' bit. That plain?" He waved his hand around the room, pointed out the groups of three or four men that seemed to have collected by each door, made his thick lips half sneer and finished with: "I'll play, but in my own way. Just *try* and take me."

Prentice jerked his hand towards his coat, cried out: "You black ——!" but Allen stood up and shoved him back in his chair, said to Hall: "Beat it. We'll call you."

Hall smiled insolently and strolled over to the bar and Allen said: "Use your head! If we take him it'll mean a shooting and *that'll* mean a trial board. Stall, and we'll take him right."

"Anytime I let a black —— like that tell me what to do."

"Wait until we got more'n a guess, Dal."

"Well. . . ."

"Let me stall him. I can, over the dough."

"The guts of him. And a dead copper up in the morgue right now. A lousy half grand."

Allen ignored him, called: "Hall!" and when Hall came sauntering over said: "Fair enough. We can't turn down money."

"You'll have to give me until tonight to dig it up. Business has been slow and I don't keep that much on hand."

"What time?"

"Say nine o'clock."

Allen looked at Prentice who gave him a surly nod. He said: "We'll be back about nine then. Okey!"

Hall looked at the clock, walked to the barred door with them and the group around it edged away. He agreed: "At nine then," and they were outside.

Allen drew a deep breath, said: "That went sour quick." He started down the stairs, ahead of Prentice, said over his shoulder: "You were too raw, Dal. That spade's smart enough to know that if you had a thing on him you wouldn't have worked like that. That's *one* act that didn't go over."

"The hell it didn't. What's the half grand for? He's scared, I tell you."

"He knows he couldn't stall a murder rap with that much dough. Use your head. He. . . ."

Allen was walking ahead of Prentice down the stairs and just as he stepped on the sidewalk, Prentice, over his bobbing shoulder, got a glimpse of the touring car across the street. He shoved Allen in the back and, off balance, Allen sprawled in the gutter. He cried out: "Damn you, Dal! What . . ." The machine-gun across the street chattered viciously, a steady burst following Prentice as he raced down the sidewalk. The first door from the stairs led into a bakery and he dived headfirst through it, beating the slugs that followed his course by inches. The car, starting at the same time as the shooting, was already slightly past him.

Allen had been as busy. He had fallen on his face and, still lying prone, was methodically shooting at the now fast moving car. He registered three hits in the tank and just before the car reached the corner hit one back tire which blew with a bang. The car, by this time traveling about forty, swerved crazily, caromed off the corner building and tipped over on the street car tracks, not more than five feet in front of a car whose astonished motorman retained presence of mind enough to stop. This car prevented Allen shooting at the three men who ran from the overturned auto and into a store.

Prentice came cautiously from the doorway where he had watched the smash, picked up Allen, said: "Those hoods can go to hell and gone for all of me. They took their ta-ta gun right along with 'em. You hurt, Al?"

Allen took a limping step. "Skinned one knee, I think."

The street was in an uproar. Two traffic policemen were asking excited questions, at least fifty cars were blocking the street, and the sidewalk around the two detectives was crowded by a mob. Prentice ordered one of the uni-

formed men: "Get the number of the car and phone it to Headquarters. It's probably bent. Don't try to follow those guys 'cause they got that damn' gun along with 'em and it's the same as suicide."

"Should I tell 'em to put out a cordon?"

"Hell, no. They've just run through that store and on to the back street most likely. No chance of getting 'em until they hole up and that won't be down here in this part of town."

The uniformed man nodded. "Okey, Lieutenant. One of those guys was Aaron Simonson, though. I know him and I saw him as I left the corner but the street car was in the way and when he got to the store there was too many people around to take a chance on shooting."

"You were smart. They'd have blasted back with the tommy, sure as hell. Tell the riot squad what the score is when they come. We're going to the station."

Allen hobbled to the police car and Prentice got in the driver's seat and drove with siren open all the way to the station and, after reporting the attempted gunning to Hallahan, continued to the apartment they shared.



PRENTICE went into the little kitchen, produced Scotch, glasses, and White Rock. His voice was bitter. "When that black — went to the kitchen I knew it had gone sour." He held the glass so Allen could see the amount of liquor he poured. "Say when!"

"When!"

"He telephoned Simonson and Simonson came there to wait for us. That's why he was stalling. That's why the half grand."

Allen tasted the highball critically. "Not bad, Dal. Of course we can pick up Simonson."

"That's no dice; he'd prove an alibi. That identification wouldn't hold him and he's too tough to sweat."

"He is, all right."

"Listen, Al! There's something screwy about this. It's a cinch the shine and Simonson were in on the killing, or had it done, else they wouldn't have tried for us. Don't that sound right?"

"Uh-huh."

"Well then, Klinker and the West Side Brewery is in it. Cinch!"

"It's no cinch."

"Then why the shooting?"

"Klinker ain't in it. He's too big to fool with stuff like this."

"Let's talk to *him*." Prentice's voice was thoughtful, slow. "It can't do any harm. Maybe he don't know what Simonson's working. Maybe Simonson's putting something over on the old geezer." He argued for a few moments and Allen said dubiously: "Well, maybe. What are we going to do about the spade spotting us?"

Prentice headed for the kitchen and more Scotch. He said over his shoulder: "Wait until we get more to go on and then tip him over. He'll clean the joint up now and keep it that way for a week or so and then get careless. We ought to be able to find everything from hay on up . . . we know he's got liquor and only a beer license."

"The vice squad won't touch him if he's fixed and he talked like he was."

"They will if they figure I'll spill the beans, fix or no fix. Besides that, if they figure this shine is mixed up in a cop killing, there ain't a fix in the world that'll stick."

"Maybe you're right."

"I'll buy a drink, huh, and then we'll see Klinker."

**K**LINKER was German-Jewish—thin, nervous and sandy haired. His looks showed no trace of his nationality. He looked across his desk at Allen, twitched almost colorless eyebrows, said: "I don't believe I understand, Lieutenant. Am I accused of

... extortion, would you call it, or murder?" His voice was thin and precise and carried a slight accent.

Allen said: "It's hardly that, Mr. Klinker. We thought you might not know just what was going on."

Klinker pursed his lips and blinked his eyes. He tightened his voice.

"I know exactly what is going on. It is my business to know."

"But this Simonson. I tell you we saw him when he tried to kill us. I tell you we know he put pressure on a retailer and forced him to take your product."

A door creaked behind Allen and Klinker looked past Allen's shoulder and said: "It's all right, Aaron. I'm busy now." His glance flicked past Prentice, rested a second on a door to an inner room that stood slightly open and had during the interview, then back to Allen. He said:

"Of course you gentlemen have proof of this."

"We're getting it. Knowing something and proving the same thing are two separate things."

Klinker said gravely: "Might I suggest you get proof before you make such accusations. Mr. Simonson's my sales manager and I'm sure he has done nothing that you seem to think he has." He emphasized "think" and glanced again at the door and Allen watched him, said: "Ask him in!" almost in a whisper.

Klinker whitened, said: "I don't know what you mean. There's nobody in the other room." His voice was loud and Allen slid from his chair and went to the other door in time to hear a door close on the corridor. He came back to his seat, said to Prentice: "Somebody with nose trouble!" leaned across the desk to Klinker, asked: "What's the trouble? Nobody can hear you now."

Klinker regained a little color, moistened his lips with his tongue, said: "There's no trouble." He stood up, said: "I'll have to ask you gentlemen

to leave if this is all you want to see me about."

Allen stood up. "That's all."

"I wish you'd remember I kept this brewery closed during prohibition when by bribery I might have made several fortunes running it. Instead I lived to the letter of the law. Think of that before you make wild statements. Is that clear?"

Allen shrugged, said to Prentice: "Let's go!" and to Klinker: "It ain't clear but it'll have to do." Prentice said: "I don't know what's going to happen to the brewery, Mr. Klinker, when this mess is cleaned up but I know what's going to happen to you."

Klinker said: "What?" in a soft voice and Prentice got up and followed Allen to the door before answering. He turned there, said: "Either life or the rope." Klinker laughed, said: "That's ridiculous!" and Prentice stared at him, said soberly: "When a copper gets killed on duty it's never ridiculous. Think it over. I don't know why the hell you're backing this stuff but the law won't care." He slammed the door behind him, said to Allen as they walked through the outer office: "I'd like to've seen Simonson's face when he walked in. He never expected to see *us*."

Allen said: "Well that's six, two and even. We didn't him."

"Let's go and report and go back to the apartment. I could stand a short one."

"Me . . . not short! This is screwy! Klinker's a good old boy but he knows damn' well what's going on and he ain't trying to stop it. I don't get it."

Prentice snorted: "I get *this*! First a man is killed and then a copper is killed and then we're almost killed. And Klinker, who's such a swell old boy according to you, is in it up to his neck." He climbed into the police car, waited until Allen circled the front and got behind the wheel, suddenly grinned and added: "Well, what the hell! Don't the city pay our wages? What'll we do now?"

"Go back and check in and then go home and spear the drink and do a little thinking. We got to figure out some angle that'll give us a line on who's working for Simonson and Klinker on this."

"Sure! Cinch! Pick 'em out of the whole damn' town."

Allen shoved the car in gear, said cheerfully: "We can figure out something. Just a question of time before we get a break."



ABOUT noon the next day the telephone in Prentice's apartment rang and Hallahan asked: "Did you guys plan on coming to work today? Or is it a vacation?"

Prentice had answered the phone. He turned and grinned at Allen and said to the phone: "Why no, Cap. We can't get out. If you'll send an escort up we'll go down and tell you about it. There's a bunch of boys outside in a car waiting for us."

"Are you kidding me? Listen Dal! What's the idea?"

Prentice sobered quickly, said: "There really are. A Lincoln touring car, green, with the top up. I don't know who it is because we can't see into the car from here but they're waiting for us. We figured to stay put for a while."

"How you know they're waiting for you? You sound like you're high."

"Come up and we'll tell you about it."

"If you're sure about this, stay where you are and I'll send a couple of cars up and we'll pick 'em up." Hallahan swore briefly. "What in hell did you do to get spotted like this?"

"I'll tell you when we see you. Don't let them work the siren. The car just keeps cruising back and forth in front of this block." Prentice put the phone down, turned to Allen. "We get an escort like the Mayor. Hallahan's starting to appreciate us at last."

Allen said: "We need an escort I'd say!" in a sour voice. He pulled up his pants leg and gingerly felt his knee-cap. It was greenish-black, swollen, and when he walked towards the window he had a noticeable limp. He said: "We might as well watch out the window and see the show. They'll be here in five minutes or less."

They saw two riot cars loaded with men edge the watchers in the Lincoln into the curb, saw them split and handcuffed and loaded into the police cars and a police driver climb into the Lincoln, then saw Hallahan leave the cars and head across the street towards their apartment. Prentice snapped the door release and stood in the outer hall and waited for him, and Hallahan said, as he rounded the bend in the hall and saw him: "This is a hell of a note." He was at least thirty feet away and Prentice chided:

"Now Cap! You're not in the station now. There might be other people hear you."

Hallahan flushed, said angrily: "You damn' fool!" He swung past Prentice into the apartment and into the middle of the room and rocked from heel to toe. He stared at Prentice, who followed him in and closed the door, and from Prentice to Allen, snapped out: "What in hell is this? Those guys in the Lincoln were petting a sawed-off shotgun and a tommy. Whyn't you call in?"

Prentice said easily: "We worked half the night to get 'em there. Can't we ever sleep?"

Hallahan looked at him suspiciously, tipped his hat back over white hair. "What d'ya mean . . . worked? What is all this?" He stared past Prentice to where a bloody shirt was hanging on a chair back, past that to where a gun was lying on a table. He asked:

"Whose shirt's that? Whose Luger?"

Allen said: "S-s-sh!" with exaggerated caution and put his finger to his lips. "It belongs to our company. The shirt too."

"You —s'll clown at the wrong time sometime. Whose?"

Allen said in a sing-song voice: "Lieutenant Prentice and Lieutenant Allen had as their house guest last night Aaron Simonson of the West Side Brewery. This should go in the society columns instead of the police news."

Hallahan stopped rocking, stood solidly on his heels. He said: "My God! Now what!"

Prentice explained: "Well, we wanted to see if we could get a line on who was in with our little house guest so we grabbed him as he started into his apartment house. We brought him up here and let him get loose long enough to phone where he was. Get it? Not so bad, huh?"

"You can't hold him."

"We ain't arresting him. We're just using him for a bait."

Hallahan said: "Bait!" helplessly, threw his hands out palms up and Allen said: "Y'see when he thought he was putting something over on us he phoned and then tried to get out the door. Dal had to bust him and he got his face cut up a little and bled on his shirt. This bunch that works for him figured we was too tough to walk in on, I guess."

"Did you work him over?"

Allen looked disgusted. "Can you imagine anybody working Aaron Simonson over and doing 'emselfes any good by it? We did *not*."

"What are you going to do now?"

"Nothing until tonight. Then you send a car up and we'll take Aaron down and stick him in the back cell tier without booking him. Then we'll go down and see if we can pick up anybody down on Selma that can identify any of the yeggs that did the shooting down there. They may be in this bunch you got out in front. Get the idea now on why we let him call?"

"Suppose you can't find anybody that saw it down there?"

"We can work on this bunch you got and maybe they'll know. Maybe they'll

know why Aaron and Klinker are chums."

Hallahan went to the bedroom door, threw it open and saw Simonson lying on the bed, his feet and hands tied, tape across his mouth. Simonson saw him and made gurgling sounds and Hallahan closed the door, said thoughtfully:

"If anybody finds out he's down there you'll catch hell."

"We can take him up through the basement. As long as he's not booked how in hell can anybody know? We won't be down on Selma long and we'll take the beef if any comes."

Hallahan looked doubtful. "You got to go easy on this rough stuff, Dal. You know how they're beefing about it. You want to go up before a trial board?"

Prentice grinned, said to Allen: "He's just like a mother to me," and patted Hallahan on the shoulder. He said to him: "Now don't fret, mama. You send up the car after dark and us boys'll do the rest."



HE pair were lucky —not in finding witnesses as that was routine work—but in finding witnesses that would admit to seeing the policeman shot down—witnesses that would admit they could recognize the man that held the machine-gun if they should be confronted with him. They brought back four men, three colored, one white, and held them in jail to keep them from any possible tampering; knowing that Joey Hall would be immediately informed of their questioning and not wanting to take chances with what he might possibly do. They had little doubt in their minds regarding what either Simonson or Hall would do to possible witnesses against themselves or men working for them.

The five men taken from the Lincoln had been put in a large cell apart from the general quarters and to this

cell, picking up the jailer on the way, they took their witnesses. Inside, Prentice glared at the five who had risen to their feet, snapped out:

"All right ——! Who wants to talk?"

The five shuffled nervous feet, remained silent. Prentice, watching narrowly, saw that several glances were directed at a short, thickset man a little at the side of the others. Reading the worried glances correctly, he snarled at this last: "You, Blackie! You know what you're here for?"

The swart man raised black eyes. "It's a bum rap, chief. You guys are on a bum steer." His decidedly accented voice was bold but his eyes shifted away from Prentice and the impassive Allen behind him.

"Is it a bum rap with you guys carrying a tommy gun? That's Federal."

The dark man looked relieved, said nothing for a moment and Prentice stared at him, told him: "It's more than that, heel. Murder ain't a bum rap."

"We ain't charged with murder. Just concealed weapons."

Prentice laughed. "Concealed weapons, huh!" He reached out and grabbed the dark man by the front of his coat, said to the jailer: "Let us out, keed! I want to talk to this mugg all by himself."

The accented voice rose in fear. "Hey! You can't do that. You guys ain't allowed. . . ."

Prentice slapped him across the mouth with his free hand, said: "Shut up!" almost indulgently. Followed by Allen, he half-dragged, half-carried the man down the corridor to a smaller, better lit room. He told the jailer: "Okey, baby! We'll call you pretty soon," and as the jailer left, asked the dark man:

"All right, now. You going to crack or crack wise?" He was smiling pleasantly.

The prisoner looked up, growled: "I ain't done nothing. You ain't got no right to . . ." He stopped—black eyes filling with horror as he watched Pren-

Prentice take an empty ink bottle from his pocket.

Prentice said, still pleasantly: "Huh! I see you been in before." He gripped the ink bottle in his right hand and with the left, wrapped a towel around his knuckles tightly, tucking the free end into his palm. He thudded the wrapped hand tentatively a couple of times into the palm of the other and said to the dark man: "All right ——! What's your name?"

"George Brown."

"Brown hell! Hopapopalous or what? You Greek rat!"

"Demetrious. George Demetrious."

"Where you come from?"

"Chicago. I been in Detroit some, too."

"Why here?"

"Well, I . . ." The man gulped. "Well, I thought it was a good town."

"Yeah!" Prentice stepped in close, grabbed the lapel of the swart man's coat and chopped viciously with his protected hand at his face. His own face was calm but his eyes were hot and glowing—showing flickering lights. He marked his words with his fist: "Why—did—you—come—to—town?" and released his grip and stepped back.

Demetrious' hands muffled his answer. "I got sent for."

"Yeah! Who by?"

"Aaron Simonson."

"What did he want of you? Come on, spit it out."

"That's all I know. He gave me a few dollars and told me to stick around. I ain't seen him since."

Prentice snapped at Allen: "Grab his hands, Al. I won't mark him. Much!" Allen stepped back behind the Greek and, snapping his arms up behind him, held him helpless, and Prentice methodically hit him with his protected hand—first a blow to the face—then to the belly. Back and forth he swung until the screaming man sagged in Allen's grasp and then Prentice stepped back, said:

"I got a hunch that when he comes to

he ain't going to feel so good. But more truthful."

Allen was out of breath from combatting the prisoner's attempts to struggle free. He panted uneasily: "I'm afraid he's going to show a lot of bruises, Dal."

"Hell no! I lifted 'em in his gut but didn't mess his puss much. His nose's broke is all. That won't show much."

The Greek stirred, sat up, and Allen reached down and pinioned his arms again, jerking him to his feet.

Prentice was still smiling. He said: "And now —! You going to start talking? I like this."

Demetrious cried out: "I saw Simonson. I'll talk."

"I know you will. What's Simonson got on old man Klinker?"

"I don't know. Honest. I don't know."

Prentice stepped closer and the dark man screamed: "I don't know. Klinker's afraid of him and does just what Simonson tells him to. Simonson runs everything." He shrank back against Allen and Prentice said: "I don't think he *does* know at that, Al. He'd tell it." He stepped in again, cuffed the Greek with his bare left hand along the side of the head, said sharply:

"What about the shooting down in nigger town. Who done that?"

The Greek shrank back even farther, chattered: "I don't know."

"No! You don't know!" Prentice's eyes were glowing into his. "You don't know!" He reached out, and the dark man screamed:

"No! For — sake, don't!" His eyes were bulging—showing yellowish, bloodshot whites. His voice was a thin whine. "I don't know a thing."

Prentice measured him, hit him at the base of his ear with all his power. Allen released the unconscious man's arms, jumped and held Prentice away, cried out: "You crazy, Dal? You'll kill him."

Prentice was breathing heavily. His face was almost purple, the heavy veins

in his forehead congested and throbbing. He said: "He's the guy that done it!" in a broken voice, his breath gasping between his lips. Allen stood between him and the man on the floor and he repeated: "That's the guy there! Cop-killer!"

Allen said reasonably: "Now, Dal! Wait a minute!"

"I got it! It's him, I tell you! What a break! He's such a yellow — that if it wasn't him he'd say who it was. I got that hunch! It's him." He regained control of himself with an effort. "You go up and get those witnesses. This is settled right here."

Allen objected: "Hell, Dal! They'll say it was him anyway with him all alone. He ought to be in the line-up with others around to be fair."

"Fair! Don't be a fool! What chance did he give the copper? It's him, I tell you. Why fool around and take a chance on a bunch of guys with no memories. You go get 'em and if they say it was him, he'll crack. It's a cinch! He's yellow and these heels with him knew it and knew he'd crack. We'll have a confession and we'll have Simonson and old man Klinker and that shine — in it. And bring a wet towel. You'd better hurry so he won't look so bad they won't know him. That face'll swell." He was still breathing heavily, looking at the man on the floor.

Allen started to leave, turned back. "You lay off him, Dal! You kill him and it won't be so good."

Prentice promised: "I won't hurt him," and Allen hurried away to get the witnesses of the Selma Avenue shooting. Prentice met him in the corridor as he came back with them, said out of the corner of his mouth: "Go on in, Al! I want to talk to these guys." As Allen went in the cell he told them: "Now listen! We got the guy that killed the policeman. Get me? You saw it and told me you could tell what the man looked like. If it's him, say so. You won't be hurt." He led the way into the cell and jerking the seated Demetrious

to his feet faced him towards the four witnesses, said: "This him, men?"

One said positively: "Yes, sir. That's him, sure enough," and two of the others nodded assent. The fourth man said doubtfully: "Well, I don't know."

Prentice nodded at Allen, said triumphantly: "You boys'll go upstairs and swear to it, won't you?" and on their answering nods, told Allen: "Will you take 'em up and bring Hallahan and a clerk with a pencil back? This is all over for this guy but the hanging and they hang 'em when they kill a policeman."

**T**HE police car swung into the curb in front of the *Selma Avenue Club* and Prentice, in the act of opening the door, cried out: "Hell, Al! Here he is!" He ducked low as the big negro coming out of the club glanced in their direction.

The man, seeing the unmistakable bulk of the official car, stared a moment, pulled his hat down over his eyes with a jerk and hurried down the street, and Prentice jerked his gun from under his coat and slid to the pavement. The man was possibly thirty feet when he called sharply: "You, Hall! It's a pinch!" His gun was half-lifted—he was walking slowly towards the negro, who had stopped in his tracks. Allen called:

"Easy, Dal!" and was half out of the car when the negro swung around and shot at Prentice. Prentice fired back—once—and the man dropped to the sidewalk and Prentice ran to him with Allen, his own gun out now, a few feet behind him.

Prentice reached Hall and stooped and the negro twisted cat-like and fired point blank up at him and Prentice dropped sidewise. Allen, ten feet back, shot once—then again—and Hall rolled over to his face. His hand, holding the gun, stretched straight down at his side, lifted once and then dropped. Allen, coming up carefully, kicked the gun into the gutter and knelt by the cursing

Prentice. He said, "You hit, Dal! You hit?" in an anxious voice.

Prentice grunted: "I think my ear's gone." He felt his face gingerly, and Allen laughed and he said: "That's right, dope! Laugh! What's the joke?"

Allen snickered: "You look like you got tattooed. There's powder marks all over one side of your face."

Prentice cursed bitterly. "And I feel like I'm deaf in one ear. That gun wasn't a foot away. Shine dead?"

"He should be. I was holding for his head."

"Oh, hell! That's bad."

"Couldn't help it. He wasn't out. You ought to know better to run in on anyone like that." Allen's voice was gently reproving.

Prentice clambered to his feet, said: "He can't talk now!" and Allen said: "Not very well." They stood in silence a moment—heard the wail of a siren on a prowler car as it neared them.

**P**RENTICE said: "Mr. Klinker, please!" and the girl at the desk in the outer office said: "He's out now." Prentice said: "Then you don't care if we wait for him."

The girl looked doubtful but said nothing and Prentice and Allen sat outside the railing in the outer office while she watched them. She got up from her desk in a moment and went in the inner office, came back in a little while and came over to the railing. Her face was flushed as she said: "I'm awfully sorry but Mr. Klinker is *always* out," and her voice was apologetic. She hesitated, seemed about to say more but stopped and turned towards her desk.

Allen, his face expressionless, said: "When Mr. Klinker *does* come in, tell him it's about Mr. Simonson. Tell him Mr. Simonson will *also* be always out. We'll wait."

The girl went into the inner room, came out to them again, said: "He'll see you!" and opened the gate in the railing and Allen winked at her and

said: "Thanks, sister," as they followed her into the inner room.

Klinker, back at his desk, stared at them as they came through the door and jerked his head at the girl without saying anything. As she went out and closed the door behind her he said: "Yes?" His voice was quiet, calm, but showed strain in its very calmness. His face looked tired, worn.

Allen asked: "Did the gal tell you what we told her to?"

"She said something about Mr. Simonson. I didn't understand."

Allen laughed and sat in the chair across the desk from Klinker while Prentice sat at his side and back where he could watch the doors to both the outer room and the inside one of the suite. Allen nodded at this, asked: "You got anybody there today?"

Klinker shook his head and when Allen looked doubtful, said: "Look if you want." Prentice went into the little room and to the door that opened on the corridor, snapped the spring lock so the door could not be opened from outside, came back and sat down and said: "Okay, Al. Go ahead." He twisted his chair so he faced the outer door squarely.

Allen said slowly: "Simonson's not arrested but he's put away for a while. Hall, down on Selma Avenue, ain't arrested either but he's put away for good. Does this mean anything?"

Klinker said in the same quiet voice: "You mean Hall is dead?"

"That's right!"

"How long has Simonson been . . . put away?"

"Night before last. He's going to be charged with murder as soon as we get around to it."

"Then you found proof?"

"Hell, yes. One of the men working for him told the whole thing. We went to pick up this spade Hall and had to kill him to do it."

Klinker stared at his desk and said nothing and Allen coughed and said softly: "Of course you know why we're

here. It's an arrest but we can make it quiet."

Klinker looked at him as if he didn't see him and Allen continued with: "We're just doing what we're paid for, Mr. Klinker. Don't think. . . ."

Klinker's eyes focused, he snapped out: "You fool! You — damned fool! This has done it."

"What d'ya mean?" Allen nodded at Prentice and Prentice snapped a pair of handcuffs from his belt, leaned a little ahead in his chair. Klinker pulled himself to his feet with his hands on the front of the desk. He cried out: "Mean! Damn you! You've done it! Holding Simonson like that." He caught himself with an effort and flattened his voice. "I've handled it wrong."

Prentice got up from his chair, swinging the cuffs. He took a step towards the desk, said: "I told you that when we were here before," and winked at Allen. "The least you're going to get is a ten-year rap. These guys were on your payroll."

Klinker swung to face him, said: "You don't understand. I couldn't stop it."

"No?"

"What could I do? It's too late so I can tell you. I have a six-year-old grandson living with me. Both his parents are dead. Well . . . Simonson took the child. Do you see?"

Allen straightened in his chair, rapped out sharply: "What's that?"

"The truth. What could I do?"

Allen shook his head at Prentice, said to Klinker: "Why didn't you tell us?" Klinker shrugged and held silent and Prentice said: "Where's the kid now?"

Klinker's hands showed white where they gripped the desk top. He stared down at them, said: "Dead. Unless Simonson called at a certain time each day the boy was to be killed. You kept him from calling."

"Then you don't *know* he's dead?"

"If you saw the man that Simonson

brought here to me and who he told me had the child you'd believe it. An immense colored man, very . . ." He shrugged again, said: "Oh, he's dead!" in a hopeless voice.

"You don't know this shine's name?"

"No."

"Well, that was Hall. The man we shot."

Klinker shrugged again, said: "What's the difference? Others would be in it."

"Why should they kill the boy?" Allen argued.

"I've thought it all out . . . hundreds of times. He's old enough to be able to identify his captors. I suppose I should have told the police but I knew that if the boy was killed I'd feel as if I'd killed him. After all, I was only losing money."

Prentice said thoughtfully: "All? What about the policeman that was killed while interfering with Hall and Simonson's promoting your beer?" He stared at Klinker. "If you'd told us that we'd have had 'em both out of the way before anything like that happened."

"But I didn't know Simonson was going to do that."

"He did. We told you that he did, remember."

Klinker gripped his forehead with his two hands, said: "Yes. I remember." He took his hands from his head, asked Allen: "Where's Simonson?"

"We got him safe."

"Can't you make him tell where the boy is? There's a chance he's still alive . . . not much."

Allen got up, said: "I guess it's the only hope. I know Aaron though, and I don't think he'll crack." Klinker said: "This third degree?" with a little hope in his voice and Allen laughed harshly, told him: "A smart guy knows he can only take so much without passing out. A guy with guts'll take it. Simonson's got both brains and guts." He nodded at a corner, said to Klinker:

"Get your hat!"



IMONSON glared up at Prentice when he reached down and jerked the tape from across his mouth. He tried to speak, gurgled a moment, said thickly:

"You —! Wait till I get a lawyer." He stared past Prentice, saw Allen and Klinker come in the bedroom and his eyes widened. He said to Klinker: "So that's how!"

Prentice said: "Shut up! I'll tell you when to talk," and slapped him across the mouth and Simonson ducked his head back into the pillow beneath it. "All we want to know is . . . Al, will you answer that damn' phone." He nodded his head towards the front room and Allen said: "Yeah! Wait for me."

They heard him say: "Yes. . . . Allen. . . . We been busy. . . . You did *what?* . . . Where is he? . . . Yeah! . . . We'll bring him in. . . . Okey!"

They heard the phone jangle as he slammed the receiver down and he dashed in and said: "It's the boy! Some wench down on Selma phoned in and told Cap she didn't want to be mixed up in a snatch and that she had the kid. She's just found out about Joey getting fixed up." He jeered down at Simonson: "We're to bring you down, baby."

Klinker said: "Where is he?" He looked suddenly sick.

"Cap's sent down a car for him. He'll be there by the time we get down there."

Klinker leaned against the foot of the bed, held his hand over his heart gasped: "Ugh—ugh—" and Allen said: "Shock, I guess." He went in to the bathroom, came out with a glass of water and dashed it in Klinker's face. Klinker straightened slightly and Allen took him by the shoulder and put him in a chair, said: "Sit tight. In a minute you'll feel better." He went to a bottle and glass on a stand by the bed, poured a stiff drink, handed it to him and told him: "Take this."

Klinker gulped and swallowed the drink and a little color came back in his

face. He said: "I'm sorry," in self-reproach. "I've been under a strain and . . ."

Allen said: "It's okey." He reached down and tried to unfasten the sash cord around Simonson's ankles, fumbled a moment, said: "Dal, will you get me a knife from the kitchen?" and as Prentice left the room, told Simonson: "You'll get rapped for kidnaping and murder both. You might beat one but not both of 'em."

Prentice came back with the knife and bent over Simonson, cut his hands free and then went to his feet. He said: "Get up, heel!" and Simonson squirmed to the edge of the bed and put his feet on the floor and fell. Allen said: "He's stiff from being tied. He'll be able to walk in a minute. I'll get his shirt."

Klinker was sitting in a chair some five feet from the door into the front room and at the foot of the bed with Prentice at the side of the bed and close to its head. Allen walked past Klinker into the front room, leaving Prentice standing between Klinker and the prostrate Simonson, called back in a moment:

"It ain't here!"

Prentice called back: "I threw it in the bathroom out of the way," and walked past Klinker to the other side of the room to where the bathroom door gaped, and as he went inside Simonson pulled himself to his feet and hobbled to a stand by the head of the bed and jerked open the drawer. His hand was inside the drawer when Prentice came back into the room carrying the bloody shirt but it came out holding his own Luger. His hands, stiff from being tied, fumbled the gun and Prentice cried out:

"Hey!" and grabbed for his own gun, carried under his coat.

Simonson fumbled with the safety on the Luger with his thumb, couldn't snap it down for a second, and in that second Allen came in from the front room and stood in the doorway. Klinker looked up in the same instant and seeing the

gun in Simonson's hand dashed for the front room, knocking Allen off-balance as he passed him, jamming him against the casing so that Allen went down to one knee.

Simonson cleared the Luger's safety with his left hand while his stiff right held it towards Prentice. He said:

"——!" and shot just as Prentice's gun cleared his coat. Prentice fired at almost the same time and Simonson took a step forward, twisting towards Allen as he did and Allen shot a second later. Simonson stopped, turned towards the bed slightly which faced him, towards Prentice, and Prentice shot again. Simonson took another step and sank down by the bed with his head on its edge. The Luger dropped by his side, slid out of lax fingers, and Allen went to him, tipped his head back. He said to Prentice:

"Deader than hell!"

Prentice slid the gun back under his coat, said: "Saves us work!" and laughed. "We had to take him down and book him and testify and all that and now all we got to do is call the morgue wagon. I hate a witness stand with some smart shyster making you out a liar. This is better."

Allen said: "I guess so," and when Prentice nodded towards the front room, said: "He was just playing safe. I don't blame him."

HALLAHAN, uniformed coat unbuttoned, feet on desk, stared at the glass of whiskey he held. He said: "Now I don't know, Dal. Technically, Klinker's in this mess and ought to be held. I should squawk about this hush stuff."

Prentice said: "Why?" in a stubborn voice. "Klinker didn't do anything nine men out of ten wouldn't have done in his place. That's the hell of it. He maybe should be stuck but I'm damned if I see it. Simonson moved in on him and what could the old boy do?"

Hallahan said: "If he'd come to us in the first place. . . ."

Prentice broke in with: "Sure! If! But how'd he know? And that threat was like holding a gun on him."

Allen offered: "And besides that, Cap, Simonson had him scared stiff. You should have seen him get out of the bedroom."

Hallahan drank the whiskey, made a face, said: "So help me, it was better than that during prohibition." He put the glass on the desk, said: "What about the copper that was killed? That's what binds."

"Sticking the old man won't bring the copper back," Prentice told him. "He didn't help 'em any. He was only wise as to what they *might* be doing. Besides Klinker's a nice old duck and he'll take care of the copper's wife. Plenty well, too. Al and I can explain that to him, he'll see that okey."

"He's got dough enough to."

Allen said thoughtfully: "Dal and I've thought of *that*, too. Enough dough so that even if the grand jury would indict him, which is doubtful, he'd beat the rap when it came to trial."

Hallahan snorted and picked up the bottle on the desk. He said: "You're

probably right. Fix it for the copper's wife and I'll keep quiet." He studied the bottle. "What's the matter with this damn' whiskey? It's a lousy blend. No wonder."

Prentice laughed and said: "Try and buy straight whiskey on a copper's salary. Drink that and cry."

"I thought that Greek would cry at that, when he went up for his preliminary. He looked plenty bad where you'd worked on him."

"Hell, Cap, he couldn't squawk. We had him on a concealed weapon charge and he had three felony priors in the East. He couldn't say a word and he knew it. Not and have anybody believe him."

"You didn't know that then."

"Well, a man's got to get a break sometime."

"*You* have!"

Allen grinned at Prentice, reached past him for the bottle. He said: "Wrong, Cap!" reprovingly. "We made the breaks. Made 'em instead of getting 'em. Ain't that right, Dal?"

Prentice said cautiously: "Well . . . at least *some* of them."



# WHAT DO YOU KNOW?

1. What is wrong with this sentence: "He kept the trigger of his Colt automatic pressed back and a stream of bullets shot from the muzzle?"
2. A rifle is set up horizontally several feet above a perfectly level plane. A bullet of the same size as that in the rifle is dropped from the position of the rifle at the same instant the rifle is fired. Which bullet will hit the ground first?
3. Which pistol cartridge has the greater shocking power, the Colt automatic .45 or the Colt Special .38?
4. Will the "impact" of a heavy bullet, say the .45, invariably knock a man down if it strikes any portion of his body?
5. Assuming that neither hits a vital spot, which weapon is the more effective at close range—the Colt .45 automatic or the Colt .45 revolver?
6. When has a police officer the right to enter and search a house without a warrant?
7. If a bullet from an army rifle, from, say, fifty yards' range, should hit a silk handkerchief suspended loosely from its upper side, how would the flight of the bullet be affected?
8. When a dried bloodstain is found, is it possible for experts to tell beyond any doubt whether or not it is human blood?
9. Given samples of blood from two different human beings, can an expert determine from such samples alone if the two are of kin?
10. What is pyromania?

## Answers to Last Month's Questions

1. Approximately 200 yards; 1600 yards.
2. No.
3. Accessory after fact.
4. About 17 feet a second.
5. No.
6. No. Don't try it!
7. Almost certainly bullet will hit twig or branch and explode.
8. Calls his precinct- or station-house.
9. Weapon; fingerprints; victim's identity.
10. Sufficient motive and possibility that suspect could have committed the murder.

If your answers do not agree with ours, we'll be glad if you will write us, telling us where we are wrong; and if you happen to think of any questions for the other readers to answer, we'll be glad to get those, too. Let's make this an interesting, informative, worth while department.

**Dept. K, BLACK MASK, 578 Madison Ave., New York, N. Y.**

# BEHIND THE MASK BREVITIES

**RAOUL WHITFIELD**, *Black Mask* ace, whose stories, published first in this magazine and later in book form, won him international reputation, has been taking time off this summer to see if he could endure the life of gentleman rancher. The ranch is in New Mexico; the horses are not too tame, and Raoul writes he's getting new ideas. He says we'll see 'em soon . . . . .

**ERLE STANLEY GARDNER**, who is hitting on all sixteen with the smooth paper fellows, the screen, and with his regular B. M. line, has been planning a South Sea Islands vacation cruise. Most people entertain the strange idea that a vacation means a period of rest from work. According to Erle this is all wrong. His ship has promised him an "office" for the trip, and Erle's entourage—over which Mrs. Gardner will preside—consists of two stenographers, a half dozen dictaphones, several noiseless or near noiseless typewriters, a complete filing and reference library and a few other odds and ends . . . . .

**ROGER TORREY**, creator of the mild and soft mannered Dal Prentice and that good natured scrapper, Killeen, takes time off now and then to go fishing for mountain trout. Not long since he was almost, almost lured into an adventurous sub-equatorial expedition; and quite recently was called upon to make sudden decision between a dog and a tree as the hitting point of his auto. Mr. Torrey likes animals; the dog went safely yapping down the street while he meditated over a smashed collarbone and seventy-five dollars' damage versus a yaller dawg . . . . .

**GEORGE HARMON COXE**—yes, that's the fellow; Flash Casey and Tom Wade, you know—has been bitten by the bug of wanderlust, or at least with the desire for a change of environment. Having wintered and summered with Flashgun amidst the dunes and flats of Cape Cod, which are pretty fine in summer but a trifle bleak in winter, Mr. Coxe thinks he can get even more pep into Flash and the cub if he takes them for a few months to more southerly waters—or the West Coast. That's fine for Mr. Coxe, but "even more pep in Flash Casey" is a little hard to imagine . . . . .

# IN OCTOBER

**W**HERE there are concentrations of people and money, there more crime is to be found—Chicago—New York—St. Louis.

Where sudden prosperity builds and expands more rapidly than elsewhere, the easy money makers, the grafters and grifters pour in to take their slice from the ready money of the active enterprise.

Hollywood — colorful, glamorous, sinful and rich, the principal factory of one of the country's greatest industries — has all sorts; the good and the evil; the live-wire and the dumb-bell; the captain of industry and the camp hanger-on. It presents all phases of life, except perhaps that of contented simplicity.

It is high tension, geared to top speed. Gold, both the means and the end, flows freely and plentifully. Those who make it easiest, spend most lavishly, and they are outstretched for illegitimate toll.

Los Angeles—"made by Hollywood"—is one and the same with the "factory" town, waging the same fight for the same

high stakes, and with the same temptations.

Colorful spots, both of them. Altogether, it's a hot story spot with crime nearly always in the making.

And here we have two separate views of it in two superb stories that will be published in our October issue — one on the town angle, the Los Angeles slant, crime not feeding directly on the Hollywood payroll. This story — "Finger Man," by Raymond Chandler—is one of the fastest, smoothest, easiest to read action detective stories we've seen in some moons.

The other story—"Snatching Is Dynamite," by W. T. Ballard—is tied directly with the industry in Hollywood and in addition to its hard, fast action, it is filled with real human feeling and human emotion—a tense drama.

These, however, are only two of the stories in the October issue; but they're powerful stories

of different phases of one of the most colorful spots in the country, on which covetous eyes are always fastened.

## IN OCTOBER

### "Finger Man"

By Raymond Chandler

The witness to a political murder is a man on the spot.

### "Snatching Is Dynamite"

By W. T. Ballard

They ask Bill Lennox to chase crime from Hollywood.

### "Somebody Must Die"

By Horace McCoy

Jerry Frost, flying Ranger, doesn't do all his fighting in the air.

### "Immunity Murders"

By Nels Leroy Jorgensen

To Black Burton, no murderer is immune.

With other stories and features

And here is Jerry Frost, tall, slender, wiry as drawn steel, captain of the flying Rangers—Hell's Strapons on patrol. Jerry has a commission, a hot one, involving all that a flyer and a Ranger combined could be expected to do. He tackles it—hopefully.

And colorful Black Burton, the cool, quiet speaking, deadly shooting gambler who never seeks trouble, never runs from it, often meets it more than half-way when a friend is in a jam and puts the play up to him.

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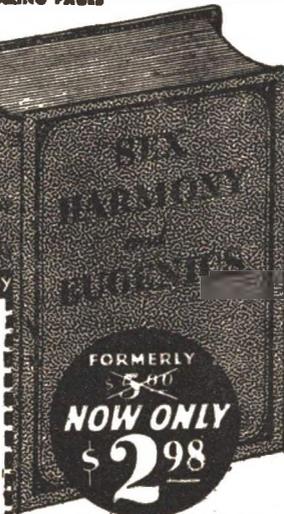
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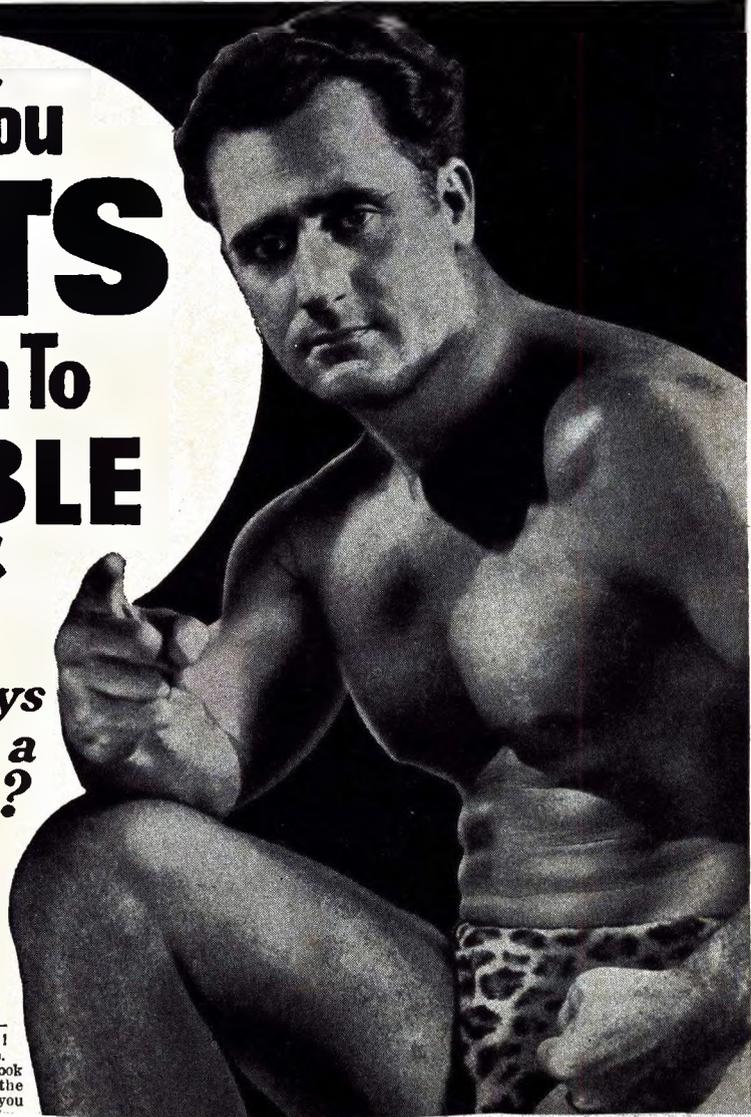
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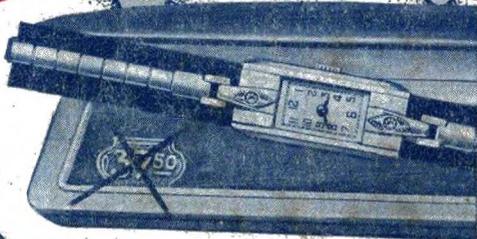
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