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MAY
1936

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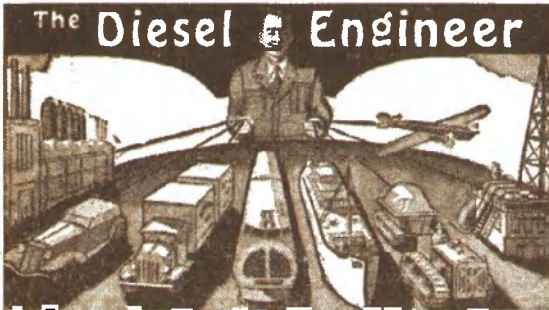
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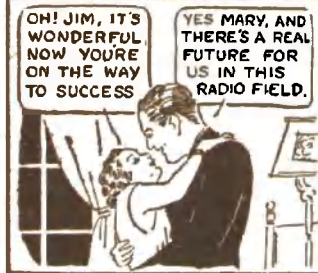
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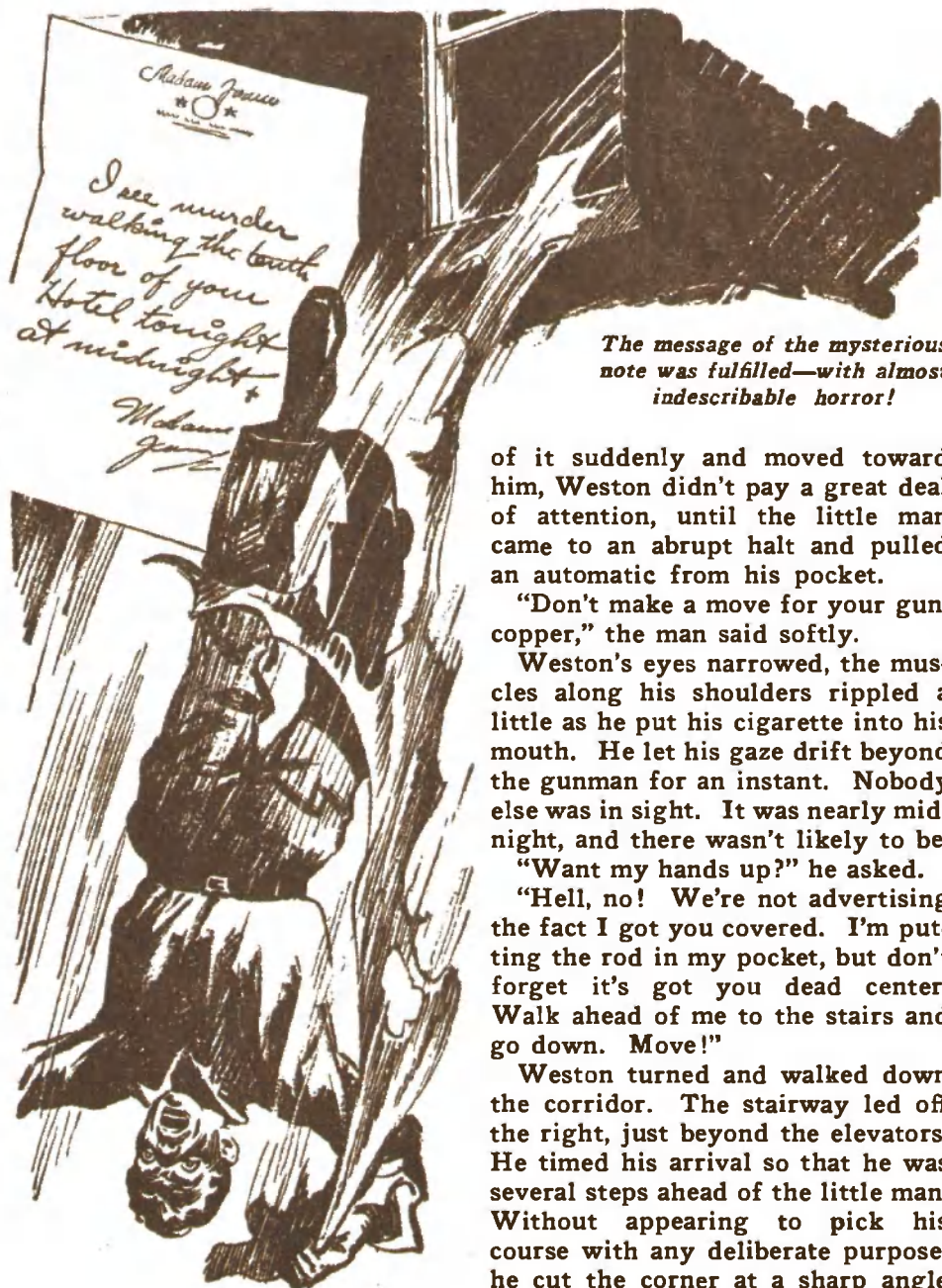
*It was very quiet—but
in that quiet there was
a tension—gripping—
menacing. It was
almost concrete!*

by Hal Murray
Bonnett

JACK WESTON walked slowly along the main corridor, tenth floor, of the Moline Hotel. Built with the lithe, easy grace of a huge panther, the detective sergeant walked with his elbows close to his sides. His steps on the rubber mat were soundless.

At the end of the corridor he turned, hesitated for an instant while he fished a cigarette from his coat pocket, then he started back in the other direction. Just in front of him was a cross corridor. When a small man in a gray suit came out

CORPSE



Albano Jones
* O *

I see murder
walking the tenth
floor of your
Hotel tonight
at midnight +

William
Jones

The message of the mysterious note was fulfilled—with almost indescribable horror!

of it suddenly and moved toward him, Weston didn't pay a great deal of attention, until the little man came to an abrupt halt and pulled an automatic from his pocket.

"Don't make a move for your gun, copper," the man said softly.

Weston's eyes narrowed, the muscles along his shoulders rippled a little as he put his cigarette into his mouth. He let his gaze drift beyond the gunman for an instant. Nobody else was in sight. It was nearly midnight, and there wasn't likely to be.

"Want my hands up?" he asked.

"Hell, no! We're not advertising the fact I got you covered. I'm putting the rod in my pocket, but don't forget it's got you dead center. Walk ahead of me to the stairs and go down. Move!"

Weston turned and walked down the corridor. The stairway led off the right, just beyond the elevators. He timed his arrival so that he was several steps ahead of the little man. Without appearing to pick his course with any deliberate purpose, he cut the corner at a sharp angle

and went down the first step. For the barest fraction of a second, the corner of the corridor wall was between him and the gunman.

When the man in the gray suit stepped around the angle hurriedly, aware of his thoughtlessness in letting Weston get so far ahead of him, the detective's fist shot out in a short, straight-arm punch that packed dynamite. It exploded on the little man's jaw, lifted him bodily from the floor and sprawled him against the opposite wall. His eyes rolled glassily and his mouth hung open.

Weston bent over him, took hold of a limp arm and jerked him to his feet. The man wasn't unconscious, but he seemed incapable of movement, dazed.

He offered no resistance while Weston's hands ran over his body. His only weapon was the automatic, and Weston pocketed it himself.

"What," he asked, "is the idea?"

The little man's eyes rolled, and he said nothing.

Weston jerked a pair of cuffs from his pocket, locked the man's hands behind him and pressed the button for the elevator. His lips were a tight line as they rode down.

The lobby was deserted, but for a couple men lounging in chairs before a fireplace. Their backs were to the elevators, and they didn't look up as Weston and the little man stepped out. The clerk back of the desk looked up, however, and his thin face became tense. His finger jabbed a button.

Almost immediately a door back of him opened and a short, rosy-cheeked man appeared. Samuel Ridenof, manager of the Moline Hotel, gazed at Weston and his prisoner with pale eyes which held alarm.

Weston pushed the gunman ahead of him into Ridenof's office.

The manager wet his lips. "Is he——"

"He came walking along the corridor, drew a gun on me, and we started down the stairs. He made a few mistakes and lost out. That's all I know so far."

Weston shoved the gunman into a chair and glanced briefly at the other two men in the office. The tall young fellow leaning against the desk, he recognized, for the simple reason that during the past month Perry Hawthorn had been seen everywhere, doing practically everything. Heir to a sizable fortune left him by his father, and, incidentally, owner of the greater part of the stock in the Moline Hotel which was one of the chain his father had founded, Perry Hawthorn had been going places and doing things since he had returned to the United States.

Though he didn't know the details, Weston knew there had been an estrangement between Charles E. Hawthorn and his son Perry. For that reason, Perry Hawthorn had, for the past five years, lived abroad, traveling, usually, wherever his heart desired, but not once had he returned to native soil until his father had died a month ago. When Charles Hawthorn had died, Perry Hawthorn had come home to take up his father's affairs, but if he concerned himself greatly with them it must be done from a table in one of the night spots.

Darkly handsome, he was dressed now in faultless evening clothes, and his hat and coat were thrown carelessly across Ridenof's desk.

RIDENOF SAID, in the manner of a man whose business it is to play the perfect host regardless of time

or circumstances, "Detective Weston, Mr. Hawthorn. This other gentleman is Mr. Adam Caurker, the big-game hunter. We are honored by having him as a guest here at the hotel during the couple of weeks he is in the city."

Hawthorn nodded.

Caurker said genially, "Glad to know you, officer." He was a large, solid-bodied man with a deeply bronzed face. Forty-five would probably hit close to his age. Weston had heard of him—a wealthy sportsman, interested in and famed for his big-game hunting.

Weston said hello to both of the men and turned back to the prisoner in the chair. To the little man he said, "You'd better open up, brother." And over his shoulder he added to Ridenof, "Phone headquarters for me and have a radio car stop here to pick up this fellow."

The man in the gray suit squirmed in the chair.

"I was going to pull a hold-up," he said. "I wanted to get you out of the way. I know where there's a heavy poker game going on up on the tenth."

"That's lousy," Weston said. "What's your name?"

"Go to hell!" The man's face was expressionless. "If you don't want to believe me you don't have to. I've said all I'm going to say." His voice carried a tone of finality which Weston had heard before. It might take hours of persistent work on the gunman to get anything more from him.

Perry Hawthorn's voice drifted lazily across the room. "Ridenof just started to tell me something about why you're here, Weston. What about it? I've been out, and just returned."

It was Ridenof who answered. "About eight o'clock to-night, a let-

ter came by special messenger, addressed to the manager of this hotel. The note was signed by a woman calling herself Madame Jeanne."

Hawthorn's eyes opened in surprise. "The astrologer?"

"Yes. She is the woman who has gained considerable fame lately by becoming the fad of society—a feature of parties, and that sort of thing."

Hawthorn nodded. "I know. There has been a bit about her in the papers."

"That's why I became alarmed at the note and took it to the police," Ridenof continued. "It had but one sentence: 'I see Murder walking the tenth floor of your hotel to-night at midnight.'"

Caurker smiled. "Melodrama in every word. I'm glad you invited me in for a nightcap, Ridenof, for otherwise I wouldn't have been in on this. Better than big-game hunting." The big man chuckled deep in his throat.

Hawthorn looked at Weston. "And what have the police done?"

"Everything they could," Weston answered. He was a little irritated by the other's tone, but he tried not to show it. "Madame Jeanne has an office in a downtown building, but beyond that we know nothing of her. Obviously that isn't her real name, but it's the name she does her business under, and for all we've been able to discover so far to-night, she disappears into thin air when she leaves her office. We haven't been able to find yet where she lives or what her real name is, so we haven't been able to question her regarding the note."

"Very little seems to be known about that woman, considering the fact that she's in business," Caurker suggested.

Weston nodded. "Right. We've

never been interested in her until now, though, so we didn't know about the fact. When Ridenof brought the note, we were inclined to believe it was some sort of publicity scheme for the woman, or else the work of a crank. However, I came down to keep an eye open. So far, we've got this fellow to add to the puzzle. He won't talk, and I'm not going to waste time with him—they'll do that at headquarters. I'm going back to the tenth floor as soon as I'm rid of him."

Hawthorn yawned and selected a cigarette from a silver case. "Personally, I'd prefer a drink. When you get a chance—any of you—come on up to my suite and I'll give you a cocktail I caught up with in Paris." He glanced at his wrist watch. "It's my man's night out, and he won't be in probably until dawn. Russel is a good valet, but he thinks that just because I sleep until the afternoon he can too. However, I think I can get the ice and things together myself. I'll be seeing you. Ridenof, I want to be notified, of course, if anything further comes of this matter."

Hawthorn gathered up his hat and coat. As he went out the door, a uniformed officer from a radio patrol car came in. Caurker said good night and followed Hawthorn.

Weston gave a few brief instructions concerning the prisoner to the officer. "I'll call the skipper and give him the details," he added. He followed into the lobby, then entered a telephone booth and called headquarters. He talked to Captain Jenkins for a moment and found out that, as yet, nothing further had been learned concerning the woman who called herself Madame Jeanne. It was her habit to appear at her office at ten in the morning. Other than that—who she was or where

she went—she was a woman of mystery.

When Weston came out of the booth, he glanced at Ridenof's office and saw that it was empty. He bummed a match from the clerk, got into the elevator and rode to the tenth floor. As he stepped from the cage, his body came to a sudden, startled halt.

A scream had rung along the corridors. A high, ear-splitting scream that a person might make as he saw death descending on him—a hopeless, terror-ridden scream that jerked off and stopped before it had fairly begun.

II.

IT WAS hard to tell from just where the scream had come. For an instant Weston stood perfectly still, then he turned and ran toward the first cross corridor. When he reached it, a breath of chill air struck him from the side. He looked to the right, and a cold hand seemed suddenly to grip him inwardly.

To the right, another corridor ran parallel to the main one. The cross corridor ended just beyond it in a small alcove, the depth of a single room. At the end of the alcove was a window which was wide open—and it was far from being a warm night. Weston ran toward the window.

He rested his hands on the ledge, leaned out and looked down. It was the east side of the hotel, and ten stories below, in an alley formed by the wall of the hotel and the wall of a garage, lay a twisted, smashed body.

There were lights at both ends of the alley where the streets intersected, and they cast a weird glow on the scene of death.

Doors were coming open. There was suddenly a confusion of voices. Years of training and a good deal of

common sense made Weston's mind reach a sudden decision. In the alley lay a corpse. The person had been murdered—thrown, or pushed, into eternity. Weston knew with a cold certainty that it was not suicide. Already his rapidly moving thoughts had given him proof of that.

As for the murderer, there had been possibly ten to fifteen seconds from the time of the scream until Weston had come in sight of the window. In that period of time, the murderer could have slipped out of the alcove and turned either way in the corridor, running swiftly and silently on the rubber mat which carpeted it. There were scores of rooms, other corridors, stairs. It hadn't been hard for the murderer to escape. A murderer was loose in the Moline Hotel—a killer in the midst of hundreds of other people. It wouldn't take much for panic to reign.

A portly man in purple pajamas and a red bath robe stepped from his room and hurled questions in a loud voice for the benefit of every one within hearing.

"Who was that screamed?" he demanded. "What happened?"

"Nothing has happened," Weston answered, his own voice loud enough to carry a good distance. He made a motion with his hand down the left corridor where a considerable number of the room doors remained closed. "A friend and I just brought a pal up to his room. He's drunk, and when he gets that way he sees snakes. We couldn't stop him from letting out a scream. My friend's staying with him, and I had to get some air."

The fat man grinned. "Try some black coffee on him," he suggested. He went into his room and closed the door. Other people who had opened their doors, smiled and

closed them again. One white-haired old gentleman made a distasteful sound in his throat and shook his head in disgust. He slammed his door.

A gray-eyed, brittle-looking man, fully dressed in a dark suit had come out of the corner room, closest to the alcove. His voice was quiet.

"I am Dr. Justin," he said. "Perhaps I can be of some assistance."

Weston nodded. "Perhaps you can, doctor. Come along." Briefly Weston flashed his shield. "Being a doctor, I rely on your sense of discretion. A man just plunged from this hall window to the pavement below."

"Good Lord!"

JUSTIN was an elderly man, but he matched strides well with Weston as the detective strode to the elevator. The operator, scarcely more than a boy, had followed Weston from the cage at a little distance and had seen what had happened. So because of what he already knew, Weston gave him what explanation was possible on the way down, and told the boy to hold his tongue.

As they stepped from the elevator, the night clerk stared wide-eyed. He came forward swiftly.

"You'd better call Ridenof," Weston told him, striding toward the side lobby door. "There's a man in the alley next to the garage. He plunged from the hotel window."

The body was a mess.

It was a middle-aged man dressed in a dark suit. Ridenof, when he appeared, identified him immediately.

"His name is Peters. Richard Peters. He's lived here for a couple of months. A salesman of some sort, I believe." The manager's plump cheeks had turned a pasty gray.

"Where's his room?"

"On the tenth floor. Ten fifty or close to it."

"An outside room?"

"Yes. It's on the alley here."

Wheeling abruptly, Weston went inside to the telephone. He put in a call for the medical examiner and the wagon. When he went outside again, both Perry Hawthorn and the big, bronze-faced Caurker had put in their appearance. Hawthorn had been summoned by the clerk, and Caurker said he had come down to the lobby after cigars when he had noted the excitement.

Weston spoke to Dr. Justin. "Your room is on the corner of the corridor, closest to the alcove. Did you hear anything—any unusual sound before you heard the scream?"

The doctor shook his head. He had examined the corpse very briefly, and now stood beside it. I was reading. Suddenly I heard a scream. I believe I sat as I was for a moment, then went to the door and looked out. You were already at the window. That is all I know."

"You heard no other sounds, then?"

"Not that I recall."

Weston stepped close to the wall of the garage and gazed up toward the tenth floor of the hotel. The tenth was next to the top floor. There was a heavy fog, and the entire upper part of the building was hazy in a swirl of dank mist.

A radio patrol car arrived first, then the emergency ambulance. Bursell, the assistant medical examiner, came along. Several reporters put in their appearance. It was all very quiet, without the usual sirens or clanging bells.

Bursell, a dried-up little man, made his examination, stood up and brushed his hands. "Suicide, eh? I never saw such an ugly mess. Ten stories! Ugh!"

"Suicide! Of course it was suicide," Ridenoff put in quickly. "His bill hasn't been paid for weeks. We gave him his final notice to-day. He was broke, probably despondent."

The reporters wrote in their notebooks rapidly, supplied with information Ridenof poured out to them. A couple of photographers went to the tenth floor and took some pictures of the window. It was all over in a hurry, without fuss or disturbance.

Weston pushed his hat to the back of his head and lighted a cigarette. He stood beside the medical examiner and he spoke so only the doctor could hear.

"It's not suicide," he said. "It's murder. Go on home now and go to bed. Forget what I told you. If you'll stay out of this in your official capacity—let it go as suicide so far as reporters are concerned, so far as anybody is concerned, for that matter, I can find an answer to this a lot faster than I can if you go messing it up. Give me at least until morning."

III.

THE CORRIDORS of the tenth floor were silent with a chill silence that wrought nervous tension and made footfalls on the rubber matting seem to boom out with their sound until the echoes beat against the eardrums.

The door of Richard Peters' room was locked. Ridenof produced a pass key and opened it.

Weston went in first. Of the little group which had been in the alley, Dr. Justin alone had gone to his room, but, for the moment, Weston had no objection to the presence of Ridenof, Perry Hawthorn, and the big Adam Caurker. As a matter of course, they had all followed the

detective to the dead man's room when Weston had begun his investigations.

Caurker was smiling, evidently enjoying the entire affair as an unusual lark. Perry Hawthorn looked a little sick, and his hands were trembling as he lighted a cigarette.

"Lord!" he exclaimed. "I need a drink. Every time I think about that body my stomach turns over."

Ridenof said nothing. He stood just inside the door, wringing his hands nervously while Weston began a careful examination of the room.

Everything seemed in perfect order. While he looked through dresser drawers, Weston said, "Before we came up, I looked at the record of Peters' account, Ridenof. The clerk showed it to me. It's paid a week ahead."

"Yes—yes that's right." Ridenof stammered the words. He wiped his pudgy face with a handkerchief. "I was desperate in an attempt to get rid of those reporters. I wanted them to write this up as suicide, so I gave a motive. As suicide, there would be a few lines on the inside of the papers. As murder, it would be a front-page scandal for the hotel."

Weston kept his eyes on the dresser. "You don't think it was suicide?"

"No—no, I'm afraid I don't. Do you?"

Weston heard a faint gasp from Perry Hawthorn. Caurker swore.

"I'll be damned!"

The detective closed the dresser drawers and went to the window. It slid open easily at his touch. "Here's one thing that says it wasn't suicide. Or it makes a person wonder, anyway. Why did he have to go out into the corridor to make the jump? The natural place would be

from the window of his own room. You're lucky the reporters didn't think of that, or your suicide story wouldn't have got far. As it is, it was murder and the story will have to come out, naturally. However, if the murderer can be caught before the story does come out, the damage to the hotel won't be great."

"This certainly jibes up with that note," Caurker suggested. "Damned weird, I call it, but, by the gods, not supernatural. My guess is, Weston, that this Madame Jeanne is your solution."

Weston paused suddenly in his activities and lighted a cigarette. Through a haze of smoke, he asked: "What can you tell me about this Dr. Justin?"

Perry Hawthorn made a startled exclamation. "Surely you don't think——"

Weston shrugged. "His room is right beside that alcove, though there are other rooms about as close. It was just a thought."

Hawthorn shook his head. "Dr. Justin has lived here since I was a boy. He has an office just around the corner. Father and I lived here from the time my mother died, and Dr. Justin doctored me through measles, whooping cough and everything else I ever had. He's a fine old man. Of course, I've been away for a solid five years, but——" Hawthorn spread his hands. "You're off the track there, Weston."

Weston returned to his investigation of the things in the room. He spoke to Ridenof. "What do you know about Peters' comings and goings to-night? Anything?"

The hotel manager nodded. "I've already talked to Jones, the clerk, and the bell boys. So far as I can find, he's been in the entire evening. Of course I can't tell positively, but the elevator boy doesn't recall tak-

ing him either up or down since he brought him up just after dinner."

FROM A SUITCASE, Weston took an order book with the printed heading of a St. Louis firm of furriers. The book was well-worn, but not a single blank was gone.

Weston grunted. "It seems," he said, "that Peters was a salesman of fine furs, but sales must have been few and far between."

"Yes," Ridenof said quickly. "I recall now that he was a salesman for a firm of fur dealers. I knew he was a salesman, but it had slipped my mind what his line was. We try to take a very personal interest in all our guests. Our motto is friendliness, and I've chatted with Peters a number of times."

From the same suitcase, Weston took a small, paper-bound notebook. There were several pages of what seemed to be notations of little consequence, made at various times and places. There was also a page with a girl's first name and a telephone number. Written in pencil were the words: "Irene—TE 4670."

Weston put the notebook into his pocket without comment.

By chance, Weston's eyes locked suddenly with those of Perry Hawthorn. It seemed to Weston that Hawthorn tried to convey a message in the look.

"I've had enough of this," Hawthorn said. "I need a drink and need it bad. I think it would do all of us good. How about slipping up to my suite?"

"It sounds good," Weston agreed. "As soon as I take a look through this closet."

There were several suits on hangers. The pockets yielded nothing. It was beneath a paper on the closet shelf that the thing was found which made a sudden, perplexed frown

crease Weston's brow. It was a coil of stiff rope. The rope was about as big around as a pencil and probably thirty feet long. Fastened in one end of it was a round object which looked as though it might be a woman's cheap bone bracelet.

Ridenof muttered in astonishment.

"What the hell?" Perry Hawthorn asked.

Weston shook his head. "How I wish I knew."

He stuffed the coil of rope into the pocket of his topcoat. "That seems to be about all. If the offer's still good, I'm ready for a drink."

"There are things I have to do downstairs," Ridenof said. "If you want me, I'll be in my office." He glanced at his watch. "Though goodness knows I should be in bed."

The eleventh floor of the Moline was given over entirely to suites—the best thing the hotel offered. Weston, Hawthorn and Caurker walked up the single flight of steps, and at the top Caurker left.

"Thanks for the offer," he said, "but I never drink—not even a snifter. I believe I'll turn in, even though I'd like to hang along with you and see how a detective works. It happens I have a busy day tomorrow." He walked on down the corridor.

Perry Hawthorn occupied five luxuriously furnished rooms along the east side of the hotel. Weston gazed about and nodded.

"Nice."

Hawthorn smiled a little. "It is nice. Unfortunately these suites seem a little too nice, for the prices are in accordance. At this time of year most of them are empty."

OVER the rim of a tall, frosted glass a moment later, Perry Haw-

thorn's dark features became serious. "I mentioned the drink," he said, "because I knew Caurker didn't drink. When Ridenof invited him into the office to-night to have one, he came in, but refused to drink."

"You wanted to see me alone?"

"Yes. I have some information that may be of importance." Hawthorn put down his glass. "I've been living in a suite up front, next to Caurker's. I decided to move to this one because it has the advantage of the early morning sunlight, which the other didn't have. However, the point is this—" Hawthorn leaned forward from the arm of the chair on which he sat. "One night last week I was just leaving my suite as this man Richard Peters was leaving the one next to mine—Adam Caurker's. I waited for him to mention his acquaintance with Peters, but he didn't. What do you think about it?"

"There's only one thing to think," Weston said. "Thanks for the drink and thanks for the tip. I'll be going. I've got a lot of work ahead of me."

In the corridor, Weston hesitated, for the moment undecided. He went so far as to turn in the direction of Caurker's suite, then he changed his mind and went to the stairs instead. From Adam Caurker's appearance, little could be gained by verbally challenging him for an admittance of something he had obviously withheld purposely. Better to let him retain the belief that whatever relationship he had had with the murdered man remained a secret, for the time. Somehow, Weston had the feeling that Adam Caurker was not a man who would commit murder.

The detective returned to the tenth floor. He had cut his search of the murdered man's room shorter than he would have if he hadn't realized that Perry Hawthorn's invita-

tion to his quarters held more of a meaning than appeared in his casual words. Hawthorn's glance had conveyed that fact. Now, alone and unhurried, Weston intended to look at Peters' things more carefully.

As Weston turned from the main corridor, a feeling of menace swept over him suddenly. It was very quiet. Now, at almost one o'clock in the morning, it seemed that every one slept. But in that quiet there was a tension. It was something that was almost concrete.

He swung into the east corridor. His eyes sought the door of Peters' room, then flicked to the door of the room directly across from it. That door was closing with an incredible speed, but Weston caught a glimpse of blond hair, of a girl's face that was attractive in a hard way. Then the door was tight shut, but it hadn't made a sound.

Vaguely, the blonde's features had been familiar. Weston puzzled over it while he unlocked the door of the dead man's room and switched on the light. His mind was preoccupied while he searched again through Peters' things. Finally, after several minutes, he telephoned down to the clerk at the desk.

"Who," he asked, "is the girl registered in 1049?"

The clerk answered without hesitation. "The girl who did have that room was a Miss Ruth Bowen."

"Did have it?"

"Yes, sir. She checked out about a minute ago. She had me call a cab for her."

Weston swore and put down the phone. He ripped open a fresh pack of cigarettes with a savage movement and put one into his mouth.

"That," he muttered, "is what I get for not playing hunches when I first get them."

Now that he had the girl's name

he remembered why she seemed familiar. He had seen her in court once. Ruth Bowen—— Richard Peters, if he had had money, certainly couldn't have got it through salesmanship of furs, by the look of his order book. The fur business was, clearly, a mere front.

Without a doubt, Ruth Bowen had packed in a hurry. Her room might be worth looking over. Weston stepped across the corridor and tried the knob. It turned easily in his hand. Pushing the door open, he stared into blackness, his hand running along the wall in search of the light button.

His fingers never found it. Something he couldn't see—some slight sound—warned him to duck.

He dodged too late. Glinting metal hurtled from the darkness—metal that might have been a heavy flashlight. It hit his head just above his right ear.

Dazed with pain, he lurched forward, his hand clutching for his revolver. Then, in the blur of light coming from the corridor behind him, he saw a pair of gloved hands clutching a chair. The chair was swinging up, looking gigantic as the light struck it. Weston tried to change his course, to swerve to the side, but the blow from the thrown flashlight had done too much damage. His muscles refused to respond with enough speed. The world crashed down on him and he landed hard on the floor.

IV.

WESTON wasn't sure how long he was unconscious. In fact, he wasn't sure that he had been completely out. It seemed as though he had heard running feet, very far away. He had heard the door close, and that had been but an instant ago.

His fingers groped at the weight on top of him—the wreckage of the chair. He shoved it aside and crawled to his feet. For a moment he swayed groggily, then he got across the room and found the light button.

The room was a wreck. Besides the smashed chair on the floor, drawers were out of the dresser. The mattress on the bed had been turned back; so had the edges of the rug.

For an instant Weston considered fingerprints, then shook his head. It had been gloved hands of which he had caught a glimpse, though the man to whom they belonged had remained only a vague blob in the darkness.

A wound in his forehead was bleeding profusely. Weston turned out the light, closed the door behind him and went down the corridor to Dr. Justin's room. When he knocked, the doctor opened the door immediately, surprise mirrored on his face. He was still fully dressed.

"I've had a little accident," Weston told him briefly. "I'd appreciate it if you could do something to stop the bleeding."

"Why, yes, of course. Go into the bathroom."

While he cleansed and put a brief bandage on the detective's wound, Dr. Justin did not inquire as to the nature of the accident. His training as a doctor had been too long.

When it was done, Weston sat on the edge of the bed and lighted a cigarette. His eyes fastened on the doctor thoughtfully. Justin had sunk into a chair. A book he had evidently been reading, lay on a smoking stand by his side.

"Isn't it true," Weston said abruptly, "that it's a pretty much agreed fact among psychologists that when a person plunges from a great height toward his death—even

in the case of suicide—he invariably regrets it instantly?”

Dr. Justin nodded. “I believe that it’s pretty well accepted as a theory.”

“The person will scream as he falls,” Weston went on. “And he’ll scream all the way down—providing, of course, he screams at all.”

“Without much doubt. While there might be remote cases where the person would not emit a scream at all, the usual natural reaction is to scream. If the person does scream, he will scream from the beginning to the end of his fall.”

Dr. Justin came suddenly to his feet. The expression on his face was difficult to read.

“By heavens, officer!” he exclaimed. “I think I see what you’re driving at! It’s the first I had thought of it. When the salesman chap plunged to his death, there was only one short scream. What do you make of it? Could it mean——”

“That’s the fact which made me decide from the very first that it was murder,” Weston said. “It was murder—yes.”

“Then what——”

Weston leaned forward. “Richard Peters was either dead or unconscious *before* he fell. And if he had emitted that scream as he was attacked, the person who murdered him would have had to lift the body and throw it from the window *after* the scream. Where time was a matter of such a few seconds, it would have been impossible to have done that and then got out of sight before I rounded the corner of the corridor and came in sight of the alcove.”

“What are you driving at?” Dr. Justin asked tensely.

“I think it was the *murderer* who screamed, and not the murdered man. The body was first thrown

from the window, and then the murderer screamed and had just time to make his escape.”

“Why”—the doctor wet his lips suddenly—“why would he scream? I would think it would be to his advantage to keep discovery of the crime as long as possible.”

Weston had finished his cigarette, and he prepared to leave. With his hand on the doorknob he said, “As I see it, there can only be one answer to that. The murderer wanted the crime discovered at once. If it hadn’t been for that scream, the body might well have stayed there in the alley, undiscovered until morning. Think it over and see if you can get any answers for me— And thanks for fixing up the head.”

AS Weston rang for the elevator, he noticed that one of the cars was at the eleventh floor. It came on down and stopped for him. Adam Caurker was on it. The big man’s bronzed face broke into a smile.

“I went down after cigars a while ago, and in the excitement I forgot to get them. I like to pick them out myself. None of his bell-hop stuff for me.”

The car reached the lobby. They got out and Weston put his hand suddenly on Caurker’s arm, detaining him for an instant.

“Caurker, did you know Richard Peters?” he asked. His eyes were level and almost without expression.

The wealthy sportsman returned the gaze evenly. The color became more noticeable in his cheeks.

“Yes,” he said. “I had a slight acquaintance with him. Have I got myself in a jam by not mentioning the fact?”

“Not necessarily. It might help clear up some things, though, if you’ll tell what you know.”

"You have no intention of placing any charges against me, have you?"

Weston's tone was frank. "Caurker," he said, "I've probably got the record of making fewer arrests—ungrounded arrests, that is—than any other man in the department. I've never used my badge to go blustering and storming through any case I've ever worked on. When I really have grounds that warrant an arrest I make it. That should answer your question. What were your relations with Peters?"

"I chatted with him one evening last week when we sat side by side here in the lobby. He told me he was a fur salesman. I am interested in picking up a nice piece of fur for a lady friend, and I asked Peters to come on up to my room while we talked some on the subject.

"He did come to my room with me, but, frankly, the man seemed to know very little about his line. He left me after a very short time, pleading an engagement. That's the entire story."

Weston nodded. "Thanks, Caurker."

The detective strode on to the telephone booth which had been his original destination. He was glad now that he had met Caurker and questioned him. He had the feeling that the sportsman was telling the truth.

Weston's tongue was in his cheek as he called the number written after the name Irene on the page of Richard Peters' notebook. Then his eyes glowed in sudden satisfaction as a man's voice said: "Fairmont Arms."

Weston hung up without answering.

The Fairmont Arms was a comfortable-looking hotel with a small lobby and a plump little night clerk

almost asleep behind the desk.

Weston wasted no time in preliminaries. He flashed his shield.

"Do you," he asked, "know of a woman named Irene living here?"

The plump little clerk's eyes were wide. He spread his hands in a helpless gesture. "Lord, mister! There might be dozens of them for all I know."

"Let me see the register."

On the records, Weston found the name Irene twice. One was a Mrs. Irene Barrington and daughter. She had been at the Fairmont two days. The other Irene was Miss Irene Black. She had been there a little more than six weeks. Weston pointed her name out to the clerk.

"What do you know about her, anything?"

The clerk's eyes brightened. "I had forgot about her. That's right, Irene Black. One of the bell boys was speaking to me about her just the other evening. He said he'd just found out she was this famous Madame—Madame something or other, who tells people things by reading the stars. She had him helping her about some clippings, I believe."

"Madame Jeanne?"

"Yes—yes, that's it."

Weston glanced at the register again. Irene Black's room was 1015.

"I'm going up," he said. "Don't call her."

"She—why she has probably retired by this time," the clerk protested.

"I'll get her up then."

IRENE BLACK evidently had not retired. She opened the door almost immediately when Weston knocked and gazed at him inquiringly. She was tall, middle-aged and dark. Her hair was a raven-



The rope around his waist jerked tight, brought his fall to a sickening halt.

black, and her skin a flawless olive. Weston saw that, without doubt, Irene Black, occasion arising, could endow herself with a majestically cool beauty. Now, however, there were circles beneath her eyes.

"I'd like to speak to you a moment," Weston said.

"Yes?"

"Detective Weston — headquarters."

"Oh," Irene Black said softly. She stepped aside. "Come in, please."

It was a single room and bath, comfortably furnished. Weston remained standing.

"First," he said, "I want you to explain the note you sent to the manager of the Moline Hotel to-night."

"Note?" A look of questioning surprise passed over the woman's face. "I sent no note."

"The note was signed Madame Jeanne." Weston's tone became grim. "We both know that you're the woman calling herself that. Now what about it?"

"Yes. Yes—I'm Madame Jeanne. But still I know nothing about a note."

Weston pushed his soft hat back on his head, flopped open his topcoat to get a cigarette. He offered one to Irene Black and held the flame of his lighter to it.

"Would you object to taking a trip down to headquarters—just for the purpose of checking things up?"

The dark eyes of the woman flashed suddenly. "Really, Mr. Weston, I see no cause for this procedure. I most certainly do not intend going with you or any one else at this hour of the morning. And I feel quite sure you have no right to place me under arrest. I think——"

Irene Black broke off suddenly, turned and crossed the room to a

small spinet desk. From it she took a green leather-bound book and carried it to Weston.

"Here," she said, "is my diary. It is filled with my handwriting. If you really think I did send a note to this person, why don't you compare the handwriting? Perhaps there will be a noticeable difference. You may take the diary with you if you care to, make the comparison and return it later."

Weston accepted the book and leafed through it absently. "I saw the note," he told the woman. "It was written in a strong, almost masculine hand—clearly not the same as this." He looked up. "Can you explain why a man who died at the Moline to-night—a Richard Peters—had a notation of your name and telephone number?"

Irene Black took a step backward, the dresser stopping her. Her dark face had become a mask. Weston could see the pulse beating in her throat.

"No. I can't explain anything like that. I have no idea how it could have happened."

Weston nodded. His lips were thin and tight as he smiled at her.

"I," he said, "am not in the mood to play games."

"You are being extremely rude—insulting. Please get out."

FLIPPING through the pages of the diary again, the detective kept his thin-lipped smile which was without humor. "The first pages of this diary," he said, "are dated several months ago, but the ink can still be smeared by rubbing my finger across it hard. It hasn't been there half an hour."

The mask tightened about Irene Black's features. "Really, Mr. Weston?"

"You wrote that note to Ridenof," Weston told her. "After you'd sent it, you changed your mind for some reason and didn't want it known you had sent it. You knew the police would find you and question you so you planned to try bluffing it out by saying another person had sent it, signing your name. You destroyed, I imagine, every trace of your writing around here, rushed out and bought this diary and filled it with a writing different than your usual style so it wouldn't match up with the writing on the note when compared.

"Very clever, Mr. Weston."

"I think we'd better take that trip I spoke of."

"You're wrong!" Irene Black's voice suddenly snapped. With a swift movement she had lifted a small automatic from the dresser drawer which had been open several inches. Her skin had changed to a dull grayish color.

"Put up your hands! High!"

Weston stared at her speculatively an instant. Then he tossed the diary on the bed and put his hands into the air. His eyes were expressionless.

"I hand it to you, sister. That gun act was fast—and unexpected. You're giving the orders."

"You can bet your life I am! Back across the room and step inside that closet. The door's open."

As he went backward, step by step, the woman kept pace with him, the gun held unwaveringly. When he was inside the closet, pressed back against the dresses hanging on hangers from hooks, Irene Black slammed shut the door. The lock clicked.

"If you make an attempt to break the door down," she said, "I'll send a bullet straight through the panel. And you can believe me. These

walls are practically soundproof, and this little gun doesn't make much noise."

Weston stood perfectly quiet inside the closet for a moment. He didn't feel particularly angry at himself for overlooking the woman's unexpected movement. He was too old in the game for that. Every one pulled a boner occasionally.

The closet was very narrow, giving no space to lunge against the door. In the room beyond, he could hear quick footsteps. Dresser drawers were opened and closed several times. Then there was the sound of the corridor door. Irene Black had fled.

Weston grasped the knob and strained against the door with a steady push. The sweat was streaming down his face, and he had already begun to feel the effect of the lack of air. His breath began to come in short gasps as he strained steadily against the lock.

Abruptly there was a sharp snap and the door flew back on its hinges.

Weston wiped the sweat from his face with his handkerchief and glanced around the room. With long strides he crossed to the telephone and called headquarters. Lieutenant Moriety's voice cracked at him swiftly when he had identified himself.

"That guy you sent in," he said, "we ain't got nothing from him, but we know who he is—got it from prints. He hails from Frisco with a record a mile long. Black's his name—Frankie Black. A good all 'round thug."

"Black!" Weston exclaimed. "Did you say Black?"

"Yeah. Mean something?"

"What about an Irene Black?"

"The record we've got says Frankie Black has a sister named Irene. I don't think we got any rec-

ord on her personally. What the hell——”

“Irene Black is Madame Jeanne. She’s a tall brunette—olive skin. I think she’s wearing a black dress—unless she changed it, and I don’t think she did. I don’t know anything about her coat and hat or if she’s wearing any. She probably is, though. She might have had them tossed into a chair here in her room. Come to think about it they were—both of them dark. I——”

Weston grunted. “I was locked up with her other clothes—not that it’s anything to make a joke about. We want that woman and want her bad. Try and have her picked up. She left her room here in the Fairmont Arms not more than three minutes ago. While you’re at it, if any of the boys run across Ruth Bowen—you probably know her—have them bring her in, too. I want a talk with her. Call you later.”

Weston put down the telephone and let his eyes travel swiftly about the room. Irene Black had left, it seemed, without taking a single bit of her personal belongings. Various toilet articles were still on the dresser. An open drawer showed clothes inside. Weston began a hurried search.

It was a trunk which yielded the photograph of a man. It was a nice thing in a silver frame. Across the corner of the picture, written in ink, were the words: “To my darling wife.”

Weston’s lips were pursed in a low whistle as he put the picture into his topcoat pocket. The photograph was a remarkable likeness of the murdered Richard Peters.

V.

THERE WAS a stand beside the window, and on its top was a leather case made for holding binoculars.

The instant his eyes rested on the glasses, Weston realized the importance of two facts which had jarred oddly in his mind. In the first place, Irene Black’s room was on the tenth floor of the Fairmont Arms, on the west side of the building, while Richard Peters’ room at the Moline was also on the tenth floor—east side. The two hotels were a block apart.

Weston cupped his hand to shut out the light behind him and peered from the window. The buildings in between the two hotels were no more than six or seven stories high.

The binoculars were expensive and powerful. Weston snapped out the light in the room and returned to the window, turning the glasses on the Moline Hotel. Several windows on the tenth floor of the Moline were lighted, and it was possible to gaze into the rooms with a startling clearness and a feeling of nearness.

Weston put the binoculars back on the stand. With a thoughtful expression on his face he lighted a cigarette. It had been possible for Irene Black to look into the room of Richard Peters, who, it seemed, had been her husband. Just what did that stack up to? Weston’s eyes narrowed suddenly as he thought of the blond Ruth Bowen.

Weston rode down in the elevator. To make sure that Irene Black had actually left the hotel, he asked the clerk.

The clerk was already much disturbed and had called the manager.

Yes, the manager said, she had left in very much of a hurry—and at this time of night! What did the police mean by molesting his guests and——

Weston left him. He pushed through the heavy door to the street and saw a patrolman approaching a

half block away, patrolling his beat with a painful, flat-footed gait. Weston waited for him.

"Hello, Gargon," he said.

"Howdy, sergeant." Gargon was deep-chested, beefy, his face dark and weather-beaten.

They walked on toward the Moline Hotel. The air was cold, and there was a brisk wind. The street was deserted but for them, several blocks in either direction.

"What a night!" Weston remarked. He looked toward the landscaped park across the street from the Moline. The room was bright on the shrubbery and the gravel paths. Peaceful!

"Yeah," Gargon answered. "I heard all about that business at the Moline from Hagenmuch. He was givin' me hell for being at the other end of my beat when it happened. As if I could help that! The ignorance of some cheese lieutenants!"

As they came to the alley running along the east side of the Moline, it was only natural that they both turned their heads and glanced toward the spot where the corpse had lain.

Weston saw it first. Some bit of sound burst from his lips without him realizing it. One foot half forward in another step, his body jerked stiff in horrified, unbelievable surprise. Then he ran down the alley.

Gargon swore. He lumbered off behind Weston.

It was the body of Dr. Ivan Justin which lay there on the brick pavement—a smashed, bloody mass of flesh and bone.

Weston knelt beside the corpse.

"Warm," he said. "Hasn't been dead more than a few minutes."

Gargon had come to a panting

halt. He pointed a blunt finger. "Look. There's somethin' in his pocket."

Weston's eyes narrowed. He took hold of the inch of white paper showing above the edge of Justin's coat pocket and pulled it out. It was a sheet of Moline stationery.

The street lights burning at each end of the alley did not make enough light to read the writing on the paper, and Weston slipped a small flash from his pocket, turned it on. There was only a single line, written with pencil: "I killed Richard Peters."

Gargon had read the note over Weston's shoulder. "It looks like that settles it," he said. "Now you can go home and get a good night's sleep. Lucky, guy!"

Weston looked up at the patrolman suddenly. His eyes were bright beneath the brim of his soft hat.

"This is a faked confession," he said. "A dozen different things say so, but the most glaring fault is its shortness. If Justin had really killed Peters and confessed to it, he'd have written more—given explanations. The man who murdered both Peters and Justin planted this so the deaths would be cleared up. He wasn't very good at imitating Justin's handwriting, and he probably didn't want to take much time, so he wrote no more than was absolutely necessary. It might be he had a prescription Justin wrote, and he used it as a sample to copy from."

Weston stood up. "I think you've put me on the track of the murderer, Gargon. I'm not going to take time to explain now. You stay here with the body a few minutes. There are a few things I want to do before I put in a report. I don't want a mob under my feet."

Weston entered the lobby of the

Moline by the side door and strode to the elevator.

"Ten," he said.

The operator started to close the cage door, then halted at another word from the detective.

A WOMAN had just come in the main entrance and was walking toward the desk. Her face was buried in her coat collar, but still Weston recognized Irene Black. He stepped from the elevator.

She glanced up and saw him. Fright showed in her eyes. She turned and ran back toward the entrance. Weston caught up with her just as she reached the door. He held to her arm and steered her back toward the desk.

"Open the door of Ridenof's office," he told the wide-eyed clerk.

Irene Black had made one futile attempt to struggle, but now she was quiet. She looked into Weston's face, and her gaze was filled with hatred.

Inside the manager's office, Weston shoved her into a chair and closed the door.

"What—what shall——" the clerk began.

For the instant, Weston had forgotten the other's presence. "I want to talk to her alone," he said. "You needn't call Ridenof."

"Yes—yes, sir." The clerk went out and carefully closed the door again.

Irene Black sat on the edge of the chair, staring straight before her. Without looking at the detective, she said, "O. K., buddy. Now that you've got me what good do you think it'll do you?"

"One never can tell." Weston lighted a cigarette with an easy movement. He seemed to be without a care. "It'll go easier with you

if you'll talk," he added. "Peters was your husband, wasn't he?"

"Guess all you want to."

Weston grunted. "O. K., since you've invited it. He found a girl a lot more attractive than you—a blonde in the room across the hall from him, right here in this hotel. You moved to an apartment where you could watch him—and the blonde—through binoculars. You could——"

The color had been rising in the woman's face, and Weston, behind the gray mask of his eyes, saw he was on the right track if he expected to get anything from Irene Black.

When she interrupted him, her voice was like brittle glass that is being crunched.

"Yes—he was my husband, and he did like a blonde. He thought I didn't know it." She brought up her gaze. "And I'm not so dumb as I might look. I realize you're trying to make me lose my temper in the hope I'll say something I had no intention of saying."

Irene Black leaned forward on the edge of her chair. "There are some things you'll find about me, copper. I'm in the hands of the police now, and some things will be discovered, but you'll not find out anything from me which will ever tell you who killed my husband or the doctor. You'll find out that I'm a crook—a fake who used engagements in wealthy homes as a means of getting information about arrangements of houses, locations of safes and that sort of thing.

"That's why I built myself up as an entertainer—that's really what an astrologer is. What information I got was passed on to my husband who knew how to make use of it. For professional reasons we lived apart, but I loved that man. That

is—I did love him until I found out about the other woman, and then I hated him.”

The dark woman's eyes flashed. “The other day my husband told me of a plan he had to make a hundred thousand dollars. It included murdering a man, and it was going to be done sometime around midnight—after things had quieted down—to-night. I saw my chance for revenge. I would have him caught.

“I thought of several plans,” the woman continued. “I knew if I sent the actual information of the murder to the police, they would prevent it, and I didn't want that to happen, so I sent a note to the manager of the hotel. I thought it would cause enough worry that at least a cop or two would be hanging around the tenth floor, but wouldn't be taken seriously enough for so many precautions to be taken that Richard would be warned. There would be, however, a mighty good chance he would be seen in the corridors by the cops, and, after the murder was discovered, he'd be questioned, and he wouldn't get far when that started. He'd burn. That's all I wanted.”

“Then you changed your mind,” Weston suggested.

“Yes. I decided I wanted a split of the money more than I wanted revenge. I couldn't warn Richard without telling him what I'd planned to do, and if he found out, I'd be cutting my own throat. I knew if I could draw the cops away somehow, the cops themselves wouldn't let the information leak out about how they had been warned of an impending murder but had foolishly been drawn away from the scene so they weren't around when it happened, so I sent my brother to draw the cops away from the tenth-floor corridor. It seems he got pinched.”

WESTON leaned a little forward on the balls of his feet. “It was Justin your husband was going to kill?”

“Yes.”

Weston shot the words. “Who killed your husband first and then Justin? How did you know Justin was out there in the alley right this minute—dead?”

Irene Black gave an almost imperceptible start, then quickly regained her composure. “I saw him fall from the window.”

“Where were you?”

“Several blocks down the street in a doorway.”

“How did you know it was Justin?”

The woman's eyes became suddenly expressionless. “I've said all I intend to say. My husband's plans miscarried. He got killed as well as the person he intended to kill. I knew all of this, and I'm an accessory after the fact. I'll go to prison, but I won't be there forever. When I get out, I'll collect on what I know. I was going to do it to-night. I was going to collect and leave the country. That's why I was foolish enough to try coming here, but you caught me, so now go on and peddle your papers, copper.”

For several seconds Weston stared at her narrowly, and he read correctly the set of her jaw. With an abrupt motion he walked over to the windows and saw they were too far above the ground for the woman to escape in that manner. You had to go up a flight of steps to reach the lobby of the *Moline*.

Leaving Irene Black seated in the chair, Weston locked her inside the office and dropped the key into his pocket.

“I'm leaving that woman a prisoner,” he told the clerk. “Don't let

her out regardless of what she does."

The clerk opened his mouth to ask questions, but Weston was already halfway to the elevators. He rode to the tenth floor and strode down the corridor to Dr. Justin's room.

The door was unlocked. A reading lamp was burning. The window was, of course, wide open, letting in the chill wind.

His lower lip drawn down musingly against his teeth, Weston leaned from the window. Far below he could see the doctor's body and beside it the sturdy figure of Gargon.

Taking the small flash from his pocket, the detective twisted around and directed its beam on the lower, outside sash of the window. He searched back and forth along the sash for several minutes before he detected a small hole. His eyes narrowed thoughtfully as he drew back inside the window.

The coil of rope with the bracelet fastened in the end of it was still in his coat pocket. He fastened one end of the rope around the radiator pipe, and tied the other end about his own waist. With the flashlight in his hand, and using infinite caution, he crawled out onto the window ledge.

Jack Weston had always had an uncontrollable feeling of horror when subjected to extreme heights, and the sweat stood out on his brow as he straightened to a standing position. Back of him was space. A slip, a misstep of an inch, would send him plunging into it with only a frail rope to stop his fall. The rope might hold, and it might not. Weston didn't look down.

Clasping his free hand as best he could about the casement of the window, he directed the beam of the flashlight upward toward the out-

cropping of masonry extending out beyond the top of the window.

This outcropping was of cement which had once been white, but was now a soot-blackened gray.

Slowly the beam of the flash swung back and forth, then finally steadied. On the edge of the sooty cement was a streak half an inch or so wide where some of the soot and dirt had been brushed away as though by some object rubbing against it.

Weston swore beneath his breath and tried to get his eyes a little closer by standing on his tiptoes.

The light in Dr. Justin's room went out.

Weston jerked his gaze downward. He had the horrified sensation of seeing a rushing shape outlined against the light from the corridor. He knew what was coming. He dropped his flashlight and tried wildly to get both hands a hold on the edge of the window, but the rushing figure was too close.

A terrific force hit Weston's legs. He plunged backward into void that had its bottom on the brick pavement of the alley ten stories below.

VI.

THE ROPE around his waist jerked tight, brought his fall to a sickening halt. It slammed him against the side of the building. The wind squashed from his body. Every bone seemed to break in that terrific impact.

Blindly, instinctively his fingers clawed at the brick surface. By the very force of rebound, his body swung outward again. As he swung in toward the building for the second time, he managed to twist his body upward and got his left hand around the rope and he jerked himself to a vertical position. By rais-

ing himself this much, his face was even with the sash of the window in the ninth-floor room, directly below the doctor's room. The occupant of the room, evidently a believer in fresh air while sleeping, had opened the window nearly a foot.

It had all happened in scarcely a second's time. Weston's fingers clutched at the window sill. The rope around his body jerked sharply, and he knew the person in the room above him was working with a desperate speed to untie or cut the rope from around the radiator. It fell free as he pulled his body over the window ledge and to safety. The blood was roaring in his ears. His hands were torn and bleeding. His entire figure was bathed in sweat.

A light flashed on in a bed lamp. An elderly man, his hair mussed from the pillow, stared at him wild-eyed. Fright and amazement mirrored on the man's face.

"What—what——" he stammered.

Weston was struggling with the rope. He found at once that the fall had drawn the knot tight beyond hope of loosening it. He had no knife, so he drew the trailing end of the rope through the window swiftly, coiling it into his left hand. He stopped long enough to flash his badge toward the man on the bed.

"Stay where you're at," he snapped. "Nobody's going to hurt you."

WITH the rope gathered in his hand, he ran to the door, flung it open and plunged into the corridor. Behind him, the occupant of the room still stared with wide eyes and a slack mouth.

Weston raced toward the stairs. As he passed the elevator shaft, he saw the hand above one of the doors

swinging swiftly upward. It was at the sixth—the seventh——

Weston bounded up the steps, taking them four at a time. The murderer was making a desperate effort to escape. He knew Weston had discovered his identity, and he had seen the detective escape death by drawing himself into the ninth-floor window. If the murderer could get into the elevator before Weston reached him, he could streak down to the lobby and walk out of the building unmolested. Once free of the confines of the hotel, it might be possible to escape entirely. Weston realized these things as he ran up the stairs.

His steps were not silent. There was no time for that. He bounded up recklessly. He held his gun in his right hand.

As he reached the landing, the elevator door clanged open. Weston rounded the corner of the corridor wall, still running, but in a half crouch.

Perry Hawthorn, his eyes wild, spun to meet him, an automatic in his hand. The dapper man's features were those of a trapped beast. His lips curled back. The automatic jerked in his hand. Flame spurted—a deafening roar crashed through the corridors. It was overlapped, drowned out by the heavier boom of Weston's gun.

It was that low crouch which saved Weston from catching Hawthorn's bullet. Instead of hitting him, it smashed plaster on the wall back of him. His own shot caught the hotel owner in the shoulder, sending him spinning back against the side of the elevator cage, the automatic flying from his hand. He fell against the cowering, frightened elevator boy, then managed to regain his balance.

"Down!" he screamed.

But Weston had already leaped forward and was inside the cage. He kicked aside the automatic as Hawthorn bent down and tried to pick it up with his left hand.

"Get going," Weston snapped to the elevator operator.

An hour later, Weston dropped wearily into a chair in Jenkins' office. Captain Jenkins was a thick-set, ruddy-faced man with twinkling good humor in his small eyes. His feet were propped on his desk, and he was tamping tobacco into a very foul pipe.

"This Hawthorn fella's confessed, eh?" he asked.

Weston nodded. "I had most of it doped out, but the thing back of it all knocked me groggy. I'll admit that."

"Yeah?" Jenkins lighted his pipe.

"Those two guys were thrown from the eleventh floor instead of the tenth," Weston continued; "Peters from the eleventh-floor corridor just outside the door of Hawthorn's suit, and Justin from Hawthorn's bedroom which is directly over Justin's room. The idea was to make it appear like Justin committed suicide. Peters wasn't expecting to get killed too—that was Hawthorn's idea.

"BEFOREHAND, earlier in the day when Justin was out, a heavy tack was pressed into the sill of the window in his room—on the outside. By using a rope with a hoop on the end of it, it was possible to lean out of the eleventh-floor window, angle around with the hoop until it slipped over the tack, and then, by applying steady pressure, pull up the window. After it was up, a sharp jerk yanked out the tack and the rope was pulled back in again. That way,

the murderer took no chance of being seen in suspicious circumstances on the tenth floor. Peters and Hawthorn planned it that way, but Hawthorn, in his own mind, worked it out a little differently—including Peters' death, too."

Jenkins' eyes showed interest.

"Hawthorn felt bad the other night," Weston said, "and went to Dr. Justin. The doc discovered something about him that nobody else knew. The doc gave him forty-eight hours to give himself over to the proper authorities, or Justin would do it himself.

"There were some pretty loud words, and Peters, passing through the corridor, got an earful. Later, he went to Hawthorn with the intention of blackmail. For a hundred grand he'd keep still about what he'd heard. Justin, of course, wouldn't keep still, so Peters planned with Hawthorn to kill Justin. Peters told his wife—Madame Jeanne—about the set-up, but that was before he and Hawthorn had doped out the safety angle of really throwing the body from the eleventh floor instead of the tenth. That's why she sent the note giving the tip about a murder on the tenth floor."

Weston touched a finger gingerly to the adhesive tape on his forehead.

"Peters told Hawthorn that when he'd sneaked into Justin's room to fix that tack on the window, he'd also swiped a statement the doctor had prepared about the information he was going to turn over to the authorities. Hawthorn didn't find out until later—just before he killed Justin—that the doc hadn't written anything like that. It was a gag Peters used to strengthen his hold over Hawthorn.

"Hawthorn got the idea of killing

Peters as well as Justin, and by the same method. Hawthorn's suite wasn't over Peters' room, so he couldn't make it appear like Peters had plunged from his own window. Therefore, he used the corridor window. The eleventh floor of the Moline is practically unoccupied, so there was little danger of being seen. Also, the tenth-floor corridor window is just outside the door of Justin's room, and later, when Justin apparently committed suicide and confessed to Peters' murder, it would look logical.

"During the afternoon, Hawthorn, sure he was unobserved, pressed a tack in the tenth-floor corridor window and fixed a rope of his own, just like the one Peters had already prepared to use on Justin's window, and which Peters was keeping—I found it myself. To-night, Peters came to Hawthorn's suite at Hawthorn's summons, was slugged, his body thrown from the window, and the window below was raised. Hawthorn then leaned out and screamed so Peters body would be found at once, and he could proceed with his plan—Justin's murder."

Weston pointed to the wound on his head.

"Hawthorn did that. He was with me while I searched Peters' room, and he got me out of there before I'd done much looking around, by getting me to go to his suite with him, where he told me some suspicious facts about a man named Caurker, thinking I'd go immediately to Caurker's room and leave Peters' room free to be searched by him for that paper Peters had said he had.

"I didn't go to Caurker's suite, but went on back to Peters' room. In the meantime, Hawthorn came down in time to see this girl, Ruth Bowen, pull out. He knew of her relation-

ship with Peters through a remark Peters had made.

"Hawthorn decided Peters was probably too smart to hide the paper in his own room, anyway, and the blonde's room would have made a good convenient place to put it. The girl was hardly the type to be trusted with dynamite, so Peters had doubtless hidden it in her room without her being aware of it. Anyway it was a hunch, so when he saw her pull out, he went into her room to look it over. He wasn't expecting me to surprise him there."

WESTON lighted a cigarette, blew a cloud of smoke. "A while ago, he called Justin to his suite. He slugged him, waited long enough so that if anybody had seen the doctor come there, he would also have had time to have left, then he threw Justin's body from the window, used the rope and opened the window of Justin's room, and the job was done.

"From the darkened window of his own room, he saw me find the body. When, after several minutes, no other cops or anything had arrived, he had the feeling something had gone wrong. He came to Justin's room, saw what I was doing and realized I'd stumbled onto what had been done. He pushed me out the window, but I didn't get killed. He tried to make a get-away then, but he wasn't fast enough."

Weston chuckled. "Peters' wife tried to cash in on the information her husband had died for. She didn't know Hawthorn owned the Moline along with the rest of the Hawthorn fortune, and she didn't know he'd be told about the note. That note gave Hawthorn plenty of gray hairs wondering just who had sent it and how the person knew about the planned killing. He realized though

that Peters had let somebody in on the information, and it would mean one more person to kill or pay off."

Jenkins gave an impatient tug at his pipe. "If you're trying to get my goat, go to hell! I won't ask you what it was Hawthorn wanted covered up, if you wait ten years."

Weston narrowed his eyes. "As long as you haven't hit on the answer, I guess I shouldn't feel bad because I didn't." He leaned forward. "This man is not Perry Hawthorn. He's an adventurer named Willard, and he had a likeness to Hawthorn. When Hawthorn died eight months ago, a crooked plastic surgeon completed the likeness. Hawthorn was buried under Willard's name in Singapore.

"Willard, who had become a friend of Hawthorn and had learned the family history enough to realize that since Hawthorn hadn't been home for five years, he could get away with impersonating him, waited until the only person who might detect the difference had died. When old man Hawthorn died, Willard came on home and into the Hawthorn fortune.

"When he let Justin examine him, he didn't know Justin had removed Hawthorn's appendix fifteen years ago. The doc saw there was no scar, and the jig was up."

Jenkins' feet left the desk with a bang. "I'll be damned!"

"I had the solution to those murders in my head all night—or not long after Peters was killed," Weston added. "But it wasn't until Gargon told me I could get a good night's sleep that I had sense enough to see what I did have.

"It was that word 'sleep.' It made me remember that the first time I saw Hawthorn, or Willard, he'd remarked he never got up before noon. Later he said he'd changed his suite so he could get the early morning sunshine. Now what the hell would a man want with early morning sunshine if he slept all morning? He really changed suites so he'd be over Justin's room, and the murder plan could be worked."

Weston scraped back his chair and got to his feet. "After I'd figured that out, I began to see what the dizzy-looking contraption on the end of that rope I'd found in Peters' room could be used for. I found the tack hole, and I found the trace the rope left on the outcropping of cement above the window.

"And that," Jenkins said, "is when the murderer found you."

Weston grinned. "And that," he agreed, "is when the murderer found me. Heaven bless a piece of rope that didn't break!"

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PROBAK JUNIOR

DOUBLE TROUBLE

by Victor S. Newcome



"That boat behind me, dick, is my follow-up. You ain't got a chance."

THE MAN I saw in the park, sitting on the bench near the entrance, was the best double I had ever laid eyes on. Not only that, either. He was a dead ringer for "Trigger" Cole. There were a couple of reasons why I knew he wasn't the Trigger. One was that he didn't get the lurgies when he saw me. And the other was that Trigger was in the coop.

I'm a man of experience, and I've had to deal with a number of doubles in my time. Doubles are commoner than you might think. What's

more, they're trouble-makers. They make for kinkiness. If one double doesn't try to take the other for something, usually in the end his life, why, some third party does. However—

I no sooner saw the double for the Trigger than my mind ran to certain possibilities.

Here's the spread. A woman named Mrs. Huysten, a widow, who lives in a palace on Park Avenue, lost a necklace worth a hundred grand in a stickup. A couple of nights before, three hoist guys were

waiting for her when she came home from the opera. She was all for standing still. But her chauffeur lost his head and went into action. In the scuffle the handkerchief on the face of the guy that had the gun was pulled off. This guy knocked the chauffeur out and then stood over him with the gun and turned it loose. That was that.

Down at headquarters the next morning Mrs. Huysten picked out the gallery picture of Trigger as the man who had done the shooting. We didn't force the identification. We let her have her own way.

"This is the man," she said positively. "I couldn't be mistaken."

A squad of boys, wreckers all, romped out to the Pair of Dice on Ninety-second Street, headquarters of "Oily" Blandon's mob, and gathered up the Trigger. He became mussed up a little. Not that it amounted to much. Besides he brought it on himself. Just the same we waited till next day before we asked Mrs. Huysten to come down and take a gander at him in the flesh. The Trigger had an alibi that would have been hard to beat in court if we didn't have a positive identification from Mrs. Huysten.

We put Trigger on a platform for her.

She shook her head. "He's not the man," she said, "though he does look like the man who shot poor Fredericks."

She seemed very much upset. Moreover she wouldn't change her mind about Trigger.

The chief was hot and bothered. "She's on some kind of spot, Mac," he said. "Go out and find out what it is."

I went out to her home and I eventually found out, from a servant girl, a Mary somebody or other, that Mrs. Huysten's son, Reynolds, was

strangely missing. The girl made no bones about saying she was sure that the lad—he was about eighteen—had been kidnaped.

I was on the way back to headquarters when I cut through the park and spotted the double for Trigger.

I went to the bench and sat down. "Hello," I said.

He nodded.

"Nice day."

"It ain't bad."

His gray eyes were steadier than Trigger's, his mouth firmer, his chin stronger.

"Where are you staying?" I went on.

"What's it to you?"

I showed him my badge.

HIS FACE changed. "That's different," he said. "Why, I'm puttin' up at the Cosmo. That is, I was." And he went on to tell me, as I led him out, that he had been kicked out that morning because he hadn't been able to pay his back rent, that he couldn't find work.

"I may be able to help you if you're on the up and up," I said. "And if you've got guts."

"I've got the guts."

"I'll have to put you in the jug for a while," I put it.

He started to get sore. "If you're that kind of guy——"

"Don't misunderstand," I said.

"It's like this," I sketched out a part of what I had in the pan. Which was: To have him double for Trigger, send him into the Blandon mob at the Pair of Dice, and try to get the low-down on the necklace and on the boy, Reynolds.

"What does this bring me?" he said.

"There's a big reward for the necklace," I told him. "You'll cut about fifty fifty on that."

He went for it. "Sure," he said. "I'm game."

I gave him a pair of glasses for cover and told him to go to room Number Five at headquarters.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"John Tracey."

"All right, Tracey," I said. "I'll be waiting for you."

When I got up I saw Jim Davis standing near the entrance. He had been watching us, but, like the good dick that he was, unobtrusively. I gave him the high sign, as I went by, to keep Tracey under the gun.

Number Five, was the chief's private office. I was closing the door when the chief swung round to the phone that had just jangled.

"Yeah?" he said into it. "Well, I don't know. Wait a minute. I'll ask Mac. It's his case." He turned to me. "It's the head jailer, Cooper. Some woman's down there who wants to see Trigger Cole."

"Let me talk to him," I said.

The chief handed me the phone.

"Is she blond, about five two, blue eyes, twenty-five, molly-dolly?" I asked Cooper.

"Right on the head, Mac," he said. "Says her name's Lucille Gray."

"It is. Ever since she switched from Grobovitch." Which was neither here nor there. And so I added: "Stall her off till I get there."

Things were crowding me and I hoped John Tracey would show up pretty soon for work. He didn't. While I was waiting I told the chief about the double and what I was trying to do. In about an hour Cooper called up again and wanted to know whether I was coming or what, because the dame was getting sore and wanted to know if she was going to see Mr. Cole—

"Looks like your double has got cold feet," said the chief.

I shook that off. That could be, of course. On the other hand there could be some other explanation.

When I got to the jail our sweet Lucille Gray was spraying poison here, there, and everywhere, in between telling Cooper that she'd get a lawyer, she'd get Mr. So-and-So, and Mr. Whosis—she all but said she'd have the members of the supreme bench come down to the jug *en masse*—so that she could see her Mr. Cole.

I got some of it when she saw me.

"You're the guy behind this," she howled. "You're framin' him. But you'll never get away with it."

I tried to look injured. "Who me?"

"Am I goin' to see him, or ain't I?"

I gave Cooper the office.

"I'll bring him down," Cooper told her. "Cool off."

*

I WENT to the office as soon as Trigger came down. I picked up the wire. Meantime Cooper placed Trigger in the proper place behind the screen, guiding him over to the corner of the inclosure farthest from the office. Lucille followed on her side.

"How're you, hon?" she began.

"I'm burned up," said Trigger.

"Oily says take it easy and stand pat."

"There's nothin' else to do," said Trigger. "It's a bum beef."

"Oily is sore. He thinks you pulled the caper, but he's goin' to the bat for you." She looked about. "He found out that the women had fingered your picture at headquarters and—"

"I wouldn't cross him and the mob by pullin' anythin' like that," cut in Trigger, "on my own. He's nuts. Tell him to get busy and get me out of here. The dicks ain't got a leg to

stand on. The woman that lost the junk, her name's Huysten, told them in front of me that I wasn't the guy."

"Yeah, we know that," Lucille said. "She was talked to this morning and told that if she went on fingering you she'd never see her boy again. The mob snatched him last night and——"

"Shut up."

"What's the matter?"

"Some one may be listenin', for all you know."

"All right, hon, but——"

Just then Cooper came into the office. "Getting anything?"

I told him I wasn't getting anything I hadn't suspected before. "Except this: It may be that Trigger pulled that job on his own last night. Oily Blandon doesn't like it, even though he did snatch the Huysten youngster to put the screws on the mother not to identify Trigger."

"When did that happen?"

"Last night, it seems. Oily moved pretty fast. I guess that he figured that Trigger might squeal on the mob, especially on him, Oily, if he found himself on the route to the hot seat and could dodge it by talking the right way."

I then gave up the wire. Trigger and the girl were being cautious. I went back to headquarters, hoping I'd find the double there. He wasn't. Jim Davis was there, with enough to give me a headache. There was a turban of snowy-white bandages round his head.

"I just woke up in the emergency a while ago," he said. "Two guys took Trigger out of the park soon after you left. They had guns on him. I horned in and——"

"That wasn't Trigger," I told him. I made a sketchy explanation.

Evening came. Trigger was in the process of release. Some shyster got a writ of hocus-pocus to

make us show cause why Trigger wasn't charged. The time limit was up, too. There was nothing we could do.

About fifteen minutes after this sweet news, who shows up but my friend, the double, John Tracey.

"You're too late to do any good now," I said.

"I couldn't get here before," explained Tracey. "The fact is I was snatched—kidnaped."

"What!"

He shook his head. "Yeah, that's right. I was taken less than a minute after you left me."

I looked at him. He gave me a straight eye.

"Tell me all about it," I said. "Sit down."

TRACEY sat down. "A fellow came up and he wanted to know what you said to me. I told him it was none of his business. Another guy came up. This one wanted to know if I knew Trigger Cole. I said no. He said I was a liar. I said he was one, too. The other wanted to know what you said to me, what you wanted me to do. When I wouldn't tell him, he told me I'd have to go with 'em. I told him to jump in the lake. The other guy came out with a gun and said he'd burn me if I didn't go peaceful-like. Just then some other fellow came up, and he wanted to know what was going on. The guy with the gun didn't say anythin'. He just knocked him kickin'. So I went with 'em.

"They put me in a car that was by the curb and took me out into the country, to the north. Then they began asking me again what you had said to me. I thought I'd better tell 'em somethin' reasonable. So I said you asked me if I wanted a job and if I did I should come to headquar-

ters. They didn't go for that, and so they tied me up and punched me all around the place. But I didn't change my story. So they finally let up. About an hour ago they got pretty tight and I slipped out of the rope and got away. I flagged a truck on the highway and came straight here."

"Could you find the place now?" I asked.

"I know where it is," he said. "It's on the Bronxville road. How far out I don't know. But you can't miss the place. On the left-hand side is a little lake. The house is off to one side. There's no other house there. You couldn't miss——"

The door slammed. In came the chief. "They've just bumped him," he said.

"Who is 'they' and who is 'him'?" I asked.

"Some mob has bumped off Trigger Cole—killed him as he was leaving the Justice building. Stein, his lawyer, too."

I gave him plenty of attention.

"They got it when they were on the steps of the building. A car swung up to the curb and sprayed them with a machine gun. I wasn't far away and I saw the whole thing. I commandeered a car and rushed them to the emergency, but they were gone before we got there. The dirty, murdering——" And so on.

The killing wasn't a bad thing for the city, exactly. It wasn't bad, either, for the scheme I had.

"Have the reporters got hold of it yet?" I asked the chief.

"I guess so. Why?"

"Head them off, give them the go-around," I said, "by telling them that Trigger wasn't bumped at all, only slightly wounded, because he had the presence of mind to topple over as soon as the gun began to smoke. You get the idea?"

"Not yet," admitted the chief. "I saw where the slugs went in."

"If you'll give out the dope that Trigger only pretended to be bumped and tell the boys at the emergency to keep mum, we can send Tracey, here, into the Bandon mob as Trigger, to see what he can fish up about the Huysten job and the kidnaping. I've got a hunch it'll be plenty, if the mob will go for him as Trigger."

"I'll go down to the pressroom and see what I can do," said the chief.

"Now, this is a tough thing to go into," I said to Tracey. "It's possible that the bump was done by the Bandon outfit. I happen to know that Oily Bandon more than half thinks that Trigger pulled the Huysten on his own hook. If Oily is behind the killing, then you'll be going into double danger by cutting into that mob. I don't think he is. But—if you want to pull out, now is the time to do it."

"I know that," said Tracey. "I'm strong for it. I've got a score to settle for myself." He gave a short laugh. "Those guys were pretty rough with me this afternoon."

"Jake." I gave him a service revolver.

PRETTY SOON the chief was back. "The reporters are going to be good," he said.

I took Tracey to the emergency and had Dr. Harlow put a blister on Tracey's forehead and then open it up. The result looked like the kind of wound that a grazing bullet might make.

"It'll cover up any blunders you may pull," I said. "They'll think the shock has made you a little silly. But, even so, you won't be able to put it over on those guys for long. A few minutes maybe—that may

be long enough for you to get the dope on the whereabouts of the boy. As soon as you get it, blow. I'll have some men in the neighborhood to help you if you get into a jam. They'll know who you are and be on the lookout for you. I can't go in the neighborhood. The mob knows me too well."

Tracey grinned. It was clear that things were going straight up his alley.

I thought it wouldn't be wise to send him to the Pair of Dice for an hour or so. A man that's been in a shooting jam like that in front of the Justice building doesn't just bounce away from it. So, for a while I sat around coaching Tracey in some of the tricks of manner and gab that Trigger had, and told him all I could about the sweet Lucille Gray.

It was about seven o'clock that I gave him my blessing and started him off. At the corner he called a cab and gave the address of the club. The man was game, all right.

I went to the detail room at headquarters. Jim Davis, the turban on his head, was reading a magazine.

"How's the head?"

"It's not too bad," he said.

"Where's the Bronxville road, do you know?"

He nodded. "Up north. It's a jerk-water highway that runs between——"

"Do you know the place on it where there's a lake?"

He thought a while. "Yeah."

"Take a couple of men with you and go out there to a little house on the other side of the lake. It's a hide-out for the Bandon outfit. I'll get the assignment for you from the chief."

I saw Davis and the men off, went down and had some chuck, and then decided to go out to Park Avenue

to see whether I couldn't make Mrs. Huysten open up about the kidnaping. I arranged to have a shotgun squad tail me.

THE SERVANT that came to the door didn't want to let me in. I pushed by her. Mrs. Huysten was just coming down the stairs, dressed for going out, with a heavy veil on, carrying a large jewel case.

She became angry. She said: "How dare you come in here in that manner?"

"Say, I'm here on police business," I told her. "Your son has been kidnaped. By concealing the fact, by negotiating with the kidnapers, you are compounding a felony."

She wrung her hands. "Please go away," she said. "Your presence here may cause the death of my son. I'm sure those terrible men are watching the house." She sank into a chair. "When my boy is returned to me I shall tell all that has happened." She began to sob. "Not now. Not now."

"Yes, you'd better tell me now. I know more about these things than you. If it'll be for the best not to interfere, I won't—that I promise."

"I have received another note from the men who are holding my boy and I was instructed in it again not to have any dealing with the police on instant penalty of death to my boy."

"When did you get it?"

"About fifteen minutes ago."

"Let me see it."

"Please——"

"The note," I insisted.

She fished into a pocket and brought out the note.

It was printed in lead pencil and read:

You can get your son back alive only if you do as we say. Get all your jewelry—all of it. We know

how much you have. A man will come for you in a car at eight o'clock. You have to go with him with all your jewelry. If you tell the cops or anybody else we'll knock the boy in the head. Be wise.

"Is that the jewelry?" I said, pointing to the case.

She nodded. "All that I own."

My watch read seven forty-five. I had an idea. It seemed sound. I wasn't a big man and Mrs. Huysten wasn't a small woman.

"I know who has your son," I said. "If you'll work with me we'll be able to get your son back without your having to give up the jewelry, and at the same time I may be able to round up the gang."

"Oh, I fear for Reynolds. Those terrible men will——"

As she was speaking the maid that had given me the low-down in the first place came into the room. To her I said: "Get me an outfit such as Mrs. Huysten has on. Shoes, stockings, everything. And be sure of the veil."

The girl looked at her mistress.

"I'm going in your place," I said to Mrs. Huysten.

She wiped her eyes. She looked at me steadily. Then she turned to the maid. "Bring the clothing."

"Hurry up with the other things," I said. Time was ticking away. I went on to Mrs. Huysten: "You'll have to help me a little. When the contact man comes I want you to meet him in here. I'll stay in the drawing room. Keep your veil down and make it a point to say something to him, so that he'll hear your voice. Then you pretend that you forgot your handkerchief in the drawing room. Come in. I'll go out in your place. Understand?"

She said she did.

Soon enough the girl, Mary, was

down with the clothes. She even had the sense to bring down a pair of gloves. My paws are pretty hairy. She said the gloves were her own.

"You'd never be able to get into Mrs. Huysten's," she murmured, forgetting she was paying no compliment to her own hands.

SHE led me to the butler's pantry and that's where I made the switch. When I came out the two women helped me to straighten things out.

It was just when I began to feel a little foolish that a car came up the drive. A man got out. He came up the stairs. There was something familiar about the outline of him, but his face was turned.

The bell rang. Mrs. Huysten began to tremble.

"Steady," I said.

At bottom she had plenty of spunk. Remember that she believed herself to be risking her son's life. She got hold of herself.

"Open the door," she said to Mary, and stepped out into the anteroom.

I stood behind a drape at the drawing-room door.

The man that came in the house spoke to Mrs. Huysten: "Have you got the stuff?"

"Yes," she said faintly. A couple of moments went by before she continued. "My handkerchief—I've forgotten it—in the drawing room. It'll take only a moment."

She came into the drawing room, white and shaking. When I went to her to take the jewel case she sagged against me. I shook her. She got a grip on herself. Dumbly she nodded, as if to say everything was jake again. I got the case and went out into the anteroom.

There stood John Tracey. I didn't crack a word.

He did. "Is that the stuff?" He reached for the case, got it, opened it, closed it, put it under his arm, and said: "Let's be movin'."

I followed him out. He opened the door of the car. I recognized it as Oily Blandon's machine. We started off.

As the car swung out of the drive I saw Drang, the head of the gun squad that had followed me out to the Huysten's. He nearly fell over when he saw the veiled lady give him the high sign to swing on behind.

At the corner a long black sedan with the blinds down purred up from somewhere behind us.

"That's the follow-up, Mac," said Tracey, turning around to grin at me.

"How did you know me?" I asked.

"I got a whiff of your breath when you got into the car. It ain't bad, exactly, but you smoke cigars, and I gotta hunch the lady don't." He slowed up a little. "Besides, one of the boys saw you go to the Huysten place. I was tipped off. So I put two and two together."

"Did you have any trouble when you cut into the mob?"

"Not for a while. They took me for Trigger right away—even Lucille."

"She hasn't a grain of sense," I said. "How long was Oily fooled?"

Tracey grinned into the mirror at me. "About ten minutes, I guess. We were in the office when it clicked to him that I wasn't the guy he thought I was.

"Bump him?"

"I had to, all right," admitted Tracey.

"And you got the necklace back?"

He nodded. "It was in the safe." He paused briefly. Then he added:

"You're pretty smart, for a dick. How long have you been next to me?"

"I had a half hunch when I first saw you," I said. "You see, I took into consideration that Mrs. Huysten wasn't mistaken in saying, when she saw Trigger, that he wasn't the man. I thought that if the man was not Trigger, then it was somebody very much like him. You looked like a possible answer. I'd have pinched you in the park, but I figured you wouldn't have the necklace with you—if you were the guy. At the time I couldn't be sure you were. There was a dick named Davis near by. I put him on your trail to see what you'd lead to. If I had been wrong, if you had been on the up and up, I'd have used you to double for Trigger as I said."

THE black sedan was a little nearer.

I went on: "You surprised me when you came to headquarters. Since then I reasoned that the guys that took you out of the park were Oily's mobsters who suspected you of the Huysten job and got the necklace from you."

"Yeah," said Tracey, "I had it on me. I was waitin' in the park for a fence I had a date with."

"Later, when you got away from Oily's hide-out on the lake, you thought your best bet for getting it back was to fall in line with the scheme I had put you up to, to mix in with the mob as Trigger. But you found out that he was on the way to the bricks. So you left it to your mob to knock him off while you were down at headquarters, chewing the rag with me. Your play was that if his bump could be kept undercover you would still have a good chance to go into Oily as Trig-

ger. Right? Correct me if I'm wrong."

"For a dick you ain't so dumb," complimented friend Tracey.

I glanced back. The sedan was still creeping up.

"What I don't get," I went on, "is how Oily got the necklace without knowing about you, how you look, and so on. Since we're talking things over, would you mind telling me?"

"Why not?" said Tracey. "Oily was in the dump on the Bronxville road when the two hoods brought me in. What he didn't know was that I got away after he beat it back to his club." He grinned at me in the mirror again. "That was because I bumped those two guys. Some other guy, too, that was watchin' the Huysten kid, who they had tied up in the cellar. Oily wasn't wise to my gettin' away—till a coupla seconds before I threw it into him."

"How about this ransom angle?"

"That was Oily's idea. He thought he might as well put the squeeze on the Huysten dame. Seein' that he had the kid he might as well take her for all he could. It was a good idea and I thought I could carry it through for myself. My boys were on the spot. And here we are." He gave me another sly grin. "Tired of talkin'?"

"Yeah," I said. "Turn her nose to headquarters." I put my gun to his head.

"You're going to make me change my mind about you," he said. "That boat behind us, dick, is my follow-up. You ain't got a chance."

"I know," I said. "But there's a shotgun squad right behind your mob, Tracey. That's my follow-up."

I suppose the men in the black sedan saw me with the gun. They came barging up alongside. I reached over and put the arm on Tracey, smack under the chin, and jerked him over the back of the seat. At the same time a machine gun began to crack out a *tat-tat-tat*. Hell and glass splintered all around. But John Tracey was between me and the hot stuff. His head was pretty well punctured.

Then the car went into the curb, into a fire plug. The car flopped over. Another burst of lead ripped into it, stitching a line of holes in the bottom of the car. Simultaneous with this the roar of shotguns sounded. I hoped they were the police guns.

They were. They killed all three of the mobsters in the black sedan. But that was a fact I didn't know till after I woke up in the emergency and the chief told me all about it.

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Death in the Patio

by

W. T. Ballard

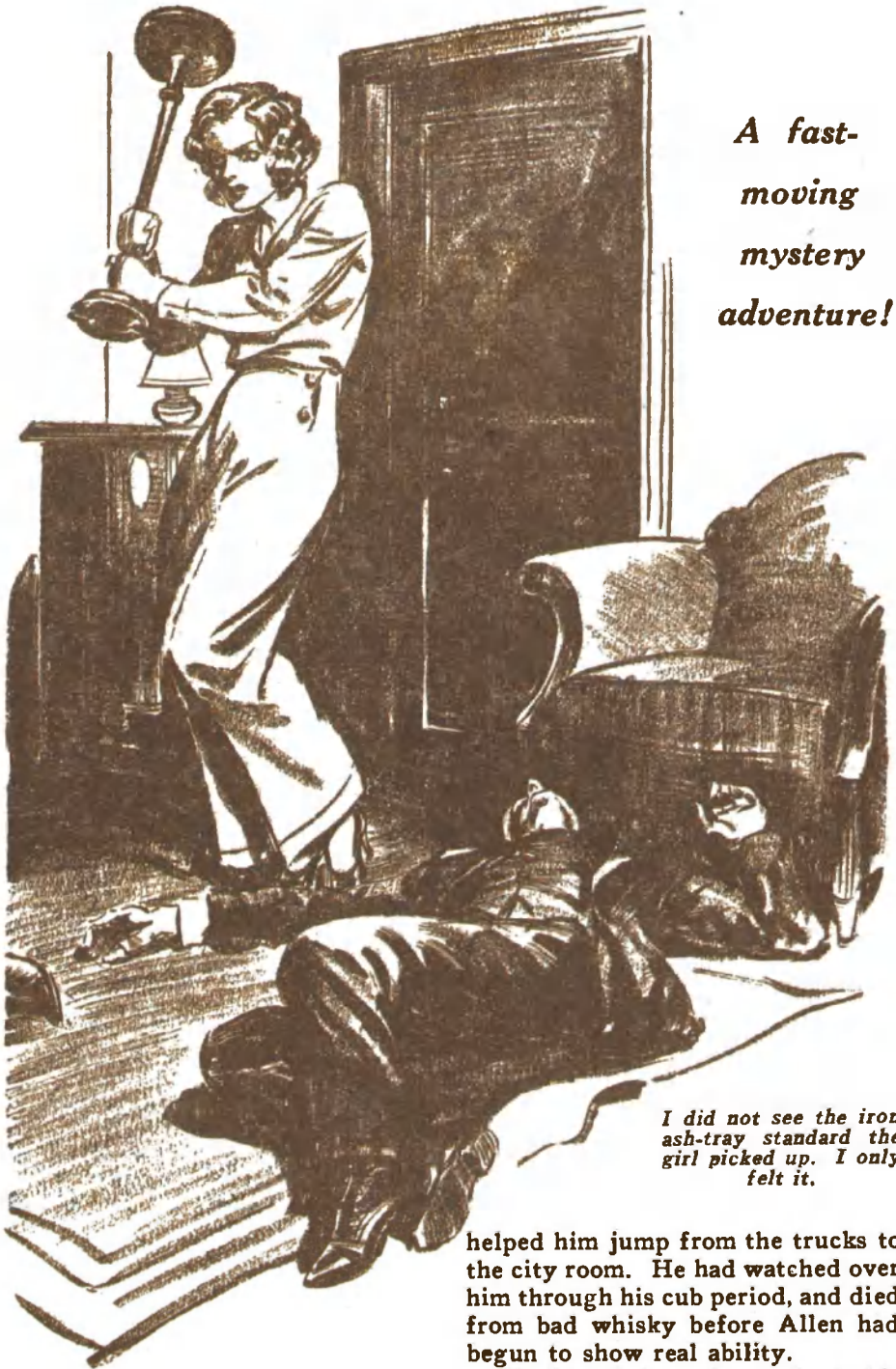


I LOOKED UP from my desk as my office door opened. "Clipper" Allen came into the room. He was small, black-haired, with sharp features and an almost colorless face. He looked frail, ineffective. I knew that he was neither.

Born back of the yards in Chicago, he had grown up with the street

gangs, taking nothing, asking no favors. That he wasn't a gangster was more accident than design. His first job had been in the circulation department during a newspaper war. A reporter had liked him, had

*A fast-
moving
mystery
adventure!*



*I did not see the iron
ash-tray standard the
girl picked up. I only
felt it.*

helped him jump from the trucks to the city room. He had watched over him through his cub period, and died from bad whisky before Allen had begun to show real ability.

His knowledge of gangland, his absolute fearlessness, and his devo-

tion to the paper had made him a good reporter. He went from Chicago to New York, wrote a novel about a gang girl, and skyrocketed into fame. I had known him in New York before R. K. B. had added Allen to its staff of writers. We weren't effusive, but were good friends.

Allen shut the door and came across the room to perch himself on one corner of my scarred desk. "Do they allow writers in here?"

I grinned. "Some writers. What's on your mind, pal?"

Allen blew smoke through his thin nose, slowly. "I'm thinking about bumping off a rat," he said, casually. "I thought you might line me up with a good mouthpiece."

I made my eyes narrow. I knew that Allen didn't often joke, that when he did it meant something. "Who's the candidate?"

"Max Gordon."

My eyes arched. "Stella Darlow's husband?"

"Yeah."

We looked at each other in silence, my eyes searching, probing, Allen's opaque. My lips twisted. I rose and walked toward the window. For a moment I stared down at the street below, then turned around, my hands sunk deep in my coat pockets. "Better think it over, Clipper."

Allen shoved his cigarette deliberately into the ash-tray, made sure that it was out before looking up. "I have. Some one ought to burn him, and I guess that it's my job."

I said, "Divorce. Why doesn't she get rid of the bum? There'd be no trouble about grounds. I'd go on the stand myself."

Allen's light shoulders moved beneath the tailored coat. "It sounds funny to people who read the junk they print about Stella in the fan

magazines and movie columns, but her religion says no divorce, and she won't have one."

I whistled tonelessly. "It's none of my business, Clipper, and if I'm stepping into anything tell me to go to hell. But—well—I figured three years ago that you and Stella were set to middle-aisle it, as our friend Walter would say—" I broke off and was silent for a moment. "Then she picked up this bum."

Allen did not answer at once. I decided that he wasn't going to. Then he said, "It was my fault, Ted. You know the type of dames I'd known. I didn't realize that Stella was different. She wasn't a star then, you know. She was the ingénue in 'Happiness Moon.' Last year she clicked in Brainard's 'Ransom,' and Evans brought her out here. This Max Gordon had a swell front. His family had stolen the land from the Indians in sixteen something or other. No one knew that he was broke, which wouldn't have mattered to Stella then and doesn't now, but he's a cheap heel. He doesn't play the game with any one, and it's up to me to do something about it."

"Have you seen Stella?" I asked.

Allen's eyes flashed to my face and darkened. "Only on the lot. And don't get it into your head that she's squawked. She didn't. She's not the kind that bellyaches to any one, but she doesn't need to with me." He rose and took a slow step toward the door. "I didn't come in here to spill my sob story, Ted; I came in to ask about a lawyer. This is my job, and I don't need help."

I CAUGHT his slender shoulders and forced him into the desk chair. "Now listen, you. I'm going to talk for a minute. I'll admit everything

that you say. I don't want any part of Gordon. I've seen plenty of chiselers in Hollywood, but he wins without an argument. I'm not thinking of him, or of you, you bum. I'm thinking of Stella. She's nothing to me, but she is on the level. She plays the game, and without marked cards.

"Have you figured what the publicity will do to her? She's just getting started out here. I happen to know that Evans thinks she's one of the best finds in years. She hasn't let it go to her head. In other words, she hasn't gone Hollywood. You've thought about this until it's burned its way into you. Forget it for a couple of days. Let me go out and talk to her. Let me see what has to be done."

I saw Allen's lips forming into a no, and put my hand across his mouth. "Now listen, punk. Give me a chance to try. You can always kill him if I fail."

Allen stared up at me. "You won't tell her what I'm planning. You won't—"

I said, harshly, "Do you think that I'm dumb? You can't stay in this business as long as I have without learning something about women. I won't even admit that I know you. I'll tell her that I've got the dope on Gordon, and that I'll help her shake him. Now get the hell out of here, and don't come back for three days."

II.

I REACHED for the phone as the door closed. "Charley," I said when the connection was made, "Is Stella Darlow working to-day? She isn't? O. K. Find out when I can see her." I hung up and turned back to my desk. At three thirty that afternoon I got out of my cab before the

Beverly Hills house which the girl had leased, and went up the winding walk.

A trim maid in black and white admitted me into a square, tile-paved hall, and led the way through an arched door into a sunlit room. "Miss Darlow will see you in a few minutes."

I watched her disappear, then looked around. The room was long, a wing projecting from the side of the house, with windows on three sides. The window at the back looked out on a small stone-paved patio, with a fishpool in the center, fed from a fountain. French doors opened into the patio, and one stood slightly ajar. I walked aimlessly about the room, my hands thrust deep in my trouser pockets. I hated the job ahead; hated talking to this girl about her worthless husband. But Allen was worth saving. I had respect for the gang-bred writer, something greater than respect.

I paused beside the French door and stared unseeingly at the patio, my mind on other things, not grasping what my eyes transported to my brain. Gradually the objects before me took shape: the fishpool rimmed with rock, perhaps two feet above the patio floor; the stone and concrete fountain, water trickling down its side. Then I stiffened, for from behind the rim of the pool a man's foot showed, a sport shoe of black-and-white, the leg above incased in striped flannel.

Startled, I pulled my hands from my pockets and pushed the door wide. I crossed the patio in a dozen steps and rounded the end of the fishpond. Max Gordon lay on his back, one leg extended, one doubled under him. He wore a brown-and-yellow, slip-over sweater over a white shirt, and there was an ugly stain spread across the breast of

the sweater from a little hole directly above the heart.

I did not trouble to stoop over. It was evident that the man was dead. I looked around, noted the wall almost shoulder-high, which divided the patio from the vacant lot next door, heard a noise behind me, and turned. Stella Darlow stood in the French door, watching me. I'd seen the actress before, had met her in Evans' office, but I hadn't realized how attractive she was.

Her face, without heavy make-up, had something childlike about it, something trusting. She said, "Hello, Mr. Cayton. How do you like my patio?"

I said, automatically, "Fine, very nice." My mind was raving, trying to plan. Something in my face must have warned her, or—I did not let myself think of that. She came a step forward.

"Why, what's the matter?" Her eyes were larger now, questioning. I knew that I should stop her before she reached the fountain, but I wanted to see her reaction. She came across the irregular stones with easy grace, her tiny slippers hardly seeming to touch the rough surface.

"Oh!" One hand was at her throat, the other clenching suddenly at her side. There was no grief in the voice, only surprise, shock. I couldn't judge whether or not it was real. It might be feigned. I realized that she was a finished actress, that she had something which no amount of training can give—natural ability. "Is—is he dead?"

III.

COLLINS was young, too young for the job. I knew him slightly, knew that he was fair, knew little else about him. I wished that the

death had happened in Los Angeles, where Louman would have been in charge. It hadn't. It had happened in Beverly Hills. The detective turned away from the phone and looked up at me. "So you found him in the patio, and no one had heard the shot?"

I shrugged, "I found him in the patio. I don't know whether or not any one heard the shot."

Collins' eyes looked at me, through me. "May I ask what you were doing here?"

Again my shoulders moved. "I came out to see Miss Darlow on business. She's under contract to R. K. B. I handle stuff for them."

The detective nodded. "And, of course, you'll do everything to protect her. She's valuable."

I reddened slowly. "Are you cracking that Miss Darlow shot her husband?"

It was Collins' turn to shrug. "From what I hear, she had plenty of reason." He was silent for a moment. "By the way, just how well do you know Miss Darlow?"

I laughed suddenly. "I'm glad I'm only a private cop. It must be hell to be suspicious all the time. So you're trying to build me up for an outside love interest, are you? Well, pal, you've picked the wrong play. It happens that I've met her once before. I saw her for exactly three minutes in Evans' office. Any other questions?"

"Several." Collins sounded angry. "Just what was your business out here this afternoon?"

I shook my head. "Sorry, but it isn't for publication."

"Oh! So you won't answer?"

My voice tightened. "Suppose you let me tell you something. I'm not on the witness stand. I'm not suppressing evidence in this killing. I don't know a thing. If you

think that I go around telling studio business you're screwy."

For seconds we stared at each other. Collins' eyes were the first to drop. "O. K. But you don't need to get hard about it."

My face was bland. "I thought you were the one that was getting hard." I picked up my hat and moved toward the door. "If you want me, you know where I am. And, Collins, just a tip: go easy what you feed to the papers. They'll make you look like a monkey when this is straightened out."

IN THE HALL the trim maid touched my arm, looked both ways hastily, and slipped a folded note into my palm. I did not open it until I was in the cab, speeding toward the studio. When I did, I swore softly as I read:

Cayton: Don't let Clipper Allen
come to see me. S. D.

I tore it into small pieces and let them float through the half-lowered window, then lighted a cigarette and slumped back in the seat. At the studio I went directly to Evans' office, and found the head of R. K. B. pacing the thick rug with short, excited strides. Boyce, head of the publicity department, stood beside the window. Both turned sharply as I came through the door.

"More trouble!" Evans' voice was accusing. "Why is it, I ask you, that actresses must have husbands?"

I shrugged. "I'm not married. You should be able to answer that one."

Evans spread his hands. "Why should I know about such people? Positively, Ted, I am through, washed up. The money we spend building this girl up on publicity, and now she kills her husband."

"I don't think that she did," I said. Evans stared at me. "You don't think— What has that got to do with it? People will read it in the papers. Do you think they want their children to see a killer in pictures?"

I said, "Let's not cross that bridge until we come to it. We don't know who killed Gordon. Personally, I don't care. There are a hundred people in this town who had plenty of cause. Why should we jump to the idea that Stella Darlow is a killer?"

Boyce detached himself from the window. "I think that you don't understand, Ted. The publicity on Darlow's latest picture is just ready for release. We can't very well send it out—"

"Hold it," I said, "until you see how things break. The trouble with this business is that you jump into things pell-mell. Let's look around."

Boyce said thoughtfully, "If we were to find the murderer—that is, assuming that Stella didn't—"

"What do you think that the cops are doing? Playing anagrams?" I asked him.

"Ted, listen." Evans swung about. "That isn't such a bad idea. Supposing you look around. Maybe you can find out who killed him."

"Sure."

Evans was getting enthusiastic. "When you find the killer we can use the publicity to put over Darlow's next picture." He walked to the big desk and drew an enormous cigar from the humidor. "Honestly, I don't know what this studio would do without me to think of things."

IV.

I WENT DOWNTOWN to my own office. I'd been handling work for several of the studios for al-

most three years, but this was the toughest job I'd had handed me. I sat down at my desk to think it over, then picked up the phone and called four different numbers. "Sid? Ted Cayton."

Blanchard's voice, slightly blurred with alcohol, reached me. "Hi, pal? Tough break R. K. B. got on that Gordon killing."

I said, sharply, "Where'd you hear it? The papers hadn't got it when I left."

Blanchard chuckled. "Grapevine," he replied, referring to the mysterious channel through which news flows about the movie capital. "You should know that a thing like that can't be covered."

"Listen, sir. You knew this heel pretty well——" I started.

"Thank you." Blanchard cut in.

"Don't get high hat with me, you bum," I came back. "What I want is the dope on his latest girl friend. Who is she? Who does she run with, and where can I find her?"

The gossip writer's tone sharpened. "What's the idea, Ted? Didn't Stella shoot him?"

"When I know I'll tell you. Now give me the dope, and if you let it leak in your column that I'm interested I'll see that you never get on any lot again."

"Will you put that promise in writing?"

"Sober up, you ape. This is important."

"O. K., O. K. Keep your hair on while I think. Gordon had so many dames hanging around that I'll have to sort them. You might try Myra Terrel. She's got an apartment on Fountain. Wait till I look up the number." He was silent for a moment, then gave me the address. "Apartment Fourteen," he said, "and you'd better take your own liquor. Hers is lousy."

"Who's the other one?"

"Honey Blake. She dances at the Corn Cob Club, on Sunset. I don't know a thing about her, but Gordon has been giving the joint a play, and Honey's the only reason that I can think of."

The door behind me opened as I said into the phone, "Keep this under your hat, Sid," and hung up.

Polly Haines, my secretary, said, "Any time that tramp can keep anything under his hat. He tells things before his column gets into print."

I SWUNG AROUND and stared at her. "Heard the news?"

She raised her eyebrows. "What news?"

I shook my head. "This is important. I found Max Gordon dead in his own patio, shot."

She said, "You mean his wife's patio."

My voice got irritated. "You don't sound surprised?"

She moved her shoulders in a negative shrug. "I'm not. The only wonder is that some one didn't get him sooner. I suppose it's up to you to clean up the mess, since Stella works for R. K. B."

"To hell with R. K. B. I'm thinking about Clipper Allen," I said.

Her eyes got suddenly wide and her voice had a certain dry breathlessness. "Like that?" She was staring at me.

"Like that." I returned the stare. "Clipper plays square with me!"

"Maybe he won't be dragged in." Her voice was thoughtful. Her gloved fingers played with the catch of her purse.

"And maybe he will. You didn't inquire how I happened to be at Stella's. You're not as bright as the cops. They asked me that."

She said, slowly, "So you went out there for Clipper?"

I shrugged, and in a dozen words told her of the writer's threat. "Now you see why I'm interested."

She was silent for a moment, then came forward and put a small gloved hand on my shoulder. "Listen, Ted, I don't like it. I don't like your getting mixed up with this mess."

I shrugged, "Clipper's a friend of mine."

"Half the people in this lousy town are friends of yours, when they get into a jam. I wish——" she started.

I stared at her. "What do you wish?"

She turned away and moved toward the window. "Hell!" Her laugh had a half-choked sound. "It doesn't matter what I wish. Go ahead. Clear this up. If I can help you——"

"You hear things. Tell me about Gordon."

She made a little sign of distaste. "I'm particular whom I hear about. I didn't like him."

I watched her with narrow eyes—her trim shoulders beneath the fur-collared coat, the perky hat which did not conceal her shining hair; then I reached for the phone and called the Hollywood Athletic Club. I asked for Allen, then hung up, swearing softly to myself.

Polly Haines had turned from the window. "What's the matter, Ted?"

I shoved the phone away from me, found a loose cigarette in my pocket, and rolled it between my fingers. "Clipper checked out of the club two hours ago, without leaving a forwarding address."

V.

I DISMISSED MY CAB, and looked at the brick-faced apartment house. It was six stories, built in two wings, with a tiled lobby in the

center roofed by a skylight. The girl at the switchboard was blonde, with a trace of brown showing at the roots of her hair. She smiled at me around the gum which filled her cheek.

"Is Miss Terrel, Apartment Fourteen, in?" I asked her.

Her eyes changed, appraised me. "Just a minute." She plugged into the board. "What's the name?"

"Cayton. Tell her that it's important."

"I'll bet that it is," she said, knowingly. Into the phone, "Miss Terrel? A Mr. Cayton to see you." Then, to me, "You can go on back, last apartment on the right." She seemed to expect something. I didn't give her anything.

I went back along the heavy runner which covered the composite floor, and pressed the buzzer of Apartment Fourteen. After a moment the door came open to expose a little girl with hard, brown eyes, and a too-long blond bob.

She inspected me in silence, then stepped aside for me to enter. In the front room, littered and stuffy, she said, "What's on your mind, brother?"

"You worked on the 'Princess Helene' picture at R. K. B. three years ago."

Her plucked brows arched. "My Heaven! My public! Mind telling me why you remembered me?"

I said, without grinning, "Because you were so lousy. I don't think I ever saw any one else quite so lousy."

She laughed suddenly, too loudly, and dropped onto the divan. She wore brown slacks. "You've got a new slant at that. Say, it's kind of good after the usual hooey that the boulevard cowboys pass out. What the hell do you want, anyway?"

I said, softly, "Ever hear of Max Gordon?"

Her eyes were narrow. "What if I did?"

"When did you see him last?"

She rose slowly. "Say, who are you?"

I shrugged. "Just some one who doesn't want to see you in a jam."

"Yeah? Big-hearted?"

"That's it. When did you see Gordon last?"

She said slowly, distinctly, "Go to hell."

I caught her shoulders. "Come on, babe, I like them hard, and I'm easier to talk to than the cops."

Her body, which had been tense, relaxed. "The cops?" There was no fear in the voice, only a question.

I nodded. "Some one killed Gordon in his own patio this afternoon. Now will you talk to me, or must I send for the boys in blue?"

Her eyes were on mine. "This is straight? You're not trying to be funny?"

"It doesn't sound funny, even to me, and I didn't like Gordon. Come on, sister. Spill it."

"You're not a dick?"

"I'm from R. K. B. Gordon's wife is under contract to us."

Her face changed, and a slow smile showed small, extremely white teeth. "I've been trying to remember where I'd seen you. You're Ted Cayton. Want a drink?"

I said, "I sent up my name."

Her shoulders moved. "Names don't mean anything, and I didn't pay any attention—but—" Her eyes got speculative. "So R. K. B. is interested in what I know about Gordon?"

I said, harshly, "I didn't say R. K. B. is interested. I said that I am."

"It's the same thing."

"No, sweetheart, it's not the same. You might squeeze some dough out of the studio, you won't from me."

Her voice was begging. "Give a girl a break, Cayton. I know plenty."

I smiled at her. "That's all I wanted to find out. I'll let the cops squeeze it out of you." I walked across the floor toward the phone on the end table. She watched me with smoldering eyes. As I picked up the instrument I turned and looked toward her.

"Go ahead, cheap sport. Make good your bluff."

I TURNED MY BACK, said to the switchboard operator, "Police headquarters, homicide department," and waited. Across the room the girl drew her breath sharply. I said, without looking around, "Want to talk?"

She did not answer, and I said into the phone. "Is Louman there?
 . . . Hello, copper, Ted Cayton.
 . . . Yeah, what's new? No. I'm out on Fountain Avenue. There's a dame out here that knows more about Gordon than he knew about himself. . . . Yeah, Max Gordon. The heel that got his in Beverly this afternoon. . . . Yeah, her name is Terrel, a phony blonde. I'll wait until you show up." I replaced the receiver and turned around, a half smile lifting one corner of my mouth. The smile died, and my eyes drew together until they were little more than slits. Aside from myself, the room was empty.

Hastily, I went through the apartment. There was no sign of her. I opened the door into the outer hall and went quickly to the lobby. "Miss Terrel come through here a minute ago?"

The telephone girl looked at me with hostile eyes. "I haven't seen her for a week."

I swore at her, crossed the lobby quickly, and stepped out onto the street, but she was not in sight. Slowly I retraced my steps to her apartment, and called Louman. The detective laughed. "That's one time you slipped up, wise guy."

I said, shortly, "The fact that she scrambled when I called you proves that she knows something." I gave him a detailed description. "Better get a man out here. She took the air in slacks and without a coat. She may double back to get her things." I hung up, locked the apartment, and went into the lobby. The operator was busy at the switchboard and



"Oh! Is—is he dead?"

I realized she was a finished actress and might be feigning her surprise.

did not look up. I leaned against the counter and waited.

Finally she raised her eyes. They were cold, mocking. I asked, "Like your job, sister?"

"I don't like some of the visitors," she replied.

I grinned sourly. "O. K., grafter, but you won't like the cops either," and moved toward the door.

I walked to the Boulevard and got a cab. I looked at my watch and saw that it was seven thirty: I rode to Sardi's and got out. Sid Blanchard was just turning into the restaurant. I stepped back and waited until the other had disappeared. I did not want to answer the columnist's questions at the moment. When he had gone, I walked down to Bob Perry's, ordered a corn-beef sandwich, and sat down at one of the stools before the bar.

ED ALBERTS of the *Telegram* drifted onto the stool beside me, ordered, winked at a redhead across my shoulder, and said, "Hear that R. K. B. is having murder trouble."

"What big ears you have, grandson."

Alberts grinned and buried his lips in the foam on his stein. "Don't be touchy. You don't know how we boys needed a good killing. There hasn't been any news except the dog show for weeks."

I grunted. "That's swell. Why the hell don't you go out and make some?"

Alberts said, "Save me. I know the story. When you were on the *Inter-Ocean* or the *World*, and there wasn't any news——"

"You kids don't know anything about a newspaper," I said. "All you can do is drop a nickel in the phone and call the rewrite."

Alberts was twisting his stein slowly in his fingers. "I was going to tell you things. Maybe now I won't."

I grinned. "You never kept a secret in your life. What's this one?"

The reporter was silent for a moment. "All right, figure it out. Gordon's been in the dough for the last three months. Find out where it came from."

I stared at him. "You mean that he's been chiseling on his wife for a year and a half. He never made a nickel in his life."

"O. K., smart guy." Alberts fished in his pockets, found a crumpled bill, slid it onto the bar and rose. My long fingers closed on the collar of his tweed coat.

"What's the answer?"

Alberts said mournfully, "If I knew, you could read about it in the *Telegram*." He lifted one hand, pried my fingers loose from the coat collar, and patted it into place. "Treat the fabric gently, son. It's old, and age demands respect." He moved away through the door and disappeared.

I finished my sandwich, paid my check, and walked to the phone booth. I called the studio and a voice said, "There's a message for you, Mr. Cayton. Hold the wire."

I held it impatiently, then the voice said, "A man called you, said that it was important. That you were to go to 781 North Humbolt, Apartment Three."

I said, "Thanks," and hung up.

I went out onto the sidewalk and looked for a cab. A newsboy, calling the bulldog edition of a morning paper came toward me. I bought one as a cab swung into the curb. I got in, gave the number, and opened the paper. Then I swore. A black

headline splashed itself across the front page:

WRITER SOUGHT IN BEVERLY
MURDER. CLIPPER ALLEN
MISSING

My eyes moved down the column and read:

The police, acting on a mysterious telephone tip, are seeking Clipper Allen, scenario writer, former gangster and newspaperman, for questioning in connection with the murder of Max Gordon, clubman and playboy, and husband of Stella Darlow, stage and screen star—

I stopped reading and dropped the paper to the cab floor. I hadn't expected the police to get the Allen angle so soon; in fact, I hadn't expected them to get it at all.

THE CAB jerked and slid to a grudging halt for a signal, went forward, swung to the left.

No. 781 proved to be a two-story apartment house. I paid the driver and walked into the tiled entry. There was no name on the mail box of Apartment Three. I pressed the bell, and waited. The inner door clicked, and I went up three carpeted steps and along the poorly lighted hall. I wondered what Allen was doing, hiding in such a place.

Some one in the building was cooking cabbage, and the smell filled the place. I paused before the floor of the apartment and knocked. It opened at once, and I faced a man whom I had never seen before. "Hello, Cayton!"

I didn't say anything. Suddenly I realized that I had made a mistake, had assumed that the telephone call had come from Allen. I started to draw back. The man said, "Come on in, wise guy." There was a gun in his hand, and a smile on the thin

lips. He backed away, and after an instant's hesitation, I followed. In the square, shabby front room I faced another man and a girl, the girl from the Fountain Avenue apartment.

She smiled, but it wasn't a nice smile. "Did you get the cops, big shot?"

I didn't answer. I was looking about the room. The man with the gun stood against the wall, watching; the other stepped forward and ran his hand over my coat. He didn't find anything, and he seemed disappointed. He said, "You were around asking Myra questions. Suppose you ask me some."

I shrugged. "You wouldn't answer if I did."

The other laughed. "Pretty cool, aren't you? What's your interest in Gordon?"

"The studio wants to know who killed him."

The man shook his head. "It won't work. You told Myra that you wanted to know. Come on. We don't want to get rough."

I looked at the girl. "Did she tell you that she tried to sell out, and that I wouldn't buy?"

She said, hoarsely, "Shut up, you."

I laughed, and let myself relax. "So you didn't tell them that?"

She said slowly, distinctly, "You're a liar, you—"

The man with the gun said, sharply, "What is this? You can't buy anything by bluffing, Cayton."

I looked at him. "I'm not bluffing. I wanted to find out who got Max Gordon. I asked the little lady, and she offered to tell me for dough."

"You—" She started toward me. The other man caught her, pulled her back.

"Cut it out. So you'd have crossed us if the price had been right?"

She said, sobbingly, "Don't, Frank. You hurt."

He said, grimly, "You'll be hurt worse, later," and twisted her arm; then to me, "But this doesn't let you out, fellow. What would you do if I told you to lay off the Gordon killing?"

The girl said, "He won't, he——" and the man slapped her sharply across the mouth.

"I almost like you," I said, with a grin. "We might use you in a picture." I looked at the girl. "I might come up on the price if you'd play with me now."

SHE eyed me sullenly. The man with the gun moved closer. I watched him from the corner of my eye. I knew that I was in a bad spot. These men might not have killed Gordon, but they knew who did, and meant to keep me from finding out. For a moment no one spoke. I said suddenly, "I don't care who killed Gordon. All I want to prove is that Clipper Allen didn't. I'll trade with you anyway, so long as I can clear——" I lunged sideways suddenly, caught the wrist of the man's gun hand, and drove my right fist into his face.

The man went down with startling suddenness, almost dragging me with him. The gun clattered on the bare floor at the edge of the rug. I paid no attention to the fallen man. I twisted, saw the other grabbing for his pocket, and leaped in.

The gun exploded, the bullet burning its way through the man's pocket, and missing me by inches. I jumped, and caught the other with a short jab which turned him part way around, as the gun spoke again, and the bullet crashed through one of the windows.

People outside were yelling. A

siren moaned in the distance, as we clinched and went over onto the rug. I did not see the girl. I was fighting for possession of the gun. I did not see the iron ash-tray standard which she caught up. I only felt it. It seemed for a moment that the world had dropped on top of my head. I wasn't out, but I seemed paralyzed, unable to move.

I knew that she was helping the gunman to his feet, that they were talking loudly as they moved across the room toward their companion. None of them paid the slightest attention to me. Their one idea seemed to be to escape. They had helped the other man to his feet, and were half dragging him to the door.

The siren moaned again, nearer this time. I managed to raise myself to my knees. I did not want the cops to find me there, did not want to answer their questions. I swayed dizzily as I gained my feet and moved to the window.

There were people outside, gathered into a little excited crowd on the sidewalk. I went to the door, gained the hall, and went toward the rear. An open window led to the fire escape, and it was only a few feet to the ground. I reasoned that my attackers had gone this way, but I hardly had time. Even as I put one leg over the sill, the police car came to a sliding halt before the apartment, its siren dying with a low moan.

I went up instead of down. I reached the roof, crawled behind one of the chimneys, and lay down. My head hurt badly, and I felt sick and shaky. I reasoned that the police would not stay long when they found no one at the scene of the shooting. After an hour I straightened, brushed my clothes carefully

with my hands, pulled my hat well down over my eyes, and went stiffly down the iron steps. I reached the ground without incident, moved through a vacant lot to the next street, and walked toward Melrose. I caught a cab, and, giving the driver Albert's address, settled back with a sigh.

The reporter knew something, that was evident. I wanted to talk with him before I made another move. I left the cab before the bungalow court which Alberts called home, and went back the concrete walk between the narrow grass plots. The reporter lived in the last one on the right, and I noted with satisfaction that there was a light.

I knocked, waited, and knocked again, without response. Swearing softly to myself, I tried the third time. Either the reporter had left his lights burning when he went out, or he was asleep; tight, probably.

I tried the door, found it locked, and walked to the window. The shade was drawn, but the window was open a crack at the top. I inserted two fingers and pushed the shade a little to one side, giving myself a partial view of the room. Then I grinned sourly. Alberts lay on a cot against the far wall, his hat pulled well over his eyes, and a bottle of whisky tipped onto the rug.

I pulled down the upper sash, snapped up the blind, and stepped up onto the sill. A moment later I was in the room and closing the window. "Hey, Alberts!"

The reporter did not stir. I said loudly, "Come on, drunk, snap out of it."

I crossed the room and pulled the hat from his eyes. "Hey, you——" The words died in my throat. There was a jagged tear in the other's vest, and a dark stain, which spread

downward onto the couch. The man wasn't drunk—he was dead.

I stood staring at him for a moment, the odor of whisky from the overturned bottle filling my nostrils, making my headache worse. Slowly I turned and looked around the room. Alberts had known something. I wished that I had talked to the reporter in Bob Perry's. I wished—but there were other things to do. Hastily, I went to the window, with my handkerchief, removed whatever fingerprints I might have left there, pulled the blind into place, and let myself out of the door. Everything around the court was quiet. I walked rapidly to my cab and got in.

VI.

THE CORN COB CLUB was a long, two-story building, set well back from Sunset. It looked cheap, was cheap, but at the moment it was the most popular spot for moviedom.

I went past the Negro doorman, gave my hat and coat to the check girl, and went into the men's lavatory. There was no one in the tiled room, and I went to the row of basins, washed my hands and face, and examined my head in the mirror. The skin wasn't broken, but there was a lump. I combed my hair, straightened my tie, and went out.

For a moment I stood in the entry hall, watching the crowd come in. I hesitated, hoping that some one I knew would arrive, some one whose party I could join, but no such person came. Finally I flipped my cigarette away, and walked toward the door of the supper room. The place was crowded; the tiny floor was filled with swaying couples. Everywhere there was noise and confu-

sion. I smiled grimly to myself. It mattered not at all to these people that two murders had been committed, and that the murderer might be among them.

The head waiter came toward me, smiling. I recognized him. He'd been steward at one of the beach clubs the preceding summer. I said, "Hello, Paul!"

"Good evening, Mr. Cayton. Do you want dinner? It's an hour before the floor show."

I shook my head and slid a bill into his palm. "You've got a dancer here, Honey Blake. I want to see her."

The other hesitated, and a film seemed to spread over his dark eyes. "I don't know—I'll see."

I nodded, and watched him thread his way between the tables. He disappeared through a door at the far end of the room, and I went back to the foyer. There was a door opposite me. I walked toward it, tried the knob, found it unlocked, and pushed it open.

Beyond was a small, heavily carpeted room. At one side was a short bar, flanked with stools. On the other were half a dozen leather-seated booths, and at the far end were five slot machines. I looked at the machines, then walked to the bar and ordered a drink.

The single attendant looked at me questioningly, then turned to mix the drink. I went over to the slot machines and lost a dollar in dimes, then returned to the bar and drank the whisky slowly. Looking in the mirror I saw a door behind me open, and Paul appeared. He came across the room.

"I couldn't find you outside." His tone was meant to be apologetic. It wasn't, and I grinned.

"You can always find me in the

bar, if there's one around. Will she see me?"

The man cleared his throat. "I'm sorry, but she asked to be excused."

My face did not change. "The hell you say! That's the first dancer that ever refused a chance in pictures. O. K., Paul! Forget it. You can fix me up with a table later. I'll stick to the bar for a while."

"But Mr. Cayton——" Paul's eyes were on my rumpled business suit.

I grinned at him. "Stick me in a corner somewhere. It doesn't matter. But when did Hollywood go formal?"

He didn't answer, and I turned back to the bar, conscious that he still lingered. I ordered another drink, played with it. Finally the head waiter left, and I got five dollars' worth of quarters from the bar man, and went back to the slot machines.

THE DOOR from the hall opened again, and two men came through. I stiffened as I saw them, and then pulled the lever so hard that the machine almost fell from its place. One man was tall, with padded shoulders and a tight-waisted, double-breasted dinner jacket. The other was short, lumpy. He was the man who had held the gun on me in the Humbolt Street apartment. They went to the bar, ordered, and turned to survey the room. The tall man said something to his companion, then came toward me.

"Why, Cayton." He extended a soft hand at the end of an extremely long arm. "Long time no see."

I said, "Hello, Koble! How's the slot-machine king?"

The tall man shrugged. "Frank, I want you to meet Ted Cayton, the private dick. He does the dirty

work for the studios around town. Ted, this is Frank Herron."

There was a bruise beneath Herron's right eye, put there by my fist. We stared at each other for an instant, then shook hands.

Herron said, "I've been meaning to meet you for a long time."

I smiled sardonically. "Any friend of Koble's should be a friend of mine."

Koble smiled. Herron didn't. He stepped back and let one hand slide into his coat pocket. Koble said, "How are things breaking? I don't see you around the hot spots as much as I did."

I shrugged. "Guess I'm getting old." My eyes were on Herron, watching him. "The floor shows are all the same, and you can buy liquor at a drug store."

Koble nodded, "Repeal did take the fun out of drinking, didn't it? But say, there's a swell little dancer in the show here. Her name's Blake."

My eyes got very narrow, but I tried not to show my interest as my mind raced. I found a cigarette, tapped it slowly, placed it between my lips, and fished for a match. Koble took a step forward, held a jeweled lighter to the cigarette.

"I said, "Thanks," dryly. I knew that Koble didn't want me to talk to the dancer, knew that the racketeer knew that I knew. "I might catch her act some time." My voice was careless. "Not to-night." I yawned widely.

Koble smiled. He tried to make it friendly. It wasn't. It was wolfish. "I'm going to tell you something, because I know you've got sense. Blake is my girl. See? I don't want her to get a chance in pictures. It's all right, her dancing in this joint; she doesn't make so much coin."

I let a smile spread slowly across my face. "I get it. You think that if she clicked in pictures she'd hand you the run around."

Koble nodded. "Paul knows how I feel, so when you sent him back to talk to Honey he talked to me instead. Paul's a smart boy, but he isn't any smarter than you. I told him that. I said, 'I'll go talk to Ted. He'll see my angle. He'll listen to reason.'"

I kept my smile on, said "Sure," and waved to the bartender. "Set them up. Just to show that there aren't any feelings."

Koble did not relax. "I knew that you were a smarty, Ted."

I tasted my drink. "Hell! There are enough dames in this country without taking yours. Sorry I led with my chin. Forget it."

Koble held out his hand, "I won't forget it, Ted. I don't forget anything."

I laughed. "That's where we're different. I forget things all the time."

KOBLE turned toward the door, said across his shoulder, "I've known guys to live longer doing that. Be seeing you." He was gone, followed by Herron.

I eyed the door thoughtfully, decided not to follow, and went back to the slot machines. Something about the whirling circles fascinated me. I hit eight, twelve, four, and eight again. The room was filling now, a little crowd of people formed about me, watching. A girl with curly, almost kinky red hair, put one hand on my shoulder, and smiled as I looked around. "For luck."

I staggered slightly as I turned, and slipping quarters into her hand, weaved to the bar. I was back again

with drinks for both of us. Her eyes studied me, seemed to pry. I knew what she was there for and went back after more drinks. Finally she decided that I was drunk enough and slipped away.

I watched her go, a smile creeping up one corner of my mouth, twisting it. I saw her slide through the door and moved after her, no sign of liquor in my walk. I opened the door a crack and peered into the entry hall. The red-headed girl was talking to Herron not three feet from me. She said, "He's drunk, plenty drunk. You can forget about him for to-night."

Herron grinned. "I've got Joe planted outside in a cab. When Cayton blows, he'll pick him up and take him out in the valley. We can't stand rough stuff around here to-night."

I shut the door quietly, went back to the bar, bought a drink, sipped it, and switched glasses with the drunk at my elbow. I'd been doing the same thing all evening. I paid for the drink and moved with careful dignity toward the door. As I struggled into my coat at the check-room counter, I saw Paul watching me.

Gravely I saluted the head waiter, moved toward the entrance, and almost fell in so doing. My hat was perched on top of my head. Outside the doorman steered my uncertain steps toward a cab at the far end of the building. I crawled in, mumbled my address, and almost immediately slid to the floor.

The doorman and driver exchanged looks. The cab started with a jerk, went out the curving drive and into Sunset. The driver was busy watching traffic. He didn't see the door on the other side open; see me slide to the running board

and drop to the gutter as we made the slow turn.

I rose, noted a tear in my pants and grinned sourly after the rapidly disappearing tail lamp; then I turned and limped down the sidewalk to the first cross street, went up it, over a board fence, across several vacant lots, and reached the rear door of the club.

Music reached me faintly as I went through the door. To the right were the kitchens, to the left a stairway went upward. I took the stairs cautiously and came out into an upper hall. To the left, a short passage opened into what was obviously the dressing rooms for the performers.

Noise reached me from below. The floor show was just over and the girls were coming up. I looked about quickly. I wanted to see "Honey" Blake, but I didn't want to be seen by any one else. There was a door almost opposite the passage entrance. I opened it and slid through into an office. I shut the door and looked around. A desk and letter files almost filled the room. The desk was cluttered with papers.

There was a second door across the room. I moved toward it, listened and then tried the knob. It was locked. I hesitated, wondering why it was locked, what was behind it; then I drew a ring of keys from my pocket. The fourth one turned. I pushed the door open a crack and peered in, but could see nothing. The room was in heavy darkness. Even the blinds were drawn to keep out the light from the distant street lamps.

I struck a match on my finger nail, then swore softly. A man lay on a leather couch against the opposite wall. The match flickered. I stared around for the light switch, found



The driver didn't see me drop to the gutter as we made a slow turn.

it and pressed it. Then I shut the door, locked it, and crossed the room.

THE MAN lay on his side, his face to the wall, his wrists and ankles bound with tape; a handker-

chief knotted at the back of his head served as a gag.

I bent over, stared. The man on the couch was Clipper Allen. The writer's eyes were on me as I turned him over on his back. He tried to

make noises around the gag. I loosened it, but for several minutes Allen could not speak. His wrists and ankles were chafed from the bonds and he could not stand.

I rubbed the circulation back into his arms and helped him to his feet. Allen said, hoarsely, "Never mind me. You'd better scram before Koble sees you.

I grinned wryly. "He's seen me already. Forget Koble. How'd you happen to be here?"

Allen was trying to walk and making a poor job of it. "My own fault," he said, grimly. "I got a tip from Stella's maid, almost as soon as she knew that Gordon was dead. I ducked, not because I was scared, but because I figured that I might be dragged in and that the publicity wouldn't be so hot for Stella. After all, we'd been friends, you know, and the papers would probably pick that up and make plenty of it.

"I came over here because I'd known Koble around Chicago and I figured that I'd be safe. What I didn't figure was that Koble and Herron had rubbed Gordon out themselves and that they'd use me. They kept me around in case things got too tough. If the cops had gotten on their tails I'd have been found in some ditch with lead in my chest."

I was staring at him. "Does Koble own the joint?"

He nodded. "Sure and like a damn fool I spilled my story to him. I never thought that he had killed Gordon."

"Just why did he kill Gordon?"

The writer shrugged. "Because for the first time in his life, Gordon was making himself some dough. He'd got backing somewhere and had bucked into the slot-machine game. He was getting too powerful and they wanted him out of the way."

I nodded. "What I don't get," I told him, "is how the cops got after you."

Clipper grinned without mirth. "Koble tipped them. He had some dame call them from this office. I heard the call, but I was tied up. They're plenty scared anyhow. The lid's about due to blow off around this town, and the dancer that headlines this show heard them plotting to kill Gordon. She tried to warn him and they caught her. They're keeping the poor kid in her dressing room between acts and there's a guy planted out in the crowd when she dances. She's in a tough spot."

I whistled softly. "So that's why they didn't want me talking to her." I turned and started for the door. The outer office was still deserted. "Listen, Clipper—you watch your chance and duck out when you can. I'm going over to Blake's dressing room. I've got to get her away from here."

Allen said, "You're screwy——" There was respect in his voice. "Don't do it, Ted. Call the cops."

"And have the girl gone by the time they burst in? No, Clipper! You're in a bad spot—so's Stella. The only way to clean things up is for this Honey Blake to talk."

I didn't stay to argue further. I turned and went across the outer office, paused for a moment to listen before I opened the door, then pulled it toward me and stepped into the hall.

I tried the doors of three dressing rooms before I found the right one. I knew I was right because it was locked on the outside. The lock wasn't much, just a padlock on a hasp, and the hasp was new. The dressing room was away from the others at the end of a short, cross hall. I looked at it for a couple of

minutes, then I pulled out my gun and smashed the lock with a couple of blows.

I PULLED the door open and went in. The room wasn't large and the single window opened onto an air shaft. There was a girl standing in the middle of the room—a girl with golden hair.

As I came in she retreated toward the far wall. She was plenty scared, her blue eyes very wide, and the back of one hand pressed against her full lips. Her voice was trembling when she said, "What is it? Who are you?"

"A friend." I knew that it sounded dumb the minute I said it. "Listen, kid—you're in a tough spot and we have to move fast."

She made no movement toward me. She stood with her back pressed against the wall. "Why should you help me?"

My voice got savage. "Don't be a sap. I'm not helping you. I'm trying to help Clipper Allen. You know who killed Gordon and I want you to have a chance to talk. You can't if you stay here. You'll never talk to any one."

She buried her face in her hands and started to sob. She was very small, terribly attractive, but I couldn't let myself think of that, then. We had to get out and get out fast.

"Come on, kid, buck up." I shook her, none too gently. Then I turned toward the door.

Koble was standing there, watching, a gun in his hand.

My mouth felt suddenly dry. I read death in his eyes, knew that he would kill. His voice sounded raspy as he said, "It seems that you aren't the smarty I thought you were."

I found my voice with an effort,

tried to make it sound natural, and didn't succeed so well. "You can't get away with this, Koble. Don't you think I called the cops before I came back here? Don't you think that I've found Allen, that he's free —" I kept talking, because I realized that when I stopped the man's finger would tighten on the trigger, that the squat gun would send its stream of death.

Koble took a step forward and the girl shrank back with a little moan. He said to me. "Shut up, you talk like Allberts. He was a smart reporter, but meddlesome. You don't know it, but he's dead. He died because he kept butting in. The same goes for you, Cayton, you —"

But I wasn't watching Koble any more, I was watching the door behind him. Clipper Allen was there, and he had a gun.

Something in my eyes must have warned Koble. He jumped sideways, swinging about and firing as he went. The bullet struck the door-frame just above Allen's head. Allen fired, missing, and Koble's second shot dropped him, just inside the door.

I jumped in, caught Koble's wrist before he could shoot for a third time, and we went down together. His strength was surprising. His massive arms locked about me, bending me almost double. I tried to wrench free; had a fleeting glimpse of Allen. He had dragged himself up and was squatted there beside the door, trying to get a clear shot.

There was red on his shoulder and his face was white, drawn. Then Koble's fingers came up, hunting for my eyes. I pulled them away and drove a hand into his face. He didn't like that and I tried it again. It broke his hold and he rolled away from me, knocking the girl down.

Allen was crawling forward grimly. Koble threw the girl from him and scrambled to his feet.

He started for the door. Allen was in the way and he kicked viciously at the writer.

ALLEN fired upward once, as I got my gun out. Koble seemed to pause, hesitate, then went over and stayed down. I climbed to my feet and went to Allen.

He managed to grin up at me.

"Hurt, Clipper?" I asked.

"Just the shoulder. I think it missed the lung." He coughed and I wasn't so sure but I didn't let him see that. I turned and went to the girl.

She was out, partly from fear. I turned toward the door.

Allen's voice was sharp. "Where are you headed?"

I stared at him. "Where'd you get your gun?"

He grinned weakly. "In the office desk. Where you going?"

"Herron's downstairs somewhere."

Allen stared at me. "Wait for the cops, you lug."

"And have him get clear!" I was already in the hall, headed for the stairs. As I reached the top Herron was halfway up, coming toward me. He'd heard the shooting and he had

his gun out. He swore when he saw me and snapped a shot, then twisted and jumped.

I sent a bullet after him, but it was too high. It's hard to shoot down. He disappeared around the door at the foot of the stairs and I went after him. As I turned into the hall, a bullet nicked my ribs, making me duck. I leaned around the door and snapped two shots. I didn't know that I'd hit him until I went through into the bar and found him a crumpled heap before the row of slot machines.

The bartender was just going through the window, and a drunk at the slot machine was staring down at Herron. As I arrived, he pulled the lever and watched the whirling circles. One bar dropped into place, the second, and then the third. The machine rained quarters, some spilling out of the slot onto Herron.

The drunk crowed, "Lookie, lookie," and started to scoop them up, but I wasn't interested. I stared down at Herron, made sure that he wasn't going any place, then went back upstairs. I wanted to call the cops, and I wanted to see Honey Blake. She was just a scared kid, but she was nice and I wanted her telephone number.

The advertisement features a four-panel comic strip and a product image of Alka-Seltzer. The comic strip panels are as follows:

- Panel 1:** A man and a woman are in the rain. The man says, "SPRING SHOWERS SURELY COME AND GO AROUND THIS TIME OF YEAR." The woman replies, "WE'VE HAD OUR ALKA-SELTZER AND OF COLDS WE HAVE NO FEAR." A sign at the bottom says "COLDS".
- Panel 2:** The man says, "THE STORM IS OVER AND WHAT IS MORE THE SUN'S OUT BRIGHT AND GAY." The woman replies, "THAT'S JUST HOW ALKA-SELTZER SCARES AWAY OLD HEAD-ACHES AWAY." A sign at the bottom says "HEADACHE".
- Panel 3:** The man says, "LET'S EAT! I THINK THE SHOWERS ARE GIVING US AN APPELITE." The woman replies, "WHEN WE'LL TAKE THIS SHOWERY ARE JUST TO NEED US FEELING RIGHT." A sign at the bottom says "ACID INDIGESTION".

To the right of the comic strip is an image of an Alka-Seltzer box and a single tablet. Below the image is the text:

Be Wise—Alkalize

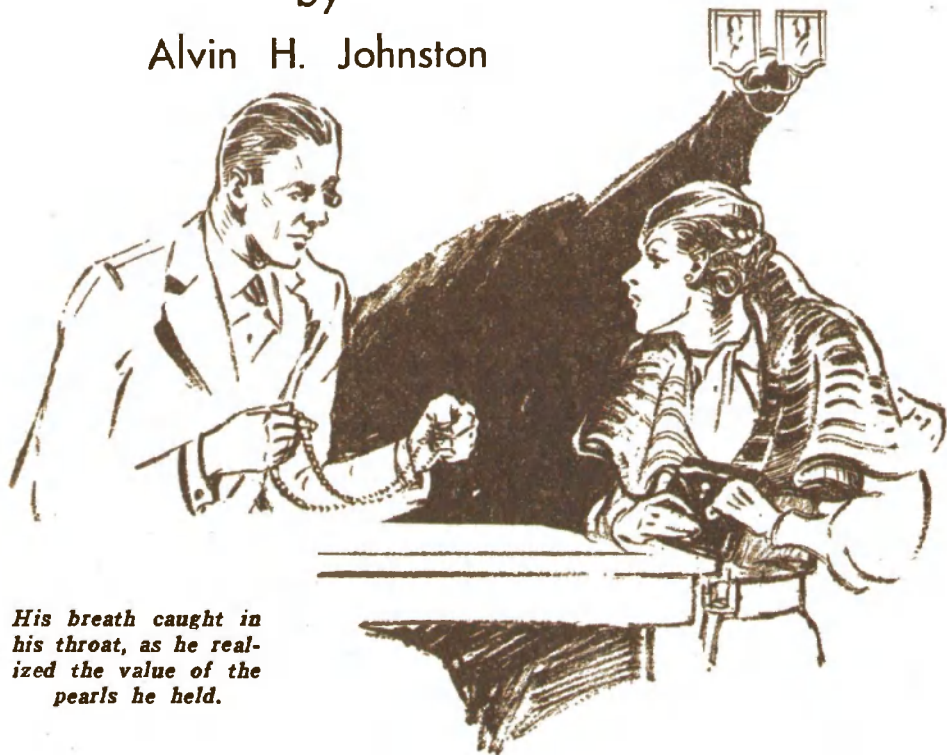
Alka-Seltzer makes a sparkling alkalizing solution containing an analgesic (acetyl salicylate). You drink it and it gives prompt, pleasant relief for Headaches, Sour Stomach, Dizziness after Meals, Colds and other minor Aches and Pains.

Alkalize with Alka-Seltzer AT ALL DRUGGISTS **30¢-60¢** TAKE IT THE NATIONAL BARN DANCE SATURDAY NIGHTS 1934

Three People Smile

by

Alvin H. Johnston



His breath caught in his throat, as he realized the value of the pearls he held.

IN THE language of the day, Mrs. Granville Page-Dodge was flat broke—that is, broke except for a heavily mortgaged house, an out-of-date automobile—and the DuBois pearls.

Mrs. Dodge did not make a practice of explaining that the string of evenly matched pearls which she wore only on very special occasions were the Bourbon DuBois pearls which had been smuggled out of France and to New York via South America and Mexico.

In fact only one or two of Mrs. Dodge's closest acquaintances knew that she owned the famous pearls. Had it been generally known, there

was not the slightest doubt but what she would have received a visit from certain hard-chinned gentlemen from Center Street; not only that, but she would also be called upon to explain just how it happened that she owned the gleaming collection!

The collection, which had for generations rested in the vaults of the Bourbon family of DuBois, had been stolen by a group of international jewel thieves—who had managed to get them to America, where Mrs. Dodge had purchased them, in a round-about manner, and with a large slice from her husband's life-insurance policy of one million dollars, cold cash. One quarter of the

face value of that policy had changed hands when Mrs. Dodge had purchased the DuBois collection of pearls.

And now the other three-quarters of that policy were gone, and Mrs. Dodge was faced with the problem of disposing of the pearls, in such a way that she would not implicate herself nor the individual to whom she sold them.

She dared not approach friends, something might slip. Those who were in the know did not have the funds; the others she did not trust. However, a few weeks previously she had been informed regarding a certain Paul Zoretti, a jewel merchant on Fifth Avenue, who had been known, at times, to take pearls and diamonds as well, from wealthy people who desired secrecy in the transaction.

It was also whispered that Zoretti handled most of his business behind locked doors. This information was given with a faint wink accompanying it, and a nod of the head.

After studying the situation for several days, Mrs. Dodge had arrived at the conclusion that Paul Zoretti was her only course; she needed money—must have it.

She was now seated in her boudoir, chin in hand, staring blankly at the wall. Mrs. Dodge was no longer young, despite make-up. Telltale signs of her forty-five years of life were plainly evident. This was one of the reasons why she needed money, quickly.

Suddenly she sat upright, reached for the telephone. She dialed a number, a number which did not appear in the general directory.

After a few moment's delay a soft voice came over the wires.

"P. Z.?" asked Mrs. Dodge. Over Zoretti's private wire his name was never mentioned. This was his car-

dinal rule. This information had been given Mrs. Dodge along with the private telephone number.

"Yes," came back the reply. Mrs. Dodge identified herself.

"I have a proposition I would like you to consider," she said.

There was silence on the wire for a moment.

Then: "Shall I call at your residence, or shall I meet you some place?" questioned the evenly moulded voice of Zoretti.

Mrs. Dodge hesitated a moment before replying. "I'll meet you some place. It would not be—well—quite right under the circumstances. I'll be in the third booth on the right-hand side, at Patsy's Gardens on Thirty-fourth Street, near Broadway, at three this afternoon. I'll be wearing a large black hat."

"I will be there," said Zoretti. The line was disconnected abruptly. Mrs. Dodge's face was white, and her lower lip was gripped tight between her teeth. What she intended doing would take courage.

She stood up and circled the room several times, glancing at the telephone after every circle.

IN HIS private office on Fifth Avenue, Paul Zoretti placed the telephone back on his desk and straightened up in his chair. He pressed his finger firmly on a button, a clerk entered.

"Obtain for me the Granville Page-Dodge file," he was ordered.

Zoretti hitched his dapper figure into a more comfortable position, fingered the pencil-line mustache, under a rather prominent nose and smiled. He took the file from the clerk, unlocked the tiny clasp, and took out a card.

The card contained a number of entries, but one in particular inter-

ested Zoretta. The one entry read: "DuBois pearls—purchased March, 1930—two hundred and fifty thousand dollars." That was all! But it gave Zoretta the information he desired.

This little man, seated in his sumptuous office on Fifth Avenue kept his finger on the pulse of the jewel trade in America and Europe. His private files, all separately locked, contained a complete list of every family of consequence in America and also a list of their jewel holdings.

Zoretta had spies in all of the larger jewelry stores, who reported to him, immediately, the purchase of any valuable item by any of the families on his lists. In this manner Zoretta knew where a certain item of valuable decoration was at any particular moment. And this information had made Zoretta wealthy.

IN AN APARTMENT located in one of the more select of the Park Avenue apartment houses, a young man picked up the ringing telephone and spoke into it.

The voice which came over the wire was low, barely intelligible. It spoke three words. They were "Granville Page-Dodge."

Roger Manwell uttered a thin "Thank you!" and hung up. He smiled softly. Those three words meant considerable to him. They meant that his spy, in the office of Paul Zoretta, had seen Zoretta examine the file card of Mrs. Dodge, and that, in turn, meant that Zoretta was interested in something Mrs. Dodge owned.

Manwell rose to his feet, and unlocked a small filing cabinet in a corner of the room, removed a paper from the top drawer. It was a newspaper clipping, yellowed with age.

It was from a French newspaper, and was a photograph of a string of pearls. Below the photograph were two words "*Le Dubois!*"

Manwell smiled thinly at the photograph. It had been in 1927 when he, along with two others, had stolen the DuBois pearls from the vaults of the DuBois family in Paris, managed to smuggle them to Rio, and then into Mexico.

In Mexico City he had been left for dead by his two partners in crime, with a bullet in, as they thought, his heart. But Manwell had gotten over the wound, had spent the next few years tracing the pearls. He had narrowed the search down to three names, and Mrs. Granville Page-Dodge was one of those three.

The fact that Zoretta was interested in something Mrs. Dodge owned was sufficient for Manwell. Zoretta did not go in for small deals—when interested, it meant large sums of money would change hands.

Manwell placed the clipping back in the cabinet, locked it, lighted a cigarette. He removed a number of cards from another drawer. They were business cards of various firms throughout the world—cards of jewel agents and dealers in Antwerp, Paris, London, New York, and Rio.

Attached to each bundle of cards was a facsimile of the signature of the principal in each firm whose cards Manwell possessed. It had been a difficult proposition to obtain these signatures, but they had repaid Manwell many times over for the labor involved.

Manwell selected a card bearing the name of Chetway. On the back of the card he wrote: "Introducing Roger Manwell," below this he signed the name of Samuel Chetway, copying the signature from the

slip attached to the bundle of cards.

Manwell, as well as being an expert jewel thief was a clever forger; the combination was priceless. Chetway's is one of London's best-known jewel houses, and Manwell had chosen their card for a reason—a good reason.

MRS. DODGE arrived at the café known as Patsy's Gardens half an hour early for her appointment, intentionally. She seated herself in the designated booth and called for the manageress. Mrs. Dodge spoke rapidly to the latter, motioning across the room, then a twenty-dollar bill changed hands. The manageress hesitated a moment, fingered the money, then crossing the café, drew one of the trim waitresses into a booth and spoke swiftly to the girl, nodding to Mrs. Dodge then to the floor.

The girl frowned, asked a question, the bill changed hands. The girl nodded. The manageress smiled at Mrs. Dodge. The latter sighed.

She glanced at her watch.

WHEN Paul Zoretti left his office and entered his private car, parked at the door, and was driven down Fifth Avenue, he did not notice a small roadster which followed him, nor did he note that the roadster was parked not far from his own car on Thirty-fourth Street, nor that the trimly dressed young man who had been driving the roadster, entered Patsy's Gardens almost on his heels, and slid into a booth next to the one occupied by Mrs. Dodge.

Roger Manwell removed a small object from his pocket, and thrust one end into his ear. It was a tiny amplifier. A thin, almost invisible wire, curled from the instrument down into his pocket. More than

once Manwell had found this little object of considerable value.

And just now, as he sat sideways, every word spoken in the booth next to him was clearly heard, and noted, although without the gadget it would have been impossible to hear, as both Mrs. Dodge and Zoretti spoke in low tones. What Manwell heard was very interesting to him as he slowly sipped his coffee.

Mrs. Dodge spoke first: "I—I don't quite know how to begin."

"Madame," said Zoretti in his precise English, "it is not so difficult. You are here to dispose of a certain object, which, at the moment, is of no value to you in its present form. I am here to purchase this same object. Am I correct?"

"Yes. I'm afraid you are right," said Mrs. Dodge. Then she said swiftly. "I have them with me. I think you know what I refer to. I have been told about you, and you will understand my position. I must sell the—the things I have here. I need the money at once.

"I cannot go to a regular dealer, for obvious reasons, of which you are probably aware. To be truthful, they are in this country illegally, and to let it be known that I own them would be to lay myself open to questions and trouble. But you—well, I understand you are in a position to handle them in your own way."

"I understand, madame. I know you are the owner of—shall we say the famous pearls. I can make use of them, and am prepared to pay you a handsome sum. But as you say it would not do for this to be known to a single soul. This transaction is between ourselves, after it is over we must forget. If I am not mistaken you paid a quarter of a

million for them—these things of which we speak?”

“Yes,” returned Mrs. Dodge. “That is correct.”

“Of course, you realize,” went on Zoretti, “I cannot possibly give you anywhere near that amount.”

Manwell could almost see Zoretti shrug his shoulders.

“I know it,” came Mrs. Dodge’s voice. “What could you offer? What do you consider a fair price?”

There was silence for a long moment. Finally Zoretti drew a wallet from his pocket.

“Madame, I know the value of the object of which we speak. I also know for what price I can dispose of them. I am willing to offer you one hundred thousand dollars, cash, now for them—if I can see them but for a moment, before buying. You understand.”

MRS. DODGE drew a small velvet-covered box from her bag, handed the box to Zoretti. The latter turned so that he faced the wall, his body blocking his hands from the café proper. He drew a glass from his pocket, screwed it into his eye, opened the velvet-covered box, and examined the string of gleaming pearls. He caught his breath in his throat.

Finally he dropped them back into the box. “Madame,” he said, handing them to Mrs. Dodge, “some years ago I had the great pleasure of handling and examining these pearls. I feel that their beauty has been enhanced through your owning them. My offer of one hundred thousand dollars is still good.”

Mrs. Dodge played with the handle of her bag, glanced across the café, where a waitress piled dishes on a tray. Finally she swung around, faced Zoretti.

“I’ll take it! But you under-

stand this is a business proposition which must never be made public in any way whatever!”

Zoretti shrugged. “Madame! Once I have the pearls, and you have the money—what is there to worry about? It is not something which we can discuss. After the sale is over we must forget about it completely, for our own sakes—and safety.”

Mrs. Dodge nodded, drew the velvet box from her hand bag again. Zoretti turned sideways again, facing the wall, commenced extracting money from the wallet.

At that moment Mrs. Dodge lifted her hand, tugged at the brim of her wide black hat. Her hand had barely dropped to the table again, when there was a crash from the opposite side of the room, a thud and the sounds of crashing dishes.

Zoretti and Mrs. Dodge half sprang to their feet. Across the room from them, the waitress who had been piling dishes on a tray stared dumbly down at the mess on the floor. The tray had been knocked over from the serving tripod; the floor was covered with broken crockery. The manageress came running, berated the girl, then stooped to assist her in picking up the dishes.

Mrs. Dodge and Zoretti sank back into their chairs. The woman handed Zoretti the velvet box. Zoretti flipped it open, nodded, thrust it into his pocket, and handed Mrs. Dodge the folded bundle of money. She counted it swiftly under the edge of the table, thrust it into her hand bag.

They shook hands. As they did so the young man rose from his seat in the next booth, sauntered toward the door, unnoticed by the two behind him.

ROGER MANWELL strolled out of the café, turned to the right, and walked past Zoretti's car, stopped, came back, started on again and then returned once more. He stared hard at the car, at the neat initials P. Z. on the door, then spoke to the chauffeur.

"Is this by any chance the car of Mr. Paul Zoretti?"

"Yes, sir."

"What an extraordinary piece of luck! I'm just on my way up to see him. I have an introduction from a firm in London. Is Mr. Zoretti around here?"

The chauffeur nodded toward the restaurant. "In there, sir. He said he would not be long."

Manwell opened the door of the car, entered, and seated himself. "That's just fine! I'll wait for him. Old Paul won't mind. I haven't seen him in years." He grinned. "Maybe the blighter won't even remember me."

He lighted a cigarette, and kept his eyes on the door of Patsy's Gardens. In a few moments Zoretti came out. Through narrowed eyes, Manwell noted that the jeweler kept his left arm tight to his side. With a thin smile Manwell slid over to the left side of the car.

Zoretti entered the car, and stopped as he saw Manwell. His eyebrows went up in a question.

Manwell hastened to speak. He whipped out the prepared card, handed it to Zoretti. "Mr. Paul Zoretti, I believe? I'm Roger Manwell. I'm just over from London, and was on my way up to see you. I met you a few years ago in Antwerp. I noticed your car, so I ducked in to wait for you. This card from Chetway's will introduce me. Samuel Chetway said I was to be sure and look you up. You know

him, he said." He smiled engagingly.

"I'm in the diamond business and I understand you are also interested in that line at times."

Zoretti studied the card; they shook hands.

"Yes," said Zoretti. "I've known Chetway for a number of years. I do considerable business with him. Anything I can do for you will be a pleasure."

They chatted for several moments as the car moved toward Fifth Avenue. At the corner they were blocked at a red traffic light. As the lights changed, and the car made a quick left-hand swing into the avenue, Manwell lurched across the seat against Zoretti, sending the latter against the wall of the car with a thud. Manwell clawed the jeweler buyer in getting his position again. As the car straightened out he was profuse in his apologies.

Zoretti accepted them with a thin, almost mirthless smile. His hand slid toward his pocket, felt the bulge there.

"I cannot get accustomed to your rapid corners over here," said Maxwell. "London is so different from New York, really."

As the car rolled across Forty-second Street Manwell suddenly sat forward on the seat. He glanced at his watch.

"I just remembered! I have an appointment with a man at the Astor. I must be late now. I say, old man, do you mind dropping me here? I'll drop over to see you later!"

Zoretti gave an order to his driver; the car stopped; the two men shook hands, and Manwell climbed awkwardly over Zoretti's feet, apologizing again, and stepped to the sidewalk. The car drove on. Manwell waited until it was out of

sight, then hailed a cab, and was driven back to Thirty-fourth Street, where his own roadster was parked. He climbed in and drove toward his Park Avenue apartment building.

THREE CARS stopped at three different points in New York at approximately the same time, within the next hour. And the three people who got out of the cars were all smiling.

Mrs. Dodge smiled at the neat trick she had put over the jewel buyer, Zoretti. Having that girl drop the tray of dishes was an invention worthy of an artiste!

It had been so simple, during the brief moment of excitement, to change the two velvet-covered boxes in her bag. The box she handed Zoretti had contained the paste string made some years previously—an exact copy of the DuBois pearls. The trick had been so simple. Zoretti would not dare raise a fuss, and she had her pearls and the hundred thousand dollars as well. She had a good reason to smile!

ROGER MANWELL smiled as he entered his apartment. He

touched his pocket which contained the velvet box he had so adroitly lifted from Zoretti's pocket, as the car had swung around the corner into Fifth Avenue. Manwell whistled cheerfully, to think he now owned the famous DuBois pearls, and Zoretti had a jewel box containing a string of pearls which Manville had picked up in a ten-cent store.

He was registered in his apartment under another name, and he would leave town at once. Let Zoretti try and locate him! Manwell smiled again as he closed the door, locked it, and reached into his pocket.

PAUL ZORETTI smiled as he entered his office, hung his hat on the rack. He had reason to smile. He was now the owner of the DuBois pearls worth a fortune the way he could dispose of them, through his various channels. And he smiled still more broadly, as he visioned the picture of Mrs. Dodge's wrath when she commenced counting the hundred thousand dollars in counterfeit money he had paid her for the pearls!





FLOWERS for VIOLET

A Violet McDade Story



*"Drop the
rod; you're
covered!"*

by
Cleve
F.
Adams

VIOLET McDADE in a night club is as conspicuous as an elephant in an aquarium. It isn't altogether her prodigious size, nor is it her atrocious taste in clothes. Rather, it is a combination

of these things added to the manner of a precocious child bent on attracting attention. She was attracting it, beyond a doubt.

The floor show at the Green Kitten was pretty good; exceptional, in fact. The crowded supper room didn't even know it was there. All eyes were centered on that great lummoX who is my partner. Or, at least, that's the way I felt. I was never so embarrassed in my life.

I said, "Violet McDade, if you ask another man to dance with me I'll—I'll scream!"

"Go ahead," she said. "People will just think you're drunk." She waved a pudgy, beringed fist at the second drink I'd had in the last hour, her fat nose crinkled in disgust. "There you go, soppin' up liquor, spoilin' the effect of all the swell contacts I'm makin'."

"Contacts!" I said. "All the contacts we've made to-night have been on my feet. I've danced with fat men, lean men, in fact every man in the room who has been unfortunate enough to pass our table. I'm sick of it. I'm going home!"

"Trouble with you"—she sniffed—"trouble with you, Nevada, is you don't realize what contacts mean to a couple of female dicks like you and me. Look, here comes Stephen Wright, the assistant district attorney. I'm going to hornswoggle him into dancin' with you and after that—well, after that mebbe I'll go home, too."

Wright seemed in a great hurry to get back to his table. His cold eyes missed her smirk of recognition and she calmly stuck out a foot, tripped him. He stopped then. Square, granite face aflame with wrath, he righted himself, muttered an ungracious apology.

She beamed. "Think nothin' of it,

Stevie. Meet my partner, Nevada Alvarado. Senator Hymes will wait for you. Fact is, it looks like you're both waitin' for somethin'. Couldn't be your new boss, the district attorney, could it?"

He glared at her, made as if to pass on, thought better of it and pulled out a chair. "Why should you think Alvin Foss is coming here to-night?"

"A little birdie told me," she said easily. "Or maybe it was a stool pigeon. Tell you the truth, that's the real reason I'm here myself. I'm kind of keepin' an eye on Rose Donelli in case her husband gets into trouble."

Something flamed in the depths of those cold eyes opposite. He said, "Why should Mike Donelli have any trouble with Alvin Foss? The Green Kitten is a licensed club."

"There's things upstairs that the license don't cover, Stevie. Mike's real business is gamblin'. He's in the rackets up to his ears, and I got a idea"—she winked owlishly—"I got a idea that a certain state senator's dough is behind him."

Wright said, "You're talking wildly, woman. Perhaps too wildly." He let that sink in, rose. His eyes on a distant table, where sat State Senator Hymes, he bowed absently. "I'll bid you ladies a very good evening." He went away.

MIKE DONELLI, very genial, very hearty, came in through the arch which led to the stairs, paused beside us just as Rosita was announced. Rosita was Rose Donelli. She did a whirlwind number, clad mostly in brilliants, and was the big drawing card of the Green Kitten—the supper room part of it, I mean. I hadn't known about the other diversions upstairs until just now.

Violet, eyes on Rose, addressed Donelli. "Why don't you get out o' the rackets, Mike? Rose is too nice a kid to be mixed up in—well, in things that'll likely make her a widow before she's twenty."

He was watching his wife. His smooth, round face was a little troubled. "You think a lot of Rose, don't you, Violet?"

"No, you ape, I don't. I think she's an empty-headed little tramp. I think she was a sap for marrying a guy like you. But"—Violet's little greenish eyes got that far-away look which somehow always brought a lump to my throat—"but Rose's mother was damn white to me back in the old days when she was tops and I was doin' the fat lady in the same circus. I—I kind of owe Rose somethin' for that."

Mike looked at her then. The lines about his mouth softened. "You're a good egg, Violet McDade. And for your information I'll tell you that I'm trying to get out. It— isn't easy." Dark eyes swept the great, crowded room, dwelt on Rosita's exit, caught sight of something which made his lips tighten suddenly. He left us hurriedly. Turning, I saw District Attorney Alvin Foss enter the lobby, go directly to Senator Hymes' table and, ignoring the senator, speak crisply to Stephen Wright.

Violet said, "I better have a word with Rose. Pay the check and I'll meet you out in the lobby." She waddled away toward the rear of the orchestra platform.

It was raining outside, not heavily, just enough to freshen the air and I breathed it gratefully after the smoke fog I'd been inhaling for what had seemed ages. The doorman signaled Sweeney, Violet's diminutive chauffeur, and presently the

great limousine rolled up to the curb.

We got in. The door slammed, and I prepared to unburden my mind of several things I'd been meaning to tell the great gooph. I might as well have saved my breath. She was asleep. It was, I think, a little after one when we reached home. I kicked off my mistreated slippers, donned mules and started to mix myself a nightcap before getting ready for bed, had got as far as the ice cubes when the doorbell rang.

Violet, plumped down on the chaise longue, opened an eye sleepily. "See who it is, Mex."

"See who it is, yourself!" I snapped. The bell rang again, insistently. Violet grunted, got up and waddled into the hall. Surprise, then dismay, registered in the rumble of her voice. The front door slammed, the chain rattled. The elephant returned, ushering in Rose Donelli.

I set my glass down, prepared for anything. Or so I thought at the time.

"Mike Donelli," announced Violet cheerfully, "has just shot a guy." She went to the windows, eased one of the drapes aside and peered out into the night. And I? Well, I just stood staring at the girl. Still in her spangles with nothing but a sheer negligee to cover her, feet bare, face pale and hair disordered, she essayed a wan smile in my direction, failed miserably and tumbled in a heap at my feet.

THERE WAS the rasp of gears from the street, sound of a car getting under way. There followed an instant of silence, then the roar of a second motor, coming up very fast. Tires shrieked down the block. And Violet said, "Douse the lights!" She dropped the drape, swiveled, to

see me rooted above the prone figure of Rose Donelli.

"Well, for cryin' out loud, don't stand there gawking like she was a ghost or something! I said, douse the lights!"

As if in a daze, I moved to the wall switch, clicked it. The dim glow from my bedroom door showed me Violet stooping, lifting the girl as she would a feather. Breathing imprecations against some unknown, the creature strode into my room. I followed.

Violet laid the girl on the bed, said, "O. K., revive her." Just like that. Busy with smelling salts and a wet towel I watched the lummoX pawing through my wardrobe and inquired with exaggerated calm what she was looking for.

"Something for Rose to wear!" she snarled. "You can't take her to a hotel lookin' like that!"

"Oh, so I'm taking her to a hotel?"

"Of course. She can't go back to the Green Kitten 'cause she's scared Mike'll kill her, too. She accidentally busted in on this party just after the guy got the one-way ticket. Mike and a couple other bums locked her up, but she got away."

"And came here. Thoughtful of her. Very. But now she's here, why can't she stay here?"

Violet glared at me over a piece of my very best lingerie. "Because, you nit-wit, she didn't get away as clean as she thought she did. A couple of mugs just went by in a car and likely they're havin' a talk with her taxi driver. I'm kind of expecting them back."

I started to shiver. Since becoming Violet McDade's partner I'd been led into practically everything except a gang war. It looked as if my education was about to be completed. Rose Donelli chose this moment to sit up.

Violet said, "O. K., kid, everything's going to be all right. Nevada will rustle you some duds and then we'll find you a place to sleep." She left us, went out into the living room again. She didn't turn on the lights.

I helped the girl as best I could. She said, "Sorry to be such a nuisance, Miss Alvarado. Murders are pretty horrible things, aren't they? Especially when your own husband commits them." Her teeth started to chatter. "Mike's been so darned good to me that I guess I've sort of shut my eyes to a lot of things. But to-night, when I actually saw him with that gun in his hands, with that awful look on his face, I—I lost my head. I'm still scared silly."

"Did you," I asked, "recognize the dead man? Or the other two who were with your husband? There is no doubt, I suppose, that the man was really dead?"

"He was dead right enough! No one could live with his face shot away, could he?" She got the jitters at that, communicated them to me. After a little: "No, I don't know who he was, but the other two I've seen around with Mike. One had very white hair, I remember."

"You're still crazy about Mike, aren't you?"

Her "yes" was smothered in a sob. And right after that the whole world exploded. The floor rocked, buckled beneath my feet. Numbed, I stood there, watching with a sort of dispassionate interest as window glass shattered, slashed through sheer hangings. The lights went out, blinked on again just long enough for me to catch a glimpse of Rose's terror-stricken face, then something very heavy—probably the ceiling—crashed down upon us both.

II.

I AWOKE with a terrible roaring in my ears, a hissing, crackling roar that could be but one thing: fire! I opened my eyes, discovered that I was hanging over some one's shoulder. Fire was licking up at the skirts of the some one, and the stench of smoke was thick in my nostrils. Those skirts could belong to no one but Violet McDade. She was carrying me somewhere. I passed out again.

Fresh air brought me around the second time—fresh air tainted with smoke, but that terrible heat was gone, and the flames. No, the flames were still there, gnawing greedily at the base of a door through which we'd evidently just come. I was lying on the floor in almost pitch darkness, and Violet, cursing under her breath, was tugging at something heavy.

I sat up. The room reeled dizzily, steadied. My eyes picked out Violet's bulk heaving at a fallen ceiling joist. Lath and plaster littered the floor, what was left of the furniture. And I discovered another form beneath that massive beam. Bridget, our housekeeper!"

"Violet, is—is Bridget dead?"

"Nope. Give me a lift with this damn timber, will you?" Our combined strength managed to raise one end and Violet wedged it with something. She said, "Bridget, can you hear me?"

"Who couldn't?" The voice was very weak, husky, but it was the sweetest sound I ever expect to hear. "Am I dyin', Mac?"

"Hell, no," said Violet grumpily. "Nothin' wrong with you except a couple of broken ribs and a crack on the dome. Now, look, Bridget, I've turned in the alarm and the fire boys'll be here 'most any minute.

In case it gets too hot for you, we've raised the timber so you can crawl out. But stick if you can."

"She'll do no such thing, Violet McDade!"

"I will too," said Bridget. "If Mac wants me to stick, I'll stick. I'd go to hell for her and she knows it!"

"Sure I do," said Violet. "But this time you don't have to. All you do is let 'em drag you out and act kind of hysterical, 'cause Nevada and me is buried up ahead in the ruins. Get it?"

I said, "I'll be no party to it!"

And Violet's great arms infolded me, lifted me, carried me, struggling and kicking, through a rear door. The flames, mounting skyward, cast a lurid glow over the back yard and the limousine waiting in the alley behind the garage, but there was no sign of the neighbors. They must have all been out in front. I opened my mouth to scream and Violet clapped a hand over it.

"Shut up, you sap! Shut up and quit kickin'. You want to catch the lice that done this to us, or you want to give 'em a bigger and better chance? Bridget's all right!"

SIRENS wailed around the corner behind us. I was suddenly assured of Bridget's safety; and the promise of vengeance was sweet. I stopped struggling. Little Sweeney opened the car door for us; I got a flash of a huddled figure on the floor of the tonneau; then we were inside and the great car was rolling down the alley, into a cross street.

"Is—is Rose all right, too?"

"Sure." Violet leaned over, tucked the robe clumsily about the still form. "Still out, but O. K."

"By the way," I demanded, "where were you when the bomb landed? I thought you were in the living room."

"Me, I was out in the garage waking Sweeney, so you and him could take Rose and park her somewhere. Lucky for you I was, too. You and the kid would have been a couple of roasts by this time if anything had happened to me. Just like I'm always tellin' you—without Vi McDade you wouldn't be worth the powder to blow you to hell."

"I guess you're right," I said, and suddenly found myself crying on her shoulder. She patted my knee awkwardly, stopped that as if embarrassed, and began her ominous sleeve-gun practice. Her left arm, flexing up and down, kept digging in my ribs. It hurt like the very devil but I didn't have the heart to tell her so. Rose Donelli heaved a tremulous sigh, sat up.

"Violet?" she queried. "Violet, is that you?"

"In the flesh."

"What—what happened?"

"Friends of your dear husband tossed a pineapple through our front window. I told you not to marry that guy."

Rose covered her face with her hands. Then, with a sudden fierce little gesture said: "Mike never ordered that. Mike wouldn't—couldn't do such a cowardly thing! But there, I've been enough trouble to you. Let me out here." She struggled to rise. "Let me out and forget that you ever saw me!"

Violet lifted her to the seat. "Look," she said, "look, Rosie, Mike gunned somebody out. You happened to bust in at the wrong time and stumbled into him and his two friends. Naturally, your runnin' away would make 'em all kind of nervous. Far as I'm concerned it's dead open and shut. You can believe Mike's the curly-haired boy who wouldn't rub us all out to save his own skin. Me, I'm for not lettin'

you stick your neck out. Not till I've paid off a couple of debts I owe, anyway." She clamped her jaws shut on this last, lapsed into a brooding silence.

Sweeney tooled the car into Wilshire Boulevard, pulled up before the Lancaster. And it wasn't till we'd actually entered the lobby that I fully realized the enormity of our position. Violet—well, I've seen her look worse though her eyes were red-rimmed, her moon face grimed with smoke and soot.

But Rose and I resembled nothing so much as a couple of plasterers after a hard day. There was a bluish welt on my forehead; blood from a nasty cut in my cheek had streaked down, dried in a pool at the base of my neck. Rose's face and arms were scarred with deep scratches; her dress—my dress, rather—was positively charred all down one side of her.

A full-length mirror in one of the great pillars told me all this—and more. My shoes were not mates. I cursed Violet under my breath for this added indignity, remembered suddenly that she had done exceedingly well to find me any shoes at all, remembered that but for her I'd be beyond the need of shoes.

SHE, the pachyderm, was at the desk, trying to convince the clerks we were respectable. Beside her, the tiny Sweeney in his outrageous uniform looked a solemn, wizened midget. It was no go with the clerks. Even the sight of the enormous roll Violet always carries had no effect. The Lancaster, you see, was our newest, smartest hostelry.

One of the desk men beckoned a house detective, evidently with the purpose of having us ejected. Mortified? I was petrified. And then, wonder of wonders, the dick recog-

nized Violet. They fell on each other's necks like long-lost buddies.

"Hi, Mac!" he cried.

"Hello, yourself," she said. Then: "Look, Elmer, tell these dumb apes at the counter who I am, will you? Our house just burned down and we got to get a roof over our heads."

Elmer addressed the chief clerk in an undertone. The fellow eyed Violet with a new respect. Still a little doubtful he finally capitulated.

"How many rooms will you need?"

Violet said, "Four of your best, all in a row."

He raised an eyebrow, stared hard at Sweeney's uniform. "Four, madam? Did you say four of our best? We have a servant's annex, you know."

Violet bridled. "Sweeney ain't no servant! Sweeney's as good as I am and probably a damn sight better. So we want four rooms just like I told you. Servant's annex!" She snorted.

And I thought of poor Bridget lying back there in the wreckage. A servant undoubtedly. An Irish cook who called her employer "Mac" and was not always civil to me. But a servant ready to risk her very life for Violet McDade. I resolutely put Bridget from my mind and trailed rather forlornly after the others as they were escorted to the elevators.

One thing I'll say for the Lancaster. They may be snobbish; they may rob you of your eyeteeth when it comes to charges, but you can get almost anything you want, night or day. In half an hour's time we were all fairly presentable, and Violet was just finishing with her hair when I entered her room.

"What do you intend doing, Violet?"

"Doing?" she snarled. "I'm going to get the two guys that tossed that

pineapple and tear 'em limb from limb. Now you, of course, don't mind—now—petty annoyances like having your cook half murdered and your house burned down around your ears, so you can stay here and play nurse to Rose until I get back."

"Oh, I can, can I? Well, if you think I've got any love for Rose Donelli you're crazy. She's the one that caused all the trouble. Sweeney can stay here if she has to be nursed. And I've got a gun that's aching for a target as much as yours are!" I bethought myself to feel for the little .32 I carry just above my right knee. It wasn't there. I'd noticed its absence before but had forgotten it.

Violet opened her purse, produced the gun. "I kind of thought you might be wantin' it," she said. "After you got the shock out of your system. O. K. then, me proud seniorita, we'll let Sweeney guard Rose while we go gunnin' for her husband."

Sweeney demurred. "Gosh, Mac, I ain't no hand with women. Besides, I'd like to take a cut at them bozos, myself."

ROSE DONELLI must have heard the argument. She came through the adjoining bath, stared from one to the other of us with suspicion.

"You're intending to pin that bombing on Mike? You're—you're going to hurt him?"

"Not much," said Violet grimly. "I'm going to put about six slugs in his middle is all."

Rose was upon her like a raging cat. "You're not! You're not! You're not!" Small fists beat against Violet. "You've other enemies! I tell you Mike wouldn't do such a thing!" Her wild eyes sought

the telephone. "I'll warn him, that's what I'll do. Let me go!"

Violet calmly slapped her down, nodded to Sweeney. "Take care of her, runt. Don't let any one get to her or I'll skin you."

We went down to the lobby. The after-theater supper crowd was just breaking up and I realized with a start that it was only a little after two—scarcely an hour since we'd left the Green Kitten. In that short hour our home had been demolished and Bridget, poor old soul, had sustained injuries that might well keep her in the hospital for months.

My heart crawled up into my throat, jiggled there uncertainly, and then dropped like a plummet at sight of a familiar figure between us and the doors—Lieutenant Belarski! Belarski whom Violet didn't like and who certainly didn't like Violet. She'd bested him too many times.

She saw him at the same instant. "Well, for cryin' out loud! Of all the dicks in the city we would have to run into that rat, Belarski!"

He spotted us, advanced unhurriedly, a sardonic grin on his lean, dark face. "Well, well, well!" he said. "Fancy meeting you here!" His grin vanished. Clutching Violet's cloak in his two hands, he snarled: "Who did it?"

"Who did what?" she inquired innocently.

"Don't stall!" he grated. "You know damn well what I'm talking about. Who bombed your house? Why did you run out on your cook, carefully coaching her in a pack of lies before you left? I'll tell you why, you fat imitation of a female shamus! You were trying to give the law a run around till you could find the mugs that did the job."

"That's what you think," said Violet. "Take your hands off me

before I flatten you!" Her voice suddenly lost its belligerence, her shoulders sagged. "O. K., Belarski, you're a smart dick. I figured we'd got away clean." She eyed him appraisingly. "Anybody else know we're still alive?"

He grinned again, wolfishly. "No," he said. "The cook put it over for the rest of the boys, even for the reporters. They're still waiting for the embers to cool so they can look for your remains. But it happens that I know you, know that any job you're interested in smells to high heaven. So I found a neighbor who thought she'd seen you leave the back way, and put a quick check on the hotels. Who tossed that pineapple?"

"O. K.," she said. "I admit I was goin' after the mugs, myself. Nobody, I says, is going to do my work for me. I figured that bein' dead would maybe give us a little edge, see what I mean?"

Belarski's dark eyes got cunning. "Yes, I see what you mean. With half an eye I could see you've got a damned good idea of who you're looking for. So open up and maybe I won't take you down to headquarters yet. Maybe I'll just leave you in your rooms under guard until I make the collar."

Violet looked relieved. "Now you're talkin'. That's what I call bein' a pal, Belarski. One of the men in the blue sedan that passed our house just before the blow-off—one of them guys looked like Broken-nose Murphy. You 'member? I helped put him away a few years back."

"So that's it!" Belarski positively beamed. "Well, I think I can locate Broken-nose!" He swiveled, signaled to a detective lounging against a pillar. The fellow came up. "Hammel, escort these two—ah—



It seemed as if the whole world had exploded.

ladies to their rooms. See that they stay there until I get back."

Violet winked broadly, linked her arm in that of the fat detective. "Sarge, you look like you're going to be interestin' company. Come on, Nevada, let's show the sarge our suite." We entered an elevator, leaving Belarski staring after us with a look of indecision on his hatchet face.

III.

THE DOOR to my room was locked. So, too, were all the others. Sweeney evidently was taking no chances. And wrangling voices from within told me that Rose Donelli wasn't being too docile. Violet knocked, and after a moment Sweeney's wizened face appeared in a cautious crack.

Violet said, "Open up, you lug, we've got company." She stepped back politely, let the burly sergeant enter first. And the moment the man's eyes rested on the bound figure of Rose Donelli he knew something was wrong.

"Rosita! Rose Donelli!" He turned accusing eyes on Violet. "So you crossed Belarski, huh? Ten to one Mike Donelli is behind all this, and you sent the lieutenant after poor old Broken-nose Murphy. Lemme at that phone!"

Violet hit him with a hamlike fist—once. He went down like a poled ox. Violet said, "There, Sweeney, is another charge for you. You ought to be able to take care of two as easy as one." And as Sweeney looked doubtful, she added: "Well, be seein' you," and waddled to the door.

Rose Donelli screamed. Sweeney, a look of long-suffering patience on his face, clapped a hand over her mouth. And Violet came back to stare down gloomily at the figure on the bed.

"Look, Rose, you came to me 'cause you was scared to death of your own husband. Now, like all women, you've changed your mind and think he's a curly-haired angel or somethin'. You want to help him, huh? Well, neither you nor all the Belarskis in the world is going to keep me from gettin' to Mike Donelli!" She strode to the door.

Under a full head of steam she sailed through the lobby below only to halt before the news stand as if she'd run into something solid. It wasn't solid, but it was startling. A boy had just deposited a stack of extras on the case. Other boys screamed: "District Attorney Foss Murdered!" A boxed-in account gave the place as an alley near Pico and Central; the time of death as approximately one o'clock, and the cause as a large-caliber bullet which had entered the back of his head and, emerging, practically obliterated his face. I thought of Rose's description. It fitted. But Pico and Central was a long, long way from the Green Kitten.

WE WENT out into the night and I climbed under the wheel of the limousine. "Violet," I said, "Alvin Foss was at the Green Kitten at one o'clock. We saw him. Do you suppose he is the one——"

"That Mike shot? Why not? Alvin Foss has been threatenin' to raise hell with places like Mike's ever since he was elected. Maybe he got tired waitin' for Steve Wright, his assistant, to do something. Maybe he decided to do it himself and Mike had to plug him. The only thing is—well, in the back of the head don't sound like Mike's way of doing things. And in his own office, too."

"They could have carried the body away easily enough; planted it in

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that alley where the rain would obliterate any traces. I mean, the police could never prove that Foss wasn't killed right where he was found." I remembered something Rose had said. "Violet, I believe Senator Hymes was there when it happened! Rose said there was a man with white hair."

"Yeah, and she said there was another guy, too, maybe with green hair. Maybe the two of 'em left Mike Donelli to get rid of the body while they tailed Rose and bombed our house. Which reminds me, I want to find a phone."

I obediently parked before the first all-night café we came to, and she got out, went inside. She emerged presently with a curious look on her moon face. "I located Rose's taxi driver," she said.

"You did! What did he say?"

"He didn't say nothin', Mex. 'Cause why? 'Cause he's deader'n a mackerel. Them bozos caught up with him, found out where he'd dumped Rose, and slugged him—for keeps. Why do you reckon they'd do that?"

"I—I don't know," I said faintly. "Unless he knew them, would be able to identify them."

"Or the car they was drivin', huh?"

"You told Belarski it was a blue sedan!"

She stared at me in disgust. "I must be improving," she said. "Or you're dumber than I thought. You think I'd tell that guy the truth about anything?"

We drove on. It was raining again and the street lamps made pale blobs of reflected light against the glistening pavement. The clock on the dash said 2:15 as we approached the neon sign of the Green Kitten. A car was pulling into the curb ahead of us, a tan touring car with

a khaki-colored top. It looked like one of the county cars, and as I passed it I saw the familiar insignia on the front door.

Two men got out, nodded to the doorman, pushed on through into the foyer. I parked a little way down the block. Violet, with a prodigious grunt, heaved her bulk to the sidewalk.

"Don't lock the car," she said. "We may need it in a hurry." She strode away down the curb like a man going to a fire; and, despite her clothes, despite her ridiculous, tent-like opera cloak, she looked like a man, a veritable mountain of a man, masquerading in woman's garb. I followed as best I could, caught up with her for the sole reason that she'd stopped beside the county car and was deliberately removing her cloak.

The doorman stepped forward. "May I help you?"

"Yeah," she grunted. "Yeah, you can help me by minding your own business." She had the cape off by this time and seemed bent on arranging its folds so that they draped over the car's right door. Satisfied, apparently, by the effect thus obtained she once more donned the garment. Peeling a bill from her roll she tendered it to the man.

"Look, general, the two dicks that just went inside. Were they here before—say, around one o'clock?"

He shook his head.

"Well, then, is Mike Donelli still here?"

"No ma'am," he said. "Mike came out and got in his car at ten after one. I ain't seen him since, but he's sure to be back before closing time."

"Swell," said Violet, "my partner will wait for him. Me, I got business down the street a ways." She gave me an encouraging shove toward the entrance, hunched over

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ast the driving rain, and disappeared in the darkness.

WELL, I managed to get past the check girl with a casual nod, flashed a glance into the main supper room as I passed. State Senator Hymes was still at his table. There were two girls there now. And over against the far wall, partially obscured by the crowd on the dance floor, I saw Assistant District Attorney Stephen Wright. With him were the two men who had gotten out of the tan car.

Wright, I thought, looked worried, but there was no sign of excitement such as should have attended a shooting in the club. And apparently news of the district attorney's death hadn't spread this far. Possibly the two detectives had come to notify Wright.

The colored orchestra was blaring away as if nothing had changed. Perhaps it hadn't—for them. I thought of our house, of Bridget, went up the broad, carpeted stairs hoping, yes, praying that the doorman had lied, that Mike Donelli was in and that I'd get to him before Violet did.

People passed me on the stairs, in the hall above. I was barely conscious of them. The door to the gambling salon stood wide, inviting. I paused there a moment, didn't see Donelli, and went on to his private suite. As I touched the knob a man stepped from the shadows. "Mr. Donelli isn't in just now."

"I know. He's down below. I'm to wait for him." He looked at me searchingly, evidently was of two minds. I decided for him and with an assurance I certainly didn't feel twisted the knob, went in. The great room was empty. I waited, heart pounding, to see if the man would follow me. He didn't. I went

on through into Mike's bedroom and, beyond that, into what must have been Rose's. No one there, either.

Back in the combination office and living room, I looked around for signs of the shooting. There were none—or so I thought till I noticed from the impressions in the thick carpeting that the desk had been moved. The thing was very ornate, heavy as the devil. I couldn't budge it.

Dropping to my knees I crawled about, searching for something, I hardly knew what. And then, just inside the knee hole I found it. A little smear that the left-hand pedestal didn't quite cover. Unmistakably blood. Not much, but the spot was still moist, sticky and gave me a pretty good idea that there was a lot more under that pedestal. Well, that was that. Rose Donelli had actually seen something.

I HEARD the door open, stood up confusedly. A man came in, his face shadowed by a pulled-down hat brim. It wasn't the fellow I'd left in the hall. It wasn't Donelli. It was—yes, it was one of the men from downstairs, from that tan car outside, a county dick.

"I thought this was a private office!" I said. "What happened to the man outside?"

"Why—uh—he was called away on business, ma'am. I just thought I'd—his eyes, studiously avoiding mine, roamed over the entire room—"that is, I wanted to see Mr. Donelli."

"Well," I said, "he isn't here. And when he gets here he's going to be very busy, so perhaps—" I let the suggestion hang in mid-air. It didn't hang long. Or maybe it's hanging yet. I wouldn't know, because at that moment the door opened again, and in walked Lieu-

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tenant Belarski. I nearly passed out.

He closed the door behind him quietly enough, passed the county dick with barely a flicker of recognition, planted himself squarely in front of me. His dark, narrowed eyes were hot and his jaws were clamped so tightly that the skin at the corners of his mouth showed gray. He said nothing for a moment, just stared at me with a glare so baleful, so ominous, that I sagged against the desk, weak with fright.

At last he said, "Well, Miss Alvarado, we meet again."

I said, "How true." And even though my voice was quivery I managed a flippant, "And how is Mrs. Belarski?"

His control broke then. "By Heaven!" he rasped. "By Heaven, where is that she-devil partner of yours?" His hands snaked out, clutched my shoulders, dug in hard. "I found Broken-nose Murphy. And you know where I found him? In jail! Right where the McDade woman knew he was all the time. You tell me where that fat fool is or I'll break every bone in your body!"

"I'm lookin' at you, Belarski," said a hoarse voice from the bedroom door. And there was Violet, very composed, very dirty, rust streaks all down the front of her, but her two .45s held unwaveringly on the irate lieutenant. "Yep," she went on, "I'm here, so mebbe you better unhand the señorita, huh?"

He took his hands away, made a half-hearted movement toward his gun, thought better of it. The county dick, over by the door, was staring at Violet as if she were a ghost.

"You—you mean to tell me, lieutenant, that these two dames are the

private dicks, McDade and Alvarado?"

"Not only telling you," said Belarski. "I'm telling the whole cock-eyed world! But they won't be private dicks much longer. They'll be occupying cells next to that runty chauffeur of theirs!"

Violet grunted. "You got Sweeney?"

"I've got Sweeney! I've got him booked for kidnaping an officer. And that's what you two will be booked for."

"What happened to Rose Donelli?"

Belarski cursed luridly. "I had her, too, but the little spitfire got away. Oh, don't worry, we'll pick her up! And with what we can wring out of the three of you we'll find out what this case is all about."

VIOLET SAID, "The guy behind you could mebbe give you the low-down, Belarski, if he would." The lights clicked out as Belarski whirled. There was a sudden burst of flame, another. I heard a body fall to the floor, the soft thud of hurried feet on the thick carpet.

By the time I had my own gun out, the lights were on again. Violet was at the switch. The county dick was gone. And Lieutenant Belarski lay on the floor, almost at my feet, a thin trickle of blood oozing from under his hat brim.

Violet knelt beside him, lifted the hat. With a vast sigh she replaced it, stood up. "Just a crease, Mex. And that's about the first lucky thing that's happened to me tonight. If Belarski had got it for keeps I wouldn't have a damn thing left to live for."

I stared. "I thought you hated him!"

"I do, you sap! But an enemy like him keeps you on your toes, keeps

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you from stagnatin'." She tilted her head, poised in a listening attitude. There was no sound from without. How had the county dick got away? How, for that matter, had Violet got in? The three-room suite was a solid unit, no other door but the one from the office into the hall.

She read my mind. "The fire escape in Rose's bedroom, ninny. He knew about it, too, which proves methin' or other." She brushed rather aimlessly at the rust streaks on her cloak, looked down at the prone Belarski. Rose escaped by the fire ladder, so did the dick. More'n likely the corpse went down that way, too, the hall and stairs bein' full of people most of the time. Point is, who helped him?"

"Couldn't we," I demanded, "do our wondering in some other place? Belarski isn't going to stay put all night."

She nodded absently, took pencil and paper from the desk and scribbled a note. This she fastened with a paper clip to Belarski's coat lapel. The scrawl said:

Honest, Belarski, I never done it. I never fired a single shot in this room and neither did the Mex. Be seeing you.

IV

SHE tiptoed to the door, opened it cautiously. The man who had accosted me was still missing. We negotiated the corridor, noting no sign whatsoever that the shot had been heard, descended the stairs. The crowd in the supper room was thinning out and a hurried glance through the great archway told me that Senator Hymes had gone; so, too, had the assistant district attorney.

Violet halted, caught the eye of the head waiter. He came over and

she whispered to him for a moment. I saw a bill change hands. Impatiently I waited as she was led away, back toward what must have been the kitchens. And then the lummoX was waving at me from out on the sidewalk. She'd gone clear around the building!

I went out vowing I'd give her a piece of my mind. But I didn't. Not then, anyway, for she had again buttonholed the doorman.

"So Senator Hymes and Steve Wright ain't been out of the club all night till just now, huh?"

"That's right, miss."

"Thanks a lot, fella. If you ever get into trouble just look me up."

I said, "Yes, Miss McDade could give you a lot of new ideas. If we're not at home, try the county jail." I departed hastily for our car, fully intending to leave her, but Violet moves rather swiftly at times. She was beside me when I meshed the gears.

"What do you mean, if we're not at home? We ain't got no home—nor no housekeeper if we did have a home. We can't go back to the hotel because Belarski will have that sewed up. Where the hell can we go?"

"You just mentioned one place. I think that's where we're pointing!" I found myself weeping. The tears ran down my nose, dripped off onto my hands at the wheel. "Have—have you forgotten that little Sweeney's in jail?"

"How could I?" she grumbled. "You never let me have a minute's peace, you cry baby. Like I'm always tellin' you, when the going gets tough you lay down on me."

I stopped crying then. I was so furious I could have killed her. "Listen to me, you hippopotamus, you're everything Belarski ever called you! You're a menace to so-

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ciety. I'm darned sick of being played for a sucker to help out some of your so-called friends. What did Rose Donelli ever do for you? Why should I take the rap for helping her? Did I ever ask you to help one of my friends?" I shook a fist under her fat nose. "Did I?"

She reached over, steadied the wheel. "Come to think of it, you never did, Nevada. I—I guess maybe I've been expectin' too much of you. But if you didn't have such damn high-class friends, if ever any one of 'em did get in a jam I expect maybe I'd be around, huh?"

Never a word about going into that flaming room after me to-night; not a hint that she'd saved my life a dozen times in the past. Violet McDade is—well, just Violet McDade. I suddenly felt very small.

"I'm sorry, Violet. I'm a—a cat."

"Course you are," she acknowledged comfortably. "A regular hell-cat. So let's forget it and concentrate on our problem. You see, Mex, we're in what they laughingly call a predicament. Havin' lied to Belarski so I'd get first shot at Mike Donelli; havin' bopped his helper, the sarge; havin' left Belarski with a bullet crease in his head; all them things is—now—mere details. The real facts of the matter is that poor Sweeney's in jail, we've lost Rose, and we ain't yet met up with Mike Donelli. Our results, to date, is null and void."

"And apt to remain so." But I was feeling more cheerful for some unknown reason. The tears may have helped. "You've stated our position with admirable clarity. Is there supposed to be a solution?"

"They's always an answer," she affirmed. "An answer to everything. Maybe you ain't got it, maybe I ain't. But it's there, Mex. 'Member that

time we got Sweeney out of jail down in San Juan Batista?"

"Violet McDade, you're not thinkin' of trying that trick again! No, you couldn't be—not even you!"

"Nope," she said, "nope, I'm afraid it wouldn't work in the United States of America. 'Fraid we'll have to use a little—now—finery in Sweeney's case. Meantime let's forget him and think of Rose. Thinkin' of Rose reminds me that we'd better turn around and get to the Green Kitten."

"Belarski," I reminded her, "is at the Green Kitten."

"I hope so," she said. "I hope he's still there and that Rose runs right into his arms. I'd a lot rather Belarski had her than some others I know." She cursed the girl under her breath.

I TURNED RIGHT at the next cross street, headed back in the general direction of the Green Kitten. I wasn't pushing the car too hard. It was still raining, but the rain had nothing to do with my caution. Personally, I was hoping that Belarski had collared Rose and her husband, too. I only got half my wish.

We were just in time to see Belarski escorting Rose out the front door and into his car. I cut the lights, skidded into the nearest alley, halted with my heart in my throat. Belarski's car passed the alley doing fifty.

Violet grunted, "Well, that's a relief. Back out and let's buzz the doorman again."

The doorman was indignant. "You again! Mike's been raising merry hell with me about you and one thing and another!"

"Mike's been here, huh?"

He spat disgustedly. "Yeah, and gone again. He comes bustin' in, goes upstairs, and right after that

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"Huh? Rosita. She goes up—
his, too. Couple of minutes later
he comes tearing down, cussing
somebody about a pineapple job.
He's got a rod in his fist, this time,
and he offers to slap me down if I
don't tell him all I know. Which is
practically nothin', but—"

"Save it," Violet advised. "Mike
was plenty mad, huh? You know
where he was goin' this time?"

"So help me," said the fellow
earnestly, "if you was to give me
other fifty bucks I couldn't tell
it."

"We got back in the car and rode
aimlessly for a while, Violet appar-
ently sunk in a stupor. I should
have known better. Presently she
straightened. "Why," she de-
manded, "why would the bombing
of our house make Mike Donelli
mad? Because it failed? Why'd he
leave Rose to the—now—tender
mercies of Belarski, when all the
time his main idea must have been
to shut her up?"

"You tell me," I suggested wearily.

"All right, I will!" But she
didn't. For just at that moment I
discovered that we were being
tailed. My cry of dismay brought
a snort from Violet.

"Hell, I've known it for fifteen
minutes. The only reason we went
back to the Green Kitten this last
time is because they missed us be-
fore. I wanted to give 'em another
chance."

"Who?"

"The mugs that tossed the pine-
apple, I'm hopin'. This damn rain
has rubbed out what little chance I
had of pinning the job on anybody.
And all the actors are hopping
around like fleas. I'm going to let
'em light on me for a change."

The car was about two blocks be-
hind us. It showed no lights, which

is probably why I hadn't noticed it
before.

Violet said, "Give 'em a few whirls
around the block and let's make
sure." So I did. I turned corners
till I was dizzy, wove in and out of
dark streets, decided finally that
we'd lost our shadow. And was
proved wrong the minute we turned
into the boulevard again. The car
was still there and coming up fast.
There were no other machines in
sight either way. At this hour in
the morning the thoroughfare was as
deserted as a county road in the
sticks.

"What do we do now, run for it?"

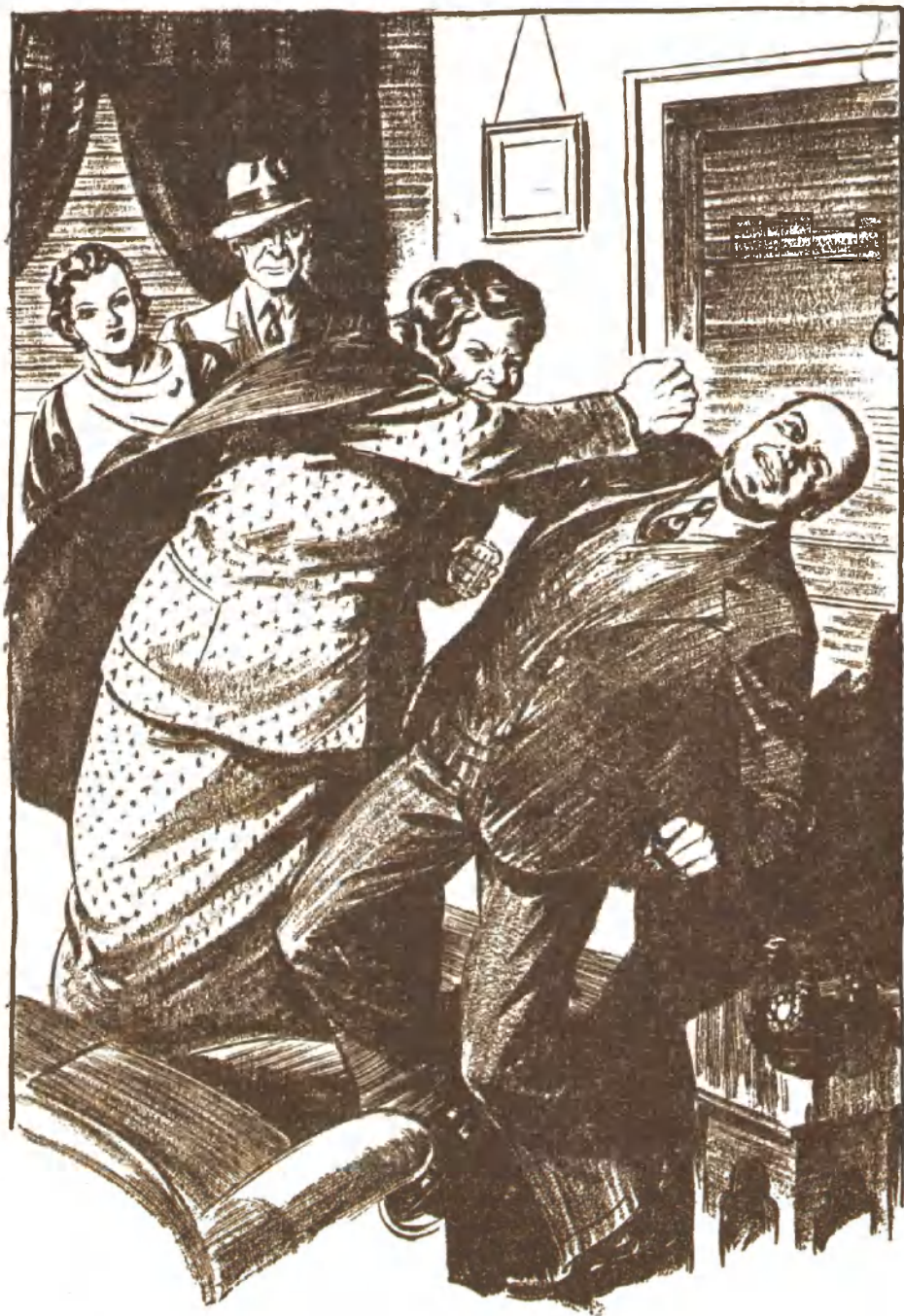
"For a ways," said Violet, peering
back. "Just enough to get 'em going
good. When I give you the word,
slam on your brakes."

I fed gas for all I was worth. We
might as well have been standing
still. That car behind certainly had
something under its hood that we
didn't have. In less time than it
takes to tell it were were doing
seventy, our limit. And the other
car crept up on us steadily. I could
make out its color now and the fact
that it held two men. It was less
than fifty yards behind us when
Violet said, "O. K."

WELL, we did have brakes—and
good tires. We stopped right now.
The shock threw me hard against
the wheel; I heard Violet go
"Oo-o-m-ph!" The other car slid
by us, rocking crazily, brakes grind-
ing. A double burst of orange flame
cut across our hood; there was a
rattling, tearing sound as metal
ricocheted off metal and into glass.
The windshield developed a sudden
case of smallpox, but held. And
the open car righted itself, whirled
on two wheels, started back.

Violet grunted, "I expect we'll be
safer outside, Mex. Not that I want

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*He went down like a poled ox.
"Here, Sweeney, is another charge for you. We'll be seein' you."*

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be safe. This is the first sign of action I've seen to-night." Which would have struck me as extremely funny at any other time. She opened the door on the curb side, floundered out. I followed, reaching for my gun. I got it, came up behind the hood just as the touring car slid to a halt.

The driver opened his door. "We must have got 'em, Logan, but we've got to make sure this time. Darker than hell, ain't it?"

I shot him. Shot again and again at that vague blur which was his face. Shot until the hammer of my gun clicked on an empty chamber. I saw him slump, slide into the street. And Violet's voice, quite calm, said: "Drop the rod, fella. You're covered."

She was evidently talking to the man on the off side. I couldn't see him. I couldn't see her, either. But he could. Or thought he could for he didn't drop his gun. He used it. The darkness suddenly became a bedlam of sound, of stabbing tongues of flame that looked two feet long from where I crouched. As swiftly as it had all begun, it was over. Silence descended like a pall, broken by Violet, slightly petulant.

"Where the hell are you, Nevada? I can't make out what this guy's sayin'. Must be a Greek or something."

I rounded the two cars, saw her on her knees beside a huddled form. The man wasn't a Greek. His voice just sounded that way because of the blood welling from his graying lips. He was one of the two county detectives I'd seen talking to Stephen Wright; not the one who had shot Belarski in the office, but the other.

Violet McDade isn't much good as a nurse. She can shoot people

but after she's done it she's rather helpless when it comes to patching them up. Not that any one could have done much for this chap; he was about through. I found my handkerchief, wiped some of the blood away, lifted his head. His eyes opened a little and he coughed, horribly.

Violet said, "You're the guys that tossed that pineapple. Who gave you your orders?"

He just looked at her. Thick lips curled in a mirthless smile and he said—his words, too, were thick, mushy: "Wouldn't you like to know?" He died in my arms.

In the near distance now there was the crescendo of sirens; in the other direction headlights were coming up, too close for comfort. Violet said, "Let's be on our way, Mex."

A swift look at the driver told us that for once my shooting had been excellent. He was dead. We were on our way. Where, I didn't know, nor did I care. I was content to go anywhere away from there, grateful for the cool freshness of the rain, for—yes, for being alive instead of lying as were those two behind us. Did I feel badly for having just killed a man? Not then. Perhaps I would later, but now I was pleasantly numb.

V.

VIOLET'S VOICE, seeming to come from a long way off, impinged on my consciousness. "I got to make a couple of phone calls, Nevada, if you can tear yourself away from your meditations."

I sat up straight. "I'm not meditating, you elephant, I'm resting."

"Rest to-morrow, or next week. If you think we're through because we rubbed out a couple of blots on the county's—now escutcheon, you're silly. Let's find a phone."

We found the phone—in a bar that was still doing business. The place reeked, and there were a couple of drunks. I ordered a drink, downed it and immediately felt better. Violet emerged from the phone booth as I was lighting my first cigarette in hours.

"There you go," she complained. "There you go, carousin' again. No wonder I can't get nowhere with drunkards and cigarette fiends for partners." She led the way outside, climbed under the wheel herself. "Can't afford to let you drive with the taint of liquor on your breath."

I actually giggled. "No," I said, "imagine being arrested for drunken driving with our spotless record. Belarski undoubtedly has forgotten all about the other minor crimes you've committed to-night—this morning, rather. Poor Sweeney."

She said, "Shut up!" and clamped down hard on the accelerator. Fifteen minutes of silence after that, and we wheeled into Gramercy Park Lane. The Lane is pretty exclusive, great stone arches at either end of the block-long street frowning on anything less than a millionaire—or a state senator. I remembered that this was where Senator Hymes lived.

As we whirled through one arch I saw headlights bearing down on the other. Violet, seemingly bent on destruction, hurled the limousine straight into their path. Brakes squealed, not ours, at first.

A thickset figure detached itself from the coupe, crossed the sidewalk on the run and disappeared into a tree-lined drive. Violet took the turn on two wheels, rocked into the drive and applied the brakes just back of the running man. The front bumper caught him, staggered him, but he didn't fall. One up-flung arm ended in a gun. He swiveled, cat-

like, and I recognized his face in the headlights' glare. He was Mike Donelli.

"Drop the rod, Mike," said Violet, and as he hesitated, "Drop it," she urged, very low, almost as if she were afraid of being overheard. "A guy we both know is plenty dead because he didn't drop his when I told him." He dropped the gun.

"Come over here, Mike. Over by the left-hand door. You can let your hands down."

He let his half-raised hands fall to his sides, came slowly around the left front fender. His broad face, always ruddy, genial, looked positively haggard now.

"What is this, a gag, Violet McDade?"

"In a way," she said. And crowned him with one of her guns. The movement was so swift, so utterly unexpected that even I was stunned. I barely caught the flash of her down-swooping arm before the blow landed. Mike's eyes crossed, he started to sag. Violet leaned out the window and supported him.

"Get out the other side, stupid!" she hissed. "If I let him fall he'll get all mussed up."

"You've just mussed him considerably," I said. "And anyway, I thought that was what you intended to do all along. You were, I believe, going to put six slugs in his middle or some such a matter."

"Don't argue!" she snarled. "Can't a lady change her mind?"

I got out, sighing a little, and between us we managed to get him into the tonneau, fixed him nice and comfy. "Do you mind, sweet Violet, explaining your unwonted solicitude?"

"I'm savin' him," she said. And led the way majestically up the drive.

SENATOR HYMES answered the bell in person. I thought he was going to faint when he saw Violet. His long face, bleak as a winter's day, under waving white hair, turned a sickly yellow; myriad tiny lines appeared in the skin as if the flesh beneath had suddenly shrunk.

He said, "I—I don't believe I can see you. I'm—uh—in conference."

"Right ungrateful, I calls it," said Violet. "Here I just saved your life ~~by~~ ~~my~~ ~~self~~ ~~and~~ ~~Stevie~~ ~~Wright's~~—by stopping Mike Donelli."

"You—you stopped Donelli! You mean you—killed him?"

"Nope," said Violet, "just stopped him from becoming a murderer." She shouldered her way past the agitated Solon, held the door wide.

A voice from down the hall said, "Bring them in, senator, bring the ladies right in. I'm sure we're both very glad to see them." Stephen Wright, the assistant district attorney stood in the shadows beside an open door. There was a gun in his hand. He gestured with it impatiently. "This way, ladies. Hurry please. My nerves are not at their best and this gun might go off."

"Like it did once before to-night, huh? Or did Senator Hymes bump Alvin Foss?"

I felt Hymes sag against me, tremble violently. He said, as Wright lifted the gun, "No, Stephen, not here! Don't do—don't do anything you'd be sorry for."

"My sentiments, exactly," Violet approved, and waddled toward the man with the gun. "We're all friends, ain't we?" She leered at Wright. "You know us private dicks can always be fixed—if the price is right. So let's talk it over and forget our past mistakes, huh?"

"Mistakes?" said Wright. He stood there, gun poised steadily

until we'd entered the room, then followed us in and closed the door.

I rubbed one knee surreptitiously against the other, felt my gun in its holster, realized with a terrible sinking in the pit of my stomach that I'd emptied the weapon into the county detective. I wondered if Violet's .45s was empty, too.

She was saying: "Yep, it was a mistake to have your two dicks bomb our house tryin' to get Rose Donelli."

"My two dicks?"

"Yours. In a way you was smarter than Mike Donelli when Rose got away. You knew she was a friend of mine 'cause I told you so myself. You knew I was a dick and you put two and two together, figured she might run to me. Now Mike, of course, knew of other places she might run and wasted a lot of time lookin' there first. You, bein' a very efficient guy, just phoned your office and gave Logan and the other guy their instructions."

"She knows!" moaned Senator Hymes. "She knows, Stephen! She's got to Logan!"

"Shut up!" said Wright. "I've heard about this she-devil. She'll talk you into hell if you let her." His eyes rested with cold malice on Violet. "Why do you think this—ah—Logan was connected with me?"

"Well," she said, "I'll tell you. Just after Rose broke the news to me I took a peek out our front window. I thought I recognized one of the county's cars, but couldn't be sure because it was travelin' dark and somebody had, thoughtfullike, tossed a coat over the door insignia. It was just an idea of mine. I couldn't prove it because again the boys was very thoughtful. They took care of the taxi driver, too, so

he'd never mention taking Rose out to our neighborhood.

"Later on one of the lugs stumbled into me and Nevada in Mike's office, knew the pineapple had failed, reports that sad fact to you, and you tell him to try again. Which he done with a sawed-off shotgun. I called the sheriff's office later and he says that car was assigned to the district attorney's office. And that reminds me, Stevie, the death of Foss makes you the new district attorney."

"I'm the new district attorney," said Wright grimly. "And I intend to remain in office if I have to kill a dozen, including you."

"Pshaw!" said Violet. "I never realized how much it meant to you, Stevie. Not until I got to thinkin' that a guy must be pretty desperate to shoot a man in the back of the head. And only a fella that would do that would resort to bombin' helpless women without givin' 'em a chance. Didn't sound like Mike Donelli, but still you can't ever tell, I says. Wasn't really until I find out how surprised Mike is about the pineapple business that I figure him for a—now—innocent bystander. Did he take the gun away from you, or from the senator here?"

"Not from me!" screamed Hymes.

WRIGHT SHOT HIM. Even as the old man started to sag Wright turned the gun on Violet. And Violet just stood there; stood perfectly still without lifting her arms. Her guns must be empty!

"Fortunately," said Wright, "the family is away. I think that I shall enjoy sending you flowers, Violet

McDade." His finger whitened on the trigger; his lips grew taut. I made a dive for my gun intending to throw it. And Violet, wrist flicking like a striking rattler, shot him just as the door burst open.

Belarski snarled, "You promised, you she-devil! You promised not to kill him!"

"And I didn't," said Violet calmly. "He'll live to hang, but, hell, I couldn't wait any longer for you. His remark about sending me flowers kind of got me nervous."

"You mean," I gasped, "you mean that you sent for Belarski?"

"She phoned me," Belarski snapped, "phoned me and guaranteed a pinch if I'd forget about Sweeney and Rose and Mike and Heaven knows who else!"

Stephen Wright sat up, stared about the room uncertainly. Then: "I—I guess I won't be sending you flowers, after all, Violet McDade."

"You wouldn't have, anyway," said Violet gloomily. "You send pineapples. I'm sorry I made the deal with Belarski, sorry I promised not to hurt you—much. There's a little old lady down in the receiving hospital, an old lady I'm kind of crazy about. The killin' of Alvin Foss and"—an overlarge foot stirred the limp form of State Senator Hymes—"and this guy don't mean a thing to me. My family does." She scowled at Belarski as he clipped the cuffs on Wright. "You sure got the best of the bargain this time, you mug!"

"I suppose," Belarski said, "that I should send you flowers!"

She brightened. "Now that," she said, "that would be kind of sweet of you, Belarski!"

CLEAN SLATE

*For more than two years he'd kept
a secret. Now—*

by Melville Burt and James E. Smith

BRICK" LYNCH, State trooper astride his motor cycle, under cover, kept his keen eyes on the steady stream of week-end motorists. One quick glance and he could clock each passing car within a mile of its speed.

So far, he'd done well: five college boys on their way to the game at New Haven, a salesman who tried the alibi of a sick mother in Boston, and a chap who must have learned to drive in England—on the left side of the road.

Brick's eyes and judgment of speed worked automatically. That gave him time to mull over his own troubles. For more than two years he'd kept a secret for his half brother, Mike. By all counts he should be hearing from him.

A dust-colored roadster streaked past. Brick checked it as one that had passed twice before—the first time headed for Greenwich, the second time toward the Bronx River Parkway and now speeding toward Greenwich again. Lynch kicked the starter.

His sudden appearance was a signal for all cars to slacken speed—all except the racer. It climbed; fifty, fifty-five. The scream of Brick's siren was ignored. At sixty-five he came alongside and waved the car to stop. Another collegiate, in a bearskin coat, who thought he

owned the road. Lynch gave him a casual look, then dug for his book.

"Sixty-five, buddy, is just fifteen miles over the posted speed limit."

"But, officer, don't you know who I am—"

"I don't care if you're the President's son." Brick looked up. He peered into a pair of blue eyes, much the same as his own except that they were squinting, also the same color of hair but thinned at the temples. Lynch's tongue went out to lick his suddenly parched lips.

"Howdy, pal! Still the arm of the law, eh?" the driver said. Although the words were clear, the mouth hardly moved. "I had an idea the speeding might be good bait. I've been cruising this damned road for an hour. They told me at the station you were on patrol."

Brick's face grew taut. "Been waiting for you to show up, Mike. It's six months since you got out. Been home yet?"

Mike shook his head. "Thought I'd better see you first. Never can tell how the folks will treat a jail-bird."

Brick was studying the younger man's features. The two years in stir had done a lot. He wasn't a kid any longer. He was full-grown—and tough, but tough in a dangerously smooth way. "Well," Brick said, "what's on your mind?"



**"Brick, you've
killed him!"**

"Plenty, pal. The cops had me ticketed as Mike Lane. So now, Mike Lynch has come home from his travels. If you've kept your promise the old man don't know where I've been. He won't know unless you——"

"I've lied for you this long; I'm not apt to change my story now. What's the present—job?"

"Aiming to run the old man's gas station. No more rackets. I had an honest job since leaving stir: auto mechanic at a Jersey beach. Wanted to get the stir smell out of me. Got a good sun-tan and let my hair grow. Take a good look, Brick. Would you figure I'd done a stretch?"

"Not until you open your mouth," Brick said. "It gives you away. You got the habit of talking through your teeth, so the guards don't get wise. Move your lips when you talk—if you want to fool a cop."

Mike grinned. "I ain't associating with cops—only the old man—and Mary. Is she still around?"

Brick lowered his head. His hands fumbled with the Sam Browne belt. "Mary's still waiting for you to come back, Mike. After you went away, and your letters stopped——"

Mike lighted a cigarette, blew a steady stream of smoke through his nostrils. "I had other things to think about," he said. "Anyway, I

figured you'd make a play. You always seemed nuts about her."

"Sure," Brick admitted, "ever since the day ma brought her home from the orphanage. I never got to first base. She stayed on, keeping house for dad—after my mom died. She always said you'd come back."

"Ain't that nice." Mike winked broadly. He put his foot on the starter and waved his hand. "See you later, at home."

"Not to-night," Brick said. "I'm living in White Plains."

"Hitched?"

"No."

"Then why the extra board bill?"

"Be your age, sap. It wasn't easy, living at home, when Mary turned me down. Be good to her, Mike."

A twisted smile carved a droop on Mike's lip. "I'll make her glad she never fell for a copper. Two years is a hell of a long time."

He jumped on the gas and was gone before Brick realized he had neglected his duty and not given him a ticket. He made up for it by lamming down hard on the next three. His eyes were a cold-green and when he gripped the handle-bars his knuckles showed white. Mary and Mike! The kid had better stay straight!

BRICK tried to eat the chicken dinner Mary had cooked, tried not to notice how her face lighted up when Mike entered the room. He watched his father take the after-dinner medicine and said he hoped his indigestion was better.

"Guess I'm gettin' old, son," Mr. Lynch said wearily. "Ever since I had pneumonia three years ago it sort o' went into my stomach."

Mary, a slim, attractive girl in neat-fitting calico, beamed. "You won't have to work so hard, now Mike's home," she said.

Lynch gave his older son a proud glance, then turned to Brick. "We're gonna build a new garage," he said. "In the month that Mike's been home the business has doubled. Lots of Mike's friends come by—rich friends, in big limousines."

Brick's jaw dropped. He said nothing until after dinner. While Mary washed the dishes and the father took a nap, Brick cornered his brother.

"Listen," he said in a low voice, "there's two kinds of people ride in flashy cars and you've never met the right kind. Don't try anything funny."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Mike said.

"Yes, you do. A guy can make a lot of friends—in five years. Keep clean or I'll clean you up."

"That's your brass buttons talking," Mike said. "I'm straight enough. I don't need you or——" The words were cut short by the entrance of Mary, who suggested that they have a game of pinochle. Dad liked to play.

All evening, Brick was low man. He couldn't keep his mind on the game. The whole thing threw him back so many years, when the three of them, as kids, would play with the father. In those days, at ten o'clock, mom would come in and say, "Time for bed." To-night, Brick kept waiting for the sound of her footstep. He came to with a start. He must be getting old. Hell, twenty-six wasn't old; Mike was two years older. Brick left just after ten o'clock.

As weeks passed, Brick wasn't happy in his mind. He stopped going home on his day off. It always ended in an argument with Mike. And Mary and dad seemed to favor the older man.

The new garage was finished—a

fine, two-story building with a modern-type elevator. Brick felt uneasy.

Then, right after the spring thaw, Westchester County had an epidemic of bank and pay-roll robberies. The jobs were planned with clocklike precision. In most cases the bandit cars were described minutely by witnesses. The cars never crossed the State line. They seemed to melt in air.

AFTER two uniformed troopers were shot down by the occupants of cars they had stopped to question, most of the force were taken out of uniform. They cruised the roads in disguised racers.

Brick's car was ancient. The rear was weighted with lead, to hold the road, because its engine could do one hundred and twenty an hour without straining. He was detailed to a five-mile strip which served as a main artery to the State line. Being on home ground, he knew every byroad, short cut and blind alley. If any one could track down cars, Brick Lynch was the man.

He did find one bandit car, sprayed with bullet holes and abandoned on a wood-lot road. He raced to the house and took his father and Mike to view the car.

"Ever see it before?" he asked. "Figured it might have stopped for gas recently."

Mike lost no time in answering. "Don't remember it," he said, "but I'll check the license with our record sheets."

The father walked around the car, studied it critically. He scratched his jaw, cocked his head to one side. "Does look a mite like a car came to our place about a week ago," he said.

"Are you sure?" Brick asked eagerly. "Can you describe the occupants? If we show you a pile of

rogues' gallery prints, do you think you can spot the right ones?"

"Well, now——"

Mike laughed. "Don't strain his imagination too much, kid," he said. "We've gassed a couple hundred cars in the past week. If you think we can remember any particular car you're dumber than most cops."

"What about it, dad?" Brick asked.

The old man again circled the car. Brick waited for the verdict. Mike appeared unconcerned. "Hm-m-m," the elder Lynch said, "the one I saw had a dent in the rear fender, same as this. But I guess this ain't it, now that I look at it carefullike. Everything else is different. Son, I reckon we can't help you with your detectin'."

Things were quiet for about a month. Then hell broke loose with added gusto. Brick was on patrol, with one hour to go before he would meet his relief at the crossroads. The radio barked: "All cars. All cars. Code Seven-Four. The cars heading for State line. One car, blue sedan, Jersey plates—one man, driving. Second car, gray sedan, New York plates, three men. All cars. All cars. Code——"

Brick galvanized into action. Code Seven-Four. Bank job and murder! He tested the shotgun, made sure it would slide free from its rack attached to the dash. Tear-gas bombs were on the seat at his side. The revolver he placed in his lap. He steered to the center of the road and kept the position.

Far ahead, a cloud of dust gathered. Brick swung his car across the narrow road, barring both sides.

The cloud raced nearer. Soon it showed the dim outline of a car. The car came to a screeching stop within ten feet of Brick's barrier. He saw a stout figure climb out. He

thought he recognized the form. "Murray?" he called.

"Yeah," a familiar voice answered. "Save your bullets." The trooper advanced to Brick's side. "Captain sent me over. You're to cover one end o' the road. I take the other. Don't miss a chance, Lynch. They're killers—every one of them."

Brick started to turn his car around. He smiled grimly. "I'm ready," he said. "I've been ready for months. My relief is due in an hour but I guess I'll stick around—even if I'm not ordered to." He had the car in gear and was easing in the clutch when Murray stopped him.

"Don't bother, Lynch. We can handle the punks. When your relief comes, scoot over to the house, I hear your old man ain't feelin' so good. Maybe you can cheer him up."

Brick grinned. "You're a damned poor liar, Murray," he said. "Trying to hog all the glory, eh? Well, when they start digging lead out of the mob, some of the bullets will have my initials. And that goes whether or not I get special orders."

Murray shook his head. "If I was you I'd hit it for home. Your old man ain't sick. He's hurt—bad. Somebody phoned the sheriff's office—said something about attempted suicide."

Lynch's body jerked. "You're crazy!" he cried. "Dad wouldn't do — He—" Brick's voice ended in a hoarse whisper, "Murray, is he—dead?"

"Not yet. Far as I know, you'll be in time, in an hour."

More than once, meeting Murray at the halfway point, Brick was tempted to ask him to patrol the full stretch while he went to his father. He knew the trooper would do it and the desertion would pass unnoticed—unless the gangsters chose that

road. Brick knew that one man couldn't stop the mob and live to tell of it. Two men could hold them off until the shots summoned additional help.

The hour seemed years long. When his relief arrived, he didn't wait to offer advice or hear possible orders.

BRICK hurried into the room that reeked with antiseptic and fresh blood. Mary sat in a near-by chair, a huddled, pale-faced figure. The doctor was bending over a moaning figure in the bed.

"A little louder, Lynch. See if you can speak a little louder."

A futile movement of the old man's lips was the only answer. At the sight of Brick, his eyes brightened.

Brick ran over, knelt down and patted his forehead. His father was mumbling something. Brick held his ear close to the pale, thin lips. The mumbling was unintelligible. He looked at the doctor. The doctor shook his head. Brick arose, stood at his father's side.

It was then he realized the dying man was trying to signal with his eyes. He would first look at Brick, then shift his watery gaze to the floor and then toward the other side of the room.

Brick crossed over and tapped the wall close to a window. The old man looked down at the floor. Brick pointed at the rug. Fading eyes looked up again. They stared until the doctor closed them for the last time.

Mary broke into hysterical sobs. Mike took her outside. Brick and the doctor exchanged glances. The older man shook his head.

"Gunshot," he explained simply. "Over the heart. Just missed it enough to make dying a hellish

agony. According to Mike, it was suicide. You know the law, Brick. I had to notify the sheriff. Mike doesn't know about it yet."

Brick nodded dully. "Of course, doc, I understand. See if you can help Mary. I'm staying here. There's something I got to find out."

The doctor left, closing the door quietly. Brick stood looking at the motionless, shrouded figure. His muscles grew taut as the latch clicked. Perhaps it was suicide, but Brick refused to believe it until he interpreted his father's silent message.

He got on his knees, started tapping the wide, old-fashioned floor boards. He rolled back the carpet and searched for a loose board. He examined the wall. He was reaching the window casement when the door opened and Mike entered the room.

"Hey!" Mike said. "You got to do something, quick. That horse doctor just said he sent for the sheriff. We don't want no bulls around here. It's bad for the business."

"What business?" Brick asked pointedly.

Mike gaped for a moment, then sputtered, "The garage business, dope. Call the sheriff and fix things. Tell him everything's O. K. The old man just picked an easy way out, that's all. I got rid o' sawbones before he started callin' the army and navy."

"I'm not so sure it was suicide," Brick said. "Dad wasn't the kind to—"

"Say," Mike said, "you tryin' to pin a murder rap on somebody? You're all wet, see? I was in the house when it happened. I got Mary for a witness." Mike tried to hold his brother's gaze, failed. He lowered his eyes and saw the upturned

rug. "It wouldn't surprise me if you bumped him off," he said. "Looks like you can't wait until he's cold before you start lookin' for his cash."

Brick clenched his fists, clamped his jaw stiff to throttle the hasty recriminations that jumped to his lips. "Listen, Mike," he said, "if we've got to gab, let's go outside—where he can't hear." He looked at the deathbed.

"Go on with your fortune hunting," Mike said. "I got no time for chewin' the rag. Somebody's got to earn money for the funeral expenses." He turned sharply and slammed the door in back of him.

Brick returned to the window and began sounding the panels. Two moving figures crossed his line of vision, drew his attention. He looked out of the window and saw Mary and Mike hurrying toward the garage.

Mike held the girl's hand and was almost dragging her. Brick's eyes traveled ahead, saw the open doorway of the garage. He looked over his shoulder at the deathbed, then back at the garage. He recalled the direction of his father's gaze. An icy chill swept over him. The old man hadn't been looking at the wall near the window. He had been looking out of the window—at the garage. Tense, his hand hovering near the revolver holster, Brick walked to the door.

THE GARAGE looked deserted. The silent rows of cars, the white-washed walls made everything as still as death. Brick walked around the open elevator pit, headed for the small office partitioned off in a corner. He entered without knocking.

Mary was sitting on a straight-backed chair. Her eyes were red. She held a handkerchief in clenched

fiat. Mike was bending over one end of the cheap, battered desk. He looked up.

"Oh, it's you again," he said. "Don't think you're going to brow-beat Mary. If you want to know anything, ask me."

Brick ignored him. "Tell me about it, Mary," he said. "Just as it happened. Forget I'm a cop."

Mike stood at the side of Mary's chair. He put his hand on her shoulder. It seemed to Brick that his fingers were digging into the girl's thin dress. Yet it might have been imagination. Certainly Mary didn't try to draw away.

"Yeah," Mike interrupted, "just try and forget. The bull sticks out all over him—from flat feet to thick head."

"I'm waiting, Mary," Brick said.

Mary looked up at Mike, at Brick. She stifled a sob. "I was in the kitchen, peeling potatoes," she said. "Mike was having a cup of coffee. There was a shot. We thought it was back fire. A few minutes later, Mike went out. He came right back and said his dad—had shot himself. I ran over and found him in that chair over there. Mike carried him into the house while I phoned the doctor."

"You're sure you haven't left anything out?" Brick asked.

Mary tried to get up. Mike didn't remove his hand. She sank back into the seat. "That's all," she said.

"You're sure you heard only one shot?" Brick persisted. "Not two?"

"I——" She thought for a second, rubbed a hand over her eyes. "I'm not certain, now," she confessed.

"Look out, Mary," Mike said. "Brick's looking for promotion. He'll end up by accusing you of shooting the old man and trying to poison me."

Brick walked to the swivel chair

at the other side of the desk. A few bloodstains showed. On the floor at its base lay a revolver. He recognized it as having belonged to his father.

"You saw dad in this chair—shot?" he asked Mary.

Mary nodded.

"How'd you guess?" Mike sneered.

Brick picked up the gun. Holding it lightly in his handkerchief, he broke it. One chamber had been recently fired. He wrapped the gun in his handkerchief and put it in his pocket. "When the ballistic man checks this against the bullet, maybe I'll apologize to somebody," he said, "and maybe I won't. I wonder what's keeping the sheriff."

"When you find out, let me know," Mike said, edging away. "I got to wash a car."

"Wait a minute!" Brick stood between Mike and the door. "You've been spouting nonsense long enough. Now you can talk straight. I want to know just what happened around here."

MIKE let his jaw drop. "What's the matter; are you nuts? We've been tellin' you right along. Maybe I should draw pictures of——"

"Stop it!" Brick cried. "Dad has been murdered. You know it and I know it. I don't think you did it—you're not that bad, yet. Maybe I'm wrong. But you are covering the guilty man. I want him!"

"Then get him, wise guy. I don't know anything about it."

"I know where he is, all right," Brick said grimly. "He's upstairs. He took the elevator up, possibly with a car. And you were too dumb to bring the elevator down again. I don't know how many are with him. Now, are you going to come clean?"

"I'm coming clean, all right,"

Mike said. His hand streaked to the V of his coat, came down with an automatic. "Get out of my way, copper. I'm goin' places."

"You're not going; you're talking." With body bent forward and fists ready, Brick continued to advance, slowly, steadily.

Mike retreated; his back almost touched the wall. Brick moved closer. He stared into his brother's eyes, ignored the gun. "You'd better look the other way, Mary," he said, "because if this fellow doesn't talk fast, I'm going to beat hell out of him."

Mike's face showed intense fear. "Stop it, Brick!" he shouted. "Get back—or I'll let you have it."

Brick took another step. "The way you gave it to dad?" he said through clenched teeth.

"I didn't do it, I swear I didn't," Mike screamed. "Get back!"

Mike's gun spat fire. Brick swung half around. His left hand dropped, hung like so much dead meat. Before Mike could bring his gun up for a second shot, Brick closed in. He sank his fist in Mike's stomach. Mike turned white, gave a gasp of pain, doubled up. Brick stepped back, coolly waited for Mike's head to rise. Then he sent a hard fist straight to the jaw. Mike's head snapped back, hit the wall. He slid to the floor and lay motionless.

"Brick!" Mary exclaimed. "You've killed him!"

"No such luck," Brick said, picking up the automatic. "He'll live to hang." Then he realized what he had said. "I'm sorry, Mary," he went on. "I'm an officer now, not a brother. I know how you feel toward him, but——"

Mary arose, walked over and stood directly in front of Brick. "Mike didn't kill dad," she explained. "Everything happened the way I

said. Mike may have done some mean things and he shouldn't have shot at you, but he'd never kill any one. If he killed your dad, do you think I'd lie to you? Don't you trust me?"

The girl's nearness bothered Brick. "Sure," he stammered, "sure I trust you. But people in love do crazy things." Blood was dripping from his left hand. He hid it from the girl's sight, walked to the door.

"Don't go upstairs, Brick," Mary said.

"Why not?"

"I don't want you to. Something terrible may happen. Please!"

"Your reason isn't good enough. And something terrible is going to happen, to one guy in particular."

BRICK skirted the elevator pit, hurried to the rear of the garage. In one corner was an iron stairway, leading to the second floor.

There was a sharp turn, halfway up. Reaching that point, Brick was met by a shower of burning lead from above. One bullet fanned his cheek, another ricocheted from the iron railing. Bending low, Brick heard two more shots whine over his head as he twisted around the curved stairs and brought his own gun into action. He saw the quick movement of a dim figure. Then the upstairs door slammed.

Brick took the steps two at a time. He hadn't heard voices coming from above. Therefore, it was fairly safe to assume he had only one man to face. Plenty of bullets had been fired. Brick decided there was no use in giving the killer chance to reload.

Brick lay prone on the landing, facing the door. He tapped once on the door with the butt of his gun.

The knock was answered by a bullet plowing through a panel.

He twisted around, reached up and carefully gripped the knob. Slowly, very slowly, he turned the catch back, pushed the door forward the least bit so it would swing free. Seeking to resume his former position, the weight of his body rested on the wounded arm. The pain almost paralyzed him. He gritted his teeth, fought to overcome an intense faintness. He eased over to the right side, used the right elbow as a brace and pushed the door with the muzzle of his gun.

The door swung wide, giving free passage to another bullet traveling high over Brick's body. The first thing he saw was a pair of legs. He fired low, saw one leg bend, sink lower and lower. Brick sprang up. He saw a thin, wasp-waisted man struggling to keep a footing that had been shot from under him. He held an open gun in one hand, a cartridge clip in the other. He staggered, fell. Cartridges and gun slid out of reach. He lay holding his kneecap, pin-point eyes glaring at the trooper.

Brick looked at him, then at the big car standing in the middle of the floor. The rear half was a dull, weather-beaten blue; the front half, a glossy black. An electric sprayer stood on the running board. Brick nodded.

"So that's the way it is. Dolling up after the bank job this afternoon."

"I ain't talkin'," the other said. He had a cold, rasping voice.

"I know. In a few minutes you're not going to do lots of things. Get your gun."

"What?"

Brick was fighting to keep from pouncing on the man, pounding him to a pulp. He watched him struggle

over and make a grab for the gun. The hand stopped in mid-air.

"What's the matter, rat?" Brick demanded. "Maybe I'm too young for you. Maybe you only pull triggers on old men—like my dad."

"I didn't know he was your old man," the other whined. "Anyway, I shot in self-defense. And you ain't givin' me the works with an empty gun in my hand."

"Pick up your gun—and the clip," Brick said tonelessly. His own gun he returned to its holster. "When your clip clicks, I draw. I'll be aiming right over your heart."

Brick followed every move of the man's hands. The click never sounded. Brick heard a blast of fire, saw the man give a horrible jerk, then lay still. Brick whirled around. Mike stood at the landing, a smoking gun in his hand.

"You fool!" Brick shouted. "You dumb, double-damned fool! Don't you know you've committed murder? Give me that gun!"

"The heck with you," Mike said. "You got one dead wing now, look out you don't get another. If you want to fight it out, it's O. K. by me. I've had one taste of stir and I don't want another."

Footsteps sounded on the stairs. Mary rounded the turn. She saw the dead man. Frightened eyes watched the brothers, each holding a leveled gun.

"You're not doing a stretch for this," Brick said. "It means the chair. Brother or no brother, I'm taking you in."

MIKE'S VOICE took on a different tone, tinged with pleading. "Listen, Brick," he said, "you've got to give me a chance to clean the slate. I never killed any one. Dopey Dan don't count. He got the old man. You've got to lower your

gun, Brick, and let me scam out of here."

"And forget about what happened to dad?" Brick demanded.

"How many times must I tell you I didn't do it? Listen. Dopey drove the decoy car. He was supposed to draw the bulls away from the other guys who had the dough. But something went wrong. The bulls tackled the mob. Maybe they got 'em by this time. Anyway, Dopey pulled in, to give the car a coat of quick-dry lacquer. The old man held a rod on him. The old man was kind o' wise ever since you showed him that car in the wood lot. He remembered Dopey as being around here a couple o' times, right after a holdup. Dopey was hopped to the eyes. He let the old man have it."

"And you covered the killer," Brick accused.

"What the hell could I do?" Mike said. "The gang forced me into the racket. I was coverin' myself—not Dopey. I ain't done nothing wrong—just hid a couple o' cars."

"And killed Dopey," Brick added.

"Wasn't you goin' to do the same?" Mike flung back at him. "You had a chance to take him prisoner, but did you? No. And now you want to have me burn for something you tried to do. Let me scam out of here and I swear to Heaven I'll go straight for the rest of my life."

Brick was in the throes of conflicting emotions. Once before, as Mike had so aptly reminded him, he had turned his back on duty. And now he found himself leaning toward the same offense. Of one thing he was certain: he could never take Mike alive; desperation shone too brightly in the man's eyes. Brick looked at Mary.

"You know what you should do," she answered his silent question.

"Do you want me to let him go?" Brick asked fiercely.

The girl was silent for a moment. She kept her eyes downcast. "If you let Mike go," she said slowly, "I'm going with him."

Her words struck Brick with more force than a bullet. He pretended not to see his brother's grin. "All right," he said, lowering his gun, "you win. Don't ever forget the debt you owe Mary."

Mike turned on his heel, started for the stairs. Mary stopped him. "Wait," she said. "You get the— the dead man. We can't leave him here. While you're carrying him down, I'll get that V16 ready. Brick can wash up the bloodstains."

Mike nodded. "The dame is smart," he said as she ran down the stairs. Brick didn't say anything. He stood with a dazed look on his face; his right hand massaging his wounded arm. The roar of a car echoed through the building.

Mike picked up the dead man like a sack of potatoes. Brick remained in the loft. He looked at the pool of blood, dimly remembered that he was to erase it. He didn't like the thought. He didn't like any thoughts. He wished he could forever keep from thinking.

ANGRY SHOUTS came in an open window. To Brick, it sounded like flies buzzing on a hot night. Then a young, girlish voice cried out shrilly. Brick shook off the stupor, raced to the window.

He was directly over the entrance to the garage. A long, sleek car, turned sideways, blocked the exit. The motor hood was up. But Brick paid little attention to the car. He saw Mary and Mike struggling with each other. Mary held a few strands

of insulated cable in her hand. At every opportunity she slashed Mike's face.

"You damned double-crosser!" Mike shouted. He pushed the girl away, reached for his gun. Brick jumped from the window.

He landed on Mike just as the gun belched. Both men went down. Brick felt a burning brand iron tearing at his insides. He tried to wind his legs around Mike; his one good hand clutched the gun wrist. He was too weak to fight. Mike was raining blows in his face. He tried to dodge them. Sometimes he succeeded.

He saw Mary. "Get help. Get help," he said. The words sounded far away. He wondered if Mary had heard them. She disappeared from view. Then Mike wrenched his gun hand free and Brick had more serious worries.

Every movement sent excruciating pain through his body. He felt as if he had been thrust into a blazing furnace. They rolled a few feet, stopped. Brick was bottom man. Mike jerked free. Blinded by his own blood, Brick reached out. His fingers closed on Mike's coat collar.

"Let go, damn you! Let go, I say!"

"In hell," Brick muttered. He was growing insensible to the cruel pounding and knee jabs. He no longer moved his head from side to side to dodge the blows. He had only one wish: to hold Mike.

"All right, copper, you're beggin' for it."

Brick forced open his eyes. Mike was sitting on his chest. One hand tore at Brick's encircling fingers; the other held the upraised gun, clublike.

"You're—my—prisoner," Brick gasped.

He waited for the gun to descend. He did not hear the roar of the approaching car. It was nothing compared to the din racking his brain for the past ten minutes. Nor did he hear the shot. He only saw the small, black hole appear in the center of Mike's forehead. Mike toppled forward—but Brick had already fainted.

When he regained consciousness, he found himself in a strange room. He was in bed. Mary and the sheriff stood close by. A nurse hovered in the background.

"O. K., feller?" the sheriff asked. "Sorry, I was so late. We got the gangsters. Too bad we couldn't take them alive. Too bad about Mike, too."

"Mike," Brick said weakly. "Mike lost his head. He was a good fellow."

"Sure, I know," the sheriff said. "Mary and I just had a little talk. I got to the garage when Mike and Dopey Dan were shooting it out with each other. I saw Dopey shoot Mike—right in the forehead. When Dopey started on you, I got him." The sheriff walked away.

Brick turned his head. "Mary," he whispered.

"Hush." She put her hand in his. "Wait just a little while. Then you can ask me anything you want to—anything."

"You mean you—I—" He tried to gain a sitting position.

The nurse and the sheriff rushed over. Three pairs of hands gently forced Brick down. Mary leaned over. Her hair brushed his forehead. "You—I—then—" she said.



Feast of the Tombs

by Arden X. Pangborn

WONG SUN, the old jeweler, looked up from the workbench of his tiny shop in Mott Street and a frown added one more crease to the wrinkled leather of his face.

"Murder," he repeated.

"Lum Kee is sure of it," said the slender Chinese. "He has asked me to bring a thousand and ten thousand blessings and to implore you to come."

Wong replaced in its bed of gray velvet the green jade necklace upon which his blue-veined old fingers

had been carving a design of lotus blossoms.

"The humble talents of Wong Sun are always at the service of one so distinguished as Lum Kee," he murmured. "Wait."

He shuffled to the rear of his shop, the blue cotton sleeves of his jacket flapping about his skinny arms. In the narrow living quarters behind the thin, wooden partition, he took his black skull cap from its hook above the coffin his four sons had given him on his sixty-eighth birthday.

"Soy Wing," he murmured to himself then. "Murdered!"

It did not seem possible that Soy Wing, the fat little importer with his hundreds of friends and never an enemy, should have mounted the Dragon of Death for the long ride to the Land of Shadows. It did not seem possible he could have been murdered. Still, Lum Kee was not one to make hasty judgments.

Old Wong sighed, shook his head. "It is a wise man," he thought, "who knows he has only ten fingers. Perhaps I shall fail in seeking the killer of Soy Wing, but at least I must try. The white police lack understanding."

He rejoined the slender Chinese who was waiting impatiently in the front of the little shop. "Let us go," he said.

THEY pushed through the crowd of loiterers talking excitedly about the gaudy red front of Soy Wing's retail shop near the corner of Doyer Street. Soy Wing lay behind his worn, wooden counter. His fat face was peaceful, but there was a red stain over his heart, and the molded bronze handle of a knife protruded from his brown cotton jacket.

"I found him thus when I came to buy some incense for the Feast of the Tombs," Lum Kee began to explain, but a bellow cut him off.

"None of that chink talk," the voice roared. "If there's any talking around here, I'll do it."

The faintest trace of a smile touched Wong Sun's old lips. "Sergeant Mitchell," he murmured.

The sergeant rose from where he had been stooping beside the body.

"So!" he grunted. "You're mixed up in this business, Wong Sun. Well, I might have known it. You're mixed up in everything that goes on

in Chinatown. And maybe this is the time you're going to slip. You've been giving me the run-around long enough.

"All right, now," he growled suddenly. "Come through. What do you know about it? Who killed Soy Wing and why?"

"The man without arms cannot be expected to wield an ax." Wong shrugged. "I have only this moment been informed of what has happened. When I have acquired information, perhaps things shall become more clear."

"Hmmp!" snorted the sergeant. "The same old stall. You never know anything."

"It was I who asked Wong Sun to come here," ventured Lum Kee. "He was a friend of Soy Wing's."

"And how do I know you didn't stick the knife in him yourself?" the sergeant demanded, whirling on Lum. "All I've got is your word you came in and found him."

"The honorable white detective forgets I have seen the note," Lum Kee said. "Certainly I would not kill my friend for money."

"Hmmp!" The sergeant was taken aback, but only momentarily. "You could have planted that," he said.

Old Wong's face showed interest. "The note?" he prompted.

"It demanded money," Lum Kee explained. "A hundred thousand American dollars—or death. It was typewritten and bore no signature, but Soy Wing took it seriously, for only yesterday he attempted to get the money from his bank."

"I've still got a hunch it was a plant," the sergeant declared. "And I've got a hunch you'd better come along with me, Lum Kee. We're going to talk things over."

Old Wong folded his skinny arms in the sleeves of his jacket. His

wrinkled face was impassive, but there was a hint of amusement in the depths of his black eyes. "The head of a calf sits poorly upon the shoulders of a man," he murmured half aloud.

The sergeant glared at him. "What was that crack?"

Wong smiled. "I was merely reminding my friend Lum that the wise man never questions the will of Heaven. I shall see that he is freed presently."

"For two cents I'd take you along," the sergeant growled. "If I had anything on you at all, I would. And don't think I won't get it on you some day, either. You ain't fooling me a bit, Wong Sun."

Wong bowed politely. "The man with a dagger has no fear of darkness," he said.

WHEN they were gone, and the medical examiner had taken charge of the body of Soy Wing, the old jeweler departed from the shop and went in search of Harry Lee, the attorney. He spent but a few moments in the attorney's office, arranging for counsel for his friend, Lum.

Then he returned to his own shop in Mott Street and resumed his labors upon the green jade necklace, his skinny old fingers moving with rare skill as they carved the delicate design of the lotus blossoms. Old Wong always thought best when his hands were at work. But to-day it was no use. The death of Soy Wing baffled him. He gave it up finally and went out to sit upon the single step of his shop.

He was still sitting there when a voice interrupted his reverie. He looked up. It was the voice of Lui Cheung, the youth who had brought him the message of Soy Wing's death.

"Great sorrow has fallen upon the household of my exalted cousins," he blurted in Cantonese. "Come quickly, Wong Sun. I have just accompanied Lum Kee home from the jail where he was held by the white police, and we have found a terrible thing. Please come quickly."

Old Wong's leathery, yellow countenance did not show the fear that surged through his withered body. "What has happened, younger brother?"

"It is Fin-long, the son of Lum Kee——"

"Dead?"

Lui Cheung nodded his sleek head. "I had grown very fond of Fin-long in the month I have lived with my cousins," he said. "It is a great blow."

"Come," said Wong Sun.

Lum Kee lived in a spacious apartment on the third floor of an old, red brick building in Mott Street. Fine silken screens faced his doors to baffle the evil spirits, which cannot go around corners. On his floors were gay mats from the markets of Shanghai.

Lum Kee's face was drawn and pale.

"Let us not forget," Wong Sun said softly, "that every one is called to the Land of Darkness. The ways of justice are often dim, but it is written that man sees only the present, while Heaven beholds the distant future. Have the white police been notified?"

Lum Kee shook his head.

"Then it is best that you retire. Lui Cheung and I shall make what arrangements are necessary. After the funeral, I shall see you, for an idea is beginning to form in my mind."

"A thousand and ten thousand blessings, Wong Sun. I have eaten much bitterness, but your words

bring me hope. A thousand and ten thousand blessings."

"It was in there we found him," said Lui Cheung, after Lum Kee had gone. "I will show you." He led the way into an adjoining room, a sort of study in which Lum Kee kept his collection of delicately brushed scrolls and his books.

Fin-long apparently had been reading and had laid aside his book when his assailant had entered. There was no sign of a struggle.

"He was killed," said Lui Cheung in a tone marked by awe, "exactly as Soy Wing was killed."

"And the knife," murmured Wong Sun, nodding his old head, "has a molded, bronze handle." He spent a moment beside the body; then he rose, glanced about the room. His face was inscrutable, his black eyes emotionless. "There is nothing more this humble person can do," he admitted at last. "Perhaps it is time we should inform Sergeant Mitchell."

THE FUNERAL was over and the hired mourners gone when Wong Sun again sought out his friend, Lum Kee.

"I have come to speak of a matter of great delicacy," he explained after tea had been served and the customary courtesies exchanged.

"You have information?"

"I have been burdened with much thought, Lum Kee."

The latter leaned forward. "Yes?"

"Soy Wing had no enemies in Chinatown."

"That is true."

"Nor had Fin-long."

"That, also, is true."

"Still, they were both killed by the same person. The knives with the bronze handles prove that."

Lum Kee nodded, and his glance

sought the placid, leathery countenance of the old jeweler.

"Soy Wing was killed because he did not submit to extortion," Wong Sun went on, "but there was no evidence of extortion in the case of Fin-long. Therefore, is it not likely Fin-long may have discovered the identity of the slayer and have himself been slain to insure his silence?"

"It is quite likely."

"Also, is it not likely the murderer was some one well known to Fin-long? Otherwise, Fin-long would not have laid aside his book so casually when the murderer entered the room where he was reading."

"Wisdom is a jewel, Wong Sun."

"But there is much yet to be answered, Lum Kee. I can think of no one who knew Soy Wing who would attempt to extort money from him."

"Nor can I," Lum Kee admitted. "Still, some one who knew him must have done so."

"Why?"

"Because every one in Chinatown knew him."

"Perhaps not every one."

Lum Kee looked puzzled.

"You forget Lui Cheung," Wong reminded him. "He has been here but a month."

Lum Kee's fingers closed tightly about the fragile porcelain of his cup. His dark eyes smoldered. "No. It is impossible. Lui Cheung is a cousin. Have you forgotten that Fin-long was killed also?"

"I have not forgotten, Lum Kee. Nor have I forgotten the tradition of the Central Glory. If Lui Cheung is truly a cousin and has come from Canton, then he could not have killed Fin-long, for the rules of family would be too strong upon him. And if he did not kill Fin-long, then he did not kill Soy Wing,

for both were killed by the same man."

"Do you question that Lui Cheung is a cousin? Have I not lived with him for a month?"

"I question nothing, Lum Kee. But if he were a criminal—from San Francisco instead of Canton, perhaps—might he not seek to pose as the cousin of some one in the community who is well known and respected? As a stranger, he would be the object of suspicion immediately, but as a member of the household of Lum Kee he would pass unquestioned."

"No. It is absurd." Lum Kee shook his head vigorously. "Besides, he does not even understand English; and without it he could not have written the note to Soy Wing on an American typewriter."

"You are sure he does not understand?"

"More than once I have forgotten and spoken to him in the tongue of the white devils. I am sure he does not understand."

"And if you were to discover Lui Cheung is an impostor in spite of these things, would you not seek to avenge the death of your son?"

Lum Kee's eyes blazed. "It is written that a son may not lift his eyes to the heavens while the slayer of his father remains alive, and it is written also that a father may not take his eyes from the ground while the slayer of his son remains alive."

"Then I shall think further upon the problem."

"A thousand and ten thousand blessings, Wong Sun."

"In the meantime, let us remember that to-morrow is the day for celebrating the Feast of the Tombs. I shall give a banquet in honor of the departed spirit of Fin-long, and Lui Cheung shall attend. I shall have special delicacies prepared for Lui

Cheung as befits the cousin of an honored friend."

"This humble person is unworthy of——"

Old Wong brushed aside his protest with a sweep of his blue-jacketed arm. "Let us not forget," he said, "that a stolid face may hide many thoughts."

THE FEAST which would speed the spirit of Fin-long on its way to the Land of Shadows was held the following night in the tea room of the Flowering Plum in Pell Street.

About the ornate blackwood table in the spacious rear room gathered sixteen men. Wong Sun had chosen them well. There was Bert Fong, who was owner of the Glittering Dragon lottery and Lum Kee's closest friend. There was the merchant, Wah Bo; the importer, Lee Sing; the book dealer, Chu Sun.

Across from Wong Sun himself and facing the door, in the position of greatest honor, was Lui Cheung, and to his right was Lum Kee. They were silent, drinking their ceremonial tea as they squatted upon their teakwood stools and raising their voices only in answer to some question from those beside them.

Upon the table itself were huge bowls of food, and thin-necked little jugs of rice wine. There were bowls of finely roasted pork, of minced chicken and almonds, of browned Peking duck and fresh-water chestnuts. There was a fine broth of mushrooms and green vegetables, with the salty, delicate flavor of imported birds' nests.

Twice, as the long meal went on, silent-footed boys came with steaming towels with which to wipe the faces of the guests; and twice other boys came to replace the big bowls on the table with new foods.

They had finished the course of

squab and boiled ham and chicken livers when Wong Sun touched the round brass gong at his elbow.

"Wah Bo, the merchant, has seen fit to provide special delicacies for the next course," he announced, "in honor of the visiting cousin of Lum Kee from Canton. There will be small shrimp imported from Canton, and an exquisite cheese, and *Dow Foo Yuk*, which is fried bean cake, prepared in the style of the City of the Rams."

Lui Cheung tasted the dishes with apparent pleasure as they were set before him. "They are excellent," he complimented. "I have tasted no better shrimp in my life, and the cheese is excelled in flavor only by the fried bean cake."

Wong Sun sipped his wine. He looked at the face of Lum Kee, then at the face of Lui Cheung.

"The man without eyes," he thought, "cannot be expected to see."

Old Wong was carving the last blossom upon the green jade necklace in his shop the next afternoon when the thin jangle of the brass bell above his doorway roused him from his task. He looked up and a smile came to the corners of his eyes.

"The humble shop of Wong Sun is unduly honored," he murmured politely. "Shall I bring tea?"

"Never mind the tea," Sergeant Mitchell rumbled. "I didn't come here to make any social call, Wong Sun. I came here on business."

"Business?"

"You know plenty about this Soy Wing killing, and you know plenty about Fin-long. I'm getting tired of your stalling me all the time. Are you going to come through with a little information, or aren't you?"

Old Wong's shoulders rose in a shrug beneath the blue cotton of his jacket. "It has been said that there is great virtue in a silent tongue,"

he murmured. "Besides, I know nothing that would add to the wisdom of the white detective."

"No?" The sergeant's tone was sarcastic. "I suppose you don't even know there was a third chink found in Bayard Street this morning with a knife in him just like the other two."

"A third?"

"Yes, a third. His name was Lui Cheung. What's so funny?"

"I was just thinking," mused Wong Sun, as he touched the wick of a candle to the squat bowl of his bamboo pipe, "I was just thinking that it takes many generations away from the land of one's ancestors to break away from the traditions of those ancestors."

"And what do you mean by that?"

"It is nothing. A great scholar once said that no armor is so strong that an arrow cannot find a way into it. The impostor always betrays himself."

"Hmmp!" The sergeant shoved his gray hat back on his forehead and planted his feet apart. "Always talking in riddles. If I could figure out what you're talking about half the time, I've got a hunch I'd know a whole lot more about what's going on in Chinatown."

"I was just thinking," Wong repeated, "how distasteful things are to some races, which to others are delicacies. The Americans miss a great deal because they won't eat preserved eggs, which reach their best flavor after ten years."

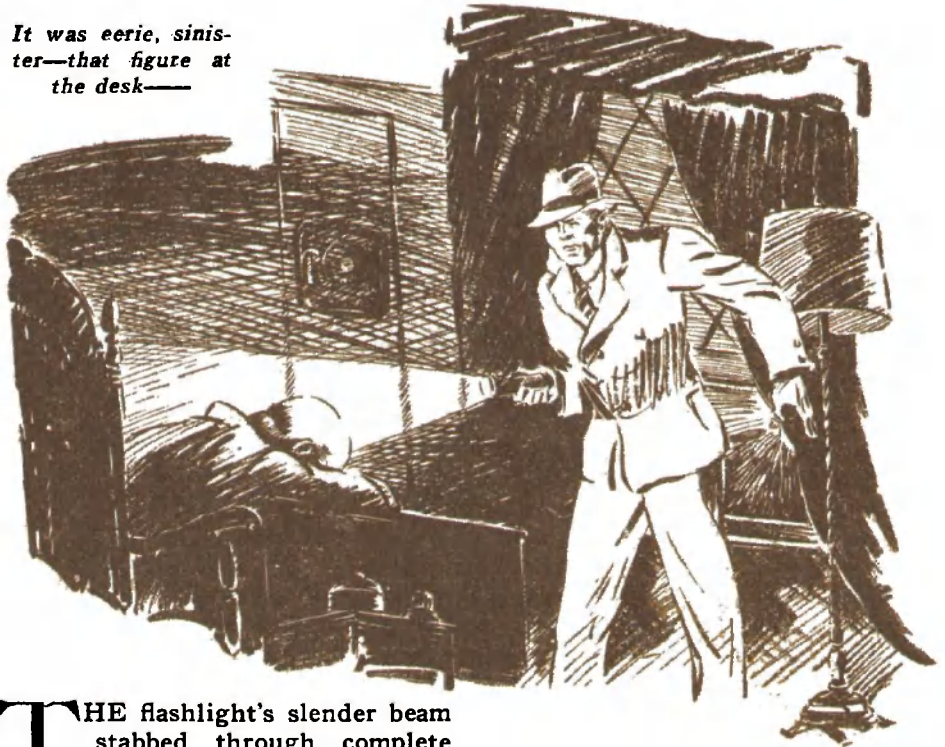
"And what have ten-year-old eggs got to do with these three gents who were murdered?"

Old Wong did not heed the question. "At the same time," he went on, "no native-born Chinese would ever touch that disgusting substance which you seem to relish—that substance you call cheese."

Planned for a Lady

by H. E. O. Whitman

It was eerie, sinister—that figure at the desk—



THE flashlight's slender beam stabbed through complete darkness in short, quick sweeps, revealing two doors—closed—but he had known that. There was a light in the front hall, hand-carved furniture upholstered in Spanish leather. Noales' study was a luxurious one. Curtains were drawn across the windows—including the one he had just jimmied. Ah! A sliding panel was partly open in the hardwood wall, revealing the front of a small safe.

Lance Gay drew in a sharp breath. A man's head had leaped into the bright ray, held it motionless as a magnet.

It was eerie, sinister, that bald dome materializing out of pitch-black. Lance Gay's hand did not waver. In a split second he knew a man seated at a carved walnut desk had fallen forward on its top—as if asleep.

But he was not asleep. The bald head, fringed with gray, bore a livid gash outlined by oozing blood. Under the furrow of blue-yellow flesh one could all but see the crushed bone of the skull.

Lance Gay listened, torch steady as a rock. The big house was still

as a tomb. He crossed to the desk with one long, sure stride.

It was Jepson Noales, of course—Jepson Noales, attorney at law, human leech, owner of this suburban mansion—Jepson Noales, shyster of shysters, struck down unwarned, and very dead.

Lance Gay surveyed the body with swift darts of his light. Jepson Noales, alive, had been an abnormally squat, fat, too-genial man. Jepson Noales, dead, bore an uncommon resemblance to a crushed toad.

But as to who had crushed him, there was no sign.

Gay satisfied himself of that, flicked his brilliant beam about the room again. There was a fireplace with a mantelpiece of Italian marble—and on a corner, *one* heavy bronze candlestick. Otherwise, there was no hint of a lethal weapon.

Lance crossed to the wall safe. He had meant to open that himself, but he did not. A pocket magnifying glass informed him its knobs had been wiped clean of all fingerprints. And Noales' body was not yet stiff.

The set-up was too perfect. Lance Gay backed off, studying each step he left.

The curtains did not rustle as he slipped out the window through which he had come. The night was darkly purple. A street lamp at the corner barely gleamed through a density of trees and shrubs. Lance started across the lawn.

He literally sensed some stranger near. Whirling, he ducked. A blunt object swished by his head, struck his shoulder with a numbing impact. From habit, he spun with the blow, lashed out a straight one-two.

His gloved fists met solid substance. His keen ears caught an exhalation—then human hands were clawing at his throat. He countered

blindly with right and left, smashed up with practiced knee.

More solid substance. An audible *pouf!* The assailant was gone as abruptly as he had come.

Lance crouched, collecting his wits. He could not be sure of a whispering of boughs, but next door a dog began to bark. Minutes had stretched into eons when a back gate banged. Indistinct, cheerful voices approached the house.

Servants, returning from an evening off? Gay slid around the corner of the pillared porch in front.

The dog next door was still barking, had started another on the other side. Lance skipped across the circular drive, made for the wide opening in the wall that bounded Noales' small estate.

Luck failed him. Just as he gained the walk, turning down the collar of his double-breasted dinner jacket, cars came into each end of the block. A big sedan pulled up at the parkway in the same moment Gay made out the red lens of a blinker light on the smaller machine stopping across the street.

A bare-headed youth with white shirt front hopped from the sedan, turned to help out a slim girl in evening wrap. The corner lamp shone on her sleek, blond head, on two men in uniform leaving the car opposite. Lance Gay, trapped, bluffed for escape.

He doffed his soft hat, said coolly, "Is that you, Mr. Noales?"

The youth stared, so did a couple in the car. The girl, wide-eyed, answered uncertainly, "Why, my uncle started home some time ago."

"Oh!" said Gay. He stepped nearer. The two men in uniform were very close. "I'm sorry. Mr. Noales asked me to drop in about ten. No one answered the door, so I——"

The policemen provided the interruption he expected. One said curtly, "You folks belong here? Wait a minute, and douse those lights. We had a call somebody was breaking into the house. Don't scare 'em off."

The young people went stiffly tense. The coppers whipped into the drive. Gay murmured some apology and sauntered off.

In two minutes he had his small coupé in gear. He would have given almost anything to have been with the police, and that sleek blond girl, when they discovered Jepson Noales' body there. But the set-up had been altogether too pat—and who could have sent for the police, and when?

And had any one noticed his license number? For once he was bitterly sorry he had always managed to wangle, for a sort of trade-mark, his familiar "LG1010."

LANCE GAY drove fast across the city. If he had been a fool, the sooner he knew it the better.

Archie Grayton, heir to a defunct lumber kingdom, lived in the Regal Apartments. Gay passed their towering bulk, parked in an alley, entered through a hillside basement garage. The sleepy attendant responded nobly to a half-dollar tip.

Grayton's big sport coupé was in its stall—had been there all evening. Lance felt its cold, polished chromium radiator shell and took the elevator up to the lobby.

He dispensed several more half dollars, then rode on to the tenth floor. Archie Grayton answered the door himself. That might or might not be odd, but Grayton's figured dressing gown looked as if it might have been worn for some time. He said eagerly, "You got 'em?"

Lance Gay walked into the huge,

ornate living room without answering. Magazines, tossed aside, littered the Persian rug about an easy chair. A highball tray held a half-empty glass, a bowl emptied of its ice, cigarette butts in profusion. Archie Grayton was scarcely clever enough to stage so natural a setting.

Grayton's hefty form, somewhat run to fat, was in fact inclined to sway. He ran a manicured hand over his thin, dark hair and thrust a cigarette into his sharp, tanned face. He was about to speak when Gay said bluntly, "Who knew I was going to Noales' house to-night?"

Archie, the playboy sportsman, said, "Why—nobody."

"Sure?" asked Lance.

His well-spaced gray eyes bored into Grayton's brown ones. He was as tall, more lean, than Archie, broad-shouldered and lithely muscular.

Grayton said, "Of course I'm sure. Do you think— What happened?"

Fear had crept abruptly into his dark gaze.

"I think," Gay said grimly, "somebody tried a frame. A police prowler got there at the same time. I didn't stay. But——"

He halted, watching. The vague fear in Grayton's glance was still uncomprehending. "But good heaven——" said Archie.

Lance shrugged, stepped coolly into his client's bedroom. It held no indication of a quick change. At least a dozen pair of shoes encumbered the closet, but none bore fresh stains of bedewed grass or flower beds.

Grayton, following blankly, sputtered questions.

Gay said shortly, "I'll see you in the morning. It's damned wrong. Who sent for the police? You told me it was the servants' night off, and

that Noales would be at the Cummings' dinner party."

"Why, he was!" said Archie Grayton. "I faked a phone call at nine to make sure, and hung up just as he answered."

Gay stared an instant. "The hell!" he muttered, and, without apology, went out.

IN THE ALLEY, Lance hesitated briefly. He had disliked Grayton's commission from the start, and he liked it less than ever now.

He cursed a little, under his breath, as he started his coupé, but he wasted no time on futile questions. He drove downtown, went into a club long enough to be recognized, drove on to his small flat.

Gay leased the second floor of an old brownstone house in a quiet neighborhood. He liked it for its detached location, and because it had not one private entrance, but two. He left his car in front and went up by the separate stairway.

His flat had not been entered. But there was no reason why it should have been. Whoever had set the police on him at Noales', attempted to knock him out when he left, before officers arrived, most likely had no use for him except to be found at the murder scene.

Though he had kept on graveled walks so far as possible at Noales', Lance's first move was to wipe his shoes. Then he strapped a short-nosed automatic in the shoulder holster under his left arm, mixed a drink, and sat down near the telephone.

It was not the phone that rang, however. Half an hour had passed when his doorbell buzzed. Gay pressed the button that released the latch and turned on a light downstairs. He opened his apartment's heavy door a trifle and watched.

His visitor was neither a policeman or a thug. A woman's slender form in a light suit appeared on the landing, finished the ascent. Golden hair gleamed below her mannish hat. She had changed her clothes, but it was the girl he had seen an hour or so ago—Jepson Noales' niece!

Gay swung the door wide and bowed. The girl met his regard with upflung head and imploring blue eyes.

She said quickly. "You're Mr. Gay? Lance Gay? I'm Marcia Moore. You must help me. You were at my uncle's to-night. They found him dead."

"Dead!" said Lance, with all the feeling he could sham.

Marcia Moore shivered, but there was no grief in her fine features. "Yes!" she said. "If you're a detective—if my uncle sent for you to-night—you must help me. I don't know any one else. Who murdered him?"

"Easy!" said Lance.

He piloted her to a chair, poured her a drink.

"You mean," he said coolly, but with a quail for the hypocrisy, "that Mr. Noales was murdered before I rang? But it's incredible. Of course, I'll help—now I think of it, some dogs were barking. But why do you come to me?"

The gorgeous blond girl had not touched her glass. She shivered anew. "Because," she said, "I think—they think I—killed him."

Gay's start was genuine. The girl believed it. But— And just then his doorbell buzzed again.

Marcia Moore jumped up.

Lance stood erect, considering. He could hardly hope to pretend he was not home. He motioned, silently. The girl darted into his bedroom. Again he pressed the button, stood at the rack of the heavy door.

A man came up the stairs—a square-formed man in uniform. Detective Inspector Rourke of homicide removed his cap and wiped his high, square forehead on the last step. Lance Gay grinned from the doorway. “Dan?”

INSPECTOR ROURKE came in, sat down, glared truculently. Gay hastened with the Scotch; he was horribly afraid Dan already had noticed the second glass. “And what brings you here, inspector?” he asked.

Rourke drank deep, fixed his host with bright eyes. “Just what,” he inquired, “were you doing at Jepson Noales’ house to-night?”

Lance remembered his story perfectly. He arched his dark eyebrows blankly. “Noales? Why, he asked me to drop in at ten. But nobody was home. Why?”

“Yeah?” said Inspector Rourke. “And since when do you leave a place when a prowler comes?”

Gay shrugged. “Noales wanted to see me—privately.”

“Yeah?” said Dan. “And you knew he was dead. Murdered!”

He knew how to whip out words. But Lance Gay knew how to act. His lean jaw went slack. “Murdered? Noales?”

The inspector’s shrewd eyes were unflickering. “Yes! And you told his niece you had an appointment. You’d seen him!”

Gay appeared not to notice the veiled accusation. “So that was why nobody answered the door!” he muttered, as to himself.

Rourke growled. Lance fixed him with a sudden stare. “Wait a minute, Dan. How did it happen a prowler was sent to Noales’ at the very time I was to be there?”

“Some man phoned in. Said he was passing by and saw a guy break-

ing in. And there was a window jimmied.”

Lance frowned. “You didn’t check the call, of course? Hell’s bells, Noales’ place was dark as hell. Nobody in the street, or next door, could have seen a burglar if there had been one. Somebody who knew Noales was dead must have phoned headquarters to get me!”

“Maybe,” said Rourke. “So who knew you’d be there, then? How’d you make the appointment?”

“Noales,” Gay lied smoothly, “phoned me this afternoon.”

“Yeah? And who were you seeing him for?”

The lean, tall young man smiled. “Sorry, Dan. That’s professional business.”

“Privileged, eh?” Their eyes met, the inspector’s grim and hard, Gay’s grim but smiling. “All right,” said Rourke. “I know you can call yourself a lawyer, even if you’re really just a common dick. And a society dick at that. But you’d better come clean while you can.”

Lance retorted coolly. “You ought to know that if any client of mine has anything bearing on a murder, you’ll get it quick. Tell me about it, if you want me to help.”

“Noales,” said Rourke, “was at a dinner party with his niece—just six blocks from his house. He excused himself at nine, had a date. At ten our prowler fellows, and the servants who’d just gotten home from movies, found him dead at a desk in his study, head bashed in. The big antique candlestick that did it was lying in a flower bed outside.”

“Near a jimmied window, eh?” Lance said coolly.

“Yeah. A wall safe had been opened, but we don’t know what would have been in it, anyway.”

He bit on a cigar. “The funny thing, though, was that there was a

woman's handkerchief in the hall outside the study, and a drop of blood on the stairs. The candlestick could have been dropped out the window of this niece's room.

"And get this, son: Noales and his niece had a big row this afternoon—over her estate he had in trust and was supposed to have turned over when she was twenty. He'd been stalling about it, and they hadn't been friendly for weeks. The servants heard 'em both make threats. And we can't be sure the niece was really at this Cummings' affair all the time from nine until she had some friends take her home just before ten!"

Gay's glance narrowed. Rourke helped himself to Scotch, idly touched the odd highball glass. Lance said quickly, "But ladies don't ordinarily kill gentlemen with candlesticks."

"No," said Rourke. "But a crack tennis player could. Then why has she skipped out since we let her go to bed a while ago?"

He got up abruptly, but Gay was before him. Dan Rourke was anything but dumb. Lance unobtrusively barred the way to the bedroom door. "If you ask me," he said quietly, "all you need to know is who phoned for your prowler car. I'll let you know within an hour who could have known anything of my business with Noales."

Rourke glowered, but he did not force the issue. "If you ask me," he said, "you'd better. And tell me a lot more. And so had Miss Marcia Moore."

He slammed the door. Gay turned as Marcia Moore came in.

SHE WAS very pale, but her lips were firm, her eyes steady. It could not be denied her lithe, athletic figure might be capable of crushing a

man's head with a heavy candlestick. But Lance was morally certain she had not.

"You heard?" he asked dryly.

"Yes. That's why I came. I heard them questioning the servants. It's true. Ever since I've been back from college—six months—I've felt my uncle was concealing something about my inheritance. I'd never lived with him before, you see. We did have an awful row to-day. I did follow him home from the Cummings'. He was talking to some one in the study—arguing, I think, but I couldn't hear. One of them walked toward the door and I lost my nerve and ran. I must have lost my handkerchief there, in the dark, but I did not go upstairs.

"I went back to the Cummings', and, as soon as I dared, asked some one to drive me home. Then when I heard the servants repeat the foolish things I'd said, I was frightened. I'd heard some one at the country club say something about cases you had solved. I needed help—and you'd been there——"

She stopped; her eyes widened. Evidently she had been too engrossed with her own predicament to grasp fully other implications Rourke had made. For a moment there was terror in her gaze, but it faded as Gay's well-cut features softened in a quizzical smile.

"Yes," said Gay grimly, "I was there, too. And it's as hard for me to explain that, as it is for you. We're in a bit of jam together, and you were rash to come to a stranger. Now—are you rash enough to trust a stranger more?"

She looked at him deeply for half a minute, nodded. "Yes!"

"Then come on," said Lance. "We've got to give the police a lift before they make it worse."

INSPECTOR ROURKE, undoubtedly, had left a man or two to watch Gay and trail his suspected visitor, but Lance's flat had conveniences to take care of that. He took the girl's hand, guided her, through darkness, down the rear stairs, then into the basement. Store rooms there apparently were separated by solid partitions, but two doors led to an abandoned outside entrance masked by heavy shrubbery on the other side of the house.

If Marcia Moore were afraid, she did not show it. She followed obediently. They gained an alley safely, went on to the end of the block. There Gay unlocked a detached garage. "For emergency," he said, "I keep an old car here that no one knows about."

He drove to the Regal Apartments. While he drove, he questioned the girl tersely. About her uncle, what she knew of her uncle's business and associates—which was very little—about herself. But the more active half of his mind was occupied with Archie Grayton.

Lance couldn't get rid of the idea that Noales' death—or the unknown prowler's attempt to have Gay himself found unconscious outside Noales' study—had something to do with Arcie Grayton's unwelcome commission. And why hadn't Grayton, worried, telephoned Lance before this?

Gay parked in the same alley as before, asked Marcia if she would be afraid to wait.

It was nearly one when he reached Grayton's floor, alone. He rang, received no answer, rang twice more. He touched the door. To his surprise, it opened.

The huge living room was still lighted by the same bridge lamps. But in its center Archie Grayton lay sprawled on his back, an ugly red

wound blackening his temple, a small automatic in his hand.

Gay sucked in his breath. He crossed with care and knelt by the body. Congealment of the blood, a stiffening of limbs, indicated Grayton had been dead some time—perhaps since shortly after ten thirty, say!

Lance frowned, whipped out his magnifying glass. He was bent low, peering at the pistol, when a board creaked—or, more likely, a shoe.

He whirled. Detective Inspector Dan Rourke was staring at him, square face hard. They stared at each other an instant. Gay said coolly, "You work fast, don't you, Dan?"

Rourke strode over, stood looking down. "Who bumped him?"

"Not himself," said Lance. "The gun was wiped, then put in his hand. The prints on it are very dim. I doubt if they'd match the grip he would have had to have to put a bullet in his head."

"You," said Rourke, "have a lot of nerve to admit that."

"Why not?" asked Lance.

"Because," said the inspector, "if you'd undertaken to pull a little burglary for this millionaire—and if you'd had to kill Noales when he caught you—you might have had to kill Grayton, too, for fear he'd give you away."

Again their gazes locked. Gay said, "If," empty.

A thought flashed on him suddenly. "Wait a minute, Dan. What do you know of Noales and Grayton?"

"Know?" said Rourke. "I know this guy had written some letters to a married woman. Noales got 'em—probably bought 'em from a discharged maid. He was blackmailing Grayton to buy 'em back, on threat of selling 'em to the woman's hus-

band for divorce and alienation suits, or to Grayton's separated wife for a divorce with a fancy settlement. They must have come to terms to-day, because Grayton was to send the cash to Noales and get his letters back to-night.

"But if you ask me, he knew Noales was going out, probably would risk leaving the papers in his safe a few hours, and hired you to get 'em back for nothing."

"No!" said Gay. "Grayton had offered ten thousand. Noales had sneered at less than fifty. But this afternoon he called Archie and offered to take twenty if he could get the cash to-night. Ten to one his niece had finally given him a scare about her inheritance he'd lost, and he decided to get together the money to shut her up. But Grayton didn't trust him. He hired me to go to Noales at his place, inspect the documents, and if it wasn't another black-leg trick, bring Noales back here to get the amount in bearer bonds. Grayton had them in his own bedroom safe."

"Yeah?" said Rourke. He started involuntarily for the bedroom, halted and motioned Lance ahead. "You call the squad; I'll look. The same guy killed 'em both, maybe, but heaven help you when the district attorney comes."

"But damn it, Dan, who told you Grayton was sending some one to Noales' house?"

HE HAD wheeled in the luxurious bed chamber to fire the question.

Rourke pressed him on; growled, "Why, Noales' partner, of course! Sam Kuller. The boys called him to the house—he'd phoned for Noales—while I was wasting time on you."

Gay flung up a fist; his eyes flashed. "Why, damn it, Dan, don't you see it? Nobody knew Grayton

wasn't going to Noales' house himself, until I phoned Noales just as he was leaving for the Cummings', at seven!"

The inspector blinked, but his mind was too methodical to be swayed. "Yeah? We'll see, all right. Get busy on that phone."

"Sap!" said Lance. "Search Kuller's, quick."

Rourke, from habit, barked. "Sit down," reaching for his gun. Gay thrust him aside, sprang out into the narrow hallway and jerked the key from the door, all in one motion. He had the door locked from the outside before Rourke's heavy body hit it, had the hall doors locked, too, and was ringing for an elevator in the floor corridor, before Rourke could have had time to remember the telephone at hand.

Lance was thankful the Regal's apartments were advertised as soundproof. He heard a muffled thud from Grayton's apartment as the elevator doors opened. But the boy dropped him to the basement garage without question. Gay was through the open entrance before the attendant answered his house phone.

Marcia Moore was waiting bravely. She exclaimed as Lance leaped into the driver's seat. His heavy reserve car was old and shabby, but it was fast. He headed across town at breakneck speed.

Inspector Rourke, fortunately, had left his car in front and come up to interview Archie Grayton alone. But time, and surprise, were precious now.

"I know who killed your uncle," Lance told the girl grimly. "But I can't prove it to-night, they're more likely to prove to-morrow that I did it. You know your uncle's partner, Kuller? Where does he live?"

He could have kissed her when

she supplied an approximate address offhand. "But," she said, "he didn't come to the house often. I didn't like him. He and uncle didn't seem to trust each other very much."

"They wouldn't, in their business. One thing I must be sure of: You threatened your uncle, before four o'clock this afternoon, that you'd go to a judge to-morrow if he didn't account for your inheritance?"

"Yes. I didn't want to live with him. I'd heard—talk—about the way he made all the money that he spent."

"Good girl," said Gay. "Either I'll prove something in the next half hour, or be in jail to-morrow."

He located Kuller's house, less pretentious than Noales', but as detached from neighbors, drove by and parked. He ran back, on the grass. A car standing in a dark driveway had a radiator that was still warm.

The house had seemed dark, but at close hand the windows of a small lower wing gleamed faintly through heavy shades. Lance did not ring. He stepped to faintly gleaming French doors and knocked.

Only then did he notice that Marcia Moore was at his side. He whispered; she shook her head. "You'll need a witness," she said.

A man's voice called sharply, "Who's there?"

"Police," said Gay, not too loudly. "We've got our man, if you'll help out again."

THE WINDOWS swung open a bare crack, but Lance pushed in. A thin, pale man with sharply triangular features and nervous red eyes fell back. He still wore a hat; apparently had been going out as soon as he finished a drink that stood on a table. His nostrils quivered as the girl followed Gay in.

Lance absorbed the room in one

glance: a combined library, work-room, and den—untidy, shut off from the rest of the house. Kuller, it was supposed, did Noales' shadier and inside work; briefs littered a table, and a filing cabinet had a big combination lock.

"Say!" said the sharp-visaged man.

Gay snapped, "Sit down, Kuller. This is a pinch. Where were you between nine and ten to-night? And between ten forty-five and eleven?"

Kuller was not a courtroom lawyer. He wet thin, savage lips. "If it's any of your business, I was right here. Till I had to call Jep and heard he was dead. Now get out, or have Inspector Rourke tell me it's a pinch."

"You're a liar, Kuller," said Lance. "Sit down, I said! Rourke's on his way. You killed Jep Noales to-night, and Arch Grayton, too."

Kuller stared, laughed harshly. "Are you crazy?"

"No," said Gay. "I'll tell you what you did!

"You'd made the deal to get the Grayton letters—you always handled that end. They were worth fifty thousand, worked right, and you knew it. But when you started home to-night you discovered Noales had come back to the office late in the afternoon and taken them. You knew he needed money, were afraid he'd let them go for less, and do you out of your share.

"You knew Noales was dining out, shouldn't have time to close his deal until afterward. You went to his house and waited for him. He came home at nine. You had a wrangle in his study. Miss Moore heard you. He was going to sell to Crayton to-night because he had to pacify his niece; his reputation wouldn't stand any inquiry she started. You made him admit Grayton was sending a

lawyer to see the papers and arrange payment. And you killed Noales because you knew you'd be double-crossed!"

Kuller's loose lips were drawn down in a sneer, but his eyes were shifting rapidly.

Gay went on inexorably: "I was Grayton's messenger, but I got there early. You were at Noales' safe when I rang, at nine forty-five. You knew the house was empty. You ran upstairs. I went around the side. The study lights were off, but they'd been on before. I got in a window. You thought fast, and phoned the police a fake message from upstairs, and dropped the candlestick out a window.

"Then you came down the back stairs and came around to try to make sure I'd be caught. But I started to leave too soon, and you tried to slug me. You got away, but I did, too, I beat you to Grayton's. You came right after me to try to sell him the letters on your own. But he knew something was wrong and stalled. You shot him—with a gun you'd taken from Noales' desk—and got the money anyway.

"And we'll find those bonds, Kuller, the letters, too! You had to phone Noales' house right away, for fear the police would discover you weren't home. And when they told you he was dead, and to come at once, you did not dare waste too much time getting there, if you were to pretend you had come from here. And you can't have been home here long now."

Kuller snarled. "Why damn you, you're just a common hold-up. I place you now, Lance Gay, and I'll help swing you."

Gay smiled. "You might, at that, if you'd only had the sense to tell

Rourke that Noales was to have met Grayton at his house—not an emissary you didn't know. Because Noales, himself, didn't know that Grayton wasn't coming personally, but sending me, until he was leaving for the Cummings'. Noales answered no phone calls between that time and his return at nine. The only time he could have told you was at his house, between nine and nine forty-five—when he was killed!"

The thin man's triangular face was working hard, but he managed to retain his sneer. "And what evidence is that?"

"A lot," said Gay, "when I make you show Rourke the bruises you got when you tried to slug me at Noales to cover up your own crime. I hit you four times, Kuller—and when I hit, I hit hard, even on chest or arms."

Marcia Moore began a scream. Sam Kuller had spun in his chair, jerked out a gun. Lance's pistol hand was faster, but though he aimed for the wrist, the bullet grazed it and plowed on into Kuller's chest.

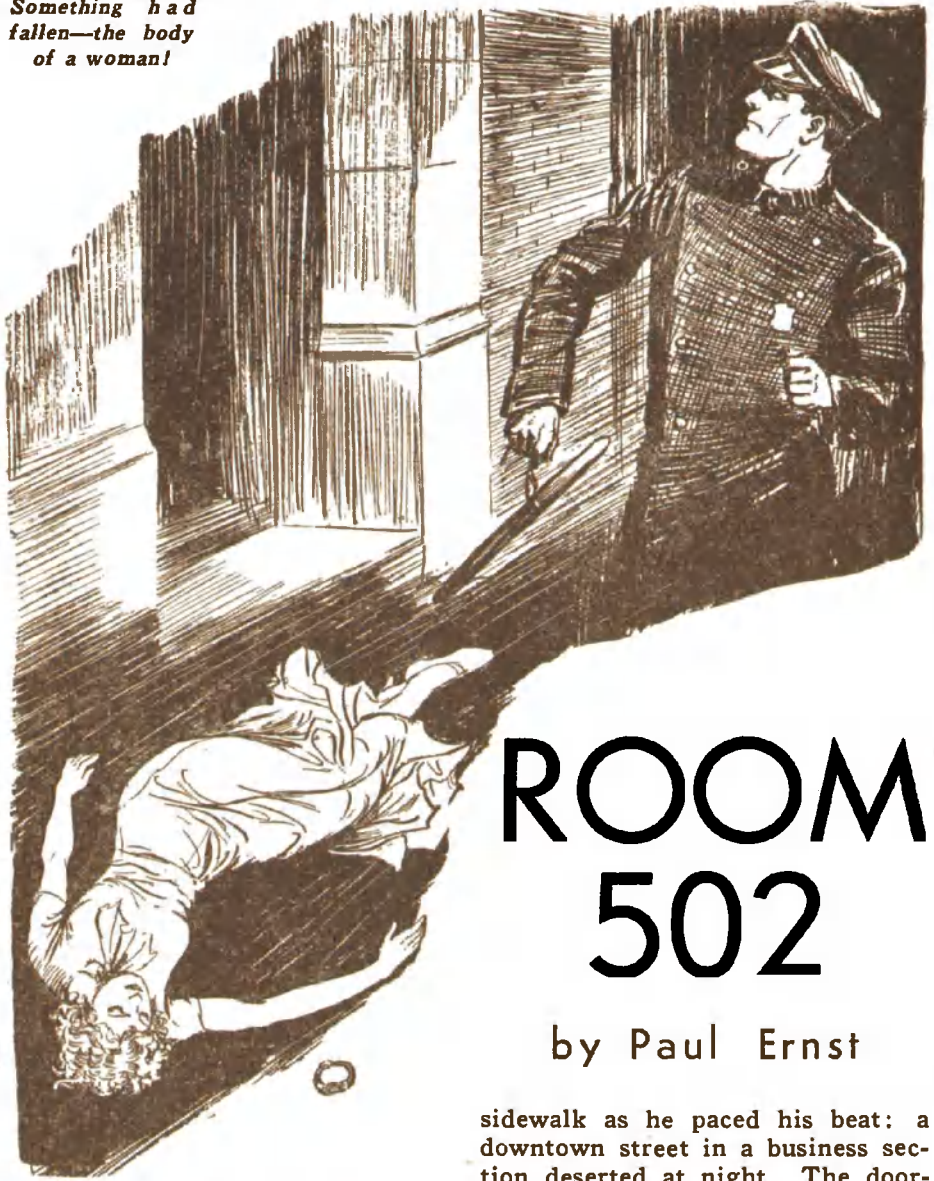
INSPECTOR ROURKE, arriving in less fury than chagrin, found Marcia Moore sobbing quietly outside and Lance Gay administering futile first aid. Kuller was talking disjointedly; on his table lay a thin sheaf of yellow-colored bonds. An ambulance siren screamed distantly.

In the fireplace a charred pile of papers still glowed.

"And what's that?" said the inspector, pointing, after he had expressed his opinion of ends of justice served by unofficial means.

"That," said Gay, "is the stuff that brought death to two men for a woman. And we don't know—positively—her name!"

*Something had
fallen—the body
of a woman!*



ROOM 502

by Paul Ernst

THE LATE NIGHT was heavy with promise of cold spring rain. It was so dark, from the low-hanging clouds over the city, that the street lights seemed to battle but feebly with the blackness. To battle—and lose!

Officer Carlson instinctively walked along the outer edge of the

sidewalk as he paced his beat: a downtown street in a business section deserted at night. The doorways looked like black cave mouths from which danger might dart at any instant. He felt more comfortable walking at a distance from the dark entrances, along the curb.

The crazy little instinct saved his life.

There was the slightest of sounds from above him. It was a faint,

whistling sound, like that which might be made by a projectile hurtling rapidly through the air. At the instant he did not notice it much; but later the whistling noise of air being cleaved rapidly by a moving body recurred to him—and sickened him.

But all he knew at the time was that for a fraction of a second he heard this slight sound. And then, with the suddenness of a hand clap, there was a padded crash between him and the building wall.

Something had fallen less than a yard from him—something that had almost jarred the walk when it smashed down.

Carlson turned. And then the exclamation that had almost been ripped from his lips by his narrow escape, came out in a smothered curse.

The thing that had fallen was a body—the body of a woman. He jumped to it, shuddered away a little.

The woman had been young, beautiful. Her honey-colored hair lay in a wave around her head, which had been mercifully spared in the impact on the cement. Her glazed, open eyes were blue.

“Suicide,” was Carlson’s thought. He looked up the wall of the office building. Some party in an office suite, with this girl drunk and remorseful, ending it by leaping out of a window—

But the wall at this point was unlighted to the roof. Other parts showed lights, where late workers toiled. But there were none in this tier.

And then Carlson touched the remnants of the lovely body as he fumbled for a white gold bracelet that had burst and lay near the flaccid wrist.

“Not suicide,” he said aloud, eyes hardening. “Murder!”

For the body was cold. The girl had been dead before she hit the sidewalk.

At headquarters, Detective Steve Clarke got the call. At the patrolman’s description of the dead girl, his breath hissed between his teeth.

“Blond, young, swell-looking, deep-blue eyes?” he repeated. His big, bony fists clenched. “I’ll bet that’s—”

HE LEFT the sentence unfinished and got up from his desk, reaching for his hat as he did so. He was tall, nearly six feet three, with a wire-rope body that looked gangling till you noticed how big the bones were and how the long, steely muscles snapped it around.

When he moved, he moved fast; and he had the faculty of instilling into others some of his own efficient rapidity. In a matter of scarcely more than seconds he was in a squad car with Detective “Shorty” Mosher, Photographer Beeson, and a fingerprint man holding on with him as the car screamed around corners.

Shorty grimaced at Clarke.

“You don’t know it’s Dorothy Barbour till you see her,” he argued. “Maybe it’s some dumb secretary the boss has thrown over—”

“And maybe it’s my grandfather’s great aunt,” said Clarke. “I’ve been afraid of this right along. And now—it’s happened. The worst break we could get in the Corrigan case.”

Shorty shut up then. If Clarke was right, and he was seldom anything else but, it was the worst possible break in the Corrigan murder. And that case was big; one of the kind that makes or breaks police commissioners.

Three weeks ago young Alexander Corrigan, twenty-year-old wastrel,

who seemed to have dedicated his life to finding out how quickly he could spend eight million dollars left to him by his department-store-owning uncle, had been murdered. He'd got it in a downtown apartment he kept for entertaining purposes: a .38 bullet through the brain.

It had been established that with him at the time was a girl, one Dorothy Barbour, formerly a chorus beauty. Two people besides the doorman of the apartment building had seen her go in with young Corriman; the doorman had seen her come out, white-faced and trembling, and race off in a cab.

The killer? Well, no. The police didn't think she was the murderer. Four people over a bridge table in the apartment below had heard a man's voice, a girl's scream, and the shot—a man's voice—but not Corriman's. All four were prepared to swear to that. All were acquainted with young Corriman; all knew his rather thin falsetto. This had been a deep voice, raised in anger.

The open-and-shut conclusion was that some man had shot Corriman in the presence of the girl, producing that rare thing, an eye witness to a murder.

Dorothy Barbour had seen Corriman killed, and had escaped somehow from the killer. She could tell who the murderer was. And so the police turned the city upside down to find her on a case that was the most important of the year so far.

And they hadn't located her.

Clarke swore softly as the car skidded to a stop in front of the office building from which the girl had dropped. Find her, get from her the simple statement of who had killed Corriman, and the case of the year was solved. It had been that simple.

And now their invaluable murder

witness was dead, murdered herself, with her lips permanently sealed by the tomb.

"Unless," Clarke muttered fancifully, "I can make the dead speak a little, somehow——"

DOROTHY BARBOUR lay on the lobby floor of the building she had fallen from. The lobby was being kept clear of morbid spectators. Above her a cluster of lights in the lobby ceiling cast down white beams on her lovely face and shattered body. To her left the old-fashioned grille of the elevator doors showed like black lace.

"Shorty, see if you can find anything on the walk or in the gutter near where she fell," said Clarke. And, to the print man and photographer: "Get going. Remember, this is the Corriman case. We've got to find something, even if there seems to be nothing to find."

He bent over the dead girl. Her glazed, blue eyes seemed to look directly into his, as if she were trying to speak, to tell him who had killed Corriman and later murdered her.

"Dead about two hours, I think," said Clarke. "The coroner can give a more exact figure when he gets here. Stabbed before she was thrown from the window. Cut over her heart—must have gone right in. Killed her in a second."

Patrolman Carson came from an elevator. With him was an elderly man in a blue serge suit like a worn uniform. He was pale and trembling.

"Who're you?" snapped Clarke.

"My name is Walsh," stammered the man. "I'm the night watchman here. I was just opening doors for this officer——"

"O. K."

Clarke turned to the cop.

Carlson had brains. He was slated for plain clothes himself sometime soon. He had already gone through a lot of routine work for the detectives.

"I got the office she fell from," he said. "Suite 502, on the fifth floor. Window's open there—blood on the floor."

"Who's the tenant in that office?" asked Clarke.

The patrolman did not answer in words. Beside the two was the building directory, names in white letters on a big black, glass-covered plaque. With an instinctive sense of the dramatic, Carlson simply pointed to one of the names. And as Clarke read it, an exclamation came from his lips.

The name was: Martin H. Corriman.

And Martin H. Corriman was uncle and guardian of young Alexander Corriman, whose murder was the dark act behind the death of this girl on the cold lobby floor.

IN THE OFFICE of Martin Corriman, Clarke nosed around like a hunting dog on a hot scent. And the scent seemed plenty hot, too!

As Carlson had said, there was blood on the floor—lots of it, on the rug near the big, flat-topped desk. And the window from which the girl's body had been dropped was still open with the beginning spring rain pattering in.

Shorty Mosher came up.

"I found part of a bracelet on the walk," he said. "That's all. Initials on it are E. R. I think the letters are: 'E. R. to D. B.'"

Clarke nodded abstractedly. The reason for his abstraction was a little row of blood spots leading from the central pool to a closed door.

He opened the door. It concealed a tiny washstand and lavatory. On

the floor was the murder instrument: a heavy brass paper knife crusted with blood.

Clarke gave it gingerly to the print man, who looked at it through his lens.

"No prints," he said.

Clarke scowled. "You're sure? That's funny."

He began looking through the desk belonging to Martin Corriman. From the bottom of a pile of loose papers in the top drawer he pulled one that he studied for several minutes, while the rest stared at him.

"This," he said slowly, at last, "is funny too."

The paper was an unsigned carbon copy of a letter written a month before to young Alexander Corriman. The last paragraph was the one that had nailed Clarke's attention.

Your extravagance, Alexander, is pulling me down, along with you, to eventual bankruptcy. I have not the power to forcibly stop your draining of large sums of money from the Corriman store, which needs cash badly. I can only urge you again to stop your squandering and let me use the money for the store, lest there be a financial crash which ruins me as completely as you—

"Damned funny," muttered Clarke.

He handed it to Shorty, whose fist smacked into his palm as he read.

"It was Martin Corriman! The old man killed his nephew to keep him from dragging him to the poorhouse. Dorothy Barbour saw him do it. He got her here, somehow, late to-night, and knocked her off to keep her from squawking. This letter gives the motive. The blood and the knife in here, and the window being open, hangs it on Corriman's office—and on Corriman. Looks like we got our man, Clarke."

"Yeah, looks like it," Clarke said.

Then his long, gangling body stirred itself. He went back down the lobby for another look at the dead girl there. And after a minute examination a glint suddenly showed in his eyes.

He stared at the thing that had produced the glint. That was a portion of the girl's body just under her left arm. Her silk dress had been torn away there, and the flesh showed. In the flesh was an indented, rough line.

CLARKE went from her body to the building directory. He opened the glass front of the directory board and stared closely at the numbers, 502, after Martin Corriman's name.

It looked to him as though the numbers were not quite even. They were separate figures, stuck into grooves in the board so that they could be easily changed if a tenant moved and a new number was required.

The 5, in the 502, was just a little crooked. All the other numbers on the board were meticulously in line.

Clarke went back to the girl and stared at that rough, deeply indented line in the flesh under her arm. Then he straightened to his full, steel-thin height. If the dead had not spoken, at least the dead had whispered a hint. And he thought it was going to be enough.

The others watched him—Shorty, Carlson, the building watchman, three newspaper reporters who had already gotten here on the big case.

Shorty spoke at last.

"We know our man: Martin Corriman. Shall we get him?"

The news hawks hung on that one. They stared eagerly at Clarke. And Clarke shrugged.

"Why not?" he said.

"Hot dog!" cried one of the re-

porters, preparing to rush the news to his office that the uncle of young Alexander Corriman was the murderer of his nephew and, later, of Dorothy Barbour, eye witness to the killing.

Shorty and Clarke went out to the squad car—

Around the corner from the office building, Clarke put his hand on Shorty's arm. Shorty, who was driving, slowed and looked inquiringly at him.

"Let me out," said Clarke.

"Let you out?" Shorty gasped. "What the hell! Corriman—"

"Didn't kill the girl. At least, I don't think he did. Let me out. Then you go back and get the reporters as they leave the building, and tip 'em off to hold that story. But don't let any one in the lobby see you."

"But Clarke—"

"Scram," Clarke said.

Shorty scrambled. Clarke did some funny things sometimes, but he always seemed to know what he was doing. And orders were orders.

Clarke watched the car disappear, then walked back toward the office building. He walked slowly, keeping in shadow. And when he got to the dark recess of a building door across the street and down a little, he was reasonably sure he had done so unobserved.

HE CROUCHED in the shadow there, wet from the rain, cold, but scarcely feeling his discomfort. He watched the building across the way.

An hour and a half went by. The coroner had come and gone long since; the girl's body had been taken from the lobby; the last of the morbid onlookers had cleared out. Gone too were the last of the late workers in the building, chased away by the tragedy as well as by the

lateness of the hour. The building was a black cube, unlighted, now.

Clarke watched, and suddenly the muscle of his jaw tightened. In the dark face of the building a light had suddenly sprung into being. The light was from a window in the tier from which the girl's body had fallen. But it was not the window of 502. It was the window of the office three floors above, on the top floor of that tier: 802.

802, according to the report of Carlson, who had gone through all the offices in that tier to find the one from which the body had fallen, was untenanted, vacant.

For perhaps five minutes the light

Keeping over a block behind, Clarke followed. And as he went, his eyes narrowed to steely slits, his mouth was hard, grim.

The man he was following was the building watchman.

The man had no business deserting his post at night; nor would any citizen on prosaic, honest business move as furtively and swiftly as Walsh, the watchman, did. Clarke thought of the light that had gleamed in 802 for a few minutes, and smiled bleakly.

Walsh went four blocks to a subway, boarded it and went uptown. Clarke followed. Walsh got off at Seventy-second Street and walked,



stayed on in 802. Then it snapped out, and Clarke transferred his gaze to the street level of the building.

There was an alley entrance to the building as well as the front one. But this made little difference to Clarke's watching. The alley the rear door opened onto was a blind one, opening only into the street beside the end wall of the building.

Clarke watched the front door and the alley mouth. And in about fifteen minutes a figure came quickly from the alley. It was swathed in a dark overcoat and moved so furtively that he barely caught sight of it. Then it was moving up the street.

in the same swift and furtive way, toward the Drive. Clarke tailed him like a long-distant shadow.

The watchman went into a big apartment building on the corner of the Drive. And for an instant Clarke scowled as he thought of trying to find which apartment in the vast pile the man was visiting. Then he saw that there was a sleepy looking doorman, colored, in the building lobby.

He waited for five minutes after Walsh's entrance, then went in and up to the doorman. He showed his badge.

"The man in the black overcoat and blue serge suit who just came

in," he said. "What apartment did he go to?"

The doorman shook his head.

"The gentleman didn't say. He walked right to the elevator and punched the button, like he knew where he was going."

"What floor did he go to?"

"I didn't notice, Mr. Detective. But it was up high. The elevator was goin' for a long time——"

CLARKE looked at the elevator doors. Above them were indicators. The indicator hand over the one elevator used for night service pointed to nine.

"Has the night elevator been used since the man in the black coat came in?" he asked.

"No, sir. He was the last."

"Who's on the ninth floor?"

"Gentleman by the name of Wheaton, lady and gentleman named Black, lady and gentleman named Johnson, gentleman named Ryker, two ladies——"

"Ryker!" said Clarke.

He remembered the white gold bracelet found near the body of Dorothy Barbour. And he remembered the initials on the fragment turned in by Shorty: E. R.!

"Ryker. What's his first name?"

"I don't know. Earnest, I guess. They call him Ernie."

Clarke's nostrils suddenly showed a little white. Ernie Ryker! That name was known at headquarters! Ernie Ryker, small-time racketeer, imitation man-about-town, gambler. His name had come up in connection with the search for Dorothy Barbour. But it had been only remotely, and after one grilling in which he had established an apparently iron-clad alibi for the time of Alex Corriman's murder, headquarters had let him go.

"Got a pass-key to Ryker's apartment?" he asked the doorman.

"No, sir," mumbled the man, evading Clarke's gaze.

"Give it to me," said Clarke.

"I ain't got——"

Clarke looked at him.

"Yes, sir," said the man.

With the key in his hand, Clarke went to the stairs. The elevator, if he used it, might be heard in Ryker's apartment. Best to go up the stairs.

He started the nine-story climb, eyes grim, lips a line in his lean face.

The Corriman murder, and the succeeding Dorothy Barbour murder, made up the big crime event of the year. To the man who could crack it would go plenty of prominence. And Clarke was willing to wager his life—was in fact on his way now to wager it—that he was the man!

IN THE living room of Ernie Ryker's ninth-floor apartment, Walsh faced Ryker. There was silence between them for a moment like an angry wall. In the silence a clock, of gilt with two angels' wings most inappropriately framing the clockface, ticked loudly.

A wall of anger between the two men! But Walsh's anger was tremulous and blended with fear, while Ryker's was cold and contemptuous.

Ryker leaned back in the easy-chair he had not bothered to get out of after admitting the office building watchman. His dark, heavy face was surly. His black eyes were coldly venomous. In the ease of his position, with his silk-clad right ankle crossed over his left knee, and his right hand in the pocket of his maroon silk dressing robe, was a disdain—and something else—that

was obviously not reassuring Walsh at all.

"So everything is all right at the building," Ryker said softly.

"Yes," said Walsh in a whining voice. "The cops didn't get wise — What was that?"

"What was what?" said Ryker.

"It sounded like a click from the outer door in your vestibule."

Ryker shrugged. "You're jumpy. You said you were sure you hadn't been followed."

"Sure I'm sure. I——"

"Then there probably wasn't a click from the door. But you'd better go and see if any one's there."

Walsh walked through the living room to the small anteroom. He went to the door, looked out into the hall. He sighed in a relieved way and returned to the living room, passing a high-backed divan slanting across a corner of the little reception hall. He didn't think to look behind this.

"O. K.," he said to Ryker. "Guess I am jumpy, all right. But I'm not used to this kind of thing. It was awful——"

"What happened at the building?" Ryker interrupted smoothly.

A little of Walsh's shakiness left him.

"Everything went off smooth and nice. The cops landed in 502 right away. And a little after that they went off to nail a murder charge on Martin Corriman, with the reporters right on their heels. It'll be in the noon papers."

"802?" said Ryker.

"They looked in it, along with all the other 02s. But not very hard. And they didn't find anything. I went up there just before I left to be sure nothing was around. And it's all right. You're clear."

"That," said Ryker thinly, "is nice."

Walsh's shakiness came back. He cleared his throat.

"Now," he said. "I guess you'll be ready to give me the thousand dollars I was to get for helping you."

Ryker looked at him for half a minute before replying. And at his look, Walsh's pale face got ashen in hue.

"Oh, no," Ryker said softly. "You don't get a thousand bucks now. You get something else."

"I—I——" Walsh faltered. Then he stopped.

"You sap!" Ryker went on in the same soft tone. "You know I gave it to young Corriman because he wouldn't lay off the Barbour girl." His heavy voice thickened for an instant. "Damn him! I told him to play away from my girl, and he wouldn't. So he got it. You know that, Walsh. And you know all about the Barbour business to-night."

Walsh was bracing his trembling body against a table near Ryker's chair. He wet his lips.

"You know all that," Ryker went on tonelessly, "yet you have the guts to come here to-night and ask for the grand I said I'd give you! Right after I knocked off the girl because she knew too much! What a mug you are!"

His right hand came from his pocket at last. It gripped a .32 automatic. Leisurely, he dipped into the left pocket of his dressing robe and drew out a compact small cylinder.

Walsh watched him with the staring eyes, the trembling motionlessness, the stunned horror of a small animal hypnotized by a snake. The small cylinder was a silencer; and, still in a leisurely way, Ryker attached the silencer to the .32.

"You don't get a grand," he said.

"You get what Dorothy Barbour got. You know I killed young Corrigan and you saw me kill her. Now you follow the other two. Now, you sap, is——"

"Oh, no!" a voice cracked out from the anteroom doorway. "Not now, Ryker, or any other time! You've got a date with the chair, mister. And Walsh'll get life—maybe the chair himself—for being an accessory. Drop the gun."

RYKER stared at the doorway, and at Detective Clarke standing in it, his own black eyes vacant from the shock and his mouth agape.

"Drop the gun!" Clarke cracked out.

Slowly Ryker dropped the silenced .32. Clarke came forward into the room.

"So everything was all right at the office building, the cops were fooled, and you're safe, huh?" he said. "That's what Walsh thought. And Walsh thought the guy you framed, Martin Corrigan, would be safely in the cooler by now. But both of you slipped a little in your frame.

"You planted the letter in Corrigan's desk, and didn't stop to think how funny it would seem that the old man should keep a carbon copy of an intimate letter like that. You bloodied up Corrigan's office, and left his bloody paper knife there, and didn't think how funny it would seem that there weren't any prints on the handle: Would Corrigan, leaving all sort of other cockeyed evidence in his office, bother to wipe the knife handle?"

The sound of Walsh's breathing was loud in the room. But Ryker simply looked at the detective out of basilisk eyes and said nothing.

"I'm no Sherlock," said Clarke, "but I got the lay down at that building in about five minutes. And

what I just heard here completes the picture nicely.

"You killed young Corrigan because he was playing around with your girl friend. You let Dorothy Barbour go because you were nuts enough about her not to want to kill her. Then, you found out in the newspapers that it was known that she was an eye witness and the cops were after her. You knew then that she'd have to go too, and that you'd have to find her first. You did, and, pretending to be Martin Corrigan, you urged her to come to 'your office' and help justice by confessing what she'd seen. She went.

"On the building directory board she saw the office number 802 after Corrigan's name instead of 502. Walsh had changed it. She went to 802, was admitted by you to an empty office and was knifed.

"Then came your smart trick. You'd been buzzed once by the cops and were afraid to trust your phony alibi again. You'd planned what seemed an easy frame. You took blood to Martin Corrigan's office, bloodied his rug and his knife, wiping the knife handle later to remove your own prints.

"You got ready to plant the body in his office too. But that was harder. You couldn't just walk down the stairs with a body in your arms. There were a few late workers in the building and one of them might see you. So you lowered her body on a rope Walsh got you, planning to swing it in through the window of 502. Then you saw a cop. You tried to haul the body back out of sight, and it slipped from the rope and nearly fell on the cop.

"You beat it over the roof, still thinking you were safe, anyhow. And Walsh, thinking the same, came here to collect his dough."

FOR the first time Ryker spoke. His lips scarcely moved with the words.

"You're nuts. You think a pipe dream like this would go down with a jury?"

"You'll find it's more than a pipe dream. There's a number crooked on the directory board: the number 5, after Corrigan's name, that was changed to 8 and back again by Walsh. There's a mark of a rope on Dorothy Barbour's body. There's what I just heard. And if you think it's only my word against yours in court, you're crazy. Walsh led me here in the first place, after I'd tumbled that the murder couldn't possibly have been done without his help. He'll rat on you in the back room at headquarters. He's that kind. And you'll get the chair and maybe he will too—"

With a scream that was hardly human, Walsh leaped. He hit Clarke just as the detective, who had underestimated his scared rat's courage just a trifle, snapped up his gun and shot. The slug missed the watchman. He smashed into Clarke.

"Hold him!" yelled Ryker, diving for his gun.

Still screaming, Walsh scrambled for the hand in which the detective held his gun. That hand came down

as Ryker straightened with the .32 in his hand. Clarke's gun crashed on the watchman's head as the silenced gun leveled at him spat its load.

Clarke spun, with red streaming from his side. The .32 cracked down on him again.

There was a *spang-g-g* as the .32 spun through the air, shot from Ryker's hand, which was now a red-dripping pulp. And Ryker crouched before Clarke, incoherently snarling his defeat.

The gilt clock with the angels' wings bracketing its face ticked in the silence. Walsh lay stark on the floor. Clarke pressed his hand to his streaming side, then went for the telephone. He dialed headquarters.

"Shorty?" he said. "Got a couple gentlemen here who are just aching to tell us about the Corrigan and Dorothy Barbour murders. Hop in a squad car— Yeah, I got winged a little. No, not much. But I'll want to stop off at the hospital on my way down with you, so give em a ring. Oh, and Shorty"—Clarke grinned amiably at Ernie Ryker, who squeezed his wounded hand and spat a curse at him—"have 'em reserve the same nurse I had last time, will you—the red-headed one?"



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