

MAR.

CRACK DETECTIVE

ONE WAY



ORCHIDS FOR
MADAME
By GRETA
BARDET



THE CASE
OF THE
TIMID
COMMANDO
By ARTHUR
L. ZA

FREE OFFER FOR FALSE TEETH



**JUST 3
EASY STEPS**

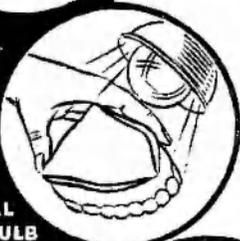
Tightens False Teeth or No Cost!

Here's new amazing mouth comfort without risking a single cent . . . enjoy that feeling of having your own teeth again. Satisfy your desire for food . . . eat what you want. **CROWN RELINER TIGHTENS FALSE TEETH OR NO COST.** Perfect for Partial, Lowers and Uppers.

Don't suffer embarrassment and discomfort caused by loose dental plates. Apply **CROWN RELINER**. In a jiffy your plate fits like new and stays that way up to 4 months. No old-fashioned heating to burn your mouth. Just squeeze **CROWN** from tube and put your teeth back in. They'll fit as snugly as ever. Inventor is a recognized authority in dental field. A patent has been applied for **CROWN RELINER** to protect you from imitators. After you reline your plate with **CROWN**, take your false teeth out for cleaning without affecting the **CROWN RELINER**. **CROWN RELINER** is guaranteed . . . it's harmless.



**No. 1
CLEAN
WELL**



**No. 2
DRY WELL
UNDER BULB**



**No. 3
SQUEEZE CROWN
RELINER FROM
TUBE, SPREAD
EVENLY, PUT PLATE
BACK IN MOUTH**

READ WHAT A USER WRITES

J. Clements of Algonac writes: "My plates were so bad they rattled when I talked." E. W. W. of Virginia writes: "I have found Crown Reliner all you claim for it and more."—Many more attest to same excellent results. Reline your plates with **CROWN**. It's tasteless. Has that natural pink color. Order a tube of **CROWN RELINER** today . . . enough to last a year. We include **FREE** a tube of **CROWN** plate cleaner.

NOT A POWDER or PASTE

Crown Dental Plate Reliner is not a powder or a paste. It is a scientific discovery that you use without fuss or bother. Just squeeze it out of the tube onto the plate and in a jiffy your plate will again feel as light and comfortable as it did when it was new . . . feels comfortable too! Doesn't burn or irritate. Order today and enjoy this new oral comfort right away.

SEND NO MONEY

You take no risk when you order Crown Plate Reliner. You must be one hundred per cent delighted or no cost. Try it for four months and then return it for a full refund if not satisfied. Order at once and we'll include free with your order a tube of Crown's Dental Plate Cleaner. You'll be delighted with both and the Crown Cleaner will always make your mouth feel clean and refreshed. Rush coupon sending name and address. Pay postman one dollar for combination plus postage, or send cash and we pay postage. Act now and enjoy this new happiness.

RUSH COUPON Send No Money

Order this
this FREE

CROWN PLASTIC CO., Dept. 3403
 4358 W. Philadelphia Ave., Detroit, Mich.

Send your wonderful Crown Dental Plate Reliner and include the free Crown Dental Cleaner. I will pay postman one dollar plus postage on arrival. If I am not satisfied after four months I may return partly used tube for full refund.

I am inclosing one dollar in full payment same guarantee.

Name

Address

Do You Want Success Like This in RADIO



BEFORE COMPLETING YOUR COURSE I OBTAINED MY RADIO BROADCAST OPERATOR'S LICENSE AND IMMEDIATELY JOINED STATION WMPC WHERE I AM NOW CHIEF OPERATOR.

HOLLIS F. HAYES
327 MADISON ST., LAPEER, MICH.



I WAS WORKING IN A GARAGE WHEN I ENROLLED WITH N. R. I. I AM NOW RADIO SERVICE MANAGER FOR M. FURNITURE CO. FOR THEIR 4 STORES.

JAMES E. RYAN
119 PESBLE COURT
FALL RIVER, MASS.



CLIPPING YOUR COUPON GOT ME STARTED IN RADIO. I AM NOW IN CHARGE OF THE RADIO DEPARTMENT FOR THE AMERICAN AIRLINES AT CLEVELAND.

WALTER B. MURRAY
AMERICAN AIRLINES, MUNICIPAL AIRPORT, CLEVELAND, OHIO.



MY LOUDSPEAKER SYSTEM PAYS ME ABOUT \$35 A WEEK BESIDES MY RADIO WORK. IF IT HAD NOT BEEN FOR YOUR COURSE I WOULD STILL BE MAKING COMMON WAGES.

MILTON I. LEIBY, JR.
TOPTON, PA.



I HAVE BEEN IN BUSINESS FOR MYSELF FOR TWO YEARS, MAKING BETWEEN \$200 AND \$300 A MONTH. BUSINESS HAS STEADILY INCREASED.

ARLIE J. FROEHNER
300 W. TEXAS AVE.
GOOSE CREEK, TEX.



I MAKE \$40 A MONTH FIXING RADIOS IN SPARE TIME. I STARTED MAKING EXTRA MONEY 3 MONTHS AFTER BEGINNING THE N. R. I. COURSE AND MADE ABOUT \$100 WHILE LEARNING.

WILLIAM CHERMAK
RT. 1, BOX 287
HOPKINS, MINN.

Here's the Formula That Has Worked for Hundreds

Mail the Coupon—I will send you my 64-page illustrated Book, **RICH REWARDS IN RADIO**—a real introduction to the wonders and opportunities of Radio.

You'll see how my thorough, practical methods offer a tested way to more pay, and a chance to get a steady job in a field with a bright future. It's not a "miracle cure" nor a "long chance" operation, but the same formula that worked for the men above and hundreds of others, too. It is a time-tested way to make \$5, \$10 a week extra while training for a full-time Radio job paying up to \$50 a week.

Beginners Quickly Learn to Earn \$5, \$10 a Week EXTRA in Spare Time

Many N. R. I. students make \$5, \$10 a week EXTRA MONEY fixing Radios in spare time while learning. I send EXTRA MONEY JOB SHEETS that tell how to do it!

My "50-50 Method"—half building and testing Radio Circuits with SIX BIG KITS OF RADIO PARTS I send, half learning from illustrated lessons—makes you "old friends" with the miracle of Radio before you know it. You can run your own spare time shop—get paid while training!

Act Now! Many Radio Technicians Make \$30, \$40, \$50 a Week

Today there's room nearly everywhere for more spare and full time Radio Technicians.

Extra Pay in Army, Navy, too

Men likely to go into military service, soldiers, sailors, marines, should mail the Coupon now! Learning Radio helps men get extra time—extra prestige, more interesting duties, **MUCH HIGHER PAY.** Also, more pay for home. Hundreds of service men now enrolled.

Many Radio Technicians are starting their own businesses—making \$30, \$40, \$50 a week! Others take good pay jobs with Broadcasting Stations. Many more are needed for Government jobs as Civilian Radio Operators, Technicians, Radio manufacturers employ others to help fill Government wartime orders.

And Aviation, Commercial, Police Radio and Loudspeaker Systems are live, growing fields. Then, think of the NEW jobs Television and other Radio developments will open after the war. I give you the Radio knowledge required for these fields.

Find Out Today What N. R. I. Can Do for You

MAIL THE COUPON NOW for my 64-page book FREE. You'll discover things you never knew about Broadcasting, Radio Service, Manufacturing, other Radio fields of opportunity. You'll read a description of my course, "50-50 Method." Six Big Radio Kits, Extra Money Job Sheets. You'll see letters from many men I trained telling what they're doing, earning. Mail Coupon AT ONCE! J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. SB22, National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

TRAINING MEN FOR VITAL RADIO JOBS

THIS FREE BOOK HAS SHOWN HUNDREDS HOW TO MAKE GOOD MONEY

MIR. J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 3B42 National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

Mail me FREE, without obligation, your 64-page book, **RICH REWARDS IN RADIO.** (No Salesman will call. Write plainly.)

Age.....

Name

Address

City State

I Trained These Men at Home I Will Train You Too




CRACK DETECTIVE

Volume 4



Contents for March, 1943



Number 2

POWERFUL MYSTERY NOVEL

- Art and I would have laughed had you told us that
ORCHIDS FOR MADAME By Greta Bardet 10
 would lead us into an amazing web of murder and intrigue, with a choice between hot
 lead at the hands of the swastika-boys and the hot seat, courtesy of the police!

THREE SUSPENSEFUL NOVELETS

- Suicide or murder, Lt. Dink wanted
THE LADY IN THE CASE By Lee E. Wells 32
 because it looked as if an epidemic of dry-dives from top floors was on, unless he could
 find the answer!

- In the midst of the war, B & B Detectives found that
THE CASE OF THE TIMID COMMANDO By Arthur Leo Zagat 49
 was one upon whose solution rested the morale of an entire company of US trainees!

- Listening to voices in a nearby booth led the little man to
MR. BINGLER'S MURDER MAZE By Wilbur S. Peacock 62
 which made him very happy until he learned that he was supposed to be one of the
 corpses!

SHORT STORIES

- If you ever decide to get bumped off, remember,
NICE CORPSES LIKE FLOWERS By Dorothy Les Tina 79
 and a gilt "U" can point the way to the killer's trail!

- Sheriff Sam Spaulding didn't realize he was in
THE STOOLPIGEON PLOT By Fred J. Ford 89
 until the trap was sprung and he was helpless!

- I don't mind the villagers' laughter, because
DEAU BRUMMEL MURDER By Ray Cummings 99
 is something they won't expect of a sissy-looking guy like me!

SPECIAL DEPARTMENT

- ON THE BEAT** 97
 Facts and fun about the people who make CRACK DETECTIVE!

ROBERT W. LOWNDES, Editor

MATHEMATICS MADE EASY

FREE!

THIS VALUABLE NEW BOOK "Mathematics Made Easy" — gives you simplified instruction in every phase of figuring ALL types of work, PLUS a FREE Deluxe Professional 10 inch SLIDE RULE. Saves time, simplifies all calculating, fractions, estimating, percentage, decimals, costs, ratios, etc. Complete instructions for using a Slide Rule, BOTH FREE—with this offer.



if you want
A BETTER JOB and BIGGER PAY

Learn

Three New SHADOWGRAPH Method — You Read Blueprints the First Day

BLUEPRINT READING

AMAZING NEW INVENTION

Makes Blueprint Reading Easy as Seeing a Movie
Learn at Home—Easily, Quickly—in Spare Time
THOUSANDS OF MEN WANTED AT ONCE!

MEN of ALL AGES and ALL TRADES

if you are a Mechanic, Student, Welder, Carpenter, Plumber, Shipbuilder, Machinist, Sheet Metal Worker, Tool Maker, Electrician, Steel Worker, Aviation Mechanic, etc. you must know **BLUEPRINT READING** to win promotion and bigger pay



Better Jobs — Bigger Pay are waiting for men who can READ BLUEPRINTS. Here, at last, is a new quick and easy short-cut way to learn Blueprint Reading at Home in an amazingly short time — at an unbelievably low cost. This sensational "Shadowgraph" Method of Blueprint Reading was created by Nationally Famous Experts — skilled in teaching technical subjects to men without previous technical education. They have eliminated all complicated details, they explain all technical words in simple language. Contains everything you need to know about Reading Blueprints — no matter what kind of work you do.

NOW ANYONE CAN READ BLUEPRINTS

Everything about Blueprint Reading is put right at your finger-tips! Simple as A, B, C. No need to attend an expensive trade or technical school. No previous technical or special education is needed. Here's a speedy Blueprint Reading Course for all trades that is ABSOLUTELY different. No dry textbooks — you learn by seeing and doing — and you READ BLUEPRINTS from the very FIRST DAY. With this amazing new method—a few minutes a day is all you need to read Blueprints on sight. This simplified, spare-time Home Study Course meets all Blueprint Requirements for Civil Service and National Defense Jobs.

QUALIFY QUICKLY FOR A BIG PAY JOB

Here is really big news for you — if you have a job, or if you want a job in any branch of aviation, shipbuilding, sheet metal work, welding, electricity, machine tooling, plumbing, carpentry, radio, building, automotive and Diesel Engineering, or any other of the mechanical, construction or DEFENSE INDUSTRIES—the AUSTIN TECH. "Shadowgraph" Method CAN HELP YOU QUALIFY for a BETTER JOB AND BIGGER PAY in an amazingly short time. This marvelous home-study method is so easy—it enables even a school boy to learn Blueprint Reading from the first day!

This 24-Volume Blueprint Reading Course is packed in a specially constructed bookcase, which in itself is a unique "Working Model" designed to enable you to read Blueprints from the first day. The Course contains over 800 Actual Blueprints—Charts—Tables—Diagrams—Signs—Symbols and other Instructive Pictures that help you to read Blueprints practically on sight.

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lege, N. Y.; F. E. BURNS,
B.S., M.E., Prof., New-
ark Co. of Engineering.

FREE EXAMINATION

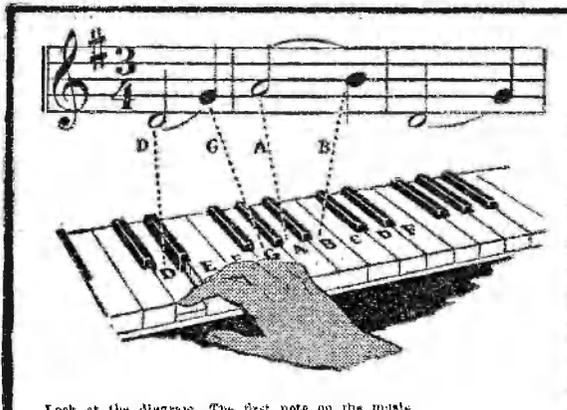
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Send me on FREE APPROVAL your complete 24-Volume Blueprint Reading Course with special "Working Model" Bookcase. I am to get FREE "Mathematics Made Easy" and Professional Slide Rule. I will pay postman \$1.95 plus postage and C. O. D. charges on arrival. If I return everything within 5 days you are to refund my money in full. Otherwise I will remit \$2 monthly for 3 months and a final payment of \$1 for the 4th month until the total price of \$8.95 is paid. (10% discount if full payment accompanies order—same refund guarantee.)

Name
Address
City State
Reference

Address
NOTE: If you enclose \$1.95 with coupon—we will pay all postage charges. Every cent refunded if not satisfied.

LOOKS EASY.. DOESNT IT?

AND IT IS! Yet it's from the famous "Merry Widow" Waltz



Look at the diagram. The first note on the music is "D." Following the dotted line to the keyboard you'll find "D" is the white key between the two black keys near the middle of the keyboard. From that you can locate the other notes. As you strike them on the piano you'll be playing the melody



of the ever-popular "Merry Widow" Waltz. Simple, isn't it? Now read below how you can take lessons on any instrument and learn to play quickly and easily . . . at a surprisingly low cost.

HERE'S PROOF THAT you, too, can learn to play the piano or any other instrument!

Don't let the mistaken idea that it's difficult to learn music deprive you of the pleasure of playing any longer. Learning to play is now actually easy as A-B-C . . . thanks to the amazing new "Note-Finder."

This invention of the U. S. School of Music takes the mystery out of the piano keyboard, ends tedious scales and exercises, enables anyone to play a real tune almost from the start. You learn to play by playing. Soon you will be thrilled to find that you can pick up almost any piece and play it at sight. That applies to the piano, violin, guitar . . . any instrument you choose!

Takes Only Few Minutes a Day!

With this modern method you don't need any previous knowledge of music; you don't need to spend months on monotonous exercises. It's real fun to learn music this short-cut way, and it takes only a few minutes of your spare time. What's more, it costs less than 7c a day . . . and that includes everything.

But see for yourself! Simply send today for our Print and Picture Sample. It will show you how you can quickly learn your favorite instrument. You will also receive a handsome booklet and details of the money-saving offer that enables you to learn music for but a few cents a day. Mail coupon today. Mention instrument that interests you. Note: Instruments supplied when needed, cash or credit. U. S. School of Music, 1233 Brunswick Bldg., N. Y. C., N. Y. (Est. 1898.)

HERE'S FURTHER PROOF!

Invited to Parties

Before I took your course, I did not know one note of music. Then 3 months later I started to play for dances. I've been invited to many parties.

R. M. Vancouver, B. C.



Plays From Start

Your advertisements are true to the letter. I can actually play my favorite instrument even though I'm only at the beginning. How can I ever express my joyful gratitude.

F. R. O., Illinois.

Actual pupils' names on request. Pictures by professional models.

U. S. School of Music, 1233 Brunswick Bldg., N. Y. C.

I am interested in music study, particularly in the instrument checked below. Please send me your free illustrated booklet, "How to Learn Music at Home" and your illustrated Print and Picture Sample. (Do you have instrument?.....)

<input type="checkbox"/> Piano	<input type="checkbox"/> Trumpet, Cornet	<input type="checkbox"/> Piccolo
<input type="checkbox"/> Guitar	<input type="checkbox"/> Reed Organ	<input type="checkbox"/> Modern Elementary
<input type="checkbox"/> Hawaiian Guitar	<input type="checkbox"/> Tenor Banjo	<input type="checkbox"/> Harmony
<input type="checkbox"/> Violin	<input type="checkbox"/> Ukulele	<input type="checkbox"/> Mandolin
<input type="checkbox"/> Piano Accordion	<input type="checkbox"/> Drums and Toms	<input type="checkbox"/> Practical Finger
<input type="checkbox"/> Plain Accordion	<input type="checkbox"/> Trombone	<input type="checkbox"/> Control
<input type="checkbox"/> Saxophone	<input type="checkbox"/> Flute	

Name.....
 Street.....
 City..... State.....
 Note: If you are under 18 yrs. of age, parent must sign coupon.

SAVE 2c—Stick coupon on penny postcard.

HE Mailed This Coupon

J. G. O'BRIEN
Atlas Champion
Cup Winner

This is an ordinary
probability of one of
Charles Atlas' train-
ees: See page 10.



...and Here's the Handsome Prize-Winning Body I Gave Him!

J. G. O'BRIEN saw my coupon. He clipped and mailed it. He got my free book and followed my instructions. He became a New Man. NOW read what he says:

"Look at me NOW! 'Dynamic Tension' WORKS! I'm proud of the natural, easy way you have made me an 'Atlas Champion!'"

J. G. O'Brien.

"I'll Prove that YOU, too, can be a NEW MAN!" *Charles Atlas*

I don't care how old or young you are, or how ashamed of your present physical condition you may be. If you can simply raise your arm and flex it, I can add SOLID MUSCLE to your biceps—yes, on each arm—in double-quick time! Only 15 minutes a day—right in your own home—is all the time I ask of you! And there's no cost if I fail.

I can broaden your shoulders, strengthen your back, develop your whole muscular system INSIDE and OUTSIDE; I can add inches to your chest, give you a nice, tight grip, make those legs of yours lithe and powerful. I can shoot new strength into your old body, exercise those tired organs, help you drain your body so full of life, vigor and red-blooded vitality that you won't feel there's even "standing room" left for weakness and that, as health, restore I get through with you I'll have your whole frame "measured" to a nice, new, beautiful suit of muscle!

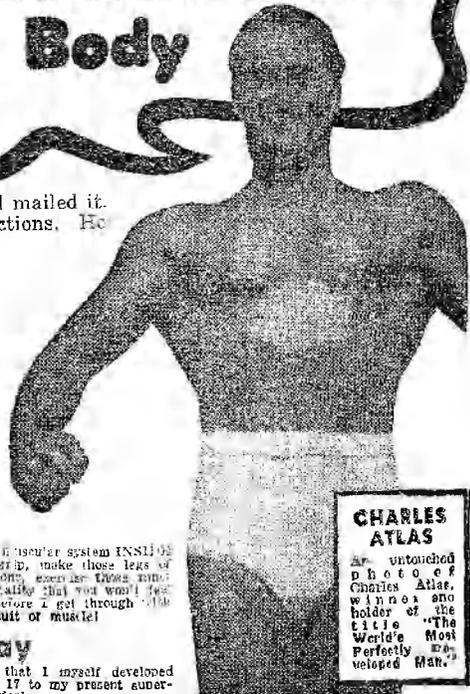
Only 15 Minutes a Day

"Dynamic Tension!" That's the ticket! The identical natural method that I myself developed to change my body from the scrawny, skinny, cheated-looking I was at 17 to my present super-men physique! Thousands of other fellows are becoming marvelous physical specimens—my way. I give you no gadgets or contraptions to fool with. You learn to develop your strength through "Dynamic Tension." You simply utilize the DORMANT muscle-power in your own God-given body—watch it increase and multiply double-quick into real, solid LIVE MUSCLE.

My method—"Dynamic Tension"—will turn the trick for you. No theory—every exercise is practical. And, man, so easy! Spend only 15 minutes a day in your own home. From the very start you'll be using my method of "Dynamic Tension," almost unconsciously every minute of the day—walking, bending over, etc.—to BUILD MUSCLE and VITALITY.

FREE BOOK "EVERLASTING HEALTH AND STRENGTH"

In it I talk to you in straight-from-the-shoulder language. Packed with inspirational pictures of myself and dupli- fellows who became NEW MEN in strength, my way. Let me show you just how I helped THEM do. See what I can do for YOU! For a real thrill, send for this book today. AT ONCE, CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 43, 115 East 23rd Street, New York, N. Y.



CHARLES ATLAS
An untouched photo of Charles Atlas, winner and holder of the title "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."

CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 43,
115 E. 23rd Street, New York, N. Y.

I want the proof that your system of "Dynamic Tension" can help make me a New Man—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscle development. Send me your FREE book, "Everlasting Health and Strength." No obligation.

Name (Please print or write plainly)

Address

City State

Check here if under 16 for Booklet #.



Business Demands Accountants



... because Accountants Command Business

Accountants are usually in demand—at better than average earnings.

But today—more than ever before—the competent accountant finds his services at a premium.

Business in war has tightened up the reins and is watching costs—prices—every move—striving to operate on that basis of close control so essential to service and profits.

Then, too, business is working under tighter government regulations, with many more records and reports—war production, priorities, more and larger taxes, wage and hour laws, payroll deductions for Defense Bonds, etc., etc.

The Home Study Way to Accountancy Success

Thousands upon thousands of men have trained for Accountancy with LaSalle—at night—at home.

Their success—their progress—is a matter of record.

Whether their goal was a C. P. A. certificate or advancement in business, our files are full of letters reporting income increases far out of line with the time and cost investment.

Note for instance, these six cases out of many we might cite. (Names on request.)

A cost clerk, J. S. H. became, after completing 30 training assignments, cost accountant. Within nine months, only half through the course, he became chief cost accountant with a salary nearly four times what it was when he enrolled. C. K. was an immigrant day laborer. Within a few months he secured a bookkeeping job. Within a year, he secured three raises. In two years, he was in charge of his company's accounting department, although not yet through the training. W. J. F. moved up from store clerk to assistant bookkeeper after the first ten lessons. Now he is office man-

ager. S. W. N. knew nothing about bookkeeping. With 19 months of training he passed the C. P. A. examination on first attempt and opened his own public accounting office. Although a university graduate, P. M. was a grocery clerk at small wages. Today he is Secretary and Credit Manager with an income 300 per cent higher. Already in cost work, G. N. P. within nine months was earning 40% more; within two years, 100% more. The third year his income went up still more. Now he is manager.

These Men Won Success in Ordinary Times —You Have War Opportunities

Remarkable as is the success of these men—you will have an advantage over them—you will be entering accountancy when unusual national conditions work with you for success.

Conditions not only call for more accountants—but offer unusual opportunities for both quick and permanent success. The need for accountants will increase during war and will continue for years afterwards during the difficult post-war adjustment period.

—If You Can Qualify

Ask yourself three questions:

1. Are you ambitious?
2. Have you determination?
3. Can you see and grasp an opportunity?

If you have determination; if you are ambitious; if you can take advantage of circumstances—prove it by investigating. A three-cent stamp, sixty seconds time, and the coupon below will bring you full information regarding Accountancy training and the opportunities to which such training leads. Then you can judge intelligently.

LASALLE EXTENSION UNIVERSITY

A Correspondence Institution
Dept. 372-HR CHICAGO

Opportunities in Accountancy—Check below and we will send you a free copy of "Accountancy, the Profession That Pays," also, information about our training in Higher Accountancy, all without obligation.

Higher Accountancy

Other LaSalle Opportunities: If more interested in one of the other fields of business indicated below, check that:

- | | | |
|--|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Business Management | <input type="checkbox"/> Effective Speaking | <input type="checkbox"/> Modern Foremanship |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Expert Bookkeeping | <input type="checkbox"/> Law: LL.B. Degree | <input type="checkbox"/> Business Correspondence |
| <input type="checkbox"/> C. P. A. Coaching | <input type="checkbox"/> Commercial Law | <input type="checkbox"/> Stenotypy |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Traffic Management | <input type="checkbox"/> Industrial Management | <input type="checkbox"/> Modern Salesmanship |



Name Age

Present Position

Address City and State

Here's the Greatest BILLFOLD BARGAIN in all America

Your **LODGE Emblem** or **Army or Navy Insignia**
and **Name Engraved in 23K. Gold** —
Absolutely FREE

Special Introductory Offer

\$1.98



Your Name Engraved Here!

Genuine
Highest
Quality Leather
BLACK CALFSKIN
De Luxe **VALUE**

Your **LODGE Emblem, NAME, ADDRESS, and Social Security Number Engraved in GOLD—FREE!**

Rising Costs
of Leather
May Make
It Impossible
To Repeat
This Amazing
Offer!

YOUR **LODGE EMBLEM** HERE



YOUR **INITIALS** HERE
FREE!



This beautiful three-color lifetime Identification Plate carries your full name, address and social security or draft number.



Also FREE!—If you order at once we send you this beautiful Identification Key Tag and Gift Chain to match, hand engraved with your name, address, city and state. Will last a lifetime.

Men:—Here, without a doubt, is positively the greatest Billfold and Pass Case Bargain that you'll be likely to see for a good many years to come. For a high quality Calfskin Billfold, beautifully engraved in gold, with your **LODGE Emblem and Name**, you would expect to pay up to \$4.50 and consider it a marvelous buy. If you take advantage of this sensational introductory offer you can get this superb genuine Calfskin Wallet and Pass Case for only \$1.98, and we will send you absolutely free a specially designed three color lifetime Identification Plate, which carries your Social Security Number, your Name and Address or your Army Draft Number. This fine grain calfskin Billfold must actually be seen to be fully appreciated. Besides the spacious compartment at the back which can be used for currency, checks, papers, etc., it has four pockets each protected by celluloid to pre-

vent the soiling of your valuable membership and credit cards. When closed this handsome Billfold has the soft velvety feel you find only in quality Calfskin. Your choice of Emblems and Initials, are beautifully embossed in 23 karat gold on the face of the Billfold. Due to difficulty in obtaining choice leather because of war conditions, the supply of these Billfolds is limited. Remember if you send your order promptly, we will include absolutely FREE, a beautiful Identification Key Tag and Gift Chain to match, all hand engraved with your Name, Address, City and State. If after receiving your Billfold and Free Gift, you don't positively agree that this is the most outstanding bargain you have ever come across, return them to us and your money will be cheerfully refunded in full. Send your order today, without fail so you won't be disappointed.

Rush This Coupon For This Once-In-A-Lifetime Bargain!

IMPORTANT!

This People's Billfold makes one of the handsomest gifts yet—GOLD plated and engraved with your name and address. This Billfold is made with the finest leather and is guaranteed to last a lifetime. **Send your order today!**

ILLINOIS MERCHANDISE MART,
Dept. 245-B, 54 W. Illinois St., Chicago.

If you want a **LODGE, ARMY or NAVY** Insignia, state name here

Gentlemen: I enclose \$1.98. Please send me a Genuine Calfskin Billfold with my name and choice of Emblems engraved in 23K gold. Include absolutely free, a life-time Identification Plate carrying my full Name and Social Security Number, or Draft Number. Also include **FREE** an Identification Key Tag and Gift Chain to match, all hand-engraved with my Name, Address, City and State.

My Full Name..... (Please print clearly)

Address

City State

Social Security Number..... Army Draft Number.....

Please ship the above C.O.D. for \$1.98 plus a few pennies postage and C.O.D. charge.

ORCHIDS FOR ★ MADAME ★

A Powerful Detective Novel

By Greta Bardet



We go over those orchids the blondie shoves into Art's hands with a fine-tooth comb, but there is nothing the matter with them except that they are stale. But who goes around tossing lead and beating up beautiful maids over fifty-cent flowers? And this Baroness Von Kamp, who looks like one of Hitler's favorite people . . . we are positive something dirty is up when a gang of uncharming individuals usher us into a black sedan for a nice spring slay-ride!



Fatty makes with her head that Helen should answer the door and comes up with an automatic.

CHAPTER I

ALL Art did was try to pick up this beautiful blondie, and whiz-bang, we get more trouble than I ever seen in my whole life! And it all starts so innocent that day in Meyer's salon. It is like this. Art is bringing old man Meyer his favorite cigarette case, which a big-shot gangster gave him a long time ago. It has Art's full name, Arthur N. Holter, in diamonds on the front of it, and his address engraved on a gold shield inside. Art moved someplace else again, and is bringing the case to Meyer to scrape off the lit-

the gold shield and engrave the new hang-out on. Which gives Meyer a good profit in money and gold shavings no doubt.

All right, so it is spring, and Art has been wearing that goofy expression you get this time of year. So while Meyer and I are discussing the blackout we had last night, Art is standing by the door, looking across the street where there is this flower shoppe. All of a sudden I see a little blondie walking down the street and go into this shoppe.

Art takes one look at her and his eyes go narrow in that way he has got which says my mind is made up, do not argue, and he says: "That is for me." He starts for the door.

I turn to Meyer and throw my arms around to show Meyer Art is crazy in the head and there is nothing I can do about it. Meyer he laughs and says, "Hasn't changed as long as I've known him. Still the same romanticist, I see." So I laugh and follow Art out in the street.

There is no use arguing Art out of trying to make a blondie when he sees one, so I follow him silently right in this here flower shoppe and there is the beautiful blondie saying to the character behind the counter.

"Orchids for m'dme!"

Well, I do not blame Art. The baby is a dish. Great big blue eyes and lots of blonde hair she wears with bangs down in front of her head, and a mouth that is just asking for trouble. Which is Art's favorite kind of trouble!

So after this blondie says, "Orchids for m'dme" she turns around and happens to look up at Art, who is immediately giving her the glad eyes. She blushes awful sweet and looks away quick. At this moment the personality behind the counter says, "Can I do anything for you gents?"

I turn and look at him and almost fall over in surprise. This character is none other than Joe Stucci, a jerk strickly poison to Art and I.

It was like this. When Art was on the force, he sent this Joe Stucci up the river. When this Stucci personality come out of hock he got Art

in a little framed-up trouble, which made Art resign from the force on account of because he had this hot-headed argyment with Chief Brandt. But everything is all right, because if Art would of not resigned, he would of not started this private detective agency of his own with me, Kelly, as the partner. Besides, it was a case of hate at first sight between them two. Art always said that he would catch up with this Joe Stucci some day and give the rat what was coming to him.

"Well, well," says Art to Joe Stucci now. "And what the hell are you doing here, may I ask?"

Joe Stucci smiles in that slippery way he has got and says, "Why Art, this is my flower shoppe. I am going straight. Crime does not pay no more. I love flowers. Flowers is beautiful. I am a law abiding flower shoppe owner now."

Art gives him a sarcastic laugh. "A rat like you selling flowers; that is a hot one."

"Why it ain't neither," says Joe Stucci like he has been insulted. "I love flowers. I am so happy here. Honest."

"Yes, indeed," says Art.

Well, the blondie is waiting, so Joe Stucci goes to the icebox and takes out this cellophane box with orchids on the inside, and hands them over to her. Her madame must have a charge account because I note she does not fork over any dough. She takes the box and goes to the door.

"And now," says Joe Stucci, "What can I do for you, ha ha?"

Art grabs himself a rose and puts a buck in Joe's hand. "If you are sincere, I am the last one to hold a grudge."

"Why I am so honest now," says mealy-mouth Joe Stucci, "I would not think of giving a customer yesterday's flowers even."

WHEN Art goes out of the store, and right away he forgets all about Joe Stucci for the time being.

Art sure has got nerve. He goes right up to the blondie and takes his hat off and says, "Have I met you before someplace?"

She blushes nice and looks like she does not know what to do about us. She is a shy kid, and must of fallen for Art right off. And why not? Art is one hell of a nice-looking guy. He is tall with big shoulders, hardly no hips, no stomach and plenty of black hair. Everything just the opposite from me.

Blondie says she does not think she met him before, and Art comes back with a good line, then asks if he and Kelly can walk down the street a ways with her, since he is going in that direction anyway. She smiles bashful and says she does not mind in the least.

So, we walk along in this nice spring afternoon, and Art and this doll talk about how nice the weather is, and how she likes this and how Art likes the same thing, and after a while I feel like I am living on the moon.

I often wonder what would of happened if I never said anything like I did. Nothing I guess. You see, all of a sudden I want to say something and I speak out the first thing shows up in my brains. It is half a block past where Art lives, so I say, "Are you going down to the office today, Art?"

Blondie turns to me and gives me a load of them big blue eyes.

"Office?" she says to me. "What business are you in?"

I smile and say, "We are dicks."

"Dicks?" she says.

I do not mention before she has got a accent you can cut with a hatchet. Of course she is one of the foreigners because she does not understand certain American lingo, like dick, for instance.

So I spell it out for her. "I and Art are private detectives."

Wham! She slams on the brakes, and stands there looking at me like I am something disgusting. And her face gets as white as snow. "Detective!" she says like she cannot believe anything so terrible about two such nice guys. "What... what... do... do you... want of me... me?"

"Why nothing," says Art. "I just want to pick you up."

"Pick me up!" she hollers, and Art

opens his mouth to explain what he means, but before he can get out one letter, she slaps the box of orchids in Art's hands.

"Here! Take them! Please, I am innocent! Do not arrest me! I am innocent!" And she hot-foots it down the block.

Well! Art stands there with his mouth hanging open looking down at the cellophane box with the two beautiful orchids inside. Then he shoves the box at me, and beats it down the block after her. The street is kind of crowded, and I could of told him it was no use chasing her. And like I figure correctly, he loses her. He comes back mopping up his brow.

"Can you tie that, she beat it around the corner. She is gone! I have lost that beautiful woman."

"Better luck next time," I say, and look at this thing in a practical way. "We just inherited two orchids. Let us each wear one and our friends will think we pay income tax."

"This is funny," Art says taking the box. "But this is funny."

"Oh yes, extremely."

"Why did she give me the orchids?"

"I do not know; dames is screwy."

"That beautiful woman thought I was going to arrest her. Kelly! There is something phoney with the orchids!"

He takes the box, holds it this way and that, then he takes off the cover, takes out the two orchids. There is nothing phoney about them I can spot. They are just like any other orchids I have seen, tied up with a big shiny silver ribbon with lots of loops different sizes, two straight pins stuck in the top, silver tin fern wound around the stems. That is all.

"Do they look all right to you, Kelly?"

"They look just like the kind I used to buy for my ex-wife before I married her. And what a dope I was!"

"But there must be something wrong with them. Why should she shove them at us when she finds we are dicks? She thinks I am going to arrest her because she does not understand pick up means on the make. 'I am innocent. Do not arrest me!

Take the orchids! Gee, this stinks!"

"She is afraid of cops; maybe she has a record?"

"Hey, maybe she is out on parole. But that makes everything easy. We will take her pretty little fingerprints off this box and make inquiries on the cuctee. In this manner I will be able to find her again."

HOLY snakes! You do not even care is she a criminal?"

"Do not make such remarks about her in my presence. Whatever she did I do not care for one. Besides there is no question in my mind. If that beautiful woman did something, she was framed!"

"Maybe she is a pickpocket," I say and start looking for my wallet, but Art shoves me one so hard I start to stumble up the block.

"She is no pickpocket!"

And he is right, because my wallet is intact. And since it looks like I will get the orchids around my ears, I do not mention no more about the wallet.

Art says, "Come, we go right home and get out my fingerprint outfit."

"Let us use the one in the office."

"Home is nearer!" So we turn and walk back up the block. When we enter the apartment house, I say, "But this blondie sure has knocked you out of this world! And you a detective! Is it possible you have overlooked the fact that she was wearing gloves?"

"Was she?" he says, looking like the world just fell down all around him.

"Black kid ones."

"Oh, what a pity! That woman was just my type. It is hard to believe I will never see her again."

"You remind me of myself just before I married my ex-ball and chain. Now I wish I never laid eyes on her twice."

In his apartment Art mixes drinks. I sit down on the couch and take off my shoes. My feet hurt because I am painfully developing two new corns. I get my drink and Art goes over to the window and looks out. I do not like the view from this living room as good as the

last apartment, because it is nothing but a brick wall. But naturally in Art's condition he is not seeing it anyway, so what is the difference. I drink my drink, wiggle my toes, and while I am reflecting about life in general, I sort of fall to sleep a little.

It is about one hour later when the door bell rings and interrupts a beautiful dream I am having. Art goes and opens up the door, and what do you know!

A character is standing there with a heater in his mitt. His face is all covered with a black handkerchief. He motions Art back into the room and comes in like he owns the place. His gun is wearing a Maxim and I am having gloomy premonitions.

"Don't move says the mysterious character and I up with my hands and find I am still holding my glass. All I can spot of him is that he is medium height, thin, dressed in a black suit, and little lights showing where he has got his eyes.

"Is this a stick-up?" Art asks, and the mysterious character answers in a deep voice which is a put-on because he has trouble with it. It cracks and he has to start over a little higher up.

"I believe you have a box of orchids?"

"Orchids?" Art says and gives me a surprised look. "We got orchids around Kelly?"

Now, I am looking straight at them. Art put them on the telephone table. But this mysterious character cannot see them because they are behind his back, and on account of this here brick wall view we got, it looks like it is always twilight in the room.

Art says, "What is all this about orchids?"

"Don't lie! You have them! I was watching! Are you going to hand them over, or are we going to have trouble!"

Art says softly, "We are going to have trouble!" And with that I let our new playmate have it. The glass, right between the eyes. He puts his arms up to cover the face. Art's leg comes up, kicks the rod out of this character's hand. The rod flies up, hits the ceiling and bounces off someplace. I jump! Art jumps! And in

the next instant there is bedlam, which means a scene of uproar and confusion.

Fists are flying around, until all of a sudden I get a sock in the nose that near knocks me out. It is one of those things I will never be able to explain, except that it is twilight in the room, and the sock got my Irish up!

The next thing I know I have a neck between my powerful hands and I am waving it up and down with all my strength. Then the fog clears and I see that Art is kneeling in front of me yelling his head off. I am fighting my best friend! I let him go and start looking around for the mysterious character while Art swears at me. But the man is gone.

Art runs out in the hall, while I go to the mirror to see that my left eye is closing up. I find the mysterious character's gun around the radiator.

Art comes back and jumps for the telephone table. "See? There is something phoney about the orchids. So phoney this man came gunning after them."

"All this fuss about two orchids," I complain, and go to the kitchen to see if there is any steak left over from breakfast. It is extremely funny, but every time Art gets mixed up in some trouble, I, Kelly, am the one who comes up with the black eye.

CHAPTER II

WHEN I came back into the living room wearing a cube steak, Art is over by the desk, the box of orchids in front of him, and he is taking off the cover. He holds the cover, and the box up to the light which he has lit and looks through the cellophane to see if there is maybe some invisible ink. We even give the box a couple of tests, but nothing shows.

Then he takes up the orchids, takes out the two pins, and unties the pretty silver bow very slowly. The ribbon we hold to the light too. Every inch we work over the ribbon, but no dice.

Then he unwraps the tin ferl.

There is nothing wrapped up inside, like a package of nose candy, or smuggled diamonds or something. I even make the tin ferl nice and shiny with my thumb nail, but if there is something phoney about it, we do not find it. The next thing we poke around the orchids. Through the stems, inside in the middle, outside around the peals, all over. He feels; I feel; we flatten and we poke, but if there is anything precious hidden away in them orchids, I will gladly eat them.

"Aw, now look here," Art says to me like I am hiding the secret of the orchids from him. "There must be something wrong!"

"Maybe they are a very expensive kind, and..."

"Why, they are not even very fresh orchids. At least no more. See how they are beginning to show up brown around everywhere. And these are the most cheap kind of orchids there is. Anybody who paid more than fifty cents for these two broken-down orchids was being seen coming."

"And to think I used to fork over five bucks apiece!"

"That was during prohibition! Everybody had money to burn during prohibition. Purple ones like this are cheap today. Fifty cents tops!"

"Well," I says thinking, "Joe Stucci said he would not even sell stale flowers, and these are..."

"Why, Kelly! That is downright clever! I forgot all about Joe Stucci. Of course he is lying about going straight. There is a racket connected with these orchids, and Joe Stucci is in the middle of it."

"And put the blondie in, too."

"As I remember," says Art pretending not to hear that last crack. "Joe Stucci is a small-time punk with a record from hijacking liquor down to peddling stolen neckties on Fourteenth Street."

"He was even picked up for insulting the Government on Columbus Circle once. He is a rat that one!"

"However, our mysterious assailant just now was not Joe Stucci. Stucci is tallish, big-chested and on the well-fed side. No, Joe Stucci could

never shrink down to this man's size."

"Maybe Joe Stucci has a partner. He wore a mask and changed his voice so we could not recognize him again."

We put the orchids back in their original condition, sort of, while we picked the problem around. Then the doorbell rings.

This time we both jump up with rods ready. I hide up against the wall just outside the foyer, while Art creeps up to the door. Suddenly I am hearing Art say in a surprised way. "Oh, come in."

Well, bust me wide open, if it is not the beautiful blondie! Here we thought we would not see her again, and here she is! But immediately I am seeing she is scared. Her face is pale like a piece of paper, her hands are shaking and her eyes is just full of fear.

Art gets excited and asks her how she found us. She swallows and tries to be brave. She says how she followed us, and since she did not know his name, she had to ring every apartment in the building before she got to us at last.

"And now," she says, "please. You will be kind to give me back my orchids."

And something is wrong with Art's face. He is having what I call a danger look with a smile. "Oh," he says real friendly. "But of course. You want the orchids, and I will be glad to give them to you, that is..." he stops talking for a minute, then says, "if you will tell me why you want them!"

She tries to smile but it does not pan out good. "M'dme will be most angry with me. I must have them back."

"Who is m'dme?"

"She is the woman I work for. I am her maid. May I have the orchids please?"

"This m'dme, what is her name?"

"Now please, it is none of your business. Just return to me my orchids, and I shall be grateful to you."

"What is the matter," says Art getting sore. "Your m'dme cannot afford to buy herself two more or-

chids? Here! I will give you a buck. Go buy some more."

SHE tries to think up a come-back for that one, but cannot.

Art says, "Now please give me the credit for knowledge I was born with. There is something phoney about the orchids and I will not rest until I know what." He points to his black and blue chin. "See this? A mysterious character planted that on me unless it was Kelly done it. And see this gun? This character thought these orchids valuable enough to come gunning for them. And look at Kelly's eye. Go ahead! Look at poor Kelly's eye. Oh no, my lady fair, either you will explain to me what is screwy about these blooms, or you will not get them, and I will go to the police with this problem, much as that will just about kill me!"

"Oh no! Not the police! Not that!"

"You just watch me!"

"Oh no, no! If you do that, they will ...kill you...maybe."

Art waves his arms in the air. "Who will kill me?" He yells so loud she backs up a couple steps.

"There must be some mistake," she says. "Especially about this ridiculous mysterious character you are raving about. These orchids are nothing but orchids. It is not the orchids so much but the principle. When I went back to m'dme and told her you had taken the orchids from me..."

"I took them from you!"

"Why, yes." She speaks with level eyes. "You took them from me!"

A pause follows that is like lightning has just struck and you are holding your breath for the thunder to come.

"I took them from you!" Art bangs on his chest. "The hell I did! You gave them to me!"

She pretends it is the first time she hears this. "Oh, but sir, you are obviously making a lot of mistakes. Why, it was you who reached out and took them from me. After all, I ask you, why? Why should I give them to you? I do not give flowers to any strange man who comes along. You took them from me, and I be-

came frightened and ran away. But this is funny! I give you m'dme's orchids! Oh, how this makes me laugh."

Art fills his lungs with fresh breath. "That you should stand here with the face of an angel and lie like the devil is a deep shock to me."

"But it is a misunderstanding. I thought you were stealing my..."

"Stealing yet!"

"Well, I mean, just taking my orchids. Please? You will give them back to me?" and she looks so sweet like a baby.

But Art is cold. "What is your name please?"

"Helen."

"Helen! You are a liar! Are you going to tell me what is wrong with the orchids?"

"But you are making everything mixed up! I was responsible for the flowers, and m'dme said I had to get them back, so please, please give them to me and earn my undying gratitude."

There are fires flashing around Art's black eyes like I see only when he is very mad at somebody and about to land a haymaker. And then it happens. He steps over to Helen, grabs the startled girl and pulls her dress down her shoulder.

Well! I am very mad and about to paste Art one for getting fresh with a lady, when Art says, "Come over here, Kelly." And I come over and he makes me look at the shoulder and what do you know. There is a wound on the skin. Somebody has beat the poor little thing with a strap.

"Now!" says Art, leaving go the struggling girl. "Why are these orchids so important you have to get beat up to come and get them back from me?"

And Helen pushes her fists into her eyes and starts to cry. "Stop this trouble! I cannot stand this. I will do something to myself. I will kill myself. Do not ask any more questions, I am going out of my mind!"

Art looks down at her for a long time. Then he reaches back where the orchids is hid and holds them out to her.

"Here! I cannot stand to see a woman cry. Make believe I never saw the mark on your neck that told me you were beaten with a strap. Go tell your m'dme I am sorry I stole your orchids. I was just horsing around."

"Oh...you are kind. Very kind," and she starts for the door. Only Art does not let her get away. Suddenly he takes her into his arms and crushes her tight to him and kisses her hard on the mouth.

It makes me feel embarrassed, but I look anyway, because love is a beautiful thing, and I have to note these things because I am a writer besides being a detective. To be a great writer you have to watch life as it passes by in front of you wherever you are.

THE door no more shuts after her, when Art grabs his hat and I dive into my shoes. We are going to shadow Helen and find out about this here madame!

We do not have to shadow her long. We follow her to one of them old-fashioned brownstone houses, of which this city has plenty. And she never once looks back behind her to see if anybody was following either.

She goes up into the brownstone house, and Art goes in shortly after her. I stand in front of the stoop while I step on my cigarette butt. Meanwhile I slide my eyes back up the block to make sure nobody is tailing us. Nobody is even on the block, except a big black sedan devoid of people. So I turn and go into the house myself.

Art is motioning to me at the second door from the left. He has his ear glued to the door, and by the screwy expression on his face I know he is not hearing anything. Then I spot the transom above the door, closed tight, and Art spots it too, and he says, "Come, Kelly, I will boost you. Give a look through the transom."

I am not so enthusiastic about this and right away Art gets insulted. "I can carry three of you. Come on, time is awasting."

He bends down and I throw my

legs around his back. I sit there a minute then start climbing up. It is not easy. When I start to kneel on his back it is touch and go; I stay put. I get my balance, then inch up along the door, while I get my feet on Art's shoulders. This is extremely difficult to maneuver, and I would not be surprised if any minute I was to fall flat on my kisser right through the door.

I grab hold of the frame of the transom and give a hoot Art should hist. But he hists too far. He has to lower, and soon I am adjusted with my face pressed against the glass.

It is like I am seeing a movie picture without the sound. There is Helen standing and talking to a big tub of lard which is m'dme I presume. This woman is sitting at a desk and I whisper this all down to Art. The conversation between us is as follows:

Art says, "What is fatty doing now?"

"She is picking up a magnifying glass and is looking through same."

"What is she looking at?"

"Damned if I know. I cannot see anything. She is looking at the orchids— Now she has put them down and she is looking at nothing."

"Nothing!"

"Hey, remember I am on top of you. She is looking through the magnifying glass at nothing. Unless it is her fingernails."

"Where are the orchids?"

"Parked at her elbow."

"In or out of the box?"

"She has put the orchids inside the box. She is not even interested in the orchids. The box is just setting there like they was forgot."

"But Kelly, nothing! That does not make sense!"

"I cannot help that. Hey...she is putting down the glass, taking up a pencil and writing something down on a piece of paper. Helen nods her head. Fatty is now picking up the glass again. There is nothing, absolutely nothing in her hands. Now she is putting down the glass, and is writing some more on a piece of paper."

"Kelly! I got it! You are looking at a piece of cellophane."

"Why sure! I never thought of that. It is cellophane, and I am looking right through it!"

"That must be it. And she is no doubt writing down a code message from this piece of cellophane. And we was so careful about that cellophane, too. Must be a new method for invisible writing."

"She is taking up the glass again."

"Kelly! We have got to find out what is on that piece of paper. Can you move fast for once in your life?"

"Sure."

"All right, listen. You stay parked. I am going to knock on the door. Keep your eyes glued to that piece of paper she was writing on. Do not let it out of your sight. See where she puts it. When she comes to answer the door, you jump down and look like nothing happened. Then we go inside and swipe the paper."

"If she stuffs it down the front of her dress, count me out. You should see the muscles on her. What a m'dme!"

"You ready?"

"Sure."

ALL right, so Art knocks on the door, bang bang. I cling up there with my face to the glass. I see Fatty jerk up straight in her chair. Helen too. The two look at each other, then Fatty makes with her head Helen should answer the door, opens a drawer where I can see a wicked-looking automatic. I am keeping my eyes on that paper with rising excitement, trying to reach my own armament. Helen comes to the door. She is practically on top of us when I see Fatty lift the blotter and stick the paper under it; she has thought better of shooting and the drawer is closed.

I yell to Art he should let me down, but that dope! What does he think I am, an acrobat in a circus and I would maybe bounce in a standing position just like that?

The next thing I know my face is going down the door like I am an eraser at the end of a pencil. My feet are a couple of hooks glued to Art's

shoulders. I see the floor coming up but I cannot do a thing about it, because my arms are wrapped around my neck. I gather splinters, and my face slaps the floor with a dull sickening thud, and there I am like a dope and Art is making a wheelbarrow out of me laughing his head off.

I find my arms, and push my face away from the floor. I crank my head around and look straight up into Fatty standing there.

"Vot is diss! Vot is diss!"

"That is Kelly for you." Art can hardly talk from laughing. "Always clowning." And he starts to let me down. Gradually I am down on the floor on all fours. I am letting loose a lot of curses under my breath, and Art is lucky there are ladies present.

I get up and brush off my pants, and give Art a dirty look. Then I see Helen standing there next to Fatty looking more scared than I ever seen her.

Fatty is saying, "Vot you vant?"

Art takes off his hat and makes a bow. "I have come to call on Helen."

"Helen?" booms out Fatty. "Mine Helen?"

"Yes. I want she should go to dinner with me tonight."

"Go away," says Helen. "Go away."

"Who," says Fatty to Helen, "are these chent la ments?"

"These are the two...the two men...who stole my orchids."

"Ohhhhhhooooo!" says pickle-puss.

"Come in. I vish a vord wiss you."

That m'dme sure murdered American.

In the room she turns on us. "So! You are the two men who go around stealing packages from little curls. Væs iss a madder mit you?"

Art digs his elbow in my ribs. "It is like this, lady..."

"I am not a lady," says she who ought to know. "I am a baroness. The Baroness von Kamp."

"Have it your way," says Art, and pokes me again.

"Cut that out!" I warn him.

Says Fatty. "I am listening for eggsblanashins!"

"But that is easy," says Art, glaring at me. "What the hell is eating that guy? "That is our racket. We

swipe things from people on the streets. Especially little girls and helpless old ladies. We even swipe the pennies from a blind man, don't we, Kelly?" he says between clenched teeth, and pokes me another one. "Don't we, Kelly?"

"Yeah!" I yell back at him. "I ain't argyng with you!"

"Why we even steal newspapers from stands, don't we, Kelly, you remember how we swiped newspapers?"

"Are you kiddin'?" I say, and Art makes like he is going to give me the back of his hand. I duck, just in case, then I get it. That paper! He is giving me the high sign I should get busy on the job right away. I make on the nose with my fingers while the baroness is saying, "Vot is diss! What you two crazy boys want with mine Helen? Please, you will tell me or I get you arrested by the police."

"Oh," says Art, "get us arrested, will you? Why, lady, you do not scare me. You would not dare call the cops because right away I will tell them you are the kind of madame who goes around beating up her maid."

"Beating up!" says the baroness, and her face grows purple with appleplecksy. I get over to the desk and sit down in the chair innocence itself. "Beat her!" says the baroness, and looks daggers at Helen. "You tell these poyls I beat you?"

"Oh, no," says Helen. "No, no, no. I did not. Oh no."

"Yunk man. I consider you a insult. You are stupid."

ALL I do is reach over, lift the blotter. I look to see if there are any other papers, but there is just this one. So I take it, slip it into my pocket and examine my nails.

"Helen did not tell you her husband beat her up when she is stupid enough to lose package?"

"Her who...?" says Art in a strangled voice.

"Ohhhhhhooooo! Helen did not say she have husband?"

"Husband!" says Art and turned to Helen who is nodding her head like

anything. "You got a husband?" Helen nods wilder.

"Und now, get oudt mine house! Und you leaf Helen alone, you hear dot?"

Art's mouth is a thin line. He is mad, see, and a little embarrassed because he feels foolish getting caught at trying to make a married woman. "All right, so she is married, and I am a sucker. But I am here mainly because there is something phoney about the orchids. I want to know what it is!"

The baroness just stands there and looks at Art like she does not quite know which part of him she is going to cut off first. "Look you!" she says in a quiet voice. "I am tired and sick such fuss aboot mine orchids. It is evidently somesink funny inside your head that makes you steal packages from little girls. So!"

She turns around, takes up the box of orchids and hands them to Art. "Here! You want them so much, take them! And get oudt mine house, und leaf Helen alone!"

Art stands there like a dummy with the orchids in his hands. We just never expected she would give them to us. Did you?

"Well," says Art a few times, "well. You win. There is nothing phoney about the orchids. But one more thing," he says to Helen. "What is your married name?"

"Get oudt mine house!" shrieks the baroness. "Or I will fire Helen and her husband will beat her up good."

"What is the matter you cannot tell me? Is his name a secret or something?"

The baroness is having a fit of temper. "Her husband's name is... is Joe Stucci, now get oudt! Get oudt! Get oudt!"

"Stucci!" chocks out Art. "Joe Stucci!"

And immediately something goes wrong with the baroness' face. "Vot?" she says, cooling off fast. "You know him maybe?"

Art blinks a minute, then shakes his head. "No, I never heard of him, why?"

She starts to push Art, so we get out.

CHAPTER III

"IMAGINE," says Art, as we start walking back up the block, "anybody being married to a low character like Joe Stucci, especially if it is Helen."

"Oh, that was a swell stunt you pulled. It was lucky Fatty never got wise we was after looking through the transom."

"I told you you should act fast!"

"Act fast! What you expect? A half gainer off your shoulders? Gees! I come down so fast I got a kisser full of wood."

"So can the beef, and give me the paper you swiped, and brother! Were you fast on the uptake! What were you going to do, swipe it tomorrow sometime?"

"Listen, this is all past history. Let us talk about other things."

"Give me the paper."

I give it to him, and we stare down at it together, and it is written like this:

1 pumperknickle, 10c liverwurst, 10c potato salad, 2 herrings, plenty onions.

Art lets out a roar like a lion, and he pushes me so I near fall into the gutter.

"Oh, you dope! You got the wrong piece of paper. You bird brain! Oh, I should have known this would happen, I should have known."

"It is not the wrong piece of paper," I yell excited. "That was the only one under the blotter. Honest, I made sure. I would of took all the papers there is."

"But..." he looked down the paper. "This is nothing but a list Helen should maybe get from the delicatessen."

"I cannot help that!"

"Oh dammit. I thought we were going to have a nice code message, and there is nothing but an order for herrings. Oh, but it is enough to make a fellow up and quit!" and he looked down at the cellophane box with the orchids.

"You know, Kelly, I got too much

imagination for my own good sometimes. Maybe this whole thing is only a hoax. An innocent bunch of circumstances which has set my imagination to work. Maybe these orchids are, well... just plain fifty-cent orchids, that is all."

"I would say yes, except for the mysterious character."

"I wonder. Maybe the whole thing is a gag. You figure the boys down the precinct are maybe playing a gag on us? The baroness would never give us the orchids if there was anything criminal involved. She never even touched the orchids. She would never be so dumb," he sighed. "I am greatly disappointed in everything."

"Especially Helen being married to Joe Stucci."

And then Art laughs, and starts to tell me something but he does not do this. At that same instant I feel a rod being pushed into my ribs, and somebody behind me is saying:

"Okay, you mugs, no funny business, stand where you are!"

Now what, I am saying to myself, now what!

"Keep the hands away from your rods, boys," says the voice, and we are confronted by two ugly-looking characters. They deprive us of our weapons of defense.

"What is this?" Art asks. "What is this?"

"Shaddap!" says one guy with a gun, and waves at something behind us. I turn a little and see a big black sedan drawing to the curb. Oh, oh!

Art tries to be friendly. "You guys got the wrong number!"

Everybody is very silent. The car draws up and there are two more ugly-looking characters in the front. The two that are holding us up motion we should enter the car.

"Oh yeah?" says Art. "I will not get in there unless you are telling me where I am going."

"You are going for a ride," says the redheaded guy. "Get in, or do I throw you in."

"Let us talk this over. I am Arthur N. Holter, and this is Kelly, my partner and pal."

"How do you do," says the guy. "Get in."

"Aw, now look, fellows..."

The rods move in on us in a businesslike manner. I look at Art; Art looks at me. What are we to do? We get in.

Art sighs as he settled back. "I get it," he says, and the redhead nods sarcastic like.

"So this is this," Art says. The redheaded character is sitting on one of the folding seats just opposite Art, holding the gun on us. "Here!" says Art, shoving the box of orchids in his lap. "I know when I am licked!"

The ugly-looking brute looks down at the orchids, then slides his eyes up at Art. "Giddaddahere!" he sings out, and brushes the box of orchids off his lap like it was last week's garbage.

Art is surprised. "You do not want them?"

THE redhead looks at Art narrowly. "This comes as a surprise to you?"

"Well... if you do not want the orchids, what do you want?"

"You'll find out in a minute," he says, and sure enough, the car slows down, and I look out the window. And I near fall off the seat in surprise. It is police headquarters!

"Well," says Art, "I was never so surprised in my life. Cops! And here I am thinking we are taking a ride again like in the good old days of prohibition!"

"Move!" says all the cops.

We march into headquarters, march upstairs, march into an office and there is Chief Brandt who we know good, sitting at his desk surrounded by lots of other interesting-looking personalities. Brandt takes one look at us and does a burn.

"What the!" and his face goes like he was eating a lemon. "What you two bums got to do with this case?"

The redhead says, "We picked them up as they was leaving her apartment."

"So! You two lunkheads is mixed up in this!"

Art is happy. "Do not tell me you know what we are mixed up in? And

what is the big idea? And who is all these guys?"

"These is F. B. I. boys. What were you two bird brains doing in Baroness von Kamp's apartment?"

"Is that all you wish to know?" says Art. "That is easy. The baroness has got a maid, Helen, who I was stuck on. I tried to make her, and was going calling. That is all."

Brandt spots the orchids in Art's hands. "Ain't them kind of faded-lookin' for a dame?"

"Yes sir," says Art. "They are that. I guess I should not of bought them so early in the day. But tell me, Chiefie, what is the meaning of all the pushing around? I bet this is a gag."

"You louse. If you are calling on a skirt, what's Kelly doin' with you?"

"Oh, Kelly is my friend."

Then he says to the F. B. I. boys: "I do not think these two bums would be involved in anything like this. I know them. They are a couple of lugs who play around with a detective agency and give this racket a black eye. They are too dumb to be mixed up in anything like this."

I do not like that crack. "Listen you, we are smart enough to be mixed up in anything!"

"Shut up!" says Art.

Chief Brandt says, "So you went to the baroness' apartment? Tell me what you seen and done there."

And Art tells him. But he leaves out so much of what happened, he is practically telling a downright lie. I do not know why he does not mention about the orchids, maybe he thinks it is too foolish. Anyway, he ends up with the baroness throwing us out on account of Helen is a married woman.

"And now," says Art, "I have been good. Suppose you guys wise me up, and maybe I'll see something I overlooked and can help you out."

"So Brandt tells. "We got a tip about the baroness. She is a famous German aviatrix. She was born in Switzerland, of German parents, and we cannot arrest her because we ain't at war with Switzerland. But we suspect the baroness is mixed up in some fifth column activity, spy work

or sabotage. We don't know. We only suspect, but in these days we can't afford to overlook anything. We are watching her closely, and we think she knows she's bein' watched. She ain't left the house in days. We got her phone tapped, but the only call come through was today when she made a call to the flower shop saying that she needed two more orchids, to send them. Only the maid leaves the house, and she don't do nothin' but go to the stores. Of course, this whole thing may be a big mistake, but we gotta make sure, see? Now, did you see something while you was at her house which might be connected with any of the above mentioned crimes?"

"While I was at the apartment," says Art, "nothing happened, but her saying get oudt mine house, and to leave Helen alone because she was a married woman. This is, you see, strictly personal."

"Yeah, I'm afraid it is. So beat it!"

We leave headquarters.

Outside I say to Art, "You left out about the orchids."

"Why should I tell them lunk-heads? Listen, Kelly, we are a detective agency trying to make good. Should I give the cops a lead on a case we are going to solve?"

"Cops! Them was F. B. I. boys!"

"Sure, but we are taking it out of their hands. They are very busy and will appreciate it in the end. What if we two, single-handed, was to unearth a whole nest of Nazi Agents or spies?"

YOU figure Nazis is mixed up in this mess?"

"I trust and pray it is Nazis! Because if we round them up, it will make international headlines all over the world for us. Success is staring us in the face."

"To me it looks like jail!"

Well, it is pretty late now, and we are hungry, so we eat, then we go home. All this time Art and I do not talk. We are both thinking a lot and Art does not like to talk while he is thinking.

We are walking down the hall to Art's apartment when we hear a noise

coming from inside. It is the sound of a bullet fired from a Maxim. If you hold your nose with your fingers and say snuck, that is the sound a Maxim silencer shot makes. This sound makes like that.

But we do not know for sure does it come from Art's apartment, or if the neighbors are killing each other again. Art gets out his key, opens the door, and we step into the foyer, looking into the dark living room, which is like a tomb. Art is feeling around for the light switch and like luck is, he forgets that in this apartment the switch is on the other wall.

A bullet breezes past my ear and thuds home in the door.

I am down on the floor before you can say uh. I yank out my rod, which the cops give us back, and I stare so hard in the darkness to see who is taking the shots at us, my eyes hurt.

Art is stretched out on the floor next to me and there is another shot. But this time we see the fire from his gun, so both I and Art fire instantly where we seen the flame. But this gunner is quick, because we do not hear anything like a body falling or a groan to show he has been hit.

The shadows in the living room begin to take place, and I see a shadow moving along the bedroom door which is closed, and I fire. But nothing happens. A shot thuds home in the floorboards right next to my shoulder. I quit this spot!

I leap behind a big upholstered chair to hide. I am waiting like anything, straining my ears around the room, but it is all deathly silent. I can not hear anything but my own breathing and Art's clock ticking like mad in the bedroom.

Then all of a sudden every muscle I have stiffens up. Little worms start wiggling up my spinal. I am realizing that I cannot be hearing Art's clock in the bedroom, because the bedroom door is closed and besides his clock is one of them silent ones anyway. Well holy gee! I am staring right at an illuminated dial coming toward me around the chair. I see the assailant is coming to where

I am without any knowledge that I am here, too. The arm comes around, and I raise my gun to blast away, then hold fire. I am suddenly not sure if it is the assailant, or Art.

The next thing something bangs over my head and I am knocked for a loop. But it does not knock me out. I jump blind and land on top this guy, and we dust up the floor. The next thing I hear a shot, and the guy under me goes, "Ahhhhhgguhguhguh," and he lays still.

Then Art is shaking me and I am yelling, "I am blind! I am blind!" But Art wipes away the blood from my eyes and I can see again. I thank Art for saving my life.

"Aw nuts," says Art. "Turn him over." And I do it.

Well! I near fall back in shock. The guy dead as a coffin nail is none other than Joe Stucci in person!

"Joe Stucci!" cries Art. "What is he doing here?"

"Art, I do not like this. It is no good. Everybody knew you were after Joe Stucci's guts."

"This is self-defense. If I would not of shot him, he would of shot you."

"Oh! I hope the nice policemen will believe us."

"But what is the rat doing here?" Art looks around the room. There is nothing wrong with the room. But I am worried, and silently I point to the bedroom. We go over, open the door, and brother, I near faint!

The room looks like a panzer unit just come by. Chairs are dumped over, bedspreads pulled out of shape, pillars thrown around, everything looking like a fight has been had here. I cannot speak. I am afraid. Even I am afraid to look around the room for fear what I shall see. Oh that rat Stucci.

Between the twin beds we see a pair of feet sticking up in the air. We rush over and look down at a dead guy we never in our lives seen before!

"We been framed!" yells Art. "Joe Stucci planted a corpse on us. Look at this room, he made it look like we had a battle. We caught him just as he was making his getaway after

leaving the corpse. What we going to do?"

I POINT to the rod near the dead man.

"Holy!" says Art. "That is my rod, my spare .38. He was shot with my rod. Holy!"

"Yeah. Filthy with your prints. and Stucci wearing gloves."

"Don't you ever notice anything but gloves on people! But why? Why should Joe Stucci plant a dead duck on us, huh?"

"He always hated your guts."

"But railroading us to the electric chair!"

"What do you mean us! Leave me out of this!"

"Oh, go back on a pal when he is framed, huh?"

"Now wait a minute, wait a minute."

"But who is the corpse? I never see this guy before."

He is a little old guy with chin whiskers like a goat has, and plenty of white hair. I bend down and take a close look at his face. I see he has been pasted on the chin, and I touch him and he is very very warm yet. So Joe Stucci killed him with the shot we heard in the hall.

Art pulls up the lid of this guy's eye. "He must of come here alive. Look at the eyes, dilated pupils, that means he was drugged. He was brought here in a stupor and killed on the spot. It looks like we are a sure thing for a double murder rap."

"Maybe we could explain everything to the cops?"

"You ever try to explain anything to a cop?"

But at that moment, way way off I hear something that turns my remaining hair grey. Sirens! Coming fast! I start to run around in a panic.

"Our shots!" yells Art. "They attracted attention. Someone called the cops! Quick, let us beat it!"

"Oh no, Art, please!" I beg like anything, "Do not run away. Please, Art, not from the scene of a crime!"

"Many innocent men get the chair every day. Me, I want to solve this case. I cannot concentrate in jail. I know, because I tried, so come!"

"But a murder rap, Art, a double murder rap!"

"It should be a massacre I would still beat it!"

"Mama mee-ah, mama mee-ah! My ex-wife told me I would end up like this!"

CHAPTER IV

A RT runs into the living room, grabs those orchids, then grabs my arm and literally drags me into the john. There we climb out on the fire escape and head for the roof. We run over to the edge of the roof and look down, and there the whole street is beginning to look like everybody in the five boroughs of Manhattan has heard our shots. A police car noses around the corner. That is all I stay to see. Now I am running for all I am worth.

We are in it this time, up to the neck! It does not seem like this was happening to me. And it all started because Art cannot keep from making a blondie when he sees one. Women! That is what comes from associating with them!

We keep moving and do not stop running until we hit an alley and hide behind a mess of garbage cans. So this is what I come to, hiding out behind ash cans, and all because of a woman! I am glad Maizie and I had a divorce! I do not want to have anything to do with a woman no more!

"We got to find a radio," says Art.

"Look around," I says as sarcastic as I can get it. "Help yourself!"

"We just got to find out who the dead man in the bedroom was. If I know who he is it will explain everything I am sure."

"Ha! But I am sore! Why, oh why, did you not tell Chief Brandt about them lousy orchids? Why?"

"Because!"

"Don't gimme that!"

"Shshsh! I do not wish to involve Helen with the F. B. I."

"Oh, you don't! Well, you look here, Mr. Arthur N. Holter, our friendship may date back to knee-

pants, but I will see what a dope I am to run away from the scene of the crime, and I will sing long and loud about everything what happened from the minute that Helen says, 'Orchids for m'dme!'"

"Shut up. Where are we?"

"In an alley amongst ash cans. And from the way they stink I..."

"Good! We got to get to a radio and listen to the news flashes. Let us get a drink. We will take a chance and walk along the street until we spot a nice dark saloon."

"All right, but I am giving you fair warning. This has gone enough for me, Kelly!"

SO WE get up from the garbage cans and walk down the block until we find a dark saloon. We go in, sit way in the back, order drinks. The radio is going full blast.

Not only do I near fall down in surprise, but I choke on my rye when I hear what they say about us. I get so nervous I do not remember clear exactly how it all goes. But it is terrible.

A spectacular gun duel was fought between arch enemies in Art's apartment, causing the death of Joseph Stucci, and an unidentified man. They give out with our descriptions and I near have a fit. What kept me from fainting right then and there I believe was the three ryes I had. Then ten minutes later there is another flash, and oh brother!

The police identified the mysterious dead man in the apartment as Dr. Herman Fischer, an eccentric scientific genius. Dr. Fischer mysteriously disappeared from a train in Grand Central Station three days ago. Dr. Fischer was on the way to a Government laboratory with a precious formula for a gasoline substitute.

Dr. Fischer had successfully demonstrated to Army officials that he could make any engine run with a tank full of distilled water and a hand full of white powder which was a secret formula. This stuff was combustionable and guaranteed to make a motor run. Only Dr. Fischer knew

how to make it, and he was going to show the Government how when he disappeared.

"Holter and Kelly are now believed to have this formula in their possession," says the announcer. And... according to Chief Brandt of the police, we had been taken down to Police Headquarters earlier in the day for questioning concerning our connections with enemy governments. They had let us go for insufficient evidence.

Reasoned Chief Brandt, Holter and Kelly, suspecting that the F. B. I. were closing in, went back to their apartment, killed Dr. Fischer. They believed that Joseph Stucci might have been an innocent bystander, or might have been shot trying to prevent the killing of Dr. Fischer! The imagination of them people!

"That's it!" yells Art. "A formula for a gas substitute. Now at last we know what we are mixed up in!"

"Yeah, and we are hunted men."

"Only thing is, although I know what we are mixed up in, and that in some way these orchids connect...but the baroness would not give them to us if they had a priceless formula in code on them."

"And you put Helen in this, you hear? You put her in. Mrs. Joe Stucci. She started all this!"

"Mrs. Joe Stucci!" Art laughs at me. "Go on!"

"What do you mean by that?"

"This is the one thing I understand about the case all right. I started to tell you but them cops took us off to headquarters. Look, Kelly, Helen is a nice respectable girl. Would a nice girl like she is stop to talk to two lugs if she is a decent married woman?"

"I should say no to you and add to my troubles?"

"Helen knew I was on the make; she let me make her. Use your deduction. That is not what a decent married woman of Helen's type would do!"

"Are you trying to tell me she is not Mrs. Joe Stucci?"

"Of course she is not. She is not married to anybody, I hope."

"But the baroness said..."

"What the baroness said, hell! It was the baroness beat up Helen and because I come out and accuse her of it, she got scared. She covered up by saying Helen is married. and when I get tough and ask the guy's name, she gave out with the first name come to mind. Joe Stucci she says to keep me off Helen, and thereby she makes a big mistake because she tells me Joe Stucci is positively mixed up in something phoney with her."

"But why should the baroness beat Helen?"

"To make her come back for the orchids. Helen is the shy type and got rattled when she heard the word cop, knowing something was fishy about the orchids. That is always the way with innocent people. Innocent people are afraid of cops. not criminals."

"All right, so she is not married to Joe Stucci. But how does this mess we are in tie up with the orchids?"

"I do not know. I swear I do not know. There is only one thing to do. We sit here until we get the answers!"

COOPY THAT time I will be ripped roaring drunk. Not that I mind such a condition. In fact, I do not mind so much running away like I did before."

"Running away... Kelly! I am getting an idea!" He slaps the table. "Kelly, remember when Helen came to our apartment she said she followed us and rang all the doorbells in the apartment until she found ours?"

"I recall such a statement."

"Kelly, she never followed us! She never, never, never could do such a thing!"

"Are you crazy? How else would she know where two perfect strangers who accosted her like us lived if she did not follow?"

"But that is it! I have it! She did not know! She ran around the block and disappeared, remember? I live half-way up the block from where the business of the changing of the orchids took place. Kelly, she never had time to follow us, because, before

she had time to run back up the block again...we would already be entering our apartment house!"

"But, Art, that does not make sense."

"But it does! It clears up the mystery! Someone told her where we lived, and I know who."

"But, Art, who told her?"

"The mysterious character who came gunning after the orchids."

"Oh, he followed us, not Helen..."

"No! That is just it. Nobody followed us! If he followed us and was after the orchids, he would have come into our place right after us. He would not wait one whole hour. No, Kelly, neither the mysterious character nor Helen followed us, and I have solved the whole case."

"Please, Art, go easy on the liquor. You are stinking."

"I have solved the case. If Helen did not follow us, and the mysterious character did not either, and I just moved yesterday and nobody knows but us where we live, there is only one answer.

"There is one guy, and one only who knew where we lived, without following anybody!"

"Who?"

"Meyer! Meyer the jeweler! My gold cigarette case with the little gold shield inside which has my address inside."

Then Art grabs up the box of orchids and rummages through like he is crazy. Then he yells out.

"I got it! No wonder Fatty the baroness gave us the orchids. No wonder. Why that big fat...she gave us the orchids back, but she did not give them back complete!"

"Oh? A petal is missing?"

"No, Kelly, no! But the two straight pins are! See? The pins are gone! Gee, don't you see? Meyer! Engraver! Pins! You can engrave the Lord's prayer on top a head; on two you can print the library. Don't you see, Kelly? The formula for Dr. Fischer's gas substitute is engraved on those two pinheads which were in these orchids!"

I cannot say one single word.

"Now I get the whole setup. The F. B. I. Agents were watching the

baroness. She knew they were watching her. Meyer had the pins ready, and she had to get them, so she sent Helen for them. Meyer and Joe Stucci were in on the deal.

"They had to get rid of Dr. Fischer; they had to kill him because if he lived he would give the Government the formula, and they do not wish this. They are enemies of this Government. Joe Stucci thought it a swell way to get rid of the body by pinning the rap on us. Only we killed him before he got away.

"Helen, knowing something is wrong with the orchids, gives them to us. The baroness, when Helen gets back home, quick phones up Joe Stucci; flowers is lost, send more. But she doesn't mean orchids, she really means pins. She is telling Joe Stucci to quick tell Meyer to engrave two more pins.

"Joe Stucci hot-foots it over to Meyer across the street, and relays the message. Meyer remembers us guys in the store, and that we left, tailing Helen! He only thought I was on the make, but now he remembers we are detectives, so he does something about it. He hurries to our apartment, having the address handy, and comes gunning after the orchids...the pins!

"He is unsuccessful. Back he goes to the baroness, sneaks in unseen, and sends Helen out after them. Helen is afraid and does not want to go, so she is beat up and made to go.

HELEN gets the orchids, gives them back. Hey Kelly! That is what you saw through the transom. Not cellophane, but pins! They would disappear in her big fat fingers, and from that distance you were looking at nothing. You could not see two itty bitty straight pins she was looking at through the magnifying glass, to see if they were engraved with the gas formula."

"Art, you are a genius! A sheer genius!"

"That is why she gave us the orchids. She knew I smelled a rat, and took this way of quieting me down. She already had what she wanted. Kelly, the case is solved! We are made! The Holter-Kelly Detective Agency is made! Just wait until... Just wait...until..."

"Yes, just wait until the first cop spots us. Do you think Chief Brandt is going to believe this yarn about two pins? Oh sure, like a flash of lightning! I can just see it myself!"

"Oh, oh! You are right. He will never believe that. Not after I said the orchids was for Helen, and without no pins now. Kelly, we got to do something. The baroness has in her possession two pins with a precious formula that means millions to the war effort. She is probably right this minute on her way to the Nazi Government, and who would stop to think two pins about two pins?"

"She cannot get out of this country!"

"She can too! You forget she is a Swiss citizen. To get her out of the country has been doped out long ago. We have got to stop that woman! Someway, somehow we have to stop those two pins from leaving this country!"

"With the whole United States mad at us, that should be a cinch."

Art gets up. "Come on, Kelly, we are going back to Meyer, this engraver! I got the best idea I ever had in my life!"

Meyer is sitting under a light, way back in his store working. Art knocks on the front door, and Meyer looks up and comes hopping over. He peeks through the window trying to see who we are. He recognizes us and his face falls. But he unlocks the door.

"Well," he says all smiles. "This is most unusual. I hadn't expected you

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until morning. However, your case is ready, Mr. Holter."

We get inside the store, and stand with our backs to the window. "Now, Mr. Meyer," says Art, "it is your turn to stick them up," and he has his rod in his hands and is showing it to Mr. Meyer. "Only you do not put up the hands. Just stand there like you are having a friendly conversation with us."

Meyer's face is a thing to see. "What's the meaning of this?"

"History repeats itself. Only this afternoon we were saying the same things to each other, only the other way around."

"Mr. Holter, I demand to know, is this a holdup?"

"In a way."

"Look here, I heard the radio. You are wanted by the police..."

"Nuts! I am wise to your setup. I am here for the express purpose of marching you down to headquarters where you are going to explain to some nice F. B. I. boys the story of two pins, which have a certain formula engraved on them."

Meyer makes believe to laugh. "You must be crazy! Pins? Engraved? Formula? What are you driveling about?"

"I'm talking about the two pins Kelly snitched from the baroness' apartment this afternoon."

Well, Meyer's face gets as white as snow. "You mean you..."

"I mean this afternoon while sitting at the baroness' desk, Kelly here simply took two innocent nude pins and switched them for the pins in the orchids. We saw the baroness examine them through a magnifying glass while we were looking through the transom. And now we are going to tell it to the F. B. I."

"You switched the pins!" he says in a hoarse voice. "I can't believe it."

"Then don't. But we did it."

"But the baroness..."

"The baroness is on her way with two pins that don't mean a thing. Some gag, huh?"

"I... I don't believe you!"

Art laughs at me. "He does not believe us, Kelly."

I go along with the gag. "Why do you not show them to him, Art? Just show them to him?"

Art gets startled. He glares at me. Meyer's eyes are all lights. "Oh, you have the pins with you?"

"Now what did you have to say that for, Kelly?" Art says like I have spoiled everything. "Oh, well, the harm is done, so what? Sure we have the pins. And they are well hidden. You could not find them in a million years, I have hidden them so good. But enough of this horsing around. You will kindly step this way. Oh, but I laugh whenever I think of the baroness beating it the hell out of this country with two perfectly nude pair of pins."

AND he starts to laugh and slaps his knee and naturally he moves his gun off Meyer.

"Yes, isn't it?" says Meyer with icicles, and he whips out a gun on us. Art stands there with his mouth open and so do I. Art swears.

"You will please," says Meyer, "place your guns upon the counter?"

We do this. He puts them in his pockets, and frisks us, too.

"Now, you both are coming with me. I hope there is still time left to stop the baroness and give her the right pins. I have no alternative but to take you to her, since you won't give me the pins."

"You will never get them!" says Art.

"Never," I say.

"We shall see. There are many ways we can persuade you, I'm sure. A hot foot in the form of molten lead. That usually brings amazing results. Crushing your fingers with pinchers; I like that one. We'll make you give them up, I'm sure," and he motions us to get in the back of his store.

There he proceeds to gag us, and tie our hands behind our backs. He shoves us along to the back yard where there is a garage. He throws us down on the floor of his car. He binds our ankles together, throws a heavy blanket over us, and gets into the car and drives off.

After a while I am wondering if

Art was so smart to try this. It will be hot stuff to torture us for a pair of pins we do not have on us. I can just see the hot lead coming for me, and me screaming I do not have the pins. I am very uncomfortable.

We drive along and we drive and drive. I have no idea where we go, or how long it takes because I cannot see anything. I do not even breathe so good on account of the blanket.

After a long time we suddenly ride over a lot of bumps, which show we are using a country road. Then suddenly the car stops. I hear Meyer get out, throw open the door, and take off the blanket. I can breathe cold clear night air.

Meyer grabs hold my coat, yanks me up and out of the car. I see we are in a pretty deserted part of the country section. I turn a little, see an old farm house. Right behind that there is another frame building which looks like a big garage. And then I see something I can hardly believe I am seeing it.

An aeroplane, a big streamlined job. I no sooner spot the plane when I get the whole thing. The baroness with the pins on her is going to pull a Hess! It is the only meaning for a big plane like that. That woman must be crazy to try a stunt like that, at a time like this!

NO SOONER do I spot the plane, when I see two women coming over to us. It is the baroness and Helen, and they have guns. The baroness is all rigged out in flying togs. Helen, she looks at us like she is seeing ghosts. Meyer calls out to the baroness, and she comes on the run with "Vot is diss! Vot is diss!"

"I am that relieved!" says Meyer. "I was afraid you'd gone."

The baroness glares at him, then at us. "These two men! They are the yunk men in mine house this afternoon. Meyer! Vot dey doink here? Meyer? Heil Hitler!"

"Heil Hitler!" says Meyer.

"Heil Hitler!" says Helen. "What are these men doing here?"

"These fools. They came to me



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with a story! They wanted to arrest me, the idiots!"

"Vell? Vot dis got to do wiss me?"

"Somehow these idiots managed to switch pins on you this afternoon. Kelly took them while seated at your desk."

"What!!!" roars the baroness. "You cannot . . . vy you pork! You ayezel! You stupit incompetent undecent stupit. Switch pins?"

"They took the engraved pins and substituted two nude ones. They have the real pins concealed upon their persons somewhere."

"Gott in him mel kreutz-bombendonner vetternochamah! Meyer! But you sink I do not know if I have right pins after they are gone? They make joke wiss you! I have right pins! I have magnifying glass, nicht wahr? I have right pins before they come see me, and I have right pins after they are gone. Gottohgottogott! Meyer, vot have you done!"

"You mean . . ." and it dawns on him. He turns to look at us, and if looks could kill I would be pushing up daisies right then and there.

Helen is standing there stiffly, her lips a hard line. "Meyer! That was stupid. Do you think the baroness would leave with the wrong pins? You underestimate the baroness's intelligence. She has the right pins. We made sure just a short time ago; these men are obviously up to something!"

Meyer reaches up and tears the gags from our faces. "So! You tricked me. You haven't got those pins after all!"

"I cannot tell a lie," says Art. "No, I have not."

Helen sighs and releases the safety on her gun. "You two boys have caused me no end of trouble. It was stupid of you to come here. Why did you do it? Now I am sorry but there is only one thing left to do. You have guessed our secret mission, therefore you must die."

"Ch, Helen!" says Art.

"I am sorry, Mr. Holter, you have asked for this. It was a big blunder, your coming here. Did you imagine

you could stop the baroness from flying to Germany?"

"Flying to Germany?" yells Art. "But you'll never make it."

"Ha!" says the baroness. "Ha ha! What Hess could do, I can do! Have I not big plane? Plenty gasoline? I will fly into the stratosphere where no guns reach me. And the pins with the precious formula will to mine Fuehrer. Heil Hitler!"

Everybody makes with the Heil, except Art and I.

"Come," says the baroness, "time is short. To think that in the near future we Chermans will run automobiles, and maybe aeroplanes without gasoline, but with water. Ach! But that is a funny thought! And to Chermany will go the honor of being the discoverers of this new formula."

"I thought Dr. Fischer discovered it."

"Vell yes, but Dr. Fischer has Cherman blood around him somewhere I am sure. Even just a little. Only a person with superior Cherman blood in them can make such great revolutionary inventions. Ach yes. Mine Fuehrer will be so please wiss me. So please wiss me when I come home wiss the pins!"

"YOUR Highness," says Helen, "I think this fight has been delayed long enough."

"Yes, yes, mine kint. I must go. He vill be please wiss me. I can just see his beautiful face when he thank me in the name of the Reich."

"Do me a favor," says Art. "When you see his face, kindly spit in it for me, will you?"

They ignore that. Meyer says, "Your Highness, you won't forget to mention to Herr Hitler the . . . er . . . small part I played? My engraving?"

"But of course, Herr Meyer. You will be most valuable to our cause here in this country. And you, Helen, I will tell our Fuehrer about you too."

"Oh thank you, Your Highness, thank you."

"Oh Helen," moans Art. "Helen."

"Quiet, you fool!"

There we are, tied and helpless, and

the baroness grunts her way into the plane.

"Helen," says Art. "Please, you are not going to let her go!"

Helen laughs. "And why not? Of course she will fly. And she will get to Germany! She must! I am a true German. I will do anything to help our New Order. She must get to Germany!"

"Oh Helen!"

"Ach," says the baroness, "but the Fuehrer will be please."

"Helen!" begs Art. "Shoot her. Do something Helen, you have a gun!"

"Quiet! Or I will have you gagged again."

Art starts to jig around trying to release his hands and feet. I do it too, but Meyer did a good job. The ropes do not budge. Helen and Meyer laugh at us.

The baroness is in the plane, the motor starts. We stand there helpless and watch the baroness fix her goggles and settle herself. She makes a heil at us. Helen and Meyer heil back. The plane starts away, cruises down the field.

"No!" yells Art hysterical. "No! Helen! Shoot! Do something!"

"Quiet!" yells Helen.

Back comes the plane, it speeds down the runway, it lifts easily off the ground. We watch, our mouths open with dismay, as the plane takes to the air. For a few seconds I pray she misses and hits the tree tops, but she does not. She rides over them like a bird, and disappears, the plane headed out to sea.

"Helen!" moans Art. "I will not forgive you for this."

"Who wants the forgiveness of a dead man," says Helen. "Come, Meyer, let us get this over with."

"Right," says Meyer and turns away. Helen jumps and sticks the gun in his ribs. "All right, Myer, stick up the hands!"

Well, I am so surprised I do fall over this time because on account of I forget my feet are tied. In a minute Helen has Meyer's guns. Then she takes out a knife and slices Art's hands free. Then Art cuts me free. We tie up the struggling Meyer.

"But Helen, I thought..." says Art.

"About the baroness? She will not get far. Not in that plane. You see I filled her tank with dirt. Pooh! I hope she drops in the middle of the ocean."

"But the pins, Helen; the formula will be lost to science."

"Ha! You think so? Well, I have the pins! It is I who did the switching around. For one minute when you two come here with the story about switching pins, I am so frightened she will take one more look at the ones she is wearing. Ha, she has nothing but two ordinary straight pins on her now."

"Helen, you are wonderful."

"Nonsense. I had to do it. This afternoon when I was told to get the orchids for m'dme, I did not know how important they were. I knew there was something wrong with them, but I never, never dreamed their value. When you say you are dicks, I am confused, and do what I did do, for which I am not sorry. When I get them back from you, she tells me their importance while she writes out what I should get from the delicatessen. Then I know what I must do. I switch pins here when she takes the last look at them. I just pin the wrong pins on her, that is all. Well? What do you say we all go down to the police station and tell them about this?"

Art was right. We made headlines! I never in my life see anybody so grateful like the American Public. You would think we was heros the way they treat us. The Little Flower welcomes us at City Hall. All the expensive broadcasts have us as guests. We have the time of our lives.

They pick up the baroness' plane just outside Coney Island. Art and I have pitchers took next to the wrecked plane and Helen. We get it framed in our office. We are, however, going to give up the Detective Business, because Art and I was taken into the Army and we are going to do some more work for Uncle Sam.

THE END

THE LADY IN THE CASE

Complete Mystery Novelet



By Lee E. Wells

One by one the jilted men took dry-dives from hotel windows, and the search for the deadly blonde became desperate . . .

CHAPTER I

THIS love business, Lt. Jim Dink of Homicide decided, had gone a bit too far. The crushed body on the pavement be-

side the Mardott Hotel was the fifth death for love in a month. Dink stepped away from the crowd on the lawn and looked upward, eight stories where drapes flapped out of an open window.

Instinctively his bulging green eyes traced the fall of the body, down before the height of brick and windows to the thin width of the walk that bordered the green lawn. Dink's wide lips shifted the frayed cigar to the other corner of his mouth. Beyond the police line, the curious crowd craned and gaped. Traffic on the boulevard that bordered Fall Creek was tied up in knots. There sounded the far-off wail of the ambulance.

One of the detectives had already given Dink a brief resume of what was found. This fellow, Werner, had typed a farewell note to his sweetheart and had deliberately walked out into thin air. It could happen, of course, had happened four times before. Dink wondered if Dan Cupid could be subpoenaed for murder.

Lieutenant Dink wished profanely that guys would take their loving or leave it, instead of taking nose-dives out windows because of some frail with a come-hither look. He pushed his soft hat back on his thinning hair and the tops of his big ears folded slightly under the brim. He bit down savagely on the cigar and walked away from the men around the body.

The drive of the Mardott Hotel arched in from the street between aloof potted plants and there was an aloof arch over the doorway. The uniformed doorman looked a little frightened. He saluted Dink.

"He's dead, sir?" he asked.

Dink stared up at the man. His own scant five feet made him seem a dwarf beside the tall expanse of uniform and braid. Dink noted sourly that the doorman was a handsome young fellow. "Are you in love?" he asked abruptly.

The man looked startled and confused. "Why, yes, sir."

Dink pulled at one of his big ears. "Ever been jilted?"

The man grinned wryly. "Yes, sir. Several times."

Dink nodded and shifted the cigar again. "Did you ever want to end it all because some dame did you wrong?"

The doorman stared hard at the detective. He slowly shook his head. "Not quite, sir. I've felt like hell sometimes, but never that bad."

Dink took the cigar out of his mouth and examined the frayed end. He decided it was good for a few more minutes. He looked hard at the doorman. "Take it easy, son. The love-bug's pretty deadly around here."

He pushed around the man and through the doors. The rich lobby was filled with an awed and frightened crowd. The manager was having a hard time explaining why such things happened at the Mardott. He saw Dink and came hustling over.

His moon face was worried. "Can't your men finish up quickly out there, officer?"

Dink's thick lips pursed. "Maybe. We must have pictures."

The fat hands fluttered in horror. "I don't know why it should happen here! This is an apartment hotel with a fine and distinguished name. It will be hard on us."

Dink's green eyes glittered. "It was pretty hard on Werner. But you wouldn't know, would you?"

The manager showed a fleeting look of contriteness. "Of course it is very sad, officer. But it is also a shock to my guests. After all, I must think of them."

Dink nodded. "They're having the time of their lives, Jacobs. Nothing like a good suicide or murder to awaken a sluggish liver. I'll want to see you later."

He walked quickly to the elevator and the girl closed the ornate doors. The elevator started upward at a dignified pace. Dink leaned back against the wall and decided he liked what little of the girl's legs he could see below the conservative uniform. She had neat ankles and was pretty.

Dink asked, "Did you know Mr. Werner?"

She nodded and kept her face

turned, her eyes on the light panel. It wasn't very busy. "Yes, sir."

Dink scratched his lean jaw. "A nice guy?"

"Oh, yes, sir!" she said abruptly and Dink saw the red flush at the back of her neck. "That is, he was quite a gentleman, sir, and very considerate."

DINK saw that they were passing the sixth floor. He pulled himself away from the wall. "I bet he was nice to you."

He caught a quick glance of brown eyes. He felt suddenly sorry for the girl. She was frightened. "Don't mind me," he growled.

"Thank you, sir." The doors slid open and Dink faced the hall that led to Werner's apartment. He could see the uniformed policeman before the door. He grinned into the girl's worried face and walked down the hall.

Prentice and Hall, from Dink's department, were looking things over. Prentice had the closet door open and was checking Werner's collection of suits. Hall had an open briefcase on a spindleleg table and was going through the papers.

He grinned up at Dink. "This guy did all right, Lieutenant. He lived in style."

Dink nodded and walked to the open window. He looked down at the little figures far below. The ambulance was just rounding the corner. Dink turned back to the room and walked over to a desk against the far wall. Its top was open and a portable typewriter glistened in the light. There was a sheet of paper in the roller.

Dink bent down and read the typing. The letterhead was engraved, announcing that Jefferson Werner sold preferred lists of bonds and securities. The message below was brief.

"I cannot live without you, Mary. Life has meant so much that it is blank and drear after you said all was over between us. I feel this is the only way out."

There was no signature, typed or written. Dink studied the note. The

whole thing followed the usual pattern, still the note didn't ring quite true. He turned to Prentice, who had come out of the closet.

"Any idea who Mary is?" he asked.

Prentice shook his head and pointed to a dresser near the bed. There's some frail's things over there that we found tucked around."

Dink pushed away from the desk, giving the note a second irritable look. He took off his hat and threw it on the bed. His baldness became immediately apparent and his ears looked bigger. His face was thin and bony, the nose large and predatory. His green eyes bulged slightly in the sockets and he always looked to be on the verge of an angry outburst. His lips were too wide for the face, and too thick. They always held an evil, frayed cigar.

He picked up a vanity case. It had a wing design with a lipstick container built into the top. Dink turned it over and read the manufacturer's name. It could have been purchased in a hundred places in the city. There was a brown bobby pin. There was a little square of white linen that had no laundry mark.

Dink held it to his hawk nose and sniffed. It faintly suggested face powder and nothing more. His green eyes glittered when he looked at the little .22-caliber revolver pushed back against a pair of military brushes.

He turned to Prentice. "The lady didn't like him or didn't trust him. Maybe Werner was a heel."

The detective grinned. "Sure. She fought for her honor and Werner got discouraged. He did a Brody."

Dink stood back and looked at the collection. "Maybe you got something." He pulled at one of his big ears. "Prentice, there's a cute little dame on the elevator. Bring her in."

The detective straightened. "Her? You mean this guy played around with the help?"

"How the hell do I know?" Dink growled and Prentice left the room. Dink stood by the open window again. He took out the frayed cigar, inspected its end. He sighed and threw the remains into a wastebasket. His bony fingers pulled out another

and he thoughtfully chewed off the end.

He turned slowly, his eyes going over the room. Near the door, one edge of the rug was turned up and there was a big wrinkle in the fabric. A low table stood before two easy chairs. Powder made a peculiar pattern that caught Dink's attention.

He took his handkerchief and lifted the wing compact on the dresser. He crossed to the table and carefully lowered the metal box. The powder line on the table exactly framed the edge of the compact.

Hall looked up from the briefcase. "Got something, Lieutenant?"

"Where did you find the compact and gun?" Dink asked.

Hall pointed to one of the chairs. "The compact was down behind the cushion. The gun was over there on the dresser."

DINK nodded. "The handkerchief?"

"Right where it was, on the dresser."

The door opened and a fat detective, Donegan, filled the frame. "We're through down below. Say, his guy Werner didn't register for Selective Service. Anyway, we can't find his card."

Dink's thin brows raised. Prentice looked over Donegan's shoulder. "I got the girl here, Lieutenant."

Dink ordered the others out of the room. The girl was clearly frightened and nervous and Dink tried to make her comfortable in one of the chairs. She kept looking around the room and her hands wouldn't stay still in her lap.

Dink lit his cigar. It glowed a few seconds and then went out. He didn't notice. His bulging eyes watched the girl. She sat stiff in the chair. He saw that she had brown hair and that probably she used the same shade of bobby pin that he had found. He was satisfied to chew on the dead cigar and stare. The girl looked around the room, her eyes rested on the open window and skittered away. She twisted her fingers.

Finally she looked up, her fore-

head lined. "I can't tell you anything."

Dink shrugged. "Maybe, maybe not. Did you bring anyone up to see Mr. Werner today?"

"I don't know." She explained hastily when his thin eyebrow arched. "I've brought several to this floor, but Mr. Werner's wasn't the only apartment."

"Any women?"

She hesitated noticeably. "Yes, three. One of them was Mrs. Morton, down the hall. I didn't know the other two."

Dink shifted the cigar. "Both of them young? Pretty?"

She dropped her eyes to her fingers. "One of them, yes. The other was about forty-five." She looked up and added quickly, "I don't know where they went."

Dink smiled. He shouldn't have done it. He looked like an inebriated gargoyle. "What's your name?"

"Ruth Garson."

Dink seemed to go into a conference with the end of his cigar, considering it closely. He popped it back in his mouth. "Did you come in here today?"

The girl's hands gripped the chair arms and there was strain in her face. She stared at him and Dink fixed her with his bulging green eyes. She licked her lips, then seemed to collapse back in the chair.

"Yes," she said in a choked, low voice. "I came just before I reported on duty." She jumped from the chair and her voice trembled in fear. "But he was all right then! I didn't have anything to do with this."

Dink managed to get her back in the chair. "You're not accused of anything, Miss Garson. What did you discuss?"

She had control of herself. "I'll be fired for this. We are not supposed to become intimate with the guests."

Dink touched her arm reassuringly. "I don't think this will get to the estimable Mr. Jacobs. Let's have it now."

"Mr. Werner had taken me out several times. He was a nice and thoughtful man. We—that is, I

thought a lot of him. We were to go to the Sapphire Room tonight. That's what we were talking about."

Dink picked up the compact in his handkerchief and held it before her. "Is this yours?"

She stared at it and shook her head. Dink replaced the box and shifted his cigar. He patted her arm twice. "That's all, Miss Garson. This won't get any further and you needn't worry about your job. Just give the officer in the hall your name and address. Don't move unless you inform the police, and don't try to leave town."

She arose uncertainly from her chair, dabbing at her eyes with a cheap handkerchief. Then she pushed back her slim shoulders, gave Dink a half smile, and walked from the room. Dink jerked his head at Donegan.

The big man came in, closing the door. Dink scowled at the compact. "Well, here we go again, Donegan. This is murder. No guy with a date with a girl like Miss Garson is going to jump out of a window."

CHAPTER II

DINK prowled around the room for a time after the girl had gone. He chewed hard on the cigar and stared blankly at the typewriter and the suicide note. Donegan had eased his bulk into one of the chairs and he followed Dink with his little blue eyes. Dink walked to the open window, stared across the Boulevard to a mortuary mansion and a sprawling tavern.

He pulled the cigar from his lips. "Who lives across the hall?"

Donegan fished a battered notebook from his pocket and leafed over some pages. "Porter Stanfield, registered from New York."

Dink drummed on the window sill a second, then turned. "Stay put. I'm going to call on Mr. Stanfield."

He crossed the hall and pressed the pearl gray button in the white door frame. The door opened almost instantly. A stocky man with wide

shoulders and a square-cut face looked inquiringly at Dink.

Dink showed his badge. "I'd like to ask a few questions, Mr. Stanfield."

Stanfield's hard gray eyes looked blank. "I'm afraid I won't be much help."

Dink smiled. "You never can tell. You're Werner's nearest neighbor and you might have seen something important."

Stanfield shrugged and stepped back. Dink walked into his apartment. It was a duplicate of Werner's except that the windows opened on a court. Stanfield waved to a chair near one of the windows and Dink sat down. He looked around.

Porter Stanfield walked to a table loaded with bottles and glasses. "A drink?"

Dink looked longingly at the bottles and sadly shook his head. "No, thanks. I'm always a heel when I drink."

Stanfield looked surprised, then grinned. His square face lost its hardness and he looked almost youthful despite the touch of gray hairs at his ears. Dink had a favorable impression of the man. He was dressed in a dark suit that clearly spoke of money. The small diamond on his finger flashed a cold blue fire.

Dink rolled his cigar around in his thick lips. "You've been a guest here for some time?"

Stanfield poured a drink and nodded. He sank down in a chair. "Yes, about three months. My firm obtains defense contracts for manufacturing plants."

Dink nodded. "Have you ever seen the man across the hall?"

Stanfield nursed the whiskey. "Several times, but only casually. A matter of nodding when we entered the elevator together."

Dink looked out the window at the expanse of brick and glass across the court. "You've been here most of the day?"

"All day. I'm waiting for a couple of deals to come to a boil and I wanted to be close to a phone."

Dink leaned forward. "Did you

notice if Mr. Werner had any visitors?"

Stanfield looked up quickly. He tossed down the drink. "I really can't be definite, Lieutenant. I did see one girl leave the elevators and ring his bell. There may have been others, of course."

Dink examined the frayed cigar. "Did she have brown hair and eyes?"

Stanfield shook his head. "No, she was one of those blonde dames that belongs in a magazine."

The bulging green eyes gleamed and Dink pulled at the lobe of his ear. Stanfield seemed fascinated by their size. "You'll be in town for a while, Mr. Stanfield?"

The man shrugged. "Not too long, I hope. A week, maybe two, until these deals are finished."

Dink arose. "We might need you later on, Mr. Stanfield. You might be able to help us identify this blonde. If she's of any importance."

STANFIELD looked puzzled and scratched his jaw. "I heard rumors that Werner had committed suicide. You don't talk that way."

Dink shrugged and grinned. "A copper was born suspicious, Mr. Stanfield. We'll tell the papers suicide and maybe we'll come around to making that official."

Stanfield arose and escorted Dink to the door. "If I can help in any way, Lieutenant, let me know."

Dink nodded. "Thanks a lot. You might begin by letting us know when you decide to move."

He waved his thin hand and crossed the hall to Werner's apartment. Donegan was still in the chair. He had found a bottle of scotch and looked happy. Dink raised an eyebrow.

"You're pretty careless, Donegan. Maybe someone poisoned that stuff."

Donegan choked and looked unhappy. He replaced the glass on the coffee table and sat quietly as though waiting for some inner disturbance. He seemed to feel better after a few minutes. "What did you find out?" he asked.

Dink looked down out of the window. The body was gone and traffic

was again moving up and down the Boulevard. There was still a small knot of curiosity seekers at the far corner but they wouldn't be there long.

Dink's fingers played a tattoo on the wall. "Stanfield doesn't know much. He gave us one lead, though. This Mary is a blonde and a swell looker. Now all we got to do is find her full name and where she lives."

Donegan reached out a hand for the whiskey glass, thought better of it and sank back in the chair. "Maybe Werner was playing her for a stock deal."

Dink turned. "Could be. Let's see if we can get a line on his customers."

He crossed to the table where the briefcase and papers lay. There were a few letters, a list of prospects with their addresses, booklets describing the strength of the stocks Werner had to sell.

It didn't take Dink long to discover that none of the names on letters or lists were Mary. He leaned back, discouraged. Donegan held up a letter.

"This guy Werner hit them all," he said wonderingly. "Here's that hot-shot writer in town, Stanley Crandall."

Dink made a wry face. Crandall wrote passionate love novels and made himself a nuisance at the better bars. Dink took the letter and looked it over. It confirmed an appointment for a day or two before. It was signed with Crandall's flourished scrawl. Dink was about to throw it back on the table when he caught the typist's initials—M.T.

He threw his cigar away and fished for another, his eyes grew thoughtful. "I wonder if Crandall has a secretary named Mary. It might pay for us to take a look."

Donegan scowled and sighed. "More travelling around! I wish there was a case where a guy could just sit right still and get all the answers."

Dink snorted. "Haven't you any ambition? How do you want to earn your money?"

Donegan pulled his bulk from the

chair. "The easiest way, and I'm tired already."

The Garson girl gave Dink an appealing look as they went down in the elevator but he said nothing to her. Dink left the fat detective in the lobby while he hunted up the manager. He found Jacobs in his office, slumped disconsolately behind his big desk. Jacobs pouted his lips distastefully when Dink came in.

"It should happen to the Mardott," he complained. "Police all over the place."

Dink dropped in a chair. "You worry too much, friend."

Jacobs shrugged his fat shoulders. "I'd worry less if you were out of my sight."

"You haven't the right attitude, Jacobs. You're not used to excitement and mystery."

"I don't want to be. They hurt business."

Dink sighed. "No appreciation for adventure, Jacobs. You'll probably have the misfortune to die very wealthy."

Jacobs sputtered a moment, then his eyes narrowed at the policeman. "What do you want now?"

"For the peace of the Mardott, I can report that the body has been taken away, all of the police are gone but myself and two detectives. I want the keys to Werner's suite. Then we can lock everything up nice and tight and there won't be any police at all—except now and then."

Jacobs looked puzzled. "Why lock it, Lieutenant? I had thought to straighten it up and rent it again."

Dink pulled the cellophane from a cigar. "Not right away, friend Jacobs." He grinned at the staring man. "You see, Werner did not kill himself."

Jacobs looked shocked. "But he jumped—" He stopped, staring as Dink shook his head. The man licked his lips. "You mean he was—"

"Murdered," Dink agreed affably.

Jacobs sighed, "Oh, my God!" and sank back in his chair.

Dink lit his cigar. "Naturally, we won't want anyone messing around that suite for a while, so we'll have to lock it up for a day or two at

least. By the way, Jacobs, did Werner have many callers?"

JACOBS stared horror-stricken, then visibly pulled himself together. He shuddered. "Suicide is bad enough and now you say murder. What the papers will do with that! My guests will all leave."

Dink shook his head and pulled at his big ear. "Not if you play ball with me, Jacobs. I haven't said a word to the papers about homicide. I won't, unless I have a lot of trouble."

Jacobs licked his lips. "I'll help you all I can," he said fervently.

Dink crossed his thin legs. "Now about Werner's visitors. Did he have many?"

"I don't know. I seldom pay full attention to any one guest, Lieutenant. But the desk clerk should know. I'll call him."

He flipped the key on a desk box and spoke into it. He settled back in his chair to wait, his face showing his dismay and worry. Dick worked hard at chewing his cigar and was well along when the sleek young man came in.

He answered readily enough. "Mr. Werner had quite a few callers and he was constantly coming and going himself. He seemed to be a very busy man."

Dink brightened. "How about women?"

The clerk hesitated but Jacobs gave him a sign to go ahead with what he knew. The man cleared his throat. "I'm afraid there were some. Mr. Werner was not always discreet in that respect. However, he was very quiet and the desk could have no complaint. After all, our guests' rooms are their castles so long as they do not disturb anyone else."

Dink nodded. "How about a blonde? A particularly beautiful blonde?"

The clerk's eyebrows raised. "Yes, there was such a person. She was here several times. She was so striking that I particularly noticed her, begging your pardon, Mr. Jacobs. Her name was Mary Taggart."

Dink gave the man a hard stare

with his hypnotic green eyes. "How did you know her name?"

The man blushed. "She was striking, sir, and once there was a telephone call while she was in Mr. Werner's rooms."

Dink's eyes narrowed. "Did the caller happen to be Stanley Crandall?"

The clerk looked astounded. "How did you know, sir?"

Dink grinned and waved the question aside. He turned to Jacobs. "You've been a big help. Now if you'll lock that suite, we'll leave you alone for awhile."

Jacobs gave orders to the clerk and Dink left the office with the man. Donegan waited in a big leather chair near the elevators. Dink ordered the clerk to give the key to the officer on guard upstairs.

He turned to Donegan. "Rise and shine, Fatso. We're going to call on the world's great lover."

Donegan looked surprised. "Who?"

"Stanley Crandall."

Donegan's face fell. "That lily! I'd like to give him a poke."

Dink grinned and turned toward the doors. "Who knows what the day may bring, Donegan? Now if you're really a good boy—"

"Agh, cut it out!" Donegan growled. "I got a prowler car around the corner."

CHAPTER III

DONEGAN filled all the space behind the wheel and Dink was crowded against the door. The way led northward, up broad Meridian Street where aloof apartment houses and many-gabled mansions stared haughtily at the traffic. Dink watched the houses, a sardonic gleam in his eyes. Police work over a period of years had taken the glamor from extreme wealth. Jim Dink had long ago learned that a debutante will love and kill for the identical reasons that would affect the girl behind the dime store counter.

Donegan swung to the east, toward the road that would lead him to Woodbine, an ultra-snobbish suburb

of the city. He shifted uncomfortably behind the wheel. "Maybe we could give this Crandall the murder rap. I never liked him."

Dink grinned. "Donegan, you're a cold-blooded monster."

"No, it's just that I never liked that guy."

The rest of the drive went in silence. Finally Donegan turned off the state highway into a graveled drive that wound deep into a heavily wooded estate. The house was brick, its long and low expanse broken by huge windows. There were bright-colored canvas chairs in the yard.

Donegan made an unpleasant noise when he saw the man reclining in one of the chairs. "There's God's gift to heels."

The man stood up and came toward the car in long strides. He was dressed in an open-throat shirt and cream trousers. He had a narrow face, black hair that was slowly retreating from his forehead, and a hawk nose. His lips were uneven, set in selfish lines.

His dark eyes flashed and his face was unpleasant as he came up to the car. "You took long enough. Do you think I like waiting for you police?"

Dink had opened the door. He halted in surprise, staring at the man. "How did you know we were coming?"

Stanley Crandall threw his long arms wide in a gesture of despair. "Did they have to send the dumbest of a dumb force? I called you, how else?"

Dink threw a quick glance at Donegan, whose knuckles were white as he gripped the wheel. Dink shifted his cigar. "Of course, Mr. Crandall. What's wrong?"

CRANDALL swore luridly. "I told you over the phone. Theft! Someone has taken over a hundred thousand dollars in negotiable securities."

Dink whistled. "That's a lot of dinero. Any suspects?"

Crandall rolled a lot of dirty cracks up in one smile. "Yes, but you'll probably let him get away. You'll probably stand here and argue and exer-

cise your futile brains until he's escaped."

Dink held back his anger though his eyes glinted and his fist doubled. "You're wasting time yourself," he said abruptly. "Name the guy, and your reasons."

Crandall's tone hit a new high in insults. "This man has been here several times. He has made love to my secretary and she has completely lost her head. In fact, I think she probably was his accomplice. Jefferson Werner stole those securities. Or my secretary, Mary Taggart, or both of them working together."

Dink sat back in the car. "Werner won't get away," he said slowly. "We've already got him—at the morgue."

Crandall stared. "What on earth are you talking about?"

"Just that," Dink said. "Werner's dead. My men have gone over his apartment with a fine tooth comb. There's no negotiable securities there."

"Then Mary killed him and ran away," Crandall said flatly.

Dink's voice lowered dangerously. "How long has Miss Taggart been with you?"

"Ten years."

"Aren't you pretty fast accusing someone who's been with you that long?"

Crandall drew up. "You dolts wouldn't understand how a genius thinks. I know she has killed Werner, he probably jilted her. She has run off."

Dink sighed, counted to ten and then could talk again. "You seem to have a lot of dough for a novel writer," he suggested.

Crandall flushed angrily. "I do not sully my art. My father left me a sizable fortune, so I write as I please. It just happens they sell."

Dink nodded. "So I hear. Where does Miss Taggart live?"

Crandall told him. Dink obtained a list of the securities, looked at the wall safe in the over-rich office in the house. He discovered Werner had been eager to sell Crandall some mining stock. The novelist kept bringing the talk back to his secretary.

Dink left with the definite impression that Crandall was burnt up because Werner had taken Mary Taggart's interest.

Finally he came back to the car and climbed in. "Let's get out of here," he growled at Donegan. "One more minute with that inflated crackpot and they'll be giving me the hot seat at Michigan City."

Donegan wheeled the car around. "Nature sure went off the beam when that guy was planned," he said acidly.

CHAPTER IV

THEY drove back to town and Dink directed Donegan to Mary Taggart's address. It proved to be a big house on a curving, tree-lined street. Dink opened the front door to a small lobby and saw the girl's name and apartment number on a mail box. The old mansion had been remodelled and cut up into small apartments. Dink walked up a winding stairs to the second floor. The girl's door was the second down the hall.

He knocked gently and waited. No one answered. Dink shifted his cigar and knocked again, just as softly. He thought he heard a furtive movement but couldn't be sure. He tested the knob and the door cracked open a little.

Dink shot a quick glance up the hall and slipped into the apartment. He closed the door and turned into the room. He froze.

A girl stood in a far door and she held a deadly little revolver. She was a beautiful girl but fright made ugly lines around her blue eyes and red mouth. Dink's bulging green eyes swiftly told him that he could never get across the room before she fired. She stared at him, wordless.

Dink slouched back against the door and took off his hat. He grinned amiably. "You're Mary Taggart?"

For a moment she didn't answer. Then she nodded, "Yes."

Dink sighed deeply. "Boy, I'm glad I found you! You're lucky I did, too."

The gun wavered a little. "What do you mean?"

Dink stepped carefully to a chair and sat down, crossing his thin legs. "Jefferson Werner has been killed. That prince of heels, Stanley Crandall, claims you stole a lot of securities."

She gasped, "I didn't! Werner stole them. That's why I—" she broke off sharply. "Who are you?"

Dink ignored the question. "Did Werner have them?"

She shook her head and suddenly dropped the gun. She started crying. Dink crossed the room, picked up the weapon and led her to a chair. "Tell me about it, Miss Taggart. I'm here to help you if I can."

She sobbed on and he could only catch phrases. "Werner said he loved me... tried to sell Crandall stock... Werner stole the securities... Stanley was always careless with the safe... I went to Werner to get them back. I wanted to kill him and I took a gun..."

Dink listened, soothing her, trying to bring her around to tell a coherent story. He finally got it, and the reconstruction fitted in with what he knew. Werner had used his evident charms on Mary Taggart, becoming a constant visitor to the Crandall home. He had seen opportunity in the open safe door and had taken advantage of it. Mary realized who had stolen the securities when Crandall had discovered the loss.

She choked when she thought of the theft. "I couldn't believe that Jefferson would do such a thing. I was crushed. I guess I lost my head. Anyhow, I got Crandall's gun and went to Jefferson's apartment."

Dink broke in. "He was alive?"

She nodded miserably. "Yes, but I wish he hadn't been. I accused him of the theft, and he didn't deny it to me. I told him that I could not marry a thief." She buried her face in her hands and her words came muffled. "He laughed and said that he could not remember any words of marriage. That's when I pulled the gun. He was frightened for a moment and then he took it away from

me. I couldn't stand it any longer and I ran out of the apartment."

Dink looked down at the gun he had taken from her. "You evidently know of his murder."

She gasped. "Murder! The papers say he killed himself."

Dink shook his head. "That's what the papers say until I tell them different. I'm just working on a hunch at that. There was a note in his typewriter accusing you of breaking his heart. He had taken the easiest way out."

Mary stared hard at him. "He didn't care for me at all."

Dink arose. "I can see that and it means my theory is right. You stick around close, Miss Taggart. We might want to talk about things later."

"I'm under arrest?" she asked fearfully.

Dink grinned. "Not unless you've got another one of these playthings around. They're bad business for nice young girls. I'll be seeing you."

He rejoined Donegan in the car and leaned thoughtfully back against the seat. Donegan waited for instructions and started fidgeting under the wheel.

Dink pulled a cigar from his pocket. "Let's go to the station. I think Jefferson Werner had concealed talents."

Donegan grunted as he started the car. "He ain't no more. Leastways, there ain't much he can do on a slab."

AT THE station, Dink made out a rough report and then read it carefully. He kept trying to rearrange the few clues he had so that they would make a logical pattern. He frowned, looking uglier than ever. Two things were clear in the summary. There was nothing to prove that Werner hadn't done the high-dive of his own volition. If it was murder, everything pointed to Mary Taggart with the exception of one important item. She didn't look strong enough to knock a man out and then push him through a window.

Dink called the laboratory for the

fingerprint man. He asked about Werner's prints.

The man sounded excited. "Yeah, I got 'em, and I got a surprise for you. Werner's prints were on file. Yeah, we got 'em about five years ago from the FBI. He worked a fake securities racket in New York under the name of James Fenton. Seems he had a partner in those days, John Ordren. They split up and Fenton dropped out of sight."

Dink asked about Ordren. "We ain't got a thing on what happened to him. He might be in prison somewhere."

Dink replaced the receiver and thoughtfully tugged at his ear. He wished to hell he knew where this Ordren person could be found. He decided to check the modus operandi file and spent most of the afternoon there. He couldn't say that he learned very much.

CHAPTER V

LEADS in a case have a bad habit of suddenly going dead and Dink recognized the symptoms. Nothing new developed in the Werner case. He asked questions, went over and over the information he had and he might as well have been on a vacation for the week that passed.

He questioned Porter Stanfield at length again. The man wanted to be helpful, but he had little to offer. He did identify Mary Taggart from a photograph that Dink showed him, but that in itself meant little. It confirmed her presence just before the murder and it also confirmed Mary's own confession that she had been there.

Dink questioned the desk clerk at the Mardott, the housekeeper, the bellhops. Nothing came but what he already knew. Jefferson Werner was constantly going and coming and he had many visitors, the greater number women. Mary Taggart's photograph brought immediate recognition several times.

He went over the apartment again, very carefully. Jacobs sat in one of the easy chairs and watched him.

Finally Dink slammed the closet door and faced the fat man, his green eyes glinting angrily.

"Not a damned thing!"

Jacobs shrugged and looked up hopefully. "Look, can I rent this suite now?"

Dink popped a cigar in his mouth and bit viciously down on it. "Sure, go ahead. But, Jacobs, be careful of your tenants. I don't like 'em getting killed."

Jacobs shuddered. "You should be telling me! Lieutenant, I shall personally look them over, each and every one."

Dink nodded, grinned, and went to the door. "The place is yours again, friend. Better luck next time."

Porter Stanfield was just coming from his apartment. He smiled at Dink. "You're very busy on a suicide case, Lieutenant. Has anything new come up?"

Dink grunted and shifted his cigar. "It's still suicide. I just wanted to make sure."

Stanfield stepped into the elevator. "That's good news."

Dink growled, "Why?"

Stanfield shrugged. "Who would want a murderer running around loose in the hotel?"

Dink didn't answer. He drove from the hotel to the dirty gray stone Headquarters. He pushed upstairs to the Homicide room. No one was in and the telephone was ringing. He picked it up and snapped his name.

"This is the First American Bank," a deep voice said. "We have just received a line on those stolen securities."

Dink shouted. "I'll be over. Hold everything."

In a short time he sat in a somber office while a somber man behind a somber desk answered his questions. "One of our clients purchased these securities from a dealer who called on him."

Dink felt his heart sink. This would come right back to Werner and he'd be no better off than before. The Fifth Vice-President folded his hands and went on. "The dealer's name was John Ordren and he does not seem to be licensed."

Dink's jaws clamped on the cigar.

"I have a line on Ordren. He's not exactly a righteous citizen. Where did your client meet him?"

The man shrugged. "The usual manner, a securities salesman calling on an executive. My client recognized the securities, and so believed the salesman was bona fide enough. The catch came at the discount offered on face value. My client became suspicious and checked with us."

Dink leaned forward. "I'd like to know what this Ordren looks like."

The Fifth Vice-President reached for a piece of note paper. "I asked the same question. Here's a brief description. Stocky, with gray hairs at the temples. Square-jawed, forceful personality. Wears diamond ring."

DINK smiled and hastily arose. "I got it, and thanks. I think I can put the finger on friend Ordren. I'll let you know."

He fairly shot from the office and through the crowded bank. Donegan dozed in the car and Dink punched him awake. "The Mardott Hotel and use the siren. We got to get there."

Donegan flashed him a surprised look and his big foot came down on the starter. The motor roared to life and the red blinker light flashed on. They shot from the curb, the siren starting its high wail.

Traffic quickly parted for the car and Dink grimly stared out the windshield at the flashing street. He cursed himself for being sound asleep. He should have seen the connection long before. Donegan wheeled the car into the curved drive and Dink jumped toward the hotel doors.

Jacobs came running forward, horror on his face. Dink grabbed the man's lapels. "I want Porter Stanfield."

Jacobs looked blank and then started. "Mr. Stanfield checked out this morning."

Dink stared at him, still holding tightly to the black lapels. His bulging green eyes grew desperate. "Checked out? He couldn't. You shouldn't have let him."

Jacobs angrily pried Dink's fingers from his coat. "I believe we handle our own business, Lieutenant. There was no order to that effect from the police department. Something else, that red light and siren has done the hotel no good. I shall complain very strongly to the proper—"

Dink wasn't listening. He turned on his heel and ran to the desk. The clerk stared as though Dink was about to gibber. He was. "Did Stanfield say where he was going?"

It took the clerk a minute to catch up, then he shook his head. "No, sir, he did not. He simply checked out."

"What cab did he take? Did he go to the railroad station?"

"He had his own car, sir. It was brought around from the garage."

Dink held onto the counter and glared at the clerk. Then he snatched his hat from his head and slammed it to the floor. He cursed fluently, damning himself as a numbskull. His angry eyes happened to rest on the switchboard.

He paused in mid-action, sanity slowly returning to his green eyes. He crossed to the stunned girl and out of his anger somehow managed to drag a grimace that passed for a smile.

"Did Mr. Stanfield make any calls just before he left?"

She shook her head. "None, sir."

Dink came close to losing his temper again but he counted to ten. "How about last night?"

The girl consulted a black notebook. "There was one made last night. Broadway 6592."

Dink grabbed the phone and dialed Headquarters. "Whose phone is Broadway 6592?"

There was a long pause. Then the official voice answered. "That's listed to Mr. Stanley Crandall, Woodbine."

Dink slowly lowered the phone. He impatiently waved Jacobs aside and walked slowly out of the hotel. He didn't answer Donegan's questioning look. "Headquarters," he said briefly, and sank back against the seat.

He began to have faint ideas of what might have happened the day Werner, alias Fenton, was found

smear over the Mardott grounds. There were several big pieces missing, but if he could find Ordren, Dink felt certain he'd have the complete picture. He growled to himself at letting Ordren fool him in the guise of Porter Stanfield.

They arrived at Headquarters at last and Dink stumped up the stairs to Homicide and his own office. He slumped down in the chair and stared morosely out the window to the freight yards just beyond. Ordren's call to Stanley Crandall stumped him.

It was easy to see that Ordren might have worked with Werner in stealing the securities and later disposing of them. That would be smart. But if that were true, why had Ordren called Crandall?

Dink shifted uncomfortably and stared at the phone. He twisted his thick lips thoughtfully and rubbed his hand over his high, bald forehead. He snapped his fingers and picked up the phone.

Crandall answered and Dink tried to make his voice concerned. "This is the First American Bank. I believe you were worried about some missing securities?"

There was a second's hesitation, then Crandall's haughty voice snapped back. "I am not. I have changed my mind. They were not stolen."

Dink gasped and then remembered who he was supposed to be. "But we had word to look out for them. They have just turned up."

Crandall roared into the phone, "I don't give a damn what word you had or where they are! I said I've changed my mind. That is quite sufficient."

The receiver banged in Dink's ear. He stared into the mouthpiece and then slowly put the phone back in the cradle. He pulled at his upper lip. He picked up the phone again and asked that a prowler be brought around for him.

A half hour later he wheeled the car into a side road and turned it around. From where he sat he could watch Crandall's drive, and there was little likelihood that he himself

would be noticed. He made himself comfortable for a long vigil.

The afternoon wore on and Dink was close to the end of his cigar supply. He felt the first vague stirrings of hunger. He began to wonder if he had made another mistake in playing this hunch to watch Crandall. He looked at his watch and decided he'd stay on until dark.

A quarter of an hour passed. Dink felt definitely hungry and he kept himself from breaking the jacket on his last cigar. Suddenly he caught a glimpse of metal through the trees. He straightened. A roadster pulled out of Crandall's driveway and rolled smoothly toward the city. Dink caught a glimpse of Crandall's haughty face. Dink started the motor, waited a few seconds, then rolled out on the highway. Crandall's car was far ahead and Dink made no attempt to catch up for a while.

He closed the gap when the city limits came and the further they drove into the city proper, the more safe Dink felt. The man ahead drove without once looking back. He was headed for the heart of town. At last they were in the business district and twilight was upon them. Dink clung close to the roadster. At the famed Monument Circle, Crandall turned into a parking garage.

DINK hastily found an empty space along the curb and climbed from the car. He hurried across the street and caught a glimpse of the novelist as he left the garage. Dink stepped into a doorway as Crandall searched the street. Then the man turned around and headed around the Circle, walking fast.

Dink had to scurry to keep up with him. Crandall went into a large cafeteria. Dink slowed up and cautiously approached the door. The place was crowded and Crandall wasn't in sight. Dink pushed in. He saw Crandall far ahead in the line and Dink picked up a tray, ducking behind a heavy woman who eyed the steam tables with an avid gleam.

Crandall ordered and Dink watched

a girl take his tray and follow him among the tables. In a short while Dink cautiously went along the wall, his eyes probing the tables. He spotted Crandall, and Dink had to suppress a shout. Porter Stanfield, alias Ordren, sat across the table from the writer.

Dink took a seat not far from the cashier and he could also watch the duo at the far table. He was thankful that his trailing had led him to a place where he could at least keep hunger from killing him. He gratefully cut into his steak.

He didn't have time to finish his coffee. Crandall passed something to Ordren and both men arose. Dink hastily picked up a menu and buried his face in it. The men paid their checks and left. Dink scrambled from the table.

Outside, he caught a glimpse of the men, walking along and talking earnestly. Dink followed them right back to the parking garage. He crossed the street to the plain black prowl car and waited. The hunch was growing in him that the end of the trail was not far off. He wondered what the final answer would be.

CHAPTER VI

IN A FEW minutes the roadster rolled out into the street, Ordren seated beside Crandall at the wheel. The novelist turned west. Dink started his own car and a sudden fear clutched at him. The airport was to the west and he remembered that Crandall owned a plane.

Crandall drove at a fast clip, yet well within the traffic rules. Dink had to drop back several times when he was pocketed or a traffic light went against him. However, Crandall stuck to Washington street and Dink was able to keep him in sight. By now night had fallen and Dink felt better. There was less chance of Crandall discovering he was tailed.

Dink lit a cigar and comfortably started chewing on it, his green eyes steady on the two men in the roadster ahead. The city began to thin and

shortly they came to the limits. Dink had to drop back though traffic was fairly heavy on the National Highway. At High School Road, Crandall turned south and Dink's heart dropped. They were going to the airport.

He wondered if he would have to tip his hand and have Ordren arrested on a theft charge. The theft must be cleared but Dink felt the solution of Werner's death to be the most important. He cursed silently at the run of luck he had encountered in this case.

He braked suddenly, for Crandall swung the roadster off the state road onto a gravel lane that led westward. Dink pulled his car to the shoulder, puzzled. Where was Crandall going? That lane had a dead end not more than half a mile ahead, no outlet. Dink switched off the motor and lights. He climbed from the car and loosened the automatic he wore in a shoulder holster. He slipped an extra pair of handcuffs in his pocket.

It was pitch dark and the lane was but a white blur that was quickly swallowed by the trees. Dink shifted his cigar to the other side of his mouth and started walking.

He went cautiously, his big ears strained to catch any sound. There was nothing alarming. Dink kept away from the lane, trying hard to be soundless. He stumbled once in a ditch and his leg plunged into tepid water. He cursed silently and went on.

A few yards further he stopped, frozen. He had heard the single blast of a shot. His thick lips set grimly around the shredded cigar and the automatic flowed into his hand. He started running.

He heard a motor start a short way ahead. Lights flashed on and swept in a half circle as someone turned the car around. He plunged into a small glade just as the roadster jerked forward.

Dink yelled, "Halt!"

The roar of the motor was deafening and the metal monster thundered down upon him. Dink blasted a shot to the windshield, then jumped for

the side of the road. The car missed him by scant inches.

He twisted around and sent three fast shots after the roadster. A tire blew like blasting powder and the car jumped crazily from the road. It hurdled the shallow ditch and jarred to a halt against a tree.

Dink started forward, his face grim. There was a roar and a red tongue that licked toward him from the car. Dink heard the bullet sing close and he dropped flat, rolling to the protection of some bushes. Another bullet whined over his head but he made the bushes.

He discovered that he had lost his cigar and it made him angry. He swore fervently and peered toward the car. There was no sound and Dink wondered if the sharpshooter had scurried away. The man cut loose again, his lead searching the frail concealment of the bushes. Dink dropped flat and burrowed his nose in the ground.

The firing stopped and Dink was instantly on his feet. A man had jumped from the car and was zig-zagging down the road. His running figure swiftly dimmed. Dink took careful aim and fired. At first, he thought he had missed. Then the man stumbled, caught himself and stumbled again. He took another step or two forward and fell flat.

Dink advanced cautiously toward the sprawled figure. The safety was off the automatic and he was taking no chances. He came closer. The man lay face downward. Dink rolled him over. Stanley Crandall's pale face showed white in the night. Dink struck a match.

THERE was a long wound along the man's skull where Dink's lucky shot had knocked him out. Other than that, he was not hurt. Dink snapped handcuffs on the limp wrists and another pair on the ankles. He straightened and turned back the way he had come.

Dink came to the end of the road, a blank wall of saplings and bushes. He peered into the darkness but could see nothing. He finally held matches low to the ground until he

found the tire marks showing where the car had been halted and then turned around.

He worked in a circle from there and finally came upon a broken swath leading into the bushes. He trailed in. A few yards beyond the road, he stumbled over a body on the ground. He quickly recovered, stooped and lit a match.

Porter Stanfield, alias Ordren, was very dead, a bullet in his heart. Dink stared into the white face for awhile then snuffed out the light. He worked his way out of the bushes and back down the road.

Stanley Crandall had recovered consciousness. He was sitting up, staring at the manacles. Dink approached slowly and the novelist's arrogant face jerked up to him.

Dink sighed and he suddenly felt very tired. "You do a messy job of murder," he said. "I found your handiwork back in the bushes."

Crandall was silent a moment. Then he spoke, his voice disdainful. "He had it coming. He was a common blackmailer."

Dink nodded. "I figured that angle. Crandall, you did a much neater job on Werner. Of course, I think you're a heel to have tried to turn suspicion on Mary Taggart."

Crandall shouted back. "Why shouldn't I? She was turning me down for him!" He broke off sharply and there was only the night noises for awhile. Then his voice came quietly. "How did you know?"

Dink shrugged. "Oh, I figured it out from what was left laying around. I see the case this way. You told the truth about Werner calling to sell you stock. His real name was Fenton and that was his racket. I also knew that he played the ladies pretty heavy and it was obvious your secretary fell hard for him.

"You were also truthful in reporting the theft of the securities from your safe. Werner was an opportunist of the first water and an open door like that was too much to resist. But after that, Crandall, you tried fiction. You'd write lousy detective novels, judging from the way you tried to set this stage."

"I'll be the judge of my own writing," Crandall snapped.

Dink sighed. "Not much longer, I'm afraid. But here's what happened. Mary went to Werner, shocked at his theft. You also went to see him to recover the securities and to raise hell about Mary. You had to wait until she was gone and Porter Stanfield got a good eyeful of you hanging around. Enough to make him suspicious, in any case.

"Mary left and you went into Werner. Things got pretty hot and you slugged him. Maybe you hit him too hard, maybe his head cracked against some object. Anyway, you found you had killed him. You were jealous as hell of Mary Taggart and you wanted to get even. So you wrote the note in the typewriter, you set the whole stage, even to gun Werner had just taken from Mary when she was hysterical.

"It worked nicely, you figured. The stage set, you pitched Werner out the window and very calmly left the apartment. Two strikes were against you from the beginning. First, Stanfield probably saw you leave the apartment, but in any case, he knew you had been hanging around after the girl left.

"The second strike was Werner's way with the women. Mary wasn't the only one, and he had made a definite date with a girl for the night of his death. I never heard of a guy like that bumping himself off. It made your note look silly, and when the note was false, the rest of your setup was haywire.

"I suppose Stanfield told you what he knew and that he could easily have suspicion swung right around and you'd be in trouble. Probably, he pretended to be satisfied with the stolen securities at first. That's why you changed your mind."

Crandall growled. "Stanfield was too damned greedy."

Dink nodded. "All blackmailers are. He called you last night, figuring he could pull out of town safely enough now. But he wanted some more dough and you realized that you were in for a bleeding as long as you lived or your money held out. You figured you could never be sure Stanfield would be silent even if he was paid. So you pulled a second murder."

Crandall was silent. His voice came in a surly whisper. "I don't have to confess to anything, you know."

DINK sighed again. "That's right. But I can prove Stanfield's murder and you're burnt just as bad for one as for two. So you might as well come clean."

Crandall stirred uneasily. "I'll think it over. How about getting out of here?"

Dink pitched a key at his feet and he pulled the automatic from the holster, covering Crandall. "Take 'em off your ankles. Think it over in your cell. I'll book you on tonight's killing and that's all I'll try to prove. But you'll get the chair, Crandall. Why not give Mary Taggart a clean slate?"

Crandall came to his feet. He smiled at Dink. "She is a nice kid, isn't she?"

Dink growled, "The best. If I wasn't so damned old and so damned ugly—" He broke off.

Crandall chuckled as he turned to walk toward the police car. "You've got something there, Lieutenant. It's a good idea for a love story. Well, let's get going. I'll make a full statement in the morning."

They walked down the road toward the car, Crandall slightly ahead. Dink cursed silently and wished he had a cigar to chew. Except for that, everything was fine.

THE END

2 NEW NOVELS

"No Appeal From Judge Colt" by Archie Joscelyn

"Trail of Laughing Death" by Ed Earl Repp

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THE CASE OF THE TIMID COMMANDO

By Arthur Leo Zagat

B. & B. Detectives, and their cat, Sinbad, solve the mystery behind a fighting man's sudden loss of nerve.

IT WAS a veritable behemoth of a truck, blunt-nosed, a dull olive-green, it stood in the camp road as ugly as the Puritan's concept of sin. Passing soldiers looked at it—looked again and whistled

softly. "What a dream!" one exclaimed; another, "Mama! Ain't she somethin' to write home about."

The feminine pronoun did not refer to the truck, even though it bore the insigne of the American Women's Voluntary Services. Pronoun, and admiring remarks, appertained to the occupant of its driver's seat.

Trim in gray-blue uniform, canoe-shaped cap perched jauntily on hair the mouth-watering shade of sage honey, tip-tilted little nose impudent over a damask-rose dab of mouth, Betty Marvin was for once oblivious of male adoration. Her eyes, cornflower blue, were riveted anxiously on the door of the long, low building before which the truck had been waiting an hour.

Beside her, a furry bundle the exact color of her hair heaved, uncurled and became a huge cat stretching lithe muscles. "Mrreow," it commented in a deep-chested baritone, looking up at its mistress with eyes blue as her own.

The girl stroked the cat, but her gaze remained on the door with the stencilled words, MEDICAL DETACHMENT. "All right, Sinbad." Her voice was silver. "They'll be through with him soon." A silver wire stretched almost to breaking. "We'll soon know—" It caught in her throat.

The door was opening.

Ben Marvin came out of it and across the board sidewalk slowly, as if he were very tired. Sunlight glinted from his lieutenant's silver bars, struck into sharp relief the weary lines cutting into his dark, sharp countenance. His uniform was impeccable, his black mustache needle-pointed and intransigent as always, but his left leg dragged a little, its knee stiff.

A silvery little laugh greeted him as he reached the truck. "Pay me," Betty chuckled, her tenseness gone. "One hard, round quarter."

"Yeah," Ben grunted. "You win." He put the coin into her soft palm. "They marked me unfit for duty for another month. A month," he repeated bitterly. "Ten cents gets you

another quarter the division's overseas by then."

"It's a bet." The girl reached for a gear lever. "Come on, Ben. Hurry. I've got to get Helen 'Lisbeth back in her stall before the Gorgon discovers I drove her down here." A series of backfires announced the motor had come alive. "She'd love the chance to chuck me out on my—"

"Betty!"

"Ear," she finished sweetly. "Well?"

Ben climbed a little awkwardly to the high seat. "Not that I'm afraid of Mrs. J. Hall-Morris," Betty giggled, "since I found out her bee-organious silver lucky's a wig." Cogs clashed. "It's lucky, Ben."

"That Mrs. Hall-Morris wears a wig?"

"No, silly." The truck lurched into gargantuan motion. "That you don't have to go back to the army right away. 'Cause I just bought the most beautiful leather blotter pad you ever saw."

"A leather—What the devil for?"

"Your desk. To keep your spurs from scratching it. If you wore spurs."

BEN pulled in a long, reluctant breath but the pain had eased from his face. "If you think I'm going to hang around that triple-be-damned office—"

"It isn't. It's a lovely office and it's ours. 'B. & B. Detectives.' Remember how proud we were when the painter lettered that on its door. And someone might even bring in a case—Oh, look!" Betty braked so abruptly Ben was within an ace of being thrown from his seat. "Look at those soldiers."

The road had brought them to a wide, grassless plateau, where men in baggy battle uniforms, their faces and hands blackened, were sorted off in pairs, industriously endeavoring to commit mayhem on each other regardless of the rules of Queensbury or even those of common decency. "What are they doing?"

"They're playing Puss-in-the-Corner, honey," Ben said sweetly, "to

see which ones get ice cream for dessert tonight."

"Benjamin Rowland Marvin! If you expect me to believe any such nonsense—I know very well there's plenty enough ice cream to go around—Oh," she broke off. "That man." Betty's fingers went to her lips. "There. Something's wrong."

"Wrong's right," Marvin agreed. "That's Art Lanning, and—What the hell?"

The soldier had jumped suddenly back from his antagonist, stood rigid now, left fist clenched hard against his temple, right arm stiff along his flank, its sooted fingers working convulsively. His eyes, seeming all whites, stared unnaturally large from his face's black mask and his voice, thin, tortured, came clearly across the field.

"I can't. I can't do it."

"You blasted yellow..." A burly non-com pounded stiff-legged toward the man. "You lily-livered..." An officer caught the sergeant's arm. "Hold it, Jackson." A second lieutenant. "Hold everything. I'll take care of this."

Ben started down off the truck. Out in the field, the lieutenant was saying, "Okay, Lanning." Gently. "What's it all about? What's got into you?"

A shudder ran through the man but he came to attention, saluted. "I don't know, sir." He spoke dully. "All of a sudden I kind of got a picture of me really sneaking up on a guy and breaking his back with that hold and it was like someone conked me with a sledge-hammer. I—" His voice thinned again, was edged with hysteria. "I couldn't do it. Not even to a Jap or a Jerry, I couldn't—"

"Settle down, Lanning." In the background, Sergeant Jackson was bellowing the rest of the detail back to work. "Get a grip on yourself."

"Yes, Lieutenant Corbett."

Corbett sighed. "That's a little better. Now go to your quarters and stay there. I'll have a little talk with you later."

"Thank you, sir." The private was stockily built, rock-jawed, young. He looked the kind that doesn't know

what nerves are. He saluted, about-faced smartly enough but stumbled as he started away and went across the field in the curious, blindly groping manner of a sleepwalker.

CORBETT watched him—turned to a tap on his arm. "Lieutenant Marvin." His bronzed face lighted with genuine pleasure. "I hadn't heard you were back with us." He remembered to salute. "I suppose you're taking over the platoon."

"No, Dick." Ben returned the salute, put his hand out for a friendly clasp. "I'm still on the inactive list—look. What's got into Lanning? He's the last man in the platoon I'd expect to put on an act like that."

"Or I." Corbett shook his head. "I've always figured him the toughest hombre of the lot and the Lord knows they're all plenty tough or they wouldn't be detailed to this special Commando course." His hand fisted at his side. "He started to soften up about ten days ago, but this is the climax. Guess I'll have to transfer him out."

"That won't repair the damage." Marvin was looking past the second lieutenant, to where Jackson was roaring at the other men, on the verge of apoplexy. "Look at the rest of your gang. They're just going through the motions. They're thinking of what Lanning said and it's taken all the oomph out of them."

"Yeah." Corbett pulled the edge of his hand across his forehead. "That sort of thing's infectious. But what the devil can we do about it?"

"Find out what's ailing Lanning and straighten him out. That'll cure the others."

"Sure. But how? I—Hold on! I can't get anything out of him, but I've seen him confabbing with old Frazier over at the Red Cross shack. I wonder if—"

"Got it." Ben twisted, was limping back to the truck. "Come on, Bets. We've got places to go and things to do."

"The Gorgon," Betty wailed, but as Ben resumed his seat beside her she asked, "Where to, me lud?"

"The south end of camp. Take that first turn to the left..."

The white-haired man with the Swiss Cross on his lapels said, "Yes, Lieutenant Marvin. I know what's bothering Private Lanning," and stopped.

A muscle knotted in Ben's gaunt cheek. "It's something you can't pass on to me because I'm his officer, and it would be marked up against him."

"No." Frazier pursed thin, sexless lips. "No, if that were so I should not even admit he had talked to me. His troubles do not concern the army at all."

"The hell they don't," Marvin blazed. "They're only ruining a damn good soldier and sapping the morale of the platoon I half killed myself making the best in the division. Listen, mister!" Tersely, he related the incident that had brought him to the Red Cross Field Director. "Now tell me again this is none of my business."

"Your business, Lieutenant," Frazier smiled thinly, "is leading your men in battle. The life they've left behind them, the welfare of their loved ones, is ours. We've built a vast organization that reaches into every city and village and rural community in this land to handle that job." His fingers drummed on the edge of his desk. "I think we've been fairly successful thus far."

"Yes," Marvin admitted grudgingly. "You have."

"But I confess," Frazier went on, "that in this case I find myself on the horns of a dilemma." His hand dropped to a drawer, pulled it open. "Arthur Lanning received this letter from his wife about a fortnight ago. On Friday, the twenty-fifth, to be exact."

The writing on the folded sheet of notepaper was neatly formed, the lines forthrightly straight:

"Art darling:

There's something I'd like to talk to you about. I'd come down to camp but we're shorthanded and I oughtn't even to miss one shift at the plant, especially with what I do there. Maybe you

could get a weekend leave and we could have one of our good old powwows.

Something awfully funny happened the other day. I was riding to work..."

The rest of the letter dealt with the sort of inconsequential trifles that mean so much to a husband separated from the wife he loves and who loves him, and nothing to anyone else. It was signed, very simply, "Your Mary."

MARVIN gave it back. "Nothing in this to send a man haywire."

"No," Frazier agreed. "Lanning put in for leave and it was denied. He wrote his wife to tell her so. She never answered that letter."

There was no emphasis in the way he said it, but a chill prickle travelled Ben's spine. "It got lost in the mail," he suggested.

"Perhaps. But it is hardly possible that Lanning's second letter would also meet the same fate. When that brought no response, he came to me."

"Yes?"

"I followed our usual procedure, had our local Red Cross chapter send someone out to make a discreet investigation. The three times our worker called, Mary Lanning was not at home. She had not reported for work since Saturday, the twenty-sixth, when she drew her last pay. We have been unable to locate anyone who has seen her since she left the Atlas Chemical Company's building, that night."

"You have been unable to locate—" Ben Marvin's jaw ridged. "Didn't it occur to you that this ought to be reported to the police?"

"Naturally." Frazier adjusted a fountain-pen stand that needed no adjustment. "But that is up to Arthur Lanning, not to us."

"And he—?"

"Refuses to bring the police into this affair, refuses to permit us to. I offered to tell Colonel Fosdick the circumstances, secure a furlough for him so that he can search for his

wife himself. He has refused to permit me to do that. Nor will he tell me why."

"No?" Little light worms crawled in the blackness of Marvin's eyes. "What do you want to bet he'll tell me?"

"Oh look here, lieutenant. You can't—" Frazier didn't finish the sentence. He had no one to whom to finish it. Ben Marvin had slammed out of the little office.

"Okay, hon?" Betty smiled down at him. "Are we going home now?"

"You're going home," Ben grinned back at her. "I've got a little matter needs attending to here."

"Then I stay too."

"Unnh, nnh. If you think I'm letting you hand the Gorgon her chance to give you the old heaven-to—"

"The Gorgon go to—to blazes."

"Amen. And you can get going. Pronto!"

The smile died from the girl's lips and under her lucent skin pallor spread. "Are you giving me orders, Lieutenant Marvin?"

"I'm telling you to start this truck back to where it belongs." Black eyes caught, held, cornflower blue ones and there was sudden, silent but intense conflict between them. Abruptly Ben's voice was fuzzy, deep-toned. "Please, Bets."

"That's better," she sighed, and her smile was back. "'Bye honey. Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

Gears clashed. "That isn't restricting me very much," Marvin grinned, and a salvo of backfires drowned his word. The behemoth roared away and pain twisted Ben's face as he bent, grabbed his left knee with both hands and squeezed hard.

"Damn," he murmured. "Damn it to hell," and straightened and moved off, hobbling now like a spavined horse.

As Ben entered the barrack's room a soldier sprang from a cot, stood at attention in undershirt, shoeless. "At ease," the lieutenant smiled and looked past the relaxing man. Two long rows of neatly made cots stretched either side the room, alternating head and foot. There was

no one else in sight. "Where's Lanning, Gordon?"

The private's eyes went blank. "I don't know, sir." He fumbled with the arm bandage that explained his own presence here. "I don't know," he repeated, needlessly.

Marvin's eyes came back from the wall above the fourth cot on the right, where a pack hung from one hook but the one next to it was empty. "I take it you don't know," he said and then surprise flared into the soldier's face as the officer's hand went to his own collar, deftly unpinned silver bars. "Get it, Gordon?" Ben asked, warm-toned. "This is between you and me and these walls."

"Yes, sir." Gordon seemed dazed. "Yeah. I get it."

"Art Lanning's gone over the hill, hasn't he?"

THE fellow's mouth opened, closed, opened again, and then the dam broke. "Gees," he blurted. "He come in here lookin' like the wrath uh God. I don't think he heard me ask him what was up. The way his eyes looked, blind kind of, I don't think he even saw me. He just marched to his bunk and grabbed his holster from the hook there and stomped on into the latrine in back."

It was Ben's turn to look confused. "The latrine?"

"Yes, sir. You climb out the window in there when the sentry's the other end of the post and you can make it to the woods without his spotting you. We—I—" Gordon swallowed, decided to go the whole hog. "I've got away with it more'n one night when the sarge wouldn't gimme a pass to town."

"I see." The corners of Marvin's mouth twitched. "Well, you'd better not try it too often. I'd hate to see you hauled up before a summary court on charges." The twinkle of humor vanished. "Look here. I've got to get Lanning back on the reservation before he's hauled up on worse charges than just being A. W. O. L. Have you any idea which way he went?"

The private spread his hands help-

lessly. "You go through them woods about a half mile and you come out on the Post Road. You can get a hitch there 'most anywheres."

"Almost anywhere," Ben Marvin repeated, his brow knitting. "And he's had plenty of time to reach the highway...."

"'You take the high road,'" sang Betty Marvin as she hurled the huge A. W. V. S. truck along the wide ribbon of concrete, "'and I'll take the low road.'" The great blonde cat was once more curled on the seat beside her. "'And I'll be in Scotland afore you—' Isn't it weird, Sinbad, to see the Post Road all empty like this?"

"Mrreow," Sinbad agreed, lazily blinking his extraordinary blue eyes.

"Since camp, we've just seen that one army car that whizzed past us. It's the war, you know. Civilians can't get gas or tires unless—Oh," she broke off. "There's a soldier now, thumbing a ride."

He'd stepped out of the bushes ahead, already lifting his arm to signal her. Fighting the ponderous brake, Betty looked puzzled. "Funny, Sinbad," she murmured. "It almost seems like he's been hiding in there, looking over the cars that come along before showing himself." The truck skidded to a halt and the soldier came up on its steps.

"You going through to the city?"

His nostrils quivered and the quick look he shot into the truck's interior was somehow harried. "The big city, I mean."

"Yes." The soldier was bareheaded and there was a soft along the hard line of his cheekbone, as if he'd washed hastily. "Come on a—I know you!" Betty exclaimed. "You're the soldier who—You're Private Lanning." Lanning's mouth greyed, went thin, straight. "What about it," he demanded, flatly.

"You shouldn't be—Your lieutenant sent you to your quarters. You ought to be—" The girl's voice died and she was staring into the black mouth of a revolver clenched suddenly in Lanning's fist. "What—What's that for?"

"For being too blasted smart." The soldier's pupils had shrunk to pin-

points. "You—" The gun pounded, ripped a hole in the truck roof as he was hurled back off the step by a blonde, spitting fury of enraged cat that had exploded from the seat.

There was a soft, sickening thud in the road, a yowl of jungle fury. "Sinbad!" Betty cried, scrambling down. The cat, arch-backed, enormous with bristled fur, lashed a sinuous tail above the soldier's prostrate form. "It's all right, Sinbad. He can't hurt me now. He's harmless."

A long scratch, just beginning to bleed, raked from the tip of Lanning's left ear to the point of his jaw. It was the only visible souvenir of the feline's attack, but he lay very still, very white in the road. Reckless of Sinbad's deep-chested growl, Betty sank to her knees and probed a tawny scalp, her fingers anxious.

SHE let breath filter from between her lips. "Not broken, Sinbad. He just cracked the back of his head on the concrete and knocked himself out. He'll be—"

A thrashing in the bushes twisted her to them in time to see Ben burst out, breathless. He saw her. "Betty!" hobbled to her. "Bets, honey. I heard the shot and—You're all right, Bets? You're not hurt?"

"Only my pride, Ben, the way I blurted it out." Her smile was rueful. "'I know you,' I prattled. 'You oughtn't to be here. You're Private Lanning and—'"

"Lanning!" Marvin stared at the stunned man, really seeing him for the first time. "I'll be everlastingly—That's whom I was tracking through the woods. He left a trail plain as Broadway and—What happened, Betty?"

She told me. "He wasn't going to shoot me, Ben. I'm sure he wasn't. He—"

"Hold it, Bets. He's coming back to us."

Lanning had stirred, groaned. His eyelids fluttered open and he looked up, dazedly at first, then with sudden terror as he made out Ben's uniform. He thrust a spread palm against the concrete, shoved to a sit-

ting posture. "Easy," Marvin murmured. "Take it easy, Lanning. I'm not going to turn you in."

"You—you're not...."

"Not unless you persist in acting like a blasted idiot." Ben let himself down, gingerly, to the truck step. "You were on your way to look for your wife, weren't you? For Mary."

"Mary!" The name was an oath, the way Lanning mouthed it. "Hell no! I'm out after the son of perdition she run off with."

"Mary hasn't run off with anyone," Marvin told him. "She loves you too much for that. A hell of a lot more than you deserve."

The soldier stared, Adam's apple working. "Mary loves—What the blazes do you know about it?"

"I read her last letter to you, Lanning. Frazier showed it to me."

"Her letter—" Lanning laughed, curtly. Bitterly. "Yeah. Sweet as honey it was. And phoney as hell."

"Not phoney," Ben denied, gently. "No woman living could fake a letter like that if she didn't love the man she wrote it to."

"That's what I thought." The soldier was fumbling in a pocket of his battle uniform. "Till I got this and thought it over." He brought out a dingy, crumpled envelope, thrust it at Ben. "Here. Since you've stuck your nose this far into my affairs, you may as well shove it in all the way." He'd long gone beyond distinctions in rank. "Go on, read it."

"I will."

Betty read it too, over his shoulder:

"Maybe it's none of my look-out, but being as how you're a soldier I can't help it, I got to tell you. You better get a furlow and come home and ask your wife Mary what she's up to, running around with a greasy little foreigner and going away with him weekends and all.

I think it's a shame she's acting like that when her man's fixing to die for his country.

A Neighbor."

Ben's lips curled with disgust but it was Betty who exclaimed, "How filthy!" She twisted to Lanning. "Don't tell me you put any stock in that—that garbage!"

The soldier had plucked his revolver from the roadbed, was struggling erect, "Maybe it's garbage," he snarled, "but she's gone off somewhere, ain't she? And she didn't go alone." His hand tightened on the gun butt. "I don't know where to look, but I'm gonna find them, and—"

"No," Ben said. "I'm going to find her for you. If she's alive—"

"If—!" Lanning went corpse-gray. "What do you mean?" His fingers dug into Marvin's shoulder, bruising. "What makes you think Mary's not alive?"

The lieutenant lifted his head to look into the man's face, his slender frame otherwise motionless. "Nothing," he said blandly. "Not a thing. But the thought of her dead hit you smack in the solar plexus, didn't it? The thought of Mary dead, the woman you love so much you were willing to let her go with someone she'd learned to love more than you till the vermin that crawled out of this filth ate into your brain and ate away your love for her." The smile under his needle-pointed mustache was faintly mocking, but his eyes pitied the man. "And made you forget something else, your duty to the uniform you wear."

Ben came to his feet as the soldier's hand dropped from his shoulder. "You're going back to your bunk, Lanning, the way you came—"

"No!"

"And I'm going to find Mary for you," Marvin went on, very quietly. "I'll give you my solemn promise, Lanning, that if I find she went away willingly, with a lover, I'll not only tell you where they are, but see that you get long enough leave to go to wherever they are. Is that fair enough?"

"Yeah." Arthur Lanning's face was the color of putty. "Yeah. It's fair enough."

"Okay. Now, go back to the barracks, I want to ask you some questions...."

THE A. W. V. S. truck pounded down a narrow street of drab apartment houses, one cut above tenements. "The Gorgon must be throwing eleven different kinds of fits by now," Betty chuckled. "I wish I could see her, Ben."

"Yeah—Watch it, Bets. There's four-nineteen, about the middle of the block."

She eased the behemoth to the curb, braked, turned to Ben. "Okay. What now, Sherlock?"

"Now we—Uh, uh." Marvin pulled back from peering out and up from under the roof. "A dame's leaning out of a window up in the third floor."

"So what?"

"And she's got a pillow planted between the sill and her—er—chest."

Betty looked bewildered. "I still don't see...."

"That cushion means she parks there by the day, watching the street."

"Like a few thousand other women in this town that haven't anything better to do with their time, even if there is a war on."

"True, my sweet," Ben agreed. "But this one's leaning out of a third floor window and the Lanning flat is on the third floor—"

"Rear, remember."

"Precisely. Nevertheless, we shall make a slight change in our projected tactics. Listen closely, oh light of my life and consolation of my declining years—if any. Listen to my words of wisdom."

There followed a low-toned colloquy, after which Betty swung lithely down to the sidewalk, crossed alone to the brownstone stoop and climbed it.

The usual row of letter boxes was set into the vestibule wall, brass cubbies faced by tiny glass windows below them, nameplates and under these a row of pushbuttons misshapen by many years of thrusting fingers. The girl found the framed slip that said, LANNING 3R, peered into the box above it.

She could make out a white envelope, 'Soldier's Mail—Free' scrawled in the corner where the stamp

ought to be. Her eyes narrowed. Then her forefinger jabbed a button, not Lanning's. The one next to it, over which the nameplate read, RALSTON, 3F.

She rang once more before the hall door's latch clicked. As she pushed the heavy portal open, Ben arrived at her side. "Mamma's alone in the flat," he murmured. "She had to pull in from the window to answer your ring."

"Yes—Ben. I've been thinking all the time the reason Mary Lanning wrote her husband to come to her was because she wanted to see him again, to help her make up her mind between him and someone else. I thought that when he wrote he couldn't come, that decided her. But I was wrong."

"How'd you make that discovery?"

"She never read his first letter. She was gone before it came. It's still in the box. I could read the postmark through the glass."

"Interesting." They were climbing steep stairs, their feet silent on the carpeted treads, their voices barely audible. "But—Oh, oh. Here's where I stop." They were midway of the flight between the second and third floors, and above them hinges were creaking. "You remember your little speech, don't you?"

The hall door of the third floor, front, flat framed a big woman in a cheap and dingy house dress. "Yes?" Weary eyes, the irises a blurred brown, peered at Betty. "What is it?"

"Mrs. Ralston?"

SHE must have been pretty once; now her straggly hair was the color and texture of hay that's lain in the hot sun too long, and the skin at her throat was loose, wrinkled. "Jen Ralston's my name."

"I'm from the A.W.V.S., Mrs. Ralston." Betty's smile was ingratiating. "One of your neighbors has applied for a certain highly confidential position and I've been assigned to investigate her. I thought you might be able to tell me something about her."

"I can't." The door started to close. "I ain't lived here but a month

and I don't know nothing about nobody."

"Oh," Betty interjected, hastily. "You can't help knowing about her. She lives right here on your own floor."

The door stopped moving. "Mary Lanning, you mean?"

"Mary Lanning. You can help me, can't you?"

Mrs. Ralston gnawed an under lip on which rouge was splotchy. "When'd you say she applied for this job?"

"I didn't say." The girl still smiled blandly but in the hollow of her throat a pulse fluttered. "Because I don't know, exactly. But it must have been yesterday or the day before, because we didn't know about this thing till then."

"Yesterday..." The faded brown eyes were peering out past Betty, into the shadows that shrouded the stairs and the woman seemed to be listening for something. "Come in, miss. Come on inside where we can sit an' I'll give you an earful about that—about Mary Lanning."

The flat door closed on the two women. For a moment there was musty vacancy in the stairwell, then Ben Marvin appeared on the landing. His sombre gaze rested on the door of 3, front, for an instant and there was satisfaction in it, and perturbation too, but he shrugged and moved to the rear, to the door of 3, rear, sunk in the gloomy rectangle of a deep embrasure.

Metal clinked tinily. Metal scraped on metal. Breath whispered against the edge of tight teeth and a lock-bolt rattled. Hinges whispered. A vertical streak of light slitted the murk. It widened, silhouetted a slender form in officer's uniform, narrowed again and vanished.

Ben Marvin crossed a minuscule foyer, entered a living room neatly in order. A window was open inches, a net curtain stirred with the breeze. The furnishings were in as good taste as instalment furniture ever is, but dust lay, a thin film, everywhere.

A confession magazine lay open on the seat of a chair. Gloves and a newspaper were thrown carelessly on

a small table. The room looked lived-in, but there was the dust and the dead, empty silence brooding in the flat.

A door in the farther wall let Marvin into a short hall that ended in a bedroom. A window was open here too. A closet was open and gaps in the huddled row of dresses within it, empty hangers, a sequined evening dress huddled forlorn on the wardrobe floor, told a story of hasty departure underlined by dresser drawers pulled half open, trailing filmy pink rayon.

The double bed was made up, but its candlewick spread was rumpled, and a chair had been overturned, scuffing up a Wilton scatter rug—Ben stiffened.

Splotching one edge of the rug and spreading over the shellacked floor was a stain. A dark red stain, dried, flaking at the edges.

"Looks like something violent happened here," he muttered, "and," glancing at the dresser, the closet on whose hat shelf was a vacant space just large enough to have contained a suitcase, "and not to Mary Lanning." He bent, picked at the edge of the stain with a fingernail, sniffed the bit of dried stuff this brought away. An odd, satiric smile touched his thin lips. "Yes," he whispered. "It looks very much like it."

His eyes were black agates....

THE Ralston flat had a smell of uncleanliness, of last week's greasy cooking, of dirt swept under carpets. "I ain't nosy by nature," Jen Ralston babbled, "but when a married woman has a greasy little foreigner comin' to her flat night after night, an' stayin' to all hours while her own man's in the army, then I got to take notice."

Betty squirmed uneasily in the upholstered chair, resisted a desire to scratch. "I—Maybe you're not being fair. Maybe this man is her brother."

"Brother, my eye. An' that ain't all. One Saturday night, about two weeks ago it was, she had him in there an' all of a sudden there was a lot of noise, like they were throwing chairs at each other or something,

an' it stopped all of a sudden." The Ralston woman leaned forward in her chair. "After awhile," she said low-toned, "Mary Lanning come out carryin' a suitcase an' went downstairs helter-skelter, like she was runnin' away from somethin', but the wop, or whatever he is, never come out at all."

"He didn't!" Betty's eyebrows went up. "I suppose you told the police."

"Who? Me? Say, any time you catch me givin' the cops a rumble—" Jen Ralston cut off as a key rattled in the hall door. "That's Jim," she exclaimed. "I knew he'd be along pretty soon." She sounded relieved.

And curiously triumphant.

The door slammed shut. Heavy footfalls crossed the foyer. A man, not tall but heavily built, face broadly moulded, stopped short in the living room entrance, eyes too small, too wide apart questioning the girl's presence.

"This lady's been askin' about Mary Lanning, Jim." Mrs. Ralston lifted to her feet. "She says she put in for a job with the A. W.—with her bunch, yesterday." Betty was up too, throat dry with sudden, unreasoning panic. "Yesterday, or the day before yesterday, she says."

"Oh yeah?" The man was moving slowly, ponderously, towards Betty. "Yesterday, huh?" The woman was moving toward her too, from the other side and it was as if the two stalked her, mercilessly.

The girl swallowed her cud of fear, contrived a little, careless laugh. "It doesn't matter, Mr. Ralston. Really it doesn't." She turned to the woman. "You've told me all I need know. Thank you." She started toward the foyer, but the man blocked her off.

"I'm gonna do you a favor, honey." His great hand closed on her arm. "I'm gonna let you talk to Mary Lanning herself." Betty was rigid as the woman pawed her, searching for a weapon, but there was no earthly use resisting. "Get your duds on, Jen," Jim Ralston said. "Looks like we got to move out uh here—fast."

The car was a sedan, so old its body squeaked, but its motor was smooth and powerful. The sedan was

so old the layers of safety glass in its side windows had separated, blurring them so that anyone outside would have to look hard inside to see that the slim girl in the back seat was blindfolded and gagged.

As the motor sent the sedan surging through endless meanderings, Betty Marvin tried to shut out the unwashed smell of the woman beside her, tried to forget the feel of the gun in her side as they'd descended the stairs, close together, and crossed the sidewalk to the car. Tried desperately to conceal the fear that sheathed her tantalizing young body with ice.

And at long last the sounds that drummed Betty's ears changed pitch, so that she knew they'd entered an enclosed space, and a door thudded, somewhere outside and the car stopped. Seat springs creaked, up front and the front door squeaked open, slammed shut. Clumsy fingers fumbled at the handkerchief that blinded Betty, pulled it away. Yellow light probed her aching eyeballs, dazzled them.

She heard a wheezy chuckle as the fingers removed her gag. Her vision cleared and through the windshield she discerned that she was in a low-ceiled small room cluttered with old tires, old license plates, empty oil cans. Obviously a private garage attached to some suburban home, but what sort of people lived here that these things had not long ago been turned in for war use?

A door in a sidewall was opening. Jim Ralston came through, thudded to the sedan, pulled open the cardoor on Betty's side. "Come on."

"Where?"

"Come on," Ralston said again and reached in to drag her out. The girl recoiled from the rough paw. "Don't touch me! I'll come." She stumbled out and, aware that the woman followed, obeyed Ralston as he motioned her to the door out of which he'd come.

THEY went into a kitchen whose blinds were drawn, making it a place of dim glints, of fearsome shadows. They went across the

kitchen into an entrance hall out of which a gloomy staircase lifted, and straight ahead a street door was tight shut and bolted. "Jim," Jen whispered. "Does he want me, Jim?" Something like terror quivered in that whisper. "Do I have to go in there?"

"He didn't say so."

"Then I'm not. I'm going upstairs."

"Okay with me," the man shrugged and turned to a wide archway to one side of the hall, pawed aside the heavy plush portieres that filled it, beckoned Betty through.

Her throat was tight, aching. Her heart pounded till she wondered it did not break through her rib cage.

Black shades were drawn down tight over deep-embossed windows but on a ponderous, oblong library table in the center of the breathless room a lamp threw light downwards on the mahogany surface, on the curled lash and ominously heavy handle of a riding crop lying there. Going toward the table, the girl was aware of a shadowy presence seated in the blackness behind it, of the pale oval of a face otherwise undefined.

"Ohhh," she exclaimed, disappointedly. "You've forgotten the candles."

"The candles?" The voice from the darkness was startled. "What candles?"

"We always have candles at my sorority's initiations. They're really very effective."

"Indeed?" At the table now, she could make out the speaker more clearly, painfully thin, head too long, too narrow, long nose sharp-bridged and mouth straight-lipped, cruel. "This is hardly a sorority initiation?"

"Oh, isn't it? When I saw all this hocus pocus I thought it was. What are you up to, then?"

"I'll ask the questions, if you don't mind." The voice was high-pitched, effeminate in a skin-crawling way. "Who sent you to look for Mary Lanning?"

Betty rubbed her thumb along the table's edge, looked at its ball. Her pert nose wrinkled. "Dust," she re-

marked, disgustedly. "You ought to speak sharply to your maid." She turned to look for Ralston, found him standing spraddle-legged before the archway. "Isn't it terrible, the sloppy way they work nowadays? But then, I suppose you've got to be satisfied with what you can get these days, with the war factories—"

"Young woman!" Exasperation, threat, were mingled in the sharp exclamation. "I asked you a question. Answer it."

"Must I?"

Fingers stole into the pool of light, long white fingers that seemed boneless. "I think you had better." The fingers touched the whip's weighted handle. "Yes, I should advise you to." They fell away into the shadow again.

"I see what you mean. Well," Betty shrugged. "If I must, I must. Here's the way it was. This morning, about eleven o'clock, I heard a tapping on my door. I went and opened it, and who do you think was there?"

"Go on."

She leaned forward, confidentially, left hand on the mahogany surface to support her. "A little green man, ten inches tall—" Her right flashed to the whip's lash, swung its heavy handle at the questioner's dodging head. It thudded duly on bone and a heavier thud signalled a fallen body as the girl whirled.

Ralston's mouth gaped stupidly but as the girl started for him, his paw went under his lapel and before she could get to him slid out again, clenched on a gun-butt. She leaped. The whip cracked on his wrist, thumped the revolver to the floor—

In that instant her foot caught a rug hold, threw her. Twisting to save herself, she lost the whip, hit the floor on hands and knees and saw legs plunging to her, looked up and saw a face contorted with pain and rage, saw a great paw reaching down—Betty threw herself at those legs, hit them with her shoulder just below the knees.

NOT with weight or strength, but the momentum of Ralston's

charge, lightly checked, sent him over her, sprawling, and Betty lifted almost in the same motion, scooped up Ralston's revolver by its barrel. Fingers clutched her ankle, tugged, and she was falling again.

Desperate, she flung the gun down, smashed it into a furrowed temple. The clutch on her ankle relaxed and she twisted, catlike, found firm footing again, reached and tore the portieres aside, darted through them.

To her left was the street door, bolted, but her way to safety. Betty turned to her right, to the stairs, went up them.

They led to a long hall, lighted by a window at the far end to the right. There were four doors, all closed—no, five, counting the transomless one at the end of the hall to the left. This was opening, on a white gleam of bathroom tile and Jen Ralston came out.

She stopped short, eyes widening at sight of the girl. "What—?" she gulped. "How—?"

"Hello," Betty smiled, stepping to the nearest door. "This is the room he said Mary Lanning's in, isn't it?"

"No, that one." The woman pointed. "But—"

"Thanks." Betty cut her off and was turning the knob before Jen's slow mind could comprehend something was radically wrong with the picture. The door wasn't locked, to the girl's immense relief. She pulled it open, went through, pulling it shut behind her.

"Ohh!" A girl not much older than Betty herself jumped up from an armchair near the window. "You—" She was black haired, not pretty but wholesome. Her red-rimmed eyes found Betty and their pupils widened. "They—They did it." Her lips twitched. "I didn't think they'd dare."

This cryptic greeting had Betty speechless for once. Mary Lanning held out her hands, wrists together. "Go ahead. Put them on."

"Put what on?"

"The handcuffs, of course. You always handcuff a murderess, don't you?"

Betty shook her head violently, as

if to clear it of cobwebs. "Who's a murderess?"

"I am. I killed him, and that makes me a—" Mary caught herself. "Aren't —aren't you a policewoman?"

"What makes you think—Oh! This uniform. Take another look, Mary. See these letters on my shoulder."

"A. W. V. S." Mary Lanning's voice cracked. "A. W.—Oh, I get it." Her little jaw was stubborn, abruptly, her eyes stubborn. "He's trying to get it out of me another way, is he?" Her tone was shrill-edged with hysteria. "Well, it won't work. I wouldn't tell him, and I won't tell you."

"Wait. Wait a minute." Betty was again bemused. "What are you talking about? What is this you won't tell me?"

"How much of number seven I put into the vats, at the plant. Did you really think you could wheedle it out of me after I refused to tell him, to pay him for hiding me from the police?"

A great light dawned on Betty. "Your job at the Atlas plant was to measure out some chemical to put into what they're making there for the army, something that has to be measured exactly or it's no good, so how much you put in is the one secret that really needs to be kept."

"Yes." The black-haired girl was puzzled now. "Didn't you know that?"

"And they're spies. They've been trying to get it out of you."

"It was him first. Frank Morse. I met him at a dance the Employees' Recreation Club gave and he was nice at first. He was a gentleman. Always remembered I was married and didn't cheat, and he'd just say hello passing me in the halls, or maybe once in awhile treat me to a soda at lunch. There was nothing wrong about that, was there?"

SHE was like a child, asking it, so that Betty's throat ached for her as she said, "No. Of course not."

"Then that Saturday night he rang my bell, and he said he had something to talk about with me, something important, was inside before I

could think to say no. He came in and he said he knew where I could get a lot of money just for telling about number seven, and I told him to stop fooling, that he knew darn well I wouldn't tell it for all the money in the world.

"He kept on at me, and I told him to get out and he wouldn't go." The girl seemed unable to stop. She was talking as if to herself, as if she'd told the story over and over to herself, sitting here alone, so often that it seemed now to her that she was merely doing it once more, forgetting she had a listener. "So I said to him then, that I wasn't going to listen to him and I went into the bedroom. And he followed me in and made a grab at me, and I hit at him and—he must have tripped or something, because he fell down and hit his head on the chair, and he was all over blood." The black-irised pupils dilated with remembered horror. "He was blood all over him and he lay so still and I didn't know what to do."

"You poor kid."

"I—I was just going to go out and 'phone for a doctor or the police or something when the doorbell rang. It was that Mrs. Ralston, from in front. She said she'd heard me scream. Was something wrong? And then she saw the blood on me, and I had to tell her what had happened."

"Whereupon she told you," Betty put in, "that the best thing for you to do was run away and hide."

"Because no one would believe my story of how a man came to be in my bedroom in the first place. Art wouldn't believe it. He'd think I—that I was—"

"She talked fast, rushed you into packing and skipping out before you had a chance to think straight—"

"She said she had a friend who'd be glad to help me, and her husband had his car downstairs, and—"

"You killed him, damn you!" The interruption, packed with choking rage, came from behind Betty. "You've killed my Jim." She wheeled to it, to Jen Ralston in the doorway, her face livid, Ralston's revolver jutting black-barreled from her shaking fist. "And I'm going to kill you."

"Wait." Betty Marvin stared transfixed at the black barrel, at the black little hole in its end out of which death leered at her, pointblank. "Your Jim isn't dead. He's only—"

"Don't lie to me. I've been downstairs and I saw—get away from that window, you!" The woman was mad with grief and rage. "Get away before I put lead in you too." But the gun was steady now, holding Betty impaled on its threat. "Jim's dead," the woman told Betty, tiny muscles crawling wormlike under her flabby skin, "and you're going to—" A thunderous crash below, cut her off.

Betty started forward, was held by the lifting gun, by Jen Ralston's hating eyes. "Bets!" Ben Marvin shouted, below. "Betty. Where are you?"

"Here! Upstairs here, Ben. Hurry!" but she knew it was no use. "Hurry, Ben." The unexpected shout had relaxed Jen Ralston's trigger finger an instant but it was tightening again. Before Ben could hobble up the long flight—

"Damn your soul to hell," the woman cursed her, and knuckles whitened—A yellow streak flashed to Jen's shoulders, a spitting, yowling feline clawed her. She staggered, struck at it, screaming, and Betty had her hands on the gun, was wresting it away and Ben was there somehow, was pulling Sinbad from the bleeding, gibbering female and a sick darkness welled up into Betty Marvin's brain.

She slid down and down into oblivion.

HE weltered back to consciousness. She lay outstretched on the bed and Ben hovered anxiously above her. "Hello," she smiled wanly. "Hello, hon."

"Hello," he grinned back, the tenseness draining from him. "Feeling better?"

"Lots better." She struggled to sit up. "But how did you get here, Ben?"

"Followed you of course. In Helen Lisabeth. Like I told you I would if that fake slip-up about Mary Lanning's applying yesterday worked out

the way I thought it might. If these people knew she couldn't have done that, they'd realize you were—"

"Yes. Yes. You explained all that before. But what I meant was how did you get in this house. The door was bolted."

"Oh! When I saw Mary's face at the window, her mouth open for a scream, and saw her pull back before she got it out, I knew something had gone haywire and I had to get to you fast. So I ran the truck across the sidewalk and battered the door from its hinges. Much quicker than using skeleton keys."

"I'll say it was. And I certainly did need you fast." Betty looked down at the furry bundle curled on the foot of the bed. "You and Sinbad. Ben."

"What?"

"Did I? Did I kill that awful Jim Ralston?"

"Of course not. You only stunned him. He's safely tied up down there, with his wife, if that's what she is, and the master mind, waiting for the F. B. I. to come and gather them in. You didn't kill Ralston any more than Mary killed that fellow in her bedroom."

"Any more than I—" The black-haired girl snatched at Ben's sleeve. "What do you mean by that, Lieutenant Marvin? I saw him lying there, with blood all over—"

"Not blood, my dear," Ben grinned. "Ketchup, squeezed from a rubber ball as he fell."

"Ketchup?" Mary stared at him as if he'd gone insane. "Did you say ketchup?"

"Precisely. It's still on your floor there, dried up but as red as when it was still wet and looked like blood. That's an old trick, Mary, used by confidence men since the Civil War. It's usually worked on some big shot from a small town, out for a good time in city where no one knows him. There are a lot of variations, but the classic is getting the sucker in a

poker game, staging a fake fight and making him think he's killed someone accidentally, then blackmailing him out of his last dollar. The technique's the same as was used on you. The seeming killing. The supposed friend talking fast and furious, hustling the sucker away before he has a chance to gather his wits, and so on. Only what they wanted to extort from you wasn't money but the secret your employers thought enough of you to trust you with."

He put his arm around Mary's shoulder, looked deep into her eyes. "You've shown yourself worthy of that trust, my girl, but I think you should be prouder of the trust your husband reposed in you."

"Art?"

"Art Lanning. He never doubted you, not for a moment, even when these spies sent him an anonymous letter telling him you'd run off with a lover, to keep him from asking the police to hunt for you." On the bed, Betty's lips formed the word, 'liar,' but her eyes were shining. "It's a wonderful thing, the faith he has in you."

"Yes," Mary whispered. "It's a wonderful thing." Then she had Ben's hand between both hers. "How can I thank you, Lieutenant Marvin? How can I ever thank you for what you've done for me?"

"I haven't done anything for you," Ben smiled. "Whatever I did, it was to straighten out one of my men, to make him back into the soldier he used to be."

Betty Marvin looked down along the bed into cornflower blue eyes that blinked at her. "We didn't do anything, Sinbad. We just came along for the ride." And then she jumped up, consternation in her voice. "Oh, my Lord!"

Ben whirled. "What is it, Betty? What's the matter?"

"The Gorgon, Ben. She'll be furious..."

THE END



"Oh dear!" said Mr. Bingler, swallowing convulsively.

MR. BINGLER'S MURDER MAZE

By Wilbur S. Peacock

SUSPENSE-RIDDEN NOVELET

Mr. Bingler was on the spot, for here was a case not covered by the situations described in his handy little instruction booklet for Home Detectives. But the little man's courage held out, even when he found himself lying next to a murdered man, with his own sword-umbrella sticking out of the corpse as sure-fire evidence!

CHAPTER I

MR. J. C. BINGLER mopped leisurely at the last trace of gravy with a piece of toast, his rabbit face calm with the pleasure that an animal feels with a comfortably filled stomach. He burped casually, stretched in indolent ease, sipped at the last of his weak tea.

He peered myopically from the dim interior of the booth, happy that he had eaten before the evening rush of diners arrived. He could hear the clatter of dishes from the kitchen, and the muted buzz of voices from the few diners. He shifted a bit, felt the weight of the hat-box against his rubber-shod feet, from underneath the seat where he had shoved it when first entering.

He spooned a bit of vanilla ice cream into his mouth, then went utterly rigid as the voice in the booth behind him became suddenly loud enough for him to understand the words.

"Oh, dear!" said Mr. Bingler weakly, horrified.

"I tell you," he heard the voice go on, "that Harvey Wilson has got to die! There's no time to waste: he's got to die tonight!"

Mr. Bingler gulped soundlessly, scooched down into the corner of the booth as far as his small body would go. Horror at the casual brutality with which the words had been said tightened his mouth into a round O of astonishment.

"I don't like it, I tell you!" a second voice said whiningly. "It's too risky!"

"Risky, hell!" The first voice stopped long enough to permit a short brittle laugh. "I've got the whole setup planned, and there can't be a slip." There was the snap of a struck match, and cigar smoke drifted over the top of the booth. "Listen," the voice continued, "Trotter gets out of the pen day after tomorrow. His letter didn't say much, but reading between the lines told me plenty. He knows who

I am, and he figures on blackmailing me white. Then when I can't pay any more, he'll squeal to the cops. No, if Wilson dies, you and I can collect a half million; and I can take care of Trotter later."

"I still don't like it; if things go wrong, I'll be left holding the sack!"

"Shut up?" The first voice was steely with a driving ruthlessness. "You'll do as I say, or I'll see you occupy the same cell that Trotter is vacating."

Mr. J. C. Bingler straightened a bit as the voice dropped to a low mutter. He pressed his ear against the booth panel, endeavoring to hear further, but was unable to make out another word.

He spooned more ice cream, ate it untastefully, his small body quiveringly tense with horror and excitement. Never in his most idyllic dreams of detecting had he thought that he would come face to face with a master villain plotting the sudden demise of another human.

"Gosh!" said Mr. Bingler wonderingly, amazedly, soundlessly.

He huddled there in the dimness of the booth, a small man with white hair astousle, his rabbit nose twitching with perturbation, his mind a chaos of conflicting thoughts.

HE KNEW that he should go to the cops with his information; but he knew, too, that the fragment of conversation he had heard was not enough for the police to act upon. In fact, now that he gave the matter deliberate consideration, he could see that he could do little more than accuse two men of plotting a murder.

Mr. Bingler fumbled under the seat for his hat-box, slid out of the booth, careful not to peer into the adjoining booth. He didn't want to disclose the fact that he had overheard the conversation; but would take a good look at the arch villain and his henchman on his way to the cashier.

He shrugged into his rain coat, set his aged derby squarely on his small head, caught up his furled umbrella. Then with the hat-box swinging casually from his right hand, he

swung around, went toward the cashier's desk. He flicked his eyes in an all-inclusive glance into the neighboring booth, ready to make a plunge for safety should its occupants detect his thoughts.

"Oh, dear!" said Mr. Bingler, and scowled petulantly.

For the booth was empty of human occupants. While Mr. Bingler's mind had been occupied with the conversation he had overheard, the two plotting killers had quietly decamped from the vicinity.

Mr. Bingler gazed helplessly around the restaurant, seeing only the orderly bustle of the evening service. He went slowly toward the front, caught sight of the two men just entering the taxi from in front of the restaurant. In that one glimpse, he could make out no details, and a shiver of apprehension raced up his spine that the two might get away without his catching a full view of their faces.

Mr. Bingler scuttled toward the door at an abnormal speed for him. "Something wrong, Mr. Bingler?"

Tony Angenelli asked from behind the register.

Mr. Bingler stopped dejectedly at the door, seeing only the rear of the taxi as it whirled into the traffic. He came back to the register, carefully counted out thirty cents and tax.

"Did you know those two men who had the booth next to mine?" he asked hopefully.

"Sure!" Tony rang the register, dropped in the change. "One man he's a name' Reeves; the other I no know."

"They come here very often?" Mr. Bingler felt the warm glow of coming success in his scrawny chest.

Tony shook his head. "No," he said easily, "Meester Reeves he come once or twice a week; this is first time I see other." He frowned. "Whatsa mat', Mr. Bingler, isa something wrong?"

Mr. Bingler laughed, shook his small head in what he hoped was an air of carefree nonchalance.

"Not a thing, Tony," he said, "I was just curious."

He went toward the door, conscious

of the Italian's gaze on his back, feeling the triumphant glow burning brighter in his breast. He stood for a moment in the coming dusk, breathing deeply of the heavy air, the smiling lift of his mouth giving his face the look of a slightly puzzled gnome.

Then he set off down the street, his rubbers patting a steady rhythm on the sidewalk, the umbrella swinging jauntily in the crook of his elbow. Mr. J. C. Bingler was in his element, lifted above the mundane routine of an unfeeling world. He was confronted by a mystery that promised to be a lulu, a mystery in which master villains laughed fiendishly and plotted brutal murders—a mystery that was just waiting for Mr Bingler's detective talents to solve.

Poor Mr. J. C. Bingler and his dreams of Empire.

CHAPTER II

MR. BINGLER entered the apartment that had been his home for years, racked his umbrella, hung his hat and boxed his derby, then set his gleaming rubbers beside the hall tree. Catching up the hat-box with its new derby, he went toward the bedroom, switching on the lights as he went.

He scowled pleasantly as he went, his troubled mind wrestling with his problem. Placing the hat-box on the neat counterpane of his bed, he removed his clothes, hung them carefully in the single closet.

CLAD in his birthday suit, he entered the tiny living room again, dialled a number on the phone he had had installed less than a week before. He relaxed a bit when he heard the even tone of the man he had called.

"Captain Donovan," he said, "this is Mr. J. C. Bingler. I wondered if you would give me a little information!"

"Any I can," Captain of Detectives Donovan said cheerily, "I haven't forgotten the help you gave the department a short time ago."

Mr. Bingler flushed a bit in modest pride, the red tiding down his bare

and skinny body. "Thank you, Captain," he said modestly, "I just wanted to know who a man named Trotter is; he's to be released from prison day after tomorrow?"

A note of caution crept into the detective's voice. "Why do you want to know that?" he asked carefully.

"Well," Mr Bingler said cautiously, "I heard two men discussing him this evening, and I just got interested."

"Oh!" Captain Donovan laughed expressively, "I suppose your detecting is becoming rusty, and you thought you'd practice on him!"

"Something like that," Mr. Bingler agreed.

"Well, you can forget him; he doesn't amount to much. He was sent up fifteen years ago for murder. His partner got away, and he never would tell who the man was. Because of doubt as to who did the actual murder, the jury recommended leniency at the time. He's to be released on parole."

"Thank you, Captain," Mr. Bingler said. "I guess I got excited over nothing."

He pronged the receiver, went directly to the bathroom, ran hot water into the tub. He hummed softly to himself as he shaved, knowing that his excitement had a very definite basis.

For he had a prospective murder, a black-mailing convict, and two men of whom one was an ex-murderer now plotting a new one.

It was a perfect setup for a graduate of the Home Detective Course—and Mr. Bingler held the mail order rank of First Class Investigator.

HE CLEANED his straight razor, soaked for a luxurious fifteen minutes in the steamy tub. After scrubbing himself clean with soap and water, he massaged his skinny body with a huge towel, washed the tub, then reclaimed fresh underwear from the chifferobe drawer. Clad in the drop-panelled BVD's, he brushed his sparse thatch of white hair, then moved to the neat bed.

He broke the string on the hat-box, conscious of a faint excitement that always came when he bought a new derby. His mouth puckered in

a soundless whistling of a tune thirty years dead, as he removed the box lid and reached in to remove the derby from its nest of tissue paper.

"Oh, dear!" said Mr. Bingler, swallowing convulsively.

His tiny fingers explored a bit, confirming what his myopic eyes were seeing. He gulped for air, his stomach gyrating beneath his ribs, heaving in an uncontrollable spasm of rending nausea.

"Oh, dear!" he said again very weakly, back-tracked until a chair edge caught his knees and dropped his horrified body into its depths.

He blinked desperately, hoping the thing would go away, pinched himself absently in the vague belief that this incredible scene was the main event in the nightmare.

But the hoping and pinching did no good; the object within the hat-box remained in a very real and terrible way.

It lay there in the crumpled tissues of the overturned hat-box, a faint smile on its lips, its greying hair brushed carefully back from a high forehead. The skin was a ghastly greenish-blue, except for a pinkish tinge at the lips and cheekbones and where the darkish cast of a heavy beard showed.

It was not a particularly ugly head, in fact, its owner must have been rather proud of its handsome regularity; but in Mr. Bingler's opinion it would have been less nerve shattering had its owner still been attached.

Mr. Bingler retched miserably, regretting his excess at the evening meal. One second he sat there, while his stomach tied itself in knots, then he headed miserably for the bathroom with its friendly conveniences.

Slowly, oh, so slowly, the neat apartment came back to its usual stability. Mr. Bingler loosened his bracing clutch on the chifferobe, his stomach muscles sore and strained. His skinny body still shook a bit within his loose underwear, and his mind was a maelstrom as it tried to cope with the suddenness with which it had been confronted by the horror in the hat-box.

He absently flipped three peppermints into his mouth, savoring their biting flavor, fumbled for and lit his sixth cigarette of the day.

His hand shook a bit with terrified excitement, and for a long moment his courage wavered like a shifting blob of gelatine. And then Mr. Bingler screwed up enough will power to investigate, as prescribed in Lesson Two of the Home Detective Course. He moved to the bed, reached out a comparatively steady hand, turned the box over even more so that the head rolled onto the counterpane.

He swallowed twice, choking a bit as the peppermints dropped into his empty stomach.

"My goodness!" said Mr. Bingler shakily.

For the head, the gruesome thing had cleaned out Mr. Bingler like a stomach pump, was but a shell of wax made by some master craftsman to simulate death in a man's face.

CHAPTER III

MR. J. C. BINGLER picked up the death mask, his flesh creeping a bit at the coolness of the wax. He coughed sheepishly, glanced guiltily toward the bathroom.

He examined the mask, his roily mind trying to make sense out of the things that had happened to him in the past hour. He was not in the best of condition for coherent thinking, but gradually his blood pressure eased, and his bookkeeper's mind began grasping the fringes of the mystery.

He knew that a murder was to be committed that evening or night; who the victim was to be had been clearly stated by the villain in the restaurant booth.

The thought brought a cold sweat to Mr. Bingler. Maybe the villain was a sadistic monster who kept a visual record of his victims?

Mr. Bingler laughed shakily, forced the thought from his mind. He stuffed several peppermints into his mouth. The simple explanation did not make sense, even to him.

But what was the meaning and purpose of the smiling death mask?

Mr. Bingle acted.

He shoved a chair into the closet, lifted the bulky envelope from the dim recess of the high shelf. He returned to the bed, emptied the contents of the envelope onto the clean spread.

He beamed a bit in pride at the tangible portions of the Home Detective Course, and he was suddenly no more the humble bookkeeper the world knew, but Mr. J. C. Bingle, First Class Detective.

He ratcheted the slightly rusty handcuffs with gentle fingers, ruefully considering the fact that never had they closed on the frantic wrists of a public enemy. He fondled the fountain-pen tear-gas gun for a moment, practiced whipping it from an imaginary pocket at an imaginary villain.

At last, satisfied that his reflexes and timing were good, he laid the pen aside, fumbled among the dog-eared booklets until he found one of a bilious blue.

Settling himself on the bed, the death mask smiling sardonically in his intent face, he flipped thin pages with a wetted forefinger.

"Masks," he read aloud from a sub-chapter, "have but one purpose in crime; they are used to shield the identities of criminals perpetrating a crime."

Mr. Bingle clucked in disappointment; for it was only too obvious that his type of mask was not the style preferred by gun-wielding crooks.

He flipped through the pages of the booklet, reading a snatch of print here and there. And as the seconds passed, shocked incredulity mirrored itself on Mr. Bingle's rabbit-like features.

It couldn't be! Such a thing was impossible! And yet the fact spoke for itself. There was absolutely nothing in his cherished Home Detective Course to beacon-light his way to a clear understanding of why a master-villain should possess a death mask!

Mr. Bingle lit and puffed savagely at his seventh cigarette of the day.

utterly reckless of the effect of too much nicotine on his heart.

He shook his head slowly, began the distasteful task of dressing. He admitted, discouragedly, to himself that he was licked. For if the Home Detective Course could not explain a death mask—then there was no explanation for it in criminal tactics.

Mr. Bingle scowled truculently into the mirror, went slowly to the closet. He removed his Sunday suit, tossed it carelessly on the bed, covering the booklets and paraphernalia. There was a bitter twist to his mouth, because of the disillusionment that filled his mind.

Then he brightened a bit. Anyway, even without the mask, he still had a mystery that was just begging to be solved. He would trot down to the police station, tell Captain Donovan of the conversation he had overheard, and watch the ponderous machinery of the Law bring the would-be murderers to Justice.

It was a very satisfying thought.

He knotted his string tie around his celluloid collar, went slowly toward the hall door, at the muffled burr of the buzzer.

"Yes?" he said inquiringly, poked his head through the door crack.

The hall light was out, and his myopic gaze could make nothing of the indistinct features of the man whose finger still pressed the buzzer.

"Mr. Bingle?" a muffled voice asked casually.

"I'm Mr. Bingle." Mr. Bingle agreed. "What can I do..."

The roof collapsed without warning onto Mr. Bingle's small and inadequately haired head. He passed out without a sound.

CHAPTER IV

MR. BINGLE tried to run from the six-headed monster that was snuffling ferociously at his heels, but strain as he might, he could not lift his rooted feet out of their tracks. He tried to yell, and his voice came out in a tenuous whisper that hung in the air be-

fore his face. He groaned in terror, and the sound brought him back to consciousness.

He was lying on the divan, a wet towel tucked carefully around his aching head. He groaned again, lifted himself to a sitting position, wincing at the stab of pain that skidded around the inside of his skull.

"Oh, dear!" he said miserably.

He staggered to his feet, made an inspection of the apartment, expecting momentarily to be attacked again. But the apartment was empty; his assailant having gone while he was unconscious. Turning on the cold tap in the bathroom, he tenderly bathed the goose-egg on his head, his thoughts gradually marshalling themselves into a faint semblance of order.

He couldn't fully understand why his assailant had paused long enough to lay a wet towel over his aching head, and then apparently gone without touching anything. A sudden premonition touched his aching brain.

He wrapped a dry towel about his head, went into the bedroom. He frowned a bit, when he found that he was right. The wax mask was gone, and in its place was the new derby resting in another hat-box.

Mr. Bingler swore rather violently, a small hot lump of fury blazing into life in his scrawny breast. This was the last straw.

He lifted the hat-box to one side, caught sight of the bit of blue sticker on the bottom. "—ax Museum," he read, and his mental teeth took a healthy bite of the lonesome clue.

He dressed rapidly in the suit he had worn all day, hanging the Sunday suit back in the closet. He clipped the tear-gas gun into his vest pocket, thrust the handcuffs into a hip pocket. He switched off the lights, went into the hall, squirmed into the neat rubbers and rain-coat. He removed an umbrella from the rack, an umbrella that could become a gleaming sword by a mere twist of his wrist.

He was conscious of a weight on his right hand, and he peered proudly at the first ring he had worn in years. It was a large, golden-brown cameo with two heads, and it seemed strange-

ly out of place on his tiny veined hand.

Mr. Bingler's face was hard with purpose, and his eyes dark with anger, as he locked the apartment and raced down the two flights of stairs.

He felt that he had been on the receiving end of a dirty deal. He didn't know what a mask had to do with a murder, but he did know that he was going to put a stop to the machinations of the master-villain one way or another.

This entire affair had become rather personal to Mr. Bingler.

"Taxi, Mister?" a prowling cabby called to the small man in the rain-coat.

MR. BINGLER nodded absently, climbed into the rear of the taxi. He seated himself exactly in the center of the cushions, braced his feet on the foot rail.

"Where to, Buddy?"

Mr. Bingler considered. "How many Wax Museums in town?" he asked.

"Just one, that I know of . . . up on Tenth Avenue. Wanta go there?"

"Yes," Mr. Bingler said shortly, "And . . . er, take the lead out of your trousers!"

"Take the . . . !" The cabby took in the derby, the rain-coat and the umbrella in one inclusive glance. "Okay, Granpop, hang onto your upper plate!" he finished dryly.

Mr. Bingler regretted his use of the unfamiliar words he had used. For without even a preliminary shifting of gears, the taxi took off down the street. For the first time in quite a while, Mr. Bingler left grateful to Isaac Newton and his Law of Gravity, for with but a bit of coaxing the taxi would have taken off like a mailplane.

Mr. Bingler swallowed his heart, clung to his derby with both hands, his stomach banking in sympathy as the taxi swished and swayed through the light traffic.

"This fast enough, Mister?" the cabby asked casually.

Mr. Bingler nodded wordlessly, too paralyzed to speak. He watched the world whiz giddily past, and his small mouth made the same gasping move-

ments made by a fish drowning on dry land.

"This is it, Buddy," the cabby said eventually, whirled the taxi into the curb with a banshee wail of screaming rubber.

"Thanks," Mr. Bingler said weakly, poured himself onto the sidewalk. He was just regaining his land-legs, when it dawned on him that he had received no change from the dollar bill he had tendered in payment for the fare.

Mr. Bingler grimaced, peered regretfully after the taxi. This mystery was proving expensive, both in mental shock and cash.

HE LOOKED up at the tarnished sign "Wax Museum," then trudged casually down the street toward the darkness of an alleyway. Certain that he was unseen, he ducked into its depths, edged along the building wall, until he came to the sliver of light that edged from beneath a pulled shade. Pulling a box from a rubbish pile, he climbed atop its frail structure, applied one eye to the slit of light.

"Ha!" said Mr. Bingler silently, triumphantly.

Lying on the single table in the small room was the death mask, and over it a man was paying money to a second man. Mr. Bingler felt an instinctive distrust of the man doing the paying, for with his heavy jowls and hard eyes he fitted perfectly into the Number Three classification of Criminals, as given in Lesson Seven of the Home Detective Course.

Mr. Bingler's grey little ego swelled with budding life, when he realized that the mask was part of some mystery, and that his deductions were working with astounding clarity.

There was a tiny "creek," and the box collapsed beneath Mr. Bingler. He squawked in sudden fright, clutched at the wall, went tumbling to the pavement. With his heart in his throat, he scurried breathlessly out of the alley mouth, hopped into a parked taxi. He hunched down into the seat, knowing that he had been seen by the doorman of the Wax Mu-

seum, expecting to hear the scream of flying lead at any moment.

"Centre Street Police Station," he snapped at the driver, breathed in sudden relief, as the taxi spurted into the traffic.

Mr. Bingler smiled then, his eyes lighting up like those of a mischievous brownie's. Mr. Bingler was in his element, and very very happy.

CHAPTER V

THERE was an unhurried bustle about the Police Station that was like balm to Mr. Bingler's quivering nerves. He scuttled through the doorway, passed unnoticed into the waiting room, knocked timidly on the door marked, Captain Donovan.

The knock went unnoticed, and he mopped his forehead with a large handkerchief, tried desperately to control his shaking knees. But there was a light in Mr. Bingler's eyes, for he believed that he was on the track of some master criminal; and such was his makeup that he was like an eager pup chasing a bus, anxious to catch it but not knowing what he would do with it if he should.

Mr. Bingler gulped, pushed open the door, went in without further knocking. He sidled to one side, watched the Captain of Detectives with worshipping eyes, amazed at his temerity at invading the office.

"Well, what is it now?" Captain Donovan snapped without looking up.

"— er, Captain?" Mr. Bingler said nervously.

"Oh, so it's you, Mr. Bingler?" the detective said disapprovingly, "Well, I'm sorry but I can't talk to you right now; I'm terribly busy."

"But, Captain," Mr. Bingler said hurriedly and mysteriously, "I think I've uncovered a crime!"

Captain Donovan seemed to shrink within his uniform, and his eyes lifted in a silent plea. He started to speak, was interrupted by the buzz of the annunciator. He listened a moment, then his voice raised in a bull-like roar.

"Now get this," he bellowed, "You

shake down every house on Fraternity row. You tell those half-baked brats that if that body isn't returned to the laboratory within an hour, I'll personally see to it that all fraternities are barred from the campus!"

He snapped the switch, glared unseeingly into space. "Those damned college kids drive me nuts!" he said finally, "Them and their initiations! Now they're stealing stiffs from the medical laboratory at the school."

"Yes, sir," Mr. Bingler agreed bewilderedly.

He stood there, a quaking little man, realizing suddenly how foolish and quixotic had been his impulse to bring his pitiful mystery to the harassed officer's attention. He shifted nervously from one foot to the other, his white hair a tousle, the derby and sword-umbrella in one veined hand, his mind trying to fashion a valid excuse for his being there.

Captain Donovan's eyes softened a bit, as he watched the meek little man before him. "I checked up on Trotter," he said. "He and a man he called Simpson murdered a gem salesman. The police caught him, but Simpson got away with eighty thousand dollars worth of unset stones. Does that help any?"

"Yes, thank you!" Mr. Bingler said.

The annunciator buzzed briefly.

"Yes?" the detective said sharply, his face hardening. "All right, we'll go right up. Get Sweeney and Carpenter, and call headquarters."

HE SWITCHED off the annunciator, strode around the edge of his desk. "There's been a murder uptown, some guy named Miller, so your mystery will have to wait. If you want to hang around, I'll talk to you when I get back."

Without waiting for an answer, he was gone through the door. His voice sounded for a moment in the outer room; there was the shuffle of feet on the floor; then a siren wailed from the street, the tones diminishing in the distance.

"Oh, dear!" said Mr. Bingler unhappily.

He stood indecisively for a moment, debating the best course to

follow. He frowned a bit, realizing that he alone could not hope to cope with a master-villain, knowing that he should go home and forget his romantic notions about being a crime crusader before he got his small head shot from his narrow shoulders.

But there was a bit of character in Mr. Bingler as unbending as chrome steel. He blinked with sudden resolve, went toward the files at the rear of the office. He found the City Directory, carried it to the desk, flipped through the pages.

Mr. Bingler beamed benevolently on the book, nodded relievedly. The decision had been forced upon him, because Captain Donovan had not paused long enough to hear of the murder that was to happen, or . . . The ghastly thought set Mr. Bingler's head to swimming. . . . had already happened.

Yes, Mr. Bingler had to pinch-hit for the police in this emergency.

He concentrated for a few minutes on the fine print, frowned slightly when he found that Harvey Wilson and James Reeves were partners, jointly owning and running an importing concern.

That information made the coming crime even worse. A partner was about to kill the man he was in business with—with the obvious motive of inheriting the entire company under a partnership contract.

Mr. Bingler girded up mental loins, went unhesitatingly toward an imaginary lion's den.

CHAPTER VI

MR. BINGLER hesitated on the street, the blood of some Scottish ancestor rebelling against wasting more money on a taxi ride. He clambered aboard a passing bus, seated himself on a rear seat of the upper deck.

He knew now what he had to do; he must go to Harvey Wilson and warn him that his partner was preparing to murder him before the night was gone.

He relaxed comfortably, smiling like some aged cherub, completely

satisfied with the simple solution of the problem. With Wilson knowing what was to happen, he could trap his partner, and turn the quivering wretch over to the police.

He wished, momentarily, that he had been invited to accompany the police in their investigation of a murder. With the aid of his Home Detective Course's training, the crime would have been solved in short order.

Mr. Bingler swore petulantly, remembering how his Home Detective Course had failed him this night. He also felt a sick feeling of futility because he had not solved some horrible crime. True, he had discovered a crime was to be committed, had fallen heir to a death mask that was tied in, somehow, with a master villain, and had been slugged by some friend retrieving the mask. But, somehow, Mr. Bingler felt that he had missed the one thing that would have made the evening perfect.

He thought of that for a while, remembering the two cases he had solved in the past, thinking of the time when he would be able to put the "EI" of an Expert Investigator after his name. And maybe—his breath caught in his throat with sudden longing — some day, he might be able to contribute something to crime detection and be permitted to rank himself as an "MD." Master Detective!

Mr. Bingler sighed deeply, realizing how foolish were his wishes. For he knew only too well that he was but an insignificant mortal on a world that was harsh and unfriendly to any but masterful men.

AND then the bus was at the corner of 80th street, and he was scrambling down the steps to the sidewalk.

He trudged slowly down the walk, strolling with what he hoped appeared to be casual nonchalance, the rain-coat swishing about his skinny legs, the sword-umbrella jauntily in one hand.

His heart leaped a bit in excitement, when he came to 7964. He saw the dark car beside the house in the

curving drive, and spied the reflections of two men on the drawn curtain of a second floor window.

Mr. Bingler paused in midstride, wondering if he were too late to prevent the murder. Two men were in the house, and one of them could be James Reeves, the calculating master villain. For one interminably long moment, there was only a helpless distress in his troubled mind.

Then he continued his walking, fearful of the results that might come if he gave his story to Harvey Wilson while Reeves was listening. He stopped just past the high hedge, trying to recall bits of his Home Detective Course that might give a solution to the situation confronting him.

Mr. Bingler shrugged, muttered maledictions against the course that had failed him so utterly that night, and ducked into the shadow of the hedge. He scuttled like a frightened rabbit toward the rear of the yard until he was certain he could not be seen from the window, then wormed through the hedge on hands and knees.

A dozen scurrying steps brought him against the wall of the house. He gulped in nervous excitement, filled his mouth with a dozen peppermints to stop the chattering of his teeth, then worked his way cautiously along the wall. He turned the corner, padded silently for twenty feet, then halted with a hiss of indrawn breath when his outstretched hand encountered a screen door propped open with a brick.

Mr. Bingler froze into motionlessness, his myopic eyes searching the night for a hidden watcher. He remembered all of the stories he had read in which the intrepid hero had stepped into such an innocent-looking trap.

Then he chuckled ruefully, felt extremely foolish, when he recalled the obvious fact that he was not expected. Too, in all probability, the door was securely locked!

But the door swung gently open at his touch on the knob.

Mr. Bingler slipped through, stood quaking in the darkness, a spider of apprehension crawling with hairy

legs up his spine. He knew that any moment he might get a slug through his small body for house-breaking.

"Oh, dear!" said Mr. Bingler, swallowed five peppermints.

Then his courage stretched a bit and he went slowly forward. He might as well, he told himself, waste a few more minutes now that he was on the premisses. He smiled smugly at his hopeful reasoning, groped his way down the dim hall toward a thread of light edging from beneath a closed door.

He listened at the panels for seconds, heard nothing, pushed the door open and slipped through. A night light glowed dimly over a kitchen table. Another door stood invitingly open across the room, and he slipped through it with incredible stealth.

A gleaming stairway rose from the far end of the hall in which he found himself, and he drifted toward it. Dull light came from an open doorway at his right, and a quick surreptitious peering around the door-jamb convinced him that the room was empty.

He darted through, his gaze sweeping what was obviously a library. Papers littered a massive desk in one corner, and a large divan was pulled close to the fireplace. Aboriginal weapons hung in wicked splendor over the mantel, and several hunting prints made bright splotches of color on the panelled walls.

Mr. Bingler paused irresolutely, hearing the hum of voices from overhead, fearful that he might be discovered at any moment. Then his curiosity gained control of his good sense, and he moved toward the desk.

He nodded gently when he read the letterheads on the notepaper. Gathering up several sheets of paper in a clumsy sweating hand, he held them up to the light for a better look.

HE GASPED, his skinny Adam's apple bouncing against his celluloid collar, his myopic eyes bulging at the import of the words on the paper.

"Oh, dear!" said Mr. Bingler.

For he had uncovered the final bit of evidence that he had needed to

convince Harvey Wilson that he was to be murdered that night, the final evidence that proved James Reeves was a calculating killer without the slightest of scruples.

He heard the footsteps then, and the papers rustled from his terrified hand to the desk. For one interminable second he was too paralyzed with fright to move. Then he whirled, ducked around the divan, fell prone between the divan and the fireplace.

He cringed against the floor, saw the single pair of feet move to the desk. He felt an insane desire to sneeze, raised his head and laid a skinny finger along his upper lip.

He saw the dead face on the couch, smiled a bit. At least his deductions about the death mask were right; it did have something to do with the murderer's scheme.

"Oh, dear!" said Mr. Bingler aloud,

He gagged, unconscious of the startled gasp of the man at the desk, his watery eyes fearfully scanning the white face and rigid body of the corpse on the divan.

He had been too late to help Harvey Wilson, he knew that now, for the man stretched so stiffly on the cushions was beyond mortal aid.

Mr. Bingler heard the footsteps at his back, whirled in frightened reflex. He cringed, seeing the contorted face of the man at his side, the same man he had seen paying money to another in the Wax Museum.

"Ulp!" ulped Mr. Bingler, tried to dodge the murderous fist that loomed with increasing speed in his frightened face.

His right hand automatically sought for and found the handle of his sword-umbrella. He ducked to one side, and the fist followed with an uncanny prescience. Dimly, he heard his teeth click together, and then the top of his head seemed to lift higher and higher until contact with the beamed ceiling blotted out all consciousness.

Mr. Bingler went down slowly, folding tiredly over the divan arm, then slipping quietly to the floor, out for the second time that night. His hands relaxed, and the half-drawn

sword spanged musically on the hearth.

CHAPTER VII

MR. J. C. BINGLER'S head was a great bronze bell, against whose sides a large iron clapper bonged and boomed with a sickening regularity. He retched a bit at the constant noise, rolled weakly to his side, his hands pressing feebly at the cold floor.

Then consciousness came back with a rush, and he winced fearfully lest he be struck again with that terrible fist. Nothing happened, and there was no sound, so Mr. Bingler opened his eyes.

Comets pin-wheeled in all their fiery glory before his eyes for a moment, and his skull seemed to expand and contract like a gigantic bellows.

"Oh, dear!" said Mr. Bingler, and focussed his bleary eyes.

He blinked unseeingly for a moment, stabbing nausea draining all strength from his body. And then his vision cleared, and he scowled in quick puzzlement.

He was lying on his right side, his hand clutching the slim leg of a white-painted table. By moving his head a trifle, he allowed his gaze to wander about the room, and he saw that, somehow, he was in the consultation room of a surgeon's office.

"Dear me!" said Mr. Bingler bewilderedly, rolling to a sitting position.

His eyes centered upon a door, from behind which came the steady rattle of a typewriter. Coming to his feet, his head swimming from the effect of the knockout blow, he took a short step toward the door.

"Oh, dear!" said Mr. Bingler horrifiedly, and his returning strength deserted him completely, his legs crumpling until he sat again on the spotless linoleum.

For it was then for the first time that Mr. Bingler saw the dead man in the white surgeon's coat . . . with Mr. Bingler's sword-umbrella thrust through his chest, the stained point

projecting a full eight inches from his back.

Terror, like a super-gravity, clamped the little man rigidly to the floor, stopping his breath, blanching his rabbit features. He knew then—as though he needed additional proof—that he had shoved his twitching nose into something too big for him to handle.

And then that bright indefinable something, that undefeatable thing in the character of humankind that lifted some men above the level of their fellow men, reared itself in all its awful strength.

Mr. Bingler scowled bleakly, feeling the first touch of the spur that drove him onward. He came cautiously to his feet, circled the dead man like a coon-hound around its quarry, his myopic eyes searching with an intent clarity. He ranged the floor, stopping before the open window, leaned outward, and peered at the shadowy ground but a few feet below.

He nodded to himself, popped three peppermints into his mouth. Then he returned to the corpse, put out a tentative hand, tugged experimentally at the gory handle of the umbrella-sword. His small body winced instinctively at the strength it took to draw the sword from its human sheath. He stood there for a moment, the crimsoned weapon in his small hand, knowing that safety lay only in flight. And the office nurse opened the connecting door.

Mr. Bingler watched her face automatically, scrutinizing every emotion on her features with the impersonality of a research worker. He gestured with the bloody sword to the corpse.

"I—er, he's dead!" Mr. Bingler said inanely, stupidly.

He smiled benignly — like some maniacal, murderous fiend.

It took but a mere second for the nurse's scream to reach the ear-splitting crescendo of a police siren.

"Eeeoow!" she screamed in terror, "Help! Murder! Polleece!"

And fainted.

MR. Bingler paused not upon the order of his going; he went from that room in a hurry, crossed the waiting room in two gigantic leaps, batted open a swinging door. He scuttled down the dim length of a corridor, still waving the crimsoned sword, giving two nurses and an interne a shock that lopped ten years from their prospective life span.

But Mr. Bingler was not concerned with anyone but himself at the moment. Blind instinct told his flashing feet what to do when his reason failed him for the time. He bounced through an outer door, its swinging bulk knocking the sword from his nerveless hand, and was too frightened to retrieve it.

He almost fell on the short flight of steps, spun right like a racing hare, went down the street with a speed that was incredible for a little man with legs as short as his.

He ducked into an alleyway, his breath sobbing in his throat, a pain blossoming in his side. "Oh, dear!" he whimpered again and again as he pounded along the paving.

He whirled around a corner, crashed into a stooping man, caromed into a wall, ended up in a gasping heap against a garbage can. Glass crashed and milk flew, and there was a dull "thwunk" as the head of the milkman made contact with the brick wall.

Mr. Bingler didn't pause for coherent thinking. He got to his feet with frightened speed, saw that the man was unmoving, and blind terror set him to moving again. He headed instinctively for the milk wagon at the curb, bounded into the interior, caught up the slack reins in frantic hands.

"Git!" he yelled, lashed the horse's rump with the rein tips.

The horse went into a dead run from a standing start, for probably the first time in its lethargic life. Mr. Bingler braced his feet, winced when he heard the muted crashing of milk bottles on the street below, knew that he was leaving a trail that anyone could follow.

He rode the bouncing wagon like a Roman Charioteer, driving the

horse with an instinct that had lain dormant for years, his breathing gradually slowing, and his thought processes beginning to come in a more orderly fashion.

And out of the chaos of his mind came but one clear thought. He, Mr. J. C. Bingler, was as nicely framed for murder as any hero in a book—but unlike any fictional character, he had no trick up his sleeve with which to foil the villain.

The bitter galling truth shattered Mr. Bingler's stunted ego, leaving it suddenly a limp grey thing barely alive.

CHAPTER VIII



A CICADA burred into life at Mr. Bingler's elbow, and he started in sudden reflex, then crouched back in the shadow of the hedge. He shivered at the faint wail of a far-off siren, remembering his terrified flight from the hospital. He had abandoned the milk wagon after a ride of ten blocks, had boarded a passing bus, changed buses twice, and then walked almost a mile. And now he was crouched in the shadow of the hedge that paralleled Harvey Wilson's lawn.

Why he was there, he could not have explained logically. He knew only that it was from this house that he had been taken for a ride that had ended with murder. He shuddered violently, recalling the fingerprints he had left on the traitorous sword.

"Why, oh why," he wailed silently, "wasn't I satisfied with my old life? Why couldn't I let well enough alone!"

The cicada burred sympathetically.

Mr. Bingler tried to gain comfort from the fact that the master-villain had thought him important enough to frame, but the thought only brought a cold perspiration to his scrawny body.

He didn't know what to do, but he knew that he had to accomplish something in order to clear himself. He tried to fit facts together in his mind, but after a moment ran into a stone wall of thinking.

Mr. Bingler stood up, took two steps around the end of the hedge. He had made up his mind that he had to face Reeves and trick him into a confession. How he, an insignificant bookkeeper, was going to bring that about, he did not know; but he had no choice in the matter—it was either catch the murderer and turn him over to the police, or burn for a crime the other had committed.

A shadow came to life, and a cone of light limned Mr. Bingler in its glow.

"Stand right where you are!" a low voice said quietly.

Mr. Bingler couldn't have moved. In fact, he wouldn't have budged for all the tea in China. He said as much.

"That's fine; now trot up into the house," the flashlight-wielder commanded, and a gun muzzle edged into the funnel of light.

Mr. Bingler trotted.

The man with the gun opened the door by the simple expedient of touching it with his shoulder, then stood aside to permit the small quaking Mr. Bingler to pass.

"Through that door on the left," the gunman said, "and be careful."

Mr. Bingler entered the room, shrank a bit in relief, when he saw that Harvey Wilson's body was gone from the divan before the fireplace. His eyes swept over the bare desk, then flicked upward into the face of the man. He saw it clearly for the first time, and he gulped in quick astonishment.

"Sit down," the gunman ordered, "and do some explaining."

"Well," Mr. Bingler said, "it's like this—"

There were solid footsteps in the hall, and John Reeves came through the door. His face went white when he saw the small man sitting on the edge of the heavy chair, and his hands clenched suddenly at his sides.

"Who?" he said, "I mean, where did he come from?"

"He was skulking outside," the man with the gun said succinctly, "so I brought him in for a talk."

"Well, do something; don't just stand there! Shut him up permanently; he knows the whole setup!"

Mr. Bingler went cold, then hot, and then chill again, at the concentrated venom and hate in the beefy man's voice. His hand tightened on the tear-gas pen in his raincoat pocket, and his eyes darted about for a way of escape.

"I—er, I—" he began.

"Start talking!" the gunman said brittlely.

"All right!" Mr. Bingler came to his feet slowly, edged backward until his shoulder touched the mantel. "I know the whole story. I know the two of you murdered Harvey Wilson."

A gun bounced into Reeves' unsteady hand, its gaping muzzle centering on Mr. Bingler's skinny chest.

"Shut him up," he barked desperately, "or, I will!"

"Wait a minute, John," the gunman said, "I want to hear his story." He moved until his gun could veer easily from Reeves to Mr. Bingler. "Go on with your tale," he finished.

"I saw Wilson's body on the divan," Mr. Bingler began.

"Did you now?" the gunman said, and the grating quality of his voice set Mr. Bingler's teeth on edge.

"Harvey," John Reeves snapped harshly, "cut out the comedy! Shoot the meddling fool; he knows too much!"

Harvey! Mr. Bingler's heart came solidly into his Adam's apple. He choked, saw the sardonic gleam in the gunman's eyes, shrank even further from the gun muzzle at the rather terrible smile of the other.

"Yes," the gunman said softly, "I'm Harvey Wilson."

Mr. Bingler remembered the voice then; for he had heard it very distinctly in the restaurant, oh, so many hours before!

"Oh, dear!" said Mr. J. C. Bingler confusedly.

CHAPTER IX

NEVER, in even his most fantastic dreams of crime-fighting, had Mr. Bingler visualized such a scene as this. Always he had had the whip hand, and

the villains had been cringing against the cold menace of his logical condemnations. But now he knew them for the dreams they were, and realized that life is at times more astounding than fiction.

"Talk," Harvey Wilson said, "and I mean everything you know!"

"I figured it like this," Mr. Bingler said hurriedly. "Reeves was planning to kill you for—I mean Harvey Wilson was to be murdered— That is—!"

"Go on, please," Wilson said softly. "I was to die for a half million dollars of insurance."

"Yes," Mr. Bingler said, "so you had a mask made of your face."

"By Miller of the Wax Museum," Wilson interrupted helpfully.

"Miller!" Mr. Bingler said wonderingly.

And with the precision of well-oiled machinery, Mr. Bingler's mind whirled a bit, fitted a few integral pieces into place—and spat out the answer to all that had happened.

Mr. Bingler straightened, and he was suddenly no more a meek little man in a raincoat and derby. There was a look of incredulous shock on his hardening features, and his eyes were keen and piercing.

"Well?" Harvey Wilson said softly, insistently.

"He's got the answers, Harvey!" Reeves said desperately.

Mr. Bingler nodded. "Yes," he said evenly, "I think I have." His thumb found the spring trigger of his tear-gas pen. "This is it," he stated:

"A few years ago, a man named Simpson and a partner Trotter murdered a gem salesman. Trotter was caught, but Simpson got away. Simpson had the jewels and disposed of them for enough to join a man named Reeves in an importing business. Simpson had no police record, and thought he was safe from pursuit. He changed his name and became a respected citizen. He thought that his partner could never find him, because even then Simpson had not been his real name."

"Go on," Harvey Wilson prompted, as Mr. Bingler stopped for breath.

"Trotter served his sentence, and was to be paroled day after tomor-

row," Mr. Bingler continued, "and sent a letter to Wilson that disclosed the fact that he knew who Wilson was. Harvey Wilson knew that a drastic solution to his problem must be found, or he might go to the electric chair for the salesman's murder. He didn't dare murder Trotter because the crook might have left a letter telling of the crime. So he planned to kill himself!"

"You're rather clever, did you know that?" Wilson said.

Mr. Bingler nodded, without pride, swallowed deeply. "Well," he continued, "Harvey Wilson didn't want to die in reality, so he thought he'd fake his death. He blackmailed his partner into helping him. He stole a body from the Medical College, making it appear as a prank of the students, then had a wax mask made of his face by Miller. He bribed a doctor to make out a fake death certificate and a cremation order. His purpose was plain. His partner, Reeves, would hold a phony service over the corpse wearing a mask of Wilson's face, then hold an instant cremation. When Trotter showed up, there would be incontestable proof that Wilson was dead. And later on, Wilson and Reeves would split the insurance. There could be no trouble in any way, for Wilson would be undeniably dead, and the insurance would be automatically paid."

Sweat rode high on Reeves' forehead. "Shut him up, Harvey," he said, "and let's get this whole deal over with!"

"You seem rather eager, John," Wilson said easily. "Maybe we'd better hear the finish of the story!"

"But Harvey Wilson wasn't so smart," Mr. Bingler said, unconscious of the interruption. "He thought he was the plotter, but his partner went him one better."

"Pull that trigger, John," Harvey Wilson said viciously, "and I'll kill you! I want to hear the rest."

Mr. Bingler edged away from the mantel, his frail legs tensing.

"Reeves," he said slowly, "figured to double-cross Wilson. He meant to go through with the fake death, then murder Wilson after the money had

CHAPTER X

been paid. But I happened to get mixed up in the whole deal. I found the mask, was robbed of it by Miller, who was not a brutal man at heart. In fact, he knew nothing of the real deal. But because he might have figured out the mummy, Reeves murdered him tonight."

"Is that right, Reeves?" Harvey Wilson's eyes were suddenly dark panes of glass without expression.

"It was absolutely necessary." Reeves said, "but the man's lying about my plans."

"Keep talking," Wilson said to Mr. Bingler.

"I came here," Mr. Bingler said, "and was knocked out by Reeves. He took me to the hospital where the crooked doctor worked, called softly through the window. When the doctor looked out, Reeves thrust him through with my umbrella-sword, then shoved me through the window. He thought that I'd be accused of the murder. Later, if he were questioned about the papers I read and the body I saw, he would say it was Wilson's. It was a perfect setup; for everybody, including Wilson, who would be dead. Reeves would be richer by a half million dollars, and there could be no kick-back."

Harvey Wilson sprang to one side, his gun centering on Reeves.

"It makes sense," he said shortly, "so much sense, in fact, that I think we'll discard the original plan—and I'll take my chances with Trotter!"

"I'm getting out," Reeves said.

"Get back!" Wilson's gun hand lifted a trifle.

"Try to stop me and there'll be trouble!" Reeves cried, took a backward step, his eyes wild with indecision.

Harvey Wilson emptied his gun into Reeves' blocky body.

MR. BINGLER stood paralyzed with horror as the gun roared in the killer's hand. He couldn't move, and his hand was tight on the tear-gas gun in his coat pocket. For a moment the tableau held, and then Reeves was only a writhing mass of flesh on the floor, crimson staining his shirt front.

The killer, his face satanic, whirled to Mr. Bingler, lifted the gun. There was hate and fear and utter savagery in his thin face as he took a slow step forward.

"It ends this way," he said softly. "There can be no other. You were found by Reeves, and shot him to death. I came in just in time to kill you."

Mr. Bingler couldn't speak past the lump in his throat. He felt anything but heroic as he faced the master villain, and he knew instinctively that the sands of life were running out.

He gasped, jerked his clenched hand from his pocket. But in his frantic haste, he released the trigger. There was a muffled shot, and tear gas billowed from his pocket.

He heard the click of Wilson's empty gun, went scrambling to one side. But Wilson had divined the movement, and caught him before he could round the couch. The killer was incredibly strong, and his clutching fingers brought red ribbons of pain to the smaller man's body. But Mr. Bingler was imbued with the strength of terror, and he drove the heavier man back.

And then Wilson caught Mr. Bingler with a looping right that threw him back a dozen feet, and then followed with a brutality that was horrible. He caught Mr. Bingler by the throat, bent him backward over a chair arm, squeezed with relentless pressure.

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Gas still boiled from Mr. Bingler's raincoat pocket, and its burning fumes clouded the eyes of both antagonists with pain.

Mr. Bingler felt the blood congesting in his head, knew that his spine would snap at any moment. He beat futilely at the killer with his small hands, and even as a terrible greyness clouded his vision, he remembered the one weapon he had been too terrified to use.

His hands fumbled together beneath the straining chest of the murderer, and then he struck again and again into the man's body. He felt the fetid breath on his face for only a brief second, then a curtain of blackness stretched over his consciousness. His arms struck feebly again and again. And then he knew no more.

And even as Mr. Bingler became unconscious, Wilson loosed his grasp, stared incredulously at the little man, took a faltering step, and crumpled to the floor beside Reeves' body.

"Drink this, Mr. Bingler," a voice said, and liquid fire seemed to sear his throat.

Mr. Bingler gasped, gagged, came instantly back to consciousness. He sat up wildly, his hands coming up for defense, then relaxed when he saw the concerned face of Captain Donovan hovering over him.

"Wilson!" Mr. Bingler said weakly. "He's the murderer. He killed Reeves and tried to kill me. And he—!"

"Take it easy, Mr. Bingler," the detective said gently. "He's over there handcuffed. Reeves was still alive when we got here, and he told us the whole story."

Mr. Bingler mopped his eyes with the wet rag the detective was holding out, swung so that the cool breeze from the window swept his face.

"How'd you get here?" he asked.

Captain Donovan shook his head. "Don't ask me!" he said. "Things have happened so fast today and tonight, I don't know which way is up. And you seemed to be mixed up in damn near everything. You said you were on the tracks of a murder. Then there was a call from uptown. I got

there, and the doorman described you as the man he thought killed Miller. I came back to the office to question you, got there just in time to hear that you had killed a doctor. I went there to investigate, and got a call that there was gunfire here. I come here and the place looks like a slaughter house. For a little man, you really get around."

Mr. Bingler's grin was a sickly thing to see. "Sometimes," he admitted, "I think I get around too much!"

The detective nodded sympathetically, his eyes roaming around the room. "How'd you manage to lay that Wilson out so cold?" he asked. "Hell, you surely don't pack that big a punch!"

Mr. Bingler smiled, held out his right hand so that the huge cameo ring was exposed. "It's a trick ring," he explained. "When the set is twisted at right angles to the mounting, it looses two hypodermic needles. And then every time I hit somebody, the needles inject a knock-out drug."

He sat up suddenly, his eyes wild and distended with inner excitement. He braced himself with both hands on the floor, as the detective held him back with a steady hand.

"Easy, Bingler," Captain Donovan said, "you've been through an awful lot tonight!"

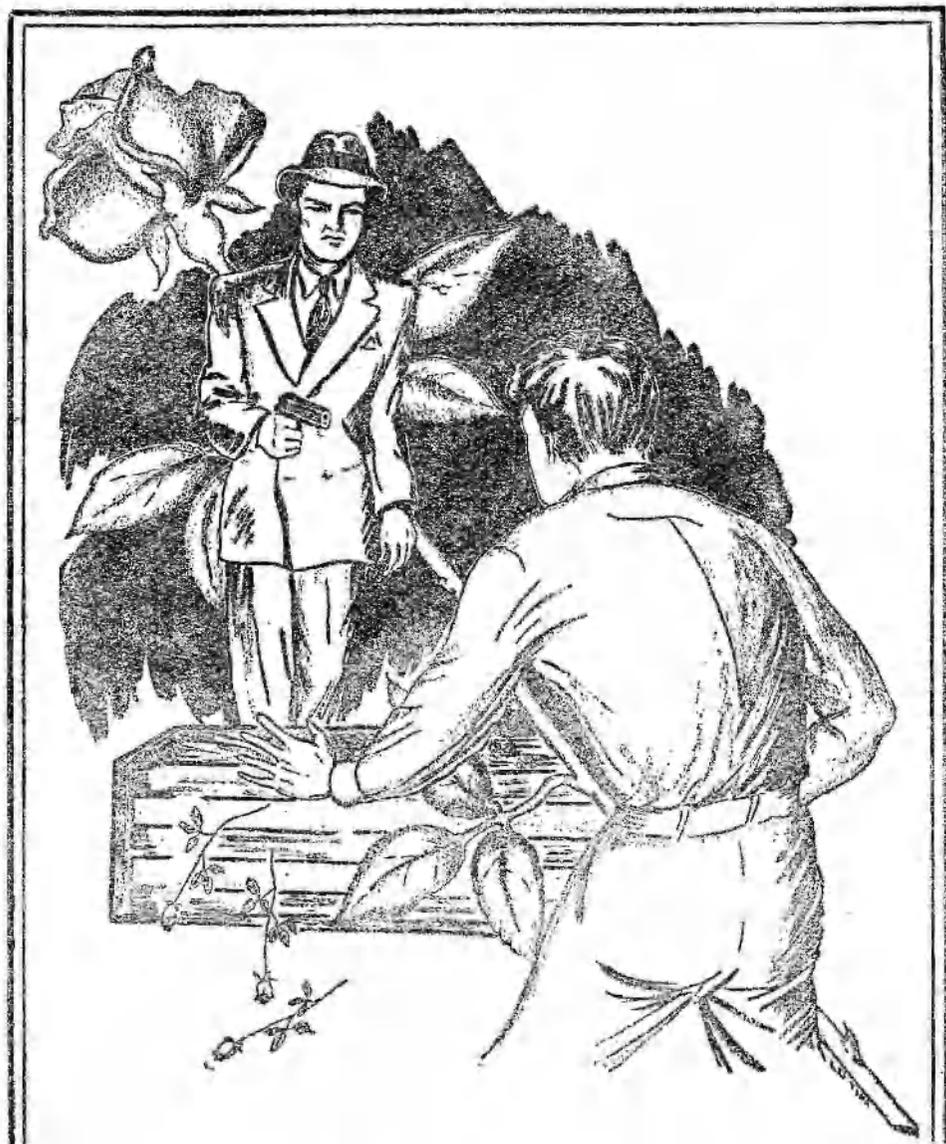
Mr. Bingler felt the twin bite of the hypodermic needles as he sat back on his hands, but his mind was too concerned with another problem to give it any thought.

He caught at the detective's arm with excited fingers.

"Look," he said rapidly, "my home Detective Course says that masks have but one use in crime—and yet I've found another! That means I can write a thesis, and—!"

He fell into a delightful brown study, unconscious of the detective's puzzled gaze. And as the slow numbness crept up his thin body from his needle-punctured, meager posterior, his rabbit face beamed with the rapture of a world-conqueror.

"Mr. J. C. Bingler, MD, Master Detective!" he murmured incredulously to himself. And passed out cold.



NICE CORPSES LIKE FLOWERS

By Dorothy Les Tina

The only clue was a gilt letter U clutched in the dead man's stiffening fingers!

THE BASEMENT of the flower store was chill with dampness; the naked light-bulb above the work table glaring harshly, piled up huge, crouching shadows in the corners. It glinted on police coat buttons.

Detective Clint Fleming pushed his brown felt hat farther back on his crinkly black hair and contemplated the body at his feet. Then he turned and swung sharp eyes at the group huddled behind him.

"I suppose," he said wearily, "none of you know anything about this—"

Three heads shook quickly, involuntarily.

Clint Fleming glanced down again at the body of the slender young man. A florist's knife—the kind used for trimming flowers—was in his chest, in the center of a crimson splash on his white shirt front. Only the green enameled handle was visible. The head and shoulders were part way under the work table, and the thin little coroner was complaining bitterly as he crawled out, stood up and brushed off his knees.

"Why," he asked no one, "do corpses always get themselves in such awkward positions?"

He picked up his worn satchel, clapped his hat on his head, and said briskly, "I'll send my report around as usual. Fellow's been dead about ten hours."

Clint Fleming nodded absently, and nudged the gilt letters that lay in confusion on the cement floor with the toe of his shoe. In his hand he held the letter U he had picked from the dead man's fingers. The pigeon-holed box that had held the letters lay overturned, empty. A cluster of M's were scattered near the lifeless hand.

"Okay, cover him up," Detective Fleming jerked over his shoulder to one of the blue-coated officers. Then he turned back to the silent three.

The redhead was crying soundlessly into her handkerchief.

"All right," he said, "let's get down to cases. Tell me again what happened."

The girl spoke. Her name was Pat Murray; she was new in the store, learning the flower business. She had discovered the body of Fred Jensen that morning when she had come

down to the basement to bring up some vases.

"Who called the police?" Clint asked.

The tall, sallow young man on the girl's right answered. "I did. I'm Jack Unger. I deliver the orders. Pat came screaming up the stairs—"

"Unger," Clint repeated. He glanced down at the paper letter in his hand and his gray eyes narrowed.

The young man flushed. "Just because that letter was—" he moistened dry lips—"in Fred's hand, it doesn't mean—"

"Damn it," Clint interrupted sharply, "it means something! Why would he have picked out a U? You use these letters to print out sentiments on ribbons, don't you? For funeral pieces?"

At his last words the girl squeezed her blue eyes shut, pressed the back of her hand against her mouth. Her slim shoulders trembled under her smock. Jack Unger touched her arm lightly and she drew away.

"It'll be all right, Pat," he said softly. She did not answer.

THE MAN on her left spoke for the first time. He was short and stocky, his black eyes antagonistic.

"Listen, Mister," he told Clint, "Pat's had about all she can stand. We don't know any more than we told you."

Clint looked at him. A brief smile flickered on his lips. Then he shrugged. "Sure," he said kindly, "but somebody has to ask questions. The Chief has plopped this case in my lap. It's up to me."

Clint thought: this being a detective isn't so hot. Nobody likes you—they're afraid if they do you'll turn around and pin a murder rap on them.

He glanced at Pat and she looked hastily away. Any other time, under the right circumstances, a girl like that would smile if a fellow's eyes showed that he thought—Clint broke off his thoughts. He hadn't missed

the look that crossed her face when Unger touched her arm. Or the fact that the paper U in his hand was the second letter of her last name. It was also the second letter of murder.

Had Fred Jensen been trying to spell out something?

"Where's the boss?" Clint asked suddenly. "Who is the Davies this store is named after?" He looked a question at the stocky, dark man.

"My name's Herb Martin. Thomas Davies owns the store. He's usually here, but he's been home the past few days. Heart trouble."

"He's been notified?"

The man nodded. "He said the police are welcome to come out and he'll tell them what he knows."

Clint made a wry face. "Helpful people rarely know anything of use," he observed. He started to walk toward the stairs that led up into the shop.

"I wouldn't take any sudden trips, if I were you," he told them. Then, with his hand on the wooden banister, he stopped. He took a deep breath of the damp air.

He turned to Pat Murray and asked slowly, "Isn't that lilacs I smell?"

She nodded and pointed to a large table that stood against a gloom-shrouded wall. "They're over there. We have more upstairs."

Clint pursed his lips. His words, when he brought them out, were careful. "Last week I tried to buy some lilacs—I was told that the season has been over for a half a month. How come you still have them?"

The girl started to speak, but Herb Martin interrupted with,

"So we're lucky? So what difference does that make?"

"None at all—I suppose," Cliff told him slowly. Then he leaned forward and his words were chill. "You know," he said, "I don't think I'm going to like you. And if I were you—I wouldn't make me positive of it."

Then he looked past the man. "You

can have the body taken away," he told one of the officers.

He went on up the stairs.

TOM DAVIES seemed more than anxious to help and he sat in a deep leather chair, his broad face puckered into a frown of worry, his fingers picking at the front of his dressing gown. His false teeth flashed whitely when he spoke.

"A terrible thing," he said. "A terrible thing, really. Fred was a nice boy. Why anyone should—"

"He had no enemies?"

Tom Davies' eyebrows drew down. "I don't want to say anything that will put blame—but, well, he and Jack Unger were both interested in Pat."

"And she preferred Jensen?"

The man nodded. "I don't think Jack would have—"

"What about Herb Martin?"

"Oh, he's all right. Bit of a temper, but—"

Clint sighed. "You think Unger did it?"

Davies stiffened. "I didn't say that! In fact—" his eyes narrowed—"this would be just the sort of thing Mike Slone would have wanted to happen. He—" He broke off.

"Go on."

"Well, Slone has the flower shop on the next corner. He's been fighting me for years. Plenty tough customer. Lately he's been making threats."

"What kind?"

Davies waved a vague hand. "Says I ruin his business."

Clint murmured deep in his throat. Then he stood up. "I'll go around and see him." He put out his hand. Davies took it, gripped it tightly. "I'm going to try to get down to the shop tomorrow," the florist said. "Let me know if you find out anything."

Clint grinned crookedly at him. "You'll know," he promised.

CLINT parked his car at the curb, and went to the door of "Davies Flowers" and rapped on the glass. Pat came to let him in. She was alone.

"How come you didn't go home?" Fleming wanted to know.

She smiled thinly at him. "I'd rather work—it keeps my mind busy. There are a lot of orders to get out. Phone orders." She jerked her red head at the crowd clustered outside the plate glass windows. "Would they love to come in and stare?"

"Probably you can open the store tomorrow," Clint told her. "But, where is everybody?"

"Herb is out having lunch; Jack is delivering."

"Look," Clint asked, "mind if I talk to you?"

She shook her head and walked back to the counter on which she had been working. She picked up a snapdragon spike and with deft fingers stripped off the leaves.

Clint watched her until she had finished the bunch. Then she took the coppery blossoms, put them in a water-filled vase. Her hands stopped as Clint asked slowly, "Was Fred Jensen in love with you?" She stood a moment, her red lip caught in her teeth, then she answered, "Yes, I guess he was. I liked him—that was all."

"And Jack Unger?"

She turned to him then. "Mr. Davies said that Jack killed Fred because of me?" she demanded.

Clint lifted one shoulder. "Could be."

"I don't believe it," she said hotly.

"Simmer down—nobody's accusing him. You like him, huh?"

Pat tossed her head. "No," she said flatly.

"He's been trying to change your mind—and Fred didn't like that?"

"Well—" she began, then her voice trailed off. Nervously she picked up a glass bottle, unscrewed the cap, poured two white pellets into her

palm and dropped them into the vase that held the snapdragons.

"What's that?" Clint asked curiously.

"Aspirin. It makes them last longer."

"As long as three weeks?" Clint's words were quick. "Or more?"

The girl looked startled. "I don't know—" she faltered.

Clint leaned toward her, over the counter. "Doesn't it strike you strange that you have flowers out of season when no one else has?" He pointed to a bowl of yellow roses in the window. "How long have they been there?"

Pat followed his motion. "Well, they're pretty expensive; they haven't sold."

"How long?"

"About three and a half weeks."

Clint looked thoughtful. "See you later, chick," he said abruptly, "I'm going down the street."

MIKE SLONE'S store was called "The Patio." It was smaller than Davies' flower shop. A small, pasty-faced man came around the counter as Clint entered.

"Can I help you?" he began.

"You Mike Slone?"

The man bobbed his head. "That's right."

"Detective Fleming," Clint said. "Investigating the murder of Fred Jensen. Did you know him?"

Mike Slone swallowed hastily. "Yes, I'd seen him around. Poor boy. I heard—"

Clint leaned against a glass case, dug in his pocket, pulled out a crushed package of cigarettes, selected one and lit it. He blew out a cloud of blue smoke and asked, "Know anything about him?"

Slone shook his head hastily. "Seemed like a bright boy. Lots of times I wished he was working for me—but I don't know anything that would help you."

Clint dragged on his cigarette.

"Davies says you've threatened him."

The little man's pale blue eyes widened. "I may have done some talking, but I didn't mean anything by it, honest! He does a good business, and I guess sometimes I get jealous."

Clint looked thoughtful. "I see."

He shrugged, then. "Well, thanks. I'll be going—"

Clint left the store, got into his car. His eyes were narrowed, speculative. That gilt U—where did it fit?

U for Unger, U in Murray, U in murder. . . .

He steered his coupe through the traffic over to the West side where Jensen had lived. It was a red-bricked rooming house with a sign, "To Let" in a lower, dirt-smearred window.

The landlady leaned on her broom and waved him crossly up the stairs when he asked Jensen's room number. He'd sent Wilson and the fingerprint gang over earlier.

Wilson opened the door at Clint's knock. He grinned at the detective. "Though you'd be showing up soon."

Fleming glanced quickly around. "What you find?"

Wilson spread wide hands. "Everything—and nothing." He waved a hand at the disorder of opened bureau drawers, clothes scattered on the floor, the bed ripped apart. "Place was like this when we came. The door had been forced. Somebody was powerfully anxious to find something—"

Clint scarcely heard him, for he had walked a few steps, stooped and picked up a half dozen yellow pencils from the floor. He whistled a thin thread of a tune from between set teeth as he studied them. All the points were well worn down. There were teeth marks at the eraser ends.

"Seems," he observed half to himself, "that our friend Mr. Jensen did a powerful lot of writing lately. Wonder what?"

THE NEXT afternoon Clint Fleming was exactly where he had been the day before—nowhere near a solution. He'd been to see the a solution. He'd been to see the chief—which did nothing for his ego, as Chief Cummings had said he'd better start showing some action, or else. And the "or else" had been punctuated by the slam of a big fist on the top of a desk. . . .

He walked into the Davies' flower store and Pat looked up from some violets she was stemming and came over to him. She looked better today—prettier, if possible. Some color had flowed back into her cheeks; her eyes had lost that reddened look.

"Hello there," Clint said. He smiled, and Pat smiled back. This was more like it—"Your boss in?" he asked.

The girl nodded, motioned with her red-curled head toward the balcony that ran half way around the inside of the store.

"He's up in his office." She rested quick fingers on his arm. "Have you found out anything?" she asked worriedly. Clint shook his head, and glanced past her to where Herb Martin and Jack Unger were standing. Neither smiled, and Herb's eyes were chill as they met Clint's. In Unger's, Clint saw sudden jealousy flare. Strangely, Clint wanted to grin—both those men were jealous of him! Of course, it was no wonder when a girl looked like Pat. . . .

"See you later, chick," he told her softly.

He turned and almost tripped over a flat, wood-slatted crate of roses that lay on the floor behind him. The roses were yellow-red and wrapped tightly in waxed paper. He bent and touched one of the buds with a forefinger—the flowers almost looked artificial.

Then, behind him, someone snapped, "Keep your hands off those flowers!"

He whirled and stared into the narrowed eyes of Herb Martin.

"Why so touchy, Martin?" he asked quietly.

The man's fist curled. "Roses cost money and I don't want a dumb cop spoiling them—"

Clint studied him coolly, then deliberately he bent down, broke off a bud and put it in his buttonhole. He gave it a final pat.

"So?" he suggested.

Martin teetered close, his face dark with anger. Then, with an effort he kept his voice quiet. Over his shoulder he said, "Pat, fix Mr. Fleming a gardenia—he wants a boutonniere."

"Thanks, I already have one," Clint told him, and turned and went up the stairs that led to Davies' office.

Davies was behind his desk. "Hello, Mr. Fleming," he said. He pulled worriedly at his chin.

Clint sat down in a straight-backed chair. "Now," he began, "have you any idea why Jensen was here, alone, last night? Who closed the store?"

Davies leaned back. "He did. I talked to Unger and Martin. They, and Miss Murray left the same time. Fred was going to clean up some things in the basement before he went home. I—" He broke off and stared at the rose in Fleming's buttonhole. "Where did you get the Talisman?"

Clint grinned. "It's one of yours."

Davies seemed to be waiting for him to say more. Finally he asked slowly, "Martin give it to you?"

"No—I took it. Why?"

Davies laughed falsely. "Martin's very fussy about the roses. They're sort of his department—" He tapped on his desk top with a pencil.

Clint's eyes were narrowed, watching him. "Yeah," he said absently. Then he got to his feet. "Well, I'll be shoving. See you around, Davies."

He went down the stairs and stopped at the counter where Pat was making the wired violets into a corsage. Her fingers were stained from the maiden hair fern.

He kept his voice low, and for her ears. "Look," he said. "Take care of yourself—"

Her eyes widened. "Why—what's the matter?"

He shrugged briefly. "I don't know, but there's plenty. Sometimes I get feelings—and I have one now." He glanced around the shop. "The answer's here someplace, if only I could find it—"

Abruptly he drew an order pad toward him and scribbled a number on it. He creased the sheet carefully and dropped it into Pat's smock pocket. "This is just in case. If you hear anything, or see anything you think I ought to know about—call me."

He caught Martin watching him, so he bent his head to the rose in his lapel. He took a deep sniff.

"This," he said, "at least smells good—"

A BELL was ringing someplace. For a long time Fleming lay in his bed, his eyes closed, hoping it would go away.

It didn't. Finally, with a sigh, he opened his eyes and reached for the alarm clock. His hand stopped half way through the motion—the room was dark. It was still night.

He sat up suddenly, awake now. He scooped the telephone receiver from its cradle on the night stand.

"Hello?" he said sharply.

A voice blurred at the other end. An excited voice; a voice shrill. Clint broke into the words.

"Take it easy—I can't understand you."

"This is Clint Fleming, isn't it?" the voice wanted to know. He recognized it, then.

"Oh it's you, Pat," he said quickly. "What's wrong?"

"Clint—I've found out something!"

"Yes? What? Where are you?"

"I'm down at the store. I came back tonight. After you said you

thought the answer was here, I decided to look around—”

“Crazy kid!”

“Well, I got to thinking about those Talisman roses. There’s something funny about those crates. I never—”

Clint cut her off. “And what did you find?”

“I—” she began.

“Yes—go on.”

There was no answer. Clint’s hand grew clammy on the receiver. He listened—the phone was dead. “Pat!” he shouted. Still the fear-starting silence.

In one motion he had dropped the phone and was reaching for his clothes. There was only one reason why Pat didn’t answer—and that reason sent the blood from his face, leaving him white-lipped, trembling.

He waited only long enough to pick up his gun. . . .

As Clint Fleming careened his coupe through the deserted streets he suddenly reached up and felt at his buttonhole. The rose was gone; he had lost it someplace.

Mentally he damned himself—he’d had the answer on his lapel and never realized it! But what was the connection?

He screeched his car to a stop in front of the darkened flower shop, then he thought of calling the chief. But there wasn’t time for that now—not with Pat in danger.

He didn’t expect the front door to be unlocked, but it was. It swung open under his hand and he walked into the store, his gun fisted.

“Pat!” he called. “Where are you?”

His voice echoed back at him, there was no other sound. Just the quiet, cool air, heavy with the scent of flowers.

He walked softly to the basement door, opened it a crack. A light glimmered up from below, and he heard, now, a feverish rustling. Cautiously he started down the wooden

stairs. The third step creaked under his weight, and abruptly the light winked out.

That was all—no sound, just the darkness rushing in.

Clint stood where he was, poised, listening for the rasp of a foot, anything. There was nothing.

He inched his way forward, and again the stairs protested.

Then, shattering the quiet, splitting the darkness, a gun spoke! Clint heard the bullet ricochet from the cement wall scarcely a foot from his head. But now he knew the direction, now he had a target for his gun.

He pulled the trigger twice, but his aim was wrong. Again the orange flame blossomed, and this time the slug was closer. Too close.

He plunged down into the darkness, firing as he went, aiming a little to the left of the last flash.

There was a sharp cry that slipped down scale into a moan—he hadn’t missed that time! He felt for the light switch at the foot of the stairs, flicked it. The shadows fled.

To the left, by a wooden crate, a man was sprawled. Fleming walked to him, turned him over.

Herb Martin!—a trickle of blood seeped out of his hair where Clint’s bullet had grazed him.

CLINT looked at the crate. It was the same one he had seen earlier, only now the waxed-paper-wrapped bundles of roses lay scattered on the cement. He stooped, picked up a bunch. The buds were open—but not naturally—they had been forced open. The very center of the roses were missing. And then Clint saw the little pile of white-powder-filled capsules by Martin’s hand.

The detective whistled softly. “Dope,” he murmured. “So that’s the answer—they were smuggling dope in the roses. . . .”

But that would have to wait. Right now he had something more impor-

tant to worry about—Pat was still missing.

He turned, went up the stairs, calling her name, searching the office. *If she's here*, he thought, *she'd answer—if she could.*

But there was no sign of the girl—she had disappeared completely.

He was just passing the counter, on his way back downstairs, when his foot caught on something. He reached down and felt it. It was a string—no, it was a ribbon, a long streamer that unwound from the big spool on the counter as he pulled at it.

Where was the other end? He tugged, the ribbon did not give. He hadn't been able to find the switch that worked the fluorescent lights, so now he struck a match.

The ribbon curled away into the gloom, toward the side of the store. Gathering it in his hand he followed it. It stopped at the crack of a small, narrow door.

Then he knew. Pat was inside—in the refrigerator! He jerked open the door. The chill, icy air struck him as he went inside. He groped on the floor. His fingers overturned a vase, sent it crashing. Then he touched a shoulder, a face, soft hair.

He didn't breathe as he bent over the girl—was she alive? She was, she stirred slightly and moaned. The other end of the ribbon spool was twisted in her fingers.

He picked her up gently, whispering her name incoherently, and carried her out into the store. He laid her down. He thought savagely, *Where is that damn switch—I have to see!*

This time he found it, and the fluorescence flooded the room. In its soft glow he studied her face anxiously. Then he took a deep breath. She was going to be all right. Just knocked out.

Her eyes fluttered open and she struggled to sit up. Then she clung to him, sobbing.

"It's all right, darling," he soothed.

"The roses—" she began brokenly.

"It's all over. I know about them. Martin's down in the basement, unconscious."

"Then he—"

"Hush, darling." He helped her to her feet. "You a'l right now?"

She nodded, swaying a little.

Clint turned and went to the wall phone. He dialed a number, spoke briefly to the chief. Then he hung up and dialed another number. When a voice answered he said, "Davies—come on down, I've found your murderer."

THE COPS were already there when the store owner came hurrying in. His broad face was tense, and he looked as if he had fallen into his clothes.

He went to where Clint was standing, talking to the chief.

"Who did it?" he demanded. "Was it Unger?"

Fleming shook his head slowly. "Davies, did you know that Martin was in the dope smuggling business?"

The man's eyes widened and his face paled. "No—" he managed. "You mean, here, in my store?"

Clint nodded. "Yes. That was why he didn't let anyone touch certain crates of roses but himself—"

"And Fred Jensen must have discovered it," Davies cut in. "And that was why he killed him."

The detective shook his head slowly. "That may have been one of the reasons why Jensen had to die—but not the only one. Martin told me before they took him to the hospital. Jensen had discovered a formula for preserving fresh flowers. There's thousands in such a discovery—"

"Yes. Jensen wanted to patent his formula, which was his right. For that, and because he was getting suspicious—he had to die."

Davies shook his head bewilderedly. "To think that Martin killed Jensen—"

A faint, hard smile flickered at Fleming's mouth.

"But he didn't—"

"You said—well, who *did* then?"

Davies exploded.

Clint's voice was very quiet. "You did, Davies!"

"You're insane!" The man backed away.

"You're the one who's insane," the detective said relentlessly. "Martin didn't know actually who killed Jensen any more than I did—until I began to add things up. The flowers lasting longer in your store than anywhere else. The fact that Jensen's room was searched. That damn U in Jensen's fingers—I finally tumbled to the fact that the poor kid had been trying to spell out something . . . and 'formula' is about the only word with a u in it that would fit into the picture.

"You wanted the discovery yourself, didn't you, Davies? You pictured yourself cornering the flower market—"

"It's a lie!" Davies cut in shrilly.

Fleming went on savagely, as if he hadn't heard. "You didn't even trust Martin, so you did it yourself—and tried to pin it on Unger. Failing that, you would have let Martin die for the murder you committed. He'll get plenty on the dope charge—but you, you're going to get the chair!"

On his last words, Davies lunged at Clint, his short arms flailing. It

was almost pitiful, the ease with which Clint's rock-hard fist arced up and caught him on the point of his soft jaw.

He sagged to the floor without a sound, and disappeared under a wave of blue-coated backs.

Fleming rubbed skinned knuckles and walked to where Pat was standing, white-faced, her hand to her throat.

He put out an arm and drew her to him. She stared up at him with wide eyes. "How did you know for sure, Clint?" she whispered shakily.

He grinned and kissed her on the tip of her tilted nose. "There was one little thing that really set me thinking—those pencils I found in Jensen's room. They were all badly chewed. And then I saw Davies playing with a chewed pencil. I knew it wasn't his, that he had picked it up someplace—It might have been coincidence—but it started me thinking."

"But how did you know it wasn't Davies'?"

Fleming laughed deep in his throat. "A guy with false teeth doesn't go around biting on pencils, does he?"

Then he looked at Pat a long moment. "How good are you at making bridal bouquets?" he asked suddenly.

"Why?"

"Because I got a feeling we're going to be needing one."

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A SAM SPAULDING

STORY

By

Fred J.

Ford



THE STOOLPIGEON PLOT

In which Ol' Sheriff Spaulding swallows the bait, and Mike Murphy has to get him off a criminal's hook—if he can!

“**T**HE NICE thing about you, Sambo,” I said sarcastically—after Sheriff Spaulding had stormed into my weekly Lakeland “Ledger” newspaper office and planted his huge hindquarters on my wife’s typewriter stool—“is that you never lose your temper; never get mad.”

The Big Baboon glared across the room at me—I was sitting behind my flat-topped editorial desk—and while

he hadn’t as yet cussed a single cuss, still I knew that Ol’ Sam was so hot you could have fried a fresh fish on his big bald dome. Then Bess, my red-headed wife, secretary, steno’-and-office duster—well, she pranced in. Bess likes our over-sized, over-stuffed, over-rated, brave-but-only-half-baked county sheriff. She failed to note his angry mood, said: “’Lo, Sam,” her usual greeting. Spaulding failed to reply, so Bess turned to me and gave forth a sound best described

as a giggle gone goofy. And then she said: "What now, Mike? What ails my palsy-walsy?"

"Damfino, Brick," I replied. "The big mucky-muck mushed in here, only a couple of minutes ahead of you, and all he's done so far is to stare and glare." So Bess said:

"What's biting you, Sam? Speak up! I'm your good friend, you know. Ignore 'Murder-Minded' Mike Murphy, and tell your constant and fond admirer."

That brought a one-word reply. Ol' Sam roared: "Nuts!"

"He probably means that he's gone nuts, Bess," I ventured.

Ol' Sam bellowed: "More nuts!" Scowling deeply.

"And being bugs, himself, he thinks everyone else is," I continued, speaking mildly—attempting to roil him up. You see, I know all the best ways to do that little thing! And that did. It brought the sulky sap off that stool in self-defense, crying indignantly:

"Ye people think ye have a lot to contend with—puttin' out an eight-page scandal sheet, once a week, filled with stuff ye buy or swipe from big-name writers, mos'ly—but if ye had to run a jailhouse for a month ye'd go wiggly-waggy, too. The same as me!"

I thought things had gone far enough, and that I should try to straighten the Big Boy out. So I said: "I've never known you to have a great deal of trouble handling your guys and gals—once you had them in your clink, Sambo."

"That's 'cause ye don't know. Plenty o' 'em raise a heap o' hell, over there. Jus' 'cause I don't advertise the fact, ever'time somebody does—well, that don't mean managin' a jug is a jolly job, by a damned sight!"

"Who's in your remaining hair, now, Sam?" Bess quizzed, striking straight at the root of the matter—like she really can, but seldom does. And for a damned wonder.

"A young squirt who says his name is Joe Smith. Smith, hell! He's a Pole, or a Swede. Or a something."

"How do you know, if you don't know him? Maybe he really is Joe Smith. There are several Smiths in this world—and there might be a Joe among them. A guy by that name built Salt Lake City and—" I said.

"Bosh! O' course there are Joe Smiths in this world—but this guy ain't one o' 'em. I'd bet on that."

"What did he do to get into your copious can? And what is he doing, now, to get you so upset?" I next inquired, adding: "Tell, Poppa."

THAT blew Ol' Sam up again, higher than a barrage balloon—which he somehow resembles—but he finally cooled off and began giving us a few facts.

"Las' Sunday night," Sam began, "some dame phones in an' tells me that there's a couple of guys out by her house actin' s'picious as the very devil. She says they are sneakin' aroun' an' aroun' a little groc'ry store that's owned by a widdier woman, who's away; an' she thinks they're aimin' to rob it."

"So what?" Bess prompted, as Sam slowed down.

"So I clim' in my car an' rolled out there."

"Jolted out there, you mean, Sambo," I corrected—and got hell for that interference from both Sam and Bess. Then:

"I got out there jus' as these two guys—a great big bird, an' this little bit o' a bum—jus' as they start to bash in a back door. I pile out o' my rig an' promptly proceed to collar 'em. I get a good holt on both o' them guys, before they realize they've got company; but 'mediately after that they begin rarin' an' tearin' an' jitter-buggin' aroun' until the big bird finally manages to jerk himself loose. He runs. I keep a good hold on the little louse an' pull out my gun an' holler for the bird makin' off to

halt. But he don't, so I begin to fire. Miss him a mile, I do, 'cause the little punk keeps on squirming an' jumpin' an' leapin' aroun' a-purpose to spoil my aim. But I hang onto this little so-an'-so, I do—even if I have to give the big baby up as lost, temporarily."

Sheriff Spaulding paused briefly, at this point, and a muttered malediction escaped him. One not intended for our ears, I guess. And then he continued:

"Anyway, I finally get this crooked little cuss down to the calaboose an' start questionin' him. Then's when he tells me his name is Joe Smith; that he has no more home than a white chip in a stud-poker game; that him an' this big bird was merely lookin' for a place to sleep—an' that if I ain't satisfied to book him as Joe Smith, I can put it down as Joe Doe or Joe Roe, or I can go to hell!"

Amusement glinted in Ol' Sam's dark-brown eyes, for a few moments, but vanished as he began talking to us again.

"I pumped this putrid pup for an hour or so more, but made no progress at all. Had other things I jus' had to do, so I heaved him in a cell. Tol' the turnkey to feed the young yap—an' then see if he could get anything out o' him. But Bert had no luck."

Bert Fairchild is a combination turnkey and deputy sheriff who works for Ol' Sam. (He's got six other deputies, but they live out around the county in various smaller towns and none of them hang around the jail much.)

"Well, Monday mornin' I tried again, but all I got was a lot o' gas—an' sass. This queer squirt tells me that he has no idee who his buddy was. Said he'd jus' met him that Sunday afternoon, down in the jungles; an' that all the name the guy had give him to call him by was 'Fatty.' He's a damn' liar, o' course."

"What makes you so certain, Sam?"

The youngster could be telling you the exact truth," Bess cut in to say; patting down a stray lock of her lovely red hair, and walking up close to Ol' Sam. They are pals, and I'm strong for the big gent, myself—even if I do rib him a lot.

"Fatty ain't this guy's name, by one hell o' a lot. He ain't a fat feller, at all. I had a holt on him, an' he's huge, all right—an' certainly solid—but not fat. Not him! Anyhow, when this big bruiser busted away from me, the little lug yelled: 'Damn! Scram, Ham!'"

"Perhaps Pee-Wee Picklepuss is a poet, Sam!" I just had to remark, and drew one of our sheriff's combination growl-scowls. Ol' Sam has no special sense of humor. He don't like my alleged wise-cracks, not a-tall.

"That shows me he damn'-well knows him, an' is lyin' like hell," Spaulding continued; hard of voice and eye, now. "So I've been fairly busy mos' o' the time since, tryin' to make him unzip his lip. Ain't had no luck, though—so far. The little louse won't sing a note; won't even talk to me, any more. . . . I don't know what to do, less'n I sort o' third-degree the truth out o' him. . . . Yep, guess I'll have to do that."

THAT'S all Bess and I heard about Ol' Sam's contrary little prisoner for almost a week, then the sheriff loped into our Ledger office and informed us that he was now holding this Joe Smith on an attempted-burglary charge; that the Justice of the Peace had set "a thousand-dollar bail hold-order" on Smith—and that the little chap couldn't raise that many cents. Sam also swore out a "John-Doe warrant" against the big boy who had wiggled loose, and escaped—he said—and was anxious to serve the same. "Would to, by cracky, an' before very damn' long," he insisted, adding:

"If I have to take the little louse

apart an' read what's in his mind, myself. I've got him where I can do it, too: in my basement cell-block, forty feet unnergroun'! I'll use it for a bomb-shelter — when an' if Loco Adolph Sicklebugle gets over here; but until he does this little louse stays there. Till all hell freezes over, less'n he talks!"

"Bess and I didn't realize what a Big Bad Bird you are, Sam! Did we, Bricktop?"

Carrot-top said: "No, Shorty." To me; then to Sam: "Are you really going to treat him rough—misuse, abuse the young man? You—your size!"

Sam declared: "He's goin' to talk. That's all. I'll cut off his grub, an' I'll cut off his terbacker—an' I'll cut off his head if he don't come through with his buddy's right name, an' also tell me where to go to put my come-alongs on him! No one guy's goin' to hold out on the interests o' justice, this way. Nor on me. No, sir! An' he can yell all it suits him to, 'cause nobody can hear him, upstairs, or out on the streets!"

"Br-r-r-r!" I said. And shuddered.

Sam replied: "Mebbe ye think I'm kiddin', folks, but I ain't. Wait an' see! An' I'll keep ye both posted on how I'm progressin'. Or on how I ain't."

"It's apt to be ain't, Sambo. If the lad hasn't come in on his pal, so far, he's not likely to—is he?" I quizzed, half sore at Ol' Sam. I've never liked this third-degree stuff. Consider it to be bad business, and dangerous.

"It's quite awhile yet before the grand jury meets, Shrimp," Spaulding snarled at me, adding: "An' long before then the bird'll have talked. Bet ye that he will!" I wasn't having any.

HERE, this recital of Ol' Sam Spaulding's trials and tribulations pauses only long enough for me

to record several pertinent facts, such as:

Sam first cut off young Joe Smith's tobacco supply—hoping to make the youth snitch on his pal—and then he chopped off Smith's chow. Cut him down to a plain bread-and-water diet; still hopeful, and just as unsuccessfully. All of which Ol' Sam honestly reported to Bess and me; but not for publication in my weekly Ledger, of course. That would never do.

"He's still as stubborn as a stinkin' Stuka stormtrooper!" Ol' Sam related, sticking to his usual alliterative style!—but gumming his simile all up. We, however, knew what he meant.

Then three or four more days passed, and the sheriff blew in again. And, now, we saw that Ol' Sam had a beautiful black-and-blue left eye.

"You ran into a cell door, I suppose!" I said to him—in a voice supposed to be a bit silky.

"Cell door, hell! I ran into that rotten runt's right duke—so I did! I was pullin' his right ear, an' I guess he didn't like it. Anyhow, he socked me a beaut, eh? But ye should see him! After he clouted me—well, I really went to work on him!"

"What did he tell you his buddy's name is?" I asked—knowing very well that the kid hadn't talked! (Else Ol' Sam would have said so.)

"He ain't come across with that info', yet, but by cracky, he will. He will—or else!"

"I'm thinking it will be 'or else,' Sambo," I said; explaining: "When any bozo holds out this long, it means that there just isn't an, sharp-nosed, longe-tailed, cheese-eating stuff anywhere in him!"

"He'll rat—before I'm through. Ye'll see! He's hungry. An' plenty hungry. I've not fed the fool a decent meal in over three weeks. I—"

"You should be ashamed of yourself!" I finished for him.

"Ashamed, hell. I set out to make

him tell me his pardner's name, an' I ain't feedin' him till he does! Nor'll I quit slappin' him aroun'. He's too small an' too weak to really clout, any more; but I'll still continue to go down there ever'day an' cuff him—till he does squeal."

"He may do his sentence and be free some day, Sam. If so, you'd better watch your step. It's one thing to whip a mule that's locked in a box-stall, and quite another thing to tackle that same mule when he's loose in a pasture! Then, too, there are a lot of good guns being manufactured in the world today, you know; and Smith might later on get ahold of one and mow you down with it. I wouldn't go much further, if I were you. It just isn't safe." That was my advice. Now, see how good it was!"

THE KID down in the can cellar continued to stand pat, in spite of Ol' Sam's "increased pressure," for several days more and then like a bolt out of the blue—as Bess would put it—young Joe Smith, or whatever the hell his right name was, hauled off and told all! And not because of Ol' Sam's pressure but because he wanted to! (Or so he said.)

"Sheriff, I've decided to tell you what you want to know," Smith began, explaining thusly: "My buddy was 'Big Bill' Burney, and what a swell guy he's turned out to be—leaving me in here to face the rap, alone, and not even sending me over a mouthpiece! No eats! No cigarettes! No nothing. He's a Big Ham, like I sometimes called him."

"That explains ye callin' him 'Ham.' Keep goin'," Spaulding said, making notes on the back of an old envelope. The kid did. At some length.

"You'll find Big Bill hanging around Little Minnie's Dollar Dug-out, down in Valley Alley, almost every night, Sheriff, and I want you to go get him. But you watch your step—because Big Bill is really

tough! He's done a lot of wrestling and boxing, and he's strong as an ox. You'd better take a deputy along, I think. But you get Bill, and after you get him you shove the big bum right down here with me! Leave me to face this thing alone, will he? I'll tell my big pal a thing or two—so I will—and then I haul off and tell him why I snitched!"

OL' SAM ignored Joe Smith's advice about taking a deputy along with him to arrest Big Bill Burney, and went alone. Wasn't he, Sheriff Spaulding, a big man, too? Hadn't he a warrant for Big Bill? And two good Colt 45's? Since when had he needed anyone with him—to pinch any just one man? And wasn't he forewarned that this bozo might prove tough?

Little Minnie's "Dug-out" was a dive well known to Ol' Sam, too; as was Little Minnie—who weighed nearly three hundred pounds, and had a whale-sized mouth! Sam didn't know any of her dames, and didn't want to know them. It was Min's job to handle them, and he wisely let it go at that. She always called him "when things got too hot for her to handle, personally." Which wasn't often.

Minnie was there, when Ol' Sam barged in; and four other husky dames in scant garb, but heavily-rouged, sat at a table sipping highballs. Spaulding said: "Keep your seats. This is no raid. I'm lookin' for a fugitive from justice. One William Burney. 'Big Bill,' folks mos'ly call him. They say he's a hard guy. Any o' ye seen him lately?"

One of the broads said: "He was in here for a while, last night. It's too early for him. Only eleven o'clock. Bill's working somewhere. Try again, about midnight."

Little Minnie tried to catch this dame's eye. Wanted her her to shut up. Big Bill spent a lot of dough at the Dug-out and if he went to jail,

or to the pen'— But she failed to get this jane's attention and the already half-crooked female gabbled on.

"What you want Big Bill for, Sheriff?" she asked.

"For questionin', Nosey," Sam snapped back.

"The name is Rosey, not Nosey! If I was Min' I'd—"

"You ain't Min', Rose! Shet your fool face. Sheriff Spaulding don't come bustin' down here, only when I call him—or he has a tip that—"

"I ain't saying he does, Min'—but just the same, if I was running this dump he wouldn't ever get his fat belly inside that door. I'd make him do his stuff outside. Outside, where he belongs! And I'd phone Big Bill and warn him that the law wanted him. So I would!" And Rose got up, shoved her chair back, and then staggered away from the table.

"Where are ye goin'?" Ol' Sam asked.

"None of your business. Want to come along?"

"Don't ye try phonin' Big Bill an' warnin' him, Woman. Ye do an' I'll toss yer carkass in a cell. Come back here an' squat!"

Rosey must have been quite a bit more than half-soused—or else a born cop-hater—for instead of obeying Ol' Sam she walked over to the side-board, grabbed up a stack of dinner plates and began heaving them at the sheriff. The three other dames leaped away from the table and flew upstairs on wings of fright, while Little Minnie wobbled over to the battling female and did all she could to save the balance of her expensive chinaware—if not Ol' Sam—but Rose just wouldn't quit. The dame was dingy, but her aim was good; and it was while the sheriff was struggling to get handcuffs on the beserk female that Big Bill Burney walked in the back door. Bill saw merely some great big bird, apparently battling Rose and Min', and so

he waded in—swinging. And Big Bill could really swing!

Ol' Sam told me, later: "The big so-an'-so mus' have hit me with a hammer, first, Mike—but after that he only used his fists. An' did he paste me? I never went down—an' came back up—so damn' many times before in all my life! Lut I finally got a gun out an' made him unnerstand what it was all about. Had to clout him over the noggin' a couple o' times with the barrel o' it, first, though."

Then Ol' Sam cuffed Big Bill Burney to a still-cussing "Wild Rose" and took them to the clink. He uncuffed them, put Rose "in durance vile" in the "she section" of his jail—as he calls it—and then he took Burney downstairs to his basement lock-up. To his bomb-proof, sound-proof little cellar, where young Joe Smith was still incarcerated and anxiously waiting for Ol' Sam to bring in his big buddy.

The sheriff, of course, was covered with blood—both his own and Big Bill's; and he even wore some of Wild Rose's!—so he was a sight. And Burney did not look much better. He, too, was plastered with gore. Joe Smith took a good look at them, then began to laugh. To roar—when they finally got there.

"Yer snitchin' !' e pal's laughin' at ye, Bill!" Ol' Sam said. "But he's banged up a bit, himself, ye will notice!"

Big Bill sprang at Little Joe, then, saying: "And th' damned little lousy snitchin' rat is goin' tuh be banged up some more! Squeal on me, will yuh, Rodent! And Big Bill Burney socked Smith a wallop that lifted the young man clear off the floor. Then Burney hit Joe again and again and again. And then again! And until the youngster was completely out and lay on the cement floor like a bundle of old rags. "That'll teach th' fink better'n tuh

stool on me—and when he comes to I'll bust him again!"

"Not tonight, ye won't, Bill—'cause I'm lockin' ye up i' a cell. I don't want ye to murder the squealin' rat. Not down here, see. Wait till ye get him down to the pen'. Then I don't care what ye do! Get in Number Two cell. The other one is his."

Burney obeyed. Ol' Sam locked him up, walked over and looked down at Joe Smith for a minute or so, saw that he was breathing and would come around all right, then he started off. Big Bill yelled at Ol' Sam.

"Ain't yuh goin' tuh lock that thing up, too?"

"No. He can't get away, an' I'm leavin' him out a-purpose. Ye may want some water, or something, before I come down in the mornin'. If so, make him get it for ye."

"I'd choke tuh death before I asked that rat tuh git me—" Big Bill began.

"Have it yer own way. I'm goin' upstairs an' take a bath. See ye both tomorrer, an' if ye'll plead guilty to this attempted-burglary charge mabbe I won't swear out an attempt-to-kill-an-officer warrant against ye, Bill. Think it over."

A FRIEND of mine dropped into my newspaper office early the next morning and told me that Ol' Sam had arrested Big Bill Burney, and he gave me some of the details about the doings out at the Dug-out—and also about Rose Kelly's arrest. (That, at least, was the name the dame "done business" under, and really does not matter.) So when Bess—my red-headed wife—finally drifted down to work, about ten A. M., I told her about Ol' Sam's two pinches and said:

"Guess I'll sneak over to the calaboose and get the whole story. From Sam. He'll be too busy arraigning his two prisoners to come over here and tell us about it in time for me to write up the mess—which I want to

use in tomorrow's paper. And I want to kid Sam a bit. This guy told me that the sheriff took a damned good shellacking before he—"

"I hope Ol' Sam wasn't hurt much, Mike. Go ahead. And while you're out be sure you stop at Reed's Repair Shop and get your automatic. Jack Reed phoned me last night and told me to tell you that it was ready."

I promised to stop for it—and did. And a good thing, too! But wait.

It was about 10:20 when I walked into the jail-office, and all was as quiet as could be. I knew it was Ol' Sam's deputy's "day off," so I figured Sam would be on the job, alone—and around somewhere. He was. But wait!

I waited. Several minutes. Read some reward notices—official "doggers"—looked back and saw that the door leading into the main cellblock was locked on the outside; and then I walked back to the door that leads to Ol' Sam's basement block. That door was slightly open, I noticed. "So that is where he is," I thought. I pulled this door open a bit more, to pass through it, then stopped. Sudden. Damned awful suddenly! For, from below, came a bedlam of sound: A mixture of fists-hitting-flesh sounds, mingled with vile curses.

"Trouble, sure enough, down there," I said to myself, drew my automatic and checked it to make sure that Jack Reed had left it loaded. It was, so I grasped it firmly and crept down those basement stairs. One step at a time. More sounds, and more oaths, continued to roll up. Then distinguishable words.

"Beat up my little buddy, will yuh—yuh so-an'-so—yuh this-an'-that! Yuh big-bellied bum! Take that!" Then a crashing sound. Then a higher-pitched, younger voice, saying:

"You had a lot of fun beating me up, down here, when you had me all alone—didn't you? Well, it ain't

so funny now—is it?” Followed by several sounds that could only have been made by fists beating on flesh. A flock of loud curses and threats, made by Ol’ Sam. Then a lull. Then more words. Explanatory words, now. Spoken by that younger, unseen voice, but loaded with venom.

“You couldn’t make me snitch, you big bully—in spite of you being damned near twice my size, and me half starved to death—could you? No, sir! I held out on you—plenty! Didn’t turn stoolpigeon until I had it all figured out that you would walk right straight into my trap! Until I had you doped out for a sap who’d fall like a Jap—mowed down with machine-gun bullets!”

Someone groaned. It just had to be Ol’ Sam Spaulding, I knew. Some way or other these two crooks had managed it so that they now had the sheriff in their power. And very completely. I went cautiously down another step. The sound of fists striking flesh, again—and again and again and again—and then came that younger voice again:

“No, Copper, I couldn’t beat you, alone—and I couldn’t possibly escape. So what? Hah! I sent you to get my good pal—my old buddy, Big

Bill—knowing damned well that the two of us could glom onto you when you came down with your hands both busy carrying our breakfast tray! And did you walk right into it! Hell, Sap—Bill’s first blow to your chin raised you a good foot off the floor! Funny— isn’t it? Funny as hell, now! Ha, ha—ha!”

SO THAT was how this young slicker had managed the thing—was it?—and just what had I better do about it? I figured that they had Ol’ Sam down on the basement floor, at least—and, no doubt, about out. In which event they would un-both of Ol’ Sam’s big .45’s! What a mess this had turned out to be!

“Should you try it?” I asked myself. “Try it, alone; or sneak back upstairs, block the upper door on them, some way, and go for help?” That was what I had to decide—and it was a tough problem—and then these crooks decided it for me when one of them said:

“Let’s kill th’ big blankety-blank brute! If we don’t, somebody’ll find him an’ set him free—soon—then he’ll spill his guts, get more guns, an’ come after us again. Then he’d kill us—when he caught us!”

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACTS OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AND MARCH 3, 1933

Of Crack Detective, published bi-monthly at Holyoke, Mass., for October 1st, 1942.
State of New York
County of New York ss.

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Louis H. Silberkleit, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the business manager of Crack Detective and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 3071, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are:

Publisher, Harold Hammond, 60 Hudson St., New York City; Editor, Robert W. Lowndes, 60 Hudson St., New York City; Managing Editor, Robert W. Lowndes, 60 Hudson St., New York City; Business Manager, Louis H. Silberkleit, 30 Hudson St., New York City.

2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one per cent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member, must be given.) Columbia Publications, Inc., 60 Hud-

son St., New York City; Harold Hammond, 80 Hudson St., New York City.

3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of the total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: (If there are none so state.) None.

4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him.

5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the twelve months preceding the date shown above is— (This information is required from daily publications only).

LOUIS H. SILBERKLEIT
(Signature of Business Manager)

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 29th day of September, 1942. Maurice Cozyre. (My Commission expires March 30, 1944.) [SEAL]

So they did have Ol' Sam's guns, eh? And from the tone of that voice I knew that they really meant business. That they would bump off my old friend. (I sass and otherwise abuse our grand old sheriff a lot, but I don't want anyone else to do it. No, sir!) So I got an even firmer grip on my swell Colt automatic—which has never jammed or otherwise missed fire on me yet—and made the bottom six steps in two noisy thumps.

The door which leads into Ol' Sam's basement cell-block was a regulation jailhouse door over which the sheriff had wired a lot of steel slats. This served to reinforce it, and I saw that in the event of a gun battle with these birds it would give me additional protection—since only holes about an inch and a half square remained to be shot directly through. Not, understand, that I thought these steel slats heavy or thick enough to stop a slug fired from either of the sheriff's big guns, but they might very well serve to deflect any such red-hot hunk of quickly fired lead.

This door was pulled nearly shut and I proceeded to slam it closed, all the way. It would shut but not lock. Only Sam's key would do that, and no key was in the lock or anywhere in sight. (The crooks had it, I found out later.) Anyway, I was too damned busy to look for a key or anything else—just getting the muzzle of my automatic through one of those little holes. I fired and yelled at the same time, I guess. Fired two shots, right between these two crooks' heads—as they stood right over a reclining Ol' Sam, who I saw was bound and gagged—and I roared:

"Drop those guns, instantly, or I'll mow you down!"

Each guy had one of the sheriff's Colts in his right fist; and when they did not obey quick enough to suit

me, I fired again. Hit the big bird, too, that time. Got him in his right elbow—aiming at his mid-ribs, I was—but it had the same effect! His gun flew out of his hand and clattered to the floor. He let out an agony scream, grabbed his shattered right elbow in his left hand and said: "I quit, Copper! Pal, drop your gat, too."

But still-mad Joe Smith—who Ol' Sam thought was a lousy stool-pigeon—wasn't having any. No, sir. Young Joe was made of sterner stuff. He whipped around and sent three sizzling hot hunks of lead my way! A horizontal iron bar stopped one of these slugs, right in front of my "V-for Victory" belt buckle; and the other two ate chunks out of those steel slats—which zinged all around my head. Those brave Russians over in Stalingrad, who survived, never came any closer to death than I did, right then; but the young devil wasted his last three shots by firing over my head. I was sure of him, now that his gun was empty; and I swarmed in on him before he could reach for, and get, the Colt that Big Bill Burney had dropped. He did reach, but I slammed a .38 slug at his hand, while the going was good, that caused his right thumb and a fore-finger to disappear. Then both crooks decided that I was bad medicine and called it a day. (That suited me, also, I might add!)

● OL' SAM? He's in City Hospital yet, the Big Bum! But he'll be out in a day or so—and am I waiting for him! Bess says I mustn't rub it in—because that gag these two crooks put in Ol' Sam's mouth nearly killed him. But that is what I'm aiming to rib him about. You see, they tied Sam up with his shoe laces, belt and necktie—but they gagged him with a pair of his own stinky socks!

ON THE BEAT

The "Little Fellow" is becoming to be noticed at last; Vice President Wallace tells the listening world that we're about to enter the era of the "common man," and the welfare of untold thousands of "Little Fellows" is recognized in the formulation of the Four Freedoms and the Atlantic Charter. Heretofore it's been the thing to look upon the guy either as an object of charity, or someone to ignore as inconsequential. We know now that both of these viewpoints are wrong.

The "Little Fellow" isn't always small physically, isn't necessarily a rabby character like our own Mr. Bingler. He's likely to be almost anything, and you can be sure that he's in there fighting his end of this war. If he isn't handling a rifle, machine gun, or whatnot on Guadalcanal or points African, he's on the job in war industry, making his man-hours and war bonds count. He's given everything he had before; the "Little Fellow" was the guy who stuck by General Washington at Valley Forge, while a lot of "Big Fellows" were doing the heavy criticising of the new nation's War Effort. And he's come through every time when a crisis arose, when the "Big Fellows" were busy transferring bets and getting ready to give up the ship.

Maybe one reason why Mr. Bingler is so popular is because, despite the fact that he's something of a caricature, he has the real solid character of the "Little Fellow" beneath his timid-seeming nature, and behind the "Oh Dears." He's easily scared, but actually getting him down, and keeping him there is another matter.

We asked author Peacock if he couldn't tell us something about Bingler, and how he happened to be chosen as the (Home Course) Master Detective's chronicler. So Peacock dropped us the following note.

Dear Doc:

Boy, is this going to be fun; I've been wanting to spout off about Mr. Bingler for some months.

He's a friend of mine, a special sort of fellow to have around, for when I get too far down in the dumps, he comes out of nowhere and cheers me up with his cloistered existence and his avidity for anything even pertaining to crime-detection.

We started out together, in some senses of the word, for he was created the first year I started writing. He was the guy who shoved his near-sighted face into a kidnapping case, and after a couple of hundred words, vanished with

a tiny, "Oh dear," of protest.

I let him sleep for a time, then resurrected him when I got tired of my tough dicks slapping suspects about. He grew, became a real person to me, and so I featured him in a series of novelettes, giving him insurmountable hurdles to clamber over in each yarn. The little beggar fooled me; sometimes he went around—or under, my posed problems. And he gained character and strength with every adventure.

He's like a lot of people I know—those who look for adventure, and seldom find it. But Mr. Bingler is luckier; he makes his adventures, starting from absolutely nothing. I sometimes envy his philosophy.

Mr. Bingler is fairly well-known; he has appeared on the NBC National Network, and was well-received by quite a few detective fans.

I think he'll like CRACK DETECTIVE; for he mentioned to me rather wistfully a few months ago that there were some characters therein who could stand a bit of routine examination, as prescribed by his Home Detective Course.

I'm glad that we can both oblige his little whimsies.

As for myself, either a little or a great deal can be said; I'm not certain just which to advocate.

But anyway—

I feel that I've been in this game a long time. My yarns have run in all the major chains of magazines, and have covered the entire field of fiction, with the exception of love stories—at which I must admit I'm not so good, preferring to case-study the subject a bit before trying to write.

I'm from Kansas and Louisiana, and neither state fed me very well—for I'm definitely the lanky, hungry type. I write for a vocation, edit three mags for a vocation and fish for a vocation. Sometimes I just (like Mr. Wiggs of the Cabbage Patch) sit and think things out.

I'd like to spend the rest of my life writing and fishing, and if the army doesn't have other ideas, those are what I shall do. I'm single, with no particular prospects (who said girls OUTNUMBER men? I maintain the word should have been "outmaneuver"!), but I've got ambitions.

I hope your readers like Mr. Bingler; he's a good egg. Give him a whirl, and maybe he'll come creeping back into CRACK DETECTIVE again in the future.

Anyway, he and I hope so.

Cordially,
W. Scott Peacock

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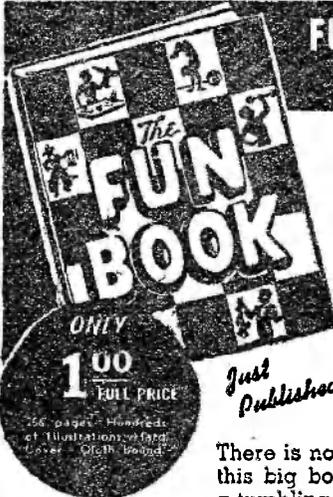
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By Ray Cummings

George Bryan didn't mind being called "Fashion Plate" by the villagers. That was fine. It would fit right in with his plans, for who would suspect the dandified fop he appeared to be of cold blooded murder?

THEY called him Fashion Plate. George Bryan didn't mind it. They were just ignorant village louts, loafers around the pool hall, stationery store and the little railroad station of Shady Valley; they thought, because Bryan took pride in being always carefully dressed, that he was something to jibe at. Beau Brummel. Young George Bryan secretly was pleased at being likened to the famous English dandy. Beau Brummel's name, also, had been George Bryan.

The thoughts were roaming in Bryan's mind tonight, as alone in his car he drove from New York City, out the main highway toward Shady Valley. His nickname of Fashion Plate—surely that would be an advantage this momentous night. Who would ever suspect the immaculate, soft-spoken George Bryan of a deed of violence? He chuckled to himself. The villagers might think of him as a sissy, but never as a murderer...

At the crossroads where the highway went on into the village, Bryan turned off onto the Lake Ontara side road. He watched his chance, so that no one saw him. The time was quarter of ten—a hot July evening. Queer what a breathless night it was! He was conscious that his heart was

pounding; his chest seemed to have a weight on it. Was he frightened, now that his chance had come? Nonsense! Just excited. Fate was with him. Every circumstance was just right. Peter Rawlings would be coming along this lonely road by the edge of the lake, in five or ten minutes now. The thing would be done, in a few minutes after that.

The idea of killing Peter Rawlings had come to Bryan from Rawlings himself. Rawlings had said:

"You know, George, I'm determined to teach myself how to swim this summer, if it kills me."

Just a little thing like that. But Grace—Bryan's sister, who was Rawlings' wife—had heard it; and so had others. It was Bryan's chance. Nothing could seem more obviously accidental than the drowning of a man who had declared he was going to teach himself how to swim, even if it killed him!

And now had come the first breathless, hot night of the summer—just the sort of night that would tempt one to take a dip in the lake. Bryan could see the lake now between the trees that lined the rocky little side road. The water was a big, lead-grey mirror, dark and sullen under the glowering clouds. There might be people and small boats over by the

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Crack Detective

distant opposite shore, far behind the big wooded island, but there was no one here.

At a place where bushes clustered to shroud his car, Bryan turned off the road and hopped out. He was a young fellow, handsome, and as always, immaculately dressed. In the heat, he had taken off his hat and blue serge jacket and laid them on the car seat. His figure was a white blob of white shirt and carefully pressed white linen trousers, as he crouched in the bushes, waiting for Rawlings to come along. It surely wouldn't be long now. Rawlings was a methodical fellow, a creature of habit. You could always depend on him doing the same thing at the same time. He had married Bryan's younger sister, Grace about two years ago. He was rich, or at least comfortably well off—one of those fellows who watched every penny and wouldn't lend a cent to a relative without bankers' security. He owned a small but prosperous department store in Thomasville, some twelve miles away. He closed it at nine-thirty; and every night like clockwork he drove home alone, leaving Thomasville at quarter of ten and coming along this lonely little side road past Lake Ontara.

For another ten minutes Bryan silently crouched. He was tense, alert; his mind was clicking with details of just what he would do so that there would be no possibility of error. There would be no footprints here; no tracks which could be identified as the tread of his tires. The road was hard and dry; the ground all around here was rocky, right down to the rocky shore where the water lapped with a sullen murmur in the stillness.

And suddenly now, faintly in the distance he heard the chug of Rawlings' old, outmoded car. Right on schedule. Bryan's heart leaped, but he steadied himself. He stood in the shadow of a tree-trunk until he could see positively that it was Rawlings,

Beau Brummel Murder

and then he jumped forward. Rawlings, in white shirt and trousers, was a dim white blob behind the wheel. For just a second Bryan thought that there was someone in the back seat of the car behind him, but when he got closer he saw that no one else was there.

"WELL, I say, that you, Peter?" he called.

Rawlings saw him and pulled up. "Hello, George," he said. He was never very cordial. "What are you doing out here?"

Bryan mastered his breathlessness. "Just coming back from New York. Wretchedly hot, isn't it? I thought I'd take a swim. Cool off." He gestured easily with a graceful hand. "My car's down the road a way—thought I'd take a ten-minute dip. Too bad you can't join me, old fellow—you've no idea how invigorating—"

Queer how difficult it was to keep his soft, suave voice normal! This damnable breathlessness! But Rawlings didn't notice. And it wasn't hard to persuade him.

"The human body really floats in water, you know," Bryan was presently saying. "It's lighter than water, when you immerse nearly all of it. But that's the trouble—the beginner wants to climb out of the water and that's what makes him sink."

Gruesome words. Somehow they made Bryan shudder inside. He had had no idea it would be so difficult to do this thing.

"Why not master your fear once and for all?" he added persuasively. "Once you do that, I can teach you to swim in two minutes."

Abruptly Rawlings set his jaw. "All right," he agreed. "I'll do it."

Perfect! Nothing could go wrong now. There was no one to see them as they went down the dark declivity, just two little white blobs down on the sullen shorefront where in a mo-

(Continued On Page 102)

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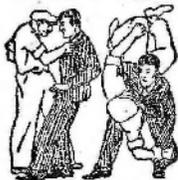
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Crack Detective

(Continued From Page 101)

ment tumbled clusters of rocks and the rise of ground hid them wholly from the road. Hastily they undressed. "I've only got one towel," Bryan was saying smoothly. "But it's a big one; we can both use it."

He had brought the big bath towel from New York. But Rawlings wouldn't be the one to use it; he'd be lying floating in the shallow water... There mustn't be any outcry now. Just a little splashing and gurgling. Rawlings was a man about Bryan's height and build, but older, not so muscular. It wouldn't be hard to hold him under—just for a minute and then he'd inevitably gulp in water and start to strangle. There mustn't be any marks on him; nothing that would show violence...

"I guess—I guess this is deep enough," Rawlings quavered as his instinctive, abnormal fear of the water made him tremble.

"Just a little further," Bryan urged. "I say, old man, don't be such a coward."

It was pathetic to see Rawlings trying to conquer what he knew was an idiotic terror. That was queer, too; Rawlings with that terror all his life, as though something within him, deep beneath his conscious brain, had always known that he was destined to meet his death like this.

"I'll do it if it kills me," Rawlings was muttering. "Damn it, I will."

Gruesome prophecy... Why did he have to say that so much? As though something were making him say it so that Bryan would shudder, with a racing heart and excited, taut nerves to make him fumble this thing? But he wouldn't fumble it... Get him to lie on his back now; and then shove him down, sit on him... Hold him, just for a moment.

Bryan's chest seemed bursting with the excitement of it. But he kept his wits. Water a bit less than waist deep. That would be ideal.

"Now, relax," he heard himself say-

Beou Brummel Murder

ing softly. "You're tense as the devil, Peter. Don't be like that. I won't even let your face get wet. I promise. Come on now, lie back—stretch out. I'll put my hand under your neck. Can't you trust me, old fellow? Think how pleased Grace will be if she can go swimming with you next week."

So easy. A faint smile of triumph twitched at Bryan's lips as he stood beside the shivering, naked Rawlings and the taut body of the older man eased backward with his feet coming up.

"Don't let my head go under, George!"

"No. Of course I won't."

NOW, down with him! Bryan shoved suddenly. There was only a little floundering splash; air bubbles rising, with the water down there choking Rawlings' first startled scream. And then it was a grim, silent struggle under water, with all the weight of Bryan's body pressing his victim's head and shoulders against the bottom. Less than three feet of water; most of the weight of Bryan's body was out of it as he sprawled, with his knees and hands down. Rawlings was like a great, floundering trapped fish. Weirdly, unexpectedly strong at first as Bryan desperately clung to him. His legs were up now, churning the water, beating it white. God, why wouldn't he die?

It was a chaos of horror to the panting Bryan. But he kept Rawlings' head under... A minute. Two minutes. There were no air bubbles now. The air had all come out; water was going in. From his first gasping, under-water scream the inexperienced Rawlings had been strangling. But his struggle was ghastly. Like fighting with a great white thing that ought to be dead, but still lunging. More feebly now. Got him!

(Continued On Page 104)

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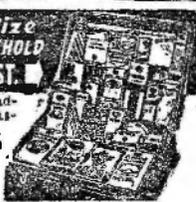
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Crack Detective

(Continued From Page 103)

Hold him! Never mind his threshing legs; keep his head and shoulders down! Three minutes. Four perhaps. It seemed an eternity to Bryan's whirling senses while he sprawled there and clung. Like fighting with a dead man. Limp, gruesome white thing that still waved its arms and legs and feebly, aimlessly twitched.

And then even the twitching was stilled. The dead fingers clinging to Bryan's arms relaxed, slipped away. The legs floated up, weaving a little from the movement of the water, as though the ghastly limp white thing were still alive.

For another moment the cold, shivering Bryan clung; and then he staggered to his feet. And the dead thing floated up beside him, with water lapping over its goggling face.

Horrible. He had no idea it would be like that. He stood ankle deep in the water, shivering, numbed, with a sudden panic sweeping him. What a chance he had taken! Suppose someone had come along and seen him? Could you see down here from any part of the nearby road? Suppose someone came along now?

The wild panic swept Bryan as he stood shivering there in the dark; a panic of haste and terror. But he fought with it; conquered it. The thing was done, and triumph swept him. He dried himself carefully with the towel and dressed. His hair wasn't wet; that was lucky. It wasn't even mussed. There wasn't a mark on him from the struggle with the drowning Rawlings whose gripping hands had only clutched so futilely at his arms.

But this panic was horrible. Despite the heat of the night, Bryan's teeth were chattering, but as he dried and dressed he felt warmer. It was the cold water, but mostly it was the excitement. He mustn't get rattled now and forget the towel. The towel

Beau Brummel Murder

with which he had dried himself was a little white blob at his feet. He snatched it up; ran for the road and his car... Yes, from farther along here you could faintly see that weird white thing, half-immersed there in the shallow water of the shore. Somebody would pass here and see it, tonight perhaps, or certainly in the morning.

With the panic still on him, mingling with his chuckling triumph, Bryan climbed back into his dark little car and swiftly drove away. He did not head for Shady Valley; he was too clever for that. Instead, driving as swiftly as he dared, he circled back around Thomasville, then cut across and hit the New York Highway at a point far below Shady Valley and the Lake Ontara side road. He passed two gas stands where he was known; drove slowly enough so that the attendants would see him and respond to his wave of greeting. Exactly as though he were on his way home from the city; no possible connection with Lake Ontara...

HE HAD stopped at the bridge over Sunapee Creek, tied a big stone in the towel and sunk it. The panic was gone now; there was nothing but triumph. Nothing ahead of him now but Rawlings' money. Grace, a shocked, grieved young widow, wouldn't be niggardly with her sympathetic brother, of course. She had already done her best, pawning her jewels to help Bryan out with his gambling debts. Bryan was senior teller at the little Shady Valley bank. Grace didn't know about his six thousand-dollar shortage there, of course. That would have been discovered next week, when the bank examiners arrived; but it would be made good by Grace now, of course. He shivered at the closeness of his escape.

It was nearly eleven o'clock when presently he was entering the somno-

(Continued On Page 106)



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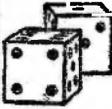
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Crack Detective

(Continued From Page 105)

lent little tree-lined street of Shady Valley. He had adjusted his collar and tie in the little rear-view mirror. His hair was sleek and in perfect array, as always. Everything was perfect. Nothing ahead of him now but gentle sympathy with Grace; and then the spending of Grace's money on Vivian. The thought of Vivian, her dark eyes, her beauty, thrilled him. Vivian was worth spending money on.

As he reached Center Avenue, Bryan's heart jumped. Down the broad shaded street, where the cluster of lamps over a stoop marked the brick building which was the Shady Valley Police Station, a little commotion was evident. A group of people were on the sidewalk; a big sedan was there at the curb; and inside the building there was evidently unusual activity.

Bryan hopped out and joined the crowd. "I say, what's happened?" he demanded of a pimply-faced youth.

"Oh, you, Fashion Plate." But the village boy wasn't jibing. He was awed; excited. "Your brother-in-law," he said. "Mr. Rawlings—guess he's dead—he was found down in the lake near the Thomasville cut-off."

Then the milling little crowd saw Bryan. Everyone always stared at him, stared with a secret envy, Bryan thought. They stared at him now as he stood, immaculate in white linen trousers, with a carnation in the lapel of his blue serge jacket. And they crowded around him: gave him swift, incoherent details... a night-driving tourist, through Thomasville, heading for Albany, had seen the white thing in the lake, momentarily disclosed by his headlights as he rounded a bend in the road. He'd brought it in a rush here to the police station. The policemen inside now were trying artificial respiration.

That made Bryan's heart leap into his throat. Suppose they succeeded

Beau Brummel Murder

... Surely that wasn't possible now...

"Not a damn pulmotor in this burg," somebody was saying. "There's one coming from Thomasville, but what the hell—"

"Why—why, good heavens, that's terrible — my brother-in-law, you say?" He knew that he should force his way into the police station. That was the normal thing to do — a shocked relative... He'd phone poor Grace from inside...

The tourist appeared on the stoop. "Not a chance," he said to the crowd. "He's a goner."

A vast relief flooded Bryan as he shoved his way to the steps. But why was everybody looking at him so strangely? All these young loafers in the crowd who knew him so well, all staring at him, murmuring to each other.

"Lookit Fashion Plate!"

"Oh my goodness, how disgraceful!"

WHAT the devil! Bryan's heart was racing. The accursed village louts were jibing at him. But they seemed puzzled, too, standing away from him, staring at him. He realized that he was in the light of the police station now.

"My Gawd," somebody gasped. "Why does he look so frightened?"

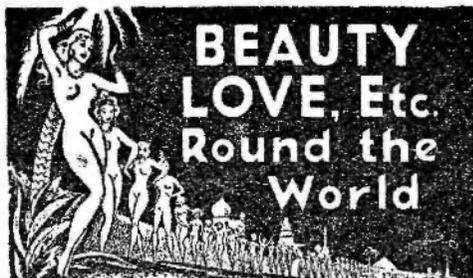
Fashion Plate! Accursed nickname. Accursed reputation. Without them, no one would have noticed him...

"Why—why—" he was stammering. "I say, don't push me like this. What's the matter with you fellows?"

He was in the police station now, with two or three uniformed men clustering around him. It was all a blur to his terrified sight. A ring of staring eyes; voices... "Lookit him! Fashion Plate never looked like this before."

"Why is he so frightened?"

(Continued On Page 10E)



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Crack Detective

(Continued From Page 107)

"Damn queer — something queer about this, fellers—"

Hands were plucking at him. What in heaven's name could this mean? Then suddenly he realized that the policemen were searching him; taking things from his pockets. His familiar things from his jacket pocket...

Then abruptly one of the big policemen was saying:

"You, Bryan—when did you last see your brother-in-law?"

"Me? See Peter? Why—why, I haven't seen him for a week."

What was this? What was the matter with everybody here? These things they were taking from Bryan's pockets—

"Didn't see him tonight—not at all today?" the policeman persisted.

"No. No, of course, I didn't."

"Didn't happen to go swimming with him tonight by any chance, did you?"

What in the devil? The scene was swaying before Bryan's terrified gaze. He fought for calmness, mustered his courage to grin.

"Say, what's the matter with all you people? Is this some kind of joke? Of course, I didn't go swimming. Haven't seen Peter in a week, I told you."

"But you're a good swimmer?"

"Yes. Sure I am. What in hell has that—"

"You wouldn't let your brother-in-law drown waist deep in water, would you now?" the police sergeant said ironically. "Funny thing, Bryan—the lake there where he drowned—only waist deep. Not over your head anywhere near there—and no current, no tide in the lake to wash the body from somewhere else. Especially since he was found when he had been dead only a few minutes. It was murder, Bryan—"

"Murder?" Bryan stammered. "Why—why, how awful—"

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Crack Detective

(Continued From Page 108)

"Yes, isn't it? And if you didn't go swimming with Rawlings—"

The big sergeant gestured with grim irony to the things he was taking from Bryan's trousers' pockets... A memorandum dated today, on a billhead of Rawlings' store... A telegram to Rawlings...

"He got that telegram at nine o'clock tonight," the sergeant said. "Stuffed it here into his trousers' pocket—"

Sickened with horror, Bryan stared down at his white linen trousers, and his whirling mind swept back... That dark cluster of rocks on the shorefront where he and Rawlings had undressed... Their clothes had been in separate piles. Except the white trousers. He realized it now—the white trousers, both so similar, laying partly on top of each other, with the white towel on them—just dim pallid blobs down there in the darkness of the ground. And as he dressed after the murder Bryan had been in such a panic of haste and excitement he had had no time to think of himself at all, nor in his dark car until he had come here... The first time in his life that Beau Brummel had neglected his appearance!

"We've got you, Bryan—"

"Yes, you—you've got me—"

He hardly realized he was saying it. He was still blankly staring down at his white linen trousers. But they were Rawlings' white linen trousers rumbled and dirty, very far from being neatly pressed because Rawlings was no Fashion Plate!

THE END



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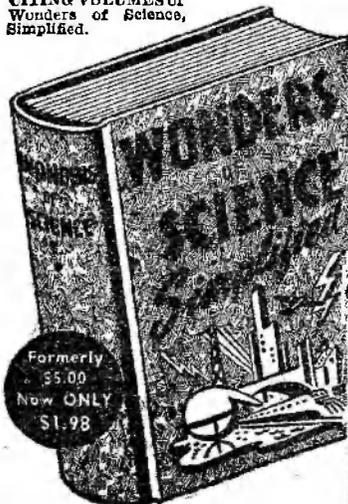
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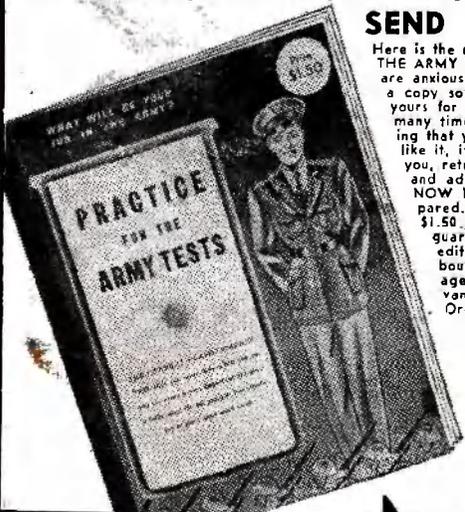
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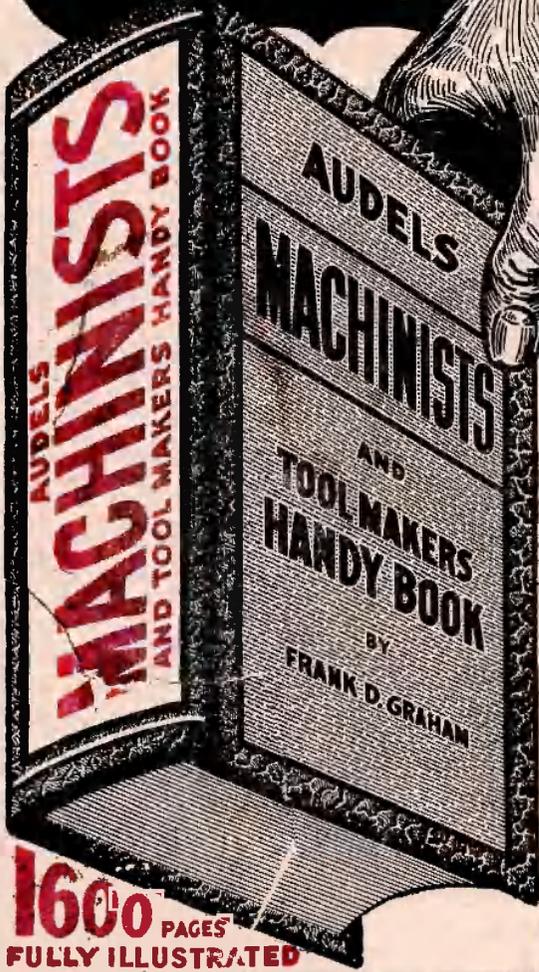
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