

Detective Romances

JAN.



10
CENTS

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*Murder and Love
on the High Seas*

by
FREDERICK THOMLEY

**DETECTIVE
DON JUAN**

*Glamorous Mystery
Novellette*

by
**CHARLES MARQUIS
WARREN**

**A
DATE WITH DOOM**

Detective Romance Novel

by
FREDERICK C. DAVIS



Detective Romances

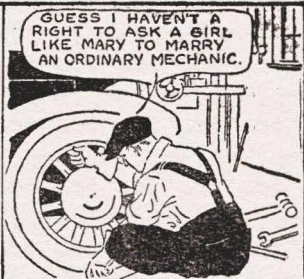
Vol. 2

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No. 1

- A Date with Doom** Frederick C. Davis 10
Nick Swayne's only chance to save his best friend from suicide scandal was a strictly secret and confidential investigation. But Nance Royce, the delectable little parcel of poison whom he loved, outwitted him in the corpse-hiding murder triangle. For Nan's uncanny intuition as an ace girl reporter was headlining Swayne to the chair.
- Murder in Paradise** Joe Archibald 34
John Rider had the bitter choice of betraying a deep trust, and disgracing himself in his daughter's eyes – or letting that lovely girl plunge into the sordid life...
- Clip-Joint Adventuress** Frank Gruber 44
When Special Prosecutor Bowers baited a dance-hall hostess for the witness stand, a clip joint syndicate bought terror tickets in a murder game.
- Perfumed Cargo** Theodore Tinsley 57
Crafty gigolos plied their sinister wile upon the beautiful women of a pleasure-bent modem cruise. And Paul Decker, ship's detective, had to play Death's chaperon in a heart-breaking game.
- Detective Don Juan** Charles Marquis Warren 74
Private Investigator "Don Juan" Stinson always liked to mix romance with his work.
- Trigger Tryst** Robert C. Blackmon 96
A beautiful platinum blonde gave Detective Lee Masters a key for a Trigger Tryst...
- Death-Dance Angel** Gloria Kent 104
The eyes of Broadway devoured Carol Carter as she danced her way to fame – and misfortune.

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I'LL TRAIN YOU AT HOME In Your Spare Time For A GOOD RADIO JOB

Many Radio Experts Make \$30, \$50, \$75 a Week
Do you want to make more money? Broadcasting stations employ engineers, operators, station managers and pay up to \$5,000 a year. Spare time Radio set servicing pays as much as \$30 to \$50 a year—full time servicing jobs pay as much as \$30, \$50, \$75 a week. Many Radio Experts own their own full or part time Radio businesses. Radio manufacturers and jobbers employ testers, inspectors, foremen, engineers, servicemen, paying up to \$6,000 a year. Radio operators on ships get good pay and see the world. Automobile, police, aviation, commercial Radio, and loud speaker systems offer good opportunities now and for the future. Television promises many good jobs soon. Men I trained have good jobs in these branches of Radio.



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National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.



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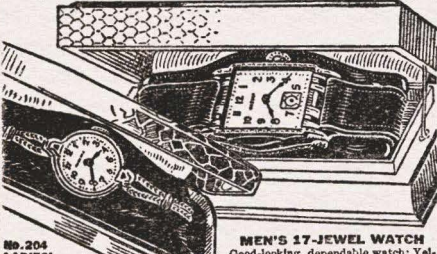
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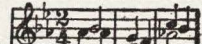
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OPENED TO EARNEST MEN

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NO HOUSE-TO-HOUSE CANVASSING
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Guaranteed 40 Power \$2.48 Long Distance Telescope

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In The
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The top illustration shows a distant view as seen with the unaided eye and when viewed through the Winnescope. Below, you see how an ordinary finger print looks when examined with the microscope feature of the Winnescope.

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10
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FREE
TRIAL

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Nick Swayne's only chance to save his best friend from suicide scandal was a strictly secret and confidential investigation. But Nan Royce, the delectable little parcel of poison whom he loved, outtricked him in the corpse-hiding murder triangle. For Nan's uncanny intuition as an ace girl reporter was headlining Swayne to the chair.

CHAPTER I GUEST CORPSE

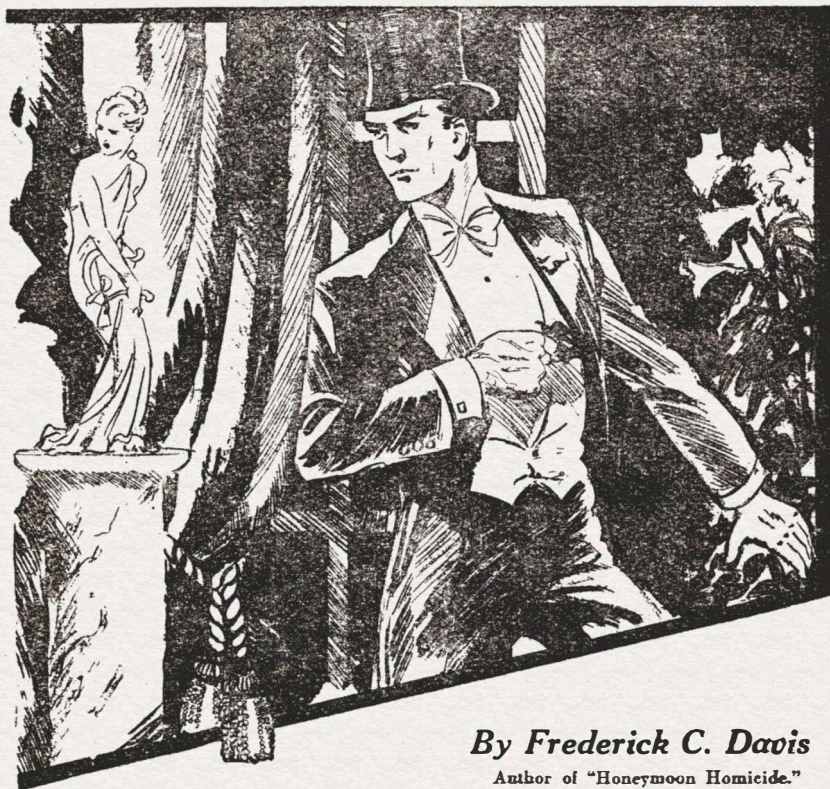
NICHOLAS SWAYNE, confidential investigator, six feet four of impeccable tails plus nine inches of glimmering top hat,

stepped into an atmosphere of charming geniality.

He cordially greeted his host, Dr. Lawrence Phillips, whose urgent telephone call had summoned him to this tasteful suburban apartment. Their friendship had a solid Princetonian

Doom

"Nick Swayne"
Detective
Romance Novel



By Frederick C. Davis

Author of "Honeymoon Homicide."

foundation. In college Swayne had known Phillips, now a brilliant young physician, as a happily ambitious sort. But tonight Phillips' cheerfulness was forced. The deep glint in his gray eyes could be nothing but smouldering terror.

Swayne, tactfully concealing his surprised wonder, cordially acknowledged introductions, first to an impressively professional, gray-mustached gentleman; second, to a benign patriarch wearing the garb of a clergyman. Then he bowed to a most delectable young woman. His fingers

lingered in the slender ones of Miss Linda Trowbridge. Though he had never before met her, he knew her to be Phillips' fiancée.

She was, Swayne recalled from having heard many enraptured descriptions of her, one in at least a billion. She was enchantingly pretty; she was gay; she was intelligent; she had family and culture. She had, besides, a great deal of money. There was nothing desirable in a young woman which she did not have. Nicholas Swayne promptly felt wholeheartedly envious of his fortunate friend.

But the stark fear lurking in Dr. Lawrence Phillips' eyes hinted something not at all fortunate. "Please pardon me," he begged the others. "We'll dine in a few minutes. First I must talk with Nick privately about—about a very important matter."

With a bewitching laugh, Linda Trowbridge asked Swayne: "If ever I find myself in great distress, will you rescue me, please, Mr. Detective?"

Swayne assured her he wished her no misadventures, but promised her he would be thoroughly delighted. As Phillips led him into the adjoining bedroom, his wonder grew. His business was the private adjustment of dangerously delicate situations. The service for which he commanded high fees was that of secret diplomacy. He had proved himself a highly successful undercover tactician. Still, he could not imagine why the studious Phillips, always profoundly absorbed in medical research, should be so anxious for his professional help.

Dr. Lawrence Phillips tightly shut the door upon his guests. His face wan, he rounded the bed to a closet in the corner. Speechless with concern, he jerked it open. Swayne's startled gaze was pulled down to a form huddled on the floor. It was an inert young woman. She was plumply ripe in a white satin evening gown. Her red hair did not completely conceal an ugly black hole in her right temple.

She was very young, very beautiful, very dead.

"**G**REAT SCOTT, Lawrie!" Swayne exclaimed, aghast. "Great Scott! Who is she? Did you kill her?"

"No, no!" Dr. Phillips glanced fearfully at the connecting door through which the voices of the two men and his fiancée were audible. "She killed herself. She came here unexpectedly, staged a frightful row, and committed suicide. You've got to get her away from here, Nick. In heaven's name, you've got to get her out of this apartment!"

Swayne looked genuinely alarmed. "Removing a dead body," he pointed out, "is a serious legal offense. It invites very unpleasant consequences. There'd have to be a damned strong reason for undertaking such a risk, Lawrie. You'd better explain."

Phillips explained rapidly, huskily. "Her name's Sylvia Lansing—Mrs. Nelson Lansing. I met her months ago. She wouldn't let me alone. She—she fell in love with me. Linda never saw her, never even heard of her, but she tried to get me away from Linda. It sounds silly, Nick, but she was very passionate, very direct. When I found out she was married—I didn't know that at first—I told her flatly I'd have nothing more to do with her. But tonight, not an hour ago, she came back."

Even in death, Swayne saw soberly, Sylvia Lansing's voluptuous figure and full red lips bespoke her capacity for tempestuous emotion.

"She came here," Phillips hurried on dryly, "just as my guests were due to arrive. She threw herself at me. She was on fire. She said—being thrown over was more than she could stand. She told me—if I wouldn't have her—she'd kill herself. She pulled a little automatic out of her purse to show me she meant it. I didn't believe that. But she—she did it."

On the closet floor beside the white-satinned corpse, Swayne perceived, a tiny automatic lay.

"We were in here. I was just finishing getting into my tux. I told her to go, then went out to the kitchen to see if everything was all right. Then I heard a shot. The cook didn't notice, but I rushed back in here." Phillips' face went pasty with the recollection. "She was lying there, at the foot of the bed. First I was stunned. Then I went frantic—because Linda and her father, and Dr. Winston, were due to arrive at any minute."

"It certainly is most disconcerting to have to greet one's guests over the body of a suicide," Swayne observed gravely. "But surely—"

"You don't understand, Nick!" Phillips burst out. "My whole life depends on those three people in the next room. Tonight my whole future is to be decided. You know how hard I've been working for years—my research in hypertonic therapy."

This, Swayne knew, had something to do with excessive brain pressure, from which Dr. Phillips himself was suffering grievously at the moment.

"Linda, through her father, has been financing me," Phillips was saying. "Without them I couldn't have made such gratifying advances. Because of them I'm about to be taken into the office of Dr. Timothy Winston, the greatest brain surgeon in the country."

"Certainly cause for congratulations," Swayne remarked. "You couldn't hope for anything better."

"Nothing better," Phillips agreed earnestly. "But if they learn of this—those three people in the next room—I'll lose it all. Mixed up in a scandalous suicide! My name screaming in all the newspapers! Linda's father—a minister of the gospel, a very pious and conservative man—could never associate with me again. My funds would stop. I'd never be able to go on with my work. Dr. Winston, with the richest, most fashionable practice any specialist could ever enjoy—he couldn't take me into his office then. Nick, do you understand? If this thing comes out, my whole life is wrecked."

"Without doubt," Swayne realized, gazing ruefully at the cadaver in the closet, "that young woman chose a most embarrassing time and place to put a bullet in her head."

PHILLIPS beseechingly gripped Swayne's arm. "Besides," he declared in anguish, "I love Linda with all my heart. This affair with Sylvia meant nothing. Even if Linda forgave me for it, it would always stand between us. You see how horrible that would be. All this is why nobody

must ever know it happened here. Nick, there's no one else in the world I can turn to but you."

Swayne was thinking intently. "Impossible," he declared, "to conceal the fact of this young woman's death. She must be found, dead, as she is, somewhere—and very soon. The whole point, I know, is that her suicide must never be associated with you, Lawrie."

"It's a ghastly thing to ask you to do, Nick," the young scientist pleaded in a parched tone, "and dangerous—but she's got to be taken away from here."

Swayne's towering frame folded over the dead woman. Very carefully he gloved his deft hands in white. He took up the wicked little automatic, tucked it into his pocket. Next he drew from beneath the corpse, an evening purse. On the outside of it was a bright crimson stain, still wet. Inside were the usual cosmetic necessities, plus a driving license issued to Sylvia B. Lansing at 1444 Sanborn Avenue in this same suburb.

"It's her own place," Phillips explained quickly. "She rented it a short time ago. She told me she had separated from her husband over me. She used to be a model—lingerie and stockings. He's a theatrical agent, I think. Picture the way the tabloids will play all that up, Nick. Half-naked photographs of her! I'm not exaggerating a particle when I say this will destroy my whole future if it comes out. She absolutely must be removed—and—"

"Her home," Swayne observed, "should be the most appropriate setting for her suicide. I'll do my best to get her there and to remove any letters or such things that might connect you with her. But if any ominous-looking men from headquarters show up to ask questions, Lawrie, you're to deny she was ever more than a casual acquaintance. Deny she's ever been here—deny everything."

"I will," Phillips forced out: "Thanks, Nick. I'm grateful. I'm

leaving it in your hands completely. And I've got to go back to my guests now, or they'll wonder."

Phillips strode choppily to the connecting door. He steadied himself, forced a smile, strove to attain a casual manner. With a wildly anxious glance at Swayne, he returned to the living-room. Swayne closed the door snugly, drew a deep breath, gazed reprovingly at the capricious corpse whose secret escort he had so unexpectedly become.

Relishing this trying assignment none whatever, but accepting its hazards for the sake of a friend, Swayne glanced alertly about. The bedroom was situated on the first floor. It looked across a gardened court lighted only by the curtained glow from the windows of other apartments. Swayne found gratification in the fact that he had parked his super-charged coupé near the dim court entrance. Its position rendered likely the unobserved transportation of the party cadaver.

Swayne switched out the lights. He returned to the dead woman, tucked her purse inside her low bodice, lifted her from the closet. Listening warily to the gay voices in the next room, he carried the dead Mrs. Lansing to the window. There he left her slumped in a chair. Tidying himself, he stepped into the living-room to find Phillips' guests taking their places around spotless linen and glittering crystal.

"Good evening," he said suavely. "Meeting you has been most charming. Good evening."

"Are you," Linda Trowbridge asked unexpectedly, with a disarming smile, "off on a confidential case, Mr. Swayne?"

He left the apartment haunted by the veiled fear gleaming in Phillips' eyes. His long, swift strides carried him out the front entrance, around to the archway giving into the court. Cautiously watching the surrounding

pattern of windows, each of which seemed to be an omniscient Cyclops, he paused at the sill of Phillips' bedroom. He reached in, grasped the still-warm softness of the corpse.

Swayne maneuvered the reheaded woman's corpse over his shoulder, supported her with one arm around her waist while her golden sandals dangled. In this way, he carried her back to the arch. He suffered with acute apprehension every heavy step of the short distance. Once in the shadow of the court entrance he studied the perilous openness of the street. Again he felt intense satisfaction because he had left his coupé in the deep gloom clotted beneath a clump of trees.

The sidewalk was deserted. No car was passing. Swayne risked it. He paused, breathing hard, at the side of his car. Gambling everything upon his quick movements, he slid a key into the baggage compartment. One moment later, the deceased Mrs. Lansing was lying huddled inside it. Swayne clicked the cover down, tested its lock. With a chill traveling down his spine like a scurrying spider, he again scanned the thoroughfare.

Though he felt an uncanny sensation that he was being watched, he attributed it to his natural anxiety. As a precaution, he swung along the walk, probing into the darkness of lawns and parked automobiles. As he crossed the street, heels clicking, he slid his hand to the automatic he had pocketed. Pausing in a splotch of light, he smoothed it with his gloves to remove any latent fingerprints that Lawrence Phillips may have left upon it. He smelled of its bore, frowned with abrupt fierceness, then jerked the clip from the butt.

The clip contained ten cartridges. The odorless barrel was shinningly clean. The weapon, Swayne knew instantly, had not been fired.

"This woman," he blurted half aloud, his nerves suddenly stiff as ice, "was murdered."

CHAPTER II

CORPSE'S ESCORT

COLD alarm turned Nicholas Swayne back to the apartment house where Dr. Lawrence Phillips lived. Dismay quickened his space-destroying strides. Even sharper consternation brought him to a quick, stiff pause. With a moan of despair surging within his lungs, he stared at a yellow roadster parked in the darkness.

A girl's quiet voice came out of it: "Hello, Nick."

Swayne knew that car. He knew that voice. He knew all too well the trim young woman who emerged from it. Nan Royce was a newspaper reporter—the most tenacious headline hunter he had ever had the misfortune to encounter. She was, besides this, the young woman whom Swayne, much to his regret, loved.

"Nan," he demanded quickly, "how did you get here? What the devil are you up to now?"

Her firm, confident lips smiled. Under her high, bold forehead, her gold-flecked blue eyes shone at him eagerly. With arch frankness she answered him:

"I followed you, of course. I always do when news is scarce. When there's nothing exciting breaking, Nick, darling, I seem to turn to you instinctively. If you'd only tell me what's in the wind, when you start off on a new case, I wouldn't have to haunt you."

"Just once," Swayne snapped, his gloved hand closing hard over the tiny automatic in his pocket, "I wish with all my soul you'd turn in the direction opposite to me. I've told you countless times, my investigations are strictly confidential. I'm retained to adjust important matters secretly, not to splash them all over the front page of the *Gazette*. I can't tell anybody anything about any case I ever handle, least of all you."

Least of all, Nan Royce—because

she never showed the slightest compunction over converting his privacies into national publicity. She was invariably zealous to seize upon the most delicate intimacies entrusted to him, to dish them up as juicy scandal to a gasping populace. Her associates in the Fourth Estate considered her the cleverest news huntress in the toughest newspaper city in the world, but to Swayne she was a guileful vixen unashamedly eager to exploit his most ticklish cases in glaring printer's ink from coast to coast.

She answered him softly: "You wouldn't say that, Nick, if you really loved me."

Swayne did love her. One night, a year ago, he had been within hours of marrying her. That evening, in a weak and happy moment, he had confided in her a succulent morsel of gossip. Promptly she had emblazoned it on the front page of the *Gazette*. The calamity had nearly finished Swayne. And it had brought him the clear realization that Nan's insatiable appetite for scandal, her unconquerable refusal to abandon her career in favor of his, made marriage with her equivalent to professional disaster. But, most dangerously, he still loved her.

With the patience of a sorely tried man he said: "Nan, darling, you know how vital secrecy is in my work. My existence depends upon it. The first time you publicize a case of mine, I'm utterly ruined. Worse than that, it might bring about a tragedy. I don't want you to be a horrible menace to me, continually spying into my affairs. We could be blissfully contented together, if you weren't so damned enraptured over eight-column screamers. Give it up, Nan. Quit this crazy job of yours now, tonight, and let's find the nearest minister and—"

In his yearning for this lissom girl, Swayne forgot the gun in his pocket, the corpse in his car. He had taken her hands. He had drawn her close to him. He had gently encircled her with his arms. But suddenly Nan's answer

brought it back to him with a chill.

"I can't, Nicky," she whispered. "Not now. Something's up. I've got to find out what it is; it may be pretty big. A few minutes ago I saw a man sneaking out of the court of the apartment house across the street. He was acting *very* strange. I wonder what it means?"

SWAYNE disengaged himself from the captivating parcel of poison that was Nan. He stared at her with heart racing. The mysterious man she had seen, of course, was himself. Stinging wonder filled him as he searched her guileful eyes. How much more had she seen? Her arch innocence aroused his most discomfiting misgivings, but he countered quickly with:

"Whatever you're talking about should be no concern of yours, young woman. I came to call on a friend, with the prospects of a convivial evening. I had to leave immediately because I received an urgent telephone call—but don't ask me what it was, because I'll never tell you. I can't let myself be delayed because you think you've seen some queer person prowling about in the dark. From the bottom of my heart, Nan, I beg you—let me alone. Now, good night."

But she caught his arm. In the golden blue of her alert gaze, he saw that avid gleam which meant she scented news.

"I've a hunch, somehow, it means a big break, Nick," she whispered. "Listen. I didn't do such a good job of trailing you tonight; and I was here, trying to decide where I'd lost you. All of a sudden a man hurried out of that court. He was trying not to be seen, and I couldn't make out what he was doing. But, right away, he disappeared. I think it's very suspicious. Maybe a crime's been committed, Nick, and if I can get at it—"

"Nan," Swayne interrupted emphatically, "good night!"

His vehement strides left her standing in the gloom. He considered it

foolhardy to rely on Nan's veracity, but he ardently hoped she had seen no more than she had said. Her closer inspection of the scene would lead to her recognizing his car, but he prayed that the others parked near it would confuse her. Inevitably, she was beginning her search, when Swayne's last backward glance caught her at the corner.

His ring at Phillips' door brought a quick response. Tight with perturbations, he bowed apologies to the dinner table. This time it was he who led Phillips into the bedroom. His abrupt reappearance, his evident anxiety, had bleached all color from the young scientist's face. He fixed his friend with a nettled gaze, raised a commanding forefinger, asked bluntly:

"Lawrie, did you murder that young woman?"

"I told you she killed herself, Nick," Phillips stated. "I told you—"

"And you were wrong. Wilfully or unconsciously, you were hellishly wrong," Swayne insisted. "The bullet that killed Mrs. Lansing definitely did not come out of her gun. Some other weapon fired it. Did *you* commit that murder, Lawrie?"

Phillips' adam's apple retreated into his wing collar, popped up again. "No!" he gasped. "Heaven above, no! I swear on my word of honor, in the name of our long friendship, Nick, I didn't!"

That stopped Swayne. He was gazing at Phillips in utter bewilderment when a flicker of light caught his eyes away. The glowing flutter came through the open window, from the court. It was the breeze-worried flame of a match. It was illuminating the features of a girl. And the girl was Nan Royce.

She was stooping over a gardened plot at the edge of the walk. Her manner was intent. She was lifting something from among the shrubbery. Swayne could not see it clearly, but the triumphant lift of Nan's head was unmistakable. Abruptly she

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dropped the match, spun about, broke into a run. Swayne's final glimpse was of her sleek legs glistening toward the yellow roadster.

SWAYNE knew in a flash that whatever the young female news-hawk had discovered—was potential dynamite. Nan had not only a reckless courage; she was possessed of a brilliant intuition that was a blessing to her as a fact-finder, a curse to Swayne as a scandal-hider. Acutely disconcerted, he turned to hurry out. Phillips' dismayed grip on his arm stopped him.

"Great Heavens, Nick! Are you sure? This—this makes it a thousand times worse!"

"At least that," Swayne agreed grimly, "for both of us. She didn't commit suicide, but what I'm doing is exactly that. Lawrie, I believe you didn't murder her. I don't care a hang, at this moment, who did. We might possibly become so involved I'll have to find out to save our necks, but right now I can't waste any time about getting rid of that body. I still believe the best place is Mrs. Lansing's apartment. You wait right here until you hear from me."

The stricken Phillips agreed with a nod. He again steadied himself at the connecting door. Swayne attained poise with less difficulty. Appearing quietly, both murmured apologies to the guests at table. Promising no further interruptions, Swayne bowed to the outer door. He was seething with anxiety over Nan's unknown discovery, but an eager question from Linda Trowbridge halted him.

"Will you tell us some day, Mr. Swayne, what this case is you're so disturbed about?"

"I never," Swayne told her solemnly, "betray the confidence of a client."

Nan was an itching rash on his mind as he hurried around the corner. He saw at once that the spot where her yellow roadster had been curbed was now vacant. Already she had

sped off on the trail of a story that she hoped would make a new sensation. Swayne knew that if she ever learned the truth, it definitely would be. Mrs. Lansing's grave would inevitably be garnished with the debris of his own career and Dr. Phillips'. For, beyond all doubt, Nan Royce had picked up some hot clue connecting with the fugitive corpse.

Swayne's only choice was to let her keep it. Not knowing where she had gone, or for what ominous reason, he continued with his grisly task of finding a setting for the murdered woman's body. He peeked furtively into the baggage compartment of his car; found the corpse curled there. Once behind the wheel, he drove as though devils were chasing him. His destination was the late Mrs. Lansing's home.

He found the apartment building at 1444 Sanford Avenue to be quiet, shadowed, U-shaped with a court in the rear. His course as corpse-bearer must be the back entrance; he must have easy access to the Lansing apartment. He remembered seeing a flat key in the blood-stained bag. It would, he surmised, open the dead woman's door. Wary of chance observation, he slightly lifted the baggage panel of his car, reached in.

He felt the coolish softness of the cadaver's neck, slid his fingers downward to the satin bodice. Suddenly he was as breathless and tingling as though he'd stepped into a freezing shower. The purse was not there. It was not lower in the gown. It was nowhere at all in the compartment. It was completely gone.

Swayne straightened dismayed. He closed the steel hollow with a vehement click. Pressed by the necessity of separating himself from the murder victim promptly at all costs, he decided to try the Lansing apartment without the key. Swiftly he strode to the building entrance. On the steps he stopped with a moan. In the darkness he saw a dim gleam of the color that haunted him.

Just visible around the corner, as though covertly watching him with its dark headlights, was Nan Royce's yellow roadster.

Swayne did not pause to conjecture the meaning of its presence. Soon enough, he had learned through experience, he would have it flung into his teeth. Grimly, at random, he punched a call-button.

SOME ONE in one of the apartments obligingly tripped the electric lock of the entrance. Swayne toed it open, read the name of Sylvia Lansing on a mail box, numbered 2-D. One minute later he was gazing at that same designation painted on a door.

And he heard a voice. It was, as he had automatically expected, Nan Royce's voice. She was saying insistently: "But you must know where she went!"

A negroid drawl answered. "Naw, ma'am. I don' know whah Mizz Lansing go. She jes' go. Naw ma'am, I don' know."

Through the panel Nan's persistent tone came again: "But look at this purse. It's hers. The driver's license proves that. See this stain? It's blood, fresh blood. It means something happened to her—something serious. Don't you know who she went to see tonight?"

"Naw, ma'am! I don' know *whah* she go! I don' know nothin' about any fresh blood, *neither!*"

Swayne's fingers closed tightly with the desire that Nan Royce's lovely neck might be inside them. Her discovery, her move, her motive, were appallingly clear to him now. While carrying the dead woman to his car, he had unwittingly lost the crimson-spotted purse in the court. Nan Royce, with her unquenchable curiosity, had found it—so near Lawrence Phillips' apartment. The license had led her directly to the Lansing home. Swayne found his only satisfaction of the moment in the ignorance of the

colored woman whom Nan was grilling, evidently Sylvia Lansing's maid.

Nan's tone came again: "All right, you don't know anything, but I'm positive there's been foul play. Wet blood on a lost purse can't mean anything else. You're going to stay right here until I've found out what this is all about. And I'm going to use your telephone."

Swayne's dismay sharpened. The combination of Nan Royce and a telephone was the deadliest he knew. Its destructive properties were doubly dangerous as matters stood, because Swayne dared make no move to forestall her call. The fundamental necessity he faced was keeping Nan completely unaware of his connection with the woman whose life fluid had been spilled. In a cold, helpless rage, he could only listen.

"Boss?" Nan asked after the dial ceased spinning. "This is your star sob sister delivering the first inkling of a front-page smash. I'm pretty sure that Mrs. Sylvia Lansing, wife of the theatrical agent, with a separate apartment at One-Four-Four-Four Sanford Avenue, Somerbush, has met with violence. Don't ask me questions—but maybe it's murder."

"It's too early to break it yet," she cautioned, "but I'll soon have something good and hot, I promise you. In the meantime, send a couple of the boys over to the Lansing place with instructions to camp here until I've got more dope. Besides that, tip off the cops right away to hunt for the woman. I've got hold of something big and exclusive, boss—it's possible."

And it was impossible now, Nick Swayne realized with fury chilling his nerves, for him to use this apartment as a depository for the murdered woman.

HIS eyes fuming, Swayne purposefully glided from the door. Intent on balking Nan at any cost, he contemplated rash measures as he descended to the lobby. A glance at

the telephone booth there decided him. He entered it, ducking perforce, sought the number of the local police headquarters, dialed it. He informed the voice that responded: "I want to report a stolen car.

"It's a yellow roadster," he went on levelly when he had been switched to another officer. "The registration number is X5-43-23. I left it parked downtown in Somerbush, and now it's gone. It's not worth stealing by a professional car thief, so whoever took it must be drunk. My name is John Andrews, and I live at One-Four-Four-Four Sanford Avenue."

"If your car's still anywhere near here, Mr. Andrews," he was assured officially, "we'll soon have it spotted."

With sincere gratitude Swayne said: "Thank you very much."

His long legs carried him out to Nan Royce's brilliant roadster. He reached in to the door pocket, found the form registering it in her name. This he tucked into the tail of his coat. Then, irately, he strode back to his own car. Sliding behind the wheel, he reflected bitterly that he still had in his possession one rapidly cooling corpse in immediate need of disposal.

About to start up, he saw Nan Royce's trim figure appear in the apartment-house entrance. Her smart black pumps glistened rapidly to the roadster. When she swung from the curb, with a dispatch that declared her to be off on some new angle of the case, Swayne made a new decision: to follow her until he saw her rendered *hors de combat*. Manipulating his coupé expertly, so that she would not suspect anyone was trailing her, he was surprised to find himself rushing straightway into the neighborhood of Lawrence Phillips' apartment.

Swayne's dogged chase ceased at the building in which Phillips' lived. Swerving into a deep shadow, he watched Nan skip from her saffron roadster. She paused in the archway of the court, studying the darkness inside, then carefully entered.

Swayne, fully aware of Nan's tenacity once she found a lead, had expected this. With his misgivings rapidly mounting, he unfolded from his coupé and silently dodged after her.

She was furtively following the walk. Pausing at the spot where Swayne had seen her pick up the bloody purse, she intently scrutinized the terrain. Around her, many windows were lighted, many dark, many closed, many open. Swayne sensed her uncanny intuition going to work. She moved off quietly to a dark objective. When he realized what it was, his breath stopped.

She paused alertly outside the lightless window of the bedroom in which Sylvia Lansing had been slain.

CHAPTER III

TOP HAT INQUEST

FOR one electrical moment Swayne's widened eyes caught no movement on the part of the headline huntress. Through the panes of the next room he saw Lawrence Phillips and guests conversing about the candle-lighted dining table. Swayne took time for only one glance, then he eased out the arch.

Dreading to think of what new clues Nan Royce might discover—among them, very possibly, his own footprints—he sprinted past the corner to the front entrance, crossed the lobby, poised at another door which gave into the court behind the Phillips apartment.

Nudging it open soundlessly, he found Nan stooping, cupping a paper match against the breeze, her keen gaze scanning the plot of garden directly under the frame of the death-room casement. A second later, when Nan shifted position, he caught a metallic reflection that struck up from the ground. Nan did not notice it but, Swayne was certain, her search would soon put it into her possession unless he acted quickly. At once he stepped out—because he recognized the tiny

object as the discharged shell of a bullet.

One stretching stride planted Swayne's shoe directly upon it. He frowned into the surprised, gold-blue eyes that Nan turned upon him. She dropped the match immediately, put herself at Swayne's side. With her hand eagerly closing upon his arm, as though to squeeze information out of him, she asked breathlessly:

"Nick, darling! What're you doing back here? You told me you had a very pressing engagement."

"I finished that," he interrupted sternly, "and returned to the party. Nan, don't you realize you're attracting attention? I saw you from the window. I suppose it's useless to remind you that well-balanced young ladies don't go prowling about strange courtyards in the dead of night—lighting matches. You're apt to be picked up and taken to an institution for observation, unless you—"

"But listen, Nick!" she cut in earnestly. "The strangest things keep coming up. I told you before about the man I saw sneaking out of here. Well, a minute ago, just as I came in, I saw him again—either the same one or another one. He was right here, but when he heard me coming, he slipped off somewhere. Darling, I'm sure I have a lead that'll mean a sensational scoop, if only—"

Swayne's quick interest was genuine. "You saw him right here? What did he look like? What was he doing? Where did he go?"

"All I saw," she answered cautiously, "was just a shadow, like a ghost. He straightened up, as though he'd been hunting for something on the ground, then he just disappeared. He must be hiding somewhere in this court right now. But why'd you ask me those questions? This isn't anything you're concerned with, is it, Nick?"

Profoundly gratified that he had been able to elude her vigilance so far, Swayne answered: "My chief concern tonight involves a tall glass

with ice floating in a clear amber solution. Just incidentally, I'm worried about you. My life would be far simpler if some mysterious sneak should slit your lovely throat, but I should regret it, Nan—really I would. Now, will you please give up this nonsense, and resign your job, and marry me, and live happily ever—"

"Look, Nick!" Nan gasped. "Over there! I saw— There he is!"

He was there and yet, instantly, he was gone. Swayne twisted about just in time to see a dark figure bounding through the arch. A man, darting from a sheltering shadow, was fleeing into the vaster gloom of the street.

The swift movement warned Swayne that Nan had actually seen a suspicious prowler lurking beneath the window, through which he had earlier lifted a woman's lifeless body. The alarm that shocked along his nerves was instantly heightened by Nan's immediate animation.

She ran gracefully along the path. Her nimble, shining legs took her rapidly through the arch. As she vanished, the snarl of a starter carried into the court. That, Swayne knew, was the unknown fugitive bent on hastening his escape on wheels. Nan's inevitable intent was to give chase. Swayne's immediate purpose became to pursue the pursuer. He stooped, straightened with the cartridge shell in his fist, sprinted.

SOMEWHERE down the murky street, a lightless car was accelerating. Directly across it, a yellow roadster was already swerving from the curb. Nan's takeoff was as speedy as that of the first machine. Swayne was positive, as he angled behind the wheel of his coupe, that she had a sharp eye on her quarry. He swung away with his gaze as keen upon her roadster. A few seconds after the mysterious prowler had run out the arch, the double chase was in fast progress.

Swayne knew positively what Nan Royce did not: that the unknown man

had been hunting for the empty shell. It meant that Sylvia Lansing had been killed by a shot fired in through the open window. Swayne logically assumed the murderer had effaced himself at once, then had fearfully returned to search for the discharged cartridge which the weapon had automatically ejected. The murderer risked the move because the shell was a damning clue that scientific comparison could identify with the gun he owned. And this reasoning brought Swayne to the horrifying conclusion that the news-avid Nan Royce was, all unwittingly, hotly trailing the murderer of Sylvia Lansing.

The chase slowed through the center of Somerbush, but the girl was sticking close. Swayne glimpsed her craning out the roadster's door, striving to read the number-plates of the fleeing sedan. The next moment, he was delighted to see a blue coupé dart from the curb toward Nan's yellow car. The golden word, *Police*, glittered on its hood. Determined to keep the sedan in sight, Swayne none the less found grim pleasure in the official machine's expert advance upon the girl reporter.

It spurted alongside her, and a visored head ducked from it to shout at her. A uniformed arm gave her the signal, so familiar and so disheartening, to pull over. Swayne saw Nan gesture a frenzied protest, then flash a press card. It did not deter the police coupé from sliding ahead of her, to force her to the curb, in spite of her persistence. Swayne passed her when she was furiously braking, with two burly patrolmen closing in on her righteously. Hoping grimly that she would experience complex difficulties in proving she hadn't stolen the roadster from a mythical John Andrews, Swayne swept on.

He exerted all his dexterity to deduce the driver of the sedan into believing that he was not giving chase. The slower speed of the car ahead soon reassured him that he had succeeded. Allowing it to gain, he

shadowed it into a wealthy residential section of the adjoining suburb of Great Cove. It swung abruptly into the driveway of an impressive house, the downstairs windows of which were lighted. Swayne swiftly stopped, left his machine, strode purposefully to the lawn, swerved deep into the gloom.

He saw the same dark figure close the garage, then hastily follow a path to a side entrance. As his man went in, Swayne quietly eased to a window. Looking into a luxurious living-room, he saw a young woman in a misty velvet gown reclining on a divan while sipping a highball. The man's entrance aroused her from her feline ease. He paused, surprised. The few words which they exchanged informed Swayne that the alluring young woman had come in during the man's absence. He fidgeted, wagged a negative to her gesture to sit down and drink with her, then feverishly strode from the room.

Swayne promptly shifted to another window that immediately sprang alight. He gazed keenly through a haze of curtain. The man was just turning from a wall switch. With marked agitation he pulled the cords of the heavier drapes. This did not completely obscure Swayne's view of the bedroom—a narrow crevice remained. Stooping to it, he saw the man step to a dresser, slide open a drawer, anxiously probe in it as though to make sure something he had hidden inside was still there.

As he lifted it, glancing around for some more secure place to conceal it, Swayne caught the glitter of the automatic.

Swayne was positive that he was observing the guilty movements of the murderer of Sylvia Lansing. But catching a murderer, was not his purpose. Cornering this man would, in fact, he realized, precipitate the very calamity he was so desperate to avert. A confession of the truth which would plunge Lawrence Phillips and Nicholas Swayne into tragedy—Swayne,

because there was no longer, and could never be again, a corpse on the spot where this man's bullet had felled her. Swayne's pressing interest was in establishing an out which, somehow, he might find here.

THE murderer was chunky, sparse of hair, with dissipated face and eyes haunted with fear. The fear in them became terror as he caught the sound of an approaching step. The automatic was still in his hand. He made a quick jerk to return it to the drawer, missed, fumbled, dropped it. Before he could recover it, the velvet-gowned young woman, highball in hand, had come to a startled pause in the doorway.

"Nels!" she exclaimed aghast. "Nels, what on earth are you thinking of? You fool!"

She was supple and tall, with hair black as a raven's wing; the kind of woman, Swayne surmised, whose smouldering emotions could break swiftly into fierce fire. They flamed now.

She dropped her glass with a stifed cry of dismay. She flung herself on the man as he desperately strove to stuff the automatic into the drawer. In a second she was retreating with it, her eyes flashing black lightning, her alabaster-white bosom surging.

"Nels, you fool!" she burst out. "You'd do that, over a woman like Sylvia—that, knowing she's been unfaithful to you? Don't be silly, Nels! She isn't worth so much of your love. Don't ever think again of committing suicide over *her*!" Her voice softened seductively. "Not while I'm around, Nels. Perhaps you haven't lost anything, after all; perhaps you've gained."

His hand was reaching. "Give it to me," he said huskily. "Give it back to me, Adair."

"I'm going to keep it," the woman answered confidently. "I'm sure I know something much better for you than this, Nels."

Inferences were parading through Swayne's mind. This man must be Nelson Lansing, the theatrical agent, the husband of the woman he had killed. Adair's full name, Swayne recalled from having seen her enacting siren parts on the stage, was Adair Dean, who was probably one of Lansing's clients. She was, also, obviously, a conquest—if he cared to make it.

He saw the woman return toward the library, still under the mistaken impression that she had interrupted an attempt at suicide. "Come, Nels," she said as she swept away, "join me in a drink." Again shifting to the first window, Swayne saw her carry the automatic to a table where she pouched it inside a velvet bag. Presently Lansing appeared, striving to control himself, while she was streaming seltzer into a generous shot of Scotch. She gave him the highball—and her white arm around his shoulders.

"To fun," she toasted.

Swayne cautiously withdrew and considered matters. He could not forget that he still was the custodian of a corpse and sorely in need to finding it a resting place. Nan was temporarily otherwise engaged, but Nelson Lansing appeared to be near the detonating point; and the explosion, if it should strew the truth in public, would effectively ruin a rising medical genius and annihilate the career of an eminently successful confidential investigator. Just how much danger there was of this burst, Swayne could only guess. He determined at once to obtain more definite information.

No longer the covert observer, he rounded to the broad veranda, climbed to the entrance, knocked.

LANSING responded to the commanding rap with the marked haste of an inflamed conscience. He stared out in a state of terrified suspense. The necessity of fabrication gave Swayne no hesitation. His glib-

ness disguised by an unwonted gruffness of tone, he announced:

"I'm Lieutenant Andrews, of the police. We've had a report, through the *Gazette*, that something serious may have happened to Mrs. Nelson Lansing. We're trying to learn something definite about it. You're Mr. Lansing, I presume, so if you'll answer a few questions—"

"I—I know nothing about it!" the distraught man in the doorway mouthed. "Mrs. Lansing and I are separated. I haven't seen her for days—haven't even heard from her. There's nothing I can tell you."

"Then," Swayne broke in, "I'd better take a statement from you. May I come in?" He chuckled as Lansing retreated. "Guess I look funny, togged out like this. My orders called me away from a party. I don't think this will take long, Mr. Lansing. Just a few— Oogh!"

The simulated grunt of admiring surprise came as Swayne, stepping into the library, caught sight of the entrancing Adair Dean. Her answering smile of appreciation was as inviting as moonlight on a tropical beach. When Lansing muttered out an introduction, she put her cool hand into his, giving his fingers an almost imperceptible squeeze. She observed softly:

"I never realized before, lieutenant, how very enjoyable being arrested might be."

"I hope," Swayne assured her gravely, "I'll never be obliged to afford you that pleasure, Miss Dean," and meant it.

He sat opposite the jittery Lansing, who was making an agonized effort to be calm. Adair Dean aided him by sitting snugly at his side on the divan, curling her ruby-nailed fingers into his. Their tiny caress put a tingle into Swayne. He cleared his throat officiously, looked about for some place to put his top hat, placed it on the table directly over the woman's bag, then said:

"This report is not definite. There may be nothing to it at all. On the other hand, it may turn out to be pretty bad. If you haven't heard from Mrs. Lansing recently, as you said, then you probably don't know where she went tonight. Just going at this thing in a routine way, Mr. Lansing, can you account for yourself this evening?"

"Why—why, yes," the harassed man answered. "I've been here—here at home, all the time."

Knowing this to be a fumbling falsehood, Swayne asked: "Can you prove that?"

Adair Dean calmly fortified Lansing's lie. "Of course he can," she assured Swayne. "I had dinner here with Nels. I've been with him ever since. We've been talking, drinking. . . ."

"Then," Swayne broke in expansively, "we can save each other some trouble, Mr. Lansing. You won't have to come to headquarters to repeat all this, in case anything serious comes up, if you give me a written statement now. Suppose you get pen and ink and write down what you just told me. Put the address and the date and the hour at the top, then sign it—both of you."

A THOUGHTFUL spider was beginning to spin a tenuous web of strategy in Swayne's mind. He was not sure to what use he might put the untruthful document he had requested, but he felt that possessing it might give him an advantage. Appearing by his easy manner to place no importance on this inquiry, he watched while Lansing brought stationery from a desk. While Lansing's fountain-pen scratched, Swayne removed a bit of paper from his pocket, folded it, began rolling it into a small, tight cylinder, apparently abstractly.

When Adair Dean finished adding her fabrication to Lansing's, Swayne took the sheet, keeping the roll of paper in his palm. He read, beneath

1657 Lincoln Avenue, Great Cove,
Long Island, July 10, 1936, 9:20
p. m.:

I know nothing about any accident which may have befallen my wife tonight because I have been at home the entire evening, not having seen or heard from her.

NELSON LANSING.

This evening I was Mr. Nelson Lansing's guest for dinner and have been in his company ever since then, therefore I can and do completely confirm his above statement.

ADAIR DEAN.

Swayne nodded, saying, "Very good," and folded the page, tucked it into his inner pocket, rose. "I hope there's no reason why you should ever hear of this again, Mr. Lansing." He bowed to Miss Dean, holding his top hat against his white shirt front. "Sorry to have troubled you—and I hope we meet again unofficially. Good-night. He strode from the library.

When he gruffly bade farewell to Lansing at the front entrance, he deftly inserted the hard cylinder of paper into the socket of the spring lock so that later, if he wished, he might reenter without a key, unobserved.

As he strode along the walk he covertly removed Adair Dean's bag from inside his top hat, felt of it to make sure it still contained Lansing's automatic, then slipped it into his hip pocket.

Striding thoughtfully toward his car, he reflected that the murdered woman's body was still a lamentable burden upon him. Increasing the ticklishness of his predicament was the fact that he had come into possession of the weapon which had killed her. Furthermore, he had added to his sins by committing the statutory offense of impersonating an officer. Keenly realizing that now the necessity of extricating himself was pressing upon him even more urgently than before, he stopped startled at the side of his coupé.

An ominous, chunky figure materialized out of the gloom. In a tone

far gruffer than that which Swayne had assumed in the Lansing home, it told him:

"We want you down at the station."

SWAYNE drew a deep, dry breath. This burly, uniformed policeman was no masquerader, as Swayne had been. From the glitter of his badge to the threatening glint in his eyes, which made him seem suspicious that everybody was guilty of everything, he was the genuine article. An imperative jerk of his thumb ordered Swayne to a patrol car sitting directly behind the coupé.

Swayne blurted: "What the devil for?"

"You'll soon find out."

He asked no further questions. The officer was standing within three feet of the baggage compartment in which the murder victim was concealed. Resistance would surely hasten the discovery of the homicide weapon in Swayne's pocket. Though he felt at the moment that doom had caught up with him, his only choice was to obey. Rankling with more painful uneasiness than he had ever felt before, he ducked into the police machine beside an even more powerfully built cop while the first wedged in at his other arm.

Swayne dared not glance back toward the cadaver he was being forced to abandon. Leaving it alone there in the dark street, even under lock, occasioned him grisly fear. The taciturnity of the two patrolmen crowding against him was an ordeal. By this time the car slid to a stop in front of a brick headquarters building, Swayne had resigned himself to suffering dishonor and the penalty of the electric chair.

But when he strode in with the two officers, toward a desk where a florid-faced captain was gulping a cup of coffee, rage stormed through him. A girl was standing at the rail. The cool archness with which she smiled, told Swayne at once that Nan Royce was responsible for his new

dilemma. She did not speak, but the patrolman at Swayne's angrily hunched right shoulder did.

"Here he is, captain. We spotted his car by the license number broadcast on Order Three-Four-One. This is the bird the editor of the *Gazette* says has been passing himself off around here as a collection agent for the paper. From the looks of that fancy outfit he's wearing, he's collected plenty."

Swayne's eyes were blazing at Nan. "You win," he told her bitterly, "temporarily." He turned irately to the desk captain. "That's a lot of popcorn. I'm a private detective—extremely private. Here's my license. This girl reporter tricked you into sending out a fake order. She's like that. She's devoting her life to trying to turn my most confidential cases into eight-column headlines. To me she's equivalent to a slug of prussic acid."

"Her?" the captain blurted. "What's she got to do with this? She's in here for stealing a car."

Swayne looked astounded. "You don't tell me!" he exclaimed. "But that doesn't make sense. She has a car of her own. It's a yellow roadster. I even know the license number—X5-43-23. If that's the car she's supposed to have made away with, it must be a practical joke. Maybe somebody working on the *Gazette* pulled that on her. You know how these reporters are, captain—always up to tricks."

The officer blinked. "What the hell," he demanded, "is this? Are you two crooks working together?"

Argument followed. It rapidly became a contest in noise-making. Within five minutes, Swayne was wrathfully pounding his fist on the desk, Nan Royce was shrieking, and the captain's blunt face was the color and temperature of chili con carne. Swayne slapped Nan's purloined registration before the officer. Nan grabbed the telephone, made a frantic call, transferred the instrument to

the captain. He snarled into the transmitter, then ended the altercation by picking up the book and putting it down again with deafening violence.

"You're both screwy!" he roared. "You can't make a monkey out of me. If you ever show up here again, I'll lock you up for a couple of nuts. Get out of here!" His clenched fist punctuated the command. "Make yourself scarce! Vamoose! *Scram!*"

Swayne, dizzy with relief but smouldering with fury, gripped Nan's arm and grimly led her to the sidewalk.

SHE gazed at him penitently. "Nicky, darling, I wouldn't have to do things like that if you weren't so mean. I knew it must be you who had me picked up as a car thief, so in self-defense I called the boss and had him phone the captain back. But I didn't think it would mean so much trouble, darling, really I didn't."

"Nan, don't *darling* me!" Swayne snapped. "When you get this contrite, I take it as a danger signal. You're putting on an act, fishing for something you think I know, when in reality I haven't the foggiest notion—"

She was standing very close to him. "Please believe me, Nicky," she whispered. "Sometimes I think you're right—this chasing around after news isn't worth while. After all, what does it get me? When a girl begins wanting a quiet home, and babies, and the man she loves—"

"Honey!" Completely lost to the surprised stares of passers-by, Swayne swept her into his arms. She snuggled close, her head lowered, her hands tugging at his lapels. "I've been waiting for you to say that, wanting to hear you say it, so long, Nan, sweet."

But suddenly the realization struck him that this was entirely too good to be true. He lifted her head, searched her very innocent eyes as she stepped back. "Just what," he

demanded suspiciously, "are you up to now?"

She flung at him: "I think you're a bum. You don't believe me; you never believe me. When I open up my heart to you, you doubt me." She lifted an indignant chin. All right, if you can't trust me, there can't be anything more between us. Just go on your way, Mr. Swayne. I have my own life to live." She added, turning from him: "I've got to go in—forgot something. Be back in a minute."

Swayne stood puzzling as she hurried into the station. Was it possible, he wondered, that he had mistaken her? Was this unalloyed sincerity? Had she really meant it? Remorse over his suspicions came into his heart as he rearranged his tail coat. With the humble intention of exploring Nan's forgiveness, he started after her. On the steps he stopped short, suddenly sure.

The paper he had tucked into his inside pocket—the statements written by Nelson Lansing and Adair Dean—was gone.

"Why, that little—that little—"

He bounded, knowing full well she had discovered the document while his arms were around her, that she had slipped it out unseen by him, not knowing herself what it might be, but hoping to find a succulent morsel of scandal. Hotly outraged, he sought her. He found her in the desk room, in the act of sliding an envelope into the slot of a mail box affixed to the wall. At the very instant he caught sight of her, it vanished into the receptacle.

"Nan," he demanded, fists white-knuckled, "tell me the truth. What did you just drop in there?"

"Just a note for the boss," she answered, tucking in a stray wisp of winey hair with elaborate innocence. "I often mail him little *billets-doux*. I didn't have an envelope, so the captain gave me one. That was nice of him, don't you think? I had a stamp. Why, Nick, why in the world are you looking so angry?"

A WENCH like this, Swayne was wrathfully reflecting, necessitated drastic measures. Her guile did not delude him. He was certain that the "note" she had mailed to her city editor was the false statement. First, of course, she had rapidly read it, eagerly hoping it would somehow develop into blazing scareheads. Knowing Swayne would soon discover its absence from his person, she had effectively placed it beyond his reach through the inviolable sanctity of the mails. For the first time in his life Swayne felt himself within a hair of striking a woman and liking it.

"You," he ground out, "come with me!"

He gripped her wrist. While the desk captain significantly wiggled his forefinger at his temples, Swayne tugged her from the building. Seeing her yellow roadster near the corner, he firmly escorted her to it. He all but lifted her to the wheel, then he slammed the door shut and slid in beside her. She asked blandly:

"But where are we going, Nicky?"

"You're trying your damndest to find something sensational to print. You're also trying your damndest to get it from me somehow. All right. You've jockeyed me into an embarrassing predicament. All I can do now is give you what you want. I refuse to explain my intentions any more fully at the moment, but if you want to learn what I'm up to, drive! Do you hear me? Drive!"

"Why, Nick," Nan sighed, "that's wonderful of you."

He answered tightly: "You'll soon see how wonderful it is."

She eagerly turned from the curb. At his direction she accelerated along the main street. With her elation growing at every passing corner, Swayne guided her into a fashionable residential district. It was a section remote from the center of the crime which was so sorely involving him. Abruptly he ordered: "Stop right there."

The roadster slowed before an imposing house, all dark, framed by an overgrown lawn from which a sign protruded: *For Sale*.

Gesturing caution upon the girl, Swayne signaled her into the driveway. She tiptoed at his side to the garage at the rear. With dramatic efforts to be quiet, Swayne opened one of the broad doors. He furtively tugged Nan inside, pulled the door shut. The blackness was blinding. Swayne's whisper came:

"You're good at lighting matches. Try it again."

He waited while she complied. A paper match scratched. Nan held the flame high, gazing around, disappointment pinching her golden-blue eyes.

"Gosh, I expected at least a corpse," she remarked, the words making Swayne wince. "I don't see anything much. It's empty, except for a few old gunny sacks hanging on nails, and a wheelbarrow, and—"

Swayne snapped at her, "That's perfect," and grabbed a length of rope hanging from a nail on the wall. He flicked the match from her fingers and grabbed her savagely.

"I hate to do this, Nan, but you asked for it," he ground out. "Damned typical of a woman like you, what you've done. You fight a man with every cunning trick you know, but when he turns on you with the only weapon he has left, physical strength, you're outraged. Go ahead—tell me I'm a beast, a brute, anything. I'm saying good night!"

Swayne rapidly exited from the garage, leaving the girl tied with the rope and deposited in an empty wheelbarrow. To play doubly safe, as a final precaution, he took the money from Nan's purse.

He ignored Nan's plaintive wail as he strode to her roadster, in which he folded himself under the wheel. As he reached behind him to smooth out the long tails of his evening coat, his hand felt something alien behind the seat

cushion. It was the white, blood-stained purse belonging to the dead Mrs. Lansing. Swayne added it to the evidence accumulating in his pockets. Then, seeing Nan's disordered head and one bare shoulder in the partly open door of the garage, he shot away from the deserted house. She, he hoped vehemently, was definitely out of the picture until such time as he chose to return.

Acid concern was fermenting within him—anxiety over the corpse he had been forced to abandon in his coupé. All the while he had been imagining horrible things happening to it. A wandering dog might sniff the smell of death, plant himself at the baggage compartment and dismally howl his grisly discovery to the whole neighborhood. A drunkenly driven car might crash into the coupé, burst the lid open and disclose the cadaver. So many dangers were threatening to reveal it in Swayne's mind, that he zigzagged Nan's roadster toward the Lansing home with reckless speed.

But, swinging to a stop behind his car, he found it unsmashed, darkly serene. He convinced himself the murdered woman was still stored in it by unlocking the cover and peeking in. It was meager reassurance. Swayne was increasingly desperate for a new location for her. Determined that any risk was justified now, that he must get rid of the corpse with the utmost dispatch, that he must sever its every connection with Phillips and himself, he gazed intently at the residence of Nelson Lansing.

What better place for the remains of a slain woman, he asked himself, than the house of the man who had killed her?

He ventured upon the Lansing lawn. Silently insinuating himself toward a lighted window, he gazed into the library. He saw Adair Dane reclining seductively on the divan, sipping another highball, alone.

She was looking intently at the door connecting with Lansing's bedroom.

Her eyes were smouldering with wonder and calculation.

Swayne shifted to the next window in order to learn what it was that absorbed her.

Through the chink in the drawn drapes, he saw Nelson Lansing rapidly transferring shirts from a gaping dresser drawer to an open suitcase, stuffing them in with feverish haste. His harassment was even more marked than before. His task, Swayne surmised, would keep him occupied some minutes. He did not pause when Adair Dean appeared in the door to wordlessly watch him.

Swayne seized instantly upon the fact that the library was now unoccupied. His lengthy legs stretched across the lawn. He searched the gloomy street with darting glances. Its dark emptiness added to his opportunity. He quickly unlocked the baggage compartment. He tugged at the corpse. He straightened with the dead woman in his arms.

CHAPTER IV

MURDER BREEDS MURDER

KEENLY alert against observation, Swayne strode swiftly to the Lansing veranda. He felt sure, when he paused at the entrance, that no eye had seen his desperate move. Gingerly supporting the satined murder victim, he tried the knob.

The paper roll he had inserted into the latch socket had prevented the action of the spring. The door yielded. Swayne listened along the amber-lighted hallway, to Lansing's and Adair Dean's voices mingling in the bedroom. He risked entering.

With painful quietness he tiptoed toward the library, looking for a new place of concealment for the body. The only offer of the hall was a clothes closet so crammed that nothing else could be added. Swayne glided on.

Looking into the library, he saw promising doors. He eased to the near-

est, opened it, looked into another closet, invitingly spacious. Reflecting grimly that since he had brought the dead lady from one he could appropriately leave her in another, Swayne entered it with her.

He was lowering the corpse to the floor when quick steps flashed him a cold warning that Lansing was returning to the library.

Swayne's blood raced with the realization that he had no time to make an escape without being seen. He made the only move possible. He let the lifeless woman slump, grabbed the inside knob, swung the door shut. Concealment was immediate but, Swayne knew icily, only temporary. Discovery at this point would mean tragic defeat. Frenziedly wishing to remove himself from this place at the soonest possible moment, he peered through a split-hair crack.

Lansing was striding into the library. He was gripping a bulging suitcase in each hand. Adair Dean appeared behind him, her eyes ebon anger. She followed as Lansing hastened across the room. He was advancing directly upon the closet in which Swayne was hiding. An alarmed glance over his shoulder showed Swayne dimly several coats and hats on hooks. Lansing must be coming for one of them. As he reached for the knob, Swayne made a hopeless gesture which meant he felt this was definitely the end.

"Nels!"

Adair Dean's sharp call stopped Lansing. Through the crack Swayne gazed at her with heartfelt gratitude. Her velvet gown rustled as she hurried, putting her drink down, gripping Lansing's arm. They were within four feet of Swayne. He caught the woman's edged words clearly:

"You've got to tell me where you're going, Nels. You can't rush off like this without explaining. And why—why are you running away? Nels, what's happened? Is it something about Sylvia?" Adair Dean's dark scrutiny was suddenly piercingly sus-

picious. "You do know what's wrong! Nels, what have you done?"

He swung on her. "Let me alone!" He paced toward the fireplace. "Quit asking me questions! I've got to get away, that's all! That fake alibi of ours—they'll tear it to pieces. They'll make my cook tell the truth, that you weren't here for dinner. They'll find out I was gone when—when—where's that gun?" he demanded fiercely. "What did you do with that gun?"

The velvet-clad woman faced him. "Tell me!" she insisted wildly. "Tell me what's happened!"

Suddenly his fists were clubbed, his eyes blazing with hopeless terror. "All right, I'll tell you! I'll tell you what all this means! You're going to find out right now why I've got to get away from here before they come for me. I killed her. I killed Sylvia!"

Adair Dean blanched.

"I was a fool!" Lansing rasped out. "I was a crazy, jealous fool! I couldn't stand it any more. I couldn't stand seeing her throw herself at Phillips. I was watching her—I followed her there. I saw her begging him to take everything I wanted. I knew right then I'd never get her back. I thought I'd rather see her dead than give her up to any other man." He palmed his haggard face. "I killed her."

The Dean woman spoke with level huskiness. "You *are* a fool. I don't know who this Phillips is. I don't know what was going on. You were crazy to do it, but I'd be crazy to get mixed up in it any deeper. I'm not going to see my career wrecked over this. If the police find out, I'm going to tell them what you've just told me—everything!"

Lansing's horrified eyes lifted. "No you won't!" he flung back. "No you won't!"

"I will!" the woman challenged. "I'd be smart to go to the police with the whole thing right now. I'm getting out of here."

"No you won't!"

Lansing repeated it desperately as Adair Dean reached for the white eve-

ning wrap draped over a chair. He caught her wrist. She attempted to jerk from him. He held her relentlessly. The struggle toppled them against the fireplace. She thrust him back, turned to run.

"No you won't!" Lansing defied her again. At the instant when Swayne, in spite of all the disaster it must mean, was about to fling himself from the closet to defend the woman, Lansing snatched a heavy brass candlestick from the mantel and leaped.

But Swayne was too late. The candlestick swung with a vicious hiss, crunched one sharp corner deep into the woman's raven hair, propelled her limp to the rug.

SWAYNE straightened back, appalled. Frigidly he watched Lansing, who was standing rigid, staring aghast at the actress' crushed skull. He dropped the candlestick, thumped down to his knees. "Adair!" he called huskily, shaking her. "Adair, Adair!" Swayne knew she was beyond answer. The blow had been powerful enough to smash out her life instantly.

Lansing pulled up. His fingers whitely entwined, he looked around haggardly. He began pacing. Swayne's fever of anxiety reached new heights as Lansing walked back and forth, back and forth.

The murderer was muttering: "What can I do, what can I do?" He paused, his ashen face lighted with the idea of a possible solution. He steadied himself, clarifying his mind. Suddenly he caught up the white cape, spent a few harried moments unsuccessfully searching for the purse which Swayne had, then turned to the dead Adair Dean.

He struggled her up into his arms. Panting with the effort, he trudged into the rear of the house. His departure from the library gave Swayne an opportunity to escape, but Swayne did not hasten from the closet. He came out cautiously, wonder in his

eyes, the gears of his mind humming. With tight stealth he followed the hallway. In the dark kitchen he found the rear door standing ajar. Lansing had gone out through it with the woman he had killed. At it Swayne intently listened.

Long moments passed before his ears caught a sound that set his lips. It was a gritty, *chuffing* noise. It was being made by the rapid driving of a shovel blade into the earth. It told Swayne that Lansing had quickly obtained the tool, probably from the garage, and was digging in the garden at the rear of the grounds. In the hope of concealing his second murder, he was digging a grave for Adair Dean.

Listening, Swayne pictured the deepening of the hollow. Lansing was laboring desperately to make it large enough. Swayne could not see him, but the regular lifting of the heaped shovel was a clear and ghastly image. Soon the rhythm broke. The quiet told Swayne that Lansing had made an excavation that sufficed. It urged an equally desperate move upon him. With the corpse of the murderer's wife still huddled in the closet, Swayne trod to the telephone in the library.

He spun the zero. "Operator," he said when a girl's voice answered, "I suspect this phone isn't working properly. Please ring this number as soon as I hang up, and keep on ringing it until I answer." When he heard, "Certainly, sir," he cradled the instrument.

Immediately the bell rippled. It began a steady, intermittent beat. The first stroke was still ringing when Swayne strode across the library to the closet. He stooped in, grasped two dead arms, slung the lifeless body over his shoulder. Straightening out, he tramped to the front entrance. There he waited, his breath rushing, again listening.

The bell was keeping it up—*rrrrr*, *rrrrr*, *rrrrr*, persistently. Swayne did not move until he heard a step at the rear of the house.

Lansing was coming to answer the summons. Swayne eased from the sill, closing the entrance, half a moment before Lansing's footfalls told that he was emerging from the kitchen. Hurriedly, steadying his lifeless burden, Swayne rounded to the side of the house. Through the window he glimpsed Lansing muttering bewilderedly into the telephone. He staggered into a run. In the rear of the grounds he zigzagged. A dimly visible mound of black turned his stride.

He peered into the dank hollow. Adair Dean's body, covered with the white wrap, lay in its depths. The first few shovelfuls of earth had been dashed over it. Swayne bent far, stretched his long arm down. Catching hold of the cape, he whisked it up. Dirt flew from it. He stooped again, gently lowering the corpse of Mrs. Lansing. It rolled out over the Dean woman's. Quickly Swayne spread the wrap over both. Into the grave he dropped two purses, one blood-blotted, the other containing a gun. Then he caught up the shovel, slung two loads of dirt across the white.

Abruptly, he replaced the tool and dodged back. Rustling footfalls on the lawn warned him Lansing was crossing from the house. He tiptoed long-leggedly, circling against the wall of the garage, then skirting on beyond. Behind him sounded the muffled chuffing of the shovel again in Lansing's hands. Once having safely reached the side of the house, he contemplated playing his gamble further. Decisively he shifted to the front entrance, let himself in silently, returned to the library telephone.

Again he dialed the operator. This time he said: "I want a policeman." The efficiently made connection brought Swayne, next, an officious male voice. He told it crisply:

"This is Gurness, city editor of the *Gazette*, calling. This time it's straight stuff. It connects with my first tip-off on the Lansing woman, and calls for fast action. I've just had

word from one of my reporters that a gunshot was heard in Nelson Lansing's house a minute ago. He's doing something suspicious in his back yard—digging. You'd better get a couple of prowl cars over there right away. It might be murder."

The voice said: "We'll handle that."

Swayne disconnected, hurried to the front door. Slipping out, he removed the paper block from the lock socket. He emerged onto the gloomy veranda full of haste, but permitting himself for the first time to feel that perhaps he had succeeded in his grisly project. Immediately his gratification vanished. Consternation sharply returned. He stared alarmed at the corner of the grounds.

There he had glimpsed a white face. It had been visible only a brief moment. But he had recognized it with cold clearness—Nan Royce's. Somehow, she had worked loose from the hastily tied knots of the rope with which he had bound her.

SHE was concealing herself somewhere along the black hedge. She could, very easily, Swayne knew, observe his escape. Escape was urgent because his own call to the police was certain to bring alert men to this spot before many more ticks of the clock. His apprehension on the scene, with Nan as witness, might occasion her some regret privately, but certainly it would provide her with the banner headlines she craved. Swayne teetered on the seesaw of indecision only a moment. Then he chanced sliding along the wall, vaulting the side rail of the porch, dropping into the garden.

He poised to dodge out to his car, but furtive noises restrained him. He heard a sly rustle of leaves which meant that Nan was creeping farther back into the yard. He caught a dull rhythm that signified Lansing was still rapidly plying the shovel. This sound was, certainly, the lure that was drawing the reckless news huntress toward a murderer. Swayne groaned over the necessity that trapped him.

He could not make his own flight good at the cost of leaving Nan in danger.

He darted to the sidewalk, strode along it to the opposite side of the broad yard. Quite openly, he trudged onto the grass. Enough light glowed from the corner to show him, soon, a vague figure huddled in the shadow of the hedge. Swayne stopped staring at it. This was, indeed, Nan.

Swayne began quietly: "Come away—"

"Shh!" she warned. "Quiet, Nick! There's something strange going on back there. Listen!"

Her blue-gold eyes were again full of that hungry light. Her hand on Swayne's, she searched the darkness with her ears, but now there was no sound. Lifting a chiding gaze to Swayne, she went on softly: "I hope you're ashamed of yourself. That was no way to treat a lady. You should have seen how the taxi driver looked at me. I couldn't pay him, so he's waiting around the corner now. That was a mean trick—taking my money from me in the garage." Then her voice became guilefully casual. "Is this something you're connected with somehow, Nick?"

She knew it was, and Swayne knew she knew it. She had remembered the address, of course, from the Lansing-Dean statement that she had picked from his pocket. At her first opportunity she had come to investigate, considering a small detail like no money of small importance. Swayne was forced to admire her for it, but his concern for her was stronger.

"You come away from here, Nan," he whispered. "You might run into something you're not bargaining for. I don't want you to get messed up. Be a good girl and let me drive you home."

"No," she refused. "Nick Swayne, you're concealing something. You know a great deal more than you pretend about all these strange things that've been happening. I'm going to find out what they mean. I promised my boss, and I will. If this is no affair

of yours, just run along, but I'm— Listen—there it is again!"

The gritting of the shovel had resumed. At once Nan twisted her hand out of Swayne's. Before he could stop her, she was bounding away. He strode urgently, unable to locate her in the thicker gloom deeper in the grounds. A chill coursed along his nerves when the shovel again ceased its beat. He caught a strangling exclamation of fear from the site of the grave. The sound of a man running followed.

Then, suddenly, a scream. Nan's voice broke out in pain and fear. Something fell in the grass. The running footfalls resumed, faster.

Swayne glimpsed Nelson Lansing stumbling breathlessly into the light at the rear of the house. Eyes shining with terror, he lurched in. Swayne let him go. He groped on, abandoning all caution.

"Nan! Nan!"

A faint cry guided him. He found her pulling herself up from the grass. She blurted: "That man hit me—knocked me down!" Then: "Look, Nick, it's the police. I *knew* something was up!"

She was no sooner on her feet than she was tearing away again, her bare legs flashing toward the front of the house. In despair Swayne trailed after her.

TWO blue prowling cars had swung to the curb directly in front of the Lansing place. Four men were climbing to the entrance.

A voice growled: "You two'd better watch in back."

A pair retreated, separated. On each side of the dwelling a uniformed man began striding to the rear door. The pair left on the porch began rapping. The quick questions Nan asked them were answered only by an amazed stare.

Suddenly a deafening report quaked the walls. It echoed muffled inside the house, stopped the knocking. Swayne realized, from the vio-

lence of the concussion, that nothing smaller than a shotgun could have made it.

Dismayed, he heard one of the officers at the rear of the house call: "This way's open!" Nan was first to respond. She followed the walk, fleet as a doe, with the two patrolmen lumbering after her. Alarm hurried Swayne.

The four men and the girl were already inside when he reached the open door. Immediately he went in, he found Nan recoiling from the library, covering her white face with her hands. She saw Swayne, ran to him, flung her arms around him. Her words came in breathy sobs.

"Hold me, Nick, darling. It's so horrible. His head—blown off." Then, immediately, she was feeling much better. "I want a telephone."

"You would!" Swayne held her arm. "You'd think of a telephone first, no matter what happened to you. Listen to me, Nan. You want to know how I'm mixed into this. I'm giving it to you straight. This evening Nelson Lansing retained me for the purpose of finding evidence enough for a divorce. I haven't even got started on the job. If you're going to print anything about me in your damned sheet, it's going to be just that and not a particle more. If you mention me in any other way, I'll sue the *Gazette*—and you, too."

"But—but I want to make a hero of you, Nick, if I can. I want to put your name in big type and have the whole country admire you for—"

"And I don't want to be a hero," Swayne countered. "Publicity is what I need least. How many times must I tell you that. Will you ever understand? Why was I ever crazy enough to fall in love with you?"

"Let me go!"

He let her go. She was bounding toward the telephone when he turned back to the door. His mental picture of the scene in the living-room was sufficient for him. Grasping at an opportunity to efface himself, he hur-

DR

ried around the house to his car. He aroused the motor with the utmost alacrity. When he swerved from the curb, he was profoundly grateful that he was no longer traveling with a corpse.

Swayne braked in front of Dr. Lawrence Phillips' apartment after a slow drive. Entering, he paused near the door of a front room. A radio was functioning inside it. The voice of an announcer reading a news dispatch carried out. Swayne heard:

"THE suicide of Nelson Lansing occurred such a short time ago that the *Gazette*, which supplies this information, is not yet fully informed as to all the circumstances. The corpses of the two women unearthed in Lansing's back yard indicate that he murdered them. Though certain details in possession of the *Gazette* seem impossible to explain—for example, certain pieces of evidence found by a *Gazette* reporter far from the scene—it may definitely be concluded that Lansing killed both Miss Dean and his wife in his home tonight."

Swayne waited to hear no more. But, reaching the door of the Phillips apartment, he paused to listen again to something else. This was the resonant voice of Dr. Timothy Winston,

his friend's guest, the most eminent brain surgeon in the country. Dr. Winston was saying pleasantly:

"I'll be delighted to have you associated with me, my boy, because I'm positive you have a brilliant future. You're certainly a most fortunate young man, quite aside from the opportunities our work may give you for further research. Linda's father is your devoted friend. Linda—certainly as fine a girl as ever lived—is whole-heartedly ready to share your life with you. All in all—"

Swayne knocked. He straightened himself, stepped in smiling. He bowed in answer to the greetings of Lawrence Phillips' guests, then answered the frantic question in Phillips' eyes with a completely reassuring wink. He sat, beaming with relief, flooded with satisfaction.

"Now, Mr. Swayne," Linda Trowbridge said eagerly, "you simply must tell us about this case that kept you away from us tonight."

"If you don't mind, please," Swayne answered, with a thirsty eye cocked upon Phillips, "I should like a drink—before I start out on another confidential case, *very personal!*"

Swayne was thinking of Nan and how he would like to strangle that delicious but treacherous little headline hunter.



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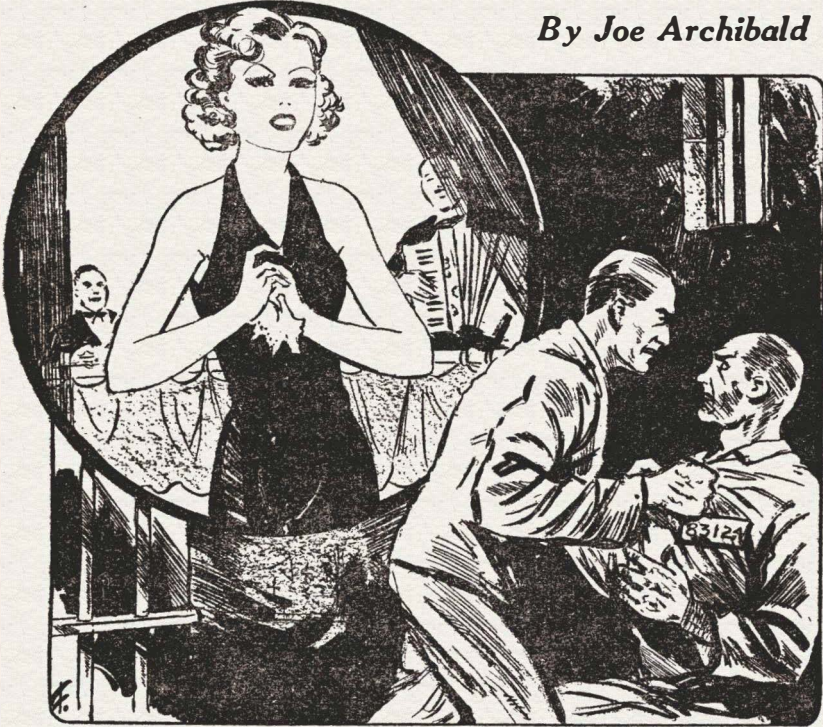
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PROBAK JUNIOR

John Ryder had the bitter choice of betraying a deep trust, and disgracing himself in his daughter's eyes—or letting that lovely girl plunge into the sordid life which had once caused . . .

Murder in Paradise

By Joe Archibald



SEVEN years. Number 34678 breathed those two words inaudibly as he stood in front of his cell door. Seven years to the day—shut in from the world outside. A seven-year nightmare of clanging doors; swirling gaunt sallow faces; the hollow beat of guards' boots on concreted floors of corridors; screaming whistles and the small night sounds that came from the cubicles of the living dead.

Number 34678's eyes were staring into his drab cell but they were seeing nothing there. They visualized a

crowded courtroom where a man stood facing the judge's bench. The man stood with his shoulders thrown back—a dark-haired man with clear brown eyes. He seemed the calmest of all those who were in the big room to hear the man receive his sentence.

Words pounded again in the convict's ears: "And so, John Ryder, I sentence you to twenty-five years in the State Penitentiary at Charlton City."

John Ryder. The name was almost strange to Number 34678. It was hard to believe that he had once been a part

of the outside world, that he had ever experienced the tremendous, wonderful sensation of freedom. That woman who had been his wife—she seemed a figment of the imagination, too; but no, she was the reason for his being here.

Caroline Ryder. Perhaps she never should have married him. Life to her had been bright lights, music, gaiety. John Ryder had taken the girl out of a turbulent big-city night spot, where she had been working as a cigarette girl. His little business had absorbed the greater part of his time, and life had palled for the girl. She had gone back to the night spot despite his protests.

And then had come a night. John Ryder, Convict Number 34678, drew a sleeve across his eyes in a weary gesture at the memory: A tired man coming home late. His wife there—with another man. His wife in that man's arms. Thousands of times John Ryder had wished he had never kept that army revolver. Then he would not have gone to that closet and lifted it from its leather holster. He could not have gone into the room to shoot that sleek young devil down.

It was not hard to bring before his mind's eye the picture of the man's pale face, that dark stain on the front of a white shirt bosom. But a more burning memory knifed through the brain of Number 34678—the recollection of a child's face. Small, twelve-year-old Pat Ryder, face as white as her little nightie, her eyes filled with stunned horror. She had come out of the bedroom . . .

Number 34678's racing thoughts scattered. A big bar that covered the top of each door was raised. The convicts walked into their drab cells simultaneously. John Ryder shut his eyes momentarily at the reverberations of eight hundred doors crashing to. He stood still until the guard had checked his number with a list he carried. Then he slumped down onto his cot and reason failed him for a while.

Presently he went through his daily

rite of producing a small snapshot from under his mattress and staring at it for a long time. The convict's eyes were always filled with hunger and shone in the dim light when they gazed on that picture.

"Wonder where she is?" he mumbled. "Wonder if she hates me?"

If he could only know. She was the only thing he loved in the whole world—his own daughter.

A VOICE jolted the convict to grim reality. It came from above him. He raised his eyes and saw a pair of heavy prison boots swing into view. A husky man dropped to the floor and looked at Number 34678 with a twist to his lips.

"H'lo, pal," he said. "I'm your new cell mate. I been over in the old prison for a couple of days. They moved me here. Didn' ya see me when they checked us in? Hah, it's got ya—first time in stir, huh?"

John Ryder nodded. "I've been here seven years."

His cell mate looked at him keenly, eyes probing. "Ya don' look like none of the others." His eyes dropped to the snapshot that Number 34678 held in a roughened hand. "A skirt maybe, huh? Forgit her! Don't be a sap. One of 'em put me in here, too."

"Shut up!" Ryder flared fiercely. "Shut up. Don't say that again." He was on his feet, his eyes red.

"Okay, sure," his cell mate mumbled. "Take it easy, guy. We gotta be friends."

He introduced himself as Crack Clevin. "They gimme a ten-year stretch for bank robbery," he explained. Clevin was not a prepossessing person. His lower jaw seemed out of line. His eyes were lemon colored, and there was a vicious set to his wide, thin mouth. When John Ryder did not volunteer any information, Clevin spoke again.

"The first time I got a slant at ya, I was sure you was an old pal of mine—Whitey Erne from Cleveland. Ya're

almost a ringer for him. If ya had a gold tooth in front now, I'd—"

Number 34678 passed his fingers over a patch of white at his temple. A rueful smile swept across his gaunt face. He had nothing to say to Clevin as the hours dragged. At nine the lights went out. Darkness was a boon to John Ryder. The blue sky did not beckon from the tiny window of the cell then.

Twenty-four hours later Clevin said to John Ryder: "I been hearin' about ya, pal. A con told me that you're sittin' pretty here; workin' for the warden as chauffeur to his daughter. Ya git outside the walls maybe once a week an' ya never tried to make a break. You're a sap, feller!"

Number 34678 said: "Maybe that's the way you look at it, sure. A man like you couldn't understand, Clevin. Word of honor—it means nothing to men like you." The prisoner's thoughts went to Warden Jim Lawton then. The warden was his friend, the only friend he had in the massive structure at Charlton City. Lawton knew his story.

When Warden Lawton had made Number 34678 a trusty, he had said: "I'll move heaven and earth to cut your sentence short, Ryder. You don't belong here. I think I would have done the same thing had I been in your place. I'm trusting you, John. I know I'm not making a mistake."

"Thank you, sir," the convict had said, "but I don't want to go out there—again. There's only one person who matters in the whole world. They've probably taught her to hate me. I don't want to see it in her eyes—ever."

Clevin laughed harshly, snapping Ryder from his thoughts. "Sap! I could git ya fixed right in the big town. There's a big shot there who'd help ya, once ya got to him. He'd stake ya, Ryder. He's goin' to git me out in three years. He got me out before. Well, if ya ever want to break out of this can, lemme know."

He maintained a brief silence, then: "I got a lot of friends in the big burg. One of 'em owns a big hot spot on the South Side. He's got a clever woman runnin' it for him. She's no high-school dame but she sure keeps her looks. An' man! She's got a daughter—about nineteen—an' nothin' in a Follies chorus can come up to her. That skirt knows her job's safe with Tony Cansino as long as her kid daughter smiles at him."

Wearily, John Ryder said: "I'm not interested in what is going on outside, Clevin. I don't want to hear that stuff."

His cell mate spat into the wash basin. "Washed up, huh? Takin' it layin' down. Well, if I was in your spot, I'd be out in forty-eight hours. I'd be sittin' in Tony Cansino's office drinkin' champagne an' kiddin' around wit' the queen of the hot spots, Carole Delroy. Yeah—"

SOMETHING seemed to burst inside the head of Convict Number 34678. For three minutes after Clevin had spoken, the name of Carole Delroy bored slowly into his consciousness. A wild gleam in his eyes, John Ryder leaped to his feet and clawed for the slack of his cell mate's prison jacket. Out of the past came a voice, a petulant, pleading voice:

"You're stubborn, Johnny, you won't see. Maynard told me I had a voice; that I wouldn't have to be just a cigarette girl if I took a few lessons. I could change my name—call myself Carole Delroy. Johnny, I want to be a singer. I—we could do such a lot more for Pat."

Clevin suddenly snarled: "What's eatin' ya, ya mug? Take your paws off me or I'll slug—"

"The kid's name?" John Ryder demanded, his eyes clouded with shock. "This—Carole Delroy's daughter. Tell me, Clevin!"

"Huh? What's it to ya? What's eatin' ya, Ryder?" the other gulped. "Her name? Pat. They call her Pat. Ya gone crazy, Ryder?"

Convict Number 34678 let his hands fall away from his cell mate's chest. He seemed to shrivel inside his clothes as he slumped down on his cot. He dropped his head into his hands. Number 34678's brain pounded with his protests: "No—no! Not my little Pat—with crooks. She wouldn't be like that."

A guard came pounding along the corridor. He paused in front of the cell and cracked: "What's all the noise in here?"

Clevin laughed jerkily. "This guy's went screwy," he said. "I thought he was gonna climb my frame."

The hard-eyed guard clipped: "Yeah? Ryder never makes trouble. Watch your step, Clevin!"

Ryder said humbly: "Sorry, Clevin. I guess I was a little crazy—screwy, as you call it."

That night Number 34678 tossed on his cot. He cursed his helplessness as he thought of a pretty little girl whom he used to bounce on his knee. Pat would be about nineteen now. She would be grown up. A lot like her mother probably. Unless some one were there to help Pat, she would look at the world through glasses that distorted the vision. She would succumb to that night world full of glamour, reckless wasters, and, worst of all, crooks. The girl needed some one to put her straight.

At the thought, a choked laugh came from John Ryder's throat. A man in prison—a convicted murderer—wanting to be the one to do that. But it was his right—she was his flesh and blood.

For hours he lay awake. A far-away locomotive whistle moaned dismally. It beckoned to Number 34678. It provoked whisperings in the prisoner's brain. Freedom was his for the taking. Every Friday the warden's daughter went to the city. John Ryder always drove her to the station six miles from the penitentiary. Tomorrow would be Friday. The insistent voices kept belaboring Number 34678. The convict, on the point of yielding

to their exhortations, thought of Jim Lawton. The warden's kindly face swam in front of his tortured vision. He had given the man his word of honor. Warden Jim trusted him.

But before he fell asleep in the early hours of the morning, John Ryder had made up his mind. Pat was something dearer to him than his pledged word. She needed him, even though she was unaware that he still lived. Number 34678 had decided to make his getaway in just seven days. He wanted another week to find out more about Whitey Erne, about the man's habits, his whereabouts, everything pertaining to him. For, as Whitey Erne, John Ryder was going out into the world again for a little while. A friend of Crack Clevin could get help from Tony Cansino.

DURING the next few days Ryder guardedly questioned Crack Clevin. He found out that Erne had fled to Canada a year before. He learned that Whitey Erne and Tony Cansino had never met, that the midwest metropolis had never been a stamping ground for Erne, who had confined his depredations to the underworld west of the Mississippi.

Number 34678 wore a loose topcoat and a slouch hat when he drove Sue Lawton to the railroad station on Friday. When the car rolled out through the gates, a guard yelled: "Be sure and come back, John!" Almost invariably the man at the gate said that. John Ryder laughed but it was a forced attempt at mirth. Four miles from the Charlton City Penitentiary he drove the roadster into a secluded side road and jammed on the brakes.

To the wide-eyed girl he said: "Please—get out, Miss Lawton. I'm running away."

"John, you can't! You wouldn't do that. Father trusts you. He's trying to free you, John Ryder. Don't be a fool. Please, John."

The convict's mind was awhirl with conflicting emotions. His voice was pleading when he spoke again:

"Please, Sue, I'm in a hurry. Tell your Dad I had to do it. Get out, Sue—get out! Don't make me put my hands on you."

"All r-right, John," Sue Lawton said, and her words were thick. "I won't tell anyone—for a while. I'll give you a chance." The girl climbed out and stared blankly at the trusty. The man looked at her with filling eyes.

"Goodbye, Sue. Just tell him that—I had to do it."

He shifted into gear, accelerated speed, then tore along the snaky country road at a crazy pace. The warden's daughter stood there until the sound of the racing engine died in the distance.

An hour later Warden Lawton's daughter called her father. The alarm went out. Sirens shrieked, their echoes breaking and running across the rolling hills that surrounded the bleak, gray prison. For hours police patrolled the roads for miles. In his office sat the warden, a little stunned. The prison board would make him sweat, but that did not matter so much to the warden. He had placed his trust in a man—and the man had failed him. He sent for Crack Clevin, who was brought to his office in a jiffy. For fully an hour he questioned John Ryder's cell mate. But true to the code, Clevin refused to betray his former cell mate.

"I don't know nothin'," he repeated over and over. "He never said nothin' to me."

In his garish night-club office, Tony Cansino, the big shot of the lake city's hot spots, was trying to soothe a badly frightened woman. She sat huddled in a big leather chair, facing Cansino, her bright red lips quivering. Carole Delroy, once Caroline Ryder, was still a beautiful woman, despite her forty-one years. Beauticians and modistes had been paid well for their battle against time.

Cansino argued: "What're you afraid he'll come after you for, Carole?

To bump you off? Don't be silly—he wouldn't dare to come near this town."

He picked up the paper she had laid on his desk. On the front page was the item of news that had brought fear to John Ryder's ex-wife:

SLAYER ESCAPES PRISON

John Ryder, convicted of the murder of his wife's paramour in 1928, a trusty at Charlton City Penitentiary, escaped in the warden's car this afternoon.

"I'm afraid," the night club hostess quavered. "He's had seven years to nurse his hate in. He'll come straight for me."

"All right, Carole," Tony conceded. "Why don't you take a trip to the coast for a couple of weeks? They'll have him behind the bars by the time you get back. How about Pat?"

"He wouldn't know her if he saw her," the woman replied. "Tony, you look after her?"

Tony Cansino smiled. "Sure, I'll watch out for the kid. Leave everythin' to me."

He turned his face away to hide the elation that was sweeping over it. But for the hostess of the Club Mirimar, he would have got places with Pat. With the mother out of the way it would be easier. Tony Cansino set his face and turned to face Carole Delroy.

"Need any dough?"

"A little."

"All right, tell Mack to give you five C's," said Tony.

Tony Cansino was a tall, sleek, black-haired man. A lot of the society debs in town had fallen for him. Carole Delroy liked him, too, but Tony had told her to act her age when she had tried to light the torch for him. With the woman out of the way, he'd put Pat on in the floor show for a few numbers. She would wow the customers. Pat would never stop thanking Tony Cansino. Things had not been going very well in the night spot. The books were in the red, and Tony owed a gambler a lot of dough. He had a lot of ideas to refill his once-

choked coffers—when the right man came along to help him. Pat would be a good front. If Clevin was only out of stir, everything would be perfect.

Three nights after the hostess of the Club Mirimar had boarded a train for the coast, John Ryder walked slowly along the sidewalk in front of the hot spot. Warden Lawton of Charlton City would hardly have recognized Number 34678. His clothes were well tailored, his shoes neatly polished. Glasses rode the bridge of his nose. When he removed his hat to wipe the sweat band with a handkerchief, his hair shone yellowish white in the neon lights that studded the marquee.

John Ryder thought of the man who had given him a lift along the road after he had ditched the warden's car. The recollection made him cringe with distaste. He had shoved a pipe stem into the man's ribs, had forced him to stop the car. He had left the man stranded and driven away. At a safe distance he had opened two suitcases in the back of the car and had found what he had needed most. Clothes, toilet articles.

By devious ways he had made his way to Tony Cansino's place. For a quarter of an hour he walked up and down the busy street. A taxicab drew up to the curb, and he sauntered toward the doorway of a shop that was closed for the night. In the shadows he stood waiting, face turned away from the street glare. Then a voice shook him through and through. It had spoken a name—Pat.

The escaped convict whirled on his toes, saw a husky young man emerge from the murkiness of a doorway and hurry toward a pretty young girl who was alighting from the cab. John Ryder could not help but hear what those two were saying. His hungry eyes feasted on the slim, dark girl whose face was turned toward him. His heart leaped, then thudded sickeningly as he yearned for the days that had gone. She had her mother's eyes—but her pretty mouth seemed

stronger than the one that had whispered love to him a long time ago.

"Please be reasonable, Dan," the girl said. "I'm in a hurry. This is my night. I'm going to sing—going to be somebody. Please go. No, I can't marry you—"

"All right, Pat," the man shot at her, his lower jaw thrust out. "Go ahead—mix up with crooks like Cansino. You'll get into a jam. I'll have to come and pull you out—if it's possible."

"I can take care of myself," the girl retorted hotly, full of the self-confidence of youth. "I don't need a detective to tell me how to live my life. If I want to go out with Tony Cansino, I am not going to ask you for permission. You're jealous. He's rich, and you—you're just a—"

"Don't say it, Pat," the husky young man clipped. "I'm proud of my job. Proud to get a chance to kick mugs like Cansino into line. Go ahead—I'm tired talking to you."

"Well that's mutual, Dan Porter," the girl snapped, and walked swiftly toward the entrance of the Club Mirimar.

THE eavesdropping John Ryder fought down the impulse to cry out to her. Pat—his daughter. How many times he had sat cuddling her, her sleepy head on his loving breast, her plump little hands patting his big ones. Never in all his life had John Ryder felt so alone, so miserable—even in his cramped cell at Charlton City Penitentiary.

John Ryder told himself that his brain would have to work more smoothly than it had ever worked. Not twenty feet away stood a man for whom promotion was assured if he should step up and place his hand on John Ryder's shoulder. The escaped convict felt a surge of admiration for the character that showed in Dan Porter's face. Here was the kind of man whom Pat should marry. He was husky, young, clean looking.

Suddenly the young headquarters man turned and stamped away, the swing of his shoulders bespeaking his anger. Number 34678, at large, moved toward the Club Mirimar.

At the door of the gaudy night spot, John Ryder said to a man who blocked his way: "I want to see Cansino."

"What's the name, buddy? He don't see nobody who *wants* to see him."

"Tell him a friend of Clevin is out here," replied Ryder.

In just five minutes the escaped convict was alone with Cansino in the big shot's office. Cansino's face was alight with expectancy.

"So Crack is a friend of yours, huh? He send me any word?"

"No," replied Ryder, "I ain't seen Crack for a couple of years. I'm Whitey Erne."

Cansino made a sharp clicking sound with his tongue. His dark eyes dilated. "Erne? Well, I'm a— Say, where's the gold tooth?"

Ryder grinned. "Think I'm dumb? I had it took out. I got me a swivel tooth put in its place. Wanna see it?"

Cansino said: "Sit down, Erne. Let's have a drink."

After a while the night club owner led John Ryder to a door. He opened it, and the fugitive could see the show going on out on the floor. A pretty girl in evening dress was singing. John Ryder stiffened and drew in his breath. Cansino swung his face toward the pseudo-Whitey Erne.

He grinned and said: "Yeah, she knocks 'em all over. A new kid. I got plans for her. First time she's shown here. Her old lady lammed outta town for a couple of weeks. Seems her ex-husband broke out of stir. She was afraid he'd find her an' knock her off. The kid don't know about it. She was pretty young when it happened. Carole, the kid's mother, told her that the guy passed out with a weak ticker. She thinks her old man is dead."

John Ryder fought for control of himself. He forced out: "She's a— swell lookin' number, Cansino." What he really wanted to do was to claw

this man's throat to ribbons with bare hands, tear at him until the yellow blood ran out of the oily carcass.

Cansino closed the door.

"Erne," he said, "you better get a place to hide out in. The cops don't forget easy. I've got a flat across town. I'd dye that hair of yours black."

John Ryder looked at him. "It's an idea, Cansino—and thanks. Say, I'm flat. If—"

Cansino laughed. He peeled a century note off a roll and handed it to the man he had accepted as Whitey Erne. "You can pay me back. I'll give you a chance."

Before he went out Ryder said: "Clevin said you was a good guy to tie up with. He said you'd show me a way to get some dough."

"Sure—beat it. The kid'll be in here in a minute," Cansino replied. "Three's a crowd, Whitey. Get it?" His suggestive laugh cut through the convict like a knife. Outside, John Ryder looked at the slip of paper and the key that Cansino had put into his hand.

Several hours later John Ryder sat in a richly furnished flat and stared at a newspaper headline.

LAWTON UNDER FIRE AT CHARLTON CITY

"I'm sorry, warden," the escaped convict mumbled as he let the paper slip from his fingers. "Maybe I'll get back before—"

There was a package on the table. John Ryder picked it up and went into the bathroom. For a long time he stood in front of a mirror, darkening his hair and eyebrows. It was a trying task, but one that had to be done perfectly. Later he lay down on the soft bed and gave up to thinking. How lovely Pat was. No wonder that nice looking young fellow wanted to marry her. But Cansino was in the way—Tony Cansino, the devil with the face of a movie actor. Pat had just enough of her mother in her to be easy prey for a man such as that. But

John Ryder would be watching—watching.

A noise outside caused him to open his heavy lids. Then he laughed softly. No, it wasn't a guard. At last he slept, completely exhausted.

TONY CANSINO came to see the man he thought to be Whitey Erne. It was late the next morning and Ryder was up. The hot spot owner whistled softly at sight of the man who opened the door for him.

"Phew-w-w!" he exclaimed. "You sure changed a lot, Whitey."

The convict agreed: "Yeah. Sit down, Cansino. It's your joint, ya know."

The czar of the Club Mirimar wasted little time.

"Erne," he began, "you've got a chance to make fifteen grand. It's in your line, too. We got to work fast—you're hot, don't forget. If a clever flatfoot gets you spotted—"

"Go ahead," John Ryder interrupted him.

"I meet a lot of people in my place," Cansino went on. "I met a doll the other night who took the air from a big-shot politician in town. She tells me while she's half oiled up that she's going to blow the lid off. She's got a bunch of letters. I asked the dame if the big boy didn't know that. She says he does, but that she had a wall safe put into the flat he pays for, and that the big boy don't even know where it is. She came home one night and found the joint had been fine-combed, Whitey. But the big boy's goillias didn't locate the stuff. She's a smart number—she's holding out for fifty grand. Well, last night she tells me that the playboy is going to deliver the dough tomorrow night."

"How do you fit in, Tony?" John Ryder shot out.

"We take them tonight," Cansino bit out. "I been waitin' for a guy who could open a safe. We raise the ante on the big shot to seventy-five grand. You act as my agent, Whitey."

"Yeah? You got the safe spotted, too?" the convict countered.

"In the wall of a clothes closet," Cansino replied. "The dame likes me even when she isn't full of gin. She tells me everything."

"What time do we start tonight?"

"That's talkin', Erne!" Cansino grinned. "I meet you in front of the place—seven-six-eight Wilson Drive—at nine o'clock. At just nine-twenty a car will stop to pick us up. Pat likes to drive my V-twelve Whitey. I promised her we'd go for a ride along the lake tonight. I'll call her up and say I've got business, but to bring the car to that joint at nine-twenty. It's an alibi, too, Whitey, if the dame who owns the torch letters should put the heat on me."

"Yeah," John Ryder clipped. "Sure, Tony, you got it figured all right. Show me the tin can holdin' the letters, that's all you got to do."

Ten minutes after Tony Cansino had left the flat, John Ryder called a number. He asked for Dan Porter at police headquarters. When the detective answered, Ryder said: "I'm talking fast, Porter. Listen close. Never mind who I am. Just listen."

A short time later, down at headquarters, Dan Porter fell back in his chair, a look of wonderment on his face. Whom had he been talking to? What had the speaker meant when he had said: "You be there, Danny. It means everything in the world—to both of us." There was only one thing in the whole world that meant "everything" to Dan Porter. Her name was Pat Delroy. But that man could not know about Pat.

He told himself that he was running into a trap. Yet there had been an earnestness about the man's voice that haunted him. He had called the detective by the familiar name, Danny; had sounded as if they had known one another a long time.

JOHAN RYDER took a cab to the address on Wilson Drive at eight-thirty. Tony Cansino was waiting for

him just inside the lobby Ryder nodded, and Cansino led him to an automatic elevator. They went up to the seventh floor and paused in front of a door. Cansino produced a bunch of keys from his pocket.

"The doll give me this a long time ago," he mumbled to Ryder. "She's like that. I bet a dozen other guys have one just like it."

He opened the door and went inside. One light was burning in a narrow hall.

He said: "Follow me, Whitey. Your job begins now."

Ryder looked at the clock that was ticking on a small dressing table. Ten after nine.

Cansino whispered: "Here's the closet. The safe is in the wall behind that row of dresses. Get to work, Erne."

The convict stepped inside the closet and snapped on a small flashlight. His fingers fumbled at the dial. He tried to keep his hands from trembling. Suddenly he stiffened.

"You hear anything, Tony?" He stepped away from the safe, pulled a gun from his pocket. "Wait here." Softly he padded out into the bedroom, crossed it and stepped into a small living room. Then a door was flung open. A voice behind him cracked:

"Stick 'em up! You in that closet—come out!"

Tony Cansino came out—an automatic in his hand. But Dan Porter fired first and the movie-profiled crook choked blood. John Ryder heard the man pitch forward on the floor. Then he tore out into the hall. Dan Porter fired a shot that went wide of its mark, and the fugitive ran to the stairs and went down to the lobby, legs driving like pistons. He ran into the street just as a big sleek roadster was pulling up at the curb. The girl at the wheel looked startled as Ryder leaped into the machine.

"Get out of here! Don't you dare—"

"Shut up, sister," the convict cracked. "Start this thing going or

I'll plug ya! Tony got drilled. If they nab you—!"

Paralyzed into speechlessness from fright, Pat Delroy, née Ryder, threw the machine into gear. She let in the clutch desperately and gave the V engine the gas. It shot away just as Dan Porter started firing from the entrance of the apartment building.

"Step on it, sister," Ryder cried hoarsely. "Go where I tell you to. Turn right the next block. Keep on going across town—step on it." He shot a look at the girl who was his daughter, and his heart was wrung dry.

"Don't tell me ya didn't know what ya was doin'!" the convict forced out, keeping to his character. "Maybe you thought Tony Cansino was a Sunday school dope— What're you doin'—stopping here? You crazy dame!"

"I'm getting out of this car," Pat Ryder screamed above the squeal of hot rubber tires.

John Ryder struck his daughter in the face with the flat of his hand and pulled her away from the wheel. He had had to strike Pat. His little girl. All the time he was longing to reach out and take her into his arms. He wished that something would come down out of the dark skies and strike him dead. But John Ryder could not stop now. He had to go on. He looked at the dazed girl crumpled beside him as he got the big car to racing again. A trickle of blood ran down her chin.

"Think I want ya runnin' away to the cops?" John Ryder forced out through quivering lips. "Stick with me until I beat those bulls, sister. Maybe Tony was takin' you for a ride. Maybe ya'll thank me for gettin' ya out of this. Don't try to make a break! Stay where ya are."

JOHN RYDER drove the car into an alley and left it there. When he got out of the car, the frightened girl saw that he held a gun in his hand. Terror sealed her bloodless lips. She went with him into the house, into the flat that had been paid for

by Tony Cansino. There the escaped convict had to steel himself to avoid taking his daughter into his arms.

"Get into that room," he ripped out. "I'm lockin' ya in. An' keep your trap shut or you'll never see the light of day."

"Please—what are you going to do with me?"

For answer the man grasped the girl by the arm and flung her into the room he had indicated. He locked the door, then leaned against it, his breathing labored, his eyes closed.

Time dragged. From the adjoining room John Ryder heard his daughter sobbing. Heart torn to shreds, the man waited. At last came a loud hammering on the door.

A voice yelled: "Open up in there!"

John Ryder steeled himself. He cracked: "Come an' git me, ya lousy flatfoot!"

He heard Pat scream, and his legs became weak. A heavy body crashed against the door. Once, twice. Then it gave with a splintering sound. The convict fired two shots into the wall when Dan Porter came in. He whispered: "She's in there, Dan Porter—in the next room. Put the cuffs on me!"

The detective said uncertainly: "All right, hold out your hands." He looked into John Ryder's eyes and said: "I don't get this. How did you know that Pat and I—?"

Ryder shook his head and remained mute. Dan Porter went to the door of the room where the girl was imprisoned and unlocked it. As the door swung open, the girl cried out, and John Ryder saw the husky young detective take the girl into his arms. He knew then that everything was going to be all right.

Pat cried hysterically: "Take me away, Dan. Take me home. I—I've been such a fool. You were right—you had to pull me out of a mess, Dan. I didn't know that Tony—"

"Sure, sure, go on out, Pat," Dan Porter said gruffly and thrust her gently toward the door. "My car is

in front. I'm going to work on this mug. He struck you, Pat. Please—I won't be long."

The door closed. Both men waited until the girl's footsteps had died away. Then the convict spoke.

"Yes, I struck her, Dan. I want to cut off the hand that did it, but I had to—had to save her."

"Who are you?" the detective shot out. "Why did you look at her like that when she went out? Why did you cross Cansino? You're no crook."

"I'm an escaped convict," John Ryder said at last. "That's all you have to know."

Dan Porter's eyes fell to something lying on the floor. John Ryder followed his glance and tried to reach for it first, but failed. The young detective looked at the soiled, cracked and yellowed snapshot of a beautiful little girl. He turned it over. On the back was written: *Pat Ryder—aged ten years.*

The husky young man said then: "Let me take off those cuffs, John Ryder. I'm not the one to take you back. I get it all now. You framed Cansino so that Pat—" His voice broke, and he held out his hand. "I'll be proud to have you take it, John Ryder."

A short silence fell after the escaped convict had dropped young Porter's hand.

"I'll be good to her, Pop," Dan said then, a catch in his voice. "Maybe if I talked to the D.A.—maybe I could help you to be near her."

John Ryder shook his head. "No, Dan, I don't want her to know—ever. I have to go back where I came from. It won't be hard. I have a friend there—a good friend. He'll understand why I—"

Dan Porter nodded, and he blinked his eyes quickly.

"When you come out, Pop," he said as he stepped out of the room, "be sure to—come home."

The door closed and John Ryder, Number 34678, was alone—but no longer lonely.

Clip-Joint Adventuress



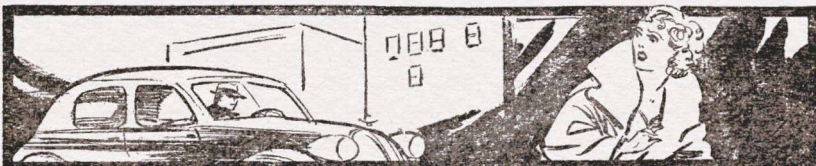
By Frank Gruber

Author of "Dime-a-Dance Murder."

When Special Prosecutor Bowers baited a dance-hall hostess for the witness stand, a clip-joint syndicate bought terror tickets in a murder game. And Bowers was blocked by a gun-blazing girl of gorgeous beauty. For that tragedy-marked girl was out to get him.

THE Blue Room Ballroom was just off Broadway. It had a canopy over the sidewalk from which dangled blue paper half-moons. On each moon, in brilliant gold letters, was the legend, *5c A Dance*.

Barney Bowers cocked his head to one side and looked up owlishly at the paper moons. He appeared to be slightly under the weather. The dark-blue suit he wore was new enough, but the collar of it was turned up in



back, his necktie was pulled halfway to his left ear and his hair was mussed.

He walked wobbily to the entrance of the Blue Moon, a flight of stairs leading down into the basement. A uniformed doorman stepped up briskly. "Yes sir, right downstairs," he droned. "Bee-oo-tiful hostesses!"

Bowers started to descend, missed a stair and almost plunged down the entire flight. But he caught himself on the railing and navigated the remaining stairs safely. Downstairs he heard the muted strains of an orchestra. He essayed a double shuffle to the ticket window.

"Gimme a half dollar's worth of tickets," he said, and brought out a roll of bills fully two inches thick. The ticket-seller's eyes almost popped from his head.

Bowers peeled a five-dollar bill from his roll and shoved it through the wicket. The ticket clerk extended five tickets. Bowers counted them, rubbed his chin with an unsteady hand then counted the tickets again. "Hey," he protested. "The sign outside says five cents a dance."

"Sure, sure, mister," soothed the man in the booth. "But each ticket is good for two dances."

Bowers considered that a moment, then nodded his head. He wobbled past the ticket booth into the ballroom. A half dozen of the beautiful hostesses the doorman had recommended, stood in a row, smiling invitingly at him.

As an admirer of beautiful women Bowers' tastes were cosmopolitan. These girls seemed to him just a little too gaudily dressed and a trifle overpainted, and they showed their physical charms just a little too daringly. But as dance-hall hostesses went, Bowers guessed that they were up to standard. His eyes settled on a willowy blonde, dressed in a flaming-red evening gown.

The girl writhed sinuously toward him. "Dance, honey?" she asked in a sugary voice.

"Sure, why not?"

He held up his arms, and the girl snuggled into them. She pressed her body close to his. It was soft—and warm. They glided out onto a handkerchief-sized dance floor.

In one corner of the room was a four-piece orchestra. There were booths on three sides of the floor. Soft-blue lights in the ceiling dimly illuminated the dance floor. Tiny lights in the booths were shaded. Bowers caught a glimpse of two sailors and a pair of hostesses in one of the booths, wrapped in tight embrace.

The music stopped. So did Bowers, although the girl in the red evening gown still clung to him. He held out his tickets to her. She took all five. "Only five tickets, hon?" she asked sweetly. "You'll want to dance more than that, won't you?"

"Uh—sure," replied Bowers. "I'll get some more."

The orchestra burst into another number. Bowers and the girl circled the dance floor twice, and the music stopped. "Don't you want to sit out the next one, hon?" asked the girl. She moved suggestively in his arms.

"Sure," replied Bowers. "I—I don't feel so much like dancing anyway. What I need is a drink." He licked his lips thirstily.

"Gosh, hon, I'm sorry," said the girl as she steered him to a dimly lit booth in the far corner. "We ain't allowed to sell liquor here—on'y soft drinks."

THEY reach the booth, and the girl slipped into one of the benches. Bowers started to climb in on the other side of the table, but the girl exclaimed: "No, sit here beside me. I—I like you."

Bowers beamed as he slipped in beside the girl. She snuggled up closely so that her leg was touching Bowers' knee. Her hand under the table caught his and pressed it intimately.

"Gee, I'm thirsty," she said. "Would you buy me a coke?"

"Sure, if that's all they got." Bowers picked up a menu from the table and scanned it under the dim light.

He gasped slightly when he saw the price of cokes—twenty-five cents.

A waiter appeared out of nowhere. "Two cokes," Bowers ordered.

"Any'ing else?" asked the waiter.

"Tha's all," said Bowers, but the girl squeezed his hand. "D'you mind buying me a package of cigarettes? I'm all out of them."

"All right, bring the lady some cigarettes."

Bowers looked out over the dance floor. The orchestra was playing, but there wasn't a single couple dancing. Giggles and laughter emanating from the various booths, however, told that there was a fair complement of customers in the place. It seemed that the patrons preferred sitting out the dances.

"What's your name?" cooed the blonde.

"Uh—Barney. What's yours?"

"Trixie—Trixie Thompson," whispered the girl. "My, but I'm lucky. When I saw you comin' in I hoped you'd ask me to dance."

"Zat so? Why?"

"Because you looked so handsome. I just love men with broad shoulders like yours." Trixie brought her hand up from under the table and ran it around Bowers' shoulders. She hugged him.

A coke and a package of cigarettes—shucks, she was selling her company cheaply. Or maybe it really was his manly charms. Bowers was thirty-two, six feet tall, and he'd played football in his college days.

The waiter returned with the cokes and two packages of cigarettes. "Dollar thirty," he said, laconically.

"What?" gulped Bowers. "How much are cigarettes?"

"Forty cents a package."

Forty cents for thirteen-cent cigarettes! And the waiter was forcing a double order on Bowers. What a joint! Bowers pulled out his thick roll, peeled off a single and fished around in his pocket until he found a half-dollar. He handed it over, hesitated,

then said magnanimously: "Keep the change."

"I knew you wasn't a tightwad," cooed Trixie. Her eyes were glued on the bills in Bowers' fist. He looked at her, then put the roll into his trousers pocket—on the side away from Trixie. Her eyes glinted for just a second, but then she was smiling, and cuddly, again.

"How about dancing?" Bowers asked. "Must of used those five tickets by now."

Trixie coughed. "Uh—why, yes." She toyed with a heart-shaped card on the table for a moment, then passed it to Bowers. "You better read this, darling—just so there won't be no trouble later. But I know it won't make no difference to a swell fella like you."

Bowers turned the heart-shaped card over and read the printing on it:

Hostesses are permitted to sit out dances with patrons but a charge of \$3.00 for each half hour or fraction is made for such time.

Three dollars per half-hour; six dollars an hour! No wonder Trixie had suggested sitting out a dance or two. She couldn't have earned any more, if as much, dancing a solid hour.

"How long we been sittin' here?" asked Bowers.

"About eleven minutes. Why?"

"Uh, let's see, I gave you fifty cents worth of tickets. That entitles me to five minutes. I owe you—"

"Why, Barney," exclaimed Trixie reproachfully, "you're not going to be a tightwad! Don't you like me—just a teeny-weentsy bitsy?"

She leaned forward until her lips were less than an inch from Bowers.

"Uh, sure, I like you, baby. Only—only it's warm in here, isn't it?" He drew away from her and fished for the silk handkerchief in his breast pocket.

"It is warm," admitted Trixie. "Gosh, these cokes are flat. And to think I've got all that nice cold beer

in the refrigerator at home. Wouldn't that go swell now?"

"It sure would," said Bowers. "But it won't do us any good here."

Trixie's forehead wrinkled. "We could go to my place for a while—get cooled off and drink some beer . . ."

"Eh, they let you leave?"

"Well, ah, yes—but Tony makes the customers pay for the time we're gone. It's only ten dollars if I'm gone only an hour." Trixie slipped her hand down from Bowers' shoulder and caught his hand under the table. She pressed it promisingly. "Would you like to run home with me for an hour—and have some beer?"

Bowers cleared his throat. "I'd sure like to do that."

Trixie threw up her head. "Tony!" she shrilled.

A swarthy, stocky man of about forty-five came across the dance floor. "Tony," giggled Trixie. "My friend wants to take me out for a little ride to cool off. Do you mind if I leave for an hour?"

"Well, we pretty beesy t'night, Trix'," hesitated Tony. "But if de customer make him right, why I guess it's hokay by me. Tony like ever'body have good time. No?"

Bowers struggled out of the booth. "Sure, Tony, how much you think would make it right?"

Trixie climbed out after Bowers and clung to his arm. Tony looked at his wrist watch and said: "Lemme see, you here now about forty minoots. Tha'sa one hour. And ten dollar for take Trix' out. Make heem fifteen dollar. Awright?"

The sucker pulled out his roll and peeled off a ten and a five. "Fifteen dollars, and a dollar and a half for the cokes and cigarettes, and a half-dollar at the door. That's seventeen dollars altogether. An' I been here forty minutes—you say. But your watch goes too fast. Mine says I been here only twenty minutes."

Tony looked sharply into Bowers' face. "Wha—what you mean?"

ROWERS grinned widely. Suddenly he seemed to gain height. His slouch disappeared, and the foolish, drunken expression faded from his face. It became hard, and his eyes gleamed with a fierce light. "I mean this is a clip joint—to give it a polite name," he barked.

"Barney!" cried Trixie. "What's come over you?"

"You'll see, baby." He jammed his hand into his coat pocket and brought out a police whistle. He put it to his lips and blew lustily on it.

"A cop!" gasped Tony. Trixie shrunk away from Bowers.

"No, I'm not a cop," said Bowers. "My name is Bowers—Barney Bowers."

Tony's mouth fell agape. "Special Prosecutor Bowers!"

"Right!" snapped Bowers. "I'm closing up this joint. I've got enough evidence to send you up."

Heavy boots pounded the stairs outside. A moment later three men stormed into the dance hall. Two wore blue uniforms. The third was in civilian clothes. "Hello, chief," said the plainclothes man. "You got the goods on him?"

"I'll say I have," replied Bowers. He turned to Trixie. She was scared stiff. Her face was dead-white, strange in contrast to the vivid-red gown and the scarlet gash of her mouth.

"Nice work, Trixie," he chuckled. "Your technique was excellent."

"You're pinchin' me?" trembled Trixie.

Bowers shrugged. "Maybe. If you'll talk—be a witness—I might let you off. Otherwise, it's the woman's prison for you for some time."

Tony, the manager, suddenly recovered his composure. "What's dis talk about jail? You no send no one to jail."

"Is that so? Where do you think you'll be in twenty minutes from now?"

"I calla my lawyer. I get bail. You no keep me in jail. I gotta pull."

"Have you now? Well, call your lawyer and have him meet you at the station. Trixie, you come with me."

Leaving Tony in charge of the policemen, Bowers led Trixie out of the Blue Moon.

"How long have you been working in this dump?" he asked the girl as they walked to his coupé a block away.

"About three months." She turned to him. "Say, Mr. Bowers, did you really mean that I'll be sent to prison?"

"Unless you turn state's evidence."

"What does that mean?"

"Testify against Tony—tell about the joint, how you worked—and all that. You worked according to Tony's instructions, didn't you?"

"Yeah, sure. We were all told to work the suck—the customers, for all we could. We worked on a percentage basis."

"Well if you'll tell all that at the trial, I'll see that you get a suspended sentence. And say . . . who owns the Blue Moon?"

"I don't know—but it ain't Tony. There's a swell comes around 'bout once or twice a month. Him and Tony always have long talks in Tony's office. I guess he owns the joint. He used to come around to the Danceland too, where I worked before I went to the Blue Moon."

"Could you identify him if you saw him?" asked Bowers eagerly. "I think he's the man I really want to get."

"I'd know him if I saw him," replied Trixie, "but I don't know his name."

"I'll try to find that out," said Bowers. "Meanwhile, what about it—will you testify?"

They had reached the car. Bowers handed her in and walked around to the driver's side. Before starting the engine, he waited for her answer. Her face was troubled. "I—I couldn't stand to go to jail," she said. "But I'm scared to squeal. Tony's a bad actor when he gets mad."

"You have nothing to worry about him," Bowers assured her. "I'll see that you're protected."

"All right then, I'll talk."

"Fine." Bowers stepped on the starter. Ten minutes later he parked his car in front of the precinct station. He led Trixie Thompson inside. Tony, the manager of the Blue Moon, was standing before the desk. A swarthy, excited man was beside him.

The desk sergeant saw Bowers and sighed in relief. "Mr. Bowers," he exclaimed. "Will ye talk to this shyster?"

"Shyster!" bellowed the lawyer. "I'll have your badge for that! I've got influence, I have."

"You won't have anyone's job, Dave Hampel," snapped Bowers. "I arrested this man, and I'm going to make the charge stick."

Hampel continued to bluster, but in a more subdued tone.

"We'll see about that, Mr. Special Prosecutor. We'll see whether your testimony has any weight in a court. It'll sound very swell in the newspapers, too, the special prosecutor going around to a dance hall and trying to bait the hostesses into doing illegal things—just so he could make an arrest. Wait!" He bounced off to a telephone booth.

"Fine specimen of our legal profession, isn't he?" said a voice at Bowers' elbow. Bowers turned, saw that the speaker was a tall man in evening clothes. Bowers knew him by sight and reputation, although he had never spoken to him.

James Faraday was a member of one of the city's oldest families. He was a lawyer, but had plenty of money. With him, now, also in evening clothes, was Deputy Police Commission McClintock.

McClintock smiled. "Mr. James Faraday, Barney," he said. "We were just coming out of the theatre when we heard about your—ah, arrest. We came over to congratulate you on your clever performance."

DR

PROSECUTOR BOWERS shook hands with both Faraday and the deputy commissioner. "It was about the only way I could get anywhere, Mr. McClintock," he said. "My agents all seemed to be recognized as soon as they entered these dives, and while they were there, everyone acted as if it was a Sunday school social. But I've got the evidence on the worst of these clip joints. I'm going to close it up—and all the others. I'm positive that further investigation will prove that most of these joints are owned by the same people, and if I can close one of them, I can close all."

"I certainly hope so," declared the deputy commissioner. "Our own men haven't been able to get anywhere because of lack of evidence and sufficient witnesses. I hope you have your own witnesses lined up pretty well." He and Faraday walked out of the station.

Bowers eyes roamed to Trixie Thompson. In the bright light of the police station, Trixie looked to be merely an overpainted, overdressed, scared girl.

Hampel, the shyster lawyer, stormed out of the phone booth. He cast a malignant glance at Barney, then began whispering to Trixie Thompson. Trixie listened a moment, then shook her head and glanced appealingly at Bowers, who came closer.

Hampel said loudly, "Okay, sister, your bail's put up. You can go."

The desk sergeant called to Bowers. It was about a minor matter, and when Bowers looked around Trixie had gone.

The special prosecutor decided that he'd done enough for the evening. He left the police station and climbed into his car, and as he was about to step on the starter, a big limousine hurtled past at terrific speed.

Bowers tried to catch a glimpse of the license number, but to his surprise the tail-lights were out. Then he heard the scream up the street, followed instantly by the screeching of brakes.

An icy shudder ran up his spine. He piled out of his car, started running up the street toward other running people.

The limousine with the darkened tail-lights was more than a block away, but the body that lay limp and huddled in the gutter told the grim story.

A wild, chattering crowd was already surrounding the body, and Barney had difficulty in forcing his way through, but then he did—and a fresh chill swept over him. For the victim of the hit and run driver was Trixie Thompson. Her red dress was splashed and discolored with a red liquid—blood. Her body was smashed and bruised.

Bowers dropped down on one knee beside Trixie's body, but for a moment he did not see the body because of the haze that swept before his eyes. He had a miserable feeling that this had been deliberate murder—with himself as the cause. But why—how? He'd arrested Trixie not more than a half hour ago. No one but Tony and the shyster, Hampel, had known that Trixie was going to turn state's evidence. And Tony had been in custody all the while. Hampel—yes, Hampel had made a phone call in the police station. Had that been for the purpose of arranging this?

A heavy hand fell on Bowers' shoulder. He looked up into the face of Deputy Commissioner McClintock.

"Isn't that the girl you arrested in the raid?" asked the commissioner.

The special prosecutor nodded. "Yes, she just left the police station—on bail."

The commissioner shuddered. "Gruesome coincidence."

"Coincidence?" Bowers' eyes flashed. "This girl was murdered. She was going to be my star witness."

The deputy commissioner's eyes widened.

Bowers rose to his feet. "I've maintained all along that important money is behind these clip joints. And they're not going to stop at anything to keep

them going. Those places are gold mines. Hell, they clipped me seventeen dollars for less than a half hour of—well, call it entertainment. And there're fifty of these joints in this town—most of them owned by the same people, I'll bet. No, they're not going to stop at a murder or two."

Police had piled out of the precinct station and were pushing back the morbidly curious throng. Two policemen brought up a stretcher, started to cover up the body. But Bowers suddenly caught hold of one of the men. "Wait!" he exclaimed. "Let me look."

Something on the dead girl's face had caught his eye. He leaned forward and looked at it closely.

There was a strange design cut into the girl's forehead. It was shaped like a miniature hand. The half-inch outline was cut as sharply as if made with a die. How had it been cut into Trixie Thompson's forehead? It hadn't been there five minutes ago, when she had left the police station.

Bowers' forehead wrinkled, but after a moment he nodded gently. "All right, you can take it away."

The crowd began to disperse. "What now, Barney?" asked the deputy police commissioner.

"It looks like I'll have to start all over."

"Too bad," sympathized the commissioner. "Well, good night."

Bowers went back to his car. He drove slowly up Broadway to Seventy-second Street. There he parked his car and went into a restaurant. He ordered a dinner, but merely toyed with the food. He couldn't erase the memory of Trixie Thompson's dead face. After a while he paid his check, left the restaurant. He drove slowly to his apartment on West End Avenue.

His mind was still going over the evening's events when he let himself into his apartment. But it snapped back to the present when he found the apartment lighted and a girl sitting in a big armchair facing the door. There was a small automatic in her hand.

"CLOSE the door, Mr. Bowers," said the girl in a metallic voice.

Bowers pushed the door shut. "What can I do for you?" he asked, his eyes appraising the girl.

She was about twenty-four or five and was dressed in a white satin evening gown. She was seated, but he guessed that she was more than average tall. Her form was slender, but well proportioned. Her face and hair, however, were her striking points. The face had the smoothest skin Bowers had ever seen, and the finest chiseled features. The hair was a glorious mass of golden waves. There was something faintly familiar about her.

"Yes," she said in answer to Bowers' question, "you *can* do something for me. You can give me—*your life!*"

Bowers gasped. He suddenly knew why she looked familiar. She looked like Trixie Thompson, was her sister no doubt. But she was a different type of girl than Trixie. Trixie had been pretty, but in a cheap, shallow sort of way. This girl was different.

"You're Trixie Thompson's sister?" he asked.

Her eyes flashed, and for just a moment, her chin trembled. Then she regained control of herself, was again firm, cold. "Yes—I've just heard how she died. Because she was going to talk for you."

Bowers nodded soberly. "Yes."

His reply had an astonishing effect on the beautiful girl. She leaped to her feet. "You—*admit it!*" she blazed. "You admit that you're responsible for her death. You murderer!"

Bowers recoiled from her sudden fury, took a step backwards and tripped against a chair. That alone saved his life. The gun in the girl's hand had cracked, and a leaden pellet whizzed past Bowers' ear, missing it by less than an inch.

The discharge of the gun seemed to shock the girl. Bowers sprang forward and wrenched the gun from her hand. Then he pushed her back into the chair.

She began to sob softly. The special prosecutor judged by her dress that she'd been out somewhere for the evening when she heard of her sister's death. Shocked, she'd come to shoot the man she believed responsible for it. But now, reaction had set in, and she had collapsed.

In less than a minute the girl stopped crying. She dabbed at her eyes with a lacy bit of handkerchief and essayed a weak smile. "I guess I was a fool coming here," she said. "I—if you'll let me, I'd like to go now."

"You can go whenever you like," said Bowers. "But, Miss Thompson, will you believe me when I say that your sister's death was almost as much of a shock to me as it was to you? You see, I promised her protection—and fell down on the job. The—accident happened before I quite knew what it was all about. But I made a solemn promise to myself to get the man, or men, who were responsible for it. You can help me, Miss Thompson. By telling me some things about Trixie—who her friends were."

The girl sighed. "I'm ashamed to say that I don't know, Mr. Bowers. I think the reason I went all to pieces awhile ago is because I realized suddenly that I was as much responsible for Trixie's life as anyone else. Trixie got off to a bad start. She wanted to be an actress, but couldn't make the grade. She drifted into that dance-hall work. I—I didn't know about it for a long while. We sort of drifted apart. Instead of looking after Trixie, I neglected her. I—I let my career immerse me too much."

"Career?"

"Yes, I'm a lawyer." She smiled at the look on Bowers' face. "Yes, a lawyer. That's why I was so interested in your work." She stopped and blushed faintly.

Bowers smiled wryly. "I'm glad some one is interested in my work. Everyone seems to think it's useless."

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Trixie's sister. "People are much more interested

than you suspect. At the office we've talked about it."

"Where is your office? I'd like to get in touch with you, if I learn anything . . ."

"The Hubert Building, Suite 2410."

"And your name?"

"Nell Thompson."

She picked up a mesh bag from the chair, rose to her feet. Bowers extended the little automatic to her, but she shook her head. "You'd better keep it. I really have no license to carry it. I—I'm sorry about what happened."

"I'm not," said Bowers. Then he realized that he'd blundered and added quickly. "I mean—about your coming here."

She smiled faintly and walked to the door. "Thank you, about everything. Let me hear from you—if you learn anything."

"I will."

THE morning papers commended Special Prosecutor Barney Bowers and condemned him at the same time. They praised him for having had the courage to go personally to the dance hall for evidence, but they censured him for not having furnished ample protection for his witness.

His eyes glinted when he was through with the papers. They glinted even more a little later when he received a telephone call from the city hall. The voice was that of the man who had appointed him to the special post.

"A delegation has just left my office," the crisp voice said. "I backed you up, Barney, but if you don't deliver—it's going to cause me considerable embarrassment. Do you understand?"

"Yes," gulped Bowers. "Give me forty-eight hours more, and if I haven't landed the king-pin of this gang by then, I'll resign."

"I wish you luck," was the reply.

Bowers sat slumped in despair for several minutes. He'd made a promise that looked very hazardous. Every

dance-hall manager in the city knew by this time that the special prosecutor himself had made a raid the night previous, so they would be exceedingly wary for a while—wary that they clipped no one except very obvious suckers.

Well, he couldn't sit around moon-ing. Certain things he owed to Nell Thompson—and the memory of her sister. He hadn't asked about Nell's family, but guessed from what she'd told him that she had no near-relatives in the city. At a time like this, Nell would need help.

He thought of calling her on the phone, then realized that he hadn't been given her home address, nor the name of the firm with which she was connected. He'd have to go down to the Hubert Building. He took a taxi and ten minutes later paid off the meter before a tall office building.

As he started for the entrance, a tall, dignified man stepped out of a big limousine and hailed him. "Hello there, Mr. Bowers."

It was James Faraday, the friend of the deputy Commissioner, to whom Bowers had been introduced the evening before.

Bowers shook hands with him. "Going in here?" asked the wealthy attorney.

"Yes," replied Bowers.

"So am I . . . The papers weren't kind to you, Barney. People are short-sighted."

They entered a waiting elevator, and Bowers said: "Twenty-four."

"That's my floor," remarked Faraday.

Suite 2410 was directly opposite the elevator. Bowers looked at the names on the door and his eyebrows went up. For the name on top was that of James Faraday.

"I guess I'm going still farther with you," he said.

"Eh, You're coming into my office?"

"Yes, it seems my friend is one of your associates, a Miss Nell Thompson."

They entered the suite of offices, and Bowers' eyebrows went up still farther when he saw the elaborate anteroom. Faraday turned to him. "So Miss Thompson is a friend of yours. Very interesting. She's the youngest member of our staff, but one of the most brilliant. Well, good day, sir."

He passed through the anteroom while Bowers turned to the girl at the switchboard. "Mr. Bowers to see Miss Thompson," he told the girl.

"I'm sorry, but Miss Thompson didn't come in this morning."

"Of course not; she had—things to attend to," Bowers said. "I'm a friend. Could you give me her home address?"

The girl frowned for a moment. "I guess it's all right," she said then. "She lives at 800 West 106th Street."

Bowers took another taxi to Nell Thompson's apartment house. But there he received another disappointment. The elevator operator informed him that Miss Thompson had left an hour ago and hadn't returned. Bowers gave the man a dollar and his office phone number. "Will you ask her to phone me just as soon as she returns?"

By one o'clock Nell Thompson had not yet phoned. Bowers called her apartment, but no one answered. He called four times during the next two hours, then decided suddenly to go again to her apartment.

THE elevator operator to whom he had given his card, was still on duty. "Yas, suh," he declared. "She came in 'bout an hour ago. I gave her your card. She went out again, half hour ago."

Why hadn't she called him? Had she, after thinking things over, decided again that he was really responsible for her sister's death?

He pulled out his gold shield and showed it to the operator. "I want you to let me into Miss Thompson's apartment."

The operator's eyes bulged. Without hesitation, he said, "Yas—suh!" and let Bowers into an apartment on the eighth floor.

It was a two-room and kitchenette apartment, attractively furnished. There were breakfast dishes in the sink, and the bed was unmade. Nell Thompson had had breakfast here, but had been apparently been in a great hurry to get out.

On the living-room couch there were several pasteboard boxes, wrapping paper stripped from packages. Bowers examined the paper and the boxes, and his forehead creased. One box had contained a cheap bottle of perfume; another, earrings. Still another had contained a dress. The sales slip in the box said *Evening gown, \$19.75*. The name of the store was one that he knew catered to a bargain-seeking clientele. The perfume and earrings had come from a ten-cent store.

He found the perfume bottle on the bedroom dressing table. It reeked of musk. It reminded him of Trixie Thompson.

He drew in his breath suddenly. The idea was fantastic—but it must be so. The purchases bore it out. Nell Thompson wouldn't buy such things otherwise.

And then he saw the classified telephone directory on the bed beside the telephone stand. It was open at *Ball-rooms*, and the Blue Moon was the second name on the list. Below it was the name *Danceland*. The address was ringed in pencil.

Bowers was positive then. Nell Thompson was going to work at the *Danceland*. She hadn't picked the Blue Moon where her sister had worked because she feared recognition of her resemblance to Trixie. But Bowers had dropped the hint that he believed all the taxi dance-joints were secretly run by the same man or gang, and Nell Thompson was going to work in one. Hoping to get a clue to the person responsible for her sister's death.

A SAILOR who pranced into the *Danceland* was passed unhesitatingly by the doorman and the ticket seller. The Navy supplied a goodly percentage of the customers. Sailors weren't big spenders, but they were good for ten or fifteen dollars at a time and as long as their money lasted, they were welcome.

"Hello, sailor!" the line of girls inside the door greeted the sailor.

He hitched up his bell-bottomed trousers and appraised the girls. His eyes ran from left to right, started with the girls' legs and worked up to their faces. He stopped at the golden-haired girl, second from the right. She was smiling—but the smile was just a bit frozen.

"How about dancin', baby?"

"Let's go!"

The sailor whipped the girl into his arms, and they trotted out onto the dance floor. The remaining girls broke ranks to wait for new customers.

"How did you know?" the golden-haired girl whispered into the sailor's ear.

"I tried to get in touch with you—couldn't. Finally, I went to your apartment. I guessed the answer from your purchases and the open phone book. Nell, you shouldn't have done it."

"Why not?" Her whisper was fierce. "I neglected Trixie. The least I can do is bring her—her murderers to justice."

A glow spread through Bowers. This girl had the courage of her convictions. "I think you're fine," he whispered.

She flashed a smile at him. "Am I doing it right? You see, I told them I worked in a place like this in Chicago."

"I had some experience last night. I'll coach you. First thing is to sit out the dances."

He steered her to a booth at the side of the room, choosing the one with the dimmest light. Then he went through practically the same routine as he had the preceding night

with Trixie Thompson. Nell played up gamely.

She sipped at the coke he bought for her. He moved up closer to her. "We've got to make things look right," he said and slipped his arm about her waist.

For a moment her body was stiff, but then it relaxed and Bowers drew her close. She was deliciously soft. His pulse quickened.

"A kiss might make it look even better," he suggested.

She turned and planted a sticky kiss on his lips. He wiped away the rouge from his lips and grinned at her. "Nice work if you can get it regular," he chuckled.

Her fingers jabbed suddenly into his side. Bowers turned his head and looked into the sleek face of a man in a dinner jacket. "Sorry to interrupt," the man said smoothly. "But you're wanted on the phone, Peggy."

Nell had evidently given a fictitious name when seeking employment here. She disengaged herself from Bowers' embrace. "Excuse me a minute."

He let her out of the booth. The manager smiled unctuously and followed her across the dance floor.

A girl with platinum blonde hair strolled up, swinging her hips. "Lonesome, sailor?" she drawled.

"Not yet," replied Bowers. "My girl just went to answer the phone."

"Okay, sailor—but if you get lonesome I'll be in the other room."

Nell was taking a long time at the telephone. Bowers smoked a cigarette and still she didn't return. He climbed out of the booth then and strode determinedly out to the section where the girls were waiting for customers. The sleek manager sat in a chair before a door marked *Office*.

"The girl I was dancing with," said Bowers. "Where is she?"

The manager rose to his feet. "Oh, I'm sorry. Guess I should have told you. She had to go."

"Go?" echoed Bowers. "Where?"

"She got a phone call. Somebody in the family sick. Sorry—plenty of other girls though. Yes?"

"Yes," conceded Bowers, nonplussed. Something was phony. It was damned strange that Nell should tell anyone she was working here—and stranger that she should walk out on Bowers.

He swore under his breath. There wasn't any use hanging around, now. He started for the door.

"Going already, sailor?" asked a girl.

"Yeah, too tame here," snorted Bowers.

The Danceland was on the second floor. He descended the stairs to the street, stood out in front, uncertainly, looking up and down Broadway. A big car was parked at the curb, which was a violation of the law, for no parking was allowed on Broadway at this time of the evening.

SIGHT of the car angered Bowers. People with cars like that were always getting away with things. If it had been a small car, there would already be a ticket on it. Probably some petty politician's car. Out of curiosity Bowers walked to the curb to look at the front license number. Yes, it was a low number. Only politicians got the low numbers.

Bowers' eyes, attracted by gleaming nickel, came up and rested on the fancy radiator cap. He started away, then suddenly turned back. He'd seen a radiator cap like this before, not so long ago. He stepped closer to it.

For a moment he stared at the figure of the flying Mercury; then he drew a handkerchief from his pocket, and spreading it out over his hand, unscrewed the cap. He wrapped it in the handkerchief. Then with a fierce gleam in his eyes, he started back up to the Danceland.

He brushed past the ticket-taker, ignored the girls in the formation, and strode to the manager's office. The sleek manager was gone, but a heavy-set man, who might just as well have

been labeled "bouncer," was in front of the door.

"Hey, you can't go in there," he growled.

"The hell I can't," said Bowers. He feinted at the thug's jaw, then smashed his other fist into his stomach. The man let out a pained *whoosh* and folded forward. Bowers dodged past him and pushed through the door.

Nell Thompson sat in an armchair, her face white under the heavy layers of powder and rouge. Standing over her, was the sleek manager of the dance hall, and to one side, his face scowling, was James Faraday.

The wealthy lawyer gasped when he saw the special prosecutor. "You—what are you doing here, Bowers?"

"Arresting you," Bowers snapped, "for murder!"

"Murder?" said Faraday. "Are you crazy?"

"He's the man you want, Barney," exclaimed Nell. "He owns this place, and he—"

Her words were cut off by the palm of the manager clapping over her mouth.

Bowers swore and stepped forward. He lashed out a sizzling blow at the manager's head. The man saw it coming and dodged, but Bowers' fist caught him high on the head and staggered him back. Bowers sidestepped and opened the handkerchief in which he had wrapped the radiator cap from the car outside.

"This is going to burn you, Faraday," he said, crisply. "The hand of this flying Mercury hit Trixie Thompson's forehead when you ran her down last night. The handprint is cut into her forehead."

Faraday, already pale, staggered back. At that moment, the bouncer whom Bowers had slugged outside the door, burst into the room. He was accompanied by two more of his brethren.

"Shall we take him, boss?" cried the head bouncer.

"Yes," yelled the manager, "get him!"

The bouncers spread out fanlike and advanced on Bowers. The manager, behind Bowers, drew a leather blackjack from his pocket.

Bowers was in a tight spot. These men would kill him—had to, to protect themselves. Five against one, and three of them professional fighters

The special prosecutor sidestepped, to miss the blackjack in the manager's hand, and rammed a fist into the stomach of one of the bouncers. The man came back with a sledge-hammer blow to Bowers' head which knocked him to his knees. Shaking his head, Bowers looked out through the half-open door into the dance hall.

He saw a blue-uniformed figure out there, just about to dance with a girl, and a brilliant thought struck him. A sailor—and there were probably a half dozen or more out there. There had been that many the night before at the Blue Moon. Which had given him the idea of disguising himself as a sailor.

Bowers remembered a story he'd heard about sailors—How when one got into trouble, he yelled, "Hey, gob!" and all the sailors in the neighborhood would come to his assistance. It was the same as the circus battle-cry of "Hey, rube!"

"Hey, gob!" Bowers yelled at the top of his voice. "Hey, gob!"

One of the bouncers lashed out with his foot and kicked Bowers in the chest. He went over backwards, but yelled again: "Hey, gob!"

Another bouncer, who had no doubt had experience with sailors, sprang to the door to close it, but it was too late. A sailor was already in the doorway. He took one look inside, yelled, "Hey, gob!" and leaped into the fight.

Bowers, encouraged at sight of his assistant, struggled to his feet. Weakened by the heavy blow and kick, he was content to feint and dodge for a moment. And then a veritable hurri-

cane of blue uniforms tore into the office. For two or three minutes the room was a madhouse of thumps, yells and smacking of fists. And then it was all over.

THREE bouncers and the manager were stretched out on the floor. Faraday's age had earned him some consideration, but he was crouched on his knees in a corner, bleeding from a half dozen bruises on his face.

Seven grinning sailors ringed Bowers. "What ship you from?" asked a big tar with a nose that spread all over his face.

"None, boys," replied Bowers. "I'm not a real sailor. I'm Special Prosecutor Barney Bowers. I'm sorry to say that I'm closing this place."

"What?" yelled the big sailor. "We helped you so you could close this place? Hell, we spoiled our own fun."

Bowers grinned. "If you'll come to my office tomorrow I'll have reservations for all of you for a real party at the Astorbilt. All the champagne you want—free."

"Champagne!" chorused the sailors. "Oh, boy!"

Nell Thompson came forward. "And what about me? You've lost me my job."

Bowers looked at her warmly. "There'll be a better one in my office. And as my associate, I'll have to see you outside of office hours now and then . . . Yes?"

Nell Thompson smiled happily. "Yes."



STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AND MARCH 3, 1933

Of Detective Romances, published bi-monthly at Springfield, Mass., for October 1, 1936

State of New York }
County of New York } ss.

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Rose Wyn, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that she is the editor of Detective Romances, and that the following is, to the best of her 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 537, 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 manager are: Publisher, A. A. Wyn, Larchmont, N. Y.; Editor, Rose Wyn, Larchmont, N. Y.; Managing Editor, A. A. Wyn, Larchmont, N. Y.; Business Manager, A. A. Wyn, Larchmont N. Y.

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.) Periodical House, Inc., 67 W. 44th St., New York, N. Y.; C. A. Publishing Company, Mount Morris, Ill.

3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of 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 her.

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 months preceding the date shown above is (This information is required from daily publications only).

ROSE WYN, Editor

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 21st day of September, 1936.

EDWARD H. ZINSER,
Notary Public

Queens Co. Clk's No. 2976, Reg. No. 3095
N.Y. Co. Clk's No. 100, Reg. No. 6-Z-66
Commission expires March 30, 1938.

Perfumed Cargo



*Murder and Love on the
High Seas*

By Theodore Tinsley

Author of "Ballots for a Brunette." etc.

Crafty gigilos plied their sinister wile upon the beautiful women of a pleasure-bent, modern cruise. And Paul Decker, ship's detective, had to play Death's chaperon in a heart-breaking game with the love of reckless Marjorie Grant, to stop her from flirting her headstrong way into an extortion trap.

PAUL DECKER stood alone at the moon-drenched starboard rail of the luxurious cruise liner *Megantic*. The ship was cutting a smooth, effortless path through the tropical sea. Dark water foamed backward, its broken crests touched here and there with flicks of phosphorescence like the writhing of bluish flame. The breeze that ruffled Decker's hair was hot. Snatches of music came from

the B Deck salon, where most of the wealthy passengers were dancing to the slow, voluptuous rhythm of a tango number. Farther aft, Decker knew, others—sleek men in white dinner coats and lovely women in daringly cut evening gowns—would be knocking ping-pong balls around, drinking bonded liquor, laughing. . . .

His handsome eyes hardened. He was glad to be alone for a moment where he didn't have to veil the worry and disgust in his eyes. Dancing, flirting, and worse—on a ship where death had only two evenings earlier wiped out a foolish woman's life. She had plunged down into that moonlit sea, a suicide from the shadowy boat-deck, leaving behind her no reason nor explanation. Her body had not been recovered. The thing was hushed up now, forgotten by heedless cruise passengers whom the warm breath of the tropics had touched with the call to hectic pleasure.

But Paul Decker had not forgotten the woman's death plunge, nor did he think of it in his mind as suicide. Alone at the rail, he could call it by its real and ugly name—murder.

He had learned from a steward that the woman had emerged, pale and distraught, from the cabin of a man who specialized in the visits of desperate women. Decker was aware she had lost steadily in the card room to John Hobson and to two other men. She had tried to regain her IOU's by the only way left to a woman; a hopeless sacrifice that had tangled her more deeply in Hobson's slimy net—Blackmail. And Hobson had killed her—and Stickney and Tooner, too—as surely as if their sly hands had actually pushed her overboard.

Suddenly, along the moonlit deck came the discreet thud of rubber-soled shoes. Decker heard it, swung instantly around. It was a ship's steward, smiling obsequiously.

"Beg pardon, sir. Mrs. Stephen Grant presents her compliments and asks if you'll join her in the game room."

"Thank you." He masked his surprise at this unusual request, his surprise that Marjorie was on board. Her beauty was magnet enough to attract anyone she desired. In the past, Decker had tried to avoid her as much as possible. Now, he was afraid of forgetting his real reason for being on board, if he allowed himself to pay constant homage to her as did everybody else.

DECKER'S face was suddenly grim in the moonlight. He thought of Marjorie Grant. She, too, was in peril from the sleek ship's trio that preyed on young and impulsive wives. Marjorie didn't know that Decker was a detective. No one did except the captain and the ship's officers. He was traveling incognito, hired by the directors of the line for the sole purpose of protecting the passengers.

The presence of Marjorie Grant on board had upset all of Decker's calm plans. Tight-lipped, he went straight to the captain for an explanation. Why had she been allowed to make this trip? Why hadn't the captain warned her husband, Stephen Grant? The captain shrugged and explained that although Stephen Grant was an official of the line, he hadn't been present at the conference which resulted in the hiring of a detective. Grant had been called suddenly west to take part in a Pacific Coast traffic agreement. He had already booked passage for his wife and himself. At the last minute, he telegraphed her to take the trip alone, hoping to rejoin her later by plane. He hadn't been able to do so.

So Marjorie sailed alone—to Decker's grim anxiety. There was a double reason for the detective's worry. Marjorie herself was young, beautiful, inclined to be reckless. And Stephen, her husband, was Paul Decker's best friend. Steve had done generous favors which the lean, good-looking detective could never repay if he lived to be a million. . . .

Later, Decker was crossing the well-deck. It was dark on the port

side, warm with sluggish shadows. His heart beat as he thought of Marjorie Grant. Slim, blonde, with eyes so blue that they were almost violet, Marjorie was enough to make any man's heart quicken. She was only twenty-two, almost fifteen years younger than the man she had married.

There was a short flight of steps leading upward to the aft deck. Decker took them at an eager pace. No one was visible on the deck, but he stopped suddenly as he reached the top. Caution, a quick suspicion of peculiar things, was an inborn trait in him. And that aft deck that led to the game room astern was damned peculiar for two very definite reasons.

Only a single dome light was lit; the other two were extinguished. The deck was therefore almost pitch-black, except for a bright circle under the center lamp. Smearred across the deck, where it could be vividly seen, was a white chalk mark—an arrow that pointed inward from the ship's rail toward a bulwark. Something was written on the wall; he couldn't see what. He came closer, his body tense. He was coldly certain that some one had planned for him to do just that. It was a deliberate lure to his curiosity.

His breath hissed faintly as he read two familiar words. The chalked scrawl on the wall was his own name.

Instead of remaining rigidly surprised, as another man might have done, he twisted swiftly on his toes and flung himself downward to the planks of the empty deck. As he did so he heard a sharp explosive *whing*. The sound came from the stairway behind him—the powerful wheeze of compressed air from a spring gun. It was followed instantly by the hum of something flying at terrific speed above his falling body.

A missile struck the metal bulwark and rebounded with a sharp click. It was a feathered dart with a long steel shank pointed at the end to razor sharpness. Had Decker been a second

later in hurling himself to the deck, the murderous thing would have imbedded itself deep into his spine.

He writhed upward to crouched knees. His eyes caught a momentary glimpse of his assailant and the mysterious weapon. The thing was a slender, long-barreled gun, like a dueling pistol. The man who held it had been flattened at the top of the well-deck steps. He had turned now and was racing away on rubber soles like a phantom.

As he fled, his arm moved in a swift, flinging gesture. The gun sailed end over end through the air and vanished overboard with a distant splash. The killer made straight for the dim, tunnel-like opening of an enclosed corridor. Decker saw a gloved hand clutch desperately for the steel fire door. The barrier swung shut behind the man as he fled out of sight.

THE ship's detective didn't pause to take the steps; he leaped downward, landing solidly on the planks of the deserted well-deck. In two bounds he was at the closed corridor door, trying fiercely to wrench it open.

He was just a second too late. The killer had shot the bolt home with extraordinary rapidity. A mule couldn't have forced that locked water-tight door.

Decker didn't try. He sped toward the starboard promenade and ran through brilliant moonlight to the main companionway. In less than a minute he had crossed a foyer and reached the inner end of the long corridor. It was empty.

Decker eyed the closed cabin doors on either side of the luxurious passageway—eight doors on each side, sixteen people, of whom anyone could be the man who had just tried to murder him. The fellow had been wearing a sport cap drawn low on his forehead; it had been impossible to recognize him. Yet Decker had a grim certainty that he knew who the man was. His senses had a habit of registering accurate details, and the thought was

strong in him now that his enemy had been dressed in a familiar tufted material like soft and brownish tweed.

Harold Stickney. . . . Again Decker thought of the sinister trio he had been considering before the steward had summoned him to meet Marjorie Grant—Harold Stickney and Ralph Tooner and the gray-haired, very distinguished Mr. John Hobson.

Paul Decker smiled. He went back to the well-deck, climbed the stairs to the promenade where he had been attacked. His name was still chalked on the bulwark. The murderous steel dart lay where it had fallen. He slipped it into his pocket, rubbed his name from the wall. He didn't want any fuss made about this incident. Passengers wandering by would think that the chalked arrow on the planks had been put there by some member of the crew as part of the ship's regular inspection details.

He knew that the "message" from Marjorie was a fake; that Hobson's gang was aware that he was a detective. From now on he could expect a grim continuance of murder attempts.

From the game room in the stern came a sudden burst of laughter, followed by the furious *rat-tat* of a ping-pong ball. Topping the laughter he could hear the clear, soprano mirth of Marjorie Grant. It was gay, reckless, curiously sweet in his ears. Rounding the stern, he approached the wide-open door of the game room.

There were a dozen passengers in the room, but Decker had eyes only for the man and girl at the ping-pong table. A furious game was in progress between Marjorie and Tooner. Tooner looked up for a fleeting instant as Decker entered. He recoiled, missed the ball, lost the point. But his momentary confusion was cleverly covered up. He continued playing, apparently oblivious to the presence of a man he had thought Stickney had killed. Deliberately Decker gazed at him, as he lost another point.

Marjorie rallied, topped Tooner's score. Elated by the thought that she was beating a good player, she won the game with a brilliant attack. She was like a darting elf, her blue eyes ablaze with excitement, her bosom tautly rounded under the thin sheath of her silver evening gown. Decker's pulse pounded. He was not a man to bother much with women, particularly young married ones—but Marjorie. . . . He gulped, forgot about everything but her blonde, provocative beauty.

There was a round of applause as the game ended. Ralph Tooner, dark, athletic, reputed among the passengers to be independently wealthy, gave Decker a brief, sidelong scrutiny.

The detective smiled. "Tough game to lose, Mr. Tooner. By the way, have you seen anything of Mr. Stickney tonight?"

Tooner's eyes grew sullen. "No."

He turned toward Marjorie, the momentary ugliness wiped from his sleek, handsome face. "Another game? Or shall we go up above and try a tango?"

But Decker had already taken left care of that. Marjorie Grant said breathlessly: "Sorry, Ralph. Mr. Decker has just asked me to take a moonlight stroll on deck."

"A good idea," Tooner said promptly. "Do you mind if I join?"

"A damn' bad idea," was Decker's cool response. "We do mind."

MARJORIE didn't seem displeased by the sudden silence in the game room. It was pleasant, thrilling, to have two such nice young men at loggerheads over her beauty. And she was beautiful; she knew that, with a sharp, singing delight, every time she studied her smooth, white figure in the candid mirror of her private shower stall. It amazed her to think how conscious she had become of her body's perfection on these languid tropic evenings, when the breeze itself was like a hot caress and men's

eyes followed her—like Ralph Tooner, for instance, or Paul Decker . . .

She slipped her arm inside Paul's, and the two walked slowly along the starboard promenade. They had it to themselves. The smooth planks were milky in the moonlight.

"Deck chair or the rail?" Paul asked her.

"The rail, of course. I love to watch the glitter of the sea." She spread her arms outward, and the breeze whipped at her silver gown, pulled it taut against thigh and knees so that she stood statuelike, staring with a half-smile at the dark water that fled backward endlessly, ridged with phosphorescent flame where it broke and hissed into foam.

"What do you know about Ralph Tooner?" Decker asked her suddenly.

She turned at the curt sound of his voice, surprised.

"Or Harold Stickney?" Paul continued. "Are you quite sure they're the kind of gentlemen that it's—prudent for a young married woman to know?"

"Did you bring me out here to warn me about my friends or my behavior?" Marjorie Grant asked very quietly. Anger made her voice like velvet. She had expected wit, compliments from Decker—and she was getting insulting advice.

"I brought you here to ask you to be prudent," Decker told her in his level voice. "You don't quite know what you're up against on board this cruise ship. You're a young married woman, traveling alone. Your husband in New York is wealthy. For that very reason—"

"Stop!" she said. "That's quite enough." She was tense with anger, not so much at him as at herself. Decker's quick clutch at her wrist had filled her with a sudden warmth, a queer bubbly pleasure at the fact that his grasp was strong. She liked Decker; she had never admitted it to herself until now. Perhaps he had guessed her feeling, was using the knowledge

to intrude impudently on her own personal behavior. She remembered the rumors she had heard about this lean young man, the whispered hint she had heard tonight from Ralph Tooner.

"So that's what you are," she said breathlessly. "A hired snooper! Not a passenger as you pretend to be, but a cheap-minded detective, and a rather impudent one."

"Who told you I was a detective—Tooner?"

"That is none of your business. All that you need to know is, I want no advice nor warnings from you. I'm perfectly competent to take charge of my own personal life. In the future, kindly pay no further attention to me or my affairs. Is that clear?"

"It's clear," he said huskily, "but it's impossible. The officials of the line hired me to save headstrong people like you from the consequences of their own folly. I intend to do my duty."

"Really?" Her soft laughter stung him. "My husband happens to be one of the directors of this line. I shall certainly send him a wireless and have you put off the ship at the next port."

She turned away, but Decker continued to grip her wrist.

"I'm sorry," he said slowly. "Perhaps I talk more bluntly than I should. If I did, it's because I'm worried. I meant no insult to you. I—I admire and respect you. Good-night, Mrs. Grant."

His face swung toward the sea with an abrupt dismissal of her. She misinterpreted it, thought he was sending her away with an apology because he was afraid he would lose his job with the line if she sent a wireless to Stephen Grant.

She walked rapidly down the deck, rubbing her wrist where his lean fingers had pressed, hating him anew for his cowardice. She had never thought of him as a coward; his tanned jaw and resolute mouth had attracted her the first time she had seen him on board the ship. How

tightly his fingers had held her! For a coward, he certainly was no weakling

DECKER stared rigidly until he heard the angry click of Marjorie's heels die out. His face was pale, but not for the reason that Marjorie had thought. For the first time in his life, he was desperately afraid—of himself. That was why he had swung away from her in curt, almost contemptuous dismissal. He knew that in another second he would have swept this young, lovely wife of his best friend into a tight, passionate embrace. His lips would have pressed hungrily against hers. He was mad about her. He knew that now.

He stood alone on the deck, getting a grip on himself. The thought of Stephen Grant quenched the flame in his eyes. Marjorie hated him now, and he was thankful. It would make his task easier. She had gone back to rejoin Tooner. He'd have to break that up, somehow. An idea occurred to him that made him chuckle faintly. He was completely master of his emotions as he strode purposefully back toward the game room.

Marjorie, as he had guessed, was talking to the suave Tooner. She glanced at Decker, puzzled by his calm smile, the complete ease of his manner. He acted as if nothing unusual had occurred between them on the deck.

"How would you like to be beaten at ping-pong?" he asked.

It annoyed her, as he knew it would. She flushed. "Do you care to bet on that? The usual stakes are a dollar a point."

"How about a sealed bet?" he said quickly.

"You mean the winner sets the stake after the game is over?"

"Exactly."

She studied him, hesitating. But his steady eyes reassured her.

"All right. If I win—you leave the ship at the next port."

"Agreed," Decker said evenly.

It was a hot, furious game. Marjorie was really a better player than Decker, but her rage against him made her over eager. His steadiness gave him a slim advantage. He had to win. In the end he did—21 to 19.

Marjorie threw down the wooden paddle with angry disdain. "How much do I owe you, Mr. Champion?"

"Not a cent." His voice purred. "I'm merely asking you to stop drinking, gambling, dancing—with Mr. Tooner."

"But I say!" Ralph Tooner was glaring at Decker his fist clenched. He swung back toward the girl, his eyes pleading. "You've already promised me a tango, Marjorie."

"You can welch on your bet, if you like, Mrs. Grant," Decker told her with a cool shrug. "I won't insist."

"I never welch on bets," Marjorie snapped.

"That's why I played so hard to win," he grinned. He turned and walked quickly from the game room, leaving Tooner staring after him with cold, speculative eyes.

He had taken barely three steps toward the stern when he stopped short. Two men were standing close together at the taffrail, conferring in whispers. At sight of Decker, they sprang apart. One of them hurried away, melting into the darkness of the port promenade.

But Decker had seen the blur of his face, had recognized him. He was Harold Stickney, the man who had tried to kill Paul from ambush with a steel dart from an air gun.

The other man stayed where he was. Decker advanced slowly toward him, eyeing the clipped, gray hair and mustache, the thin, almost feminine face. His body was slim, but the detective knew that the fellow's muscles were wiry, powerful. He had seen him boxing in the ship's gym—John Hobson, the third of the blackmail trio aboard the *Megantic*. And Decker was sure that he was the brains and the leader.

Hobson was smoking a cigar. He offered another to his visitor.

"Hello, Decker. Nice to see you in good health on so warm and sticky a night." There was mockery in his voice.

Decker lit the cigar, gazed over the taffrail at the churn of milky foam from the powerful propellers.

"I'm in excellent health," he said steadily. "Too bad your friend Stickney's air gun missed."

Hobson grinned. There was no humor in it, merely an unpleasant curling of the thin lips. "I see your prefer to get down to brass tacks. That suits me. Mr. Ship's Detective."

"You've found that out, eh?"

"I've found out plenty."

"Perhaps I have, too. For instance, I know why that unfortunate woman committed suicide two nights ago."

"You wouldn't be trying to scare me, would you?" Hobson purred.

"I'm telling you to let Mrs. Grant alone."

Hobson took the cigar from his lips, inspected the glowing end for a second and then tossed it over the rail. It hit the milky swirl of the propeller, bounced upward for a churning instant and then was sucked out of sight in the tumbled moonlit wake behind the ship.

"Detectives are a lot like cigars," Hobson said harshly. "If one of them was to fall overboard—accidentally, of course—he'd be sucked down into that propeller and cut to mince meat in ten seconds. Think it over."

He turned, flashed his mirthless, wrinkled grin and walked away.

Decker rubbed his chin thoughtfully. He had deliberately brought this thing out into the open to test his man. Hobson hadn't scared worth a cent. His cool assurance, the sly triumph of his manner, puzzled Decker. He considered the ugly blackmail trio while the stern of the vibrating ship rose and fell under his spread feet. Stickney was the tough guy; Tooner, the suave ballroom come-on. Hobson was

undoubtedly the leader. Together they spelt ruin for Marjorie's life, heart-break for the fine, decent man she had married.

The air was getting warmer, stickier. Every speck of breeze had died. Decker wiped perspiration from his forehead. He glanced into the game room, saw that neither Marjorie nor Tooner were there.

He hurried aloft to the dance saloon, where the orchestra was still playing slow tangos for the languid merry-makers. The skylight and all the windows were opened. Heat hung like a palpable blanket. Decker peered only long enough to make sure that Marjorie and the sleek Tooner were not there. He felt a swift tug of relief at his heart. The girl was behaving sensibly.

Perhaps his curt talk had sent her to her cabin to think things over. Fundamentally she was as fine as Stephen Grant, not easy to be cajoled. That was undoubtedly why Hobson and his gang were proceeding so slowly and carefully in their plot to frame her. The fruitless attempt on Decker's life was their first mistake so far. From now on they'd be out to get him.

IN his cabin Decker was surprised to find his steward standing in the narrow alley, knocking insistently at his closed door. At sight of Decker, the man turned, relief on his worried face.

"You're wanted at once, sir. I—I thought you'd gone to bed."

"What's the matter?"

"There's something wrong in H Corridor. One of the passengers is very frightened. She wants you to come at once. She says—"

"H Corridor?" Decker's face hardened into alert gravity, for Marjorie's room was on that corridor. "Who's the woman—Mrs. Grant?"

"No, sir. It's Miss Devoe. Her room is directly across from Mrs. Grant's. She's terribly frightened. She told me

not to alarm anyone but to get you instantly."

"Did she say why?"

"She started to," the steward said uneasily, "then a man walked past, along the main corridor, and she shut up like a clam."

"Who was the man? Did you see his face?"

"Yes, sir. It was Mr. Hobson."

Decker said swiftly: "Keep quiet about this whole affair. Get back to your call desk. I'll take care of things."

He walked swiftly along the starboard corridor to H Section. H was like all the others, a narrow alley with three stateroom doors on each side. It extended from the silent corridor to the steel hull of the ship. At the inner end was a wicker laundry hamper, and above it a porthole, opened wide to admit humid, breathlessly warm air.

Marjorie's door was wide open. He glanced in before he rapped at the door opposite. There was no sign of Stephen Grant's pretty wife. His summons at Miss Devoe's door brought a tremulous whisper from within.

"Who is it?"

"Mr. Decker."

He heard a faint sigh of relief, then a key turned and the door framed a pale, lovely face. "Come in. Hurry . . . I don't want any of the passengers to hear what I—"

Decker was conscious that he was being pushed nervously inward. He turned, caught a quick glimpse of Miss Devoe's attire and the strained look on her face—and sprang quickly toward the closed door.

He was a shade too late. The key had turned in the lock. She jerked it loose, ducked under his clutching arm and retreated to the rear of the cabin.

"I'll take that key, please," he said in a harsh whisper.

"If you do, I'll scream bloody murder, boy friend—and where will that leave you?"

"A scandal plant, eh?" he growled,

keeping his angry voice low. "Very nice."

"Do you mean the plant—or me?" she said, her lovely eyes bright, jeering.

They were blue eyes, almost the same pale blue as her sheer nightgown. Her feet were bare under the robe's hem, the toenails lacquered red; so were her lips—deep crimson, parted with excitement and triumph as she backed away, her hands clenched on the key behind her. The sheen of her white body was faintly visible through the gauzy blue gown.

"You can't pull any cheap gag like this and get away with it," Decker whispered hoarsely. "The steward will testify that you decoyed me here by a lying story of fright."

"The hell with the steward," she breathed. "What do you suppose Mrs. Grant will think. She's the only one we're interested in. Move away from that door panel, or I'll scream."

He saw that she meant the threat, and he moved aside. She glided past him to the door and slid the key into the lock. She didn't turn it, just stood there expectant, tense. He knew that to get the key and escape from the trap, he'd have to clutch at her warm, perfumed body, struggle with her—and he didn't dare . . .

She was obviously listening for some signal outside in the alley.

Decker heard the sound the moment she did. It came from the corridor. The sound of two familiar voices—Ralph Tooner and Marjorie. The voices turned into H. Tooner coughed.

Instantly the woman inside the stateroom door writhed her left shoulder through the arm-hole of her wispy gown. She turned the key. Decker sprang silently at her to keep her from opening the door. His moist palm slipped on the knob. It whirled under the woman's clutch, and the door was thrown wide.

The clever Miss Devoe handled the lying tableau with the skill of an actress. Her left arm went upward and around Decker's neck. The right

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trailed so that the shoulder strap slipped, and the loosened nightgown slid partly downward. For just a dazzling instant the smooth perfection of her beautiful torso was revealed. She pretended to see Marjorie and Tooner at the same instant.

With a choking cry she caught at the pale-blue fabric, clutched it modestly against her panting bosom, whirled back into her room. The door slammed and was locked.

For a moment there was complete silence outside. Then Ralph Tooner chuckled. It was brief, nasty with polite understanding.

"We seem to have intruded on something rather personal. Sorry."

Marjorie was as pale as a ghost. She said nothing. But in her frozen eyes Decker could read reproach, disgust—and the scorn of a decent woman faced by something that was utterly heartbreaking. The one man on the ship she had thought utterly straight and clean—pretending to advise her . . . And he was slyly indulging in clandestine visits to an "easy" woman's cabin. She hated Decker, but most of all she hated that milky-skinned blonde.

"Take me away," she said chokingly to Ralph Tooner.

Decker sprang in front of her as she turned. His eyes were level, imperious.

"Marjorie—there's a true explanation for this, if you'll listen to me."

She shivered, tore her glance unwillingly from his. She wanted to listen, to believe in his innocence, but what could he possibly tell her, except smooth, expert lies, that she'd be tempted to believe?

"Come, Ralph. As you say, we seem to have intruded on something personal—perhaps intimate?"

Decker followed the two of them down the deserted corridor, pale under the dim glow of the wall lamps.

"Marjorie darling, the thing is a frameup. I was lured to that cabin by a lying trick. This man with you—Tooner—is one of the gang. They

mean to discredit me so that you won't listen to me. It's important that you do. I tell you that you're in serious danger."

"I'm not interested in your opinions, Mr. Decker." Her words were like icy pellets slung at him.

"Go back to your cabin—please," he pleaded.

Her answer was to turn toward the carpeted staircase that led aloft to the public rooms. Tooner's arm assisted her. His grin, twisted backward for an instant toward the helpless Decker, was derisive, gloating.

The two ascended. Decker heard the faint sound of Marjorie's repressed sob. Then she was gone, and Tooner with her.

THE lobby was deserted, except for the elevator attendant who had stepped out of the small caged enclosure and was staring at Decker with wide, curious eyes. He had seen quarrels like this before in the early morning hours. Just another guy trying to cut in on a dame and getting nothing but a snub for his trouble . . .

Decker glanced woodenly at his wrist watch. The hands pointed to a quarter of three. He eyed the lobby, the closed office of the ship's purser and the elevator shaft opposite. He was aware that he had played his last trump with Marjorie—and lost. From now on she'd be certain to pay no heed whatever to his warnings. Worse than that, she'd be eager to disobey him, to show him that she was a grown woman with a will of her own—easy prey for rogues like Hobson and Tooner and the murderous Harold Stickney. And they'd be quick to take advantage of her—probably this very night.

He strode abruptly to the elevator, snarled a brief word at the sleepy operator.

"Up!"

"Which deck, sir?"

"'A' Deck—and stop staring and get busy!"

The captain's quarters were on 'A'

Deck. Decker found the old man still awake in the tiny study that adjoined his severely furnished bedroom. He was writing busily in a large book with a pen that scratched and sputtered across the paper.

He looked up, smiled as he recognized Decker. The smile vanished as he saw the detective's face. "Is anything wrong?"

"Mrs. Grant—" Paul said harshly.

"Well—haven't you been watching her? That's your job, man. You were put on the ship for that one purpose."

Decker told the captain swiftly what had happened. The old man listened, his hand tugging with worry at his gray, bristly hair.

"I'd like to grab those three scoundrels by the heels—clap 'em in irons till we reach port. That sly Miss Devoe, too! I've had complaints about her behavior from some of the married women aboard. She's been playing around with their husbands." He sighed fiercely. "Damn the tropics—it does something to people's minds and bodies. They go crazy, like that poor woman who committed suicide a few days ago."

"She didn't commit suicide," Decker said tonelessly. "Hobson's gang was behind that. I've said nothing because I've had no proof. But I'll get it—and get it tonight."

His voice hardened. "Will you back me up in anything I do?"

"Of course. Mr. Grant is the most powerful member of the line's board of directors. His orders were to nab the gigolos who have been infesting these cruise ships and turn 'em over to the shore authorities. He wouldn't have allowed his wife to make the trip if he hadn't been certain that—"

Decker interrupted the older man huskily.

"Don't you think I know that? Stephen Grant is the best friend I ever had. He's depending on me. I—I can't let anything happen that would ruin his belief in—in Marjorie."

He choked on her name, and the captain eyed him grimly.

"I've noticed the way you look at her sometimes. If you're not careful, you'll be in love with her."

"I'm in love with her now," Decker groaned.

Agitated, the captain sprang to his feet. "Damn you! Are you trying to tell me that you—"

Decker clenched his fists, turned to the door. His eyes burned haggardly. "There'll be trouble of some kind tonight. Marjorie is reckless enough now to lose sight of her common sense. I—I intend to protect her."

"Are you protecting her for her husband—or yourself?"

Decker didn't reply. For the first time in his life he had met a woman who had kindled his blood to a consuming fire. He loved her; he admitted it to himself, gloried in the passionate, virile pleasure that flooded eagerly through his body when his hand touched hers. And he believed that Marjorie loved him. Her very anger when she had seen him clutched against the scantily attired blonde had been proof of Marjorie's swiftly awakening desire. The tropic heat was weaving its warm, perfumed spell about both of them. So easy to follow its call; so hard to resist . . .

DECKER hurried down the narrow staircase to B Deck. He heard the tense, excited voices of two men whispering. A sentence came to his ear with sinister clarity:

"I tell you, doctor, it couldn't be anything but a deliberate attempt at murder."

A second later, rounding a turn, Decker saw the speaker. It was the chief engineer of the *Megantic*. He was talking excitedly to Dr. Carrol, the ship's surgeon. Both men swung with relief toward Decker. Every one of the ship's officers knew that he was a detective, placed on board by orders of the directors of the line.

"You tell him what's happened," the surgeon said hastily. "I'm going aloft and notify the captain. Keep the news quiet, if you can. We don't want

a panic among the passengers. It's a good thing most of them are already in bed and asleep."

He vanished at a swift, noiseless run. The chief engineer explained hurriedly, his face worried and apprehensive.

A murderous attack had been made a few minutes earlier on the ship's electrician. He had been struck on the head from behind by an unseen assailant. A member of the crew, hearing his groans, had discovered him. He had a fracture at the base of the skull and was seriously hurt.

Decker said instantly: "The dynamo—the lights—some one is planning to plunge the whole ship into darkness. There's no other explanation for an attack on the electrician."

The chief engineer nodded grimly. "I have men guarding the dynamo right now. It isn't that which worries me. It's the danger of a short circuit. There are a dozen places all over the ship where a cunning man could short-circuit the wiring from a fuse box and put out the lights. I'm trying to post guards as fast as I can. Listen, will you keep an eye on the fuse-box in—"

"Sorry," Decker refused over his shoulder. He was already moving away. "I've got something more important to look after." He remembered that Marjorie Grant was still roaming the dimly lighted ship in the company of the suave Tooner.

His guess was that Stickney had slugged the electrician. Tooner was keeping the girl under his eye. Hobson, somewhere unseen, was waiting for the zero hour . . .

Decker raced grimly toward the public rooms. It was a logical guess, but a poor one just the same. Each step Decker took was carrying him farther and farther away from Marjorie—just when she needed him most.

MARJORIE was, at this exact instant, outside her cabin door, bidding a quiet good-night to Ralph Tooner, who seemed in no hurry to

take his departure. He stood in the narrow alley, smiling, wiping his moist forehead, complaining faintly about the heat. The air was stifling without a hint of breeze.

Tooner said gently: "I wonder if I might have a drink of water, Mrs. Grant?"

"Certainly."

He stepped across the threshold, walked with her to the stand on which her ice-water bottle rested. Marjorie looked faintly alarmed at his temerity in entering her room without permission. But Tooner was so deft about the intrusion that she had no reason to object.

He took the glass stopper out of the bottle and poured himself a drink. He held the glass in his right hand. His left cupped the open top of the bottle, rested there casually. He nodded toward the electric fan on the wall.

"Your fan has stopped," he told her huskily. "Perhaps that's why it's so hot in here."

While she was vainly trying to start the motionless fan, Tooner's hand opened quickly and closed again. He replaced the stopper in the bottle, drank his glass of water with slow, smiling enjoyment.

Marjorie picked up her cream-colored telephone and called for the electrician. She frowned, waited a minute or two, and then hung up.

"That's queer," she said slowly. "There's no answer."

"He's probably gone to bed and disconnected his phone," Tooner suggested smoothly. "Electricians are usually a lazy lot. I'll knock on his door as I go by, if you like."

"Please do," she gasped. "The heat in here is really unbearable."

He bowed, walked out. She closed the door behind him, bolted it. She had a queer sense of impending evil. She wondered suddenly about this suave Ralph Tooner. All of Paul Decker's warnings came back to her, redoubled and amplified. She sank into a chair, thinking of him, curiously comforted by the memory of his lean, steady

face. Then she thought of the blonde Miss Devoe and began to pace the room nervously.

She tinkered with the electric fan, but it remained absolutely dead. Perspiration came out on her smooth forehead. She took a long drink of water from her thermos bottle on the stand. It was cold and delicious. She drank two glasses full and slipped out of her silvery evening gown.

Standing in front of her long mirror, attired only in stockings, brief silken shorts and a wisp of brassiere, she was still uncomfortably warm in the stifling room. She removed her remaining garments with a sigh of relief, reached out a tired hand for her robe.

Her eyes remained on her lovely reflection in the mirror. She was slimmer than Miss Devoe, but her figure was firmer, more delicately curved. Watching her reflection, she began to think about Paul Decker.

The thought of him made her cheeks flush. The flush crept down the white skin of her throat, and stained her bosom pink, but her eyes didn't waver. She loved Paul. Why shouldn't she admit it to herself?

Drowsily she threw her robe loosely around her body. She propped pillows on the couch and began to read a book with listless attention. Her eyes blinked more and more. She threw the book to the floor and relaxed. She felt queerly dizzy, the room was spinning about her. Frightened, she tried to rise—and fell weakly back.

She thought sleepily: "The water—in the drinking bottle. Tooner drugged it while I was looking at the fan. I've got to stay awake—got to call—"

The broken thought vanished into a deep blackness. She seemed to be falling through that blackness, faster, faster . . .

She lay with closed eyes and wide-open mouth, breathing rhythmically. Except for the soft rise and fall of her half-exposed bosom, she was inert, motionless.

PAUL DECKER'S anxious search of the deserted lounge rooms brought him no satisfaction. There was no sign of Marjorie or Tooner. He looked in the smoking room. They were not there, nor in the bar. The whole ship seemed to be wrapped in uneasy silence. Even the lights seemed to flicker strangely. Decker was afraid that any moment the lights would vanish into darkness.

He was hurrying along a corridor past the writing room when he heard a faint sound behind him. He whirled instantly. There was no one visible. But he had a queer hunch that a tip-toeing figure had just vanished into the open door of the library. The doorway was just behind the smaller writing room.

Decker retraced cautious steps, peered inward. As he did he saw a man up on a chair, prying within the electric fuse box on the wall with something that looked like a short screwdriver. His hands were incased in rubber gloves. It was Harold Stickney, and he snarled an oath as he saw Decker watching him from the doorway.

His hand jerked. There was a brief crackling sound and the purplish flare of shorted electric current. It was followed by instant darkness as every light in the forward section of the ship went out.

As the ship's detective sprang forward, Stickney leaped headlong at him from the chair. His arched body struck the detective like a battering ram, toppling him backward against the sharp edge of a table. Decker went down under his assailant's weight, and his head struck with a dull thump. In the dim moonlight he saw Stickney crouched over him, lunging downward with a glittering blade.

Decker twisted, clutched for the man's descending wrist. He missed as a sweaty hand slipped through his. A second later he felt hot, stabbing pain as the sharp blade buried itself in his thigh. It was jerked loose by the killer

and raised for a second murderous stab.

But this time the detective caught the tight grip for which he had been praying. He wrestled grimly for possession of the knife, fighting to keep his opponent on the floor. He knew from the sharp pain in his leg that Stickney would have the advantage if he could tear loose and get to his feet for the finishing blow.

Not a sound was uttered. Neither of them wanted to alarm the ship—Stickney to prevent exposure of a criminal plot, Decker to save the woman he loved from the threat of scandal and shame. In the end Paul Decker bit into Stickney's wrist till he could taste the spurt of blood. There was a thin scream—then Decker had the knife. He didn't hesitate. Its point drove into Stickney's wincing body.

In an instant Decker was up, hobbling weakly on his wounded leg. He dragged Stickney across the floor, struck a match, located a locker in the panelled wall. He thrust his groaning enemy into the tight enclosure, slammed and made fast the door. Except for distant shouts somewhere below in the ship, the upper deck was quiet.

THE detective ran limping along the corridor toward the rear companion that led aloft to the boat deck. He had grim reason for his route and his haste. Marjorie was undoubtedly at this moment in her cabin, unaware of peril. But there was a bolt on her door instead of the usual lock and key.

The change had been made at the beginning of the cruise at Decker's own suggestion. No one could enter from the outside without smashing down the door. The sudden darkness was the answer of Hobson and his gang. Unless they could enter the cabin secretly to frame their lying evidence, the blackmail would be exposed as such and rendered useless. Hobson would have to enter the cabin in the

only way open to him—the porthole. He would probably use a rope from a point directly above.

That was why Decker was hobbling so desperately toward the open sweep of the boat deck up above. He knew that the *Megantic*, like most luxury liners that cruise in the tropics, had portholes large enough to permit the passage of a man's body. Extra size was necessary because of the heat and the necessity of providing for adequate ventilation throughout the ship. The forced draught of air that came from the gratings of the *punkhalouvre* system wasn't enough. Hobson and Tooner, both slim and wary, would have no trouble crawling through the porthole.

The bare sweep of the boat deck was dim with moonlight. Smoke hung in a black smudge above the tall funnels, drifting slowly backward. Although the giant ship was moving at a rapid clip through the dark sea below, there was no breeze. The canvas-covered lifeboats hung like sheeted ghosts in their davits.

Decker ran swiftly toward one of them, squirmed past its stern, approached the unrailed edge of the deck. He knew exactly the location of Marjorie's cabin. It was almost in a plummet line below this spot.

His heart leaped as he saw a rope fastened to the steel support of the davit. Leaning, Decker followed its snake-line length with his eyes. It was knotted every couple of feet to provide handholds for a descending man. The end of it trailed past the dark, unlighted circle of Marjorie's porthole.

Decker clenched his teeth. He could feel the drip of blood along his wounded leg. It was no longer a matter of minutes—seconds counted now. There had been no outcry or alarm from Marjorie. Drugged—that was the only answer. And once Hobson and Tooner unbolted her door from the inside, made their escape in darkness, they could hide whatever slimy evidence they had secured and wait with greedy

patience to collect a rich reward. Marjorie, terrified of scandal, would move heaven and earth to get the money to keep the gang's mouth shut.

Decker was swinging down the dangling rope while these thoughts raced through his mind. His wound throbbed, made him light-headed with pain. But his grim hands never slackened their grip. They lowered him swiftly from knot to knot until he was past the round darkness of the porthole, hanging desperately below it, with both palms clenched fiercely on the metal rim.

He lifted his face inch by inch until he could peer inside. Part of the blackness within was deeper than the rest. He made out the bulky figure of a man, stooped over a little, his arm raised high with a queer, flat object in his hand like a small tray.

Without warning the tray gushed into blinding, white light. Decker heard the click of a camera, saw the room for the millionth part of a second, revealed with microscopic detail—a camera on a small tripod, Hobson crouched alertly with the flashlight pan; and on the couch opposite was Marjorie's half-uncovered body, lax and unconscious, like a crumpled lily.

Tooner was sitting beside her, his coat off, his collar and tie loosened, one arm curled possessively about the satin smoothness of the girl's bared shoulder.

Darkness blotted out the sight. Then Hobson's voice came in a quick whisper: "Hold the pose, Tooner. I'm going to take two camera shots—play safe."

"Take a dozen," Tooner chuckled. "I don't mind this a bit. Make 'em quick—we still got a getaway to think about."

"Shut up, and hold the pose!"

Again the light flared briefly. The instant it faded Decker was lifting upward on his hands, silently squirming inward through the porthole. He knew that both crooks' eyes would be dazzled by the blinding flare of magnesium. For thirty seconds or so,

their eyeballs would be filled with colored sparks of light from the afterglow of the illumination. Decker had closed his eyes tightly just before the second flash went off.

He writhed inward, unseen by the jubilant conspirators. Hobson was folding the small tripod on which the camera had been mounted. The stuff had come down the rope with him, strapped on his back. As he folded the aluminum leg pieces, Decker was already crouched in the dark cabin. Both hands were outstretched in the darkness as he approached the couch where Tooner had just risen to his feet. The hands darted across Tooner's shoulders and fastened like steel hooks in the flesh of his relaxed throat.

Tooner had no chance to utter a sound. The hands never moved. Their deadly pressure increased.

"All set?" Hobson growled.

Decker lowered the body to the rug, careful to make no sound. He took a noiseless step toward Hobson, another . . .

HOBSON'S frightened oath coincided with Decker's quick leap. The two men staggered backward, upsetting the stand on which the thermos bottle rested. It made a small, barely audible thump. In the darkness both men strained desperately at each other to prevent arm motion. Each knew that it was a fight to a finish. Each guessed that the other was armed. But it was Decker who got his gun out first. His had been the advantage of surprise.

He didn't jerk the trigger. Instead, the weapon reversed swiftly in his hand and lunged downward at the blackmailer's skull.

It struck, and Hobson reeled. Again it struck, skidding against the falling man's shoulder. Decker lost his grip and dropped the weapon. But he knew as he fumbled fiercely to recover it, that the battle was over. Hobson lay where he had collapsed. He was out cold.

Decker unbolted the door, peered out. The ship was still plunged in darkness. But here and there flashlights glowed in the gloom, and he could hear the murmurings of awakened passengers and the brusque voices of ship's officers.

"There's no need for alarm," some one cried clearly. "The short-circuit has been located in the library on B deck. The lights will be on again in just a moment."

Decker tiptoed back to where the girl lay on the couch.

Her eyes were glassy, but they were wide open and intelligence was flooding swiftly back to them. Decker shook her gently. He lifted her, swung her bare feet to the floor.

"Are you all right now?"

"Yes—yes—"

"Dress as quickly as you can. And don't worry about scandal. Your name won't appear in this mess at all."

He picked up Hobson, carried him through the darkness to the end of the alley. The pain of his leg forced him to drop the man there; but he caught him by the collar and dragged him, unseen, to the broad lobby just beyond. He was back in an instant, fumbling for the unconscious Tooner. Tooner's trailing heels made no sound on the carpeted corridor. A third time, Decker returned like a flitting ghost and secured the camera and the folded tripod.

He had barely reached the side of his prisoners when, with sudden brilliance, every light in the ship came on.

There were murmured gasps, shaky laughs of relief from passengers grouped here and there in the spacious lobby. Suddenly a woman screamed: "Look! Over there!"

Decker and the two men sprawled at his feet were revealed with stark clarity under the strong lights. The detective was pale, rumped, dirty. Blood from his wounded thigh soaked the leg of his trousers with a dark, spreading stain.

Women shrank away, but some of the men passengers hurried forward,

ringed Decker with grim, suspicious faces. One of the passengers had a gun in his hand.

A ship's officer saw the weapon, barked curtly: "Put that thing away. This man is a police detective."

"Where's the captain?" Decker snapped.

The officer blew a long blast on the silver whistle he carried. Decker bent over his prisoners, searching their pockets with swift efficiency. He found nothing he wanted in Tooner's clothes, but his search of Hobson disclosed something that brought a sparkle to his tired eyes. He broke the seal of an envelope, read the contents, glanced at the wavering feminine signature of the bottom.

He showed it to the captain when the latter came rushing into view. The captain read it, glanced at the two prisoners on the floor.

"Good—you've got them! Why did the fool Hobson carry it on his person?"

"He was so crooked himself that he probably was afraid of a double-cross from his two subordinates. He kept it on his own person as the safest place he could think of. It's proof positive of what I told you two days ago—that the unfortunate woman who committed suicide was driven to her death by the hold these wolves had on her. They threatened her with exposure to her husband. She took death as the only way out of her misfortune; and I rather expect a jury will decide, when they see the evidence and listen to my testimony, that the whole ruthless conspiracy constitutes murder."

"Where's the other rat—Stickney?"

"He's the man who shorted the lights," Decker said. "You'll find him wounded, jammed inside the library locker."

THERE was a flurry of orders from the captain. A squad of sailors vanished at the double-quick. Others picked up Hobson and Tooner and carried them below.

Decker, staring at the dazed faces of the passengers, suddenly saw the pale countenance of Marjorie. She was fully dressed, gazing at him with a look of love and trust that made him avert his own glance for an instant, the better to get a grip on himself. She had heard the talk; she knew now that he had kept his word and saved her from the threat of scandal. The camera clutched in his hand was proof of that.

"If you'll question Stickney and Tooner separately, and keep Hobson locked in solitary," Decker said to the captain, "I think you'll get confessions that will sew up this case for a conviction. Both henchmen will be eager to clear themselves at Hobson's expense."

He slid his arm inside Marjorie's and walked her away with him. The captain followed. They went to Decker's cabin. He shut the door. Quietly he explained the real reason for the turning out of the lights and the stoppage of the electric fan in Marjorie's cabin.

"The two undeveloped negatives are still in the camera, Mrs. Grant," he told Marjorie faintly. He handed the square black box to her. "Use your own judgment." His eyes veered toward the open porthole.

Marjorie held the camera as though it were a poisonous snake. With a shuddering gesture she hurled it through the circular opening into starlit darkness. There was a faint splash.

"Good night, captain," Decker said curtly.

The captain took the hint, his face expressionless. His eyes seemed to bore warningly into the detective's, but he said nothing.

The moment he was gone, Marjorie swayed impulsively toward Decker.

"Paul—oh, Paul!"

Her arms reached out for him, but he took her hands in his and held them tightly together. His face was suddenly white.

"I'm glad to have been of assistance to you, Mrs. Grant."

"Mrs. Grant?" she whispered. "Oh, Paul, why be afraid of the truth? It's Marjorie to you, dearest—and you know it. I love you! You love me, too. You can't hide it from me any longer. Paul—"

"You happen to be a married woman," he said huskily. He tried to move back from her, but he couldn't. Her body was clinging desperately to his.

"I'll get a divorce. We can't give each other up now. We'll leave the ship at the next port. Stephen will understand. I'll—I'll write him a letter and tell him the truth. Paul—darling—"

The perfume of her hair was like a flame of madness in him. For the first time in his life he knew what love could mean. He knew that she was the one woman, the only woman, he would ever want. But as his arms tightened to crush her, a man's face swam into his mind with the clarity of a photograph. Stephen, his best friend—Stephen, too, loved this woman; and she was his, bound to him by decency, honor—yes, love. The tropic magic had made her forget how truly she loved this fine, square-shooting husband of hers in New York.

THE issue was in Paul Decker's own hands. His hungry arms dropped away from Marjorie, and he stepped backward. He began to laugh, jerkily—a cold, freezing sound like the tinkle of metal.

"Why are you laughing? You look so queer, Paul."

"The thing is funny. Don't you think you're being just a little ridiculous, Mrs. Grant?"

Her face grew slowly paler until even her lips were white. "Are you telling me—you don't—"

"I'm telling you that a joke's a joke, Mrs. Grant. You're just a little too cheap for my taste."

"Cheap?" She swayed back as if he had struck her. The bewildered hurt in her blue eyes made him close his own tightly for an instant. But his jeering laughter continued.

"You played around with Tooner, didn't you? He's not the only one. I hate to disillusion you, Mrs. Grant, but my only interest in you was to guard you and to earn my pay as a detective. Personally—well, I'm not interested in second-hand women—not even you."

"You think I'm—that kind?"

He shrugged. "It's all over the ship."

Her open palm struck him stinging in the face. He was like marble, except for the red imprints of her fingers. Sobbing, she whirled, fought her way blindly out of the cabin. He stood there, without movement, listening to the diminishing click of her heels. It was like lovely music fading forever out of his life. After a long

time, he walked like an automaton to his door and closed it.

He had chosen deliberately the one sure way to kill her love for him. He uttered queer, choking sounds as he fumbled for the liquor decanter on his desk. He poured himself a full tumbler of the fiery stuff, with a hand that shook like an old man's.

He whispered: "Stephen Grant. Luck to you, Steve, old man. You're a true friend. I owe you plenty, but I think I've paid you the debt tonight—with interest."

He downed the liquor, coughing, spilling some of it. Gradually the torment cleared from his mind. He had done the only thing possible for him. To do anything else would have been—not Paul Decker's way.

Looking at the pale reflection in his mirror, he saw that he was able to smile. Unconsciously his shoulders stiffened, his head lifted proudly—like a good soldier . . .

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Detective Don Juan



By

Charles Marquis Warren

Private Investigator "Don Juan" Stinson always liked to mix romance with work. But the bloody trail of Ex-Gangster Arnold's racket money led Stinson to the beautiful but hard Doris Hanlon—a woman who would kiss him one moment and try to murder him the next.

THE office was done in faded tan leather which matched the faded, blotchy wall paper and the lustreless mahogany of the two roll-top desks. Threadbare curtains stirred feebly in the sun-warmed breeze that came off East Hollywood Boulevard where it met Sunset.

Don Stinson lolled leisurely back in the swivel chair in front of his desk. A cigarette dangled from his thin lips and sent blue smoke spiraling. His thick dark hair was combed neatly except where two obstinate

Glamorous Mystery Novelette

forelocks persisted in drooping over the corners of his wide brown forehead. His clean-cut, almost striking features, as well as his slow, well-modulated, drawling speech had a fascinating, virile masculinity, and had earned him the sobriquet "Don Juan." The latter was by no means a misnomer, considering Stinson's well-known amorous exploits.

He shifted easily in his chair, with urbane disregard for the knife-edge creases in his well-tailored suit. The immaculate fit of the suit hid the deceptive strength of his tall frame and slightly rounded, powerful shoulders. He kept himself awake by the simple expedient of whistling inane.

He was, he reflected, afraid to think at the moment, because the Stinson-Doolittle Detective Agency was broke. It had been a week since the last case. And, unfortunately, your money didn't last long when you had a girl such as Angel to lavish it on. If something didn't happen soon—

The door to the outer office opened, and a girl came in. She was tall and blonde, her skin a creamy sun-tan that made her eyes large and luminously blue. Her soft knit sweater-dress hung closely to her graceful, slender body. She had a sheaf of photographs in her hand.

She allowed the door to swing softly shut behind her, came over and laid the photographs on Stinson's desk. She said:

"There's a man outside to see you."

Stinson's eyes twinkled as he looked at her.

"Ah," he said reverently, "you're lovely as a vision of an angel. As my secretary, you should come in more often, Angel."

"As your secretary, I would come in more often if there was more business. As it is we're almost idle. And while we're idle, Don Juan—" she looked at him significantly, eyes sparkling—"I'll remain in my outer office. I know you."

With deliberate ease Stinson picked up the photos. They were glossy pictures of semi-nude girls in various poses. His wistful, half-closed brown eyes appraised them, examined them thoroughly with indolent, mischievous relish.

"Where, may I ask, did these come from, Angel?"

The girl's eyebrows went up in skeptical amusement.

"You mean you don't remember?" she asked.

Stinson looked at her and then, as vague recollection came to him, he winced.

"Ah, me!" he murmured in mock solemnity. "Don't tell me I accumulated these the other night when we gently painted the town a delicate pink? I must have imbibed more than my usual twelve Martinis."

The girl nodded and tried not to smile.

"We did the rounds, Don. And before you left each night-spot, you had to collect a picture from the foyer as a memento. It's a wonder the managers didn't trace you down the next day."

Stinson shook his head in resignation. Then he held one of the photos at arm's length, surveyed it judiciously.

"Celestial," he murmured. "Pure loveliness. A treasure of feminine perfection." He winked slyly at the girl when she wrinkled her nose at him. "Naturally she doesn't compare with you, Angel. No mere girl would have a chance with an angel. You're my choice every time, out and away."

"I wish I could believe that, Don Juan." She moved to a position behind him and looked over his shoulder. "But she isn't your type. Your weakness is the tough ones, the hard-to-get girls. They seem unapproachable and intrigue you."

"My weakness is you, Angel. We're both aware of that."

ANGEL'S body pressed momentarily against Stinson's shoulder, truant wisps of her blonde hair brushing his lean brown cheek. He slipped his arm about her waist, gently kissed her shoulder, smiled.

"I've seen that girl before, Angel. Forget where. In the line at some night club. *Ambassador*, maybe. Or the *Summit*, or possibly the *Penthouse*. She's a hooper, or perhaps she sings. But with a figure like that, she'd be wasting her time singing."

Angel grimaced and straightened up, said briskly:

"The man who's outside to see you, remember? He said it was important and he looks upset. As though he's in a hurry, or afraid something's going to happen."

Stinson shoved the photographs into the desk drawer.

"Right, Angel. I was merely trying to appreciate some other girl's beauty to make you jealous. But I suppose it's impossible. You have me roped and tied."

A roar exploded from behind the desk at the other side of the room.

"Stinson, what the hell's the matter with you? Y' gone crazy?"

Amos Doolittle twisted his head up from his massive chest, where it had been reposing while he grabbed off a few hours' shut-eye. He unlimbered his hulking body, emitted one or two sonorous grunts and made sucking noises with his tongue as he wet his dry mouth. He stood up. His barrel body was offset by a head just as large in proportion. His face was heavy, but with a lean sort of heaviness found in too active men of forty. He glared down at the recumbent figure of Don Stinson.

"Is this a detective agency, or are you running a beauty salon. There's a guy waiting outside. Maybe he's got a couple of bucks to spend!"

Angel nodded her head and said:

"Mr. Arnold, the guy who's waiting—"

"What Arnold, Angel?"

"I tried to tell you. Caleb Arnold."

Doolittle's rubicund face became fiery, his voice an exploding roar:

"Caleb Arnold! Hell's little devils, why didn't you say so! A regular big-shot in our office and you let him cool his—"

Angel stood her ground, blue eyes regarding Doolittle impassively.

"It's Don he wants to see, Amos," she said. "He says it's imperative. I think something's awfully wrong."

"Angel, I love you," Stinson murmured.

Doolittle ambled across the floor and jerked his big paw to his partner's shoulder. He shook him hard. Stinson twisted his head and stared at the hand.

"Don, you gone out of your mind? Women have been falling for you ever since we been in 'business. And they get you in jams. Leave 'em alone. At least until we find out what Caleb Arnold wants."

Stinson nodded, reached over, took Angel's hand and kissed it. Doolittle clenched and unclenched his big fists. He said:

"If only the clients would ask for me. I'd handle 'em. I'd show 'em what business is. I'm no lover, no Casanova. I wanna make money. But no, they got to have Don Juan Stinson or they go to another agency. Say, don't you know who this bird Arnold is?"

Stinson's thin lips cracked in a wider smile. "Certainly, Amos," he said. "I know as much about him as anybody knows—which isn't so much. He's sort of a mystery man, and nobody can find out anything about his past. But since he came to Los Angeles he's been pretty much in the thick of things. He was a politician at one time and he's still a sort of power behind the throne. He owns some night clubs and gambling joints in the city. Certainly, Amos, I know Caleb Arnold—as much as he'll permit to be known. I know also it's been rumored recently that he's almost broke. But I imagine he still has plenty salted away."

Doolittle swore, took a deep breath and rumbled:

"This guy can pay money. Plenty tin. And on the line. We can use it. We got to have it. We're lousy broke."

"Amos, you're right. We need the money. We're flat. I can see that kind of logic. Angel, show Mr. Arnold in."

He watched the swaying, lithe movement of Angel's hips as she went to the door, opened it, and ushered Arnold in.

CALEB ARNOLD looked like a lightweight circus strong man. Thick chest and arms and legs encased in a tight-fitting, flashy double-breasted pin-stripe suit.

Stinson figured there was something funny, something incongruous in Arnold's general appearance. Maybe it was the face that was a little wrong. The sinewy face with its iron-gray, heavy mustache. The mustache was thick and drooped slightly over the corners of the wide mouth. It was worn that way probably to give character to his rather weak, innocent features.

Arnold kept his vacuous eyes on Stinson, who remained seated and neither smiled nor nodded. Finally Stinson made a languid motion with his hand.

"Sit down, Mr. Arnold."

Arnold ignored the invitation

"Listen, Stinson—"

Stinson smiled.

"Call me Don. I'm used to it."

"Stinson—"

"Don."

Arnold's blue eyes flickered with impatience. "I'll call you what I like. And I give the orders. The sooner you find that out, the quicker we'll come to an understanding."

Stinson watched him from under lowered lids and finally said: "Sit down, Mr. Arnold. I'm listening."

Arnold leaned forward, his pink face pinker, his hands gripping Stinson's desk until the knuckles showed white.

"Look, Stinson, I came because I need your help. Because I'm in a jam. You've got a reputation, Stinson. You're crazy and you do crazy things, but you have a rep for landing on your feet every time. That's why I came to you."

Stinson looked impassively at Arnold, said slowly:

"I'll help you if I can. It's my business to help."

"I guess you've heard about my situation," Arnold said in a measured voice. "I've had a series of financial

reverses in the last few years. It's hit me pretty hard. My places used to bring in plenty of dough every week, but I wasn't smart enough to hold on to it. Easy come, easy go."

Stinson nodded, got a cigarette working.

"It's like this," Arnold went on. "I don't kick about losing the money I made. No kicks coming. I can take my losses as well as the next guy. I managed to save two hundred grand. It's everything I've got. And that's the dough I don't want to lose. If that goes, I got to join the nearest bread-line. The joints I own couldn't be sold for enough to pay taxes on 'em. So you see what a spot I'm in."

Stinson plumed the cigarette smoke out of his nostrils.

"You're afraid something's going to happen to that two hundred grand?" he asked.

"Something's already happened to it. That's why I'm here."

Doolittle sat upright in his chair, his bovine eyes sparkling with a kind of malicious anticipation. Stinson grasped his lower lip between thumb and forefinger and eyed Arnold levelly. He said:

"Gone in the wrong sort of way?"

Arnold nodded. "Yeah. The wrong sort of way. Stolen."

"Let's have the setup. What happened to the money?"

Arnold's voice was strained.

"You heard of Pierre LaRue? He's my number-one man. Been with me since I started. Handled all my dough. I'd have trusted that guy with my life. For damn' near five years he's carried the dough every Saturday night down to my safe-deposit box. He and I were the only ones who knew how much was in that box." Arnold stared at the worn tan rug. His blue eyes looked a little bewildered.

"Pierre got too big for me after I lost most of what I made. I couldn't keep him at the same high salary. He lived high. For the last year, or maybe less, he hasn't been putting money in the safe-deposit box. And

he was taking out what I had. If I'd ever been suspicious I'd have taken a look. Hell, I don't go to the bank once a year. I went down yesterday. There should have been two hundred grand in that box." Arnold kicked lethargically at the faded tan rug. "There was twenty-seven bucks and fifty-five cents."

Stinson flicked the cigarette out the window, said:

"Where do I come in?"

"Nobody," Arnold said in a flat tone, "but LaRue knows where that money is. Nobody! He's got me any way you look at it. If I go to the police, he'll take the rap and won't talk, so I still won't know where he's keeping the dough. If anything else happens to him, then he's dead and he'll never be able to talk. I'm on a spot, Stinson. And you can help me." Arnold took a long whistling breath and leaned close to the desk. "I've got to see that nothing happens to LaRue. The guy's cutting my throat. I'd give my shirt to croak him, but he's got to be kept safe. If anything happened to him I'd never find out what he did with that salt."

Doolittle, his hard face sparkling, said:

"That means our job is to guard him. That's okay. We'll keep him alive. With Doolittle on the job, he's practically gonna live permanently from now on. How much dough as a retainer, Mr. Arnold?"

Arnold took out a folder leather wallet, dropped two crisp fifties on Stinson's desk.

"That's in good faith," he said. "I ain't got a hell of a lot more than that at this minute. Soon as I get that two hundred grand I'll see that your fee is taken care of. You know that. I'm not tight."

DOOOLITTLE picked up one of the fifties, inspected it, put it in his trouser watch pocket. Stinson crumpled his in his hand. Then he opened his desk drawer and took out his sap and a black, ugly .38 automatic

eight shot, and its shoulder holster. He slipped the sap in his hip pocket. He stood up, took off his coat, adjusted the holster under his shoulder. Arnold watched him as he put on his coat.

"If anybody wanted to do me a bad turn," Arnold muttered, "they could do it easy enough now. They could knock off LaRue, and I'd never see my dough again. That's why I want that guy guarded extra special."

Stinson said:

"Where's LaRue now?"

"At his house. He's got a home in Hollywoodland. He's usually home this time of afternoon."

"Let's get going. You show us his place, Mr. Arnold."

As they went through the outer office, Stinson leaned over the desk where Angel was typing. He put his hand at the nape of her neck, tilted her head, kissed her warm lips. She frowned, pushed him away; then she smiled slowly, leaned forward and kissed him again. He pressed her hand. When he moved away, she stared at her hand.

"Hey, Don, what's this fifty for?"

He grinned at her as he went to the door.

"Back salary, Angel. Take a good look at it. We don't see that kind of bill very much around here."

"Don't you need it?"

"I have seven bucks. If this case costs me more than seven bucks, I'm off the case."

Doolittle said: "Come on. Mr. Arnold's waiting down in his car. This ain't no holiday. We got a job."

Angel called: "Don Juan, are there any—any women involved in this case?" Her voice wasn't casual.

Stinson smiled at her and said, "The hell of it is, there isn't a one," and went out.

They got in Arnold's high powered, last-year's model phaeton. Arnold drove. Stinson sat beside him and crumpled his immaculate figure until his knees were higher than his chin. Amos Doolittle sat in the back seat.

They drove in silence. Arnold manipulated the car well, ripping in and out of the afternoon traffic that crawled along Hollywood Boulevard. At the Vine Street intersection they stopped for the red light, and Doolittle said:

"If we're going to guard this guy LaRue we'll have to work in shifts."

Stinson looked back and grinned.

"That's right, Amos," he said. "I'll take the day shift."

"Yeah, so you can have the nights off to date some skirt. Nuts to that. Leave women out of it this time, I say."

They turned up Highland and skirted the base of the Hollywood hills, winding up a graded road which led to the crest of the hills. Tiny white-stucco bungalows clung to the hills, their pastel-colored roofs contrasting sharply with the aquamarine-blue of the sky and olive-green of the close-clipped grass. Arnold pulled up in front of one of the bungalows, one with a green roof and green shutters. He shut off the ignition, his rough hand jerking a little unsteadily.

"Here's Pierre's house," he said. "Better go in without me. I'm afraid if I see the rat I'll lose my head and—" He looked away, looked down at the sprawling, rambling town of Hollywood. "If only I could put a couple of slugs in that heel's scurvy heart!" Bitterness and futility were in his tone.

Doolittle propelled his hulk out of the car. Stinson eyed Arnold drowsily, reached over and patted the small man's coat pocket.

"Carrying a gun, Mr. Arnold?" He took a small .32 out of the man's pocket, turned it over in his palm, broke it.

Stinson ejected the shells from the gun into his hand, slipped them into his pocket, returned the gun.

"Just for security's sake," he murmured. He got out of the car and ambled up to the bungalow's green door.

A MIDDLE-AGED woman in an apron answered the doorbell.

"Yes?"

"We'd like to see Mr. LaRue. It's important."

The woman, obviously the housekeeper, shook her head.

"Mr. Pierre left after lunch. He said he would be at Mr. Arnold's house some time this afternoon."

Doolittle snorted.

"We'll have a look anyway," he rumbled, "just to make—"

"Never mind, Amos. The lady says he isn't here, therefore he isn't here. Thank you, madam." The woman smiled at his quiet, flattering courtesy as she closed the door.

Doolittle grunted and followed Stinson back to the car.

"The housekeeper says LaRue went over to your place," Stinson said.

Arnold frowned.

"My place? What would he be doing—?" A sudden light of understanding came into Arnold's childish blue eyes. The corners of his mouth drooped down unpleasantly. "My place, eh? I guess he's figured he hasn't gotten enough out of me. Maybe he's going to try and shake me down for some more. He could threaten me, all right; he could say if I didn't fork over he'd never let me know what he's done with the money." Arnold peered intently at Stinson. "It's a good thing, Stinson, that you emptied my gun. If I see LaRue in my house I might be tempted to use it."

Caleb Arnold's house was in Beverly Hills and it was an eminent, palatial memento of his better days. It was one floor only, spilling out over the immense green lawn like a huge, stucco H. There was a white-shell driveway alongside it, leading from the street to the garage.

Arnold drove halfway to the garage and stopped in front of a awning-covered patio. The delicate pink flush of his face had heightened, and a puzzled frown creased his forehead

as he looked at the black police ambulance parked at the curb in front of his house. Stinson noticed the ambulance, said nothing. He followed Arnold out of the car. Doolittle scratched his shaggy blond head and considered the ambulance. He said:

"It sorta smells, don't it?"

The baronial living-room library of Arnold's home was filled with people. Official people. They seemed to mill aimlessly about the room, wasting time, glancing impassively at each other through a haze of cigarette smoke. Now and then a gentle gust of wind would blow through a partly opened door of the French windows and dispel the smoke.

The L. A. Medical Examiner's physician was standing by the shiny mahogany desk in the center of the room, rolling down his sleeves. Three uniformed cops had planted themselves stoically about the room and were standing stolidly, impersonally aloof while two plainclothes men nosed silently around. Captain Bender leaned against the desk, staring down and blowing hard through his large, ruddy nose.

Arnold sucked in his breath sharply and said: "What the hell!"

He moved across the room, bent down by the desk.

The man on the floor looked like he had died seeing something horrible. He had dark hair and a face that had been handsome in a Continental way, before it had twisted into a gruesome apparition. The dark suit was rumpled and the dark shoes were pointing toe to toe in a limp, pigeon-toed manner. He lay flat on his back, his coat having fallen open and exposed his white shirt. Just above his belt the shirt was messy and red. His arms were outspread as though he had been crucified to the floor. The fingers of the right hand were twisted unnaturally.

STINSON took his eyes away from the face, closed them for a moment to get the contorted features

out of his mind. Captain Bender blew hard through his nose, muttered:

"Through the abdomen. About the most hellish way a guy can die. They live a couple of minutes and feel their guts turn upside down inside 'em. Whoever gave it to him either hit him there by accident or was the darnedest fiend there is."

Stinson nodded. Arnold said:

"Pierre. Pierre LaRue," in a dull, flat sort of way.

Doolittle's eyes went big. He jerked his head at the corpse.

"There goes our job," he said. "We got no job."

Arnold got up and stood staring emptily toward the shelves of green and red-backed books. He said softly, "I'll never find out now. Only he knew—and he's dead."

Captain Bender looked at him sharply.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Arnold. Caleb Arnold. This is my house. LaRue is—was—"

"Yeah, I know. Should have recognized you, Mr. Arnold. You see, we been looking for you. Sent out an alarm."

"Me? You want me? You think I did it?"

"It got around about his taking your money. Sorry, Mr. Arnold. Don't guess I blame you a devil of a lot."

Arnold nodded dully. He glanced at Stinson as though the private dick were his only friend.

"Yes," he said. "I can see where I'd be under suspicion. Yes. I understand. I don't mind going with you, captain."

There was a sudden commotion in the doorway to the hall. One of the detectives was scuffling with a dark, oily fellow, and saying:

"Hold on, guy! You can't come in here. Who do you think you are?"

The man muttered under his breath and stopped struggling. He looked bewilderedly, first at the body on the floor, and then at Arnold.

Caleb Arnold nodded to him and said:

DE

"Come in, Chico. It's all right, Captain Bender. Chico works for me in the Golden Casino."

"Gambling joint, eh?" Bender muttered. "See what he wants, Mr. Arnold."

Chico came forward hesitantly, eyes staring as they fixed on the corpse.

"If I'm buttin' in on somethin', chief—" he began.

Arnold gave a cursory wave of his hand. "What did you want to see me about?" he asked dully.

Chico forced his eyes from the dead man, ran his tongue nervously over his upper lip.

"It's the boys at the *Casino* again, Chief. They want to be paid off and there ain't enough dough to go 'round. When you was there a coupla hours ago, you said you'd get their dough and bring it back. I been tryin' to stall 'em off but they're gettin' nasty. You better get down there soon as you can an' give 'em their dough."

Arnold shrugged and shook his head slowly.

"I have no money to pay them off, Chico," he said. "I'm sorry, but you've got to go back and tell them that. I've got more important things on my mind now. Tell them to keep in touch with me, and if I get hold of any money I'll let them have it."

Chico frowned, nodded. With a furtive glance at the corpse he started for the door.

Don Stinson called:

"Just a minute, Chico." When the dark man turned, Stinson said: "How long ago did you say Arnold was at the *Golden Casino*?"

Chico stared at him. He closed his eyes, and his lips moved as he silently figured it out.

"'Bout two hours an' ten or fifteen minutes ago, Mr. Arnold was there."

"How many people saw him?"

"Well, there's 'bout ten of us who work there. We saw him. An' a coupla customers was there, an'—"

"Thank you. That's all."

CHICO hurried out. Stinson leaned against the book-shelf and looked at Bender from under drooping lids.

"Well, Jim," he murmured, "it looks as though this time you're wrong. How long does the M. E. man say LaRue's been dead?"

"About two hours," Bender said. "Maybe a little longer."

Stinson nodded. "Arnold was at the *Golden Casino* at the time the murder was committed. You heard Chico. There are ten men and several customers who saw him. Sorry to spoil your suspect possibilities, Jim, but I've got to protect my client."

"Client!" Captain Bender roared.

"Yes. Caleb Arnold came to my office almost two hours ago and paid me and my partner a retaining fee to guard this man LaRue; paid us to keep him alive, because if LaRue died, he died with the secret of where he had hidden Arnold's money, which he stole."

"Cripes!" Bender said.

"That doesn't sound much like Caleb Arnold murdered La Rue, does it?"

Arnold was looking stupidly at the floor, muttering:

"I'm wiped out. I've got nothing—absolutely nothing. I might as well go with Captain Bender. It'll be a place to stay. In a day or so I won't have this house—or anything. I'm wiped out."

Captain Bender scratched his nose, said hesitantly:

"I don't like to take you in, Mr. Arnold. Not you. It wouldn't take you half an hour to get released anyway. You know people. You was a politician once. And now you got a pretty air-tight alibi. You can stay here at your house if you want. But I got to leave a man to watch you. Can't take any chances."

"Thanks, captain," Arnold said.

Stinson queried: "How'd you find the body—as it is now?"

Bender held out a small loose-leaf notebook, which Stinson took.

"That was lying on the floor beside the stiff. Doesn't mean much. Just a book with a lotta girls' names and addresses."

Stinson idly flipped the pages of the book, glanced at the long list of addresses, some in L. A., some in other cities. Abruptly he held the notebook for closer inspection. From one of the ring clips he took a tiny fragment of paper. There was a puzzled frown on his face as he handed the little book back to Captain Bender. His glance went to the French windows, where the breeze was gently coming through. Then he asked:

"Jim, tell me. How did you find out there had been a murder?"

Captain Bender moved away from the desk.

"There was a girl here to see Arnold. Name's Doris Hanlon; works in one of Arnold's night clubs. She saw it and phoned in."

Stinson half turned and followed Bender's jerking thumb. He hadn't noticed her before. She was standing inconspicuously behind the door where it swung open into the room. She wore a smart gray suit, trim without being severe, and a small pert hat which looked like a miniature of a man's derby. She had dark, reddish hair, cut short and curled nicely at the ends. Her eyes were grayish-blue with a keen sparkle.

Stinson let his eyes drop over her body. It was finely molded and exquisite, the hips tapering gently to the slim silken legs. She missed being beautiful because of an indefinable something which Stinson decided was an icy, almost delicate hardness. She could, he thought, make perfect love to a man, but she could also shoot him down without batting an eyelash.

With a start he realized this was the kind of woman Angel had referred to when she said he had a weakness for the tough ones, the hard-to-get girls. Angel, he knew,

came first, last and always, but for some reason he was a sucker for a dame as hard as this one.

THE girl eyed Stinson steadily, sizing him up as he sized her. Then the gray-blue eyes flickered slightly, a frown brushed over her face. It was gone in an instant, but Stinson knew the frown and startled look had come when her eyes had roved fleetingly to the empty hand of the dead man.

Stinson looked at Captain Bender, said:

"Where's the gun?"

Bender pointed at the dead man's outstretched right hand.

"A gun was in his hand, I guess. Whether it was the one that killed him or not, I don't know. It's gone."

Stinson knelt beside the corpse, examined the cramped, twisted fingers.

"They were holding onto something," he admitted softly. "I don't know whether it was a gun. No powder burns on the body."

One of the detectives got up from his knees where he had been chipping at the bottom sill of the French windows with a penknife. He held a long, empty shell in his hand.

"It's easy to tell what kind of a gun this here slug come from," he said. "A Luger. Lugers take 'em long and narrow." He dumped the bullet into Captain Bender's outstretched hand.

Stinson looked hard at the open window. The breeze was still blowing, and it still had strength to it. He moved on his knees to a side of the desk, picked up a red-yellow lead pencil which lay on the floor. He got to his feet, methodically slapping the pencil against the open palm of his left hand. Going deliberately to Arnold, he reached in the man's pocket and withdrew the automatic .32. He held it up for Bender to see, tossed it to him.

"LaRue was killed by Luger bullets, Jim. This is Arnold's gun. It's

not important; I just wanted you to know. There's a lot of difference between a Luger and a .32."

Captain Bender grunted and put the gun in his pocket. He said, "Okay, boys," to a couple of internes, and they placed the body of the dead man on a stretcher and carried him out to the ambulance.

Stinson moved to the French windows. The gentle gusts of breeze came intermittently. A puzzled frown etched across his forehead. He kept the red-yellow lead pencil in his teeth. He noticed the sharp grey-blue eyes of Doris Hanlon were fixed shrewdly, intently upon him and upon the pencil in his teeth.

The crowd was thinning out. Arnold came slowly over to him, held out his hand and said in a dull voice: "Thanks, Stinson." His childish face looked pained, the blue eyes on the point of tears.

Amos Doolittle said: "Hell, I guess you won't be needing us now, Mr. Arnold."

"No, not now. I'm sorry I haven't got enough to pay you more for your trouble."

Captain Bender said: "It ain't over. Somebody's gonna hear more about it. This is murder, and somebody done it. I got to find out who. That's my job."

"I wish I had a job," Doolittle said.

Stinson looked toward the other end of the room, the end directly opposite the French windows. A large doorway, evidently leading into the dining room, was draped in green velvet curtains. The curtains stirred at the bottom from the draft from the French windows. Lids drooping drowsily, he stared at the velvet curtains as they moved. Doris Hanlon, he saw, was following the direction of his eyes. He said to Bender:

"Yes, you have to clear this up, Jim. The best way to do it is to find Caleb Arnold's enemies. Somebody who wasn't his friend, somebody who wanted him to lose that money knocked LaRue off. Maybe they

dragged the money's whereabouts out of LaRue before they killed him. Maybe not. But you find Arnold's enemies and you'll have a pretty good lead on the murderer."

"Sometimes," said Bender, "you private dicks show signs of brains. That's not a bad idea. Mr. Arnold, who you got for enemies?"

Arnold looked surprised. He half closed his eyes in thought. He murmured finally:

"Everybody's got enemies, I guess. I guess I got mine. In my racket I'm bound to. But I can't think of anybody who actually hated me. Maybe LaRue did. But I don't know."

"We'll find out later," Bender said. "I'm leaving Garrity with you here. Maybe you can remember and tell him. Better not leave the house."

Arnold nodded wearily. Then he tried a grin and said:

"I'm kind of tired. My age, I guess. Things sort of get me more than they used to. This has been right much of a shock. If you don't need me any longer, Captain Bender, guess I'll go upstairs and try to get a little rest. Is that okay?"

Bender nodded, and Arnold left the room, followed by Garrity.

STINSON moved through the waving curtains to the dining room. His eyes dropped to the polished hardwood floor, searching. There were soft steps behind him.

He and the person behind him saw the object simultaneously. It lay where it had fluttered, where the gentle draft had blown it. It lay on the polished floor by the wall baseboard, next to a curtained window.

There was a sudden movement behind him. He catapulted across the floor, scooped up the piece of paper and lost his balance as he did so. There was a sharp little intake of breath, and a soft body thudded into his, a small hand groping for the slip of paper.

Stinson hit the floor shoulder-first, his head rapping hard against the

wall. He crumpled the paper in his hand, shoved it into his hip pocket and glanced up at Doris Hanlon.

"Finders keepers," he said laconically and rubbed the back of his head.

The girl's eyes were narrowed, blazing a little, and seemed harder than ever. She regained her balance, stood looking coldly down upon him, her bosom rising and falling, her hand outstretched.

"You're beautiful," Stinson said. "You're hard as nails, but you're beautiful."

Her lips parted.

"Lay off that stuff, wise guy. Give me the paper, lug." Stinson winced.

"You don't sound as beautiful as you look," he remarked.

The girl stooped slightly, drew back her right hand and slapped Stinson hard across the face. He grinned at her, and she hit him again, this time with her fist. A trickle of blood came from the corner of his mouth.

"Give me the paper, Don Juan. Your reputation as a heartbreaker doesn't go with me. I don't like your type. Get up off the floor and give me the paper, or I'll let you have it again." Her fist went up again.

"Careful," Stinson warned.

She leaned forward and her fist came down. Stinson jerked his head back and caught her wrist in his big fingers. He gave it a sharp twist and watched her face. She flinched but didn't cry out. She raised her slim leg, placed the spike heel of her right slipper on Stinson's outstretched foot, ground the heel into his ankle. Stinson let out his breath in a sharp whistle. He twisted the wrist a little more forcibly until she took her heel from his ankle.

"Okay, punk. Let go," she said.

Stinson grinned. His ankle felt numb. The lisle sock just above the shoe was wet and sticky and warm.

"I'm only tough when I have to be, beautiful. But I like tough women. Taming you would be a pleasure, I'm sure."

He let go her wrist. Her eyes studied him for a moment, and then she turned away. He put his hand back against the wall to help himself up to his feet. He pushed. His body came halfway up. The ankle was still a little numb. He pushed harder, slipped, and his head cracked the wall. He whistled sharply, was on his feet locking down at the wall. There was something strange about that wall, he thought. Didn't feel solid.

The girl was watching him intently.

"What did you find, Stinson?"

"Nothing, beautiful. Nothing. And lots of things."

"Give me that paper. It's no good to you."

"If it's some good to you, it's some good to me. I saw you watching me when I was examining LaRue's fingers. And I know you know what I know. He didn't hold a gun in that hand. He held a pencil—the same lead pencil I found on the floor under the desk. That notebook they found by him—I saw a tiny piece of paper still clinging to one of the clip rings. That meant one of the leaves had been torn out. And most likely LaRue was the one who tore it out. I figured he had that pencil and was trying to write something on the notebook leaf while he was dying and going through a hellish agony. The wind from the French windows blew the paper out of his hand after he died, and blew it into here.

"You knew I'd found out something but you didn't know what. I'm just wondering why *you* should be so interested in the leaf out of that notebook. I'm wondering if I shouldn't turn you over to Captain Bender. But sad as it seems, I never can resist a fair maiden in distress. If you play fair with me I won't turn you in. I like your type, you see. You're not only beautiful and hard, but you're smart. Let's hope you're not too smart."

"Give me the paper, punk."

"There might be the name of the person who shot him on that piece of paper. And whoever shot him is somebody who's hard as nails and ruthless and doesn't care where in the body a man is shot." He looked at her lazily, smiled.

"What were you looking at this wall for?"

"Beautiful, suppose I ask the questions? Why are you so interested in what I do or find? What have you got to do with this setup, and why shouldn't I let Captain Bender know how interested you are?"

The girl lifted the corners of her red mouth in a sneer.

"Go to hell, Don Juan."

ARNOLD came in, followed by a heavy-set plainclothes man. Bender came in and said:

"What goes on here? Miss Hanlon, I told you you could go. You won't be needed until the inquest. Stinson, you've hung around long enough. Go on home. I'm in a bad mood. I don't like unsolved murders. Go away. This is no place for a private dick. Nobody'll give you a fee around here."

Stinson's half-closed eyes appraised Doris Hanlon's figure.

"I have plenty of incentive to remain on this case," he murmured.

Arnold said in a soft voice:

"Thanks again, Stinson. If I get into the money again, I'll take care of you. I never forget a good turn. I appreciate what you've done."

Captain Bender cleared his throat loudly.

"Hell," he growled, "you'll have me in tears. It ain't so bad as all that. You're acting like a kid, Arnold."

Arnold tried a smile. "I'm sorry," he said.

Stinson looked suddenly puzzled, as though trying hard to remember something. Then he said:

"Captain Bender, I thank you, my friend, I thank you."

Bender looked suspicious and grunted:

"What the hell's the matter with you?"

Stinson ignored Doris Hanlon and moved for the door. He said over his shoulder: "Nothing, Jim. Absolutely nothing. Except that I think I've hit on something."

"Except that I think you're crazy," Amos Doolittle stood at the doorway and muttered.

They went outside and started to walk towards Sunset, where they could catch a cab. Stinson studied the slip of paper. For a moment he felt a funny feeling come up from his stomach into his chest. There was something morbidly fascinating about that slip of loose-leaf note paper which had been blown from the hand of a dead man. He glanced at it, frowned and swore softly.

Dried, brown blood was smeared over one half of the paper. Written legibly in ink in a firm, even hand was the name and address of what appeared to be a girl: *Lida, 10 144th Street, Apt. A-seven.* Evidently, Stinson thought, this had been in the notebook quite some time; there had been neither pen nor ink near the body of the dead man.

It was the other part of the paper that caught his frowning attention. Scrawled in large shaky strokes were two penciled letters *KI*—

"What the hell's that?" Doolittle growled over Stinson's shoulder.

Don Juan didn't answer at first. He was thinking of the agony that had gone into the wretched scribbling of those two solitary letters. Then he said quietly: "I think we'll take a look at ten One hundred forty-fourth Street. Perhaps Lida will be able to tell us something of importance.

"But that *KI* on the paper?" Doolittle persisted.

Stinson shrugged. "I wish I could figure it out. I have a hunch it would answer a lot of things." He put the paper back in his pocket. "Anyway, we'll see Lida soon as we can. Right now we've got to hurry."

"Where we going now?"

"To the morgue."

"The morgue? What the hell for? You gotta date with LaRue?"

"No, Amos. This is the *Clarion's* morgue. Where they keep old clippings and photographs and things."

Doolittle scratched his head.

They caught a cab, and Stinson gave an address in Los Angeles. He turned and looked out the window at a cab coming along behind them.

"Amos," he murmured softly, "don't be alarmed and don't look around, but we're being followed."

Wilson, city editor of the *Clarion*, let Stinson browse about in the morgue without any questions. At the end of twenty-five minutes, Stinson came out, thanked him, and said to Doolittle:

"Amos, there is something radically screwy about this case."

Doolittle snorted: "Case? We ain't on any case. We ain't got any job. Nobody's paying us a retainer to do anything about this mix-up."

"The federal government will give us five thousand dollars if we solve this case. How's that for a fee?"

Doolittle gasped.

"Are you goofy?"

"Not yet. And I'm still healthy. But if we don't watch our step we won't remain healthy."

They came out of the *Clarion* office on Spring Street. The rush of pre-dinner traffic hurried up Spring, down Broadway. They caught a cab and headed towards Hollywood. Some distance behind, another cab paced them.

Stinson took out the blood-stained piece of paper, handed it to Doolittle.

"Amos, I'm going to drop you off at One hundred forty-fourth Street. Try looking for number ten, and find out who lives in apartment A-seven. I think I've found out what the KI on this paper means."

The cab came to a stop at 144th Street. Doolittle got out.

"Where'll you be if I find out anything?" he asked.

"I'm going home, Amos. I have an idea Miss Doris Hanlon is in the cab that's following us. I can think of no place better to talk to her than in my cozy apartment."

Doolittle scowled.

"You can't resist a skirt, can you? Go on, get into trouble, that's all women are good for."

"That's one of the things they're good for, Amos. Phone me soon as you get something. We can use that five thousand dollars."

STINSON dismissed the cab in front of his conservative apartment house on North Franklin. With a slight, amused smile he smoothed the impeccable creases of his suit and waited until the cab that had been following him came around the corner. Then he went into the small vestibule, unlocked the door and left the key in the lock.

He went slowly up the two flights of stairs, waited a moment on the landing, then, still smiling, went to his apartment and opened the door.

Doris Hanlon got up from the settee and smiled at him.

Stinson said, "Ouch!" and ran to the window. The cab was disappearing down the street. Whoever had been following him had evidently decided to call it quits. He turned, went back to the girl, said:

"I thought you were following me, and here you're waiting for me—smiling, too. You've no idea how it becomes you. You don't look like the same girl who gouged my ankle."

Doris Hanlon's eyes sparkled. She said softly: "May I sit down?"

Stinson looked at her moist, smiling lips. She did not sit down, but moved slowly to meet him. Her face was close to his, the face that seemed to have lost some of its hardness. She kissed him slowly on the lips, and he felt the blood beginning to race through his veins. She pressed closer to him, her lips seeking his ear, brushing it, whispering softly: "Don, darling."

He felt himself weakening. He'd always been a sucker for this tough type of woman. Even Angel knew that. Angel! This wasn't the way to treat Angel. He tried to push away from Doris Hanlon but she evaded him and kissed him again.

They moved to the sofa and sat down. Her eyes were closed, her lips parted in passionate invitation. She snuggled in his arms, her lips speaking, barely audible:

"Don, tell me. Tell me, darling, what was on that slip of paper you found? Tell me, sweet."

"I am at a loss to remember, beautiful," he breathed.

"Please, Don. For me, darling. You must tell me." Her voice was husky and came alluringly from the graceful arch of her throat.

"All in good time, beautiful," Stinson said.

He felt her arms go about him, felt them move behind him. He shook his head quickly and stood up. But she had already removed her small .32 from under the sofa pillow. She stood up too, the gun pointing levelly at his stomach. The smile on her lips had been replaced by a straight, grim line and her eyes were bold and cruel.

"I'm sick of this stalling, heel," she grated. "Give me that paper and quick, or I'll drop you so fast—"

"Desist, beautiful. I haven't got the paper. And I wouldn't tell you what was on it for love nor money now. You almost fooled me the other way. This way doesn't work. Besides, I haven't fallen for an old gag like that in a long time, and I'm sore."

The girl said: "Get your hands up, punk."

He let them dangle.

"Get 'em up, *now*, or I'll give it to you."

Stinson grinned and raised his hands.

"I believe you would shoot, beautiful. You're that hard."

"What was on that paper?" she demanded grimly.

Stinson grinned. He kept his hands up, but shook his head and said slowly:

"Beautiful, I had a hunch about you in the very beginning, when I saw you at Arnold's house. I was trying to figure out why you were so interested in the page out of that notebook. At first I couldn't understand it. Then it came to me that you might be tied up some way with the dead man, LaRue. Might have been trying to get one of those girls' names for some other reason, such as jealousy, or—revenge!"

The girl's pale eyes shone with a strange light. She took a step towards Stinson, the gun coming up in her hand.

"Shut up, punk," she rapped. "Talk about that paper."

"So," said Stinson, "when I went down to the *Clarion's* morgue, I was looking for two things. I found both of them. One of them was about you. It was a small announcement of your marriage, Mrs. Pierre LaRue."

The girl gasped. Then she raised her gun-arm and, before Stinson guessed what she was doing, brought the barrel down on his head. The small sight on the weapon raked his forehead, opened a jagged cut. He swayed forward, dazed. She raised the gun and brought it down on his forehead again.

"The paper, lug," she rasped.

"Cut out the horse-play," a voice cut in. It was a tough voice—smooth and oily, but tough. Stinson vaguely remembered having heard it before.

DORIS LARUE turned and stared. She dropped her gun on the floor and slowly elevated her hands. Stinson shook his head and looked at the man in the doorway.

The man had on a short, bulky brown coat that came a little below his knees. He wore a derby, and from under the derby a dark, slitted handkerchief was dropped over his face for a mask. The man stepped closer,

and there was a heavy automatic in his hand.

"I got things to talk over with you," he grated. "This is one of 'em."

The man shifted the gun from his right hand to his left, drew back his right and crashed it suddenly into Stinson's jaw. Stinson's breath came wheezing out of his sagging mouth, and he slid softly to the floor. The man said:

"Get up. I got more to talk to you about." He reached down and collared Stinson. He yanked him roughly to his feet. Stinson opened his eyes and took a wild swing at the masked face. The man moved his head to miss the blow and struck Stinson again in the face. The blow caused the blood to spurt from Stinson's lacerated forehead. Stinson tried a feeble grin.

"Go on, gorilla, hit me again. A child could beat me up in my condition." He swung weakly at him. The blow landed, but had no force behind it. The man shook Stinson, hit him again. Stinson sank to the floor and lay there, breathing jerkily. The man grated in a muffled voice:

"You gonna pay attention to me?" asked the thug.

Stinson nodded his head feebly. The man rasped:

"What I came to tell you is, keep your nose out of business that ain't yours. And I mean business such as this LaRue mix-up. It ain't gonna be healthy for you if you keep mixing in it. You better not leave your apartment. Got me?"

Stinson nodded. The man started to move away. Stinson gasped: "Hey."

"What, punk?"

Stinson pointed feebly to the handkerchief that covered the man's face. He gasped out:

"What's the idea of the masquerade? Afraid to let me know who's warning me?"

The man said: "You're gonna be smart, huh?" He came back and hit Stinson under the jaw with the butt of his heavy automatic. Stinson's

head hit the floor, and he was out. . . .

The telephone jangled loudly and persistently and finally awaked him. It was a long minute before he could crawl to his knees, push himself to his feet and stagger to the phone. He looked around and saw that both the masked man and the girl who was Mrs. Pierre LaRue were gone.

Doolittle's voice boomed over the wire:

"I'm in a drugstore around the corner from Ten, One hundred forty-fourth Street. You were right, Don. It's an apartment, and a jane lives in A-Seven. I told her I had the wrong apartment."

Stinson rocked on his feet, rubbed some of the sticky blood from his eyes and mouth. He said softly:

"Hang around, Amos. I'll be over."

Doolittle's voice rumbled:

"Okay, okay. But I'm getting sick of it. I do all the work, get all the lousy exercise, and you do nothing but have it soft and lazy up there in your room."

Stinson put out a dry tongue and licked some of the blood from his lips. He said gently:

"Right, Amos. I'll quit taking it easy after this."

He pronged the phone quietly and wobbled towards the shower.

In a little while Stinson came out of his apartment. The shower had refreshed him, and he had a small, neat strip of adhesive covering the cut on his forehead. He walked down to the Boulevard to a small tailor's establishment. Inside was a swarthy little man in a dark apron.

"Got a rush job for you, Riccy," said Stinson.

The tailor looked up and beamed.

"Grittings an' salooshuns, Meester Don Juan. Your soot, she look mussed down. That's not like you, excuse me very much if I'm saying so."

Stinson smiled, went behind the counter and began taking off his clothes. Riccy's eyes narrowed suspiciously as he stared at the gun in Stinson's exposed shoulder-holster.

"When you carry the canon, Meester Don Juan, I'm knowing there is gonna be trouble. Excuse it me, please, but you be carefool."

"Obliged to you for your concern, Riccy. Hurry along."

Riccy disappeared into another room, and immediately there came the sound of the steam press. Stinson stood behind the counter, took out his gun and idly examined it. He stuck it under the counter, took off his holster out of regard for Riccy and in order not to discourage any of the little fellow's customers who might choose to walk in. He looked up as the light from the doorway was suddenly blotted for a moment. Then he started.

The man was holding the handkerchief to his face, as though he had put it on as he came into the shop. The same automatic was pointing across the counter. Stinson felt an involuntary shudder run through him as he remembered the manhandling this masked gunman had given him in his own apartment. And then a sudden wave of anger enveloped him.

"So you're not smart, huh?" the man said through the mask. "You go ahead an' leave your joint when I tell you to stay there."

Stinson's hand was moving slowly under the counter toward his gun.

"You're damned right I did!" he exploded. "I've got leads and I'm going to follow them up."

"Get your hands up!" rasped the man angrily.

Stinson obeyed. And in his right fist was his gun. The thug stiffened. Suddenly there was a shout from the rear of the shop.

"Halp! Halp!"

For a split second Stinson's eyes flicked to the doorway of the other room, where Riccy stood trembling and wide-eyed with terror. The dark man made the most of that split second by leaping for the doorway and heading into the Boulevard. Stinson was over the counter and after him

before he had gotten twenty steps down the street.

"Hey, you! Stop before I—" Stinson started down the sidewalk in full pursuit, and then stopped. People on the crowded Boulevard had turned to stare in profound amazement. Some of them laughed, some of them shouted and moved quickly away. Stinson looked down at himself, reflected that a man in shirt-tails and shorts, holding a .38, in the center of the busiest section of Hollywood Boulevard, might be a little ridiculous. It was, he observed, an entirely incongruous outfit for Don Juan Stinson to appear in.

As nonchalantly as possible, he marched back into Riccy's for his suit.

NUMBER TEN, One hundred forty-fourth Street was a red-brick apartment house with three entrances; one at the front, and one at either side.

Stinson got out of a cab and surveyed it from across the street. Then he walked over to where Doolittle was standing in front of the center entrance. Doolittle glowered, said:

"Where'd you get the forehead?"

"One of my love-lives gave it to me. Has anybody been up to A-Seven since you called?"

"How should I know? There's three entrances. I can't be at three places at once."

"Keep watching. I'm going up."

"Hell, Don, you ain't gonna bother that skirt?"

"That skirt may lead us to five thousand dollars. Keep watching."

Except for a sleepy-eyed clerk, the lobby was deserted. Stinson got out of the automatic elevator at the seventh floor. He walked down the hallway, found A-seven and softly tried the knob. It turned in his hand.

He hesitated for a moment, took his .38 from its holster and held it in his coat pocket. Gently he opened the door and walked in.

The living room of the apartment was large and well furnished. At first the place appeared empty. Stinson looked intently at the ceiling-high book shelves filled with green and red-backed books. He looked at the long, flowing, green-velvet curtains which hung limply from the three front windows. The lids of his eyes closed and he smiled. The curtains and books seemed familiar to him.

Something stirred softly on the divan.

The girl got up and looked at him questioningly. He had a glimpse of golden hair and blue-black eyes full, exquisitely curved lips and a tiny, elfin-like nose. But it was her figure that drew his eyes most. A filmy, translucent negligee clung to her as though it were damp, inadequately covering the smooth, tawny-satin texture of her skin.

Stinson drew in his breath and said slowly:

"Lovely, exquisite, superb Venus of Apartment A-Seven!"

The girl permitted herself to smile.

"You," Stinson murmured, "are Lida, I presume?"

"Yes. I'm Lida," she said in a husky voice that matched the taunting light in her eyes.

Involuntarily Stinson stiffened. He had had experience with this type of doll before, and this was the type that invariably fell for him; he never could seem to escape them. And this time, he realized with distaste, he'd have to play along with her for the information she might be able to give him.

"I thought you were Lida," he said quietly. "You see, your name and address was written on a piece of paper I found. They were written by a—dead man."

He watched her closely, saw her start, and then immediately cover it up. She smiled and moved a step closer to him.

"You are the man who is known as Don Juan Stinson?"

"You honor me, Venus."

"You are as charming as the real Don Juan must have been."

Smiling as though to acknowledge the compliment, he bowed a little and took a step away from her.

"How did you happen to know my name and—ah—expect my call?"

"A friend of mine told me he was going to call on you."

"A friend with a gun and a handkerchief over his eyes, by any chance?"

"A friend of mine."

She drew close to him. A strange, erotic perfume from her body clung to his nostrils and made the pulse in his throat quicken in spite of himself.

"It's been my extreme pleasure," he fenced, "to have seen you somewhere before. I can't see how I could forget the place. Perhaps I was a trifle inebriated."

Her smile was fixed as she said quietly: "We haven't met before. But I'm glad we have now. Lots of women would like to meet Don Juan Stinson."

He asked suddenly: "Where did you get the books and green-velvet curtains? They make an enhancing background to your beauty." Sudden recognition flashed in his eyes. "I've got it," he said. "You're the girl in the picture. Only more lovely in person, by all means. I have a photo of you in my office. When I'm on a bender, I have a unique habit of collecting them. I'm glad I do, now. You sing a couple of numbers every night at the *Penthouse Club*, don't you? Lovely voice. Knew I'd seen you."

She nodded, her creamy arms going about his neck, her lips pressing in search of his. Stinson felt the warm blood surge to his temples. He pulled back, smiled.

"Much as I'd like to oblige you, Venus, I'm afraid—"

She clung to him and murmured: "I like you, Don Juan." He shrugged and remained motionless while her damp lips brushed his. Perhaps he could get some information out of her

this way. It would never do to antagonize this type of blonde. The warm lips still clung to his.

A voice sounded behind him. He dropped his arms and smiled wryly. Once again he knew he had gone soft for a woman and allowed himself to be tricked. The voice, which by now he was used to hearing, said:

"Get 'em up again, heel. This time they'll be stiff when you put 'em down."

STINSON turned very slowly and saw his friend of the tailor-shop, the handkerchief once again held up to his face. The girl moved close to the man, said:

"I thought you'd never come. I've been making love to him to stall him. And—" her voice grew softer as she turned on the fixed smile at Stinson—"it wasn't so bad."

"Shut up," the man growled through the mask. He leveled his heavy automatic at Stinson. "I warned you, rat."

Stinson tensed himself, his right arm descending almost imperceptibly, ready to streak for his gun.

"If you're going to shoot me," he said softly, "why don't you take off that mask? It won't do me any good now to know who you are." The jumbled, half-vague conclusions that he'd drawn when he had seen the clippings in the *Clarion's* morgue, had been materializing more and more in his mind. It seemed now they had come to a tangible realization. If he could only stall a little while, let the killer come into the trap and expose himself.

He said very slowly:

"Go on and shoot. Get it over with. But let me tell you this: I know now who murdered LaRue, and if I die, that knowledge will come to light when they go through my papers. I wrote down the name of my suspect, and the proof. So go ahead and shoot—if you dare."

A low growl came from under the mask. The gun leveled at Stinson's head dropped slightly. Stinson's own

hand was dropping, as he continued:

"Pierre LaRue stole that money from Arnold and spent it on Lida here." There was a short gasp from the girl. "LaRue spent a fortune on her, and Lida liked it. She's the type. But LaRue overlooked one thing—Lida's jealous lover. LaRue was murdered by Lida's jealous lover. And I know who that lover is. I've left his name for the world to see. Yes, I know him. I recognized your voice—haven't forgotten where I heard it first. I know who you are, and I know that you murdered Pierre LaRue because he was taking away your girl, Lida."

There was an insane snarl from under the mask, as the heavy automatic came up. The muffled voice shouted:

"Why you dirty— Lida ain't my girl. I didn't knock off LaRue. You pinned it on me, did you—left my name as the murderer! Damn you—"

The hand went up to snatch off the mask as the finger tightened on the trigger.

Stinson saw out of the corner of his eye that the door to the hallway was opening. He sensed another presence in the corridor even before the big, black Luger poked its ugly snout around the door.

Stinson dropped on one knee as the masked man's gun barked. He felt the breath of the bullet above his head. The masked man was having difficulty spotting Stinson through the mask, and in the excitement seemed to have forgotten he could pull it off.

Stinson's gun came out and up. Lida cried:

"You fool! He didn't murder LaRue! It was—"

The roar of the ugly Luger filled the room just as Stinson's gun threw lead into the masked man. The Luger roared twice and disappeared. The second shot grazed Stinson's hip, missing his abdomen by a fraction of an inch.

His own bullet had gone straight through the mask into the man's forehead. He saw the girl writhing on the

floor, a crimson blotch at her waist. He heard steps clattering down the hallway stairs, heard what seemed to be a wild commotion in the lobby below. He looked back for a moment at the man and the girl and saw that they were both lying still, their bodies contorted and oddly tense. They were no longer alive.

Gun in hand, he raced down the hall to the steps, took them two at a time and came out into the lobby.

The sleepy-eyed clerk was crouching, petrified, behind his desk. Near the bottom of the stairs Amos Doolittle was trying his best to hold on to a violent, scratching, screaming girl. The girl was in a blue outfit and held a gun in her hand. It was Doris LaRue.

"Grab her, Don!" Doolittle shouted. "She came in here looking for you. I got her before she started upstairs. Oooch!" He doubled up as the girl brought her small knee up into his ample stomach.

Doris LaRue whirled away from him, and before Stinson knew what she was doing, her gun was trained on him. She screamed:

"You've found that woman! You've found the woman Pierre spent the money on! The money that belonged to me! You've found that, too, and won't tell me where it is!"

"Hey, beautiful!" Stinson shouted. "Don't shoot, for hell's sake! Listen to me—I'm trying to help you! I *can* help you! Don't—"

He left his feet in a dive, but her bullet would have split his skull open had it not been for Amos Doolittle, who plunged into her legs from the rear and sent her sprawling. The gun went off harmlessly into the ceiling.

STINSON bent over, put his arms under her shoulders, and helped her to her feet. He held her, talking to her in a quiet, soothing voice.

"Listen, beautiful. I'm not trying to hurt you. I'm your friend, if you'll only give me a chance to prove it. I know who murdered your husband. I

know what happened to the money—just give me an even chance, and I'll help you."

Doris LaRue had stopped kicking. She lay quietly in his arms, her solid little body relaxed, the blue-green eyes soft and a little frightened as they looked up into his. Stinson held her for a moment. She didn't look tough now; she looked beautiful and human. The tawny tigress had turned into a lovely child, hurt and tired and bewildered. Stinson suddenly felt sorry for her, a sympathy that was mingled with admiration for the desperate fight she had put up.

"I'll help find that money," he said gently. "You deserve it, kid. I'm on your side. Just hold on and wait."

She looked at him and then slowly raised her lips to his. He bent his head and pressed his mouth against hers. He felt the warmth of her body as it pressed his, and he straightened up and pushed her gently away. He rapped:

"Come on, Amos. We've no time to lose—if we aren't too late already!"

It was quite dark when they got out of the cab at Caleb Arnold's home. The big house was dark and strangely forbidding as it squatted in the shadowy gloom.

"I feel kinda chilly," Doolittle whispered hoarsely. "I oughta go home and get a coat or something."

"Shut up," Stinson said softly. "Get your gun in your hand and follow close behind me. If you hear or see anything, shoot first and ask questions later."

They moved slowly through the blackness, carefully and quietly skirting the house, continuing on to the garage. The sliding door of the garage was opened a crack, as though it had been hastily, but not thoroughly, closed. For a moment Stinson hesitated, then he stuck his head into the black interior.

Nothing stirred within the garage. Gun in hand, Stinson crept inside, followed by Doolittle. There was no automobile in the place. Stinson began

feeling with his hands around the wall that faced the house.

A startled exclamation escaped him in a few moments. He called to Doolittle. In the darkness he had pressed a protruding board and had felt part of the wall give way, slowly swing inward. There was a yawning, black aperture in the wall, big enough for a man to crawl through.

"What the hell?" Doolittle whispered hoarsely.

"Shut up! Listen!"

From the black aperture came a slow, scraping sound.

"Somebody's in that hole!" Doolittle rasped.

"Keep your eyes open and your gun up. Follow me. And if you want to live past tonight, don't make any noise."

Stinson thrust his feet into the opening, found a small ladder, let himself cautiously down it. Doolittle followed, breathing laboriously. The bottom of the ladder rested on damp, cold earth. By feeling with his hands, Stinson discovered that a small, trench-like passage ran directly under the garden in the direction of the house. The passage was just wide and high enough to squirm through.

Stinson moved slowly. The going was rough and cramped. The earth was damp and clammy. They could still hear the noises ahead, coming intermittently, as though some one or something were moving in front of them and pausing now and then to listen.

Doolittle, who was having difficulty moving his cumbersome body with any degree of silence through the narrow passage, suddenly rammed his head against the top and dislodged some stones, which came clattering down noisily to the bottom.

Instantly Stinson froze. The slight noise up ahead had ceased altogether. They waited a seemingly interminable time, but it did not resume.

"Come on!" Stinson whispered.

They crawled along, pausing every yard or so. It might have been ten

minutes before they managed to traverse the fifty-odd feet from the garage to the house. The passage came abruptly to an end, and there was another ladder leading up—this time leading up somewhere in the house.

Stinson's teeth clamped together. He sucked in his breath and slowly started up. His hands were busy holding onto the rungs of the ladder, and for a moment he did not look up. When he did, his breath whistled sharply. The hideous face of a maniac grinned down upon him, not four inches from his own. Then a black, huge Luger pressed its ugly snout down at him, pointed, not at his face, but at his abdomen.

Caleb Arnold's childish face grinned as he tightened his finger on the Luger.

Stinson tried to get his gun up from the passageway and failed. He closed his eyes, squinted and waited.

The roar almost tore his head off—sent his senses reeling into unconsciousness.

ANGEL sat on the edge of Stinson's desk in the faded tan office. Doolittle sat at his own desk with his feet propped up and his hands locked behind his big neck. Stinson sat and held Angel's hand. He had a large white bandage encircling his head. He said:

"Amos, would you kindly tell me what was the idea of shooting *me*?"

Doolittle snorted.

"I looked up and saw Arnold was going to give it to you, and I was able to get my rod up and shoot him. I had to shoot him from behind your ear, and the bullet must have grazed you before it hit him. Hell, you'd been a lot worse off if I hadn't nicked your thick head."

Angel put her long, slim hand to Stinson's cheek, pressed, said:

"Tell me all about it, but spare me the details about the women."

Stinson grinned and said:

"It will all be in this afternoon's editions, but I'll explain the things

that won't be printed in the papers.

"Seven or eight years ago there was a desperate hoodlum in Chicago with the face of a child, whom they called Kiddie Emery. Emery was a killer and had a cruel habit of shooting his victims in the abdomen. But Kiddie Emery never got caught, they never succeeded in getting his fingerprints at headquarters, nor his photograph, nor even a good description of him. All they knew was that he had a face like a child.

"Caleb Arnold was Kiddie Emery. Five years ago, when Chicago became too hot for them, Arnold came here with his partner, Pierre LaRue. Arnold had money and he built himself a house. And in that house he followed an old Chicago custom—as far as gangsters are concerned. He had a secret passageway built, which led from his dining room under the garden to the garage."

"How did you find this passageway, Don?" Angel asked.

"You shall hear in good time, my love. Things went well for Caleb Arnold. He entered politics, gained money and influence. Naturally he never permitted his past to come up. He opened his night clubs and gambling houses, and they were gold mines for him. Everything went fine until he fell in love with a girl named Lida Elsler. And even this was all right for a while. He set her up in a swanky apartment and furnished it himself—even to the same kind of curtains and bookshelves and green and red-backed books that he had in his own home. Then Lida did the wrong thing. She fell for Arnold's smooth, handsome partner, Pierre LaRue. LaRue was already married to little Doris Hanlon. Doris was extremely jealous. LaRue had tired of her and kept her in the dark about Lida."

"But Caleb Arnold *did* find out about LaRue's intrigue with Lida; and being jealous to a point of insanity, Arnold shot LaRue through the abdomen with a Luger.

"Immediately upon killing LaRue, Arnold hurried to the *Golden Casino*, which he owned, and started work on his almost perfect alibi. He fixed it with Chico, his bodyguard, to provide him with an air-tight alibi that ten or twelve people would swear to."

Doolittle nodded and muttered softly: "That Chico got away with it, too. When Captain Bender checked it, all the mugs in the *Casino* swore Arnold was there at the time of the murder."

Stinson said: "After Arnold had fixed it with Chico, he rushed over to our place and hired us to guard LaRue—who had already been dead for half an hour."

"But why?" Angel asked. "If LaRue was dead—"

"Because it would establish a doubly strong alibi for Arnold. It would take suspicion away from him almost immediately if it were known that LaRue had stolen his money and that Arnold, of all people, had to keep him alive. That he even hired two private detectives as LaRue's bodyguards."

Doolittle asked: "Why did Arnold, an experienced gangster, go to all this trouble?"

"Because LaRue hadn't kept his criminal record in Chicago as well covered as Arnold had. If LaRue were found murdered on some deserted road, the police would go to a lot more trouble identifying him, and it would come out that he had been closely linked with Kiddie Emery in Chicago. That was too hot for comfort for Arnold."

"Arnold didn't know that LaRue lived long enough to write on that paper that Lida's address was written on. He started to write: "Kiddie Emery," and meant if we went to Lida's apartment she would tell us who Arnold was. LaRue had told her. I guess the poor devil thought it would be useless to scribble Arnold's name as his murderer—no one would believe him. I knew Kiddie was the word he meant to write after I'd seen the

press clippings about Kiddie Emery. As for the secret tunnel, when Doris LaRue tripped me in Arnold's house, I accidentally discovered the wall in the dining room was hollow. I guessed that it meant a passageway out to the garage."

"WHAT about this Doris?" Angel inquired coldly.

"Doris LaRue was in this mess only because she wanted to find the woman who had taken her husband from her. She wanted that address book. She also wanted to know where the money LaRue had stolen was hidden. She figured part of it belonged to her.

"When Captain Bender inadvertently said: 'Don't be a kid, Arnold,' that struck a responsive chord somewhere in my memory, and I remembered reading about Kiddie Emery, who shot his victims in the abdomen as LaRue had been shot. At the *Clarion's* morgue I got the general description of the man, and it fitted Arnold, but I had no proof and couldn't go to the police. Arnold would have made it hot for me if I couldn't prove anything."

"Then he sent Chico around to warn me that I was getting too nosy—"

"The guy with the handkerchief mask?" Doolittle asked.

"Yes. Chico knew I'd seen him at Arnold's house and he didn't want me to recognize him. And when he found out in the tailor shop that I really was hot on the trail, he phoned Arnold. By that time I had recognized Lida from

her photo in my office and knew she worked at the *Penthouse Club*, and therefore tied up in some way with Arnold. Especially when her room was fitted out the same way his house was. Arnold came hot-footing it—eluding Garrity, his guard, by the convenient means of the passageway, to Lida's apartment, just in time to shoot his own girl before she spilled everything. The rest you know."

"But we got him anyway," Doolittle beamed. "And that five thousand buck reward for Kiddie Emery is the easiest money I ever earned. Incidentally, speaking of money, where did Arnold's two hundred grand go?"

"It didn't go anywhere. That two hundred grand loss was a fake. Captain Bender found almost a million dollars this morning in Caleb Arnold's safe-deposit box."

Stinson smiled. He thought of a tough little girl with reddish hair, exquisite body and desperate, fear-hardened eyes. He thought of how glad Doris LaRue would be when he handed her a generous cut of the five thousand bucks. It would give her a chance to get started again.

Angel glanced at him. He grinned, reached out and took her hand in his. He drew her head down, kissed her.

"I've always heard tell, Angel, that my illustrious predecessor, Don Juan, Senior, always secretly preferred one woman to the many. And when I look at you, I begin to think he had the right idea."

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FIT GEM
AND
EVER-READY
RAZORS



A beautiful platinum blonde gave Detective Lee Masters a key for a . . .

Trigger Tryst

By Robert C. Blackmon

THE platinum-blonde songster's dainty face was livid beneath the make-up. Her blue eyes mirrored terror, yet she made a smile with crimsoned lips.

Lee Masters, seated near the orchestra at the rear of Aarsal's dine-and-dance club, watched her for a moment. He grunted irritably and leaned back in his chair. His rust-flecked gray eyes swung to the few couples shuffling on the floor.

One of Aarsal's dinners glowed warmly in his lean middle. A cigar jutted from his lean, hard lips. He was temporarily contented, and that in spite of the fact that his work on the Conroy diamond snatch had turned up nothing so far. The American Gem Indemnity, his company, had a fifty-thousand-dollar policy on the missing stones, and they were yelling for quick action from their ace operative.

Lee Masters touched flame to his cigar and smoked slowly. His eyes went back to the girl. Her name was Phyllis Cleve. She did three numbers nightly at Aarsal's—his reason for coming to the place. Her clean, fresh voice did things to his nerves.

Phyllis Cleve leaned forward and talked earnestly to the sleek, black-haired man across the table from her. She was facing Lee. The man had his back turned, but the gem detective knew him. "Guffy" Paulos, an oily-tongued racketeer who ran a place with upstairs gambling rooms over on Seneca Avenue.

Lee grinned. He had run a sawbuck up to three hundred in the Greek's place last week. Paulos had squawked,

but he had paid. The details were stormy. Lee absently rubbed the knuckles of his right hand. Movement at the front of Aarsal's pulled his eyes. A slender young man had come into the place.

He came through the check-room door and stopped, nervous eyes sweeping the long main room. His gaze stopped at Phyllis Cleve's table. Terror leaped into his eyes. His sensitive face went deathly pale. He spun and ran back into the check room.

Lee Masters nodded slowly. The young man was Mark Cleve, Phyllis' brother.

Mark, Masters knew, had gone play-boy. He had bought gee-gaws for several chorus girls and had gotten a blurb or two in one of the columns.

Phyllis Cleve and Guffy Paulos together didn't make sense at first; then Mark had stepped in. Phyllis had a clean record, and would not be seen with Paulos from choice. Obviously the man was around to collect Mark's gambling losses from the girl. Somebody ought to lay knuckles on his thick lips.

The gem detective's lean muscles hardened. He started up from his chair. His gray eyes were bleak as they fastened upon the back of Paulos' sleek head. Half up, Lee grunted and sank back in his chair. He felt he should do something about the matter, but hesitated. She would probably invite his nose out of her business. If she wanted to pay off for her welching brother, it was her affair, but—Nuts! He had trouble enough with the Conroy job. He chewed his cigar

DE

and glared at the back of Paulos' head.

"Mister Masters."

It was Pedro speaking, one of Arsal's waiters. Gaunt and black-eyed, Pedro was bowing, twitching a thumb toward the back of the place. "You're wanted on the telephone. Thank you, sir."

Lee Masters dropped a coin in the outstretched palm, pushed to his feet and strode toward the rear of Arsal's.

THE telephones were in a rear hall near the washroom, three booths. Pedro had disappeared. The boom of the orchestra was faint in the hallway. Masters peered into the first booth. The receiver was up. He looked into the other two booths and frowned. The receivers in the booths were pronged.

Muttering under his breath, he started out of the back hall, a puzzled frown digging furrows in his forehead. He reached the doorway and stopped. Phyllis Cleve was coming into the hall from the main room. He could see her through the glass panels of the door. The music swelled and faded as the door opened and closed, then the girl was looking up at Lee Masters with swimming eyes.

"I—I signaled Pedro to call you to the telephone, Mr. Masters." Her lips were twitching. "I am in—serious trouble. I— You've got to help me!"

"If you want that fat thug busted in the teeth, Miss Cleve—" Masters' right fist was hard.

"No! Not that!" The terror flamed higher in her eyes. "I—I can't explain now. Go to my apartment, 4-A Commander. I'll be there within an hour and explain everything. Here—" Lee felt the hard outlines of a key in his hand. The girl's fingers were jerking with nervousness. He felt an unaccountable gladness as the smooth skin touched his own.

"Go out through the kitchen, please! No one must know that I've talked to you!"

Then she was gone.

Lee Masters stared down at the key in his hand. His lean shoulders lifted. A minute later he was swinging long legs along the alley that backed Arsal's.

In the taxi, he looked at the key again. His lips made a tight, grim smile. Serious trouble, the girl had said. Mark had been nicked for a nice sum. Paulos was trying to collect. He, Lee Masters, was supposed to take the floor, satisfy or scare Paulos, and save the Cleve coin. Nuts! He'd stick around Phyllis Cleve's apartment until she came, then tell her to carry the whole thing to the cops.

The Conroys, ultra-rich, were hipped on theatre. They had a mania for rambling backstage and hobnobbing with the theatre bunch, from grips to stars. They gave parties for the chorus girls. Conroy had been in the "heavy's" dressing room when the theft occurred. Mrs. Conroy, buxom and fluttery over her dear chorus-kickers, had wandered in the maze of scenery.

In the semi-darkness of the deserted stage, she had bumped into a man. It was too dark to tell who he was. He had caught her and kept her from falling, then had gone on. She had wandered back to Conroy, and discovered that her celebrated diamond pendant, along with several other stones, were gone.

The American Gem Company was jittery. They had hustled to get their policy in ahead of the International Jewel Association. Even now, International had men on the Conroy job, working to turn up the rocks for the publicity and to write the next policy. Cut-throat competition.

"We're there, buddy." The taxi driver was grinning over the meter.

Masters caught the robe rail, pulled half up, then stiffened.

A slender young man had shot from the entrance of the Commander apartment building and was legging it up the street. It was Mark Cleve, the platinum songster's brother.

Masters grunted, dropped a bill into the grinning driver's hand and stalked across the sidewalk toward the apartment entrance.

The entry hall was deserted. There was an automatic elevator. Apartment 4-A was off a side hall at the rear of the building. He hadn't seen anyone on the way up. He reached for the doorknob, the key in his hand. Then abruptly, his scalp went tight.

THE door to apartment 4-A was unlocked and open about a half inch. One light was on. The place had been wrecked. All the cushions were off the davenport and on the floor. A pottery lamp was on the rug, broken. One corner of the rug was up, showing the waffle-like rug cushion.

Lee's hard mouth formed a soundless whistle. He pushed the door wider and stepped into the apartment.

The books from the mahogany bookcase were in a jumbled pile on the floor. The console radio was out from the wall. The tubes were a junked heap of glass and twisted metal. The four pictures on the walls were crooked. Ashes from the fireplace were scattered on the rug.

Lee closed the apartment door and stood with his back to it. There was a door in the end wall of the room. It was closed, probably connecting with a bedroom.

Stiff-legged, the gem detective stalked across the room and opened the door. A small automatic was in his right hand. He had taken it from an arm-pit holster.

He switched the light. The room was evidently Phyllis Cleve's bedroom. There were frothy curtains, ivory-enameled furniture and a delicate perfume of face powder in the room. Masters' swinging gaze hit the frilly bed, and a queer prickling started along the back of his neck.

Sticking out from beneath the frilled edge of the bedspread was a man's shoe. It was heel to the floor, the toe sticking up straight.

The gem detective's heart quickened a beat. He gulped. Coldness started at the pit of his stomach. He eased toward the bed.

"All right, lug, pile out!" he rapped.

The foot didn't move. He touched it with his toe. His mouth drew tighter as the foot gave to his touch. The guy under the bed was either out, or—

Muscle hardened at the angle of his jaws. He got down on his knees and looked under the bed.

The man was flat on his back. One leg was drawn up, the knee touching the bed-springs. His arms were at his sides, palms in, the fingers curled slightly. His face was in shadow.

Masters gazed slowly to his feet. Thoughts flashed through his mind. Phyllis Cleve talking about "serious trouble." Mark Cleve legging it away from the apartment. The guy under the bed.

He reached down and caught the protruding foot, dragged the man out into the open. With one look at the man's face, blood started pulsing in Lee Masters' ears.

The man was Oscar Fass, an International Jewel Association man. Fass was working on the Conroy job, Masters knew.

Fresh crimson showed against the rival gem dick's pasty skin. Masters was on his knees in a moment, feeling for signs of life. Fass was breathing. His pulse was weak and irregular.

Masters shot to his feet, his lean face stone-hard. His long legs carried him swiftly toward the apartment living room. Fass needed hospital treatment quickly. The police would come into the case and raise hell with Mark Cleve, but the case was too far out of bounds now. It was damn' near murder!

The setup pointed to Mark Cleve as the man who slugged Fass, but what was the International gem dick doing in the Cleve apartment? For that matter, why should Phyllis Cleve ask him, Lee Masters, to help her out

of "serious trouble"? He hardly knew the girl. Tonight was the first time he'd ever talked to her.

A sense of danger knifed through him as he started for the living room door. His right fist plunged for his holstered automatic. He got a flash of a man's figure to his left—then a stunning weight smashed into the side of his head and knocked him to his knees. His skull filled with exploding lights. He felt hands plucking at his clothing; then everything went blank.

A DARK brown taste was in his mouth when he came to, minutes later. His head was a clamoring, pain-filled hell. His first attempt to get to his feet tore a groan from his white lips. Then he was up, clinging to the door frame. His eyes came slowly into focus.

Oscar Fass, the International Jewel Association man, was still on the floor where he had left him, but cold horror gripped him as he looked down at the rival gem detective.

There was a purplish hole in the center of Fass's forehead. Lying upon the floor beside him was Masters' automatic.

Lee Masters got the ghastly picture in one numbing flash. Fass was dead, with Lee's gun beside him. Without looking, Lee knew the gun held a fired shell. The slug from that shell was in Fass' brain.

The lean gem detective's fingers went white-knuckled on the door frame.

Paulos! Was the fat racketeer sore enough about the punch in the face to frame him for murder? Had he used Mark's losses as a club to force Phyllis Cleve into framing Lee for Fass's murder? That didn't sound like Phyllis Cleve, yet—

Fass had been alive when he'd dragged him out from under the bed. Mark Cleve had just left the apartment. Had the kid come back and—

Lee Masters' lean figure went rigid. The faint wail of a siren reached his

ears. It was coming toward the apartment building. The police!

He exploded into swift action. Catching Oscar Fass's limp body, he carried it to the head of Phyllis Cleve's bed. Long fingers stiff, Masters peeled the cover back from the two thick pillows on the bed. The pillows came back. Fass's body was stretched along the top edge of the mattress. A moment, and the corpse was covered with the pillows. The cover was tucked neatly over and around the pillows.

Masters patted out a couple of wrinkles in the cover and stepped back, rust-flecked eyes critical. Oscar Fass's being skinny helped. A woman might spot the extra bulk under the pillows and spread, but the howling police car wouldn't be carrying woman cops.

The siren was much louder. It stopped. The lean gem detective straightened his clothing and stalked into the apartment living room.

He had hardly reached it, clamping a fresh cigar between his drawn lips, when Phyllis Cleve came into the room.

The dainty platinum-blond dancer was out of breath. Her blue eyes were wild with sheer terror. Panting, she trotted across the room toward him.

"The police are coming here! They —" The shrillness of hysteria came into her voice as she noted the disorder of the room. Her fingers bit into Lee's arm. Her crimsoned lips were twitching. "What—what— Mark! Where is he? What—"

"Buck up!" Masters' tones were harsh and brutally short. "The cops will be here in thirty seconds. Someone frisked your apartment. You heard about it at Arsal's and asked me to come with you to investigate. I'm a good friend of yours. We just got here a few minutes ago. Follow my lead, or—"

Some one banged on the apartment door. A man's hoarse voice growled something.

Phyllis Cleve gave a moan of terror. Her jerking fingers clawed at Lee

Masters' hand. He felt a small chamois bag, took it, and slid the pouch into his pocket. The girl's wire-thin voice shrilled words.

"Hide these! I'll explain after—"

Two cops pushed into the apartment living room. Their ruddy faces were grim. Blue steel filled their fists.

"All right," growled one, cold eyes taking in the wrecked room, "what's all the shooting about?"

"Shooting?" Masters' dark eyebrows shot high. "I don't understand. Miss Cleve and I left Aarsal's a few minutes ago when she was told that her apartment had been ransacked. She asked me to come with her to investigate. Some of those books fell a moment ago." The gem detective moved a lean hand toward the open bookcase. "Perhaps—"

"Of all the damn'— Pardon, lady." The cop swore under his breath. "Bet that was the shooting the guy called about. The prowler get anything, Miss Cleve?" The cops holstered guns. "Want a check on prints, or—"

"No. Mr. Masters and I have looked around, and I don't believe anything is missing." The girl was smiling. "The thief was evidently frightened away. He taught me a lesson." She managed a laugh. "I'll be sure the apartment door is locked, next time." Her next laugh was better. "You don't know how much I appreciate you men coming so quickly. I'll never be frightened, now that I know I can get men like you in such a short time."

"Aw, that's our job." Four big feet shuffled on the living room rug. "Want us to look around and be sure the guy is gone, Miss Cleve?"

"I'd appreciate it ever so much." Phyllis Cleve might well have been singing. Her voice was music itself. Lee Masters stopped breathing.

The two cops stamped through the apartment, poking, opening doors. Then they were back in the living room. Masters released pent breath.

"You're okey now, Miss Cleve. No sign of the guy. He got scared off, looks like. Just any time you need

us, just put in a call. We'll come on the double-quick."

The girl went to the door with the two prowler-cops. Masters stood motionless near the davenport. The little automatic under his left arm felt like a red-hot coal. Aimlessly he slid one hand into his coat pocket, and his fingers touched the chamois bag the girl had given him. A queer thought flashed into his mind; the leather pouch seemed to burn his fingers.

PHYLLIS CLEVE shut the apartment door and came toward him. Her smile was gone.

"I—I want you to return those things in the bag to whom they belong." A dry sob broke her voice. "Without telling anyone anything. I—I—" She broke off, started crying silently.

Masters was tempted to take the lovely girl in his arms, but he put away the thought. He took the sack from his pocket. His stiff fingers fumbled at the drawstrings. Somehow, he knew what the pouch contained, and the knowledge made cold prickles crawl through his lean body.

The sack opened, and its glittering contents rolled into his open palm. There were seven brilliant diamonds—six small stones and one huge one. The largest was cut as a pendant. Lee knew the gems in his hand had been snatched from Mrs. Conroy in the semi-darkness of a deserted stage.

"Where," he asked the girl, his voice determinedly hard, "did you get these stones?"

The color whipped from Phyllis Cleve's face, leaving pink islands of rouge. Pain clouded the blue of her eyes.

"Don't ask me that." Her voice was barely audible. "I—I can't tell." Abruptly, her face was in her hands, and she was sobbing wildly.

Masters spun as the apartment door opened, fingers closing to conceal the gems and the chamois bag. Mark Cleve came into the room. His

sensitive young face was deathly pale, his dark eyes haggard.

Phyllis Cleve loosed a startled cry. Her head came up, then she was in her brother's arms.

"It—it's all right, now, Mark!" she choked. "We—"

"Hold everything!" The rasping command cracked loudly in the apartment living room. It was coming from behind Masters.

Nerves taut, the lean gem detectives slowly turned his head. His eyes narrowed slightly as he spotted the man standing in the open bedroom doorway. The man was crouched slightly. The fingers of his right hand gripped the butt of a silenced Luger automatic. Its deadly muzzle weaved, covering Masters, the girl, and Mark. The man was Guffy Paulos.

"All of you keep still," Paulos' swarthy features were utterly expressionless. "You, Masters, put the diamonds on that little table at the end of the davenport, then walk back three steps and stand still. Mark, you and the girl walk back with Masters. If anybody tries anything I'll kill all three of you."

Lee Masters stood motionless. The diamonds were in his outstretched right hand, the chamois pouch in his left. There wasn't a chance of dropping either one and going for the automatic under his left arm. Paulos would have one shot with the Luger before he had to jack another cartridge into the chamber, and that one shot would stop a man.

Mark and Phyllis Cleve were still holding on to each other. Both were stiff and silent.

"When, and how, did you get in the apartment?" Masters softly asked Paulos.

"Up the fire escape after the cops left—but that don't matter." The man's blue-shaven jaws set doggedly. "I come after them diamonds, and I'm going to have them!" His finger tightened on the Luger trigger.

"Perhaps." Masters' voice was steady and low. "The way I figure,

Mark Cleve got hooked in your crooked joint—hooked for so much that he couldn't pay. You knew he hung around the theater where the Conroy's came. You suggested he snatch Mrs. Conroy's diamonds and wipe out his crooked debt to you with the stolen stones. It was that, or a very unpleasant else."

"Yes, I stole them. I did it! Phyllis didn't have anything to do with it. I realized what a terrible thing I had done." Mark Cleve was almost whimpering. "I gave the stones to Phyllis so that I couldn't turn them over to Paulos. I came here tonight and saw the apartment torn up. It frightened me and I—"

"I believe I understand." Masters hadn't moved a muscle. "Paulos saw you when you came into Arsa's. He slipped out when Phyllis came to the telephone booth to talk to me, and came to the apartment. When I came in, he knocked me out, thinking Phyllis had given the stones to me, since they weren't found in the apartment. Paulos took my gun and—"

"You're too smart!" Paulos' voice was a vicious snarl. He raised the Luger to center on Masters' heart. "You get it like I give it to the other guy. I'm getting them diamonds and—"

"All right. Here they are!"

A QUICK flip of Masters' hand sent the gems flashing toward Paulos. Involuntarily, the man's eyes followed their flight. The Luger swung to one side.

Lee Masters left the floor in a plunging dive, his long arms reaching for Paulos' thick legs. He heard a dull, coughing sound from the silenced Luger. Phyllis Cleve screamed. White-hot pain stabbed into his left shoulder. Then his pawing hands struck the killer's thick ankles.

Blubbing curses, Paulos tried to swing the Luger down on the back of Lee's head, but Mark Cleve had followed the lean detective. Mark tried

to grab the swinging gun. Paulos drove the weapon through Mark's fending hands, and the steel crashed into the center of Mark's forehead. The singer's brother dropped to the floor, out cold.

Lee Masters jerked at Paulos's legs with all his might. The man toppled and crashed down upon him. Masters groaned as the gambler's heavy weight mashed his drilled shoulder. Then Paulos tried to batter in his head with the Luger. Masters caught his gun wrist with his right hand and tried to raise his left to tear the gun free, but the arm was numb from shoulder to fingertips. He dug long fingers into Paulos' sweaty wrist.

Snarling animal-like sounds, Paulos pawed at the silenced Luger. An empty shell shot out of the weapon and bounced on the floor. A loaded cartridge snapped into the Luger's chamber. Jerking, Paulos struggled to his feet and dragged Masters up with him. Panting, he tried to swing the gun down for a shot at the lean detective.

Masters threw all his waning strength into the effort of twisting the weapon aside. Muscles bulged along his long right arm. The gun came up between their straining bodies. Sudden, acrid flame seared the gem detective's set face. He heard a muffled thudding sound.

Paulos staggered back, a queer look of surprise on his fat, dark face. He shook his head slowly, as though to deny the existence of the crimson stream gushing from the base of his throat. He dropped to his hands and knees. A throaty groan escaped him, then his legs and arms collapsed.

The floor seemed to be bucking and weaving, but Lee Masters stayed on his feet. Fighting the lethargy dragging at his jerking body, he gathered up the scattered diamonds and put them in his pocket.

Phyllis Cleve was on the floor. She had fainted and was still unconscious. Mark Cleve's thin, sensitive face was

a mass of blood from a cut forehead, but the boy was breathing.

Masters grunted with satisfaction and stumbled into the bedroom. He came back in a few moments, carrying Oscar Fass's still warm body. He placed it on the floor near Paulos.

Breathing through set teeth, he slid the automatic from his arm holster and pressed the butt into Paulos' fat left hand. His own prints didn't matter, but the slug in Fass' brain did—a great deal. Paulos had really killed Fass, then called the cops to trap Masters in the murder frame. Masters grinned mirthlessly, wiped Paulos' Luger clean and replaced the weapon in Paulos' other hand. Fass's gun, still in its holster and unfired, he placed in the dead International detective's hand. It was all settled now.

The setup was that Paulos had shot Fass with Lee's gun—which was true. Fass had died in the discharge of his duty, also true. He'd got wind of the Conroy stones being in Mark's possession and had come to the Cleve apartment, to run into Paulos, who knocked him out before Masters came in.

Masters had a slug from Paulos' Luger in his shoulder. He could claim that the shot had knocked him cold; Paulos had taken his gun and killed Fass. The International Jewel man had come in while Phyllis and Mark Cleve were unconscious; therefore they wouldn't know anything about him. Fass could have gotten a tip that Paulos had the Conroy diamonds, and could have followed Paulos to the Cleve apartment. Dovetailing with the story Phyllis Cleve had told the cops, Paulos and Fass could have come in after the cops had left. Fass, seeing Masters, could have figured it was a play for Paulos to turn the Conroy diamonds over to American Gem Indemnity—but the cops would have to be told that Paulos had come to the apartment to collect Mark's gambling losses. Paulos could have thought it was a trap when Fass

came in, and could have gone nuts. Fine—that took care of everything.

Phyllis and her brother were still unconscious. Cold water revived them. Masters explained the revised version of the past hour's happenings.

"Mark, you can tell up to where you leaped at Paulos to save me, and he socked you, but your memory stops there." Lee's hard lips made a crooked grin. "And if you ever gamble again after this, I'll kick your backbone up between your ears! Phyllis, you've nothing to tell, see? You know nothing but that Mark gambled with Paulos. Both of you forget the Conroy diamonds and remember not to mention them from now on."

Lee winced as his drilled shoulder throbbed.

"Now, Phyllis," he continued, "you get all excited and call those two prowl cops back to save you. I'm supposed to be unconscious."

Lee Masters stumbled to within a few feet of the dead Guffy Paulos and stretched out on the living room rug. A weary sigh pushed from between his white, drawn lips.

Phyllis looked at him with an expression which showed more than mere gratitude. She knelt beside Masters' outstretched figure.

"Thank you—Lee. That's all I know how to say."

"That's plenty," Masters murmured, drawing her face close to his.

In the Next Issue—

"NICK SWAYNE"

FEATURE NOVEL

By Frederick C. Davis

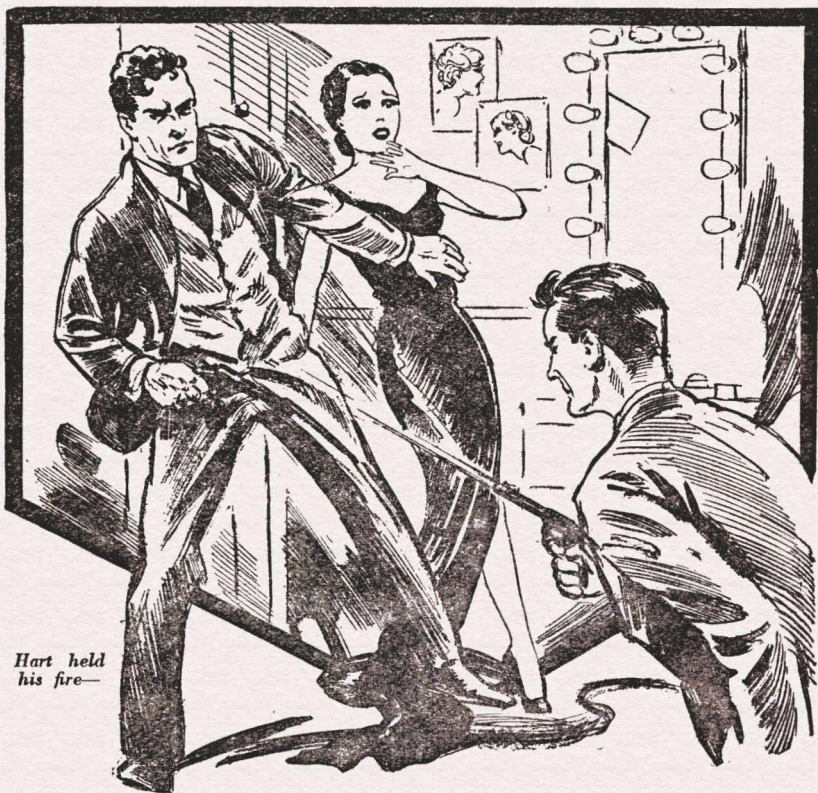
Another Gripping Tale of Nick Swayne, Unique Confidential Investigator,
and His Dearest Enemy, the Charming Nan Royce,
Sensational Girl Reporter.

**FAST-MOVING NOVELETTE OF TENSE DRAMA
BY THEODORE TINSLEY**

*And Other Short and Long Stories of the
Best in Romantic Detective Fiction*

Watch For The Next DETECTIVE ROMANCES!

Death-Dance Angel



Hart held
his fire—

By Gloria Kent

The eyes of Broadway devoured Carol Carter as she danced her way to fame—and misfortune. For that grim, heartless director, Fate, chose her a doom-fraught role, in which she must dance while Death sought the life of the man she loved.

NIGHT on Forty-Second Street; Broadway, gay, gaudy and glamorous with its hammering clamor of Manhattan's mob—pushing, jamming, chattering people, who were avid for entertainment. Automobile brakes screeched, taxis

swerved in and out, trolleys clanged, subways rumbled underground, busses lumbered through traffic. People, lights, the noise of laughter—New York at night

King's Burlesque Revue was packed. It was a smallish theatre on Forty-

second Street. Once it had housed decent legitimate plays. The ghosts of actors who had once played Hamlet stalked unseen in the wings—horried, frightened ghosts. For now the theatre was featuring girls, rouged and scanty in attire, who danced to a tin-pan band. The house was packed as it had never been before. You couldn't buy standing room with the fattest wallet in town. Bums had paid their forty cents and wouldn't move.

The place stank with the filth of coatless men; sweating, leering, cravens who cracked peanuts and ate them, and licked their dry lips and kept feverish eyes on the stage. But there were more than bums here tonight. There were people from uptown, who sat in hard seats and choked when they breathed the putrid air. But they were there—and King's Burlesque had never sold tickets to them before. They were there because Carol Carter was on contract to King, and you couldn't see her anywhere else.

Out in front, you could see the block letters, white and shimmering through the flurry of moths—letters that flashed on and off, over and over: CAROL CARTER. The foyer was crowded with pictures of her. She had been in burlesque only four months, yet she was already America's number-one strip queen.

BACKSTAGE, in the star's dressing room, sat a rather timid, quiet young girl. She had rich black hair that was like strands of fine-spun ebony; it was long hair, done up in exquisite rolls. Her eyes were black, too, and deep. The skin of her face was sleek, immobile, like a slice of priceless ivory. Her nose was small, perfectly formed; and her cheek bones jutted, very slightly, giving her countenance the matchless combination of being crafty, cunning and vicious as a Magdalene; and by the same token, as sweet and as gentle as a Madonna. That—at twenty, was Carol Carter.

Deep within, she was a very fright-

ened little girl who had had bad luck in a musical comedy, which had folded, and who was too proud to go back to her home in the Middle West. She had almost starved to death before walking into King's for "temporary" work during the spiritless summer season. That had been four months ago. It was fall now, and she was under contract. She was a very bewildered little girl whose pay check was five hundred dollars per week—whose name on the marquee drew capacity crowds to every performance.

As she sat there, making up, and listening to the echo of the blaring band, she was quite unaware that tonight was her night of destiny.

She knew only that she did not feel natural. It was as though something festered in her soul, had grown there and was now taking the shape of a monster. She put rouge on her pale face and laughed at her fears. But the laughter was empty, as though death had snatched it away and crushed it.

Then she thought she knew It was this cheap theatre, these cheap crowds. She had been tricked into the contract. She, Carol Carter, had come to New York to be a successful musical comedy star, or to be a legitimate actress, not a swaggering, swaying strip queen. But, so far, King had been relentless. Offers came from everywhere. It was her big chance to make good. King was coming to see her in a moment; she had requested it.

Before she had left home, Johnny had said: "With that figure, darling, you're going to be a wow in New York." But Johnny did not mean that she would take off her clothes in front of grimy, lust-filled tramps.

Johnny didn't know. Her folks didn't know. They thought she was a big success because she sent money home. Where she had come from, people knew nothing of strip queens.

Magdalene-Madonna — New York had never seen a combination like that, not in a burlesque show.

The door opened, and Herman King stood there. He had bushy black hair, dark, glittering eyes. His face was fat, the skin loose and flabby. He had a big stomach. He was worth half a million, but his clothing always looked shabby and dirty—like his theatre.

"Well?" he said.

FOR a moment Carol did not speak. She was conscious of defeat of her purpose before she formed the words that she wanted to say. She could see the greed in King's face—for a year's contract. They would use her up—four shows a day, rehearsals until three in the morning. They would sap her beauty.

She said: "You've got to let me go. I'll pay you my contract. I'll pay you five hundred dollars every week for the rest of the year—somehow."

King leaned against the door and lit a cigarette. "Kid, how many times do you want me to tell you it's impossible? People pay to see your body; you'd flop if you had to wear gowns and just sing songs—as good as your voice is."

"I didn't ask you that."

"No? Well, I'm telling you."

"Then I'm going to quit. You can sue me!"

He pointed a fat finger at her. "You'll leave this contract over my dead body!"

She was white with rage, and it was hard for her to speak. "You're intolerable," she managed thickly.

He puffed at the cigarette, still leaning against the door. "I wasn't intolerable when you were starving, was I, kid? I was good enough for you then. I've seen babies like you before—plenty. I build 'em up, and some high-hat on Broadway takes 'em. Well, not this time! This time Herman King gets the gravy, nobody else."

He drew a letter from his pocket, glanced at it, then threw it over to her dressing table. "Some punk sent that back to you."

King walked away.

Carol did not look at the letter. Her

fists were tight. She was choking, yet she had never known the rage she now felt.

"I ought to kill you!" she screamed after him.

But her voice was lost in the shouts back stage. The revue girls, tawdry, tired-out females in scanty tights, were trouping across the wing, one after another. They lined up, ready to go on. The stage director was bawling orders, and from high overhead, came the electricians, "All right, spot!" The assistant director from the other side of the stage cautioned: "There goes the curtain. Musical cue, girls!"

Carol turned wearily back to her dressing room. She picked up the envelope. Suddenly her heart seemed to freeze, and, fingers trembling, she tore it open and read the note inside. She shook her head, and tears came into her eyes.

Johnny had come to New York. He was out front

Before, she had always thought: "Well, it's only for a little while, this strip dancing; I'll be out of it before anybody knows; at least it has done one thing, it has made me famous." But that had only been a tonic for her conscience, and she knew it now. She had been like the thief who tells himself that he will steal just one more purse, and then goes right on stealing "just one more" until he is caught. She was caught now. Johnny was swell, but he was a small-town boy—Sunday school kind. He laughed at clean jokes and liked clean fun.

Johnny had never even seen her in a bathing suit, and it would kill him to see her stripped on the stage in front of a theatre packed with men.

Carol laughed, faintly, bitterly. She walked from one end of the dressing room to the other, and she could not tell you what she was thinking, because she didn't know herself. Everything was jumbled, confused, like a pot of paints being mixed.

She heard the musical number from out front, the hoarse voices of the lit-

tle kids who hoofed their lives away for twenty dollars a week—hoofed and sang off-key and tried to smile at the gorillas beyond the footlights. In a moment the comedians would be on, cracking raw jokes.

Johnny would not understand those jokes. But what would he think of the girls?

Time passed, inexorably, and somehow she managed to find a tentative solution. She had conceived a plan by which Johnny would not see her act.

The director announced numbers from backstage through a microphone which transmitted his voice to loud speakers in the theatre. Johnny would be called backstage just before she went on, and when he arrived, be told to wait in her dressing room until she returned.

The director nodded mechanically. "Sure, Miss Carter. I'll do that for you."

THERE were still a few minutes before her time to go on. She was nervous and did not know what to do with herself. Her soul seemed to be aching, as though it wanted to crash through her and leave her. The comedians were on now, and listlessly she looked around at the chorines.

She saw May Belle. A hippy, washed-out blonde, who at thirty was on her last flight—destination, the gutter. She saw the dullish glitter in May Belle's eyes as she read a paper, and Carol was aware suddenly—as though a chill wind were freezing her—that she was headed in May Belle's direction. May Belle had been a strip queen once, too—the glory of Broadway. Now she got twenty-seven dollars a week, and took it gladly.

May Belle looked up at a brunette who stood near. "Gee, kid, it says here that 'Babyface' is in town. You know—the big-shot public enemy. He's sporting about fifty grand he got from a kidnaping. Boy, would I like to get a chance at him!"

"Me too," said the brunette. "Burdlesque makes me sick. They talk about gun molls—but you wouldn't see *this* baby passing up a chance to be one. Fifty thousand! Mmm."

Carol shuddered and walked away.

A moment before it was time to go on, she heard the director through the speakers: "Mr. John Marvin is wanted backstage immediately. Mr. John Marvin."

Three minutes later, the cheap little four-piece band, of piano, violin, drums and saxophone, was trying to blend on a very seductive pitch for the melody of "Mood Indigo." And Carol was waiting there in the wings, trembling, nervous, almost as nervous as she had been the first time she went on.

She wondered if Johnny were backstage now. It had occurred to her to quit the show cold. But that would only have made things worse. It would have been in all the papers. Johnny would have found out. But more important—no real trouper could walk out on a contract. This was a lousy show, but a girl couldn't walk out on it.

Suddenly she was on the stage, seeing the faces of the four men in the band looking up, smiling. The piano player grinning toothlessly. Even *they* liked this part of the show. As Carol walked across the stage, the loud speakers announced:

"The sensation of America, strip queen supreme—captivating Carol Carter!"

She walked up and down, fully clothed in the blue velvet costume, then she took the stage microphone. Her voice was low, melodious, scintillating:

"*You ain't been blue, no, no, no . . .*"

A certain tingle of emotion swept through her. For a moment, she forgot everything backstage. The number, played by the very tinny little band seemed to come from a symphony. It was the feeling she always

had when she was on the stage—the spark that made her the success she was, for above everything else, her passion was the stage—any stage. Deep within her was the born ability to lose herself in her performance. She was sincere, not synthetic.

"'Til you've had that moon indigo."

A warmth, like hot fluid, coursed through her veins. Her mind reeled with the notes of the song, and she felt herself swaying with the rhythm. Now her arms and legs were alive, tingling

She finished singing, stepped away from the microphone. The melody went on. The musicians were putting all their grimy little hearts and souls into this. They were sweating, watching her. They knew the music by heart.

OUT front, the men leaned forward on their seats. Faces were set, eyes feverishly hot. Hands clung to the sides of the chairs. The peanuts cracked no longer; there was no one coughing, no sound except that which came from the band and the tap of Carol's slippers on the stage.

She was making her audience burn with the same warmth of rhythm that filled her body. It was as though she danced a waltz with Satan, and each moment became more enraptured with her performance.

"She gets hotter and hotter and hotter," King had once said breathlessly. That had been the day he had broken all the rules of the theatre and signed her at five hundred a week.

Now her hand was at the strap of her cape. She whisked it off. Her dress remained, yet the movement had brought a sigh from the crowd. The atmosphere was crowded with a grim tenseness.

"You ain't been blue Mood indigo" The saxophone kept blaring, as though it were crying, sobbing it out now.

Her face flushed, Carol smiled, slipped toward the wing, and moved

the shoulder strap of her dress to reveal the white of her shoulder. Then she left the stage.

She came back on while the applause still thundered. Now she walked up and down some more. Presently she left again, this time lifting her dress almost to her hips.

She came on the third time with the dress off, but held unrevealingly in front of her. She walked faster, moved faster. Her heart was hammering, hammering against her side, as the languorous rhythm of the music, the number burned within her. As she left the stage this time she flicked the dress away. Only beads and a cloth about her hips remained.

She stayed off the stage longer now, as the applause thundered and thundered, and then she came back on. She did not have her dress this time.

Carol trembled and shook with her own emotion. She stood in the center of the stage, put her hands behind her neck and began a slow, maddening dance. Her body writhed, twisted, turned.

"No No No"

Suddenly she stopped. Held herself rigid, like a magnificent white statue. The lights blacked her out. The strip act was over.

For doing that, four times a day, she earned five hundred dollars a week. She was America's number-one strip queen because her passion for performance was genuine, though off stage she did not think about it. It was only in front of the footlights, while music played, that she was transformed to some strange sister of Satan who danced a shameless dance for bums who had paid forty cents to see her.

The show was stopped for ten minutes by the unceasing applause. But it was always like this, and she never went out to take another bow. That too, was part of her success.

One of the girls who had waited in the wings, handed her the dress.

Johnny Marvin was in her dressing room. . . . Quickly, she slipped into

the costume, even to the cape. Tiny bits of sweat covered her forehead. She was nervous—a different sort of nervousness now. She hurried to the room. "You will have to smile at him," she told herself; "smile and kiss him and be very glad. Don't show that you're nervous. And if he talks about what kind of a show it is—"

She opened the door. She stared, and she could not move. She knew she should say something, scream or make a noise. But sound froze in her throat.

She saw Johnny—tall, face bronzed, curly of hair. He stood by her wardrobe trunk, not looking at her, but looking down.

Herman King lay on the floor, dead.

AFTERWARD, Carol was amazed when she remembered how strange were the first thoughts that came trickling through her mind when she saw King like that. She thought, almost incoherently: "There is still another show tonight, I wonder if I will have to go through with it?" And: "Did Johnny do this?" Then she began to be frightened.

Johnny Marvin saw her at last: "Hello," he said—but his voice was not at all as she remembered it.

She said: "Johnny, did you do this?"

He looked down at the corpse—blood smeared all over the chest, a knife still sticking there. He laughed hysterically, his boyish face white. "I? Carol, how could I do such a thing? I don't even know the man."

There was a silence while Carol tried to gather her thoughts. "It's going to look awfully bad," she said at last.

He gulped: "I guess it is."

And that was the way they met, after not having seen each other for a year; no kisses, not even a handshake—a corpse between them. . . .

A picture was flashed in between shows; but the second show *would* go on. It was a sell-out. King would have wanted it that way. Carol thought bitterly: "A man dies who, an hour

ago, was important to everyone in this cast, who could hire or fire, make or break them—and yet the show must go on." It was rot!

Still, she was frightened, and as she stood beside Johnny Marvin in the little half circle, in the middle of which was a policeman and a detective, she was aware that she was shivering. They were questioning chorines.

Johnny whispered: "Gee, it's good seeing you again, kid."

"Good seeing you, too," she said tremulously.

"We're going to be together a lot from now on," he went on.

She almost choked. He would learn about the theatre sooner or later; it was inevitable. "Yes," she answered, "of—of course we are, Johnny."

"Things have changed," he said. "Like you, I'm making a little money now, and—"

But Carol's attention was suddenly directed to the detective. He had been questioning May Belle. The washed-out blonde, puffy rings beneath her bloodshot eyes, was pointing an accusing finger at Carol, exclaiming:

"She did it! Just tonight I heard her threaten King. She wanted to break her contract, and King said she would only over his dead body. Then, as he was leaving her dressing room, she shouted: 'I ought to kill you! I ought to kill you!'"

Carol felt her whole body jerk. She remembered speaking the words that May Belle now repeated, "I ought to kill you," but she had only said it once, and had not meant it. Didn't May Belle understand that? Carol surged forward, fighting through the girls. She wondered, vaguely, why Johnny remained back in the darkness.

May Belle went on, answering the dick's next question: "See her do anything suspicious? Sure! Just before she went on the stage, King came back to her dressing room—"

"This was *after* she had said she ought to kill him?"

"Yes—a minute before she went on. I saw him go into the dressing room and didn't see him come out. Carol did. She looked nervous, and she rushed across to the wing and was almost late getting on the stage. She—"

"That's a lie," Carol broke in. "You are lying, May Belle. You know you are."

"No, I'm not! You killed King, and you know you did—you little hell-cat!"

Carol knew that what May Belle said was not true, and it struck her—like the blow of a hammer—that May Belle must be guilty. It was May Belle who had been back by the dressing room, not Carol. Once May Belle had been in love with King; lately she had been under the impression that King was giving his affection to Carol. This was not true—but May Belle had nevertheless been jealous of her.

"What about it, Miss Carter?" the detective asked.

"It's not true," she said hoarsely. "I tell you, I didn't have anything to do with it!"

The dick pushed back his derby, looked her over. "You may be able to persuade a jury that you didn't sister, but as for me—"

Johnny Marvin spoke from where he stood, back of the little crowd: "Listen, copper, you lay off her—see? She didn't have a damn thing to do with it!"

The detective's eyes glittered. "You're the kid who was in the dressing room, aren't you?"

Young Marvin moved through half of the crowd, still stood partly shadowed, but Carol noticed that his face was livid.

"Sure—why? Going to try and pin a phoney like that on me?"

CAROL wondered at the strange way he spoke. He had been to college since she left home, she remembered; maybe it was adolescent slang which he had picked up. But he was still just a boy; that was written all

over him—the smell of a hick town was on his clothing.

She remembered the nights when they had sat high on a hill-top and watched the dust of the stars—the picnics they had gone on—the sleigh ride 'round Christmastime. She was homesick of a sudden. Johnny made her homesick.

Grady, the detective, was talking. "Come on up here, you. What's your name?"

"John Marvin." He told briefly how he had just arrived in town; how Carol had sent for him and he had come into the dressing room, to see Herman King—whom he had not even known—lying on the floor with a knife in his chest. "It was just a minute after, that Carol came in," he finished. "I tell you, I didn't even know the guy!"

Grady was looking at Johnny Marvin curiously. "You didn't, eh? Don't I know you?"

Marvin laughed nervously. "Why should you?"

Grady scratched his head. "Don't know, but—"

"He didn't do it," Carol came in quickly. "He's just an innocent kid. He hasn't been in New York even—" she wasn't sure, but took a chance—"three hours. If you want to know who's behind this, you'd better ask May Belle. She lied about me. She's trying to cover herself."

May Belle's hot eyes flashed her a look of rage that frightened Carol.

But Grady had not taken his eyes from Johnny. "I think I'm going to take you in, son."

"But why?"

"Oh, I don't know. Book you anyway." His eyes were unflickering. "You coming?"

Carol looked at Johnny Marvin, and there was a moment of prolonged silence. She wanted to tell Grady that he couldn't do that, but somehow she was unable to speak. She blamed herself for getting him into this trouble. She had told him to come backstage—into the filth and grime of burlesque.

"Sure," Johnny said slowly, "I'll come with you, copper. Only I'm telling you I didn't have anything to do—"

Carol jerked at his sleeve. "Johnny I'm sorry—truly I am."

"It's all right," he said, his voice hollow.

Grady shooed everyone else away, made the crowd scatter. The girls walked back toward their dressing rooms, talking in low voices. Out front, a fourth-rate movie was still flashing across the screen. Carol stood there watching Johnny and the detective moving through the shadows, out of the theatre. She wanted to cry. She had dragged him into this; it was her fault. Johnny, with whom she had gone to Sunday school—his first day in New York. . . .

She went back to her dressing room and sat there, her head in her hands. King was dead now, she kept thinking; she'd finish this week, then she was through—through with burlesque forever. Or would the new owner hold her to the contract? Her soul was tormented. Death was in the air, making her shiver. A tear dropped across her cheek.

"Buck up, Carol," she told herself, "buck up!"

A shrill scream pierced the quiet backstage serenity. It sounded a second time, hardly a breath between the two screams. There was a cracking of gunfire.

Carol leapt to her feet, jerked open the dressing-room door. She saw a lithe figure disappear into the wings of the stage; and then she saw May Belle, face drawn, as though she had jaundice. She staggered through a stream of light that reflected from the screen. She was holding her side, and her hands were bright red. Blood dripped to the floor.

Suddenly, mouth open and choking out blood, she emitted one last mute gasp. She dropped and lay there in a heap. Blood welled from her body in crimson rivulets.

THE strip queen did not know what to do. For a split-second she stood paralyzed, unable to move. Her heart beat like a wild thing against her ribs, and she was cold with fear.

Finally she bent over May Belle, and as she did so, she heard the clatter of feet—girls rushing out to see what had happened, stage hands, the director. They were suddenly all around her. She thought it was strange that at first no one spoke. The awe was that of shocked horror. Then the voices broke, all at once, like a pent-up flood.

"You did it, Carol! You did it! She accused you of King's murder and—"

"Where's your gun, Carol? Look out girls, she probably still has it."

"Grab her, somebody! Grab her!"

She stood up, her eyes glazed, and faced them. She was magnificent as she stood there; and she was conscious of that, even then. The cheap, noisy mob was around her, pointing, hurling accusations. Carol Carter, slim, dynamic, with dark-complexioned face that was a mould of beauty, with ebony-black, coiled hair that contrasted a shimmering, blue velvet gown.

"I—I didn't do it," she said, and she was surprised at the calm in her voice.

A carpenter took her arm. The chorines' voices had risen to such a pitch that everything they said was jumbled together. Noise, noise—Carol hated it. She struggled angrily with the man who held her. She wanted to get out of this place, never to come back.

The picture was still on, the sound box blaring, the silver lights dancing across the canvas. The girls were coming at Carol now, rage shaking them, hands raised. . . .

"Get back, back!" she shouted. "I tell you I didn't have anything to do with this. I—"

"That's right—back, all of you!" a deep masculine voice barked.

The clamor gradually subsided, and

as it did, Carol could hear the wail of a siren outside. She turned and faced the man who had spoken. He was good-looking, with square jaw, high cheek bones, high forehead, too, and thin hair. His eyes were gray, like granite.

"I'm from the Department of Justice," he went on presently. You could have heard a pin drop now, Carol thought. She kept looking at the man as he talked. "I want all of you to cooperate with me."

"A G-man," some one whispered.

"Carol killed May Belle," said some one else. "She—"

"This young lady—" the Federal agent, turned, nodded to her—"your name?"

"Carol Carter." Her voice seemed far away. Then a surge of relief flooded up through her, for there seemed to be something very comforting about the G-man—a quiet assurance of safety which she had not felt in Grady's presence.

"Miss Carter did not commit this crime," the agent said. "It was done by a killer, 'Babyface' Johnny Martin. He wounded a detective—and the ambulance is out there for him now. He dashed back into the theatre. I just missed seeing him. The detective told me about it. This woman," he looked down at the corpse, "must have gotten in his way."

There was silence. Frozen silence, abated breath. But to Carol nothing was quiet. There seemed to be a shrill screaming echoing in her mind and making her dizzy. Johnny had said: "I'm making money just like you, kid." Johnny, the smooth, innocent-faced killer, public enemy number one, making his money through filth—as she did.

Carol shuddered. She could not believe it. Yet she had heard the G-man speak—heard him speaking, even now:

"Martin was evidently headed for Miss Carter's dressing room when this happened. In all probability, he is in this theatre yet. I am going to have

my agents surround it as soon as I can get to a phone. The rest of you—"

"But the show *must* go on!" the director shrieked.

Carol stared at him, the girls stared at him. It was ghastly.

"It can go on," the special agent said. "Miss Carter, I want to see you in your dressing room as soon as I have made this call."

Carol nodded. She still was not sure whether she was alive or in the middle of some hideous nightmare. She moved in the direction of the room.

THE G-man's name was Rick Hart, and Carol Carter had talked to him for ten minutes. Ten minutes was eternity now; she felt she had known him for eternity.

He sat on her wardrobe trunk, his legs dangling over, a cigarette in his hand; smoke occasionally streaming from the nostrils of his aquiline nose. She could see now how tan he was. His hair was brownish, crisp; a lock of it hung carelessly over his forehead. He seemed to be at ease, gay even; yet there was that tense undercurrent that she felt. He was alive, alert. His voice was low, calm.

Hart explained that he was not attached to the New York division of the F. B. I., but had been put on Johnny's trail way back in the Middle West and was still following him. Yes, he knew his name was really Marvin. Marvin's career had so far been very short—and very bloody.

"New York hasn't had much about him in the papers," he said, "because this is the first time he's come this far East—although there was a story after he cracked the City National Bank on Forty-second Street. Grady recognized him and wanted to get him out of the theatre to apprehend him so there wouldn't be any bloodshed. But Martin is a machine—a cold, killing machine—and he outwitted Grady. Funny that he has that babyish face, isn't it?"

"It's ghastly," Carol said softly.

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"What happened," Rick Hart went on quietly, dropping his cigarette and rubbing his heel over it, "is that King had his account in the City National. He must have been present when Johnny made his stickup—that is, he and Chopper Smith, the mobster he travels with. And when Johnny got backstage and King saw him, he knew he'd have to kill King to keep him quiet. So he stuck a knife in him."

"Johnny—doing *that*," Carol intoned. Yet she did not feel so badly about it as she had before.

She drew courage from Hart, courage—and faith. She looked into his grim gray eyes, and they told her mutely of protection even to death. She had heard, or read once, the line: "You can't beat the government. The cream of the country's young lawyers are trained to the breaking point of cold efficiency. They are America's regiment of crack crime fighters—the G-men." And she thought that Hart was all of that.

He lit another cigarette, and she was aware suddenly that he was looking at her differently, almost tenderly. A warm shiver ran to her toes. In the midst of terror and murder, queer thoughts were trouping across her mind.

He said: "Miss Carter—" his voice softened—"do you mind if I call you—Carol?"

She flushed, and she was trembling just a little. "Why, no; no, of course not."

"Thanks. What I was going to say was, you don't look to me like a strip dancer. I've seen them before, in other cities, and—" He paused, as though he were embarrassed.

Now it was she who was embarrassed; she didn't know why. She owed him no apologies for what she did. A few minutes ago, she hadn't even been aware that he existed. But now she gave him apologies, and she found herself hoping that he would take them and believe her.

"I was broke—had to take the job here. Then before I knew it, King was

featuring me and I was on a contract. Couldn't break it. . . ."

"Do you like it here?"

"I hate it—hate the cheap glamour, those coatless men out front whistling and stomping for girls to take off their clothes. The routine is death—four shows a day. You work all the time, and the hours are never your own. They make you old twenty years too soon, keeping that pace. And you ask me if I like it!" She laughed hollowly.

"I'm sorry," he said, a note of regret and sympathy in his voice. "I didn't know. I only guessed it from your face, and I was afraid to trust myself; that's why I asked you."

"I didn't mean to be so dramatic about it," Carol said, "but you see—"

"I know, and somehow I'm glad." He looked at the wall and smiled. It was a strange smile that did something to Carol. What was this feeling that seemed to be overpowering her, like a tonic? Did he feel it, too? Was it true that something—perhaps a kindred spirit in their personalities—had met and moulded as one? Foolish ideas, she thought; the ideas of a little girl. He was a G-man, and she was a strip queen.

She heard herself say, inquiringly: "You're glad?"

He looked at her, and he was blushing. "Yes." He got to his feet, moving forward. Then he stopped. "I think my men will be here by now. I've got to post them about." He was talking fast, and she knew he was nervous. She was happy because of that. Everything seemed to change.

She looked at the door as it closed behind him, and she turned toward her mirror, sighing.

A harsh voice from the back of the room clipped: "G-men are good on mush, aren't they?"

She turned, startled. Johnny stepped out of the clothes closet, a gun in his hand. The babyish face she had thought innocent, was twisted, hard as death itself is hard.

"I didn't want to bump him yet," he went on. "It'd be too hard to get out after the shooting."

"J-Johnny," was all that she could say. Cold terror pumped through her. She wanted to scream and run out the door.

JOHNNY MARVIN came over to her, his gun still in his hand. He pushed her shoulder about so that she faced him.

"Kid," he asked, "why do you think I risked coming East—showing myself in public? For you, of course. Now we're going to be sweethearts, just like before, see? You and me, kid, we—"

"Johnny, I—I didn't know you were a killer."

"Well, that—"

Fury rose within her. "I want nothing to do with you. Get out; get away from me!"

Red touched his cheek tips. "Listen, kid, you're excited, that's all. Excited, see? Hell, I'm as good-looking as ever, aren't I? And I've got jack—" he brushed back his coat and showed her a sheaf of hundred-dollar bills—"plenty of it. You're a nifty head yourself. We'd make a swell pair. Boy, would the gang envy me—Babyface Martin with—"

His vanity made her know that even her rage was wasted, and now she was afraid of him. Killer, slinking rat; twice tonight he had struck. She would be his victim, too. He would kill her. Yet, she managed to say:

"You're asking me to be your—"

"Moll—my baby. Say, we'd have some good times—some *swell* times."

"Dodging bullets, you mean? Killing people—little men, honest men, who work in banks, attend filling stations. Is *that* having a swell time?"

He laughed harshly. "Aw, you've got a conscience. But you'll get over that. Don't worry, I won't let *you* take any chances. I'll do the dirty work myself."

"Johnny," she said evenly, "you are different. You're bad. I hope they—"

"You aren't any saint yourself," he came back. "Out there shaking like jelly, taking your clothes off—"

"But it's work," she cut in, "and it's honest. As for you, the government will get you. They'll kill you Johnny."

"Other guys, Carol, maybe other mugs—not Babyface Johnny. I'm clever, and I've got a system, see? I want you to come with me. You'll see how swell everything is."

"Come with *you*?" Her voice was incredulous.

"Yes—now!"

She looked at him, and she saw death in his face—the babyish face of a hunted animal; a killing machine, Rick had said, quick of the trigger, utterly ruthless.

"But I can't run out on the show. I've got to go on soon." It sounded weak, but that was all she could think of. She had to stall.

"Then I'll meet you on the corner of Broadway and Forty-third as soon as you're through. That is, there'll be a car there for you—a big limousine. You get in it and—"

There was a knock at the dressing-room door. Johnny stiffened against the wall, his lips tight, his eyes narrow and glittery. He lifted the gun in his hand, whispered: "Say you can't be disturbed."

Carol looked at him, then at the door. She felt that it was Rick Hart out there; that Rick could save her from this killer. Yet she was somehow powerless to speak.

Babyface Johnny's upper lip curled. His face was a white mask as he moved forward and shoved the gun into her side.

RICK HART had heard Johnny Marvin talking. Babyface had spoken too loud. Carol knew that, and she was hoping against hope that Rick would not come in. Johnny would be merciless. He would burn him down, kill him. Strange how utterly much that mattered to her.

She said: "I'm busy. Please don't come in."

A relieved smile crossed Marvin's tight face. She saw that he was sweating. At that moment the door opened. Johnny whirled, snarling. He crouched, jerked the trigger of his gun.

The bullets screamed by Carol's head; one of them came within an inch, so that she felt its whirl of air. She saw Rick Hart, his tall figure bent, stumble. He clutched his side, and gun in hand, plunged into the dressing room past her, without firing a shot.

Babyface was backing, like a trapped beast. Carol looked almost unbelievably at his face, which was like carved stone, in which were two burning eyes.

Then Rick's police positive went into action, jerking in his hand, and Johnny was up and away from the first shot. The second he took—it hit him, even though he had been catapulting across the room at the time. The third missed. But the second bullet was in Johnny's shoulder. It jerked him around, like the hand of a monster. He went reeling against the wall.

He landed there with a thud, brought his gun up.

Carol saw Rick then—his calm young face, the square determined poise of his jaw, the coolness that was in his eyes. He was holding his hand over his side, firing with the other hand. And through it all there was a smile on his face, a deathless smile. A shiver of pride shot through Carol.

The guns of the two men crashed simultaneously. But Johnny, smooth, wiry, lithe, was not against the wall any more. He had fainted extreme pain when he slumped; he was now swerving across the room. The fed's bullet made a hole in the boards where Johnny had been.

Johnny's bullet sent Hart whirling around. He crashed to the floor. Johnny paused at the door, looked

back. He laughed what Carol thought was mad laughter. Then he was gone.

She rushed to Rick Hart, lifted his head in her arms. His eyes flickered, and he looked at her. There was still a slight smile twitching on his lips.

"I'll get that rat. I'll—" He lost consciousness.

People were gathering about the door of the dressing room. Carol got up.

"Some water—some bandages. . . ." As she spoke she heard the blare of a tin-pan band, the thundering applause from out front. The show was on. A lesser strip queen was finishing her act. The chorines were lining up at the wings. Now they were trouping on. The band toned up. The reedy voices of the girls blended as one.

"You'r a nobody's sweetheart now. . . ."

"Water," Carol was saying, "water. . . ."

IT was while she was nursing him back to consciousness, limp and helpless in her arms, his head in her lap, his tan face turned up to hers, that she realized the truth—that there was such a thing as love at first sight. She knew as well as she knew she was alive that she loved Rick Hart. At first she was frightened with this knowledge, then it thrilled her. . . .

Rick Hart could have remained outside the dressing room and waited for Johnny; could have hidden, shot him down when he tried to escape. Instead, he had come in, exposing himself because she, Carol, was in danger. He had done that for her. More, he had walked through a barrage of screaming lead, passed her, before opening fire. He had done that because he didn't want to take the chance of hitting her. That was how he had got his first wound, which had made him unequal to Johnny's cool trigger finger—for her. . . .

He looked at her, his eyes warm. "Next time we'll get him," he said, and he still spoke softly, gently.

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"I owe you so much," she whispered, "so very much, Rick."

In a moment he got up, looked at the closed door, listened perhaps to the music out front. He said: "I knew it would be like this when I met you. It was only a matter of finding you."

She remained sitting, and her Madonna face was very tender; so tender that there were tears in her eyes. "Oh, Rick, don't say any more. I'm so happy—and so afraid. . ."

She broke down, crying. It was strange, the sobs that choked from her throat. But she had been through a hell that she had loathed—a cheap dance routine, a squalid theatre engagement, the lonesomeness of a little girl lost in a big city without anybody to whom she could turn.

He touched her shoulder. But he said nothing. Words were no longer needed.

She dried her tears and looked at him, smiling. "I'm a little fool, am I not?"

He nodded. "My fool—and you're through burlesque after tonight."

"Through burlesque?" she echoed. It was like a dream, and it did her good to repeat those words aloud.

"Sure—" He hesitated, then went on: "But your life is in danger every minute Johnny Martin is free. We've got to find him!"

She looked up into his eyes. "Rick," she said softly, as though it were difficult for her to speak. "I owe it to you to help all I can in apprehending Johnny—and I will."

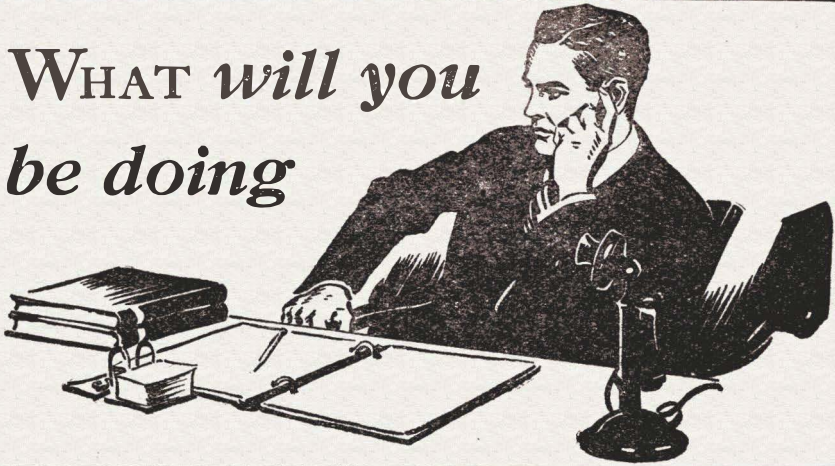
He was incredulous, and yet she could see how eager he was; how utterly much Johnny's capture meant to him.

Carol heard the music ending the number that was before hers, and for a moment she stood there facing him, a little breathless. She weighed everything in her mind, even the possibility of her own death. Then she said, speaking rapidly: "As soon as my number is over, follow me."

"Follow you? But—"

(Continued on page 118)

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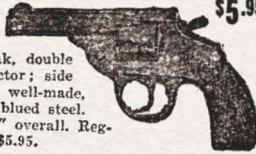
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(Continued from page 116)

"No questions." She tried to smile. "Please—just follow."

Before he could say any more, she had fled for the wing, was waiting to come on the stage. She caught her cue, straightened, and heard the voice through the microphones:

"The sensation of America, strip queen supreme—Captivating Carol Carter!"

She was conscious that death was in the audience, in the music, in the air. But she came on in a blaze of loveliness. . . .

THE audience was very quiet, and the boys in the band looked excited. She was trembling, but she saw the stage microphone, heard the music. She sang, her voice low, pulsating:

"You ain't been blue, no, no, no. . . ."

Her consciousness swirled into the mood—*Mood Indigo*. The warmth of her love for the footlights worked slowly up through her white body until she wanted to dance.

But even as she walked up and down, strutted, took off her jacket, then her dress, she kept telling herself that this was the last—the end of it all. She was glad, infinitely glad, and yet she gave her best to the part she was playing. And she was rapturous. . . .

Then she was thinking of Johnny, knowing that she would have to go to Johnny when she was through here—so that Rick could follow, and find him, and kill him.

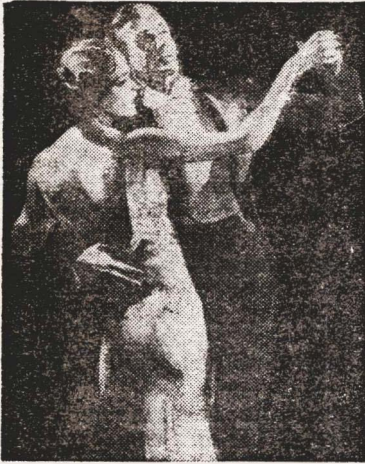
Before she was aware of how fast time went, she was on the stage without her dress. Her hands were about the back of her neck. Her body writhed, twisted, turned; her hips moved rhythmically back and forth.

"No No No"

She finished, and lights blacked her out. The roof shook with the tremendous applause.

Carol came off the stage, saw Rick

(Continued on page 120)



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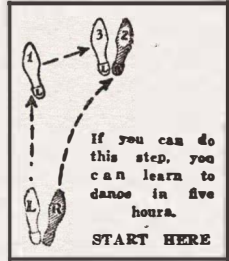
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(Continued from page 118)
near her dressing room. If he knew she was going to meet Johnny, he would stop her. She didn't dare go to the dressing room yet—she had nothing on. . . .

Then the director who had slipped out during her number to get himself a cup of coffee, came walking toward her, his slicker glistening with rain. He was slipping it off.

She ran to him, wrapped the rubber coat about her and dashed for the exit.

"Carol!" It was Rick who called to her. He was following.

She reached the street. It was dark, and rain was pouring down. But she did not hesitate, lest he catch her and make her stay inside. She ran down the sidewalk, brushed through the late night crowds on Forty-third Street. There was the sound of running feet behind her.

"Carol!"
She neared the corner and saw the limousine parked across the street, a man wearing a cap leaning over the window. She darted through traffic, almost slipped in the rain. The man in the car saw her, jerked open the back door. She leapt in. The car started at once, wheels whining, and pulled away from the curb.

"Carol. . ." Rick Hart's voice was lost in the rain.

THE big limousine roared up Sixth Avenue, weaving in and out between elevated posts. Chopper Smith glanced about, grinned. He watched the street again, speaking out of the side of his mouth.

"You got the stuff, all right—just like the boss said. He was sure you'd think it over. After all, there ain't many like Babyface Martin sporting fifty grand around."

Carol sat in the center of the plush cushions, shivering, terrified. What if Rick were unable to follow? What if he thought she was giving him up to go to Johnny because she loved Johnny? No, he *couldn't* think that.



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(Continued from page 121)

her mouth; her body gripped with the cold fever of fear. "Yes," she said wearily, "I decided to come to you, Johnny. . . ."

He looked down. "Chopper, you stay there in the hall, see? Get the Tommy-gun, and stay there until we're ready to go—just in case we have any more company, you know."

"Sure," said Chopper.

Carol wanted to cry at that; cry and scream. She was almost at the top of the stairs. "You seem afraid, Johnny, afraid of something." She tried to make her voice scornful.

"Fear and common sense are two different things," he snapped, and he grabbed her and dragged her up onto the landing.

"You don't have to pull me around," she told him. She looked down. If Rick came in now, he would be killed—die thinking she had drawn him into a trap. Her thoughts were incoherent, hysterical; yet she managed to appear calm in front of Johnny. She must do that.

"Come on," Babyface Johnny said, speaking like something automatic. A machine, Rick had said, a killing machine. "I've got to get my bag, then we'll get out of here."

"I'll wait for you."

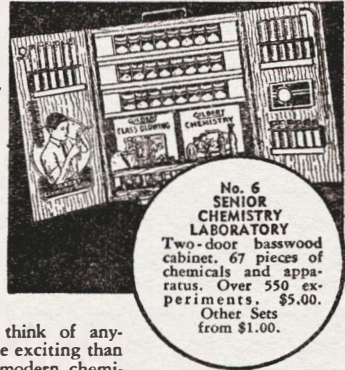
"Naw, c'mon into the room with me. Just take a sec', kid. Then we lam, see? You and I and Chopper. Aw say, we'll have some nifty times. Jeez, you look great kid, even in that slicker. Like a million bucks—that's how you look!"

She must not cry, she told herself; must not let Johnny see that she was afraid. She glanced down, over the rail, at the foyer below. Saw Chopper crouching under the staircase, a Thompson machine gun in his lap. He was smoking a cigarette. His eyes were hot, his face white. Rick, Carol thought, was to be his target. . . .

JOHNNY dragged her into the room. She felt as though she were just a doll—something subject to

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other peoples' wills. She stood at the door. Johnny's filled suitcases lay open on a bed; there were packets of money in the lining of the cases. He closed them up, buckled them, and turned to say:

"Gee, kid, it's good knowing you're always going to be around. . . ." He touched the slicker, brushed it back over her shoulder. "You—"

"Please," she said.

"Aw, kid—" He dragged her into his arms. She felt his hot lips on hers. She thought she would faint; the room seemed reeling. Rick Rick dying. . . .

Johnny was tense, a bundle of nerves. She knew that he was afraid; his life was like that—dodging the law, hiding, trembling at every sound.

"We'd better be going now," she said, but she didn't know how she was able to speak at all.

"Sure." He grabbed the cases, pushed her ahead of him. She was in the hall again, on the stairs, going down.

Her eyes were on the door. She saw that Chopper Smith was more tense now; he had put his cigarette out. He too, was watching the door. She knew then that that door was opening. Rick—a machine gun. . . . Oh—Rick!

She was on the stairs just over where Chopper Smith was crouched. Rick, the man she loved, was at the door—death's door. She could not help but shudder. She *had* to help him. She just couldn't stand back and watch him torn to pieces by bullets—not Rick. Yet, what could she do? She had no weapon. She had no—but yes—there was one weapon she had *always* had, and yet she had not been conscious of it. The weapon of a woman. . . .

She laughed, remembering this, and her voice was tight. Johnny was right behind her. "A woman's weapon," she told herself. And then aloud, she called:

"Chopper."

He glanced up, for only a moment. She whipped back the slicker, as

ugh it had been an accident. American number one strip queen. Smith stared, his eyes dilating.

The door burst open, then. Rick was inside, a gun in his hand. A moment ago he would have been dead, coming in like that. Now Smith had been distracted, and when he turned back to the gun, jerked at the trigger, he was that fraction of a second late that meant life or death—a fraction of a second. . . .

A short blast stuttered, but following the *wham* from the G-man's police positive, Chopper Smith fell over his gun, a bullet between his eyes.

But the short machine-gun blast had all but shattered Rick Hart's fingers. He dropped the gun he held as though it were a thing red hot; and he slumped back against the wall. Carol saw his tan face, his eyes like granite.

Johnny dropped the suitcases, hurdled the stair rail and dropped to the floor. He went for his gun, fumbling for it. But Rick was careening forward; and when the gun came into Johnny's hand, the G-man smashed it away.

Carol stood on the bottom steps unable to move. For a tense minute the two men faced each other without weapons. The livid face of Johnny Marvin, killer, ruthless machine of destruction—babyish face hard, without expression. Cool, undisturbed was the countenance of Rick Hart, G-man, a member of America's crack regiment of crime fighters. Both were men. Both had death in their hearts.

Marvin, though, was shaking, as though the snatching of his gun had left him powerless. He cringed back a little, and Rick Hart leapt forward. His fist lashed out, smacked against Johnny's jaw. His left fist followed to the body.

Johnny Marvin was a beast, trapped, cornered, fighting for his life. Carol saw him and Rick clash together. Saw a blur of fists, heard the grunting, the cursing. She saw them go down, writhing, struggling. She

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saw Johnny on top, reaching across the carpet for his gun.

And then Rick lifted his body and hurled Marvin backward. He staggered to his feet, and when Babyface got up, he slammed him down. Slammed him with a single punch of his right fist.

Babyface Marvin sat on the floor, crimson trickling from the corners of his mouth. He was a little boy with a baby face. He was frightened—scared. He began to cry because he had no gun, because the law was standing up and he, Johnny, was down.

"Don't—don't kill me!"

Other trapped beasts had cried that—those who had fired their guns ruthlessly, who had massacred innocent people.

Carol shuddered as Rick Hart reached down and put handcuffs on Johnny, dragged him to his feet.

Rick said: "It's been a long chase, hasn't it? But the end was written and planned even before the beginning, Johnny. You rats always wind up the same way. You wave a yellow flag and scream for mercy. Yes, the end is always the same."

NIGHT on Forty-second Street; Broadway, gay, gaudy and glamorous. Manhattan's mobs clamored—pushing, jamming, chattering people, who were avid for entertainment. Automobile brakes screeched, taxis swerved, trolleys clanged, subways rumbled underground, busses lumbered through traffic. People, lights, and the noise of laughter—New York at night. . . .

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