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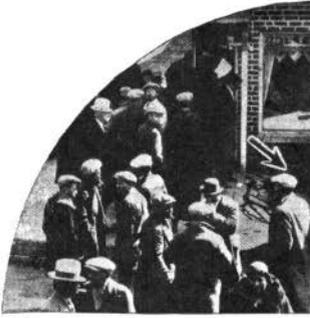
by **EDWARD S. WILLIAMS**

THE TONGUELESS BRIDE

NOVELETTE OF WEIRD MENACE

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DETECTIVE TALES



VOLUME TEN

AUGUST, 1938

NUMBER ONE

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6. **FROZEN ASSETS** *George Armin Shaftel* 30
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The jury that convicted Abner Wilkins of murder in the first degree was with him—one hundred percent!
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CUMMINGS SOLVES THE "PERFECT" MURDER . *Ray Cummings* 65
Two of your favorite authors play a game of murder. You are the judge—who wins?
11. **ODDITIES IN CRIME** *A Feature* 69
12. **THE CRIME CLINIC** *A Feature* 112

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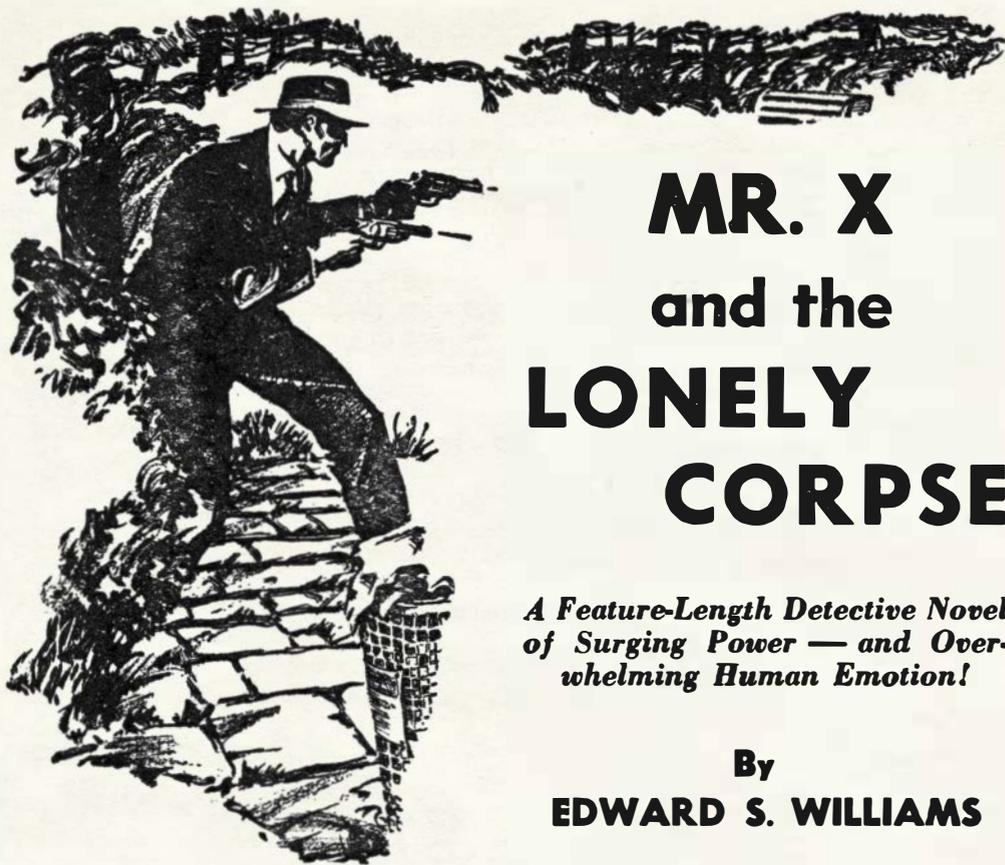
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MR. X and the LONELY CORPSE

*A Feature-Length Detective Novel
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whelming Human Emotion!*

By
EDWARD S. WILLIAMS

Duke Sprague's gangman's past loomed up to wreck his new life and mark him for the very murder rap from which he sought to save his brother and the girl he loved. Then, when death and defeat seemed certain to win, Duke unearthed two salient factors: Mr. X—and the lonely corpse!

CHAPTER ONE

Deadly Threat

THE PHONE rang and Sprague reached for it. He said, "Yes?"

The voice of Dubois, floor manager of the Club Cockatoo, came over the wire. "Duke," he clipped, "you remember a punk named Fiala?"

Duquesne Sprague—known to a few as Duke—frowned, narrowed his eyes in thought. Then he said, "Oh, yes! Cesare Fiala. What about him?"

"He's here, Duke. Says he's got something you'd like to hear. I told him you were—"

"Okay, Charley," Sprague cut in, "Send

him up." He started to prong the phone, but Dubois' voice, grating louder, stopped him.

"What was that?" he asked.

"I said—he's got a couple o' lugs with him I don't know—named Latson and Cochran. They look tough."

Duke Sprague's mouth tightened faintly. His eyes gleamed as he leaned forward over his desk. "Yeah," he said crisply, "I've heard of 'em. Barney Latson and Steve Cochran, and they're no lilies. But let 'em come. . . . Anybody else," he finished with a trace of sarcasm, "want to come up?"

"No—but seriously, Duke, don't you want me . . . sort of in the background? These guys're well-heeled, or I don't know

Gun-blasts split the stillness of the night . . . but Mayer was already down . . .



an arm-pit holster from a brassiere!"

"No. I'll handle it, Charley."

Sprague hung up, and gradually the pressure of his thin, wide mouth increased; his eyes glinted. He sat motionless, his rugged, sport-tanned face composed, but waiting with an alertness that showed in his eyes. He moved once: to open the middle drawer of his desk and to inspect briefly the .44 pistol with a one inch barrel that lay in the drawer. Then he heard the hum of the elevator and he put the gun back, its butt turned toward his right hand and with the drawer open enough to get his hand in.

Duke said, "Come in," in answer to the knock. He added, when the door opened, "Hello, Cesare! Long time no see."

"Hello, Duke," the man in the doorway said flatly, "That's right, isn't it?"

"Where've you been keeping yourself?"

"Oh—here and there."

For the space of a dozen heart-beats Cesare Fiala stood where he was, barring the other two out. Fiala was a moderately tall, thin man. He had beautiful hair: wavy, black and lustrous without looking greasy. His face was handsome in a dark way—or rather, it missed being handsome by so little that one looked at him again to see why. His small moustache was black and perfect; his skin had a blue look that told of a heavy beard, close shaved. His nose was aquiline, predatory. The mouth



and eyes . . . those were the features that did it! His mouth was too well-shaped, his lips too full to be strong. His eyes were restless, heavy lidded and long. He looked too much out of the sides of them. . . .

Cesare Fiala scanned Sprague's office rapidly. His veiled gaze touched the davenport and two chairs, done in chromium and faun leather. He took in the deep-piled russet rug, hunting prints on paneled walls, the satinwood desk behind which Sprague sat. Then Fiala showed too many perfect teeth in a smile as he entered.

He dropped his hat on the desk and sank into the chair nearest it. "Sprague,"

he said, "these boys are Latson and Cochran, two—associates of mine."

DUKE SPRAGUE looked at them both before he nodded. He didn't get up or offer to shake hands. Neither did they. Latson was fat, with little pig eyes and a roll of flesh around his neck over his too-tight collar. Cochran looked hard as iron. Whoever had fixed his nose last had made a bad job of it. He was as big as Sprague. He and Latson sat on the davenport, silent.

Fiala amplified, as though it might be a surprise to the others, "Sprague owns the Cockatoo, boys. You can relax, he speaks our language."

"Smoke?" Duke Sprague offered. "Or a drink?"

"No thanks," Fiala said; then, "Duke, I've got a little idea that I think's going to interest you. . . ."

"Yeah. . . ." Sprague's nostrils dribbled smoke slowly, "So Charley Dubois told me. Go ahead, Cesare—but remember that Sprague and the Club Cockatoo have been legal for a long time, now! There was a little something back in '32. . . . Repeal, I think they called it. Times have changed since then."

Fiala looked at him and smiled, mockingly. "You're smart," he said, "aren't you, Duke! Sure you're smart—you always were! Even when you were a kid, just coming into the racket. . . . How old were you then, Duke?"

"Oh, about eighteen."

"Eighteen! And all you had was a speedboat and lots o' guts! You were a smart rum-runner—smart enough to know that the *big* dough wasn't there. So you got out of it as soon as you had a stake. You cut yourself a piece o' territory right here in the heart of the white lights—while the big-timers were still too busy fighting each other to notice you. And when they got around to noticing, you were too big yourself for them to bluff. . . . Oh, sure, Duke! Times have changed, and you were smart enough to see it coming long before it got here. When Repeal came you were ready, with the Cockatoo—everything legal and legitimate. . . ."

"Legitimate!" Fiala laughed sardonically, "Duke Sprague legitimate—that is news!"

Sprague looked at the glowing tip of his cigarette, a faint, inscrutable curve to his thin mouth. But his eyes were not visible to the watching three. Then Duke drawled, "You've gone to a lot of trouble to dig up my noisy past, Cesare. What's the pay-off?"

Fiala leaned forward in his chair. "Duke," he clipped, "I could have gone to Forsythe, of the Mandalay, or Marchant, of the Fortune Club. They're your biggest competitors, but they're small-time stuff compared to what you used to be. You're about the last of the big-shots that's left, now. And you're wasting your time, Duke! Together, you and I can own the night-club racket in this town! *That's* my idea. . . . Like it?"

There was stony silence. Latson, the fat one, looked at Sprague out of small, reddish eyes, grinning. Cochran looked as though his face were a concrete mask, poured and set in a permanent scowl. Fiala waited, his long eyes gleaming with narrow calculation. Only Duke Sprague seemed unemotional and calm.

"Let's hear the mechanics of it, Cesare," he said.

"Simple!" Fiala rapped, "Times have changed, just like you say—but a stink-bomb still stinks, doesn't it? Acid still ruins velvet drapes and expensive rugs. People still sue when they get ptomaine in a restaurant—or a night-club! And who did it is still hard as hell to pin down. . . . But *you're* in the clear anyhow! I take charge of that end of it. . . ."

"We work on Forsythe's joint first, Duke. When he's had enough you step in and buy him out—for a song! Then Marchant. Then one or two other, smaller places, and after that we clean up! Why hell, Duke, it's better than Prohibition ever was, for the very reason that we're going to be legal and legitimate! After we get control there're no cops to fix—no politicians with a hand out. You take drinks alone: liquor can still be cut and if the chumps don't like it, where else can they go to spend their dough?"

"How much," Sprague asked quietly, "is your cut, Fiala?"

NOW you're talking!" Cesare Fiala's smile flamed, hotly triumphant. The other two edged forward on the

davenport, watching with unveiled, silent greed. None of them could see Duke Sprague's eyes. "Ten percent, Duke, of your increased take here—at first. Not much, is it? Just expense money for me. Then, I'll run the Fortune Club and get half the take there. Latson and Cochran get the Mandalay on the same basis. Reasonable, eh?"

"Is that all, Cesare?"

"Sure. That's . . ." Fiala started to answer, and then stopped. His mouth stayed open, his jaw lax. Sprague hadn't raised his voice or changed that slow drawl of his, but Fiala recognized the sudden chill in it. He saw the controlled, smouldering flame in Sprague's eyes, and his own narrowed to dangerous, glinting slits.

"What d'you mean *all*, Sprague! I'm giving you first chance at this. My price might go up if you can't make up your mind!"

Duke said, "Fiala, I told you times have changed—but some people never learn. Some are too stupid to learn. You're one of them."

"Why you—"

"Sit down! I'm not through yet." The .44 was in his hand with unexpected, paralyzing swiftness. Latson hadn't moved, but Cochran started to grab at his left arm-pit. He paused, holding a strained, awkward pose.

Duke Sprague spoke unevenly, "Whatever I may have been, Fiala, five years ago—or ten—I'm legitimate now. I told you that, too, but you couldn't understand it. You never will—but let that go and get this! Times have changed for the better, I think. I like being legitimate. I'd like to see this city cleaned of rats like you. . . ."

"Steady, Cochran!" he paused, and the menacing muzzle of the gun moved three inches to the left.

Duke continued, "Fiala, I've never killed a man in my life! Oh, I know you don't believe that. I know all the stories about Duke Sprague—I started a lot of them myself. But I never killed anybody while I was in the racket because the racket wasn't worth that to me. I was out to make a sudden fortune, and if I broke some of the rules in doing it, at least I'm not a killer. . . . But, Fiala, I'm legiti-

mate now, and that's worth a lot to me. Maybe it's worth a killing or two! Understand?"

Sprague stopped and an intense silence gripped the room. Slowly, very carefully, Cesare Fiala rose. He jerked his head toward the door and the two on the davenport got up and edged that way. Fiala snarled, "Just remember, Sprague, I offered you first chance at this. I didn't know you'd gone yellow! I thought—"

"Get out, Fiala," Duke said.

"Okay. I'll get out. And maybe the next time, you'll come to me!"

He turned, and at the same time the door opened from without. The man who opened it stopped on the threshold, staring. Even with his frightened, blood-shot eyes, his outstretched, trembling hand, he looked surprisingly like Duke Sprague. He looked younger, weaker, softer, but he was of the same build, with the same nose and chin and jaw. He stammered jerkily, "I—I—pardon me, Duquesne. I should have knocked, but—"

"Come on in, Preston," Duke spoke grimly, "These — gentlemen — are just leaving."

Fiala's eyes and smile were wolfish as he strode past the man in the doorway. Latson and Cochran followed. Cochran went last, but before he did he paused, looked at Sprague, and spat deliberately on the russet rug.

The door slammed so hard that the latch didn't hold; it re-bounded, stayed open a crack. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Death for a Dancer

DUKE SPRAGUE looked up at his brother and smiled. It wasn't a pleasant smile: it was a mingling of that former, still controlled rage, of disgust, and a faint tinge of something like contempt. But if Preston Sprague noticed, he gave no sign of it.

"What—who was that?" he faltered.

"Does it matter much," Duke asked, "to you?"

Color mounted in his brother's white face. He snapped, "You know very well it matters, Duquesne! Everything you do matters. The disgrace you've brought to our family is enough already without add-

ing. . . . But I didn't come here to quarrel with you. Let's not start that again. I—" he stopped, paling again slowly.

Duke said, "I wasn't aware that I'd started it, Preston, or even contributed to it. . . . How's the governor? How're Janet and Arthur and the rest of the holy Spragues that I've disgraced so thoroughly?"

"They're well." Preston jerked his words. He swallowed; sweat stood out in small beads on his forehead.

Duke waited. There was a moment of silence before he spoke again, and when he did his tone was different. Even his expression changed subtly — softened — when he asked, "And your wife? Ellen's well, I hope?"

"She's . . . yes."

Again that strained pause, but as always when he saw this brother of his, Duke's mind went back to the "family" that had disowned him, stricken his name from its records. The family that never mentioned him, that had forgotten his very existence — except in moments of financial stress!

That didn't bother Duke Sprague much, now. He had got over, long ago, the youthful bitterness that had driven him — at eighteen — into the rum-fleet. He remembered perfectly the boy he had been: wild, headstrong, almost unmanageable. Perhaps, he considered now, his father had been right in disowning him. Certainly it had worked out better all around, for Duke Sprague could never have survived the tradition-bound, ultra-respectable — to him, utterly futile — existence his father seemed to think proper for a Sprague. And if his father had been wrong in abandoning him, so had he been wrong in the first career he had chosen for himself.

Duke tried to be fair with the family that made no effort to be fair with him. It was *his* money that had bolstered the Sprague fortune in '29 — and saved most of it. But this brother of his, Preston, the pillar of refinement, the paragon of virtue, the pride of the Spragues, awoke resentment in Duke by his very presence! Duke Sprague knew his brother better than anyone else knew him — except perhaps Ellen, his wife. . . .

His voice hardened, the contempt in his eyes became dominant when he said,

"Well — what's wrong? What d'you want this time, Preston?"

"Duquesne," he blurted, "you've got to help me."

"I didn't think," Duke submitted, "that this was a social call. Stop sniveling, and—"

"It's that woman, Duquesne — that woman of yours who—"

Duke Sprague came out of his chair with the lithe swiftness of a panther. Preston recoiled, fear twisting his mouth. He panted, all but shouting, "I—I don't mean it *that way!* It's Carmencita, that dancer."

Slowly Duke relaxed. His breath came a little faster, flaring his nostrils, but his voice was even. "Carmencita," he said, "is no *woman* of mine. She dances here, that's all. What you mean, you hypocrite, is that you've got yourself into a jam with one of my entertainers — with Carmencita! Is that it?"

"Well, I—"

"Have you?"

"Yes."

And suddenly Duke Sprague laughed. Without humor, he leaned back in his chair and laughed softly until Preston choked out, "But Duquesne, you—you can't let her ruin me! You can't let her drag what you've left of Sprague honor and dignity through the mud of scandal—divorce. You simply can't! I—I'll kill myself! I swear it!"

"Can I depend on that?" Duke inquired.

"Depend . . ." the wild light in Preston's eyes died slowly. In its place a gleam of cornered cunning flashed — to be veiled instantly. "Listen, Duquesne, I'll submit to any terms you say — if you'll only lend me the fifty thousand. I'll—"

"Fifty thousand!"

"Yes. Look — here's her note. She says she'll keep quiet if . . ."

Duke stretched a hand for the crumpled, folded sheet of paper Preston fumbled from his wallet. He read it carefully, recognized at once the brash, uneven scrawl of Carmencita — born Lily Krug, on 8th Avenue, but star dancer, now, of the Club Cockatoo. There was no date, no heading nor signature. It said baldly:

"Listen, Sprague, I've had enough of your stalling. I want mine and you know how much. I want it now — right away. Or else I'll do some talking — thru my lawyer!"

"Duquesne," Preston panted, "I wouldn't ask this for myself. I—I'd get out of it somehow. But—Ellen—she—"

"What about Ellen?" Again there was that subtle difference in his voice at the mention of her name.

"She—she's going to have a baby! The shock of this might—"

"You miserable rat!" Duke spoke through clenched teeth, "And knowing that you've got yourself into . . ." and then he rose. Again his brother retreated before those blazing eyes. But Duke followed, caught his coat lapels in a fist that trembled with the force of his grip. "Preston!" he flamed suddenly, "You're lying! You knew the only way you could get anything out of me was through Ellen. You never loved her—it's her money! And now that there's a chance of your losing that, you've invented this 'baby' for my benefit. Damn you, is that it?"

His eyes confirmed it. He couldn't meet Duke's searching gaze. Preston mouthed, "You—you mean you won't—help me?"

"I mean just that. Get out."

"But the note . . ."

"I'll keep the note."

"Duquesne—please listen . . ."

"Get out!"

DUKE SPRAGUE rose finally from his chair, with the note still in his clenched fist. He stood for a moment, scowling at it, the mixed emotions of a mental struggle still clogging his mind. Then he tossed it savagely into his wastebasket and turned, pulled a cord that hung beside rust-colored drapes on the wall behind his desk. The drapes parted, revealing through a huge panel that seemed to be clear glass, the whole floor of the Club Cockatoo. But no one below saw Sprague. The 'glass' was a mirror, from the other side—a diaphanous mirror through which he could see and not be seen.

For some time he stood looking down at the suave luxury, the quiet richness of furnishing, and the superb service that were hall-marks of the club. There was a good crowd, he noticed subconsciously. The dark surface of the dance floor was comfortably filled with moving couples; the music that came from beneath him in a muted throbbing undertone, was vaguely pleasant. Gradually his mood changed

from one of blind, fighting rage, to a dull bitterness.

He knew he'd have to do something about Preston and Carmencita: he'd have to put a stop to blackmail. However richly Preston may have deserved the consequences of his hypocritical folly, it amounted to blackmail. And the Cockatoo, Sprague told himself, wasn't a clip-joint. Yes, he decided grimly, he'd talk to the girl. . . . Then he saw Ellen!

For a moment everything else faded from his mind. The fact that she was Preston's wife—that he was Duke Sprague, an ex-gangster—vanished under the spell of Ellen's beauty. He remembered her when she had been Ellen Parkes; vividly he remembered the night when she had said, "It's no good, Duke. We couldn't make a go of it. . . . It's funny, Duke, but I think I'd like you less if you tried to change—on my account."

And of course she was right. He'd seen that, but neither of them had foreseen then the end of an era—the end of Prohibition. Times had changed, and Duke Sprague had changed. But Ellen—was now Preston's wife.

He came back to reality with jarring force; that brought him back! Ellen was here, alone. Did she know, he wondered grimly, or suspect Preston's duplicity? Had Carmencita already talked . . .?

Ellen Sprague sat at a table on his left, as he stood looking down. It wasn't a very good table: it was too near the bar, near the drape-hung entrance to the corridor leading past the orchestra shell to dressing rooms and service entrance at the rear. And as he watched, Ellen rose and vanished through those drapes! Duke swore softly. Carmencita's dressing room opened onto that corridor. Was Ellen going to try to see her?

Abruptly he dropped the tapestry that covered the mirror, and turned—stopped again. Would it be better to intrude upon Carmencita and Ellen together, or to wait and see the dancer alone? Undecided, he strode slowly toward his door and out into the hall that gave entrance to two storage rooms as well as to his own office. There were stairs, but Duke touched the call button of the small automatic lift. He entered it when it came, went down. . . .

He saw Ellen again when he turned into

the corridor from the service entrance, but she didn't see him. She came out of the dancer's room and closed the door. She was very pale. Her eyes were wide and unseeing; her lower lip was caught between her teeth. Duke made no effort to stop her as she hurried back to the front of the club. The drapes hid her, and Sprague knocked at Carmencita's door. . . .

There was no answer. Suddenly he gripped the knob.

For a long minute Duke Sprague crouched beside the beautiful, still body of the dancer. Carmencita retained even in death the dark, passionate beauty that had characterized her dancing. Her blue-black hair was smooth and lustrous, pulled back on each side of her head from a center part. The mantilla and high comb were still in place on her head. The Spanish shawl that molded her lovely figure was swirled about her slim legs almost as though it had been arranged purposely. Her whole pose was like a figure of her dance: as if she would spring lightly to her feet in a moment, and smile, and pirouette away. But she wouldn't!

The file was driven deeply into her breast. It was an ordinary nail-file, perhaps seven inches long—thin and straight. Carmencita's hand was still warm when Duke Sprague touched it. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Mr. X

HIS eyes swept the room. Standing in the middle of it, Sprague searched for something, anything, that might give him a lead. His mind was like a confused hawk, striking at moving shadows through a curtain of fog. Ellen . . . Preston . . . Fiala . . . Time, too, might be an element of prime importance. Fiala had left—well, not more than twenty minutes ago. Preston had been with him for eight or ten, and then, perhaps, ten more minutes had elapsed while he sat alone, wrapt in thought. Then he had seen Ellen come back into the dimly lighted corridor. . . .

Why!

Murder, he thought grimly, needs a motive. Of the three, only Preston had an obvious motive. He was desperate—that much was plain—but was he capable of

deliberate murder? Of *this* kind of murder? Without answering that, his mind jumped again to Ellen. She hadn't done it—she *couldn't* have! Not even her loyalty—if not her love—would lead her to this. But a nail-file . . . wasn't that a woman's weapon? Seeing it on the dressing table under her hand, wouldn't a woman instinctively use it, if she planned murder?

And then his mind darted back to Fiala with sudden, numbing impact. Cesare Fiala wanted to control the night-club business of the whole city—wanted to make a racket of it. He had failed in his first approach. Could he have sensed a new angle in Preston's visit? Been listening at the door while Preston blurted his sordid trouble? Could he have caused the dancer's death as the first move in some scheme to trap Duke, force him into compliance with Fiala's plan?

Sprague paused abruptly over the littered, untidy dressing table beside which the murdered dancer lay. Questions, theories, vanished from his mind as he bent closer, studying carefully the dusty top of the table. It was of glass, coated thickly with accumulated layers of face-powder. Outlined in the powder he saw clearly the imprint of the nail-file, where it had lain on the table. And beside the handle end of the file were four clear streaks on the glass. The marks of four fingers, as a murderer had swept the file into his hand?

Sprague peered intently at the broad, tell-tale marks, and then bent again over the protruding handle of the file. It was clean; he could see no finger-prints on the smooth, bright steel handle, and the four streaks on the table-top were too smeared to be of any value as prints. But Duke Sprague smiled suddenly, narrowly. Whatever had happened, finger-prints or none, he knew one thing that mattered! He had eliminated one of his suspects! With a final glance at the body of Lily Krug, Sprague turned toward the door. As he closed it carefully behind him, he noticed that the door of the adjoining dressing room was open.

For an instant he stood motionless, regarding it. That room was not in use—had not been occupied for the past month. His sole star, for a month, had been Carmencita; the girls of the chorus used the

general dressing room on the other side of the band shell. It didn't connect with these two smaller, private rooms. And Sprague felt sure that this door had been kept closed, if not locked. But it was open now.

Instinctively his hand dropped to the gun that was in his coat pocket, where he had placed it after his interview with Fiala. Using his knuckles he pushed open the door and stepped forward into darkness. There was no sound, no movement. Light, as he snapped the switch near the door, revealed nothing. . . . But there was something wrong! He sensed it, even though he couldn't place it. Then, suddenly, he knew what it was! There was a faint, tenuous odor of tobacco smoke, almost dissipated, but still there. At the same time, he saw the flattened, yellow-stained cigarette butt on the floor.

He picked it up carefully. It was still moist; it wasn't dried out as an old butt would be. And it wasn't one of any of the standardized, machine-made brands! That cigarette had been rolled by hand from flake-cut, not shredded, tobacco! Duke placed it in a pocket of his wallet—and then whirled at the sound of footsteps in the corridor. . . .

DUBOIS met him at the door of Carmencita's room. Dubois ranged, "Damn her! She's missed her cue. She's balled up the whole act! She—she—some-day, Duke, I'm going to kill that phoney Spanish hooper, so help—What's wrong!" He paused with his hand outstretched toward the knob.

Duke gripped his wrist. He clipped, "You won't have to kill her, Charley—somebody's beaten you to it!"

"Somebody—" Dubois gasped, "You mean she—she's dead? Murdered?"

Sprague nodded. "Listen, Charley, I think we're on some kind of a spot. I'm telling you . . ."

"Spot! Duke, what the hell—"

"Shut up, Dubois! I'm talking. I'm telling you this because I want it known—now—just in case I need it later. . . . Fiala tried to sell me a scheme to turn night-clubbing into a racket—and run it between us. I threw him out."

"And he tagged Krug, y'mean, t'get—"

"Wait. Preston, my brother—you know him?"

"Sure—the poisonous rat! I saw him come in. I'd have stopped him, but—"

"Good! Preston had himself out on a limb—for fifty grand—with Carmencita. She was blackmailing him, and he wanted me to pay off. I threw *him* out."

Dubois breathed, "Sweet damn!"

"And Preston's wife—Ellen . . . well, she was here tonight."

"Yeah!" Charley Dubois looked at him strangely, then blurted, "Knowing how—how you feel about—Mrs. Sprague—maybe I oughtn't to say this, Duke. But she came back-stage, too. And then she left a few minutes ago in the devil of a hurry. She wasn't with that brother of yours either. She came in alone."

Duke grunted. "Ummm, so you saw her, too." Then he snapped, "Charley, you're not to talk! Understand? I'm going to find out what's back of this, and you're to keep your face buttoned until I tell you. Got it?"

"Sure, Duke," he shrugged, "whatever you say."

"Okay. Now get that floor-show going again, somehow, and then call the cops. Try to get Lieutenant Bruhl—he's got more sense than most of 'em. And let me know when they get here."

Duke turned on his heel and strode back toward the elevator to his office. There in his waste-basket was a note that was addressed simply, "Listen *Sprague* . . ." His name was Sprague, too. That note, in the wrong hands, would be misunderstood. It might even. . . .

Two minutes later Duke Sprague accepted the probability that the note was already in the wrong hands. It was no longer in his basket. His phone rang.

"Yes?" he said.

Dubois was hoarse, staccato. "Duke, I didn't have to call the cops—they're here! Somebody beat me to *that*, too. They're lookin' for you. What'll I—"

"Hold 'em Charley," Duke rasped, "Hold 'em one minute, and keep your mouth shut. I'm leaving."

SO IT was a frame—and whose frame was it!

Duke Sprague didn't drive the long, low-slung roadster that half the cops in town would see and recognize blocks away. He went out his back door, into

the alley that led from the club's service entrance. He had on a gray hat and a top-coat, turned up at the collar, to hide his white tie and tails. He got into a cab farther down the street, and gave the driver his brother's address.

A frame—but whose! Fiala? What could he hope to gain by calling in the police. Assume he had the note that Carmencita had written to Preston. Assume that Fiala had been eavesdropping and knew all about Preston's trouble—what could he hope to gain by spilling it to the police? That didn't add up. . . . But wait a minute!

Somebody—who rolled his own cigarettes—had been in the dressing room next to Carmencita's. There was the X, the unknown quantity in this murder equation! X might be the murderer himself, or he might know who was—probably he did. He might have got out of the room while Duke was in the dancer's room, might have gone upstairs and got the note out of the basket. Might have called the cops to divert suspicion while he used the note for his own purposes. . . . No! That was screwy, too. How could he know about the note? *Everybody* couldn't have known about it, and X was a distinct person—a fourth suspect. None of the others smoked hand-rolled cigarettes. Duke felt very sure of that.

It all pointed back to Preston, and it brought a savage, ruthless light to Duke's eyes as he considered—almost reluctantly—that Preston must have notified the police. Preston knew that Duke had the note, and for all he could prove now, Preston *alone* knew it! Had he killed Carmencita, and sought to pin the crime on Duke by sending the police unexpectedly, to find the note in Duke's possession?

It wasn't a pretty thought, but Duke Sprague was driven to thinking it as his cab pulled to the curb and stopped. He paid the driver and while the taxi rolled away he stood looking at the house, set back from the street in a broad, well-kept lawn. Big trees threw the place into shadow, but there was a lighted window in the lower, eastern side of the house.

Acting on impulse, Duke avoided the gravel walk. He kept to the shadows and as he approached the window he found he could see inside through the unclosed slats

of the venetian blind. There were two men in the room: Preston, and another—a thin, dark man with slits for eyes and a mouth that was like a healed knife-slash. Duke didn't know him, but it wasn't the stranger who held his gaze. It was Preston!

His brother's face was grey. He sat slumped in a chair, his head and eyes turned upward to the dark man. His eyes were glazed and staring, and his hands clenched and opened spasmodically. The other talked. Duke couldn't hear his words, but his voice was a harsh, grating sound, his face was a leering mask.

That strange scene ended even more strangely! Preston Sprague's hands shook visibly as he drew a pin-seal wallet from his coat and emptied it of bills. He held out the small wad of them and the dark man took it, counted briefly, then nodded. He said something else and turned toward the door.

Duke spun away from the window. Turf muffled his retreating footsteps as he hurried toward the street.

CHAPTER FOUR

Death of Mr. X?

THE dark man walked unhurried, yet purposefully: like a man with a definite destination. Duke followed as far in the rear as he could without losing sight of his quarry, but the other never turned to look back. Gradually Sprague's mind relaxed from the job at hand to grapple again with the whole problem.

This new element changed matters, complicated it still further. On the face of it, Preston was being blackmailed again—and this time he was paying! How much, Duke didn't know: he doubted that his brother would carry more than a few hundred dollars in his wallet. But that wasn't the point. It was more blackmail! Preston's face, his whole expression and attitude when he had handed over the money, was one of helpless, abject fear. But fear of what . . . ?

An answer came, readily enough. Too many answers came! This man whom he was tailing could be X—the unknown quantity—the man who smoked hand-rolled cigarettes and who had been in the dressing-room adjoining Carmencita's. He

could have seen Preston enter her room—possibly he had witnessed murder. Or he could be the one who had taken the note from Duke's waste-basket. And either, in view of Carmencita's death, would be good grounds for blackmail. But if the latter were the case, how had he known of the note? And in either case, why bother to send cops to the Club Cockatoo?

It went on, block after block, as Duke strode after the man ahead. He could make no sense of it; no matter how he looked at it, the thing didn't add up. But his futile thinking game came to an abrupt end when the other turned in toward a dark entrance between two stores. Sprague slowed cautiously, but the man still gave no sign of alarm. He drew a key-case from his pocket, opened the door and went in, and Duke came on rapidly.

He had hardly been aware, before, of his surroundings, of where he was being led, but he observed it keenly now. The street was a typical small business and professional center, such as dot residential sections of every large city. Groceries, cleaning establishments, drug stores, alternated with small clothing shops, a liquor store and a restaurant or two. Businesses occupied the ground floor of buildings, and above were dentists and lawyers offices, real estate brokers. . . . The door he was watching was between a grocery and a hardware store. Sprague looked to see what was above and as he did light illumined the second floor window. The sign lettered on it announced, METROPOLITAN DETECTIVE AGENCY, and his eyes glinted narrowly. He tried the knob of the door. It yielded and he went into a dark cubicle that led to the stairs.

Light from the frosted glass door at the head of the stairs guided him up. The sign was repeated on the door, with the added line: Theodore Mayer, Prop. The name meant nothing to him, but the set-up seemed suddenly clearer. Theodore Mayer, he mused grimly, a fly-by-night private dick, no doubt, who had got wind of Preston's trouble and was cashing in on it! But even as his hand touched the knob of the door, he drew it back and leaned closer, listening.

He heard the sound of the phone-dial clearly. Then there was a wait, accompanied by the tuneless whistling of the

man inside the office. Mayer himself, undoubtedly; and the whistling broke off with a sudden inquiry.

"Hello—is this Mrs. Sprague?"

Mrs. Sprague! Duke's hand on the frame of the door tightened until his nails dug into the wood. Ellen! What. . . . But it must be she! And Mayer's tone changed, became suavely ingratiating.

"Mrs. Sprague, this is Theodore Mayer, of the Metropolitan . . . yes. . . . As you know, I've been working on your case, and I have something now that I think will interest you. . . . How's that? . . . Oh, yes! I think you'll agree that it's of the gravest importance. So grave that I can't talk about it in this way. Can you meet me—say in half an hour?"

There was a long pause, but Ellen must have assented. Mayer said, "Fine! Make it Westend Park. Do you know where the Spanish War monument is located? Good. Meet me there in half an hour."

Duke heard the click of the phone as it was dropped back onto its base. He heard the scrape of Mayer's chair, but he was down the stairs and out before the light vanished. Westend Park was well enough known to him. He thought he could find the monument without the necessity of tailing the man again. Two blocks away he hailed a cruising cab. . . .

DUKE arrived at Westend Park first. The stone bulk of the monument loomed above him, shapeless and towering in the dark. The base of it was square, with a bench on each side, all deserted at this hour. Flagstone walks approached from four directions, and in each angle of their convergence were banked evergreens in a dark, screening mass. This monument, he thought grimly, was an ideal spot for almost any clandestine meeting—or any crime! But Ellen. . . .

Duke stepped into one of those clumps of shrubbery. He was completely hidden. He crouched down, waiting, and again his mind refused to accept the evidence of his senses. For the evidence said that Ellen had hired a private detective, and the only obvious inference was that she had done so in order to have Preston watched. But it was so small, so tawdry—so unlike the Ellen Parkes he had known!

Unwillingly, Duke thought again that times had changed—that time changes all of us. From a gangster, however essentially decent he had tried to be about it, time and circumstances had changed him into a legitimate business man. Not only that, but one willing to fight to retain his legitimacy. From a handsome, charming weakling, time had changed his brother, Preston, into a double-dealing coward, a moral bankrupt, perhaps a murderer—or worse! For Duke remembered the unexpected arrival of the police at the Cockatoo. And now Ellen had hired a blackmailing private dick to . . . No! There must be another explanation. He refused to believe that Ellen. . . .

A moving shadow, coming from behind the stone monument, banished thought. It was a man's figure, vague and formless in the deep gloom, but Duke recognized Mayer instantly. For a moment the detective circled the small square warily, on rubber heels. Then, satisfied, he sat down to wait.

Sprague was aware of small, indefinable movements of his hands. Mayer fumbled in his pockets, brought out something—and suddenly Duke Sprague's breath caught. He saw the small oblong of white in the man's left hand. Straining to see, he caught the shaking movement of his right. Then both hands came together about the white oblong—a cigarette paper? Was Mayer rolling a cigarette?

He was! Mayer was X, and X was no longer unknown. Mayer was going to blackmail Ellen as well as Preston. He must have seen her, too, when she went into Carmencita's dressing room. *And Mayer must know who had killed the dancer!*

The flare of the match brought confirmation. It was an unevenly hand-rolled cigarette. Mayer's face was leering, sardonic in the light. And Duke almost lunged at the man—almost betrayed himself—then crouched low again. The click of her heels on the flags heralded Ellen's approach. Mayer heard it. He rose to meet her.

"Good evening, Mrs. Sprague," he drawled in his harsh, jeering voice, "or should I say morning? It was good of you to meet me."

"Yes—yes, of course" Ellen's clear,

soft voice was richer, even more vibrant than he had remembered, Duke thought. She went on, "But my real reason for coming, Mr. Mayer, was to tell you that our—business—is concluded. And to pay you your fee. How much . . .?"

"My fee?" Mayer purred with all the sinister smugness of a well-fed tiger, "but my dear Mrs. Sprague, I assure you that our business is just beginning!"

"Beginning!" Ellen's breath caught sharply. "You're mistaken, I think. The dancer—Carmencita—whom I hired you to watch . . . is dead."

"Quite," he laughed, "I agree. But that only makes me all the more necessary to you. Your husband, Mrs. Sprague, unfortunately, was seen to enter the dancer's dressing room just before she was found—in that condition. And I happen to be the sole witness to the fact! I can report it, and you can be rid of a— shall we say, an unworthy husband? Or, I can . . ."

DUKE heard her gasp, heard the sharp contact of the purse she carried against Mayer's face. And her voice, anger-filled, "You filthy beast! I didn't hire you to spy on my husband! I didn't—"

"Or—" Mayer's tone lost all pretence of suavity—"can report with equal truth that *you* were seen to enter that room just before Carmencita was discovered—dead!"

Duke Sprague smiled. His gun was in his hand as he rose silently and stood poised—but if there was killing in his mind, there was a vast relief in his heart! Ellen hadn't changed! She was the same, loyal—even to Preston. She must have known about his affair with Carmencita. She'd hired Mayer to watch Carmencita, not Preston. And the only inference from that was that her purpose was to find some ground for a counter-threat, if the dancer tried to make good her own threat!

He still smiled as he inched forward. He had to get close before he was seen, for he couldn't risk a shot with Ellen between himself and Mayer. And even then, he had to get Mayer alive—for the man was the sole witness to murder! But a circumstantial case against any one of many suspects could be turned, now, into an eye-witness case against a real killer!

A twig cracked under his foot and Duke

froze. But Mayer's voice had covered the sound. Mayer rasped, "Which shall it be, Mrs. Sprague? Your husband—yourself—or my silence? *You* make the choice, then we'll discuss my foe!"

Ellen was still silent. Duke took another step—and suddenly the roar of a gun shattered the silence. The flame of it came from the opposite clump of greenery. Again and again the gun spoke with staccato violence, and all of them stood paralyzed. Then the spell broke! Theodore Mayer staggered backward, clawing at his throat. He hit the stone behind him with an audible, sickening thud, stood upright for an instant, supported by it, then slid slowly down. Ellen Sprague screamed—and ran. With a smothered, raging oath, Duke spun and plunged toward the clump from which the shots had come.

It was empty now. Surging, fighting his way through thick, inter-laced branches, Duke emerged on the other side. He caught a distant, swift movement far across an open grass plot and he ran that way, still cursing. Cursing himself, for if Mayer died—if he were already dead. . . . Lord, what a fool he'd been to let it come to this! Why hadn't he simply stepped into Mayer's office, got him when he could, and beaten the truth out of him! Why hadn't he realized that Mayer was the unknown X, when he had seen him so obviously blackmailing Preston!

Preston!

It could be Preston who had shot Mayer! He could have seen Ellen leaving the house, and followed her.

Duke ran with all the power in his lean, fit body. He ran blindly for the most part, led by the sound of the other's crashing

progress in the bushes. He saw him only once. That was when they both ran along the banks of a small lake. Duke sensed, more than saw, the other's momentary loss of stride, and the blurred movement of his arm over his head. Then he heard a faint splash in the water. And in the same moment, Duke fell.

He went down hard and his head hit the exposed root of a tree. There was an instant of blinding pain, of flashing light, then darkness . . . nothing.

CHAPTER FIVE

Again Fiala

DUKE SPRAGUE'S return to consciousness was a long-drawn, agonizing struggle. It was like—his mind fumbled for a simile as he lay staring up at a dingy ceiling—like a drowning man, deep in smothering water, fighting his way to the surface. Or like a sleeper striving to awaken from a terrifying nightmare. And having attained full consciousness Sprague lay motionless, exhausted, but with a clear mind at last!

The pain in his head took him back. He remembered now what had happened. Grimly he recalled the shooting of Theodore Mayer; his chase after the unknown gunman; his fall. But all that had taken place in Westend Park and he was lying on a bed, now, in a room with dirty, faded wall paper. Strange—or perhaps not so strange! The recollection of his nightmare returned, of wandering, stumbling along dark streets, of the confused effort to think, to decide who and where and what he was. But that sensation of



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horror must have been real! He must have picked himself up, after his fall, and really wandered, stunned and dazed. But where was he now? How long had he remained in the grip of that temporary amnesia? What had happened—to Ellen?

The thought of her jerked him upright, and the sudden exertion was like a fresh blow on the head. He reeled drunkenly, went blind, and toppled full-length to the floor beside the bed. But he didn't go out entirely. He remained conscious of sound; he heard the door open, the sharp, explosive voice over him. Sight returned slowly and the blurred face of the man in the doorway took form until he recognized the savage scowl and broken nose of Steve Cochran. Behind him, Latson's little pig eyes leered redly.

Carefully Duke Sprague sat up.

Cochran rasped, "So you're not dead yet? Well—that's tough on you!"

Duke put his hands on the floor and got his feet under him. He came up weaving, but he stood, and he was surprised at the calm steadiness of his own voice. He said, "Where's Fiala?"

"Oh!" Cochran turned, sneering, to Latson. "He wants t'see the boss, now, Barney!"

"Yeah," Latson grinned, "I think maybe we're goin' t'do business, Steve!"

Duke clipped, "How long have I been here, Cochran? How'd I get here? What day is this?"

"Y'wanta know a lot, don't ya, Sprague. Well, what've we got to lose . . . Somebody cracked your head for ya, an' I found ya on the street, like a nickel, see? You been here, dead t'the world, all day. It's Wednesday." He glanced over his shoulder into the other room. "But in about thirteen minutes it'll be Thursday. Fiala'll be here any time now, an' then, you legitimate——, it's gonna be a treat to see you squirm! Like the idea?"

Duke didn't answer. Wednesday—almost midnight! So he'd been out for about twenty-four hours, and meanwhile, what had happened to Ellen? Had she made her escape from the Park? What was about to happen to him didn't take much wondering. It was all working out so much as he'd foreseen; all his hunches were clicking. Fiala *was* an element in the puzzle—he must have been listening

at the door while Preston had blurted his troubles to Duke. It must be Fiala who had Carmencita's note, or else he'd never have dared kidnapping.

Cochran snarled, "Haven't got much to say now, have ya, Sprague? 'Get out!' he tells us. He says he wants to see the city clean o' rats like us. . . . Brother, before we get through with you, you'll be out, an' us rats'll be runnin' the spots in this burg! An' you're—"

"Steve!" the low voice came from behind him and Cochran spun about. Duke's eyes flicked up. "Steve," Fiala said, "you talk too much! Didn't I tell you—"

"Aw, nuts, Fiala!" Cochran flamed.

"Shut up, Cochran! I'm running this."

"Well, get to runnin' it then! I'm sick o' this you-chase-me, Fiala. I want action. I wanta see some o' this big dough you've been promisin'."

"You'll see it," Fiala clipped, "starting now!" And he faced Duke, smiling sardonically. He drawled, "Well, Sprague, we meet again, and *this* time . . ."

"All right, Fiala," Duke cut in with controlled savagery, "you can twist the knife later. Right now I'm like Cochran—I want action. Let's have it!"

FIALA'S smile grew vicious. "Okay! You'll get action. . . . Listen, Sprague, last night a dame was rubbed out in your joint. Who did it doesn't matter a damn to me. What matters is that the cops don't like you much, Sprague. For ten years or so you made monkeys of 'em. You outsmarted 'em, you were always way ahead of 'em. But the cops'd love to pin something on you . . . What'd you think they'd do if you were found with *this* in your pocket—and a slug through your head!"

Fiala stopped abruptly, thrusting a scrap of paper toward Sprague. Only for an instant did Duke even glance at it. It was the note that Preston had brought him—no doubt of that! Then, as though puzzled by Duke's inscrutable calm, a shadow crossed the other's face briefly.

"You're not kiddin' anybody, Sprague," Fiala sneered, "and I'm not kiddin' you! You'll have the gun that killed you in your hand. And you know well enough they'll call it suicide, call their murder solved—and call it a day!"

Again he stopped, almost panting, and Duke rasped softly, "And what does that get you?"

"Nothing," Fiala grinned, "except a lot of satisfaction! But if you're smart, Sprague, you'll deed the Cockatoo over to me, lock, stock, and barrel. Then we'll tear up this note and you can have twenty-four hours to get out o' town. Because I'm taking over the night-clubs in this city, Sprague! I offered you a partnership, but now that's out—and you're out! D'y'see?"

Duke Sprague saw. He saw that whatever he did the end was the same: death in some ditch, some alley, with the note in his pocket anyway.

"Fiala," he inquired gently, "do you play much poker?"

"Poker! What is this, Sprague?"

"I mean I'm calling, Fiala. I'm playing my hand pat, and I'm calling yours—because I think you're bluffing!"

"You think," Fiala breathed, "I'm bluffing, eh?"

"Shall I work on him?" Cochran demanded eagerly.

"Work on him, Steve!" Fiala ordered—and then, eyes glinting with a sudden, hotter gleam, he snapped, "Wait! I've got a better idea!"

Steve paused, half-crouching. Duke's own tense body, waiting for Cochran's attack, tautened still more. Fiala said softly, almost hissing. "You're a little soft, aren't you Sprague, about that sister-in-law of yours? You—" and before he could finish, Duke spun and rushed him—only to face the muzzle of Fiala's gun.

"I thought so, Sprague," he laughed, "I thought, when I was listening to you and your rat of a brother, that you—"

"Fiala!" Duke said, "So help me heaven, if any harm comes to Ellen Sprague, I'll kill you with these two hands, and no ten guns will stop me!"

Fiala's laugh rose mockingly. With sadistic delight he drew a folded newspaper from his coat pocket and opened it slowly, drawled, "So that's how it is! Very pretty, Sprague—but now I'll call *your* hand! I think one gun's enough to stop you. And I think all we have to do is just let things ride along as they are—just let Ellen Sprague go to the chair—for murder! Unless you want to be smart.

Take a good look and see how you feel!"

Scarcely breathing in the grip of this new fear, Duke accepted the paper. For an instant all he could see was Ellen's pictured face in the center of the page. Then his eyes darted to the headlines:

PROMINENT SOCIALITE HELD ON MURDER CHARGE

Mrs. Sprague Admits Visiting Dancer on Night of Killing

And as he read rapidly down the column, that fear turned into a cold fury, a raging blast of anger that demanded outlet in action.

ELLEN had been caught, running blindly from the scene of Mayer's shooting. The leather purse—which she had thrown in his face—was found beside the man. She had admitted being with the detective, and under the questioning of the police—Duke's eyes blazed as he thought of that 'question'—she had admitted that she had hired Mayer to watch Carmencita. She had told them why: told them that the dancer had come to her, threatening to expose Preston's folly to the eyes of the world. And inevitably she had been led deeper and deeper into a trap of circumstances, under the lash of question and cross-question. Until Ellen was charged with the murder of Carmencita, the shooting of Theodore Mayer. . . .

But Mayer wasn't dead, the paper stated! He lay at the point of death with a bullet through his throat that had struck his spinal cord, paralyzing him from the neck down. His mind was clear, it was said, but he could neither talk, nor move. The only witness to murder—paralyzed!

That icy rage seemed to steady him. Duke forgot the throbbing pain inside his skull as he looked at Fiala. "All right. You win, Fiala. I'll sign your deed. Where is it?" And the reaction was all that he had hoped for, played for!

Fiala laughed, unsteadily. Duke heard the gasping release of pent-up breath from Latson's fat body. He heard Cochran's oath of satisfaction, but it was Fiala whom he watched. Fiala had the gun. Cesare Fiala still covered him with it, but his undivided vigilance was gone. His left hand plunged into his inner coat pocket.

He drew out a sheaf of legal-looking documents and thrust them at Sprague—then a fountain pen.

In silence Duke moved toward the table. The others followed. Duke didn't sit down. He spread the papers on the table and unscrewed the cap of the pen. But as he bent over the table, his eyes were not on those papers. He was intent upon the three men who stood over him. . . . Latson was on his right, his porcine face close to Duke's shoulder. Fiala faced him across the table, the gun held loosely, all his attention focused upon the papers. Cochran crouched to the left. . . . And with the swiftness of light, Duke Sprague moved!

The pen was reversed in his hand. Like a dagger it stabbed upward, sank deep into Latson's throat. At the same instant Duke whirled. His hip caught the table edge, hurled it into Fiala's legs and Fiala went down. Duke's fist crashed full into Cochran's face and the man reeled backward, roaring curses.

Again Duke spun. Fiala fired from the floor. The roar of the gun blotted out the hoarse, gurgling cries of Latson, the oaths of Cochran. Fiala fired again and again, wildly, at the same time struggling to get the overturned table off his legs. But Duke dived from a flat-footed stand. His turned shoulder hit the table, pinning Fiala. His hands gripped the gun. With the strength and fury of desperation he wrenched it free, turned once more—to face the storm of fire from Cochran's gun.

Duke rolled. Doubled up, he rolled free of the wrecked table and suddenly he stopped rolling; his gun arm rose. Deliberately he aimed, his grip on butt and trigger closed in an even, steady pull. The gun bucked in his hand and Steve Cochran went lax all at once, like a marionette with its string relaxed. . . .

Slowly Duke Sprague rose. Blood ribboned down his face from the bullet slash over his temple. He swayed drunkenly, but the gun in his hand was steady. His eyes were terrible. . . . Barney Latson was long about his dying. His body still twitched convulsively, but the pool of blood from a punctured carotid artery denied him any chance of living. Cesare Fiala disentangled himself finally from the table and got up. . . .

"Don't shoot, Duke!" he husked.

"You killed her, Fiala—didn't you?" Duke grated softly, "You killed Carmencita in order to—"

"No! No, Duke! So help me, I didn't rub her out!"

There was silence, palpable, oppressive. Then the wail of police sirens, the rush of approaching motors in the street.

Duke said, "Come on, Cesare. We're going to HQ."

CHAPTER SIX

Mayer Points to Murder

POLICE floodlights on the banks of a tiny Park lake began to pale in the translucent gleam of dawn. For an hour the water of the lake had been receding slowly through the opened gates of a small dam, while the line of men at the water's edge followed its slow retreat. They were equipped with rakes, and they probed every inch of mud ahead of them as they walked. Stones were brought to light, empty bottles, cans—everything but what they sought. And time wore on. . . .

"By golly, Lieutenant!" At last the shout came. "Here she is!"

The silent concentration to the job ended. All of them rushed to the man who'd made the find, and the homicide squadman—Lieutenant Bruhl—took over the muddy .38 calibre revolver. The gun Duke Sprague had said was there—for he remembered that throwing motion of the man he'd chased, last night.

For a moment they clustered about Bruhl while the lieutenant carefully rinsed the weapon. Holding it by the barrel-tip, Bruhl smelled it, then tripped open the cylinder and inspected the pinmark in the center of each of the exploded cartridges.

"Okay, Sprague," he said, "so far so good. You say you chased this guy, and that he threw this gun in the lake. If it's the one that was used on Mayer, that lets the lady out of *this* jam, at least. . . . What now? Got any more ideas?"

"Plenty!" Duke clipped, "Let's go back to your office, Bruhl."

There was intense, waiting silence. There was that in Duke Sprague's inscrutable calm that dominated them all.

Even Lieutenant Bruhl waited for Duke to talk. Ellen sat motionless, pale, but very beautiful, and completely self-contained, between Cesare Fiala on one side and her husband on the other. Fiala was manacled to the chair. Preston sat on the edge of his, his hands in continuous nervous motion. Duke watched both men narrowly. Then Dubois was announced and Bruhl ordered him sent in.

Duke said, "You got 'em, Charley?"

Dubois nodded. He handed Duke a long, rolled paper, and a nail-file. Bruhl, with a touch of impatience, snapped, "Well, are you ready now?"

Duke unrolled the paper and laid it on Bruhl's desk. It was a blueprint, a large-scale floor-plan of the Club Cockatoo.

Duke spoke grimly: "Lieutenant, you have some of the facts in this case. You know that Mrs. Sprague was at my club when the dancer was killed. She's admitted going back to the dressing room—and she did. I saw her. I was watching when she came out of the room, and ten seconds later, I found Carmencita dead . . ."

Bruhl's eyes flashed. He grunted, "You say you *saw* her come out?"

Sprague nodded.

"You've not helped her there, then!

About all we needed to make our case air-tight was a witness to *that*."

Duke's smile was tight, humorless. He dropped the nail-file he held onto the glass top of Bruhl's desk, near the corner. "Ellen," he said, "pick up that file, please."

She rose slowly, approached and reached for file, her eyes fixed wonderingly on Duke's face. But he stopped her, saying, "No, Ellen! Pick it up fast! Grab at it as though you were going to stab me with it!"

SHE complied, and the Lieutenant sank back slowly. He admitted, "I missed that, Sprague. That's a good point. . . . You mean that a woman with long fingernails wouldn't leave broad finger-streaks on the glass when she grabbed up the file. And a man with short nails would. . . ."

Again Duke nodded. He said, "You know, too, that Mayer—the private dick—was hiding in the room next the dancer's when she was killed. Mrs. Sprague told you that, and I have proof of it, but that doesn't matter. Nobody denies it. Mrs.

Sprague has told you why she hired Mayer, but you've figured that Mayer saw *her* kill Carmencita; that that's her motive for the shooting of Mayer. But—"

Bruhl's phone rang and he picked it up, said, "Yeah?" and listened silently. He finished with, "Okay. That's something, anyway." He hung up.

"Well," he mused, "the gun in the lake was the gun that shot Mayer—but there were no finger-prints on it."

"Then you admit," Duke exploded, "that Mrs. Sprague couldn't have shot him?"

There was another silence—until Bruhl rapped irritably, "Sprague, I don't have to admit anything! You've still got some explaining to do—lots of it. You're no lily, y'know. You're an ex-racketeer. You ran out on me the other night before I could question you about that killing. Suppose you come clean, Sprague!"

Duke said softly, "All right, Bruhl—here it is . . ." And he told in clear, concise sentences of Fiala's scheme, of Preston's visit to his office. He told in detail of everything that had happened during the half hour before he had found Carmencita's dead body. And then he thrust the blackmail note under Bruhl's eyes and waited until he'd read it. But before either of them could speak again, Preston Sprague was on his feet, eyes blazing with fear and hate, voice hoarse as he cried out,

"He lies! My wife is—"

"Preston!" Duke swung on him.

But Preston raged on, almost hysterically, "They've been deceiving me—she and this—this reformed criminal! My brother—Bah! They hired that detective to spy on me, to try to frame me into a divorce! And because I was there that night—purely on a friendly call—they're trying to pin this on me! There's your murderer—Duquesne Sprague! And he shot Mayer because Mayer saw him kill the woman!"

The silence that followed was broken only by Preston's panting breath. Bruhl looked at the note that was headed badly; "Listen Sprague. . . ." And then he rasped, "That might be true. But by heaven, if Mayer could talk, I'd sweat the truth out of—"

Duke's hand flicked to the telephone on Bruhl's desk. He said tensely, "Get me the Eastern General Hospital—and

get somebody on the wire who knows about Mayer, the detective who was shot."

"What now?" Bruhl clipped.

"Wait!" Duke said.

He spoke again into the phone. "Hello. . . . This is police headquarters, Doctor. We understand that Theodore Mayer can neither speak, nor move. But can he hear and see? Does he have control of his *eye-lids*?"

"Hell's hinges . . ." Bruhl began again, but Duke's sudden exclamation cut him off.

Duke faltered, "Good Lord . . ." but an instant later, he said, "Doctor Peters, we're coming over to the hospital. We believe that we can solve that night-club murder by confronting several suspects with—Mayer. We'll be over inside ten minutes." He hung up.

"Sprague," the Lieutenant blasted, "what damned nonsense is this?"

"We're going, Bruhl!" Duke stated flatly, "We've got one chance to trap a killer. Mayer's going to—*talk!*"

DOCTOR PETERS met them as they emerged from the elevator. He was a young man, and his eyes lighted with interest when he looked at Ellen. Then his gaze flicked to Bruhl, and the two uniformed men who guarded Fiala and Preston Sprague. Dubois followed them out of the lift. Nobody paid much attention to Charles Dubois.

Then the physician said grimly, "I don't know what earthly good this is going to do you people. I told you over the phone that Mayer . . ."

Duke cut in bluntly, "Yes, Doctor. And I told you why we were coming. Take us to Mayer's room, please."

The doctor shrugged. Even he felt the dominance of Duke's personality. He led them down a long corridor.

Duke walked beside him; Bruhl followed, with Ellen. The rest came along silently, but the stride of the doctor took him and Duke ahead of them. No one noticed that Duke was talking rapidly, in a low voice. No one heard Doctor Peters' incredulous gasp of amazement, his final assent. "All right," Peters agreed, "you can try it, but it's as screwy as—"

"Never mind that," Duke clipped.

The doctor turned into the last room

on the right. He closed the door behind him, and Duke waited until the others came up. Silently they filed into the room.

In a gathering, electric silence, Duke moved to the head of the bed. The stillness of Mayer's body, the awful, waxen pallor of his face, his eyes staring fixedly up into Duke's face, evoked a spell that gripped them all. Even Duke's sudden speaking failed to break it.

"Mayer," he said, "night before last you saw murder done. How it happened that you saw it, however guilty you may be of blackmail, and of concealing a murder for your own profit, doesn't matter now. You can't talk, or write. But you can hear me, and you can move your eye-lids. If the murderer is here, *blink your eyes* as I call out his name!"

Duke stopped abruptly and a sudden, gasping intake of breath sighed through the room. It came from all of them as they perceived his purpose. But he gave them no time for protest, or agreement. Duke Sprague snapped, "Is it I, Mayer? Did I kill the dancer?"

The eyes in that terrible face seemed to all of them to widen, to glare vindictively, but the lids remained motionless.

"Is it Mrs. Sprague?" Duke said.

Fiala sobbed in his throat, a choked, strangling sound. He mouthed hysterically, "It's a frame! He's trying to—" Bruhl stopped him. Ellen swayed dizzily, her own gaze bound in a horrible fascination to the motionless face.

"Is it Cesare Fiala," the inexorable voice went on, "Did Fiala kill—" and the crash of a shot wrote *finis!*

Duke Sprague staggered back, swung slowly around and relaxed heavily against the wall. Bruhl's shout of warning, Ellen's scream, and the thundrous echo of the gun merged together, to break off all at once. And Preston Sprague's insane laugh rose wildly. A curl of smoke dribbled lazily from the muzzle of the gun in his hand. Blood oozed between the fingers of the hand with which Duke gripped his own shoulder. But Duke's voice was like the cut of a whip.

"So it was you, Preston. . . . I thought it was!"

Preston Sprague covered them all. His sudden move had taken them by surprise. He stood with his back to the door and they were powerless to stop him. He

laughed again, panting, "Yes—it was I! And you thought I'd stand here tamely and let you trap me! Oh, no . . ."

Duke said dully, "You're rottener than I thought it was possible for any man to be, Preston! You sent the police to the club, hoping they'd find that note of yours in my possession—knowing that I'd be charged with murder. And maybe I can understand that. But when that failed, you'd have let Ellen go to the chair for murder, because you never loved her—because in that way you'd be rid of her and still have her money! And that's why I'm going to kill you, now, Preston, or you're going to kill me!"

He moved forward toward his quivering brother, and Ellen pleaded, "No, Duke—please don't! He *will* kill you!" But Duke crouched, and moved slowly nearer. The gun in Preston's hand rose, steadied. And Duke laughed softly.

"I didn't trap you, Preston," he said, "you trapped yourself! No evidence that Mayer could give would ever convict you of murder! It was the evidence of your own guilty conscience. . . . Look at him, Preston! Mayer's dead! Mayer died just before I called here. . . . *He was dead when we came in*, but you never thought to look for his breathing. Look at him now, Preston!"

With a wordless, shrill, cry, Preston Sprague fired. And simultaneously Duke dived for him, and Bruhl threw himself forward. And then they both rose, slowly, and stood over the prone body of Preston Sprague. His last shot had been for himself. He had sent that last shot unerringly through his own head. . . .

"LEAVING . . . ?" she said, "You mean—going away permanently, Duke? Not coming back?"

Duke Sprague smiled, and shrugged. "I don't know, Ellen . . ." Then the smile faded, and he said, "Times have changed. Everything, somehow, has changed—except me. You see, Ellen, I'm still Duke Sprague—ex-racketeer—and that's what I'll always be. And all at once, I'm sick of it! I guess I'm paying up, now, for—a lot of things."

He stopped, and again the old smile flashed. "But anyway, I've sold the Cockatoo, and I'm pulling out for parts unknown. But I couldn't leave without saying—so long, Ellen."

Again he paused, and she was silent until he said, fingering his hat, "And now that I've said it, I guess I'll . . . be going." Abruptly he turned away from her, and still Ellen didn't speak. Then he was at the door, and out, and into the street.

Somberly, Duke Sprague drove to his apartment where he picked up the two remaining bags. And he turned his car, for the last time, toward the river, and the wharf where a sixty-foot sloop awaited him. That boat was the only one of his former possessions that he had retained.

As he boarded her, Charley Dubois came up the companionway from the cabin below decks. And Charley had a strange look on his face as he said, "Visitor below, Skipper. Wants to see you—now."

"Okay," Duke said.

Dubois stood aside, and Duke dropped down the steep ladder. And Ellen said, "Well—here we are! Where're we going, Duke?"

THE END

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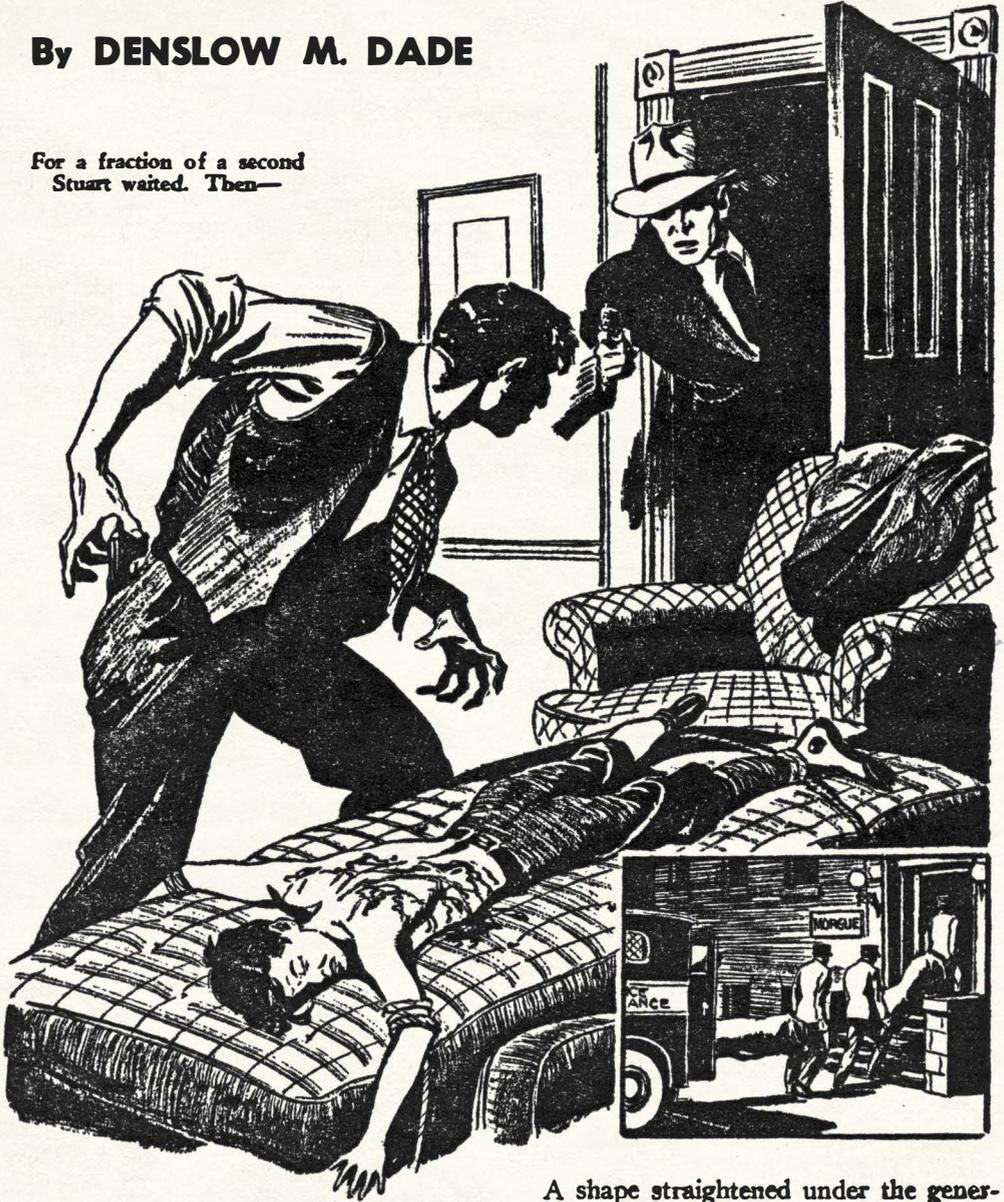
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SOMETIMES IT'S MURDER

By DENSLOW M. DADE

For a fraction of a second
Stuart waited. Then—



Detective Ken Stuart was a dead shot; yet he couldn't bring himself to blast a man's life out—until he found little Billy Hastings, his flesh laid raw with sandpaper!

LIEUTENANT MARTIN kicked open the door. "Dammit, Stuart," he roared into the tiny office, "why don't you answer your phone?"

A shape straightened under the generous blanket on the folding cot. Brown, rumpled hair appeared, and a square, sleep-ruddied face. Grey eyes blinked into electric light as fingers found the telephone hand-set on the floor. Detective Ken Stuart said, "Hello!" and laboriously hoisted himself upright.

Martin watched the big detective sitting there, clad only in undershirt and shorts. After man-killing hours on the Jason Runkle murder, Stuart had been making up sleep when he could, any hours of the twenty-four, in his headquar-

ters cubbyhole. Martin suddenly felt sorry about waking him.

Stuart was saying into the phone: "You mustn't worry, Mrs. Hastings. I'll come over. We'll check along Billy's route." He hung up, told Martin: "Billy Hastings hasn't come home from his newspaper deliveries. His ma's worried." He reached suddenly for his shirt. "I'm worried, too. It's eight P.M. and that kid's long overdue."

"Accident, maybe? We'll check hospitals," Martin's broad, red face showed concern. He had a son Billy Hasting's age, a ten-year-old.

Stuart shrugged. "Billy carried identification. His mother would've been notified." He shoved heavy muscled legs into grey trousers, dressing rapidly. "It's this, Martin. Billy wants to be a detective when he grows up. So I've been telling him about my cases. Even the Runkle murder. Nothing important, of course. But I'm wondering. It isn't like Billy to disappear."

Martin frowned. "What's the hunch?"

Stuart knotted his necktie. "Billy's been mysterious with the other kids, about his 'inside dope'. I told him to go ahead, have all the fun he could. Suppose it's got around that Billy knows things."

"To parties interested in the Runkle kill? Hell, that'll be nice!"

Stuart swore softly. "Never considered it before. But somebody might believe I've spilled important things to the kid."

Martin's brown eyes darkened. He hunched blocky shoulders. "Cripes! They'd damned sure want to know if we found that pocket watch at the murder scene. And if it means anything to us. Tell Billy about that?"

"Lord, no! But they might think I did."

"We better get busy. They're a bad bunch, beatin' Runkle to death just to rob him. You wouldn't hesitate to kill mutts like that, would you, Stuart?"

Stuart swiftly buttoned his vest, shrugged into the straps of his shoulder clip-holster. Light gleamed from the rich nickel plate of his long barreled Smith & Wesson .38. It was a famous weapon, a gem of accuracy in Stuart's deft hand. It had disabled a dozen gunmen—but it never had taken a life.

Stuart answered Martin's question. "You know damn well I wouldn't kill. You know my ideas. Wing a man, if necessary. Killing is the state's business—the electric chair. I'd never sleep right again, if I did it myself."

"You certainly sleep right. Phone ringin' in your ears two minutes just now, and you never budge."

"That's why." It wasn't funny to Stuart. "No murder on my soul."

Martin smiled slowly. "Some men sleep soundly anyhow."

"I couldn't." Stuart shook his head. "A thing like that'd haunt me the rest of my life."

MARTIN didn't go any further. When the sanctity of life was so ingrained in a man, it seemed sacrilege to say: Thou *shalt* kill. But could Stuart always win, with his fancy shots at moving gun arms?

Stuart was bundling into a dark ulster; broader than average, he was just six feet tall. He put on a derby, completing the picture of a prosperous young business man. Martin thought that little Billy Hastings couldn't have a shrewder, more substantial champion. If Billy needed one. Well, it could happen, just as Stuart feared; mugs might want to make Billy talk.

"Call you when I know anything." Stuart went out.

He swore, finding the street sheathed in ice from a sleet storm driving off the bay from the east. Stiff-legged, he proceeded to a police coupe at the curb. It was parked facing west, so the rear window was ice-covered; the windshield was fairly clear. He snailed it along at twenty, over treacherous pavements, at last reaching the middle-class apartment building on East Nineteeth where he and Billy Hastings were neighbors and had struck up a friendship.

Mrs. Hastings, a tired looking grey-haired woman, widowed and with other kids besides Billy, opened the door of her suite before Stuart even knocked. Billy hadn't reported in. The mother had found a copy of Billy's customer list, in order of delivery. Billy handled afternoon newspapers after school. Stuart saw the list covered blocks as easily reached

on foot as by car in such weather. He reassured the mother, not hinting what he had on his mind.

He went down the street, chin in his coat collar, derby tilted forward against the sleet, cursing himself for perhaps being the means of getting the kid into serious trouble. Finding Billy was rather a personal matter. Stuart's armpit tightened over his gun which never had killed.

He made eight visits in the next three blocks. Billy, and his newspapers, had arrived at those places. And Billy had reached his ninth customer, an old man living first floor front in an apartment.

"Why do you want to know?" the old man asked, puzzled at Stuart's inquiry.

Stuart told him frankly. "The kid hasn't come home. His ma's worried. I'm a cop, looking for him."

"Say." The old man looked worried, too. "I like that kid. We talk sometimes, him and me, about cops. I saw him get into a car in front of here. Could that—"

Stuart suddenly was tense. "It could. Billy got into a car? What'd it look like?"

"Big sedan. Dark green." The old man looked pleased with himself. "And I got its license number. The kid's always tellin' me how he observes things; it's got to be habit with me, too."

Stuart blurted. "Good for you! The number, quick!"

The old man consulted the margin of his newspaper. "Jotted it down. To josh Billy about his wealthy friends. It's Two-o-o-x-y-two."

Stuart repeated the number, writing rapidly. "What time was this?"

"About five. Kid in difficulty, you think?"

"Maybe. Notice the people in the car?"

"Couple of men; one dark hat, one light. I didn't see any more."

"You've helped lots. A phone here?"

"Nope."

"Okay, thanks." Stuart hurried to the street, made for a drug store phone. He swung into a booth, dialed headquarters, told Martin: "I was right, Lieutenant. A big car took the kid off. I got its license. Put out an alarm. It's—"

The door of the booth pressed suddenly in against Stuart. A face showed. A brown paper bag pointed, as much as a bag can point, at Stuart's middle. There

was a gun in that bag. Stuart knew it. A casual watcher wouldn't have noticed.

The gunner said: "Hang up. Come out of there like we were friends." Nobody else was near enough to hear.

Stuart saw the gunner's shadowed eyes, and he knew death was there if he disobeyed. Martin's voice was bellowing "Operator! Operator!" over the wire.

STUART slowly hung up. He was too cramped in the booth to try any magic with his Smith & Wesson. And the other fellow had the drop. Stuart stepped out of the booth, walked slowly toward the door. He tried to catch the eye of a man coming in, trying to give some facial signal. But the man swung to the soda counter, announcing: "Fudge sundae, please," without even glancing at Stuart.

Stuart stepped outdoors. He felt pressure on his back, heard the crackle of paper, the gun in the paper bag. The gunner said: "We'll take a cab. Remember to act nice." People were passing and he didn't risk a give-away by frisking Stuart in plain sight. So Stuart still had his gun. That was something. But he kept his hands in sight.

He understood the stick-up. This mug would be one of the crowd that had the kid. If they knew enough about the friendship to believe Billy might have been told things, they'd know Stuart would be first on the search. They'd kept track of him. And, if this was part of the Runkle kill, they'd read in the papers that Stuart was heading the investigation.

The gun muzzle prodded Stuart gently toward the curb. The gunner waved his free hand at a passing taxi. It stopped and Stuart got in, the gunner following. Stuart had no chance to start anything as they took opposite sides of the seat. He ventured: "Takin' me to the kid?"

The gunner called to the cabby: "Drive east. I'll tell you when to turn." He leaned toward Stuart, the gun in the bag pressing close, reached in for Stuart's gun and moved back dropping the Smith & Wesson in his own lap. Then in a low voice he answered Stuart's question "To the kid, yes. We'll see how much guts you got."

Stuart sat silent. His hands were folded on his knees, big fingers suddenly

crushing each other. He understood the implication of his captor's remark. He started a couple of times to speak, finally got out what was really two questions: "The kid won't talk—about the Runkle case?"

The hood, a middle-sized, swarthy man dressed in brown, said merely: "Correct."

It was the Runkle case then. Stuart asked hoarsely: "The kid won't talk—after how much punishment?"

The gunner hesitated a moment. He jerked back the paper bag so the muzzle of the gun in it broke through—as if to make certain Stuart knew he was covered. Then he answered: "Ever had your hide scaped off with sandpaper, dick?"

Stuart closed his eyes; a harsh sound low in his throat was the only hint that he had heard. For a moment he seemed to be two selves. One self panted to reach out and destroy. The other self argued: "I'll die if I do that. *He* has the guns. Then I never can help Billy!" Stuart kept hearing the gunner's words: "Hide scaped off with sandpaper!" He felt limp, then tense, cold, then hot. A person could lose only so much skin, and still live!

He was startled at the steadiness of his own voice as he asked: "The kid's alive?"

"Sure." It sounded as if the gunman didn't care one way or the other.

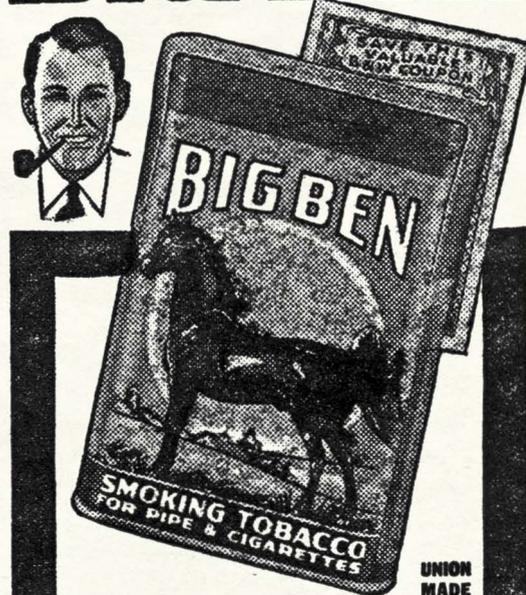
"Well, he doesn't know anything important. Drop him at a hospital somewhere. You've got me to work on. I do know things."

"We'll see. Shut up now." The thug was very watchful. The cabby, leaning far forward to peer through his windshield, couldn't hear the conversation. The storm was letting up, the sleet almost stopped.

There was a blare of auto horns suddenly. Stuart felt the rear end of their car slide around, bounce against something solid. The hood was thrown from his seat onto the floor. Stuart let himself fall, too, his eyes fastened on one thing—the Smith & Wesson that jarred from the gangman's lap.

Stuart's hand connected. There was a flash of gleaming nickel, an explosion and golden flame together. The other man shrieked, grabbing his right wrist with

WHY MEN PREFER BIG BEN

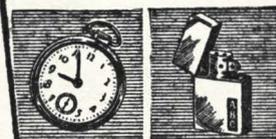


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his left hand. Stuart swooped for the gun in the bag. Then he had both guns.

THE taxi man had sat as if frozen to his seat. A harness cop opened a door and poked in his head. "Anybody hurt?" He recognized Stuart. "Shot? Back-fire? What happened?"

Stuart said: "Yes. A shot." He saw their cab had locked fenders with another skidding one. "Collision, too, eh? Just in time." He didn't bother to explain to the cop. Instead, Stuart was lifting the gangster back onto the seat. The man must have fainted, Stuart thought. But instantly he knew better. The man hadn't fainted. This was a permanent state. The man was *dead!*

Stuart stepped slowly from the cab. He felt as if someone had done him an injustice. He had only shot the fellow's wrist. And the guy's heart was bad; bullet shock had stopped it. Stuart hoped an autopsy would prove it. He shook himself. Could anybody say he had *killed* this man? Perhaps only indirectly, but—why kid himself? The answer was—*yes!*

The cop was in the cab. He called out, softly, as if breaking bad news to Stuart whose "strange" feeling about human life was known to the entire force.

"The guy's dead," the cop said. "A mug?"

"Yep." Stuart was startled at the lightness of his tone. "A mug who begged for it!" And Stuart knew suddenly, with a flood of relief, that *this* killing never would disturb his sleep, that he just didn't care a damn. For he seemed to hear other words: "Hide scraped off with sandpaper!"

But then Stuart swore aloud. There was one reason he'd rather not have killed. This man could have taken him to Billy Hastings! That was the gamble Stuart had been eager to take. Now, the trail was broken! Wait—not entirely broken. He had an auto license number. He gave it to the cop immediately, with instructions to phone it in to Martin for an alarm. Other cops were keeping the crowd back.

Stuart went through the dead man's pockets. He found in them no identification. And his was a face Stuart didn't

know. A time-losing check of fingerprints and gallery photos would show if the man had a record.

The harness cop returned. "Martin' got out the alarm."

Stuart stood moments in thought, trying to plan some course of action. The routine of identifying the dead man was up to other people. He remembered he hadn't eaten since noon, and he wasn't hungry. But a cup of coffee would help. He sat in a small restaurant sipping from a thick cup. He went to a phone booth there, gave the number to headquarters, so they could reach him as long as he was there.

A waiter offered a menu but Stuart pushed it aside. He felt ill, thinking about the kid. Skin taken off with sandpaper would be more painful than burns; raw nerves exposed. . . . He tried not to think of it. He discovered his fingers had torn a napkin into shreds. Then, when he'd been sitting for fifteen minutes, the phone in the booth rang. He knocked over his chair getting to it.

Martin's voice came over the wire, triumphant: "Stuart! Here's a break! A patrol just located that sedan parked on East Twenty-seventh, near Wadsworth. I'm throwing a cordon clear around the block. We'll search every inch of it."

"Fine! Nothing else?" And Stuart hung up, dashing into the street for a cab. Presently he was standing by a green sedan with license 200-XY-2.

Technical men had arrived, and were going over the machine for fingerprints and other clues. The entire department was determined to find Billy Hastings, and incidentally, Stuart felt sure, net the killers of Jason Runkle. The dead jeweler had toted around fifty thousand in diamonds at night, unprotected; and had been hustled into an alley and murdered.

A pocket watch, not Runkle's, had been found at the scene, evidently lost by the killer. If its serial numbers could be traced through dealers, it was a clear trail. But the makers had gone out of business and it looked like a blank. The killer who'd lost that watch would be plenty eager to know if the cops had got it, and what they'd learned from it. A murderer, thus afraid of his own life,

would go a long way to learn details.

STUART looked over the sedan. Close inspection showed the license plates were phonies. The car must have been stolen, its own plates destroyed.

Stuart said to a sergeant: "It's a hundred to one the mugs are nowhere near here." He indicated the car. "Look at it. The back's covered with sleet; practically none on the front. Yet it's now parked facing the wind. Must have been left here since the sleet stopped. It faced the other way during the storm, evidently." He strolled over, put a bare hand on the radiator. "Still hot, too."

"Yep," the Sergeant agreed. "And it seems to me, that if you knew where the car was parked while it was sleeting, you'd be close to the boy."

"That's it. And a big order, that." Stuart walked back, ran his hand over the icy sheath which covered the rear of the sedan. His fingers came away wet. He frowned, puzzled. Temperature was dropping. Nothing else was melting. He tried the ice coating on a car parked behind the green sedan. This ice was solid, scarcely moist under his hand. He went back to the killer's car. Two windows of it were open. So it wasn't *inside* heat melting ice on the outside rear. Then why in hell was it so soft?

Stuart remembered something, strode back and slammed his fist on the ice coating, breaking it. He picked off a wafer of the ice, sucked on it, savoring it with his tongue. For seconds the cold of it dulled his taste, and then he understood.

The ice was *salty*. Salt water needed lower temperature than fresh, to freeze solid.

Salt water? Swiftly Stuart believed he knew where the sedan had been parked through the storm. There was a place—ten blocks along East Bay Avenue—where sea spume carried into the street in easterly storms. The pavement ran close to the water, with no buildings on that side. Cars, under the regulations, parked there with rear wheels to the curb. He could remember no place else where a car could get a coating from the sea.

He almost blurted it out to the other cops, but he didn't. For any fanfare of cops invading the neighborhood would be dangerous. The killers never would want Billy to describe his captors. Pressed, they might silence him for good. It was a time for tact. Stuart decided to study the territory alone.

He left the group around the sedan, taxied to East Thirtieth and First Avenue, and walked from there to East Bay. The water, black in the dark, was surging against the stone abutments. And the air, even though wind had dropped, still was full of salt spray.

He was glad there were buildings only on the landward side of the avenue. That narrowed the search. And the up-town five blocks held new expensive apartment houses with doormen or lobby attendants. Stuart thought he could dismiss them as hide-out probabilities. That left five blocks of older buildings, from middle-class to tenements, on one side of the avenue. It still was a lot of territory.

He considered. Dumping of the green



sedan on Twenty-seventh just *after* the alarm, argued that the mugs had a short-wave radio set that could catch police alarms, telling them just now that their car was too "hot" for near company. So they'd moved it. Short-wave sets were not too common in poorer neighborhoods. And Stuart paid tribute to womankind by believing that few women would stand for torturing of a kid. So what he wanted, it seemed, was a bachelor apartment, men who owned a short-wave radio. This reasoning, he mused, was just like the detective lessons he gave Billy.

There was another thing. The mugs would have feared a general alarm with Billy's description and they wouldn't have wanted to be seen with him. They'd have parked their car close to their own entrance, to be on the street with him as little as possible. Stuart started along the water side of the street, looking for places from which parked cars had recently been moved; oblong spaces which had been partly protected from the ice storm.

HE FOUND one such pattern in the first block, across from a six-family apartment. The superintendent there described all the families. All happened to be married couples with kids of their own. None clicked into Stuart's picture. Of course, his reasoning about one or every point could be wrong. But Stuart had found that common-sense, human-element conclusions usually led right.

He found another auto pattern in the next block. Stuart hadn't gone far in his questioning of the German superintendent of the building opposite when the man held up a hand: "Ach! I tink." He began rapidly to describe four men who'd taken a second floor rear apartment only a week ago. His word-picture of the fourth man clicked, and Stuart mentally added details to what had been a fair description of the gunner who had died in the cab. When Stuart finished, the German exclaimed, "Dot's one uf dem, py golly!"

"Thanks. Got a passkey to the apartment?" Stuart already had showed his badge, partly explained his errand. The German produced a key.

Stuart hurried to the second floor, directed by the super. He thought perhaps he should now call for official aid. But he didn't want to waste minutes which could mean life or death for the kid. And if this place wasn't the one, Stuart didn't want any commotion in the neighborhood yet.

The German indicated a door and, when Stuart drew out his gun, skittered quickly away from there. Stuart put the key in the lock, soundlessly. If somebody innocent were behind this door, he was going to be surprised. Well, that would do no harm. He listened, heard no sound. His face was very grim and his eyes held strange, unpleasant lights. He prayed that this was the place. He was dreadfully anxious to meet with certain people.

He turned the key and the knob together, flung open the door and stepped in. His gun fanned, then steadied, on three men. Stuart's breath came out in a hiss like steam suddenly released. This *was* the place. Little Billy Hastings was here!

They had Billy spread-eagled, face down, on a couch, held there by a lot of ropes. He was gagged, but his right hand was free. On a taboret close to the couch was a paper and pencil, within his easy reach, so he could write if he wanted to; write answers to their questions. Stuart's quick glance took in that the paper was completely blank. Billy had been true to his trust. Nothing he could have told would have done any harm, but Billy wasn't sure of that, so he hadn't given them a word.

Stuart had seen something else. Billy's back was bare to the waist and his skin was as red as a boiled lobster. On the floor were pieces of brown paper, sandpaper. "Hide scraped off with sandpaper!"

ONE of the three men in the room was tall, thin, dark of complexion and dress. Another was plump and blond, blue-eyed, dressed in grey. The third was a handsome lad with curly chestnut hair and rosy cheeks, well built and wearing nicely tailored brown tweeds.

It seemed to Stuart that something held his trigger finger for a fraction of a

second, as if it took him that long to decide that there were actually human beings he could kill without a qualm. At the end of that fractional second, Ken Stuart shot the handsome lad, and the tall, dark man, through their hearts.

Their guns were in their hands as they died. The third man, the rotund blond, had got his gun out, too, but he dropped it, screaming loudly for mercy. Stuart did not fire. The blond stood with his hands reaching far into the air.

Stuart strode over, his gun steady on the blond, and with a penknife in his free hand he cut the ropes from the kid. He took off Billy's gag and the child's first pain-wracked whisper announced: "I didn't talk, sir."

"I'll bet you didn't, kid." Stuart's voice shook. "And don't bother now. Till you feel better."

But Billy insisted: "They wanted to know something about a watch. And the things they said!" Triumph showed on the small, tear-stained face. "I can prove they killed Mister Runkle." Then Billy was silent, for he'd flopped down suddenly, fainted. Blood was seeping through places on that lobster-red back.

Then Stuart was telephoning: "Saint Michael's Hospital!" And: "Detective Stuart, headquarters. An ambulance right away!" He gave the address and the apartment number.

Two interns were there in ten minutes, and bearers with a stretcher. The doctors took in details easy to read. One of them said: "Tortured—and only a kid!" He looked at the blond mug. "Could

I be alone, for a while, with the survivor?"

"No," Stuart said. "I want to be."

The other doctor said: "The kid should pull through. It'll take time, though." Then Billy was eased onto the stretcher, and all were gone but Stuart and the blond mug.

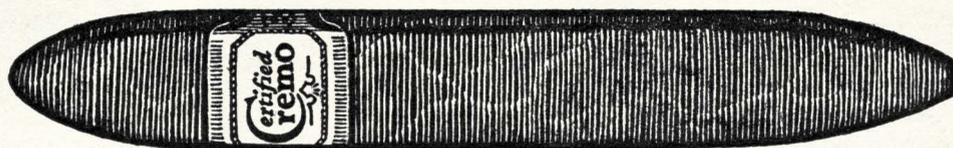
Stuart said: "Where are Jason Runkle's diamonds, fella?"

The blond stuttered: "I—I'll g-get them." He walked to a corner, pried out a piece of floor board with the penknife tossed to him by Stuart. He reached into the hole in the floor and came up, firing a gun into the ceiling. He fired into the ceiling because Stuart's slug had smashed through his forehead, disturbing his coordination.

He never heard Stuart say, "Thanks, guy." Stuart lifted out a chamois bag from where the gun had been cached. It held many unset diamonds, the gems that had cost careless Jason Runkle his life.

Stuart phoned headquarters, and at last he was back in his own cubbyhole office. The hospital said the kid was doing fine but mustn't have visitors for a while. Somebody had told Mrs. Hastings. . . .

Lieutenant Martin watched Stuart take off his shoes and shirt and pants, flop on his cot and pull the blanket up. Nobody had said a word to Stuart about snuffing out lives. And Martin didn't mention it now, for Stuart already was asleep. Martin watched the motions of quiet, untroubled breathing—as soft as the slumber of a baby. There *are* ghosts, Martin thought, which don't haunt.



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FROZEN ASSETS

By
**GEORGE
ARMIN
SHAFTEL**

Slowly, Carmack began to dig, and as he dug, he started to talk . . .



A man can take a lot of abuse for forty thousand dollars—even if it's only to bait a man-sized rat-trap!

JOHAN CARMACK had no warning of the brutal attack. He had left the bus and walked the last eighth-mile to his little truck farm. San Angelo had grown so, these last five years that he'd

spent in the penitentiary, that his little farm was now just outside the city limits. As he approached it through the dusk, he saw that his tenant had kept the place up nicely: the little cottage was proud with paint, bougainvillea blossoms crowded in colorful riot over the porch and the lawn was neat as a golf course. The board fence lining the driveway was whitewashed, as were the barn and the sheds at the rear.

"Mac!" he called, opening the front door.

He saw only a flashing gleam of light on metal, and then a pistol barrel smashed

down in a glancing blow to his temple, knocked him staggering against the door frame. Rough hands seized him, yanked him sprawling onto the parlor carpet, and shut the door.

"Say, what's all this—"

Sitting up dazedly, he saw Mac, his tenant, bound hand and foot in an armchair, staring saucer-eyed in terror over the gag that was choking him. A small, dapper man holding a gun loosely in one hand, was standing to the side, watching Carmack with cold, cruel eyes. Apparently satisfied that his victim was fully conscious, he nodded his head shortly. "Okay, Ed. Set him on his feet."

Carmack turned slowly and saw two burly men, armed, towering over him. They seized him by the arms and roughly jerked him to his feet. He stood for a moment swaying unsteadily. The small, dapper man walked over and planted himself before him.

"Carmack, faster you talk, less we'll hurt you! Where's the swag?"

Carmack opened his mouth but no words came. A slim, gloved hand snaked out and slapped him stingingly across the mouth.

"Where's that forty-odd grand you stole?"

Carmack blinked, frowning in his effort to see the men more plainly in the dusk-shadowed room. With his lean hand he brushed the sandy hair back from over his face. There was pain in his level grey eyes but no fear.

"That money don't belong to you—"

The gloved hand struck out again, knocked him staggering weakly into one of the other men who hammered a vicious blow into Carmack's stomach. As Carmack doubled in agony, the second man brought his fist driving to Carmack's jaw. Carmack slumped to the floor. Both men kicked him, then, smashing their heavy toes into his ribs and stomach. The tenant, watching, shut his eyes, his face livid and sweating.

Cold water brought Carmack to his senses. The dapper leader was still standing before him, cold and implacable.

"Where is that money?"

Reeling clouds of blackness threatened to engulf Carmack again as he croaked, "It ain't—"

"No use to lie, Carmack," the leader interrupted frigidly. "That money was never recovered by the National Trust people! You cached it here on your farm. Don't be a crazy fool. Talk up!"

His words hoarse with anguish, Carmack repeated, "That money ain't yours."

"Shall I let him have it, boss?" one of the thugs inquired, raising his gun.

"No," the leader shook his head. "We don't want a killing unless we have to. Ed, tell him what we're willing to offer."

"Look, mug," the thug addressed as Ed said placatingly. "We're right guys. You figure you spent five years in stir to earn that coin and you want it now. But, hell's fire, a cut of it is better than none, ain't it? Hand it over, now, and we'll split with you like you was one of us—a fourth to each—"

"But if you make us find that dough ourselves," warned the dapper leader, his voice curt and deadly, "we'll fix you so's you wouldn't enjoy spendin' it if you *did* have it all to yourself!"

"That money ain't yours—"

The front door banged open as if coming off its hinges. Two men wearing the badges of deputy sheriffs, guns leveled, burst inside.

Sullenly the three sluggers lifted their arms. . . .

"**C**ARMACK," said Deputy Needham after the other men were seated in the patrol car, "us deputies got word to keep an eye on you. It was the parole officer sent us out to check on your residence address—but the National Trust people want you watched, too."

Carmack shrugged his lean shoulders diffidently, though an angry glint came into his level grey eyes.

"Carmack, us deputies ain't hogs. Now, everybody knows you got that stolen money hid somewheres on this farm. You'll be pestered. Count us in for a percentage—say, ten percent apiece—and you won't be bothered."

Carmack said quietly, "No."

"You feel that way, huh? Well—you *will* be bothered!" The deputy turned on his heel and left. . . .

It was almost three days before John Carmack recovered from the beating the thugs had given him. And after that it

was two days more before he went to town on an errand that he had been thinking about for five years.

He walked into the Merchants' Bank and asked to see the president. Told him, "I want to borrow five thousand—"

"The equity you own in your farm isn't worth *one* thousand. Anyway, I wouldn't lend a dime to a thief!"

Carmack walked up the main street. There was a slight stoop to his tall, lean frame. He did not speak to people, but kept his grey eyes looking inscrutably ahead. When a couple of women whispered on passing him, women who had once been his neighbors, spots of red burned in his high cheek bones.

"Mr. Layton," Carmack said to the paunchy, ruddy-faced president of the W. F. Layton brokerage firm, "I want to borrow five thousand dollars."

"Borrow? *You—*"

Mr. Layton roared out his laughter.

"Listen," he said, bending close, choking back his guffaws, "you lend *me—* say, forty thousand!"

"You mean, I'm not good for five thousand, Mr. Layton?"

"Not good—" Again the pudgy brokerage head roared out his enjoyment. "Man, you ought to be g-good for *ten times that!*"

"I'm serious, Mr. Layton."

Layton quieted, looked sharply at him. "What security would I have? How am I going to know you won't do a little digging on your farm and then skip town?"

"It's a gamble, Mr. Layton. But you know if I leave town before I'm off parole, I'd not get very far. As for security, there's my farm—and all that's on it!"

Mr. Layton smiled suggestively. "What we might technically call frozen assets—eh, Carmack?"

"Do I get the loan?"

"Yes. At twelve percent!" Mr. Layton rapped.

John Carmack left the broker's office and walked to a big used car lot.

"How many '33 and '34 Fords you got?" he asked.

"Twenty on this lot. In our branches around the city, we probably got a hundred."

"Could you get hold of more?"

"Sure—fifty or a hundred more."

"I'd expect a low price, buying in quantity."

"Mister, you'd *get* a low price!"

"I'll pay two thousand—as down payment and sixty day option on those cars. Then ninety days to pay the balance."

"Whew! That's a lot of credit! What the hell do you think—"

"My name's Carmack. John Carmack. I—I got a lot of credit in this town."

"Carmack, huh?" The dealer looked sharply at him. "I though I'd seen your face before. I reckon you *are* good for the money, all right! But what in blazes you want so many cars for—"

"Is it a deal?" Carmack interrupted.

"At three-hundred per car?"

"No. Two-fifty per car. Yes or no?"

"By God—*yes!* You're good for the money!"

Carmack drove a used V-8 to a wagon and farm machinery firm, run by his former friend, Peter Wright.

Wright stared at him, hesitated, thrust out a hand.

"Hi, John."

"Hi, Pete. Do a job for me? First of a big order?"

"Sure. Want this jalopy overhauled?"

"Have a factory-rebuilt motor installed in this car—costs fifty dollars, plus the old motor already in the car. Strip off the body; remodel the front seat for a trunk cab. Put on a truck body according to these specifications."

He unrolled some plans. Wright looked them over.

"Cost you a hundred and twenty-five, besides the motor."

"Suppose I got you a hundred such jobs? Or more?"

"I'd shave it to a hundred dollars per car. But—how you figure on payin' for the work?"

"I'll pay you—say, a thousand on account. I want credit for the rest."

"Credit, hell! You didn't save dough on a convict's pay!"

Carmack looked him steadily in the eye.

"Don't you think I can dig up the money?"

Wright blinked, starting, then blurted out a guffaw, slapping his thigh.

"Dig up the money is right! Yeah, I think you can!"

"You'll give me credit, then?"

"Sure. All you want! But I get *all* your business!"

WHEN the first car was finished as ordered, Carmack drove up Garden Grove Avenue, the swank residential street of San Angelo, a wide street bordered by gracious lawns.

Old Pop Wetherill was mowing the Snedeker lawn. Pop's ancient sedan was parked at the curb.

The decrepit vehicle was almost invisible under its overburdening load of a gardener's impedimenta. Along one running board and the hood two rakes, a bamboo sweeper, a hoe and a shovel were stretched to trip the unwary. On the other running board a wide lawnmower and a narrow one-wheeled mower for sidewalk edges were balanced precariously, tied to the door handle by thin cord. Around the spare tire at the rear watering hose twined its serpentine length, and a similar coil of hose lay loosely tied on the front bumper. The built-in trunk at the rear yawned widely open and disclosed conglomeration of objects that defied identification. The inside of the ancient sedan was odoriferous from the two sacks of fertilizer lying up on the floor. Upon the seat lay a tall pile of clippings—rose plants, geraniums, bamboo, and small trees with roots wrapped in gunny sacking. Packages of seeds were piled on the ledge, and all available extra space was taken up by flower pots and a pail of goldfish. Outside, upon the roof, long poles for vines and a stepladder were insecurely roped down.

"Kind'a loaded, ain't she, Pop?" Carmack said.

"Yeah. And when I get a flat tire, it's a thunderation of a job to make a change. Damned old car—she rattles and bangs and jus' natur'ly balks at hills. I'm due to spend a pile on her for repairs!"

"Come here," Carmack said.

He drew old Pop over to the rebuilt Ford.

Pop stared, blinked and jerked his head forward and looked closer. The car had a truck body with a neat closed cab and

a long covered deck outfitted with spools to wind hose on. With built-in metal water containers for goldfish and aquatic plants and shrubs which needed to be carried in moisture. Built-in racks for spades and shovels. Covered cabinets for tools and supplies. A projecting rack for the step ladder, making it easier for old muscles to lift the ladder up or down. A lower deck, underneath, which tilted for unloading, for fertilizer. Handy racks for the lawnmowers.

"Holy, jumpin' Jehoshaphat! Why, it's made to order!" Pop breathed.

"The whole thing can be locked by pulling down the roll covers. You don't need to be afraid of anybody stealing a tool."

"It's p-perfect!" the old man stuttered.

"A rebuilt motor, factory guaranteed. Easy on gas, quiet and smooth. Take you up hills in high. Go eighty an hour, if you want."

Old Pop shook his head dolefully.

"It's a dirty trick, tantalizing me with a thousand-dollar job! I couldn't buy it in a million years."

"Pop, if you could get around to jobs faster, and save energy haulin' stuff in and out of that old wagon—couldn't you make more money by takin' on a few more jobs?"

"I could make twenty-five dollars a month more, easy—"

"That's what she'll cost you. Twenty-five a month for twenty-one months."

Old Pop stared suspiciously at him.

"Yeah? And a two-hundred-and-fifty dollar *down payment!*"

"No. No down payment. Understand this, Pop—this ain't a new car, it's a rebuilt car. That's why the price is low."

"But—by Godfrey, low price or not—how can you give me so much credit for so long—"

"Because I've got credit myself. Unlimited credit! All the credit I need. I'm passin' some on to you. You want to buy?"

"My g-goodness," quavered old Pop. "Puttin' a deal like *that* before me—I can't afford *not* to buy!"

JOHN CARMACK took old Pop Wetherill's purchase contract to Mr. Layton's bank and discounted the note. This

method cut his share of profit down a lot; but with the cash, he could bolster his credit, and earn more money. Later on, he would not discount notes, but keep them and keep all his profit. . . .

There were, Carmack had already figured out, a hundred potential customers like Pop Wetherill. And *this* class of customers was just one out of many varieties of classes! Truck farmers, he knew from experience, had never yet been provided with a truck that, first of all, was *cheap* and easy to pay off—and could keep eggs unbroken, and butter icy, vegetables moist, and fruits cool: and could *show* this stuff if a farmer wanted to peddle.

Besides truck farmers, radio repair men needed trucks especially built as a work shop where costly equipment could be safely locked up and work done comfortably. Estates needed cheap station wagons. Around the university on the outskirts of San Angelo there were a lot of specialists who could pay but little for trucks and had to have them each planned especially for their own individual use—botanists, and geologists, and such-like. Forest rangers in the foothills needed powerful trucks equipped to carry fish for 'planting' and fire-fighting apparatus and all the multitudinous equipment their profession demanded.

Carefully, during the five years in prison, Carmack had planned this business and gathered his figures and made his drawings in the prison library. His big idea was to build trucks for the individual needs of people in trades so numerically sparse in buyers that no manufacturer could afford to set up an assembly line for them. To deliver such trucks at the cost of a used car, yet furnish vehicles which had power and years of good service in them. To furnish such trucks for credit: at such reasonable monthly payments that anybody needing such a truck could buy one. . . .

Carmack hired salesmen. Opened a showroom.

AND as the sales mounted up, the blighting memories of prison faded under the rush and joy of satisfying work . . . until Toby McCann came to see him. Toby McCann had been in the penitentiary almost a year before

Carmack had come to serve his time.

Toby came at night, when John Carmack was alone in his farm house. . . .

"Hi, John!"

"McCann! You out on parole?"

Carmack took off his glasses and pushed back the book he'd been reading at the dining room table.

"Yeah. But I'm lamming over the border." Toby McCann's flabby, grey-whiskered face was taut, his slate-colored, expressionless eyes probing the dark shadows of the room. "You alone?"

"Yes. Sit down. I'll set out some ham and eggs and beer—"

"No! I ain't hungry. Carmack, I'm in a rush—do what I say and do it fast!" Toby's hand whipped out of his coat, leveling a .38 pistol. "Grab a lantern and come out to the barn. We'll need a spade."

Carmack gawked at him in thunder-struck amazement.

"Blast you, get a move on!"

From the peg in the kitchen Carmack took down a lantern; lighted it, with hands that shook. From the barn he got a spade. At Toby McCann's orders, he proceeded to the back of the barn, then along the fence to the edge of the creek. Toby jumped down onto a large flat rock jutting out from the bank and motioned Carmack to follow him.

"Dig there!"

Slowly Carmack began to dig, his lean body bending and straightening with a slow, sturdy rhythm as his tool knifed into the soft dirt below the overlip of the creek bank . . . and with the same, slow rhythm he began to talk.

"Toby, I was sent to prison . . . for five years . . . because I tried to spend a hundred dollar bill that I found floating down this little creek one morning. It was a hundred dollar bill that a bank teller was able to identify as one of the bills from a big payroll that had been stolen just about a year before."

"Shut up! Dig faster!"

"I didn't hold up that bank messenger and take that money. But because I had that bill—when everybody knew I hadn't worked for wages or sold anything—I went to prison as a thief. Toby, it couldn't be *you* who planted that money on my farm?"

"You're too damn gabby for your own good!"

For a moment Carmack was silent, dumb with the realization that Toby McCann had no intention of leaving here without first sealing his lips with a bullet.

"Toby, people around here believe I got over forty grand buried somewhere on this farm. But I didn't bury it. Maybe *you* did. Maybe you were bein' chased by cops, after that hold-up. You knew you'd be caught. You had two or three criminal charges against you already and you knew you'd go to prison for a while. So you hid that money, figuring to find it after you had served the prison term you were bound to get."

Carmack's spade struck something metallic.

"Step aside, sucker!" Toby ordered.

Carmack stepped back. McCann, leaning, one hand keeping the gun leveled at Carmack, reached down and dislodged a tin box which clattered onto the stony creek bed.

McCann, fumbling, lifted the lid of the box and stuck his hand inside. There was a loud metallic snap and Toby McCann let out an agonized yowl and convulsively straightened up, a stout muskrat trap closed about his hand.

Already Carmack had leaped, swinging the lantern—and brought it crashing on to Toby McCann's skull. And as McCann staggered back, half-dazed, Carmack wrenched the .38 from his hand.

"You sneakin' thief, you're going back to the penitentiary!"

"Carmack, d-don't be a blasted fool!"

Toby McCann sobbed. "L-look! If you turn me in, you'll have to give up the money, too. Let's share it—half of forty grand apiece—"

"Share what?" asked Carmack. "Look in that box. It's empty."

"**B**UT what," demanded the sheriff when Carmack told his story on delivering Toby McCann into custody, "has become of that forty grand?"

"Oh, that money," Carmack said mildly. "I figured it was buried somewheres along the creek, because that's where I found that hundred dollar bill floating down. I probed that creek bank mighty careful, believe me; and I found a spot where some poplar roots were busted where somebody had dug."

"Then you found that forty grand!"

"Yeah, soon after comin' home from prison. I didn't let word get out, though, because I knew that some day the man who framed me into prison would be coming back for the loot. I got the bank to keep it a secret, too, when I returned the money."

The sheriff shook his head in slow wonder.

"Hard to do, wasn't it? To return that money after you'd spent five years in prison—almost *earnin'* that money?"

"No—not so hard," Carmack said.

He took out his bankbook, opened it, and his lean face relaxed in a smile. The profits from his truck business—thirty seven thousand it amounted to. Before long, it would be forty grand. Money he had earned *honestly* because people had believed him a *croak*. . . .

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The Lady Laughs at Death



Only Molly Pepper and Joel Blanchard, the young assistant D.A., dared defy the powerful and corrupt administration of Hope City—but it was a grim fight against desperate odds and only the memory of her sister's horrible fate gave Molly the courage to go forward into the arms of almost certain death!

CHAPTER ONE

Trouble at Midnight

THE two girls were panting as they ran. Save for the excited clicking of their high heels on the pavement and the sound of their exhausted breathing, the night was oppressively silent. Decrepit-looking tenement houses in which no lights shone and brooding warehouses

By **RUSSELL GRAY**



Blanchard leaped forward as Molly made her break . . .

flanked the deserted street on both sides.

Suddenly one of the girls stopped under a street light. "It's no use, May," she panted. "They'll get us no matter where we go!"

The other girl tugged desperately at her companion's arm. "We've got to keep

"Will we?" she repeated. "Sally and Joan went to the police. You know what happened."

"I don't care," May replied recklessly. There was a sob in her voice, and fear was a livid mask on her pinched face. She was smaller than her companion, thinner, but the bold cut of her summer dress revealed delicately proportioned curves. "Anything's better than going back!" She

Another Smashing Novelette of the Ever-Courageous Molly Pepper Whose Guns Blaze Always in Defense of Justice and Against the Racketeers of the Law.

trying, Ella. I'll never go back. We'll come across a cop any minute and then we'll be all right."

"Will we?" Ella said. Under ordinary circumstances her face, in spite of the heavy coat of make-up, could have been called attractive. But now it was ugly with fear.

pulled at Ella. "Come on. There'll be a cop on Bridge Street."

The two girls started to run again. A voice called out to them and they stopped abruptly, frozen.

"Run!" May cried.

But Ella held her back. "It's only a girl," she said with a gasp of relief.

They stood watching as the strange girl crossed the street and came up to them. In spite of the warmth of the night she wore a loose tweed swagger coat, her hands thrust in the pockets.

"What do you want?" May demanded.

"A man is following you. Is that whom you're running away from? A block back I saw you two hurrying, then I saw the man. I followed on the other side. When you stopped under the light, he stepped into a doorway. I think he didn't try to catch up to you because he saw me watching across the street."

The two girls swung around. A man was coming toward them. He walked with his head thrust forward a little, one hand in his coat pocket. He did not seem to be hurrying. There was a kind of deliberateness in his movement, an inevitability in his approach.

"It's Pete Pollack!" Ella screamed.

May did not say anything, did not try to move. Her face, her whole body, sagged.

"Can I help you?" the girl in the coat asked.

"Help!" May started to laugh hysterically. Then she said: "Go away, please. You're not in this."

"I'm afraid I am," the girl in the coat said quietly.

PETE POLLACK'S nose was twisted to one side of his face and a dead cigarette drooped from the corner of a thin-lipped mouth. He did not give the two girls he had been following a glance. Slowly his eyes traveled over the girl in the coat. The coat hung limply open in front; he took in the tall slimness of her figure, the small firm chin, the finely proportioned features, the tawny hair which she wore straight back from her forehead.

Then he met her eyes. They looked squarely, steadily, into his own, and they were laughing.

"What are you doing here?" he growled, his dead cigarette bobbing with the movement of his mouth.

"It's a public street. Who are you?"

He pulled the cigarette from his mouth and tossed it away. He said: "Scram."

"All right," the girl said. "But these two girls are going with me. Aren't you, girls?"

They didn't answer. They simply stared at her with eyes in which terror and incredulity mingled.

"I said scram," the man repeated.

The girl kept on smiling. Pete Pollack stepped forward. His open palm struck the girl across the face. Her head snapped sideways with the force of the blow. Her face turned ashen; her lips trembled.

Then the man was looking at a .32 automatic in her hand. He hadn't seen her take it out of her coat pocket. It was just there, pointing at his heart. Her lips still trembled, but her hand didn't.

"Now *you* scram," she said in a voice as taut as a steel wire. "Before I kill you for that slap."

The man's thin lips curled into a mirthless grin. Suddenly his hand flicked out. The girl shifted the gun from his heart and it roared. Lead burned through the flesh and muscles of his forearm, but the motion of his arm went on. The fist caught the girl on the shoulder, spinning her. An instant later his other fist struck the side of her jaw, smashing her to the sidewalk.

She fell on her side, rolled on her back, and lay there on the sidewalk, dazed, her eyes looking up at Pete Pollack. He had a gun in his left hand, holding it limply, carelessly. His right arm he held stiffly. A circle of blood soaked into his sleeve.

"Damn you!" he said, standing over her. "Push your rod away from you along the sidewalk. Then stand up."

Her right hand, still holding her automatic, lay flat against the sidewalk. Her coat and skirt had jerked up to her hips when she had fallen. Pete Pollack's eyes licked over the marble smoothness of her thighs.

"What are you going to do to me?" she asked. One of the two other girls, she couldn't tell which, was sobbing.

"I don't know yet." The thin-lipped mouth grinned. "If I only beat hell out of you, you'll be lucky. Push that rod away like I said."

"I know where you'll take me," she said. "I'm not going."

He shrugged. "Have it your way, sister. If you want a belly full of lead instead . . ."

His gun was no longer limp in his hand. His fingers tightened.

"All right," she said.

Her hand moved, but the gun stayed in it. Pete Pollack ripped out an oath and started to squeeze the trigger of his own gun. For a split-second thunder filled his head—then the world vanished. He dropped suddenly, as if he had fallen from a great height, with a .32 slug in his brain.

The girl rose from the sidewalk, white and trembling. She straightened her dress and coat, dropped the automatic into a pocket.

"God!" Ella gasped. "Do you know who that was? Charlie Valenti's hood. I never saw such shooting."

"YOU'VE seen plenty in your time, haven't you?" the girl in the coat said. "I didn't want to kill him, not even a rat like that. I thought when I shot him in the arm he'd let us alone. He made me do it."

May set up an hysterical wail. "They'll hunt us down. They'll make us pay for this."

A window shot up in a house across the street and a man stuck his head out. He yelled something at them. A block or so down the street somebody was running toward them.

"The cops!" Ella cried. "They'll be here any minute. We gotta beat it."

"It was self-defense," the girl in the coat said.

"No, no! You don't know the police in this town."

The girl in the coat smiled grimly. She certainly did know the kind of justice that was dispensed in Hope City. She said: "All right, let's run for it. My room is only a couple of blocks away."

The three girls raced around the corner. From the other street they heard shouts. Somebody must have reached the body. Both Ella and May were sobbing as they ran.

The girl in the coat led them into one of the slum dwellings. They panted up three flights of dark, rickety stairs to a furnished room. Ella and May dropped down on the bed. May's shoulders shook with hysteria.

"Have some cigarettes, girls," the girl in the coat said. "Your nerves are shot." She passed around a pack. Then she said:

"First, let's get acquainted. What are your names?"

"My name's Ella Cole and she's May Slavin. What's yours?"

"Molly Pepper," the girl in the coat said.

She watched their faces. They showed no sign of ever having heard the name before. Joel Blanchard had succeeded in keeping it out of the newspapers after the killing of the corrupt Police Commissioner Thatcher. But she knew that something had leaked out to the underworld; that crooks were talking of a beautiful girl who could handle a gun like the very devil himself.

"So the man I shot was one of Charlie Valenti's hoods," Molly Pepper said, expelling smoke in a thin line. "And Valenti's the vice czar of Hope City. That means that you girls . . ."

Ellie Cole nodded.

"You were running away from him," Molly Pepper went on. "I suppose you were going to the police. He was going to bring you back or—"

MAY SLAVIN jumped up from the bed, her frail body quivering. "Or our bodies would be found in the river tomorrow," she cried.

"That's what they do to the girls who try to leave Charlie Valenti's houses. I don't care. I can't stand it any more. I'd rather be dead than stay there. I'm going to the police."

"The police!" Ellie Cole spat out. "You know what would happen to us if we went to the police? We'd be arrested for soliciting and after a session in the cooler we'd be handed back to Valenti. Other girls tried it. They never tried anything again. The only people who get protection in this hell-hole called Hope City are the crooks."

Molly Pepper nodded. "I know," she said in a flat voice.

"I don't care," May Slavin persisted stubbornly. "They say there's a new district attorney, a man named Blanchard, who'll help us."

Ellie Cole laughed deep in her throat. "He's only an assistant district attorney, you dope. He ain't got much to say. The D.A. is Martindale, and heaven help the poor girl that goes to him." She turned

to Molly. "I tried to tell her what we're up against. That's why I went with her, to tell her we ain't got a chance, but she won't listen."

Molly said: "Mr. Blanchard is a personal friend of mine. I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll go downstairs and call him up and have him come right over. Then you'll be able to talk to him. I feel sure he will be able to help you."

May Slavin's face lit up. "Will you? Oh, Miss Pepper, I don't know how to thank you."

"Just the same, I'm scared," Ellie Cole mumbled.

Molly Pepper went down to a restaurant on the next block which was open all night and called a number. After a minute a sleepy voice responded at the other end of the wire.

"Joel? This is Molly."

The voice was instantly wide awake. "Molly, where have you been these last couple of weeks. I've gone crazy worrying over you. The only time you get in touch with me is when you're in some kind of scrape. What's up now?"

"Well, among other things, I just killed a man."

"What!"

Briefly she told him what had happened.

"The rat deserved what he got," the assistant district attorney commented. "But, Molly, why must you be sticking your neck out. If anything had happened to you . . ."

"But, Joel, here's your big chance to smash the vice ring. Last time I saw you you told me you couldn't get anywhere with your vice investigation. Witnesses are afraid to open their mouths and the rest of the D.A.'s office isn't cooperating. But these girls will talk."

"Okay, honey. I'll be over as soon as a taxi will get me there."

When Joel Blanchard's taxi pulled up before the house in which Molly Pepper lived, there were two police prowler cars parked at the curb.

Blanchard jumped out before the cab had come to a complete stop. His heart stopped beating.

"What's up?" he asked a patrolman who stood in front of the entrance.

"Murder, Mr. Blanchard," the patrolman said. "Girl's been shot."

CHAPTER TWO

Wanted for Murder

THERE was ice in Joel Blanchard's veins instead of blood as he climbed the three flights of stairs. The third floor landing was crowded with patrolmen, detectives, and tenants in various states of undress. Blanchard pushed through to the open door of the room which was the center of attention.

"Hiya, Joel," his friend, Lieutenant Tom Nast of the Homicide Squad, greeted him. "Plenty of business tonight."

Blanchard looked past Nast through the open door. A load lifted from his chest. He had never before seen the girl who lay on the floor with arms outflung and sightless eyes staring at the ceiling. Dr. Burroughs, the medical examiner, stood up and lit a cigar.

"Well, Doc?" Nast asked.

"The gun was held tight against her heart. I'd be inclined to say she pressed the trigger herself if the gun were near her. But you say you can't find a gun. As for the bullet, I'm pretty certain it was a .22."

"A .22," Lieutenant Nast mused. "That's funny. The guy next door who called the police says he was awakened by a gun booming a number of times almost in his ears and when he rushed out in the hall he saw the door of this room open and the girl lying dead. Other tenants also heard shots. A .22 doesn't boom, and there seems to have been only one shot!"

Nast turned to Blanchard. "There's been a blonde going around shooting people tonight. The reason we made some sort of record getting over here is that we were at another murder a couple of blocks away. A guy there claims he heard shots and when he looked out of the window he saw three girls standing over a body. He says a tall blonde was holding a gun. And guess who the stiff was?"

Nast paused. He looked at Blanchard. Blanchard thought: Does he know that I know? Aloud he said: "I haven't any idea."

"It was Pete Pollack, Charlie Valenti's ace gunman. Shot down by a girl! I bet

Pete is so ashamed that he won't rest easy in his grave. And then they tell me that a tall, good-looking blonde lived in this room. She skipped, of course, before we came. Took all her belongings and the guns."

"Guns?" Blanchard said.

"Sure. She goes in for variety. She used something like a .32 on Pete Pollack. We don't know her name and the descriptions we have of her are pretty general. But there are a mess of her prints in the room."

As he spoke he steered Blanchard by an elbow to the end of the hall. When they were out of earshot, he turned to Blanchard and said:

"Who is she, Joel?"

"Huh?" Blanchard said.

"It was a good-looking blonde who shot down Sam Scanell last month when he and Bernie Groh tried to kidnap her," Nast said. "Maybe Bernie Groh and Commissioner Thatcher killed each other, but only you and the blonde and a cop were there, and you and the cop say she ran out and you didn't know who she was. Maybe. But I've been thinking, Joel.

"Six years ago Scanell and Groh tortured and killed a girl named Alice Stark and shot down her husband, Fred Stark. It wasn't known until recently that it was Commissioner Thatcher who had hired Groh and Scanell to do this job because Thatcher was as crooked as any Hope City official and Stark, who was a minor official, was preparing to go to the governor with the dirt.

"Alice Stark had a kid sister, an attractive blonde kid of sixteen. This kid was forced to watch while Groh and Scanell worked on her sister with a knife. Her name was Molly Pepper. I've been checking up on this Molly Pepper. She went to live with an uncle of hers named Cim Pepper in a small upstate town. His hobby was collecting fire-arms, and neighbors say that for five or six years the girl's only interest was practising with the guns. They say that she got so good that she could hit anything she could see from any angle in any position. About six weeks ago she came back to Hope City—and very shortly Scanell, Groh and Thatcher were no longer alive."

THERE was a silence. The two men looked at each other.

"Very interesting," Blanchard commented.

"Look here, Joel," Nast said. "Stepping out of my role as a cop for a minute, I can see why this girl, Molly Pepper, would want to kill the men who tortured her sister. And God knows Pete Pollack deserved to die. But this is different. A defenseless girl was shot down in cold blood."

"I don't know where she is," Blanchard said wearily.

"Maybe you don't. But you can help us find her."

Joel Blanchard laughed harshly.

"I know of at least three women whom Pete Pollack murdered because they revolted against Charlie Valenti's rule," he said. "The man who ordered their murder to their hearts' content and get away as I do that the man behind Valenti is Saul Cornelius, political dictator of the South Side, who runs the mayor, the police and the D.A.'s office. They can murder to their heart's content and get away with it. Witnesses are afraid to talk. The pressure against my vice investigation is terrific, and the only reason I'm not fired as assistant district attorney is that it might make too much stink in the papers. But now the police are at last going after a murderer—a girl whose crime is that she's trying to rid this pest hole of its slimy monsters."

A worried frown creased the lieutenant's heavy face. "I know. Maybe we two are the only honest men working for the city. But the fact is, my job is to find the murderer and yours is to see that she's punished. Where is she, Joel?"

"I honestly don't know," Blanchard said.

"You wouldn't tell me if you did know."

"No, Tom," Blanchard said. "I wouldn't."

He turned and slowly went down the stairs. He walked all the way to his apartment at the other end of the city. They would find Molly—the police or the gangsters. If the police got to her first, she would have a chance. If Valenti's gunmen found her. . . .

Dawn was tinting the sky when he reached his apartment. When he entered,

he found Molly curled in a deep armchair, smoking a cigarette and sipping a highball.

"Hello," she said brightly. "I was sure you wouldn't mind. I got in with a skeleton key."

He stepped forward. On the floor he saw the valise she must have brought with her.

"Mind!" he said. "Thank God you came here. I suppose you know the police are looking for you."

She nodded and took another drink. His heart went out to her. He was always a little astonished at her loveliness.

"I thought they would," she told him. "Did the police get there before you?"

"Yes."

"Good," she said.

He stood at the side of her chair, looking down at her. He said: "The police have a pretty good description of you and by now they have your fingerprints."

SHE stood up. Joel Blanchard was not a short man, nor was he tall, and her eyes were nearly on a level with his.

"I didn't kill May Slavin, if that's what you're thinking."

She saw the change of his expression, the relieved droop of his shoulders.

"Did you think I'd kill a woman, a defenseless woman?"

"I didn't know," Joel said. "I couldn't tell what had happened in your room."

"When I came back from phoning you, Ellie Cole was outside," Molly said. "She told me that she'd come down stairs for air and that May had fallen asleep on my bed. She wanted me to stay downstairs with her until you came. She seemed nervous, she wouldn't look at me, so I suspected something was wrong. When I started to go upstairs, she tried to hold me back. I pushed her away and went up. She didn't follow me. I found May Slavin dead."

"It was easy to see what had happened. Somebody had followed us to the house, had gone up to my room while I was out. Neither May nor Ellie had screamed or they would have roused the house. It must have been somebody they knew, somebody who terrified them into silence. The murderer had taken a .22 out of my drawer and shot May with it."

"Perhaps Ellie Cole was the murderer," Blanchard suggested.

"I thought of that. But why should she kill May? More likely the murderer promised to spare her if she'd try to keep me downstairs until you came. Then when you and I went up, they'd tip off the police and we'd be found with the dead girl in my room with my gun and the prints wiped off the gun. A perfect frame-up."

"I see," Joel said.

"I knew they wouldn't tip off the police until you arrived. Even if I were gone, the police would find you there. There mightn't be much of a case against you, but there would be enough of a smell for the district attorney to get rid of you without any comeback. I packed all my things—I didn't keep many there—and I left the door open and went out to the back yard. Somebody, I knew, would be watching in front, who'd try to kill me if I was seen running away from the frame-up."

"In the yard I emptied my .32 into the air. The .22 which had killed May Slavin hadn't made enough noise to wake anybody up, and I wanted the police to get there before you did. Then when I saw lights go on in the house, I climbed over fences until I came to an alley leading to another street. I walked until I saw a taxi, and here I am."

"Yes, here you are," Blanchard said.

"Joel, aren't you glad I came here?"

He placed his arms on her shoulders, drew her to him.

"Molly, I'll be forever grateful for what you did for me by saving me from that frame-up. And you know how I feel about you. That's why I want you to give yourself up to the police."

SHE stared at him. "Give myself up?" she whispered. She broke away from him and laughed. It wasn't a pleasant laugh. "I see. You don't want to harbor a fugitive from justice."

"Molly, please! They haven't a thing on you. You shot Pete Pollack in self-defense. They found him with a gun in his hand. And they can't pin May Slavin's murder on you."

"Even after I ran away?"

"I tell you they can't convict you. The

people of this city are honest even if their officials aren't. No jury will find you guilty. I'll resign my job and defend you."

She went to her half-finished highball and drank it down, slowly. Then she lit a cigarette.

She said: "I see how your mind works. You think I'll be safe in jail. You think once I go out in the street Valenti's gunmen will get me. You think I have more of a chance of beating the courts than of beating killers' bullets."

He didn't say anything.

She thrust out her chin. "Well, neither the police nor the killers will get me. When I went back to my room and saw that pathetic dead body of May Slavin, I felt the way I do when I remember the way my sister was slowly cut to pieces to make her tell where her husband was so that they could kill him. Well, the men who did that paid with their lives, but the rotten, corrupt power behind them still exists. I swore I'd fight that power, and I will."

There was a fire in her eyes which made her even more lovely than usual. He knew that it was no use arguing with her, that there was no way he could keep her from pitting her phenomenal marksmanship and her courage against the organized crime overlords and their henchmen who held the city in their grip. The odds against her were so hopeless as to be ridiculous.

"I'll go with you," he said.

"No. You can do more good in the D.A.'s office. You'll hear from me. And when you do, you'll have enough evidence to smash the vice racket."

She picked up the valise. He grabbed her arm, swung her to him. "I won't let you go. At any rate, stay here until tomorrow. You can have my bed. I'll sleep on the couch here."

She patted his cheek with a cool, soft hand. She said: "All right. But only until tomorrow."

They had another drink and then Blanchard went into the bedroom to get bedding for the couch. When he returned to the living room, she was gone. He dropped the bedding on the floor and dashed out of the apartment, calling her name. She wasn't in the hall. He took

the stairs two at a time. There was nobody in the ornate lobby but the elevator operator.

"Did you just take a woman down from the fifth floor?" Blanchard demanded.

"Yes, sir. Tall, good-looking girl. She got into a taxi. It was no more'n a minute ago."

Blanchard rushed out to the street. There wasn't a car of any kind in sight, parked or moving. Slowly he went back into the house, thinking: "The fool! The adorable, reckless fool!"

CHAPTER THREE

Death Laughs Loud

A MAN was sitting in the back of the taxi when Molly Pepper opened the door.

"Come right in," he said pleasantly. "There's plenty of room."

A big automatic rested lightly on his knee. Molly slid her right hand into her coat pocket and kept it there. She stood with one foot on the running board, looking at the man.

"All right, Charlie Valenti," she said.

She lifted her valise with her left hand. Valenti leaned forward, pulling it in. His gun rested lightly in his hand.

"So you know me?" he smiled.

She pressed her body in the corner of the seat, stretched out her legs. Her hand stayed in her coat pocket.

"Yes," she said. "I've seen your picture in the papers."

"And you weren't afraid to come in here?"

"No," she said. "For a moment I was afraid that you had some of your gorillas out in the street, and that one of them would unchivalrously put a bullet in my back. But then I realized that you wouldn't be holding a gun in your hand if that were so. You'd want to hold my attention and not scare me."

"You don't scare easily, do you?"

She said: "I could have killed you before you could have raised your gun. And even now, that gun won't do any good. All I have to do is squeeze my hand in my coat and you'll be dead."

Valenti smiled pleasantly. His black eyes also smiled and travelled over her.

He was a small man, and handsome in a slick, swarthy way. She had heard that he considered himself quite a ladies' man.

"You're even better than they say," Valenti commented. "I think we're going to get along fine."

Molly raised her voice without moving. "Driver where are you going?"

They were headed toward the open country. The driver did not answer. He kept his eyes on the road.

"Turn around, driver," Molly ordered. "Ride up Main Street."

The driver kept going.

She said to Valenti: "Tell him to turn around. I prefer the city air tonight. And I prefer well-lighted streets."

"Do what the lady says," Valenti told the driver.

The driver turned around and headed for the heart of the city.

"Now, Mr. Valenti, please place your gun on the floor of the car," Molly said. "I can't relax when a gun is in sight and I would like to smoke."

Valenti's white teeth gleamed as he laughed. "Looks like you've become the host of this little party. If I don't put the gun down you'll shoot me through that pocket?"

"Yes. And if you think I'm bluffing, I'd be more than pleased to have you make a test."

"I'm quite sure you're not bluffing, but you wouldn't shoot a man in cold blood?"

"You or one of your men shot poor May Slavin in cold blood. And you have a gun in your hand to protect yourself."

"Pete Pollack had a gun, too," Valenti said softly, teeth still flashing.

"Yes."

HE PLACED the gun at his feet. Then he reached into his pocket. Molly tensed. He laughed aloud, pulled out a gold cigaret-case and snapped it open. He offered the case to Molly, extracted a cigarette for himself, lit both cigarettes and settled back.

"You're a silly girl, Molly," he said. "I was going to take you to a hide-out. The cops are after you on a murder rap. We can be friends."

"Yes?"

"Sure. I've been looking for a girl like you all my life. I've known hundreds

of dames, some of them pretty swell numbers, but none of them holds a candle to you. You got what it takes, baby. Class and nerve. We can go places together."

"Even though I killed Pete Pollack?"

Valenti shrugged. "Forget it. Pete was a mug, anyway. Look, baby, whether you know it or not, you're in a spot. I don't mean I'll hurt you. The cops want you for murder."

"You know I didn't kill May Slavin."

"Try to convince a judge and jury. That nice little boy you just been to see, Blanchard, can't do a thing for you. I can, baby. I can fix it so that you can walk right into the station and the police won't bother to hold you."

"I don't doubt it," Molly said. "And in return you want—well, I know what you want women for in your business."

Valenti looked grieved. "You don't understand me, baby. I mean us two, you and me working together. There's a fortune in it. Why, if another man so much as touched you, I'd kill him."

"I think, Mr. Valenti," Molly stated slowly, "that some day I shall kill you for having made me this offer. I find it hard to keep myself from killing you now."

Abruptly the smile left Valenti's face. He looked into the steady blue of her eyes and ran his tongue over his lips.

"You wouldn't shoot me now," he said.

Her lips smiled, but her eyes didn't. "Scared, aren't you, Mr. Valenti? No, I won't shoot you in cold blood. I'm not made that way." She paused, then said: "But as I think of May Slavin, I find myself wishing that you would make a dive for that gun at your feet."

He said nothing; just kept licking his lips. They were on Main Street now. The street was well-lighted, but it was long past midnight and few people were out. Now and then they passed a patrolman.

Valenti's thin lips twisted into a grimace of fear. "What are you going to do?" he demanded hoarsely.

"I know what you're thinking," Molly said. "You know that I can't go to the police for help. You know that I can't keep riding around with you and that if I just walk out of this cab I wouldn't go two blocks before your gunmen, who might be trailing this cab for all I know,

are after me. And I can't take you to wherever I want to go because then you and the driver will know where I'm staying. But you are afraid because you know I'm desperate, and you know that a desperate person with a gun is inclined to shoot first and then reason a way out later. With you dead it would be easier for me."

"For God's sake!" Valenti gasped.

"You didn't know what you were getting into when you got me into this cab."

VALENTI shifted in his seat. His eyes drifted toward the gun at his feet. The driver hunched over the wheel. She couldn't see his face, but she knew that he was scared too.

"Not so fast, driver," she said. "And if you have any ideas of pulling a gun, forget about them. I can shoot you both in less than two seconds. It has been years since I missed anything I shot at. And, Mr. Valenti, don't eye that gun so longingly. It won't do you any good."

Valenti said: "Look, baby, we're both in a spot. Let's be reasonable. Suppose I help you get away? I'll give you my word I'll play square with you."

"I'm not an utter fool. Driver, pull up at that cab parked at the curb. Mr. Valenti and I are getting into it. He will go first. You will not start your car until the other cab is out of sight. Mr. Valenti will be my hostage."

The transfer to the other taxi went without a hitch. Valenti got in first, then Molly. The second cab driver looked at them with curiosity and shrugged. He could not know that the girl held a gun in her pocket. She left her valise in the first cab. It would be too much trouble bringing it along.

When the second cab started, Molly took the gun from her pocket. The driver glanced around and ripped out an oath.

"Drive like hell," Molly ordered. "Turn around the next block to your right." Then she said to Valenti: "You will kindly look out of that window."

"In the name of heaven!" Valenti quavered. "I'll give you anything you want. You can't do this."

"Look out of that window."

Slowly he turned his head away from her. His hands trembled violently. The

taxi was tearing down a deserted side street, but the driver's eyes stared at the mirror over the windshield.

Molly slid along the seat, and with all her strength brought the barrel of the automatic down on the base of Valenti's skull. He crumpled without a sound.

"Jees!" the driver gasped.

At the corner she told the driver to stop the taxi. She got out. "Drive on," she ordered, returning the gun to her coat pocket.

The taxi shot away with Charlie Valenti's unconscious form in back. Molly walked around the corner, waited in a dark doorway until another taxi came by. Then she ran out and hailed it. It was the third taxi she had been in within ten minutes.

She directed the driver to a street several blocks from a great, sprawling apartment house, a Federal Housing development, in which she had an apartment where she kept all her possessions, including the firearms collection her uncle had left her. She had rented it under an assumed name. Not even Joel Blanchard knew of it.

The house was on the outskirts of the city. To reach it, the taxi had to drive through a road which ran through empty lots and city dumps. Molly leaned wearily back in the cab, not bothering to look behind. If she had, she would have seen a blue sedan following the taxi.

When they were on the most desolate section of the road, the sedan suddenly shot out from behind the taxi. Molly jerked upright, snatching out her gun with the same motion. Then she flopped to the floor as a fusilade of shots poured from the front seat of the sedan. Glass splintered. The cab driver screamed and the taxi careened crazily off the road. It bounced over the bumpy ground, then stopped.

The blue sedan had also stopped. It stood on the road, fifty feet away. No more shots came from it.

MOLLY piled out of the taxi through the door away from the sedan. The taxi driver was crawling out.

"Are you hurt?" she asked anxiously.

Then she saw his face. It was clean-cut, boyish, but pale with fright.

"They got me in the shoulder," he said through compressed lips. "What's this all about? What did you get me into?"

The lights of the sedan were out. There was a sliver of moon which gave only the vaguest kind of light at that distance. Nobody appeared to be in the car. Its occupants were probably behind it.

Suddenly a voice from behind the sedan called: "Molly Pepper. Come forward with your hands in the air and we won't hurt you."

For answer she threw a shot in the direction of the car. Guns roared from behind the sedan. One bullet bored into the hood of the taxi. The others didn't come close.

The voice had been Charlie Valenti's. She had thought that she had eluded pursuit. Evidently the blue sedan had been following the taxi in which she had ridden with Valenti, then had also followed the second taxi.

The second cab driver, badly frightened, must have stopped his car as soon as Molly was out of sight, and Valenti had been picked up by the sedan. Then the men in the sedan had driven to the corner where Molly had got out and must have been just in time to have seen her get into the third taxi. She leaned around the tire in back of the car, crouching, and waited. She had counted four flashes. A single shot came from the front bumper of the sedan. An instant later Molly fired at the flash. There was a cry of pain. Then a long silence.

It was three or four o'clock in the morning. Few cars came along this road at this hour, and even if any did the drivers of the cars would be scared off.

The taxi driver sat on the ground holding his shoulder. "They'll kill us!" he moaned. "We haven't got a chance."

Molly leaned further around the car, waiting for another shot. Valenti's voice again rose from behind the sedan.

"Molly Pepper! We'll give you one minute to come out. We won't hurt you if you come, but if you don't, we'll rush you. And then you know what'll happen to you."

She didn't answer. She was hoping that they would be foolish enough to rush her. That was her only chance.

Suddenly the taxi driver was on his

feet, screaming: "I'll come out. I'm the driver. I haven't even got a gun. Look, I have my hands up."

He stood with the upper portion of his body exposed above the hood of the taxi, his hands in the air.

"Get down, you fool!" Molly yelled.

She leaped for him. Guns roared. She spun standing up and emptied the clip at the flashes. The driver shrieked and fell, clawing at his side. Behind the sedan a man cursed and exclaimed: "She got Spike, Boss. Clean through an eye."

She bent down over the taxi driver, tore away bloody clothes. He groaned with pain. A big slug had ploughed through the right side of his chest, making a horrible mess. Blood poured from the wound.

"Oh, my God, I'm dying," the driver moaned.

"You're all right," she assured him.

She tore strips from her slip, swabbed the blood with them. That didn't do any good. He might not be fatally wounded if he could be gotten to a hospital in time. She had to turn away from his boyish, pain-contorted face. She had gotten him into this. Now it was up to her to find a way to save him.

NO MORE shots came from the sedan. Perhaps they were afraid of her marksmanship. Her automatic lay on the ground where she had dropped it. It was empty and extra clips had been in the valise she had left in the first taxi.

She was helpless. She could not keep that knowledge from them long. And then they would simply come and take her or shoot her down. There wasn't any chance of running; they would get her before she had taken fifty steps. Meanwhile the boy at her feet was dying.

She stood up. There was a vacuum where her stomach should have been.

"Charlie Valenti," she called.

"You coming out?" came the answer.

"All right. But on one condition."

"What is it?"

"The taxi driver is wounded. He's innocent. Promise to rush him at once to a hospital or to a doctor and I'll come out."

"Sure."

"Do you give me your word?"

"Sure. We got nothing against him. Or against you either. Take your coat off and come out with your hands in the air. I don't think you got pockets or a holster in your dress. If you make one phoney move we'll burn you down."

She looked down at the taxi driver. His eyes expressed silent gratitude. Then she said:

"Here I come," and walked across the road with her hands raised.

Three men stepped cautiously from behind the sedan. One held a bloody handkerchief to his neck. Valenti had a bandage about his head.

"You sure can do plenty of damage for a dame," Valenti said.

Three guns were on her as he ran one hand over her, searching for a hidden gun. Her skin crawled under the touch of his large, brutal hands.

Then he said: "Still, I guess that's why I like you so much, baby."

"Ain't you gonna let her have it, Boss?" the wounded gunman asked, surprised.

"No," Valenti said. "I told you I wanted her alive. You don't find a dame like this every year."

"But she croaked Spike and nicked me," the wounded man argued. "And she's the one killed Pete Pollack."

"I like her better alive," Valenti said. He nodded to the unwounded gunman. "Okay, Beetle. That guy behind the cab."

Beetle moved across the road with his gun dangling along his thigh.

Molly swung around to Valenti. "You're taking him to a hospital, aren't you? You promised."

A crooked smile creased Valenti's lips. "Hell, baby, he's seen too much."

Molly lunged after Beetle. Valenti caught her arm, pulled her hard against him.

"You dirty, double-crossing rat!" she spat out.

She tried to bring up her hand to strike him. He laughed and held her arms tightly to her sides, crushing her against him. She squirmed, fighting.

Behind the taxi the driver screamed once in mortal terror. Then there was the roar of a heavy calibre pistol. The heart went out of Molly. She felt suddenly very sick.

CHAPTER FOUR

Killers Trap

LEUTENANT TOM NAST was standing outside the entrance of the Municipal Building when Joel Blanchard mounted the stairs.

"Good morning, Joel," Nast said. "Hear about all the fun your blonde girlfriend has been having?"

Blanchard stood very still, wondering if Nast could hear the pounding of his heart. He said: "Go ahead, let's have it."

"She's killed another one of Valenti's hoods—Spike Mulligan. Found the body on Harper Road. He had a .32 slug through the left eye, shot from the same gun that killed Pete Pollack. Near him was another corpse—a kid, a cab driver, with three .45 slugs in him. Two came from one gun and one from another. The kid's cab was there too, riddled with .45 slugs. You know what that adds up to?"

"A gun fight," Blanchard said in a tight voice. "And the girl?"

"No trace of her. The way I figure it, she was riding in the cab and Valenti and his mob came up to them in another car. Maybe she got away."

Or maybe, Blanchard thought, they carried her off alive. In that case she would be better off dead.

"Why don't you bring Valenti in?" Blanchard rasped. "He's a murderer and you know it, yet you're more anxious to get a girl. You're as bad as the rest."

Nast's heavy face was deadly serious. "That's not fair. You know we haven't a thing on Valenti. If I brought him in his lawyers would spring him in an hour. As for the girl—well, I'm a cop and I know she's killed three people since last night."

"Two," Blanchard corrected him. "Two rats. And she killed them in self-defense. She didn't kill May Slavin." He paused and then said: "If the police won't do anything, I will."

He turned. Nast grasped his arm. "What are you planning to do?"

Blanchard pulled free. He spoke lightly but his eyes were cold as he said: "To get the gun that's in my desk. By tonight you might be looking for me for the murder of a rat."

He strode into the broad lobby of the

Municipal Building, which as usual was crowded with petty politicians and riff-raff. Saul Cornelius, leader of the four wards which made up the South Side, was at the cigar stand.

Blanchard swung him around by the shoulder. Cornelius was thin, dapper, white-haired. He took a slender cigar from his mouth with manicured fingers and said: "Why, hello, Blanchard."

Blanchard put his face close to his. In a voice that quivered with suppressed rage he said: "If anything happens to that girl, I'll tear your heart out."

"Girl? What are you talking about?"

"You know what I'm talking about. Call off Valenti and his dogs. If a hair of that girl is harmed. . ."

Cornelius replaced the cigar between his lips. "Have you been drinking?" he asked.

Blanchard realized that everybody in the lobby had suddenly become silent, was crowding around them. He looked down at Cornelius, his lips working. "There won't be a hole deep enough for you to hide yourself in," he whispered.

Then he strode toward the elevators. Voices buzzed behind him.

A girl was sitting in his office. She was attractive in a hard, over-painted way. Her skirt rode above her knees.

She jumped up when he entered. "Mr. Blanchard? Molly Pepper sent me."

Blanchard walked around his desk and sat down in his swivel chair. "Then she's all right?"

"Sure. She's hiding out. She got away all right last night after she had that gun fight. She sent me to tell you not to worry."

BLANCHARD leaned back, feeling as though a great weight had been lifted from his chest. "Who are you?"

"My name's Ellie Cole. I'm—"

"I know. You're the girl who was in her room last night when May Slavin was shot."

"I wasn't," she exclaimed. "He made me go out. Said he'd spare my life if I kept Molly Pepper from coming up until you came. It was to be a frame-up. The cops would find you and Molly in that room."

"I know. Who was the killer?"

"Spike Mulligan."

"Convenient," Blanchard mumbled.

"What?"

"Nothing. Where did you see her?"

"I was walking along the street this morning when she steps out of a doorway with a gun in her hand. Naturally I'm scared stiff. She makes me go up to the place where she's staying and says she wants me to sign a full statement about Charlie Valenti's white slave business. I said all right. I said I would be glad to even go on a witness stand because of what they did to May. I will, too, Mr. Blanchard. I don't care what happens to me. I want to get even."

"And then she sent you to tell me she was all right?"

"Yeah, that's it."

Blanchard said: "Will you take me to her?"

Ellie Cole shifted in her seat. "Well—I don't think she'd want me to."

"I'm sure she does."

"Well—all right. You want to go now?"

"Yes," Blanchard said. "Will you please wait in the other office for me a few minutes?"

When she was gone he took a .38 automatic from his desk drawer and put it in his pocket. Just then Owen Martindale, the district attorney, walked in.

"I came in to tell you that there has been a great deal of dissatisfaction about the way you're handling the vice investigation," Martindale declared. "In three weeks you haven't turned up a thing the department can use. All you've been doing was to make wild and utterly irresponsible public accusations against respectable citizens."

"Cornelius didn't waste any time running to you, did he?" Blanchard said.

Martindale's head snapped up. "What are you implying?"

Blanchard leaned lightly against the wall. "I'm implying that Cornelius is behind the oldest and most contemptible business in the world. I'm implying that his political influence is keeping the vice squad from making arrests, and from protecting my witnesses and is keeping every department in the city, including this office, from cooperating with me."

Martindale glared. "Young man, you're worse than impudent. You're—"

"Fired?" Blanchard cut him short. "Did Cornelius order you to fire me?"

Martindale sputtered and opened his mouth. Blanchard spun on his heels and went through the door. In the outer office he nodded to Ellie Cole and she followed him. The two got into a taxi and drove off.

Blanchard handed Ellie Cole a cigarette and took one for himself. His hands were pretty steady. Martindale would probably fire him now. It didn't matter. Yes, he thought, his hands were pretty steady for a man who was on his way to face death.

The taxi drove them to a little white cottage several miles outside the city. Warily he got out. His hand clutched the automatic in his pocket.

A hard object jabbed his back. "Stay put, guy," a voice said. "Ellie, take the gat out of his pocket."

He knew he would be dead as soon as he moved, so he remained motionless while Ellie Cole removed his gun. The man behind him was the cab driver, of course. Fool, for not having thought of that. He had figured they would let him go all the way into the house before they tried to pull anything.

"Now walk straight ahead," the driver said.

CHAPTER FIVE

Death's Cold Breath

MOLLY PEPPER sprang up from the bed when Joel Blanchard entered the room. The taxi driver came in behind him.

"Joel!" she cried, running to him.

He held the slim loveliness of her body against him. They were in a bedroom on the second floor of the cottage. Molly had been lying fully dressed on the bed. In a chair near the window, bull-necked and stolid, sat the gunman Valenti called Beetle. The taxi driver took up a post near the door. Each had a .45 in his fist.

Briefly Blanchard told Molly how Ellie Cole had led him here.

"But didn't you realize that it was a trap?" Molly exclaimed in astonishment.

"Of course. Her story was so phoney it couldn't have fooled a child. But I realized it was the only way I could get

to you, and besides I didn't think they'd try anything before I got in the house. They got me flat-footed."

Molly kissed Blanchard behind an ear and kept her lips there.

"Should we make a break?" she whispered.

He slipped his lips around to her lips and mumbled: "No. It'd be certain suicide now. We'll have to wait for an opening. What do you think Valenti intends to do?"

Again her lips moved up his face, whispering against his skin: "I don't know. I'm frightened, darling, but I won't let them know it. Hold me tight."

Beetle rose lazily from his chair. "Break it up," he ordered. "I know you're talking."

Steps sounded outside. The door opened and three people entered. Charlie Valenti came in first, a fresh bandage taped to the back of his head; then Ellie Cole, smiling triumphantly; finally Saul Cornelius, his manicured fingers curled about a slender cigar.

"Well, well," Cornelius said. "Just a couple of love-birds."

Blanchard shifted his arm down to Molly's waist and turned. He said: "So I was right. I always recognize a rat when I see one."

Cornelius ignored that. "Just a couple of love-birds," he repeated. "So this is the little hideout where their romance went on? To think that Joel Blanchard, the hope of the goody-goody elements in Hope City, should have had a love-nest in the suburbs. Who would have imagined it!"

"So that's it?" Blanchard said between his teeth. "You better think of another one. It's too hackneyed. Nobody will believe it wasn't a frame."

"Won't they?" Cornelius said, expelling a line of smoke. "Not even when they discover that you had leased this place a month ago? When a dozen witnesses recognize the bodies and swear that they've seen you two come and go constantly?"

"The bodies?" Molly whispered.

She pressed close against Blanchard. His arm about her waist tightened.

"Didn't I make that clear?" Cornelius said. "I'm very sorry. Shots will be

heard by passers-by. They will inform the police, and when the cops break in, they will find you two in this bedroom, in a more or less state of undress—both very, very dead. And you will have been shot by a .32 automatic which will very easily be identified by the police. Very conveniently we found bullets to fit the gun in a valise which a young lady carelessly left behind in a taxi. The cases even carry her fingerprints. The reason? A jealous quarrel. You fought for the gun and killed each other."

"Rather elaborate, isn't it?" Blanchard said.

"It has to be," Cornelius replied. "Simply killing you might rouse the reform elements. That would be inconvenient. But if it could be shown that their white hope was no better than he should be—well, you see what I mean."

BLANCHARD'S eyes shifted around the room. Besides himself and Molly there were five in the room. Three had guns. Valenti had taken a .32 automatic from an armpit clip. That would be Molly's gun—the one which would kill Molly and himself.

Cornelius said: "You will now remove your clothes. Not necessarily all of them. But enough to serve the purpose."

Neither of the two moved.

"I think you will," Cornelius said softly. "There are harder ways to die than from bullets. Our friend Beetle, for instance, is an expert with a knife."

Molly shuddered at the mention of the word "knife." That was the way her sister had died years ago. It had taken a long time till she was dead.

Blanchard fumbled at his tie, his eyes busy. The narrow end of the bed was against the wall. On one side of the bed stood Molly and himself and Cornelius. At the other side near the door stood Valenti, Beetle, the driver and Ellie Cole. The room was small—and crowded, which might help.

"You too, my dear," Cornelius said gently.

Molly's hand moved mechanically up to the shoulder of her dress. Valenti stepped around the end of the door and stood at Cornelius' side. The gun was limp in his hand.

Suddenly Molly pushed Blanchard away from her. She covered her face with her hands, sobbing: "I don't want to die! Please don't kill me! I'll do anything if you'll let me live."

"Cut it!" Cornelius snapped.

Blanchard stood tense as a coiled spring. Was Molly really cracking? It wasn't easy to face certain death.

"Please let me live!" she wailed hysterically. She threw herself at Valenti, flinging her arms about him. "You like me, Charlie! I'll do anything you want me to! Only save me!"

Valenti rubbed his face with one hand and turned his head toward Cornelius. His tongue flicked over his lips.

"Don't be a sap!" Cornelius told him.

Blanchard moved an instant after he saw the motion of Molly's arms. Her arms shot out from about Valenti and her hands clamped about his right wrist, twisting. Blanchard sprang forward in a half fall, his fist coming up with terrific force against Valenti's jaw. Then he caught Valenti as the gangster sagged and whirled with the inert body between himself and the door.

As he threw himself backward behind the bed with Valenti on top of him, he saw Molly behind the bed on her side with Valenti's gun in her hand. Saw Cornelius scampering for the door, Ellie Cole with her mouth wide open, the taxi driver holding his fire for fear of hitting Valenti, Beetle's fist tightening on his gun.

An ear-shattering blast filled the room. Valenti's body jerked against Blanchard and hot agony seared into Blanchard's shoulder. Molly's automatic roared. Beetle's eyes popped. He leaned against the wall—sagged to the floor. Lead splintered the wall above Blanchard's head. The driver was shooting at last.

Molly poked her head over the bed and fired twice. There was a scream like that of a stricken animal. That was Cornelius. Then Molly was down on the floor next to Blanchard while bullets kept hitting the wall behind the bed. The driver was still shooting.

All at once there were no more shots and the room was filled with voices. Blanchard felt Molly's soft arms about him and her anxious voice: "Joel darling, are you hurt? Oh, my God, you're hit!"

AN incredible distance above him he saw Lieutenant Tom Nast's face gazing down at him with an anxious expression. Then Blanchard shifted his eyes back to Molly. Her tawny hair was a chaos and she had a big streak of dirt on her face. That face, very much alive and very worried over him, was the grandest sight on earth.

"Good acting, Molly!" Blanchard said. "And better shooting."

Nast and a detective placed Blanchard on the bed. Nast examined the wound.

"Not much damage," he announced. "Maybe a bone nicked. A little lower and it would have been too bad."

There were three corpses in the room—Valenti, Cornelius and Beetle. Against one wall stood Ellie Cole and the driver. One wouldn't have imagined that that small room could have held so many detectives and patrolmen.

"I had a man on your tail," Nast explained. "I thought you'd go to the girl sooner or later and I was right. So this is Molly Pepper!"

She was sitting on the bed, stroking Blanchard's forehead. Her hands trembled slightly now and her face was ashen. Nast stood looking at her, worried.

"You going to take her in, Tom?" Blanchard said. "She killed these rats in self-defense."

"Sure." Nast replied. But there's the little matter of the shooting of May Slavin."

Blanchard said: "Ellie Cole shot May Slavin. Valenti was sure May would come to me so he got Ellie to play along with her to keep her eyes on her. Then when the two were up in Molly's room and Molly went down to call me, and Ellie realized that I would be there soon and that May would talk, she took the .22 out of Molly's drawer and shot May."

"It's a lie!" Ellie Cole screeched.

"May didn't know she was going to be killed until she felt the gun pressed against her," Blanchard went on. "She didn't even have a chance to scream. That's because she trusted the person who killed her. Lieutenant, I charge Ellie Cole with murder."

The girl's feet gave way under her and she fell in a dead faint. When she was revived, she talked—not only about May Slavin's murder but about the whole vice racket in Hope City.

"Now we're getting somewhere," Blanchard exulted from the bed when Ellie Cole had finished. "I'll have indictments by the end of the week."

"Looks as if Molly Pepper beat you to it," Tom Nast commented grimly. "You'll have to indict dead men, except for some small fry."

Molly's hand was still stroking Blanchard's face, gently, comfortingly. They looked into each other's eyes.

"Lucky man," Nast said enviously.

But neither of them heard him.

THE END



ERLE STANLEY GARDNER,

famous author of the Perry Mason stories and ranking top-flight detective fictioneer, returns to the DIME DETECTIVE fold in the August issue with

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a smashing, complete crime-action novelette which introduces a prize pair of characters in the persons of Paul Pry and Mugs Magoo—racket-busters extraordinary. It all starts when a blue-eyed blond come-on for an enterprising gang of lush-rollers, decides to go to work on Pry. But chiseling chisellers is all in the night's work for Paul and his camera-eye sidekick. The boomerang blastout in the last chapter will chase the thrills up and down your spine and keep you on tenterhooks for more Gardner stories about these two originals in the gallery of detective heroes.

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The Butcher Leaves No Clue

(An Uncle Tubby Story)

By RAY CUMMINGS

Uncle Tubby had solved many strange and difficult cases, but this one looked as though it were going to stump him.

Vera Barton had been brutally murdered in her own room by a killer who left no clue — but a few tiny crystals on a dead girl's throat!



No one had heard her scream . . .

Ken. . . Come on, Sergeant, let's go inside."

It was nine o'clock—a warm, clear summer morning. The house was a small old-fashioned cottage standing on a heavily wooded plot of ground in the outskirts of the village.

"She was found in her downstairs dressin' room," Sergeant Cox said as he, Uncle Tubby and Ken crossed the veranda and went into the house. "There was a knife in her heart. The motive looks easy, Uncle Tubby. Damn beautiful, voluptuous looking young woman. Her clothes are about torn off her. An' I guess she was strangled, too. The M.E.

"IT'S THE damdest case I ever bumped into," Sergeant Cox said. "Three men upstairs in the house. A girl in a downstairs room gets murdered some time in the night. Nobody knows when. Nobody knows anything. There ain't a damn clue worth a hoot. Just a dead girl an' all the rest is blank."

"Well, great Scott," Uncle Tubby said, "at least we're starting from scratch, aren't we? Park the car off the drive,

has been here an' gone. I been waitin'—I left everything for you, Uncle Tubby. But I questioned the family—got all the dope, such as it is."

They stood in the dim narrow hallway of the cottage while the sergeant briefly told what he had learned. Three cousins had occupied the house; two young men, and a girl—all unmarried. From their rich grandfather one of them had inherited a considerable amount of money.

"Which one?" Uncle Tubby demanded.

"The murdered girl—this Vera Barton. The house was hers. She let her two cousins stay on for company, and for—protection. The two boys work here in town. One is George Conway—big, blond, husky fellow—works with the Jamison Concrete Company. He's a concrete mixer. The other's a small, dark-haired guy. Name's Richard Russell. He works in a radio factory."

"They're here in the house now?"

The sergeant nodded, with a gesture down the hall. "I got 'em in the dining room"—he lowered his voice—"just in case it's an inside job! You'll want to look 'em over anyway?"

"Absolutely. Who discovered the murder?"

"Peter Tracy, the old family servant. It seems—"

"Let's go in and get them to tell it," Uncle Tubby said. "You can sometimes learn a lot, watching people while they talk."

The sergeant nodded dubiously. "Yeah? Well, do no harm to try your luck."

AT THE dining room door, the tall silent Ken—Uncle Tubby's young nephew—stood unobtrusively watching the sergeant as he introduced Uncle Tubby to the three men. Conway, big and blond, and the smaller, dark-haired Russell were both clad in dressing gowns over their pajamas. Tracy, the stalwart forty-year-old servant, wore a faded bathrobe, with his bare legs beneath it.

"Just a few questions." Uncle Tubby's cherubic face was wreathed with a grave but friendly smile. "Sit down, please. We might as well be comfortable. Now then—I understand that you, Tracy, discovered this murder?"

"Yes, sir." The servant stood stiffly beside a chair at the dining room table.

"Sit down," Uncle Tubby repeated.

"Thank you, sir. I'm quite used to standing." His smooth-shaven, heavy jowled face bore a vague smile, but his eyes were blank.

Uncle Tubby nodded. "Oh—quite so, Tracy. Well, just tell me what happened."

"I know nothing about it, sir," the servant retorted sharply.

"We've already told Sergeant Cox everything we know," the dark-haired Russell interjected. He was smiling nervously, but his eyes were dark and clouded.

"Which is nothing at all," Conway added. He was a handsome blond giant, this concrete worker. He smiled. "We none of us know anything about this."

"Suppose you let Mr. Blythe judge that," the sergeant said tartly.

"My word," Uncle Tubby agreed. "Your point is well taken, Sergeant. I asked you, Tracy, about your discovery of the murder. You know something about that, don't you?"

"A little. Yes, sir. I got up at seven-thirty this morning. Before dressing I went downstairs to Miss Vera's bedroom, to wake her up as I always do. As you'll see, her suite—boudoir, bedroom and bath—is in a sort of separate wing, rather isolated from the rest of the house. She fixed it up, all handsome the way it is now, just before her grandfather died, three months ago. To me it always seemed dangerous, such a—striking looking girl like her, sleeping downstairs alone."

"Never mind that," the sergeant said. "Don't ramble, Tracy."

"No, sir. So I went to her boudoir this morning. She was lying there with—well, the way she was. So I rushed back upstairs and aroused Mr. Conway and Mr. Russell—"

Russell nodded. His pale face was tense and grim.

Conway said: "I heard Tracy shouting." His hand pushed back his thick wavy blond hair with an unconscious gesture. "I understand," he added, "that the Medical Examiner says Vera had been dead several hours—"

"Sometime after midnight," the sergeant put in.

"However, we three were all asleep," Conway resumed. "I understand that there is evidence that someone from outside broke in—came in the boudoir window—"

"Great Scott, I didn't know that!" Uncle Tubby exclaimed.

"You wouldn't let me tell you before," the sergeant snapped. "I'll show you when we—"

"You work in the Jamison Concrete Company?" Uncle Tubby asked, disregarding the policeman's words.

The handsome young Conway nodded. "I worked there till after midnight last night—superintending the mixing of a big rush order for the Millerton Construction Company. We mix the concrete with water—big vats—it's called a pre-mixed—"

"And when you came home, you didn't see Vera?"

"No, of course I didn't. Her rooms are at the rear of the house. I went right to bed."

"You didn't see Mr. Russell either? I mean to say—"

"No, I didn't. I went right to my own room."

"I wasn't home when he came in," Russell said. "Or maybe I was—I don't know. I was working last evening, also. I got in late—I don't know exactly what time. Maybe ahead of Conway—maybe not—"

"The same goes for me," Conway interjected. His smile was forced. "Are we suspected of this damnable thing, by any chance?"

"Great Scott, I don't know," Uncle Tubby retorted.

THROUGH a silence again he pondered, with his hands gripped across his expansive middle. He seemed lost in thought, but his eyes were restless, roving the three men before him. That they were all nervous and frightened was obvious.

"You work in a radio factory?" he said at last, to Russell.

"Yes," Russell agreed. "The Peters Company—we're making a new type of radio loudspeaker. If you've seen our ads—"

"It seems to me," Sergeant Cox said caustically, "that everybody wants to talk about outside things. We get dope on how concrete is mixed. And now we're gonna have a lecture on how to make radio loud-speakers. I wish you folks would remember we got a murder on our hands!"

"We'll all shut up and say nothing, if you want us to," Conway retorted. "I haven't any deep-dyed motive in talking about mixing concrete—"

"Gracious, of course not," Uncle Tubby agreed. "Everything is interesting." He suddenly turned to the stalwart servant. "You're sunburned, Tracy," he said. "A fresh burn. You went to bed very early last night, you said. Why? Maybe you were tired because you'd been to the beach in the afternoon? But you didn't wear a bathing suit—your legs are quite white."

Tracy looked startled. "That's right, sir. I did go to the beach—lay on the sand all yesterday afternoon. I guess it tired me. No. I didn't go in the water—just lay on the sand with my clothes on—"

"Nice white sand," Uncle Tubby commented. "It's a nice beach—I've been there. But you ought to go in the water, Tracy. You won't melt, you know."

Abruptly he climbed heavily to his feet. "I think that will be all for now, gentlemen," he added. "You might wait here—I'll be back presently. Come on, Sergeant. We'll take a look at the body."

With the tense, nervous gaze of all three men on him, he smilingly left the room. And as he and the sergeant went back along the small lower hall, the silent Ken unobtrusively was with them.

"They're all three pretty nervous, Uncle Tubby," Ken murmured.

"Anybody would be," Uncle Tubby said.

"You think it's one of them?" Sergeant Cox suggested.

"Great Scott, how could I possibly answer that, Sergeant? Let's see what we can find in the murder room."

The boudoir, bedroom and bath of the murdered Vera Barton were in a single story wing which evidently had been added to the old cottage. At the boudoir door—in the lower hall near the kitchen

—Uncle Tubby and Ken stood for a moment mutely surveying the tragic scene. It was a square, low-ceilinged apartment, luxuriously furnished. Windows with heavy copper screens opened on the gardens outside. Oriental rugs graced the highly polished floor. There was a center table; an electric table lamp, still burning, shrouded by a soft, brocaded rose-colored shade. Books lined the walls in tiers of shelves. There were several reclining chairs of ornate wicker, heavily cushioned; a handsome chaise-longue; a big low couch with a cream-colored velvet covering, piled with velvet pillows. In a corner stood a big mahogany secretary-desk, with an incense-brazier upon it.

It was entirely a feminine room, showing taste and refinement. But by night, with the incense from the brazier—the light from the rose-shade tinting the cream-colored velvet couch—there must have been a voluptuous quality here. Like the unfortunate girl herself—a strong allure to the potential sex-criminal.

"Well, I say, she surely had her quarters fixed up very nicely," Uncle Tubby murmured.

Across the room there could be seen the open doors to a dainty bedroom, and a bath. The bed was not disordered. Here in the boudoir, on the floor by the desk, the body of the murdered girl lay sprawled, with a small chair overturned nearby, and the rug scuffed underneath the body.

Uncle Tubby and Ken advanced and stared down at the dead girl.

"What a little beauty," Ken murmured. "By God, if I could get my hands on the fellow who did this—"

IT WAS the body of a small, dark-haired girl in her twenties. Evidently she had been preparing for bed when the murderer came. She had been clad in slippers and a cream-colored silk night-robe, with a lacy negligee over it. The dainty garments were shredded now by the defiler's hands, exposing the marble whiteness of her rounded young body—her voluptuous breasts and long black hair lying in a tangle on her molded shoulders. Her face unquestionably had been exotically beautiful; but it was contorted now with the agony of death—glazed eyes

and goggling mouth, blood-flecked. The white column of her slender throat showed contusions in the skin from the stranger's fingers, and between the breasts there was a horrible crimson wound where the knife had pierced her heart.

Uncle Tubby released his breath with a shuddering sigh. "My word—I hate to see things like this, Sergeant. It certainly makes you want to nab this damnable fellow—"

"You found the knife?" Ken asked.

"Yes. Outside in the garden, just under, one of the windows," the sergeant said.

"No fingerprints on it?" Uncle Tubby suggested.

"Seems not."

Ken and Uncle Tubby bent over the body. An open book lay on the floor beside one of the easy chairs near the dead girl. Uncle Tubby went over and picked it up.

"*The Chemistry of Crystals*," he read. No one said anything for a moment. "Sort of heavy reading for midnight diversion." Uncle Tubby commented then.

He riffled the book. On its flyleaf was inscribed the name, "Jonathan Barton."

"Her grandfather's book," Uncle Tubby said. "Published ten years ago." He stood pondering. "Now what would the girl—or the murderer—be doing with this text-book of Jonathan Barton's? The grandfather was interested in chemistry?"

"What of it?" the sergeant demanded impatiently. "Take a look here at the window—"

But Uncle Tubby stood immovable. "Not much signs of a struggle around the room, Sergeant. Just a struggle here by the desk. It seems to suggest that the girl went to the desk—and then the murderer suddenly attacked her. Now what did she go to the desk for?"

"Search me," the sergeant said. "I looked through the desk—nothin' there that seems important."

"Could there have been burglary, Uncle Tubby?" Ken suggested. "Look here."

Ken was still kneeling by the body; and now he was raising the stiffened left hand. "Look, Uncle Tubby—she wore several rings, but there's none now."

"My word, so she did. Good work, Ken!"

The marks on the fingers of the left hand—white circles on the skin—showed where the rings had been.

"And look at this," Ken added.

From under the body, mingled with the torn negligee, he produced a small chamois bag, with a narrow ribbon, evidently torn from her neck by the murderer. The bag was empty.

"Her jewels," Uncle Tubby said.

"Robbery?" the sergeant exclaimed.

"Well—an outside marauder—"

"Let's see the window, Sergeant . . . Look the desk over carefully, Ken—"

"All right," Ken agreed.

The sergeant led Uncle Tubby to one of the windows. The copper screen was slashed with two cuts in the form of a cross, and the four segments were bent forward, making a hole large enough to admit a man.

"Looks like the murderer came to this window," the sergeant explained. "Took his knife—slashed the screen—came in. An' after the stabbing, went out the same way, an' dropped the knife outside. Here's the knife."

It was a long, thin bladed, bone-handled knife. Dried blood stained its keen-edged blade.

"**Q**UEER," Uncle Tubby murmured. "What you say sounds fairly reasonable, Sergeant—except, with the murderer making all that noise slashing the screen . . . Great Scott, you'd think the girl would have been alarmed—run from the room—" Uncle Tubby was examining the cut screen. "But the murderer *did* cut this from outside, Sergeant. He absolutely did. See how all the little prongs of the mesh bend inward?"

"It was an outside job," Cox said. "Why would one of the family come in the window?"

Uncle Tubby was again regarding the knife. "This looks queer, Sergeant," he said. "The blade seems new—highly polished. But it's got several nicks in it. Cutting the screen wouldn't be apt to nick the knife like that. The death blow wouldn't nick the knife. Now what the deuce else did the murderer do with this knife?"

"There's a secret drawer in this desk,"

Ken said suddenly from across the room. "Look here—there's nearly six inches of space not accounted for.

With expert fingers he was probing the desk panels. Then a little sliding lid snapped aside. A small compartment was revealed, with a folded paper in it. The paper was a blank form of the U.S. Patent Office—Application for Letters of Patent.

"Well," Uncle Tubby said, "is that all she kept here in her secret drawer? You suppose she was thinking of taking out a patent?" For a moment he pondered. Then with a magnifying glass again he bent over the body. Ken and the sergeant watched him anxiously. Suddenly Uncle Tubby straightened up.

"Looks as though we had a clue here." Quite obviously he was excited. "Look, Ken—there's something here on the skin of her throat."

The gaping sergeant watched them as they intently peered at the skin of the dead girl's throat, shining a light on it and examining it under a powerful magnifying glass. Then Uncle Tubby, with a scalpel, carefully scraped the surface of the skin.

"Might get a very small sample, Ken."

"Yes," he agreed. "Shall I bring a microscope from the car, Uncle Tubby?"

"Absolutely. And some apparatus for simple analysis. Now what the deuce do you suppose this is, here on her throat?"

Ken could only stare blankly, and then he hurried from the room.

"Well?" the sergeant demanded. But Uncle Tubby, panting as he rose to his feet, shoved him away.

"I say, don't bother me now, Sergeant. We've struck the real trail at last."

He went to the window where the screen had been cut, examining it closely under the magnifying glass. While he was still engaged in this, Ken returned and began erecting his microscope and test tubes on a side table.

"Look here, Sergeant," Uncle Tubby called. "My word, I thought this murderer was pretty clever. But here's one error he made. You see, it seemed to me this cut screen was a planted clue—to make us think of an outside marauder. The murderer was clever enough to realize he'd have to cut the screen from out-

side, so the prongs of the cut mesh would bend inward. He did that, Sergeant."

Uncle Tubby chuckled ironically. "But he did it *after* the murder. Went outside just for that purpose."

The sergeant stared. "How do you know that?"

"Because *before* the murder, the knife had no blood on it. But *after* the murder, it did. And here's a little dried blood on the screen mesh! He forgot the blood on the knife, Sergeant!"

"Well," Cox gasped. "No argument on *that* reasoning. Then it's sure an inside job! By God it is!"

"Absolutely," Uncle Tubby agreed. "How are you coming, Ken?"

"A fair sample," Ken said. "But I'm afraid it's going to be difficult to identify it."

"Try another lens, Ken."

Ken adjusted it. "Little gleaming particles, Uncle Tubby! See them?"

UNCLE TUBBY looked into the microscope, revolving its stage on which the sample lay. "They're optically active, Ken—"

"What the devil," the sergeant murmured. "What you mean—optically active—"

"When a fragment is optically active," Uncle Tubby explained, "that means it shows different light-refractive indices when viewed from different positions. The light bounces around in it, so to speak. Well, I mean to say, when I revolve the stage, the particles twinkle so to speak."

"Well, what—"

"Well, that might help us to determine what they are."

"An' what are they?" the sergeant demanded.

Uncle Tubby gazed at Ken and back to the sergeant.

"That's what I can't make out, Sergeant. And I don't see how Ken is going to analyze them."

It was the sergeant's turn to stare. "Well, I thought a chemist could analyze anything!"

Uncle Tubby smiled lugubriously. "That's only the popular idea. That's the way you read about it—but the truth is, chemists are often stumped. Look

here—all we've got for a sample is a bunch of miscellaneous epidermis flakes—skin cells, and some dirt and dried particles of cosmetics. And a very few of these tiny, gleaming, optically active things—"

"And they are too small a percentage of the total sample," Ken put in. "We haven't got the equipment to make a thorough analysis under the circumstances." He stared, puzzled, frowning. "What in the devil could they be, Uncle Tubby? If I knew where to start, there might be a chance. . . ." His voice faded and finally stopped altogether.

Uncle Tubby was pondering. Into the silence, the sergeant said anxiously:

"You think these particles came from the murderer?"

"Absolutely," Uncle Tubby retorted. "From the hands of the murderer, to the throat of the girl. Now what in the devil—"

"Well then maybe they'll be on the murderer too!" the sergeant exclaimed excitedly. "We got three suspects—the clothes they wore last night are all upstairs. Let's check on it. Haven't you got some way—"

"Try it, Ken," Uncle Tubby said. "Take the little vacuum collector—bring samples of the dust and dirt from their clothes."

Ken hurried away.

"But I don't think we'll have any luck," Uncle Tubby said. "Let me think, Sergeant. Great Scott, I ought to be able to figure out what these particles are—"

For ten minutes he was lost in thought. Then Ken came back with his three samples—three little piles of dust, dirt, lint and other foreign matter from the clothes of the three suspects. Tensely Uncle Tubby and the sergeant watched, while he inspected them under the microscope.

"No luck," he said at last. "Plenty of particles—microscopic bits of foreign matter—"

"But not the ones we're after?" Uncle Tubby murmured.

"No, Uncle. Take a look, if you like, but it's obvious."

"And they wouldn't be on the murderer himself—now," Uncle Tubby added. "If only I could get an inspiration—a radio man; a man who went to

the beach; a worker on concrete. . . ."

And suddenly he got it. The blank, balked look left his face; his fat little body tensed; his eyes flashed and his pudgy fist came down on the table beside him with a resounding thump.

"Got it, Ken! By the gods, I believe I've got the answer. Great Scott, why didn't I think of this before! Try those particles in water, Ken!"

"Water?" Sergeant Cox murmured.

"They might dissolve! If they do, we've got this murderer—and won't I be pleased to land that damnable . . ."

KEN had already turned to his apparatus. Uncle Tubby didn't finish his sentence but started for the door. "Now, by thunder, I know where to look for some evidence to tie this thing together. I couldn't very well take the whole house apart—but it's narrowed down now. You wait here, Sergeant—stay with Ken. I'm going to investigate those nicks in the murder knife—"

He was still mumbling vehemently to himself as he left the room. For a time Sergeant Cox watched the silent Ken at his work. In ten minutes Uncle Tubby returned. There was no question but what he had been successful. He radiated triumph—and menace.

"I don't have to ask you if they dissolved in water, Ken," he exclaimed as he came through the doorway. "I know they did."

"Yes, they did," Ken agreed.

Uncle Tubby swung on the sergeant. "We've got him, Sergeant! Go get those three men. I'll get a confession, and it won't take me more than a minute to do it, either!"

The sergeant went out and returned with the three—the big, blond, stalwart Conway; the smaller, dark-haired, Russell, and the big forty-year-old Tracy, the servant. They stood tense, frightened, staring at Ken and his apparatus, and then at Uncle Tubby as he confronted them. All Uncle Tubby's cherubic look was gone now. He was fairly shaking with pent-up, menacing wrath.

"The murdered girl liked jewelry, didn't she?" he demanded. "It's gone. Been stolen. Why didn't you tell us?"

They stared at each other. Quite ob-

viously each of them had been unwilling to say anything, fearing it might be construed as guilt.

"Why, yes," Conway murmured. "She loved jewelry—always wore several rings. I guess maybe she had several thousand dollars worth—"

Uncle Tubby waved it away. "This lovely young girl was strangled by one of you three," he said with grim succinctness. "On her throat we found some tiny gleaming particles. They came from the murderer's hands. But they wouldn't be on his hands now, because of course he'd wash his hands after committing this vicious crime." He whirled on the sergeant. "Those particles, Sergeant, that puzzled us so much are a compound of potassium and sodium tartarate. Optically active little white crystals, soluble in water."

"Sodium—what?" the sergeant murmured tensely.

"Rochelle Salts," Uncle Tubby said. "They were on the murderer's hands—dissolved doubtless in the normal skin moisture. Unwittingly he transferred some of them to his victim's throat. They were still dissolved—still in solution. And then she died. With the dying, cooling skin—with the evaporating, the tiny crystals of Sodium Potassium Tartarate formed. Now how did this murderer get the makings of Rochelle Salts crystals—very tiny ones—on his hands? You went to the beach, Tracy?"

"Yes—yes, sir," the frightened servant stammered. "But I didn't have anything to do with it! I swear—"

"And we have a man who was mixing concrete," Uncle Tubby continued, interrupting the servant's protestations. "That's you, Conway. And here's a man who was making radio loud-speakers last evening. A new type of loud-speaker." Uncle Tubby's swift menacing voice was edged with irony. "He asked me if I'd seen the ads! Of course I have! And I know a good deal about that crystal loud-speaker. My business is science—naturally the newest thing in radio interested me. Crystal loud-speakers, Sergeant—and they're made of Rochelle Salts! Strange, but true. And this murderer was working around the solutions of . . . Grab him, Ken!"

The color had faded from the saturnine face of young Russell. He had seen the accusation coming, of course, but had tried to hold himself firm. Suddenly it became too much for him. His jaw dropped; he gasped with terror, and then he bolted for the door. But Ken leaped, hurled himself through the air in a flying tackle, wrapping his arms around the fleeing Russell's legs. Russell came crashing down.

"Get up," Ken said.

RUSSELL didn't have to get up; the triumphant Sergeant Cox jerked him to his feet. And Ken cuffed him in the face as he came up. "You damned dirty murderer—"

From across the room the stalwart Conway came blazing forward.

"Damn dirty murderer's right," he raged. "So you did it—you did that to Vera! By God, I always knew you were sore because she inherited grandfather's money. And hated her—because she repulsed your damn, slimy love-making—"

"You—that's a lie," Russell was mumbling. "Stop it—let me alone, you two! Sergeant Cox—help—I've got a right to a trial—you can't let them do this to me—"

With the onslaught of Ken and Conway, the sergeant had stood docilely aside, so that Russell was hurled backward. He fell, with the two of them on him, lifting him up, cuffing him, and slamming him down.

Then the startled Uncle Tubby found his wits. "Stop it, you two!" Into the mêlée, Uncle Tubby strode belligerently, plucking at Conway and at Ken. "Quit it, I tell you. Oh, he deserves it, all right—but this isn't legal procedure—"

The bulky sergeant reluctantly was forced to take command.

"Get off there," he roared. "Give him to me—"

He shoved the panting young men away; his handcuffs jingled as he slammed Russell against the wall.

"Thanks—" Uncle Tubby panted. "Don't let's act like animals—"

"I've got a right to a trial," Russell was muttering. "Crystals on her throat?

Well maybe somebody else put them there. I didn't—"

It brought a roar from Ken; but Uncle Tubby barred him.

"Oh, didn't you?" Uncle Tubby said. "Well, as it happened, you nicked that murder knife. Doing what? Well, a nice new blade—you could nick it prying up nails in a board floor, or a wall, for instance. I couldn't very well take the house apart—but when the trail started pointing at you, I took a careful look at your bedroom. It wasn't too hard for me to locate the scratches where the nails of a floor board in your bedroom had been pried up, and then tacked down again. I found—this—"

The cringing Russell could only stare as Uncle Tubby dangled the dead girl's jewels before him.

"And this," Uncle Tubby added. He showed a folded manuscript paper. "It's signed by Jonathan Barton, her grandfather. He gave it to her and she kept it hidden in that secret drawer of her desk. You forced her to tell you where it was—and then you stole her jewels—stole this paper—killed her and ravaged her—"

"What is the paper?" the sergeant murmured.

"It seems to be a pretty good description of a new method of crystallizing several chemicals into a compound for use in a new type of radio tube," Uncle Tubby said. "A valuable idea, perhaps. And Vera was going to patent it. She had her grandfather's book on the chemistry of crystals out last night. And that formula is in your line, Russell. You could patent it yourself, and sell it to your company!" Uncle Tubby snorted with disgust.

A moment later, when some of the sergeant's men had come and led the cringing Russell away, Uncle Tubby suddenly turned and stood over the dead girl—beautiful, broken thing, with a tangle of dark tresses upon the voluptuous marble breasts. The face, once so exotically beautiful, but only shudderingly pathetic now with its goggling crimsoned mouth and glazed staring eyes—

For a moment Uncle Tubby gazed down. "By God, Sergeant," he murmured, "I do wish I could be on the jury that condemns that fellow to the chair. I absolutely do."

DUST TO DUST

By JOHN D. SWAINE

EVEN the jury that acquitted Perry Wade believed that he had murdered Wilkins' young and pretty wife—killed her when she repulsed his advances on a night when Wilkins was detained at his office, and she was alone in their isolated bungalow. It was the sort of thing Perry Wade was capable of doing; but the jury, a group of honest men, was bound by the law and the evidence.

The sole witness was Wilkins himself,



Only Perry Wade's legs showed in the wreckage of his office.

Is a man ever justified in taking the life of a fellow human being? Read this poignant, emotional story—and be your own judge!

who had returned as Wade was driving off in his car, and who had recognized him. But there was no corroborating testimony; and Wade had been clever enough to leave no circumstantial evidence. As one strongly entrenched in a corrupt political ring, and with plenty of fall money available, he had the services of the smartest and most unscrupulous mouthpieces in the state. His "voice" had set up an unbreakable alibi, and there was nothing left for the jury but to acquit. The presiding judge—who also believed

in Wade's guilt—had been obliged in his charge to remind the jury that they must consider whether the State had proved its case "beyond reasonable doubt."

And so, for a long time Abner Wilkins had known that Wade must die. It wasn't a matter of revenge, or even of hate; these emotions had burned out over the dragging years. It was a matter of simple justice. A duty to be carried out. All who had known the story felt that way about it, though of course it was not their business to remove Perry Wade.

The reason why Wilkins had delayed was because he couldn't figure out how to go about the job. He was not the killer type; he was, in fact, a pacifist. He had never in his life struck a blow in anger, and had no familiarity with lethal weapons. Furthermore, the sight of blood made him sick. Just once he had been induced to attend a boxing match; and he had left hastily during the second round. How then could he bring Wade's gay career to a sudden close?

Wilkins lived ten miles from the city, and conducted a business founded by his grandfather. A faded old sign over the wooden building read: HAY GRAIN & FEED. In the era of the horse, it had been a very good business indeed. Today Wilkins brooded in the dim, dusty interior, sometimes not having a customer all day long.

He fell into the habit of spending much time watching Wade, who had a real estate office in the Merchants Trust Building. It was a matter of common knowledge that Wade was a gambler and bookmaker, the boss of a numbers racket, and that his real estate sign was only a front. Every move that he made, however trivial, was studied by Wilkins. He came to know, for instance that each day at prompt noon, Wade's one stenographer left for lunch, returning at one. At ten minutes past twelve, almost to the minute, Wade left his office and descended to the street floor below to buy a malted milk. He chatted for a few minutes with the girl at the soft drink counter, and then returned to his office. Usually he lighted a cigarette as soon as he had finished his drink. He was a chain smoker, Wilkins had observed.

This knowledge did not seem to be helpful. It pointed out no way of liquidating the young realtor! And Wilkins, a silent, unimaginative man, could think of no way. Poison? If he bought any, it would be traced to him. Besides, how could he induce Wade to eat or drink anything lethal? Infernal machines engaged his thoughts for a time; something like a time bomb to be placed in Wade's office during his brief absence at the noon hour. But Wilkins knew nothing about high explosives, nor how to obtain them. Above all, he did not want to kill Wade; to become a murderer himself. He wanted Wade to act as his own executioner!

SUDDENLY, one day the idea came to him out of the blue. He was standing at the entrance to the Merchants Trust Building; and as the simplicity of the idea struck him, he doubled up in silent mirth, to the surprise of several passers by. Those who knew the old fellow by sight had long come to regard him as slightly cracked.

Abner Wilkins bought in a five-and-ten store a large garden sprayer, or pump, suitable for both liquids or powders. On returning home that afternoon he unwrapped it in his store, loaded it with a double handful of flour, and was presently standing in a white dust cloud that floated in the air for a long time. Satisfied, he then refilled the tin tube with flour, noting that it held nearly a pound. He rewrapped it and left it on his desk. That night he enjoyed his first sound sleep in many months. . . .

The following noon saw him again in the lobby of the Merchants Trust Building, with a longish parcel under an arm. He waited until he saw Perry Wade come down to lean confidentially over the soft drink counter and give his usual order to the pretty waitress. Then Wilkins walked to the stairway and ascended to the first floor. He was recognized by several of the tenants. Wade himself noticed him, and promptly forgot him. To the gambler-realtor, he was only a harmless old fool.

The old man trudged down the corridor to where Wade's office door stood ajar. He entered, closing it behind him.

At this hour the room would be unoccupied for at least ten minutes; all the time he needed. The day being warm, both windows were open. Wilkins closed them. Then he unwrapped his blower, pointed it high and began to work its plunger, moving from corner to corner of the room. Presently the place dimmed with an almost impalpable white fog. It took perhaps four or five minutes to empty the container. Then, having no further use for it, Wilkins laid it on a desk, opened the door and stepped out into the corridor looking much like a *dusty miller*, and casually slapping his clothes to shake off the flour. Two men noticed him; one of them was the janitor of the building.

Wilkins crossed the street, and waited. He had broken no law of God or man, so far as he could see! Had not been guilty of breaking-and-entering—the office door having been left ajar. Had destroyed no property. At the worst, his act might be construed as a minor misdemeanor, the commission of a petty nuisance.

Three minutes later Perry Wade, having finished his malted milk, left with a final wisecrack thrown to the waitress, and returned to his office. As it happened, he was not smoking when he opened the door. He paused in surprise as he noted that the room seemed filled with a strange, dry opaqueness. He could not imagine what caused it; and when he had closed the door behind him he automatically felt for his cigarette case, removed one, lighted it

The Merchants Trust Building is a modern structure of steel and fireproof brick. Hence no part of it save Wade's office was injured in the explosion that wrecked everything in the room. The huge flat top desk was reduced to kindling. Not a fixture escaped; the two windows were of course blown out, their glass shivering to the street below, fortunately injuring no one.

As for Wade—the task of the doctors who performed the post mortem was much simplified; but it taxed the skill of the two morticians to arrange the gambler for his obsequies. That very night Abner Wilkins slept in a cell of the city prison. For the second time, his slumber was sweet and dreamless.

THE case of *The People vs Wilkins* was notable for the cross-examination of the accused, during which he cheerfully acknowledged everything except intent to murder, and in summary the district attorney said, in part:

"It is the contention of the State that Wilkins killed Perry Wade as surely as if he thrust a knife into his heart. As to the material facts, there is no dispute. Wilkins felt for the deceased an animosity known to many, and acknowledged by himself. He entered Wade's office at a time he knew it to be vacated, and then and there, with a blow pump, or garden sprayer purchased the day before, did fill the room with flour dust, so that it hung heavy in the air. The accused knew Wade to be a constant smoker of cigarettes, seldom seen without one. He has admitted this knowledge. I will now read to you from a report issued by the U. S. Bureau of Chemistry."

The D. A. then read from a printed document, a number of authenticated cases of dust explosions. In a Connecticut department house a maid emptied the contents of her carpet sweeper into the incinerator at the base of which was a flame. Result: three wrecked flats, eight persons knocked unconscious, two of them spending weeks in hospital. A million-dollar grain elevator reduced to debris in forty seconds. An experiment wherein five pounds of flour were blown beneath a discarded locomotive and ignited by a blow torch. The engine was hoisted to a height of seventy-five feet, and reduced to junk. Floating sawdust in a lumber mill, exploded by a spark from a briar pipe.

"The State contends that many years experience as a grain merchant had familiarized Wilkins with the fact that any enclosed place impregnated with the dust of grain, such as wheat flour, renders it as potentially dangerous as a munitions factory. In proof whereof I call your attention to *Exhibit B*, a sign taken from prisoner's grain and feed store, reading SMOKING IN THIS BUILDING STRICTLY FORBIDDEN! The accused entered Wade's office at a time when he knew nobody but himself would be present, thoroughly impregnated the air with flour from the battered powder-sprayer marked *Exhibit C*, acknowledged by him to be his; he then left, knowing that Wade would return almost immediately, and that he would either be smoking a cigarette, or that he would light one directly in accordance with his

habit. Wilkins did not have to touch off the explosive—the flour dust—himself. No, gentlemen—and lady— of the jury! His was a much subtler plan. He so arranged that Wade would do it himself! With the inevitable result of sudden death. I ask you to disregard the puerile explanation of the accused; that he blew flour over Wade's office as a mere malicious prank—to 'annoy him' as he expressed it! A mischievous boy might do a thing like that, without criminal intent; but no intelligent adult would wreak so futile a vengeance on an acknowledged enemy. When Wilkins laid his plans he knew precisely what would happen, and why! He had motive, and opportunity, and his infamous act calls for a just verdict of *murder in the first degree!*"

The jury was a conscientious body of men, sworn to do their duty regardless of prejudice or sympathies. They would have preferred to confer a medal upon the defendant, together with a pension. But they found him guilty as charged, and recommended mercy.

The presiding judge accordingly imposed a life sentence, rather than execution; and when on the following Christmas the governor issued a full pardon, the man who had removed Perry Wade by a new and ingenious method, was welcomed home with all the enthusiasm usually shown to conquering generals who have slain their thousands in the performance of duty.

Among the trophies presented on this notable day was a miniature silver flour barrel, inscribed.

FLOUR TO THE LIVING!

Some mischievous urchins emptied a bag of flour on Perry Wade's grave; but the birds and field mice removed it within an hour. Finally, in many offices, men peered uncertainly at dust motes floating in the sun, before venturing to light their smokes; and the sale of vacuum cleaners enjoyed a new high that season!



Would you like to save from a fourth to a third on all sporting equipment which you buy—at no obligation to yourself?

The Big League Sentinels Club, sponsored and founded by DIME SPORTS MAGAZINE, has made arrangements with a nationally known sporting goods manufacture to supply members with practically all types of sports material at amazing discounts from their regular prices.

There are no strings attached to the offer!

Do you need a new tennis racquet, fishing equipment, golf balls? Are you going to outfit your baseball team with new uniforms? Do you want to buy the best—at astoundingly low prices? If so, be sure to read about The Big League Sentinel Club's great member plan, in the big June issue of

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ACE G-MAN STORIES

ACE G-MAN

Ten Cents

DAVIS PLOTS

The "Perfect" Murder

We have put Mr. Davis on the spot. We have asked him to evolve a plot which another writer of detective stories, equally skilled, cannot solve. His concern has been to conceive a plan completely without flaws for the successful slaying of a human being—from the consequences of which the murderer shall escape scot-free. Has he succeeded?

FREDERICK C. DAVIS



FIRST, what is a "perfect murder"? It is not merely a homicide for which the perpetrator manages to escape punishment. That happens all too frequently. Recently a young woman pumped several fatal bullets into her lover in a New York City apartment and remained on the scene until the police arrived. "I killed him," she confessed before she composed herself, after which she kept her mouth strictly shut. The ablest criminal lawyer in the country rallied to her defense. She underwent trial. No one doubted that she had killed the unfortunate gentleman, but twelve good jurors and true acquitted her. Perhaps a comely lass is not considered guilty of murder in New York State unless she accomplishes her purpose by means of a twelve-inch cannon. Anyway, this one undeniably got

away with it. But was this a perfect murder?

By no means. The perfect murder, as I see it, must be perpetrated so adroitly that no one even suspects it is murder. Furthermore, the victim's death must be the inevitable result of the murderer's plan. The attack must be perfectly hidden and flawlessly tailor-made. This, you can appreciate, calls for considerable sagacity but certainly it is not impossible to achieve. Perfect murders have undoubtedly been committed. The very fact that no example can be cited may be taken as proof of it, for if a case could be held up as an example it would automatically cease to be "perfect"!

It is said that the capacity for committing murder is in all of us. If this is so it never comes out in most cases; but certainly there have been times when each of us has felt quite definitely the impulse to kill someone. I must admit that a search of my memory produces no name which I should wish to add to a casualty list at the moment, but I can cite an excellent instance of incipient murder simply by stepping into the shoes of a friend of mine.

MY PROSPECTIVE victim (this is my friend speaking now, not I) is my wife. She and I abandoned all marital relationship years ago, but we are still bound together by law. Also, we still live in the same house because of financial ne-

(Continued on page 107)

CUMMINGS SOLVES

The "Perfect" Murder

Now Mr. Cummings comes to bat. He has the material facts before him. He knows how, and why, and by whom the murder was committed. Yet he is not permitted to use any information or knowledge which would not be brought out in a routine police investigation. His job is to pin the guilt on the killer—inescapably. Does he do it?

RAY CUMMINGS

I AM, I assume, to picture myself now presented with the blank wall of clueless "accident" as Mr. Davis has devised it. A "real-life" murder. Certainly he has given it every aspect of human reality, so that the first thing which impresses me is that, if it is to be solved at all, no fictional "tricks", no stereotyped cleverness of a super Sherlock Holmes will in any way cope with it. A "real-life" murder must be solved in "real-life" fashion.

So I see that I cannot glibly trap this murderer into a dramatic confession. I cannot invent new facts. Mr. Davis has given us all the facts. He has told us it is a murder; told us exactly how it was accomplished, and why. That then, is the reality. They are the hidden facts; they must be brought to light.

I see that against this criminal a case must be built which in our courts, with a competent judge, a competent prosecuting attorney, with an adroit defense attorney as opponent, and a jury of twelve good men and true. The verdict asked for will be "Guilty of murder in the first degree."

I SHALL attempt to build such a case. You will hear the evidence. You can picture yourselves the jury—and give your verdict.

Let me envisage myself, just for a moment, somewhat in the person of the prosecuting attorney. In my opening ad-



dress I summarize what I am going to prove, so that beyond a shadow of a doubt you must convict this defendant.

This murderer was very clever. He contrived what unquestionably seemed to him would pass as an accident. But in that he was mistaken. "Accidents" are always viewed with great suspicion by the investigating authorities. And this one at once revealed itself to have several peculiar features which required explanation.

Our clever murderer had convinced himself that by burning down his house he would destroy every clue. In that also, he was mistaken. His house burned to the ground—quite true. But he himself left it—after the commission of the crime—and unwittingly he took guilty evidence with him. The body of his wife was carried out, before the house completely

burned. And guilty evidence came out with her.

I shall show you that this defendant had a very strong motive for murder. He planned—and he tried—to nullify that motive. He claimed that the night before his wife died, she had agreed to a divorce. I shall show you how, by one simple fact which he overlooked, that claim of his is incredible to any of you intelligent gentlemen.

In brief, you will be shown an indisputable murder motive; the occurrence of an "accident" which this husband admits he and the neighbors had often feared might occur; a sequence of mathematical facts proving beyond a shadow of a doubt that on the fatal morning, this husband "set the stage", himself, created circumstances which made the fatal accident extremely probable of occurrence. And that when accused, every statement that he made was instantly proven a lie, so that he could not—and cannot now—give any rational reason for his actions. Why can he not? Because his reason, my friends, was intent to kill!

Now my learned opponent here (I can envisage myself bowing to the adroit defense attorney at my elbow) my opponent will doubtless plead with you that this evidence is circumstantial. Since when has murder evidence been anything else? Murderers do not go about with an eye-witness making notes on their every move. This is exactly what was brought out in the world's most famous kidnaping case a few years ago—that there is a point where a multiplicity of coincidences make a mathematical certainty.

This murderer had the intent to kill in his mind. The memory of it is there now. We cannot drag it out; we have ceased trying. And if—as my learned opponent doubtless is hoping—you gentlemen will consider this murderer less than a moron, so that for weeks he was worried that his wife might blow herself up—but that on

this fatal morning for no explainable reason, he augmented the chances, and still his mind was a complete blank on the whole affair—then most earnestly I beg you to acquit him!

SO FAR, I think my case sounds promising? But how shall all this be proven? Well, leaving the role of prosecuting attorney, suppose I step into the person of the detective who secured the evidence. I can envisage myself being called, about ten o'clock that morning, by my friend, perhaps the police captain in that small suburban village.

"A murder, Captain?"

"An accident, but there's something very queer. The woman was starting to clean a glove with naphtha. And on a shelf right above her a candle was burning!"

Ah! The very thing this murderer was sure would not happen! The candle so quickly discovered! Let me recall to you what Mr. Davis said about that candle. Its light would never be noticed by the unfortunate woman. Why not? The murderer himself doubtless did not realize the significance of why not; but the answer is obvious. The kitchen itself was bright that morning—and it was bright *particularly in the region of the candle* so that the candlelight was unnoticeable. Yet the candle was behind a row of cannisters. Ordinarily that would be a dark spot—in which the candlelight would be noticeable. But this one wasn't, because behind that shelf there was a small panel window. It was closed, so no air came in. But the light came in—daylight which obliterated the candlelight—to the vision of the victim.

But not to the vision of the neighboring family! Mrs. Jones, a hundred feet away, noticed the candle burning there. She discovered it about seven forty-five. Unfortunately she didn't see any hand or arm placing it there—she merely saw that

it was there. She called Mr. Jones' attention to it. . . . Queer that the neighbors had a candle burning in broad daylight.

It was this same Mr. Jones who, when the explosion presently occurred, courageously rushed into the blazing house and carried out the dead woman. A soiled glove was still clenched in her dead hand. The explosion had pretty well wrecked the kitchen. The candle was hurled with the cannisters to the floor. Mr. Jones, with the memory of that puzzling candlelight fresh in his mind, had the wits to snatch up the candle as he carried out the body.

My friend the police captain explained all this to me when I arrived that morning. Now in fiction very often an affair like this is solved all in a few dramatic minutes. This one of real life took us many hours and days. But it was simple, routine work. From neighbors, relatives and friends of the bereaved husband we speedily learned of his marital troubles, his inamorata, Nora. In his own mind he had built up a very rosy picture of the star-crossed love of him and Nora. But of actuality, she was merely the "other woman", the incentive for his murderous lust.

I RECALL that day when we presented him with his motive. We already had our chain of factual evidence—but he did not know that.

"It's rot," he said. "Are you trying to prove me a murderer? Ruth knew about Nora, as everyone did. Nora and I were perfectly above-board about our platonic relationship. Ruth took it calmly. Last night she consented to get a divorce."

Of course he thought no one could disprove that statement. Ruth was dead. Nobody heard her say it but this husband, who is impervious to police methods of questioning. My friend, the police captain, and I knew we could not mathematically disprove it. But we had no trouble

making it incredible to any jury! I called, with a witness, upon Nora. It was simple enough to obtain from her the admission that Ruth's husband had not told her that Ruth had consented to a divorce.

Incredible! For months these star-crossed lovers had pined to be legally united. The husband gets, at long last, the joyful glad tidings—and he is not even interested enough to telephone his beloved and let her share his happiness. Incredible!

The captain and I knew then that we had our man. I recall how we flung this incredibility at him. And it floored him. He could only say:

"Well I didn't tell her—"

He fell then into a stubborn, hard-boiled sullenness as we piled his lies upon him. His attitude was identical with that notorious kidnaper who finished in New Jersey's electric chair. He could only dumbly reiterate:

"Well, I can't help it if it looks wrong—that's the way it was."

We started by presenting him with the fact that in his wife's dead fingers one of her white gloves was clutched. She had not had time to start to clean it when the explosion occurred. The glove had originally been immaculately clean—a smooth, suede surface, with a queer ridged smudge. We had no trouble matching those ridges. They were the crepe rubber sole of the right shoe which the suspect had been wearing that fatal morning! The big pores of the soft rubber—even a central flaw—were obvious. The sole of the shoe made that smudge! We are sure the enlarged photostat reproductions will convince any jury.

As a matter of fact, it convinced the murderer.

"I remember I did step on the glove," he said. "What of it? I put it back on her dresser."

Another little link. And we had found, that first morning, a drop of hardened

candlewax on the leg of his trousers. Naturally he had to admit it, because it was there. His fingerprints also were on the candle, so he said:

"We had a box of new candles in the kitchen. I handled one the night before—lit it to look in the closet which is dark. That's when I got the wax on my trousers and my fingerprints on the candle. Then I put it back in the box. We keep candles in case the electricity fails."

Then I recall we told him that Mrs. Jones noticed the candle at 7:45.

"I left for the train at 7:30," he retorted. "I was on the train at 7:45."

Fifteen minutes in which his wife could have lighted the candle. And then cleaned gloves with naphtha? Incredible.

"Maybe she committed suicide," he suggested.

"She didn't," my friend the captain retorted. "Tell us again—your wife, up to the time you stepped on her glove and left the house at 7:30—she was upstairs and you were downstairs?"

He had told us that many times—his wife was taking a bath; he was downstairs, presumably in the kitchen getting himself some breakfast. This was from 7:00 to 7:30.

We reiterated that. We made him admit that that candle—the one with his fingerprints which he said he had lighted the night before—had been a *new* candle, and he had kept it lighted, maybe half a minute. From the grocer where the candles were bought we had learned the original *length* of that candle. We had the shorter stub of it, rescued from the fire. By test with an identical candle we determined the rate at which it shortened per minute of burning. (There was no possible draft of air on that kitchen shelf; the stub showed it had burned perfectly evenly without guttering.) We knew the time of the explosion. Simple arithmetic to figure back to the time the candle was lighted.

Seven-fifteen! The time when by his own testimony his wife was upstairs taking a bath, and he was in the kitchen setting a murder trap!

AGAIN I can envisage myself the prosecutor, making his closing address now.

And so, gentlemen, you have seen this defendant with a very powerful motive for murder. He is not a moron, not an idiot. It is conceded by his learned counsel that he is no way mentally deficient or abnormal. Now we all know that every act we human beings make has some motive behind it. Only an idiot does things for no reason at all.

You have seen that this defendant, in the presence of neighbors and friends, was greatly concerned over his wife's carelessness in cleaning things with naphtha. He did not bar the naphtha from his home! Oh no! He stepped on her glove. He did not realize she would have to clean it, although such was her invariable habit. How strange!

And then, having soiled her glove, he goes into this kitchen—into this closed and breathless death-trap where the naphtha is kept, where she usually cleans her gloves to his great perturbation—and in this death-trap—for no reason at all, mark you—he lights a candle and hides it on a shelf!

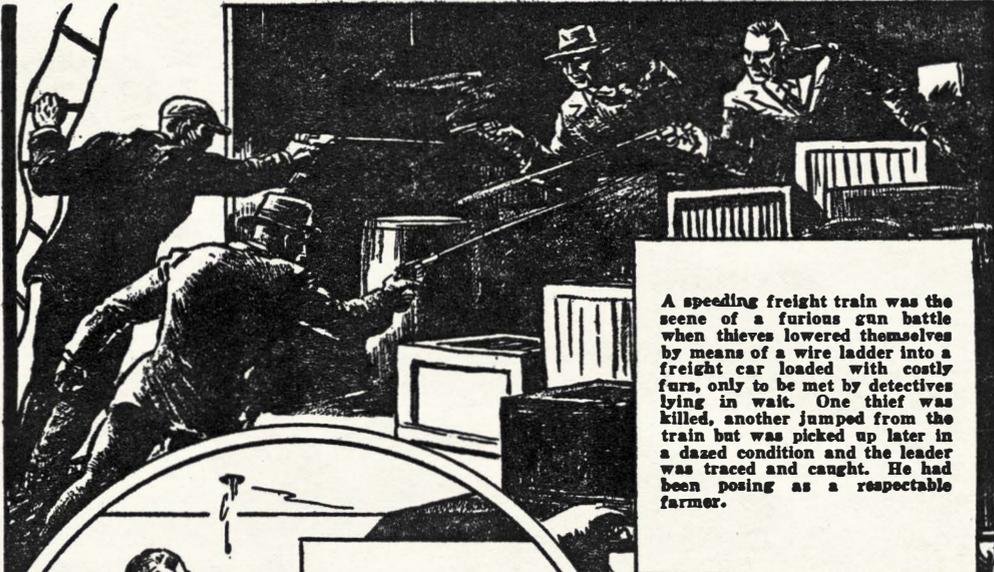
Ponder it, my friends. A monkey might do that, with animal brain imitating something it had once seen done. An idiot might do it for no reason at all. If you think this man who wanted to marry another woman, did it with no evil intent toward his wife, then you must acquit him.

But if not, then your duty is to send him to the electric chair!

* * *

And so, my readers, I leave the case to you—the jury. How say you? Is this man innocent, or guilty?

ODDITIES IN CRIME



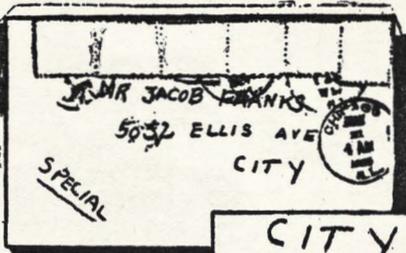
A speeding freight train was the scene of a furious gun battle when thieves lowered themselves by means of a wire ladder into a freight car loaded with costly furs, only to be met by detectives lying in wait. One thief was killed, another jumped from the train but was picked up later in a dazed condition and the leader was traced and caught. He had been posing as a respectable farmer.



A post office detective, investigating the rifling of registered mail, peered through a hole in the ceiling of a wash room. He could see the hands of the thief tear open the envelopes. He kicked the floor boards causing particles of plaster to sift down upon the culprit. Hundreds of coats of postal clerks were examined under the microscope. Finally, one coat, though meticulously brushed, revealed traces of the plaster and the thief was identified.



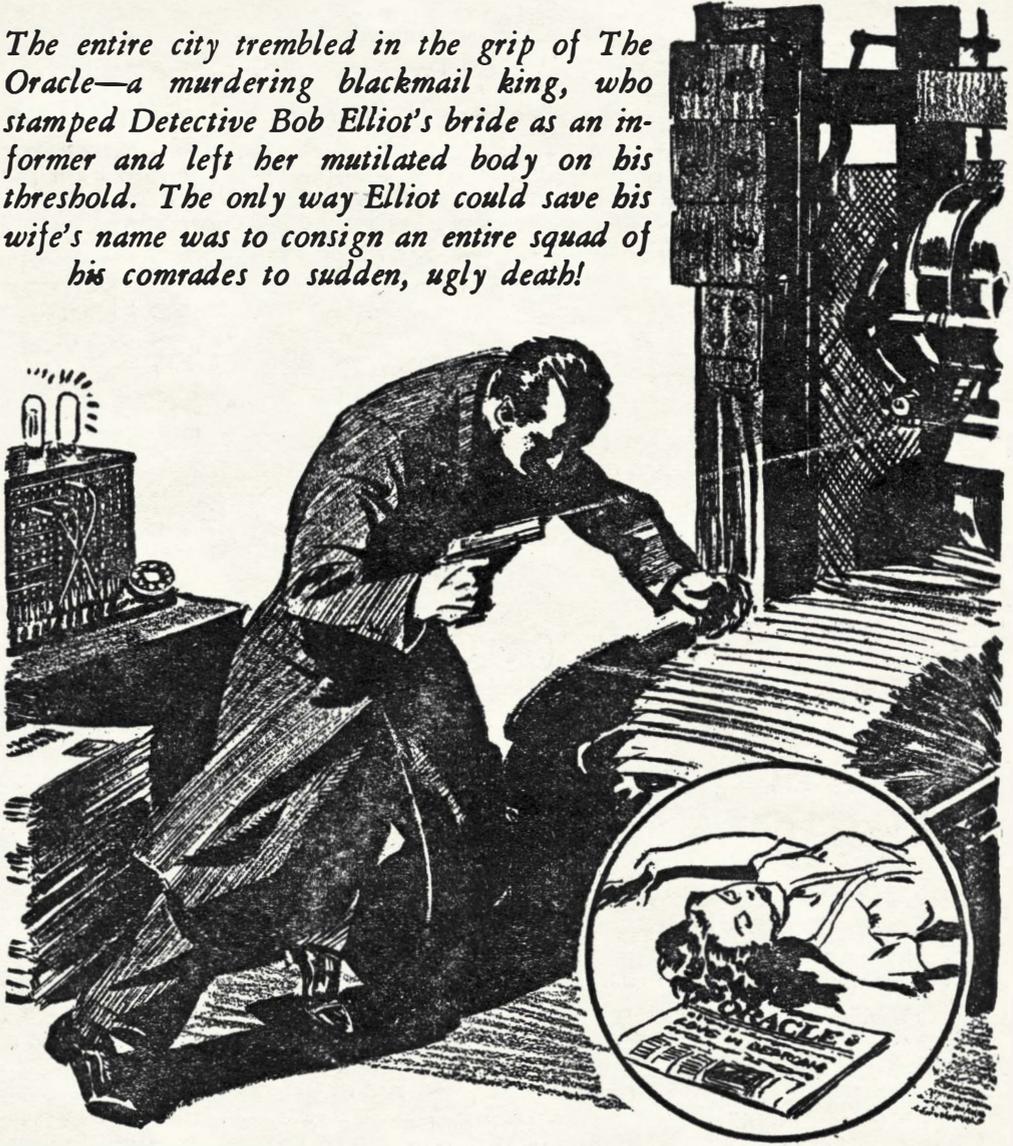
Finger prints were first used as a means of identification by the ancient Chinese. Documents were signed by the mark of the hand.



The address lettered on the envelope addressed to the father of their victim was a vital clue in trapping the murderers, Loeb and Leopold. Note the spacing of the letters in "city" and compare with the specimens of Leopold's known lettering.

THE TONGUELESS BRIDE

The entire city trembled in the grip of The Oracle—a murdering blackmail king, who stamped Detective Bob Elliot's bride as an informer and left her mutilated body on his threshold. The only way Elliot could save his wife's name was to consign an entire squad of his comrades to sudden, ugly death!



The man with the long coat pitched forward.

CHAPTER ONE

Murder Oracle

ELLIOT strode into his little apartment with a happy grin, set down Doris's bulging suitcases with a thump, and turned his twinkling grey eyes to Doris. She had paused just beyond the sill, her warm lips returning his smile, breathless and adorably confused.

"Hold it, Mrs. Elliot!" he said with a chuckle. "The traditions must be observed, you know. The bride gets carried over the threshold."

He caught her to him in a hug that made her squeal and throw her arms around his neck, and swung her to the center of the cozy room.

"That's better!" he laughed, holding her snugly. "We've been married fifteen whole minutes, do you realize that? Mrs.—Robert—Elliot. What do you

By **FREDERICK C. DAVIS**

*A Detective Novelette of Stark
Tragedy and Grim Vengeance!*

Thinking back, Elliot couldn't believe, even now, that a tough police detective like him could fall in love at first sight—but he had. Caught up in a six weeks' whirl of happiness, he had decided very suddenly, this evening, that they weren't going to wait any longer. There hadn't been much time because, as a member of Chief Flagg's Special Squad, he had an important duty to perform tonight; but that had helped him shape his impulsive course.

He'd bundled her breathlessly into his car without giving her a chance to protest, and had sped her out to Green Valley, the little suburb where he'd lived



think of your new name?"

"I like it, silly—very much."

She clung to him, small and palpitant, as he tried to assure himself that this wasn't a dream. He was thirty, rugged, and rangy and spare as a frontiersman, but tonight he felt like a kid, dizzy with a new-found delight.

for years. They'd pulled the jovial Reverend Smithson away from his dinner, hustled up two witnesses, and in a few minutes it was done. Man and wife! Then a spin around the block to Elliot's apartment.

"Lord, I wish I didn't have to run off," Elliot said. "I ought to be on my way to headquarters right now. I'll be back as soon as I can make it, but there's a big job to be done tonight. A raid on the—"

"Don't tell me!" Doris interrupted quickly. "That's—that's official business, isn't it?"

Elliot chuckled again. "Technically," he admitted, "but it's safe with my wife, isn't it? You see, Chief Flagg organized the Special Squad of the detective division as the best way of getting at the big crook behind *The Oracle*. You know what it is, don't you? *The Oracle* is a scandal sheet, and the only idea behind it is blackmail, and—"

"But you shouldn't tell me—"

"Everybody knows that much anyway," Elliot hurried on. "As for the rest, there's a lot we don't know yet ourselves. We haven't been able to find the crook who operates *The Oracle*. He seems to know everything—everybody's private affairs, and even which way Flagg is going to move next. So far, he's stalemated us every time. But now we think we're getting pretty close to him, and tonight we're going to—"

"Bob, you shouldn't!" Doris protested again. "Haven't you thought that—well, that you really don't know very much about me?"

"I know I love you, sweet, and I always will. For that matter, you don't know much about me, either."

Doris's smile was gone now. "You're different," she said quietly. "Just by looking at you, anyone would know you're aces. But me—there's something I've got to tell you."

"Something terrible about yourself, I suppose," he bantered.

"Y-yes—"

"Ho ho! A woman with a past, are you?" Again Elliot laughed, at the absurdity of it. "It can't possibly be as important as you think it is. Anyway, nothing you might say could ever make any difference, so let's forget it."

She shook her head. "I don't mean another man," she went on in a lowered tone. "There's never been anyone else for me. I wanted to tell you this before we

were married, but you wouldn't give me a chance. I've *got* to now, because it would be worse if you ever found out some other way. And because, no matter what happens, I want you to trust me."

In spite of himself, Elliot wondered. "Of course I trust you! I have, since the first time I ever saw you!"

"That's what hurts," Doris said; and her lips worked with pain. "You think we met accidentally, but we didn't. I planned it. I let you believe I was falling in love with you when I wasn't—not then. Now you mean everything in the world to me." Her words quickened. "But you were so swell I couldn't go on with the plan. I wouldn't have married you tonight if I hadn't known I'd come to really love you. And I can prove it—if you can only believe in me after you hear—"

Elliot's arms tightened around her. Now there was alarm in his voice. "Darlin'—I don't get this! What the devil have you done?"

"We met," Doris said softly, "just after the Special Squad was formed."

"Well yes, but what of it?"

"I told—"

Doris broke off, her lips parted. She stiffened, gazing over Elliot's shoulder. Suddenly her face turned white with fear, her eyes filled with sheer terror. Before Elliot could realize what was happening, a frozen sound strained from her tight throat—not a scream, but a thin wail of warning.

With Doris still lifted in his arms, Elliot was caught off guard by the ruthless swiftness of the attack. Then, as he lowered her, the onslaught struck him. Spinning about, he glimpsed a rushing black figure. It lurched upon him from the open door of the bedroom, with one arm slashing downward viciously. He tried to twist away, but the terrific blow caught him. Feeling his skull crack like an egg-shell, he caught one nightmarish glimpse of a face—a brutal face, with eyes as small and black as a boar's—before he pitched down. . . .

After a while he realized that his eyes were open, staring, but he was unable to see. "Doris!" he choked out.

The room was strangely silent. The

lights were out; the windows were a shapeless blob. He tried to remember where the switch was. With his first step he stumbled, sprawled over something on the floor—something soft and inert. His cold hands found Doris, but she was lost to his stinging eyes. She was lying there in the darkness, still, so still.

Somehow Elliot fumbled a folder of matches from his pocket. Holding the flickering flame, he stared. Realization came to him icily that the red stain on the front of Doris's dress was really there, that the deep gash over her heart was actual. Then her face. . . .

There was an ugly smear across her lips. Her mouth was gaping, revealing a red horror. Blood welled in her throat, and her tongue—her tongue—had been cut out! He dropped the match and clamped his eyes shut.

He was too stricken to think, even to feel. A few moments ago he had known the greatest happiness of his life. It had been sheer delight, bringing Doris here as his wife—Doris, so radiant, so vital in his arms. "Until death do us part"—and now, with such terrible suddenness that he could not comprehend it, she was dead. His bride was a corpse.

He sprang up. He groped to the switch, snapped it, then stumbled into the bedroom. He found the window open, and put his head out, staring, listening. The night was hushed; the village seemed as somnolent as always. There was a fire-escape leading down, but everything was quiet—there wasn't even the sound of a car rushing away.

He steadied himself. As he returned leadenly to the living-room, his long training as a detective began to assert itself. He reached for the telephone, his stinging eyes again upon the thing that had been Doris. Then he paused, seeing a bit of paper lying on the floor beside her.

It hadn't been there before. Picking it up dazedly, he found a message scrawled on it. Reading the few words, he realized distantly that it was written in Doris's distinctive hand.

F is having two different places watched. He is planning to raid

them soon. Information not yet definite. Details later.

As Elliot stood there swaying dizzily, trying to grasp the meaning of those lines, the telephone began to ring. The bell shrilled three times before he heard it and automatically took up the instrument. Before he could speak, a low voice whispered in his ear.

"The Oracle is speaking."

Elliot stiffened. Giving him no opportunity to answer, the whisper went on: "*The Oracle* has a message for you. It's something you will not want the world to know. The girl you married tonight was an informer."

The spell of the ghostly tone stifled Elliot's voice in his hot throat.

"She was acting for us. She picked up tips from you and passed them on. That was why she got acquainted with you. She did her part well. The note you found proves it—the note she wrote to warn us about the raids the Special Squad is planning."

Elliot flung out, "I don't believe that!"

"You won't be able to doubt it—soon. You don't want everybody to know that you leaked to an informer, do you? What do you think Chief Flagg will do when he finds it out? He'll break you . . . in disgrace. Be wise—say as little as possible. You still have your tongue because we have use for it. Soon *The Oracle* will speak to you again."

Then Elliot heard a click, signaling that the connection was broken.

For an incredulous moment he stared at the instrument. He remembered that it would be impossible to trace the call, because the city and all its suburbs were webbed together in the same automatic system; but immediately he rattled the contact bar and spun the dial. An answer came from one of the men in the telegraph bureau at police headquarters.

"Chief Flagg," Elliot said huskily. Then, when another voice answered, briskly and urgently, "Chief? This is Elliot, calling from home—from Green Valley. I—"

"Elliot!" Flagg crackled. "For God's sake, man, we're waiting for you—"

"Listen—"

"You can't make it to headquarters in time now. Join us at the corner opposite the building—understand? And step on it!"

Elliot drove his voice over the wire. "Listen to me! Send out an alarm for Malloy—Trix Malloy. My girl—my wife—Hello! Hello!"

Flagg was no longer on the wire. Feverishly, Elliot spun the dial again. Again he demanded connection with Chief Flagg. This time a different voice answered.

"The chief just left the office."

Flagg and the Special Squad were already starting out on their planned raid. They were counting on Elliot to take part in it. "You know damned well we need you!" It was a duty that Elliot, as one of the most trusted men in the detective division, couldn't fail—even now.

Keeping his haggard eyes from Doris's pitiful body, he closed the bedroom window and latched it. He sidled out the door and let the bolt snap behind him, hurried to his car. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Death Leads the Raid

ELLIOT drove with reckless speed. As the slapping wind cleared his mind, he tried not to remember that Doris had been cuddled beside him in this same car, happy and breathlessly, such an impossibly short time ago. His mind fastened on the Special Squad's detail tonight—the raids planned for the purpose of stamping out the scourge of *The Oracle*.

He thought back grimly, for he knew in his numbed heart that somehow *The Oracle* had decreed the death of Doris.

The insidious blackmail sheet had first appeared months ago. Regularly every week a new edition flooded from nowhere, filled with scorching scandal. The crime-king behind it seemed to possess an uncanny omniscience; he used his knowledge with utter ruthlessness. *The Oracle* was deeply feared, for not only had it been used to bleed fortunes from scores of prominent men and women, but its victims even refused to admit that they had been preyed upon. Failure to meet its demands had resulted in shattered repu-

tations, ruined political careers, business failures, broken homes, suicides.

No one knew the source of *The Oracle*. Its plant was hidden. It was circulated in such a way that the police and the postoffice department were left helpless to stop it. Each edition was mailed in plain sealed envelopes of a great variety of shapes, sizes and colors, and the addresses of the carefully selected circulation list were written in an equal variety of scripts and typewriting. Small parts of each edition were surreptitiously dropped into mail-boxes scattered all over the city, and in nearby towns. Copies of *The Oracle* could not be found except by opening all the city's first class mail—an impossible thing. Once delivered, the sheets circulated covertly from hand to hand of those who fed upon poisonous gossip.

The police had made numerous arrests, in an attempt to break up the distribution system of *The Oracle*, but this had failed. Wallace Knapp, the district attorney, had reported that he was unable to proceed against the crooks because the Grand Jury had nollod his motions for indictment, due to lack of evidence. *The Oracle* had continued to appear, so daringly, so devastatingly, that Chief Flagg had been forced to take extraordinary measures.

But even the Special Squad, organized for the express purpose of stamping out the blight and unmasking the devilishly cunning crook behind it, had made scant headway. The raids planned for tonight were really little better than a stab in the dark.

Wonder burned in Elliot's mind.

Had the Special Squad been stalemated, again and again, because of some leak of information from headquarters to *The Oracle*? Chilled, Elliot remembered the note he had found beside Doris. It *was* her handwriting. She *had* tipped off someone about the raids. She could have obtained that information from only one source—from Elliot himself.

Pressing his car hard, Elliot tried to remember. He was certain that he hadn't intentionally revealed any official secrets, but had he let something slip unconsciously? He couldn't remember. He couldn't be sure. Yet the things Doris said. . . .

And that note he was carrying even now in his pocket. *F is having two different places watched*—F, meaning Chief Flagg! *Details later. . .*

It must be true! With all his galling unwillingness, Elliot could not evade that conclusion. But—vehemently he jammed the gas pedal to the floor-boards—the real fault was not Doris's, but his. The blame was his own.

He had taken part in the investigation that had singled out the objectives for to-night's raids. Trying to find the secret plant in which *The Oracle* was printed, the Special Squad had narrowed down the field to two buildings. Flagg had planned their strategy with the utmost care, so as to take the crooks by surprise. If the first raid failed to produce the necessary evidence, the second one was to follow immediately. The newspapers were not in on it. No details had been revealed to the rest of the detective division. Only the seven trusted members of the Special Squad, besides Chief Flagg, knew of it.

So they had confidently believed. But now—that note in Doris's handwriting, her stifled confession, the whisper of *The Oracle. . .*

Elliot was speeding into the city. His strap-watch warned him that the zero moment of the first raid was almost at hand. Cautiously curbing his car a block from the suspected building, he hurried along the sidewalk. In a dark doorway he found Chief Flagg and three men of the Special Squad waiting.

"Good—you made it," Flagg said tensely as Elliot joined them. He was a wiry man who looked nothing like a cop; instead, he appeared to be a brisk, keen business executive. "We're about ready to go."

Their faces set, they gazed across the street at a building which appeared innocently dark. It seemed to be merely a vacant store in this quiet, outlying neighborhood. There was no sign of activity except the normal indications of the poor families who lived in the tenements above and around it. Yet the Special Squad had found reasonably sound hints that it was connected in some way with the distribution system of *The Oracle*.

Trying to find his voice, Elliot saw

Flagg gazing at his watch. The deadline was very near now. With a cold impulse, he caught Flagg's arm.

"Wait," he said tersely. "We know how devilishly clever *The Oracle* is. He may have learned about this raid. We may be walking into a trap."

Flagg peered at him. "Damned if I can see how that's possible. There couldn't be a leak this time—not from anybody I picked for this squad. . . . Let's get start—"

"Wait!" Elliot blurted again, tightening his grip so that the chief couldn't move. "We'd better call this raid off—find out in some other way—"

Flagg frowned. "Call it off now? Hell, no! Why, we've been working toward this chance for months. What the devil's the matter with you? You look sick. You're able to go ahead with this, though, aren't you?"

"Yes. Yes, but—" The truth was trembling on the tip of Elliot's tongue, but Flagg went on decisively:

"No time to talk now. The rest of the boys are closing in from the rear already. . . . Come on!"

The chief started purposefully from the doorway. The three other men strode after him. Only one move was possible for Elliot, in spite of his dread—to go with them. His steps quick, he hurried to Flagg's side.

Suddenly the night was full of flaring flame and deafening thunder and blinding fumes. The earth shook and the sky quaked with the detonation, while dazzling light sprang out of the burst windows of the store, while the splintering of walls and the crackling of timbers mingled with the roar. As fragments hissed like shrapnel, the advancing detectives were toppled to the pavement, Elliot among them.

Then the aftermath—tortured screams ringing out, hoarse voices calling for help through the glare and the snapping of rising fire. . . .

Elliot dragged himself up, thinking sickly of Doris's confession, of the tip-off note, of the spectral whisper of *The Oracle*—staring paralyzed at a scene of disaster.

CHAPTER THREE

Murder Must Out

THE repercussions of the explosion echoed over the city, bringing shrieking fire-engines, bonging ambulances, a mob of the morbidly curious. Men too dazed to know what they were doing labored at the heart-breaking work of extricating the wounded from the ruins, of searching through suffocating smoke for the dead. Old men, women, little children who had been peacefully asleep—images of them made a ghastly nightmare in Elliot's mind. Exhausting, torturing hours of it. . . .

At last, when most of the rescue work was done, Chief Flagg led his men to headquarters. They dragged themselves into his office, their mouths pinched with bitterness. Elliot's reddened eyes jerked from one blackened countenance to another. Worn as he was, Flagg faced them standing, his hands clenched together behind his back.

During a moment of tense quiet, the big clock on the wall ticked sonorously. Elliot found himself listening to its characteristic clicking, as if each swing of its pendulum were bringing his hour of judgment closer.

"What did you find out?" Flagg asked hoarsely.

Sewell answered—a man who had entered the department as a probationary patrolman with Elliot. "I looked all through the wreckage. I couldn't find one damned bit of evidence to show that that building was *The Oracle* plant."

"Then why was it mined?" Draper, another member of the squad, asked in a dazed tone. "Why the hell was it blown up like that, just at the very moment we were starting the raid? God knows, it's horrible enough as it is, but if we'd been inside that building then—"

Again they were grimly silent, while the peculiar ticking of the big clock paced off the interval.

"That explosion was a warning," Burrows said. "Even though it wasn't the printing plant, *The Oracle* knew we were coming. He did it to show us what will happen if we try to get at him again. The

bloody devil! Without a thought for those poor people—those kids sleeping right above that dynamite—"

Flagg put in levelly, "I can't believe that *The Oracle* was tipped off on the raid. I can't bring myself to think that any information leaked from any of you men. I'd sooner believe it of myself. The explosion must have been an accident."

Sullivan, one of Elliot's closest friends on the squad, protested flatly. "There *had* to be a tip. I found an electric wire leading out of the ruins and across the street to the corner, behind the building. One end of it must have been connected with the dynamite charge. Some crook must have been at the other end, maybe in a car, waiting to make contact just as we surrounded the place. By God, we can't close our eyes to it—we walked right into a trap."

Flagg was silent again, and the big clock ticked steadily.

McGrath asked, "What're we going to do about it? Admit *The Oracle* has us licked? Let that crook go on bleeding people and wrecking lives? Or are we going to go ahead with the next raid, and see a lot of innocent people blown to bits!"

Flagg squared his shoulders. "I know what we're up against, but I'll decide on our next move damned soon. You men had better go on up to the dormitory, all of you, and turn in for a while. If I decide to go ahead with the second raid, I'll call you. . . . That's all."

Flagg sagged into a chair while the squad filed out of the office with heavy steps—all except Elliot. He peered at his chief. During the discussion he had sat silent. He was remembering, with harrowing vividness, the mangled victims being dragged out of the wreckage.

"You're responsible for it," he heard himself thinking. "You did this. You let something slip. . . ."

Flagg was gazing at him.

"Your hunch was right," the chief said bitterly. "If I'd only listened to you—"

Elliot wanted to shout that it wasn't Flagg's fault, but his. Not even Doris's, but his.

He dragged his chair closer to Flagg's. "Listen," he said in a worn tone. "I tried

to tell you this before, but I didn't have a chance. Have Trix Malloy picked up and brought in. You've got to find him and—"

"Malloy?" Flagg interrupted. The hopeless tone of his voice came of the fact that they had already tried vainly to pin something on Malloy. The crook's nickname was a corruption of the word tricks, because he was known to be clever with tools. More than that, Malloy's cunning had been enough to defeat District Attorney Knapp's attempts to indict him as a member of *The Oracle's* secret organization. "We have no evidence to connect him with the explosion. The mere fact that an electric wire was strung—anybody could have done that."

"It isn't the explosion I want him for now," Elliot said. "It's—murder."

Flagg swung around. "Whose murder?"

"My—my wife."

"Your what?"

"My wife. We were married early this evening." Elliot's throat was parched. "We rushed out to Green Valley. Right after the ceremony I took her to my apartment out there—"

"Who was she?"

"Doris Stevens." Elliot saw that the name meant nothing to Flagg. "I hardly know how it happened, but she was stabbed. Her tongue—" He broke off. "Her—her body's out there now."

Flagg demanded, "Are you sure Malloy did it?"

"No," Elliot admitted. "Somebody hit me, and just as I was going down I thought I saw a face. It was Trix Malloy's face—his small black eyes and his broad nose. Maybe it was a trick of my senses, because we'd been thinking about him so much in connection with *The Oracle*, but—"

Flagg's eyes were shining at Elliot with a queer light. "I'll send out an alarm," he said decisively. "Knapp will have to handle the investigation. I'll help all I can, but Green Valley is outside the city limits, you know." He pulled the telephone close. "I'm sorry, old man."

Elliot forced himself to hold the rest of the truth within himself. Strange, he thought, what trivial things you notice

when your whole world is tumbling about you. The telephone that Flagg was using was one of the newest type, for instance, installed just a short time ago to replace the old. It was supposed to carry the voice more clearly; and over it, Flagg was calling the office of District Attorney Knapp and speaking gravely.

"Knapp's still there," the chief said as he disconnected. "He wants you to come right over and make a statement. He's sending several men out to your apartment right now. In the meantime, I'll have Trix Malloy brought in." And again Flagg said, with bewildered sympathy, "I'm sorrier than I can say, Bob."

Elliot went out of the office. He wondered what questions must be buzzing in Flagg's alert mind. He felt that already his position of trust was being undermined. And when he went into the district attorney's office, he found himself facing a double ordeal.

The worst of it wasn't Knapp—a smartly garbed, sharp-eyed, inscrutable man, who began his inquiry in a tone that was kindly enough. The hardest thing to take was the fact that Helen was noting down Elliot's every word.

Helen Christie was Knapp's personal secretary. For several years Elliot and Helen had been more than friends. But the appearance of Doris had changed all that. And Elliot hadn't realized until now how deeply Helen had been hurt.

She sat beside the desk, her bronze hair shining on her lowered head, unnaturally pale, her eyes downcast at her pencil as it skipped across the pages of her notebook. She strove to control herself as Elliot, in response to Knapp's incisive questions, revealed his impetuous courtship of Doris.

"And you'd met this girl only six weeks ago?" Knapp asked sharply.

"Yes."

"Who was she? Where did she live before she came to this city? What about her family? Do you know anything about her past connections to account for what happened tonight—anything questionable?"

Elliot answered with a snap, "Nothing of the sort! I loved Doris—trusted her. I had every reason—"

He saw Helen's teeth press into her lower lip; and he broke off.

"Surely," Knapp insisted, "you can tell me more about her than this. Perhaps it would be better to wait a little, until you've had a chance to get hold of yourself. After my men have made their investigation, I'll talk to you again."

Elliot lifted himself heavily from the chair. As he trudged to the door, Helen raised her clear brown eyes to his. In them he saw hurt, and sympathy, and an appeal to let her help somehow. He moved on; but abruptly his fists clenched hard.

Trix Malloy was standing in the outer office, between two of Elliot's associates. The detectives were bringing him before Knapp for questioning. Sight of the sly crook ignited a mad fire inside Elliot. He started forward, hating Malloy murderously; but one of the detectives pushed him back, and with a cold effort he controlled himself.

Eyes narrowed, he watched Malloy, swaggeringly confident, being taken in to the district attorney. Leaving the office with a stiff stride, he turned back to headquarters. He found Chief Flagg still alone, sitting under the big clock, his fingers drumming a quicker rhythm than its placid ticking.

"Elliot," Flagg said, looking up. "I can guess how hard this is hitting you. Take a furlough."

Elliot felt substance pouring out of him like sawdust from a torn doll. "A furlough?" he echoed.

"You can't carry on with your job just now. That would be expecting too damned much. The rest of us will manage to get along somehow without you. Take a room at a hotel and get some rest. Get some sleep. Then you can do your best to help Knapp, unofficially."

Elliot turned away with his shoulders drooping. Flagg's decision was made; he had to abide by it. But what was behind it? Concern for his condition, and nothing more? Or doubt—doubt eating like acid? Was he being put on probation until the investigation could be completed?

Elliot knew that, if the truth about Doris was revealed, there was one question they would drive at him inevitably.

"Did you know, during the period when

you were seeing this girl so often, that she was an informer?"

And his answer, when he vehemently denied it, could create nothing but doubt—doubt that would mean the suspicion of his chief, the contempt of his comrades in the division, the end of the world for Detective Lieutenant Elliot.

His phone was ringing when he went into his own office. Sinking into his chair, he dragged up the instrument. The voice that came over the wire drained the breath from his lungs.

"*The Oracle* is speaking."

Speaking daringly to Elliot even as he sat at his desk in police headquarters! He started out of his chair; but as if reading his thoughts, the phantom tone checked him.

"You won't have a chance to trace this call, so listen. *The Oracle* has another message for you. You were wise not to tell Flagg and Knapp the truth about your wife. But remember—*The Oracle* knows—*The Oracle* can reveal the facts to the whole world."

Dazed by this uncanny omniscience—wondering blankly how anyone on the outside could possibly know how much or how little he had revealed—Elliot could only listen.

"There's just one way to save yourself from being exposed as a traitor." The spectral tone was continuing confidently, threateningly. "That way is to cooperate with us. We already know that Chief Flagg is planning another raid, thanks to you and your—late wife. Now you're going to tell us whether or not he's going through with it—and if so, exactly when. *The Oracle* will call on you soon, for that information. Unless you supply it, you're done for—and unless you guard your tongue, you'll lose it. . . . *The Oracle* has spoken."

Then a far-away click, and the line was silent.

CHAPTER FOUR

Dark Challenge

SLOWLY Elliot put the telephone down.

"I can't do that!" he said huskily, half

aloud. "That's too much to ask—too damned much—"

Voices were coming from the next office. Recognizing them, Elliot knew that the chief had called the squad in for a conference. He got up. As he reached Flagg's door the voices ceased. He wondered, had they heard his step? *In God's name, do they think I'm eavesdropping?* His jaw clenched, he thrust the door open.

The seven men gazed at him, their eyes unreadable. No word was spoken. The clock ticked evenly.

Then Flagg rose. "That's all. You have a little time. Go back and get some more rest. I'm going out to eat—haven't had a bite since breakfast." And as the squad filed out, he turned to Elliot. "Well?"

Elliot asked quickly, "Are you going ahead with the second raid?"

Flagg said shortly, "You're on furlough."

"But that's running a horrible chance. The same thing might happen again—another explosion. Hadn't we better make another plan—find some other way of getting at—"

"Maybe you're right," Flagg said. "But tonight's our best chance. The only way of cracking this case is to catch that bunch of crooks at work. Well, we know that the new issue of *The Oracle* is due to be distributed tomorrow. That must mean it's being printed tonight. If Building Number Two is the plant, we're going to make the most of it. We have no time to lose."

"But next week—the week after—it'll be the same—"

"By that time *The Oracle* will have done just that much more damage. If we lay off now, after what happened tonight, we'll appear licked. Damn it, we'll be licked. Either we're big enough to do our job and wipe out *The Oracle*, or we're not, and temporizing certainly won't accomplish anything." Flagg's eyes sharpened. "I don't understand the attitude you've been taking lately. It's not like you. You've never before made a point of personal danger."

Elliot squared his shoulders. "I'm not doing it now," he answered. "I'm think-

ing of the other men, and of you." And he was thinking that if anything happened to them, their deaths would be on his soul. "I still don't want the furlough. What I want is a chance to fight this thing—"

"Wouldn't consider it," Flagg answered with finality.

Flagg took up his hat and strode out. Elliot's eyes clung to the door after he had gone. Then, suddenly, decision gripped Elliot. He went to his desk, pulled his portable typewriter close and fed a sheet of paper into it. His fingers hovered over the keys, and for a moment he pondered.

He knew every detail of Flagg's proposed strategy—the location of the second building, the points at which the squad were going to break in, everything. If he could manage to be there first, he might get inside and remove the danger to the others somehow. It was a crazy, desperate move that Elliot was planning, but it might be the only means of saving them from defeat and disaster.

If it didn't—if that building were doomed to fly to bits while he was inside it—well, he wouldn't be losing very much.

For he saw it now—saw that he couldn't yield to the threat of *The Oracle* and deliberately become a betrayer of his own chief, of his brother officers—that regardless of what might happen, the truth about Doris and himself could not remain hidden forever.

He began writing. With feverish haste, he set down the truth as he knew it, without sparing either the girl he had loved, or himself.

If there was any way of keeping her memory entirely clean, I would do it, but it's impossible. . . . I can still hardly believe that she was an informer, but it must be true. I didn't have the remotest notion, until a moment before she was killed, that she had been spying for *The Oracle*. I can't remember ever having given her any inside information at all, yet I must have done it unwittingly. I only know that Doris had grown to love me, and that at heart she was good—that she would have helped us to unmask *The Oracle* if a murderer hadn't silenced her so horribly. . . . I realize that, under these circumstances, I can never be trusted again. But I'm giving myself one last chance to make up for all this. . . .

Without rereading this complete condemnation of himself—a document that must mean the end of him as a police officer and as a man—he scrawled his signature, folded the page, thrust it into an envelope and sealed the flap. He wrote Flagg's name across the envelope and added *Official*. Then he strode into his chief's office and placed the confession on the desk. The big clock ticked balefully.

It was done.

Turning back, Elliot paused. Helen Christie was standing in the door, her eyes widened and searching his. Wordless, he tried to brush past her; but she caught his hand and stopped him.

"Please," she said quietly. "We're still friends. I want to help, if I can. I came here to tell you something important."

"I—I've got to hurry," he said hoarsely.

"It's about Trix Malloy," Helen insisted. "Mr. Knapp just finished with him. Malloy has an alibi. He produced witnesses to prove his whereabouts during the whole evening. You must have been wrong about him. Mr. Knapp couldn't do anything but let him go."

Elliot's fists clenched. "Thanks!" he said bitterly.

"But where are you going? What are you going to do? Please, won't you let me—"

He tugged away from her hand and strode from the office.

He didn't know how much time he might have before Flagg and the Special Squad would start out on the night's second raid, but it wouldn't be long. Thinking that some spy of *The Oracle* might be watching the cars at the curb, he decided to walk. The suspected building wasn't far. His shoulders set, he strode off, taking a zigzagging route in an effort to elude anyone who might be shadowing him.

In spite of his tactics, he felt that someone was trailing him, watching. . . .

He followed dark streets that brought him into the district where the building stood. Lightless factories and warehouses lined the way, standing among condemned properties and vacant lots. Gloomy quiet prevailed here. Now the building was only a few blocks distant. Elliot's stride

stretched; but abruptly, sure that he had heard a footfall behind him, he sidestepped into a shadow.

At the same moment a scream rang through the darkness—a feminine voice strained with terror.

Elliot sprang into a run. Black movements were blurring against the side of a building near the corner. Two figures were struggling. One of them was sprawled on the sidewalk, pinned down. The other was bending over, reaching—and a steely reflection struck into Elliot's eyes.

He dragged his gun from his hip pocket. As he shouted, the stooping figure jerked erect. Something spun through the air, darkly flashing, so swiftly that he could not dodge it. It struck his forehead. The power of the missile dazed him for an instant. Staggering, he glimpsed one of the figures racing away around the corner.

He lifted his gun to fire; but he eased his trigger-finger, realizing that his goal was within earshot, and that a report might sound a warning.

As he sped toward the corner, a call startled him: "Bob!" He stopped and turned back. A girl was struggling up from the sidewalk. He reached her as she gained her feet. With fearful impulsiveness, she flung her arms around him. He breathed in the scent of her hair—a sweet fragrance that meant Helen—and he felt a warm stickiness on her cheek as she pressed it to his.

"Helen! Are you all right?"

"Yes." Her voice shook. "It's just a slight cut. You stopped him before—"

There was a dark smear on her mouth—a smear such as he had seen on the lips of his dead bride! . . . Her cheek was gashed, but her handkerchief was already stanching the blood. Elliot knew, then, that another few seconds would have meant—her tongue!

On the sidewalk, where it had fallen, he found the keen-bladed, wooden-handled knife.

His pulse speeding, he faced her squarely. "How did you get here? What were you doing?"

"I—I followed you. You looked so wretched when you left the office, that I

thought you needed help and so I—”

He closed his hands on her arms. “Why did that man attack you, whoever he was? You know what he was going to do to you with that knife, don’t you?”

She shook her head fearfully.

“It means just one thing. It’s a way *The Oracle* has of silencing those he can’t trust any more—spies he wants to get rid of in a way that will warn the rest of his organization. You—you’re one of them!”

He saw tears in her eyes. “But I’m not!”

Elliot insisted grimly. “Someone’s been tipping *The Oracle* off to Knapp’s moves, just as—as somebody’s been spying on Flagg. You’ve been doing that. That’s why you followed me—to see what I was going to do. You wanted to tell *The Oracle*—”

Helen’s eyes held to Elliot’s “That’s not true—it’s not.”

“No one can be trusted any more—no one!” he blurted bitterly. “Not with *The Oracle* blackmailing people into being spies for him—paying others—turning decent kids like you into informers for crooks.”

She answered quietly, “If I were what you say I am, then why would that man have tried to silence me?”

He released her. “I don’t know,” he admitted huskily. “Except that it proves you’re dangerous to *The Oracle* somehow. How could that be, unless you were one of his outfit?”

“I can’t explain it,” she answered breathlessly. “I only know I’ve told you the truth. If I can’t convince you, well, that—that’s not the most important thing. *You* are. Please, if you won’t believe anything else, won’t you at least believe that?”

He battled confusion. “God knows I want to,” he said. “In spite of everything, I do, somehow.” Suddenly he burst out, “No matter why you followed me, you shouldn’t have done it! I haven’t time to take you back. I’ve got a job to do—the most important job of my life—the only chance I’ll ever have to—”

“I’ve come this far with you,” Helen said softly, “and I want to go the rest of the way.”

Urgently, Elliot gripped her arm and started along the sidewalk. Her small footfalls pattered into the drive of his heels. He crossed the street on which the suspected building stood, then stopped.

“Stay here, away from that place. Stand in that doorway. Keep out of sight. Don’t move! Do you understand?”

She didn’t answer. His nerves feeling like hot wires, he left her in the shadow and strode along the block. The darkness was so thick that he couldn’t tell whether or not she was obeying his warning. He gazed at the building which was to be the objective of the Special Squad’s second raid—how soon, he couldn’t guess.

It was a warehouse covering a quarter of a block, an old building, black with soot, its windows boarded. Though it seemed to have been abandoned for years, Elliot had, weeks ago, spotted suspicious activity around it and around the garage next door.

Alertly he stepped back as a pair of headlights gleamed around the far corner. A car rolled alongside the warehouse, then turned again, toward the closed doors of the garage. A single toot of the horn served as a signal to open the way. A man in coveralls pulled the garage door wide, and the car rolled in.

As the shine from the door fell upon the man at the wheel, Elliot recognized him with a cold start.

Trix Malloy.

Elliot stood watching. As Malloy nosed his car against one of the walls, the mechanic slid the door shut. A long moment passed while Elliot anxiously waited, studying the garage. It was a smaller building standing against the side of the warehouse. And—Malloy was not coming out.

Unwilling to waste a second more than necessary, Elliot quietly crossed the street. In one window of the garage a light was shining. The window was in a corner that had been partitioned off as an office. As he passed it, Elliot glanced in. The mechanic was slouched at an old roll-top desk, playing solitaire. He was alone.

Elliot paused at the small door in the wall beside the car entrance. He knocked.

A crack opened. The mechanic peered

out. "Overnight storage, buddy? Sorry, no room. Full up. Coupla blocks up the street—"

Elliot pushed the door hard. Forcing the mechanic back, he stepped through. At the same time he lifted his gun.

The glint of the metal signaled the coveralled man into an attack. He swung one hand that he had concealed. He was gripping a heavy jack. As it slashed at him, Elliot threw his left arm up. The jolt of the blow shocked through all his aching body. Half-spinning, he whipped his gun down. The barrel cracked against the crown of the mechanic's head.

The jack fell with a thump. Elliot caught the man as he toppled. Freeing his gun hand, he peered around the dimly lighted garage. There was no sign of Malloy.

He dragged the mechanic into the little office. After a swift look around, he grasped up the telephone and pulled the cord out by the roots. Next he ripped the receiver from the standard. He used the longer piece of wire to bind the unconscious man's ankles, the shorter for his wrists. Then, turning out the light, Elliot eased back into the garage.

He stood in the center of the gloomy, cavernous room, searching. Somehow Malloy had vanished, had slipped away. There was no other door. The walls looked solid. But Elliot noticed that a massive truck was standing backed to the wall adjacent to the warehouse—an old truck covered with canvas.

Quietly, he pulled the canvas aside. He saw the cavity in the wall that the truck concealed.

He climbed up. Musty air was flowing out of the hole. Beyond it Elliot could see nothing. He put his legs through the opening cautiously, stretching for a foothold. Finding the floor, he slid in. The silence seemed hollow, hinting that he was in a large closed room. There was not the slightest ray of light. He groped.

He seemed to become lost in limitless space before his extended hand touched another wall. Sliding along it, he at last found a door. He pressed on a handle, then pulled. The slow opening of the door revealed a dim light. It was shining some distance away, through another door

at the end of a long brick corridor. In the sepulchral quiet he caught a low rumbling of voices.

With his gun at his hip, he went along the passage. The voices gradually became more distinct. Elliot could not yet see into the room beyond the door, but he knew that two men were in there. He was able to distinguish the guttural words of one of them.

"Can't hear nothin'. Maybe they're waiting. Or maybe they've started off from some other place."

It was the voice of Trix Malloy.

As Elliot sidled closer, the second man spoke more sharply. "Damn it, are you sure that thing's in working order?"

"Sure it's workin'. I can hear—"

"If we bungle this, Trix, we're done for. By God, it'll be your neck as well as mine. You should have let Elliot have it. You should have stuck with that damned Christie girl. She's too smart—"

Elliot paused, tensed.

"Easy, easy," Malloy growled. "I'll take care of her next time." He uttered a laugh that sounded evilly gloating. "I handled that Stevens dame proper, didn't I? Leave 'em to me."

The big veins in Elliot's neck throbbed. He crept forward again. He was almost at the door now. He could see part of the big room.

Printing presses! Two of them were visible, with paper stacked alongside as if work had been suspended. The stacks looked like—they *were* copies of *The Oracle*.

A man was moving among the equipment, his back turned. His loose coat and his dark hat, shading his face, rendered him almost invisible. But the task that was occupying him was appallingly clear. He was running a thin wire through his gloved hands—a wire that led to one of a pile of boxes from which the lids had been pried. The stencilling on them revealed that they were packed with dynamite.

Malloy spoke gutturally again. "I still don't hear nothin', except—"

"We know damned well they're coming tonight!" the other man snapped back without straightening. "They wouldn't be waiting this long. They must be on their

way now. We're getting out. The wires check. Once they're inside, we'll touch this stuff off—and that'll be their finish. After that we'll find another plant, and nobody'll dare to try to stop us again."

With a sound of agreement, Malloy rose from a telephone switchboard. It stood in one corner. Several plugs were inserted in the sockets, and red signal lights were shining. Above the board, a number of vacuum tubes were glowing in a compact amplifier. Malloy slipped a pair of phones from his ears. Turning away, he froze.

Elliot was standing in the doorway.

"Stay right where you are," Elliot said. "Don't move, either of you."

The man in the coat stood rigid, his back turned, his head bowed. Malloy's response was desperate defiance. He sprang aside, his right hand whisking under his coat. Elliot fired.

The bullet smacked into the wall behind Malloy. As he threw himself forward, Elliot glimpsed Malloy's automatic coming out. At the same time he felt the other man rushing at him from behind. His second bullet blasted at Malloy as he whirled around. Malloy fell to one knee, cursing, choking with pain. Elliot spun into a vicious attack that overbalanced him.

Toppling, he gripped the other man's coat. As he jarred down to the floor, he pulled the other man after him. He struck a whipping blow with his gun as a fist crashed to his jaw. Dazed by the shock of it, he fought blindly. He heard Malloy yell.

"They're comin' in! They're comin' in!"

As another blow stretched Elliot out, he felt the man in the coat springing up. Then a shot—a sharp report. Something hot pinched Elliot's left shoulder. The other man was running away.

Slowly, Elliot dragged himself up to his knees. Through a blur, he saw Malloy writhing on the floor, clutching his chest, bloody foam bubbling from his lips.

In the corridor outside the door there were running footfalls. A shouted command reverberated—Flagg's voice. They were coming in from the garage. In the back of his mind Elliot knew that Helen

had pointed the way for the squad—but in the confusing gloom he was searching for the man in the coat.

That man was standing near the stacked boxes of dynamite. His gun was in his hand. He was pointing it into the heap of explosive. One bullet would be enough to detonate it—would release a force terrific enough to transform the warehouse into smouldering ruins burying broken corpses.

Calmly, knowing that a lost instant or a single miss would mean doom, Elliot fired.

The man in the coat tottered back. His gun spat flame, once. The bullet drove over the topmost of the boxes and splintered into the ceiling. . . .

It was all a crazy dream. Elliot, now on his feet, heard Helen's voice calling his name. He felt Flagg gripping his arm. Then he looked down into the face of the man in the coat—into the face of District Attorney Wallace Knapp—and grimly he smiled. Then he turned away. He strode into the corner, where the switchboard was glowing. With hands reddened by the blood flowing from his wound, he put the phones to his ears and listened.

He heard a sound that was as familiar, as unmistakable, as the voice of an old friend—the slow, resonant ticking of a clock. . . .

HELEN CHRISTIE returned to headquarters with Elliot, Flagg and the rest of the squad. As the men filed into the chief's office, she stepped into Elliot's. Their faces pictured grim elation—except Elliot's. He watched Flagg's keen eyes.

"That's the answer," Flagg said. "Knapp made the most of his official position. He not only capitalized on official confidences, and used whatever scandal his spies could bring him, but he could twist evidence so that the members of his organization could never be convicted. No wonder Malloy had an alibi. If he had succeeded in killing Helen Christie, too—Knapp must have been afraid that she suspected him, because she came straight to this office after he'd released Malloy—he would have gotten away with it. Well, we've nailed both of them, and

a new D.A. will get a couple of convictions that will stick. Thank God, there's no more *Oracle* now."

Flagg gazed at Elliot.

"I think it's fairly clear—the matter of your wife's death. Knapp must have tried to make a spy of her, so that through her he could get information from you. Of course he failed, but his attempt had left him vulnerable—had given Doris a lead to him which she could and would give to you. It's small satisfaction, I know, but she's the last of *The Oracle's* victims. . . . Yes, that's the answer."

"Not quite," Elliot said.

Stepping to the desk, he took up the telephone and a letter-opener. Using the tool as a screw-driver, he removed the base of the standard. He turned to Flagg with his discovery—a concealed microphone.

"That's how *The Oracle* knew of our plans. The service man who substituted this instrument for the old one was one of Knapp's crew. Malloy was clever enough to have used jumpers on the telephone wires, at each of the manholes between here and the plant of *The Oracle*, so that there was an open line working constantly. They could hear every word spoken in this office. There must be scores of these things planted around the city. I think that's the rest of the answer, Flagg."

Elliot could not add that he knew Doris's first purpose had been to supplement the information picked up by this hidden device—to learn, from him, of

police plans made outside the range of the microphone.

The chief looked amazed. "I'll be damned! Good work! Listen. You saved us all from being blown to bits, but you did something a great deal more than that. You've removed all possible suspicion that one of this squad was a traitor. That means more to me than anything else. . . ."

Wondering, Elliot plumbed Flagg's eyes. The letter—*what about the letter he had left on the desk?* The first thing that Elliot had noticed, when he had stepped back into this office, was that the envelope was gone. But—wasn't Flagg going to mention it? Not even—

"Thanks, Bob," Flagg said again with a dour grin. "Now, for God's sake, get some rest before you drop."

Elliot turned away slowly. Bewildered, he went into his office. Helen was there. She was standing at his desk, tearing an envelope through and through again.

"I saw it, just after you left it there," she said quietly. "The look in your eyes worried me so much, I couldn't help opening it and reading it. I've had it all this time. It wouldn't be fair to you, or to Doris either, to—It's going where it belongs."

As Helen dropped the fragments into the basket, Elliot wondered if this brave, loyal girl with the burnished-copper hair could re-awaken the desire for love that Malloy had snuffed out. And somehow he felt that, in time, she could. . . .

THE END



KILLER'S JACKPOT

By CHARLES BOSWELL

To save his job and stave off poverty and disgrace, old Hugo Saunders had to out-smart a battery of state police and a wily, brutal killer—while his only weapon was a pack of cards!

THESE were five of us in the game in my room at the Millbrook Hotel. Hugo Saunders was winning. I was glad of it because he needed the money. For years Hugo had struggled along on the salary Millbrook paid him for being its only constable. Now he was being discharged.

Dave Lamar was loser, a consistent sucker to Hugo's bluffs. It was stud, and Hugo was raising on every round. Dave,



Whoever killed him made a thorough—and brutal—job . . .

usually with a little pair that he hated to drop, would stick until the final paste-board fell. Then, seeing that he didn't have a cinch hand, he'd fold before the daring of Hugo's last-card bump.

Time after time Hugo pulled in the chips, and later, acting as though it were accidental, he'd sometimes expose his hole card. Nothing! He'd have absolutely nothing better than his highest card showing. . . .

Dave, blushing beneath his pimples, would whine: "Gee whiz, this game's too steep for me. My old man may be president of the bank, but he gives me a measly allowance. You guys with salaries, you can afford to play like wildcats. Not me!"

It was the first time I'd played with Dave Lamar and I didn't like it. Poker is a man's game and not a pastime for whining children. Dave was old enough all right, but not sufficiently seasoned. He'd never been out from under his father's thumb. Percy Lamar, if he'd known the boy was in a poker game, would have skinned him alive. The banker was strict with his son; strict and stingy.

John Martin, night clerk at the hotel, had assembled the gang as he usually did when I came to town. In those days I was on the road selling flour and I made Millbrook every now and then. This time I couldn't understand why John asked Dave Lamar, because Dave's father was ousting Hugo Saunders from the constable's post. Also, Hugo was a regular in the session, and John knew he was one of my oldest friends. Martin explained it, saying: "Hell, there ain't nobody else to play! This time of the year most of the fellows are off to the National Guard camp. Dave Lamar was the only fifth we could get!"

Dave left early, some twenty-five dollars in the hole. He said he'd have to get home before his father got too curious as to where he'd been. John, Bill Peterson, Hugo, and I sat around afterwards talking over his losses. Hugo said: "You can always tell poker greenhorns—they bet according to their bankrolls, not their cards and their opponents!"

And then the conversation got serious, about Hugo and Hugo's job. I was

mighty interested; the town constable was like a brother to me. Aware of his circumstances, a wife and three children to support, I knew he was worried. His prospects were pretty slim.

"Yep," Hugo told us, "It looks like I'm going. Percy Lamar's given his order to the town council and his order goes. The old skinflint's got every councilman's hands tied; they all owe him money. . . . According to him, Millbrook no longer needs a constable. It's protected well enough by the state police. My salary is a drain on the public budget. After the first of the month I'm out. . . ."

Helplessly, John Martin and Bill Peterson shook their heads.

Hugo continued: "Percy Lamar claims nothing ever happens here—no crimes. He says that if they did, I wouldn't be any good anyway. He says I've never had any training in police methods, modern crime detection, and such like. Maybe—I don't know—maybe he's right!"

They left around midnight. Hugo was the last to go; I clasped his hand encouragingly. In all the ten years I'd known him I'd never seen him with such a despondent look. "Listen," I said, "Why don't you tell Lamar this: The reason Millbrook's never had any crimes is because they've got a constable and because you're it! As far as crime methods are concerned—nuts! You've got common sense and that's more'n ninety-nine per cent of what's needed. You've got it, all right; nobody could play the hand of poker you do without it. . . . Something else—you've got nerve. Tonight you were betting on nothing with nothing and that calls for guts!"

He looked up, smiled a sagacious smile. "Thanks," he said.

"Don't worry," I told him, "Something may happen yet. . . ."

SOMETHING did. The next morning, Monday, the town was in a furor. John Martin told me about it at breakfast. "The bank's been robbed!" he exclaimed, wide eyed, "And old man Epworth, the janitor, was killed!"

"Great God!" I said, "Where was Hugo?"

"Gone home to bed," Martin went on.

"He's up most of the night, you know, prowling around, and he usually turns in about six o'clock. He'd no more'n gotten his clothes off when he heard an explosion. Half naked, he rushed back uptown. Others were there before him; Leslie Carr and Tom Jeter. . . . The vault door was blown most off its hinges and every bit of cash, down to the last dollar bill, was gone. It ain't been figured out yet, but they say something over ten thousand dollars was stole! . . . And Charlie Epworth—shame about him, ain't it? Been janitor there going on twenty years. . . ."

I gulped down my coffee and went over to the bank. A crowd of outraged citizens, knotted in groups of fours and fives, stood before it. There were three state police cars drawn up to the curb in front and in the lobby I could see several of the blue-uniformed officers.

There were murmurs in the crowd which I caught as I passed through: "Percy Lamar'll raise the devil with Hugo 'bout this! . . . The state cops say a big city mob done the job . . . Maybe Lamar's right 'bout Hugo not being worth the salt it'd take to pickle him . . . Well, anyway, as town protector it don't look as though he's so hot!"

Hugo was nowhere to be seen. Presuming he was inside the bank, I went to the door and asked for him. The state policeman I spoke with told me he'd been there earlier but had gone. They wouldn't let me in the bank building so I went up to the corner service station to see Bill Peterson.

"I was one of the first on the scene," Bill told me. "I got there right after Tom Jeter and Leslie Carr and Hugo. When I heard the fuss—and a whopping noise it was—I'd just gotten out of bed to come to work. I told the old woman: 'God A'mighty, Carrie, one of them gas tanks over to the railroad siding's blowed up! . . . But that wa'n't so; 'twas the bank."

"I came downtown and saw Tom Jeter's car standing in the middle of the street out front. The bank door was wide open and I went in. The air was still thick with dust and smoke but I could see Hugo and the other two milling 'round. Then I caught sight of Charlie

Epworth. What a mess they made of him, poor guy! Stone dead he was, and his head and face was battered up something fearful. He looked like he'd been hit a hundred times with something big and heavy like the butt end of an axe. Whoever killed him made certain they done a thorough job. . . . He'd been coming in to clean and I guess he took them bandits unawares."

A car drew up to Peterson's single gas pump. He took time out to sell five gallons and then came back to finish telling me the story. "The vault door was busted clear off," he went on. "Must have been some shot of nitro to've done the trick. Inside the vault a steel money box was chiselled open—quarter inch steel it was, too! That's where the cash was—in the money box.

"Neat job, all right. Nobody saw hide nor hair of the robbers. Slick ones, they was! The state police say they must've come from the city. . . ."

THEN I started working, selling flour. I called on the few retailers in town with no success. They wouldn't talk business with me, they were too excited about the crime. The majority of them were hearty in their condemnation of Hugo. They seemed to blame him.

Steve Miller, proprietor of Miller's Dry Goods and Grocery Emporium, said to me: "Hell, if we had a real efficient police force in this town a thing like this wouldn't have happened. I'm beginning to agree with Percy Lamar: Hugo, as a cop, ain't no 'count at all. . . ."

His attitude so incensed me I forgot he was a customer. I told him: "Miller, you're a damn' fool! Hugo's only one man and one man can't do but so much. He'd been up all night when this thing happened; when dawn came he'd just gone home to bed. What do you expect—that he should work twenty-four hours a day? . . . Besides, you're losing sight of Lamar's argument entirely. He's been saying the town doesn't need a constable, such a salary is wasted pay, the state police give protection enough! . . . If you're criticizing Hugo for being absent from the bank steps when the robbers got there, answer me this: Where were the

state police? Did they do any better than Hugo as far as protection's concerned?"

"They'll catch the criminals!" the store keeper retorted. "That's more'n Hugo'll do. . . ."

This last remark of Steve Miller's sickened me. Before the robbery Hugo Saunder's job had been in jeopardy enough; now it seemed there was no hope for its salvation. Apprehension of the bank robbers by the state police would be a triumph for them, and a consequent victory for Percy Lamar's powerful proposal.

If only Hugo could capture the bandits! But such a feat looked impossible. The state police had such an advantage over the town constable. In any sort of a competition they outnumbered him a thousand to one; their facilities were wide; his were limited to his own wits. Although I still believed in Hugo, in his cunning and native shrewdness, I felt his chances of running down a big time gang of bank burglars, lone and single-handed, were small when compared with those of a police organization whose tentacles stretched for miles in every direction.

I reminded myself of Hugo's nerve and took what little comfort I could in his possession of this quality: His nerve was certainly as great as the sum total of that in all the uniformed police! I thought of the poker game. No copper, matter not how brave, with nothing up and nothing in the hole, could do more than bet—and raise!

It was late afternoon when I finally saw Hugo. I'd given up my attempts at selling with excitement in the town as competitor. I was headed back to the hotel, just passing the bank, when I sighted the constable. The street was nearly deserted, the morning's crowd having dispersed.

Hugo was standing across from the burglaried building alone and motionless. From the distance at which I first glimpsed him he appeared forlorn, his body so lean as to be almost frail, his thin shoulders hunched forward, his head hanging down. But when I neared him I noticed there was more an air of thought about him than misery. When

he looked up there was a trace of a smile on his lips.

"Hello," I said on greeting him. He answered, and then for a long while both of us were silent. Finally I spoke again: "Well, looks as though some city thugs kinda cleaned the place out, eh Hugo?"

"City thugs?" he repeated. "What makes you think city thugs robbed Percy Lamar's bank?"

"That's what the state police say," I told him.

HE SNORTED, "Humph!" Then, his eyes aglitter, he beckoned me closer. "Listen," he whispered. "You're my friend; you're the only one 'round here's got confidence in me—I'm going to let you into a secret. . . . Haven't seen me 'round all day, have you?"

"No."

"Know where I've been?"

"No."

"I'll tell you—down to Charlie Epworth's house. That's the janitor, you know—the fellow that was killed in the robbery. I've been down there talking to his widow, expressing my sympathy—and getting information. I found out this: Charlie went to the bank to clean earlier this morning than he has for a long time. Usually he goes about seven o'clock but this morning he went at six-fifteen because of a directors' meeting Saturday night and he knew he'd have a lot of work to do, cigar butts and such like lying 'round.

"Something else. I got a good look at Charlie's body and it was battered up awful, head bashed most beyond recognition. There were enough blows to kill a dozen men. Whoever did the killing wanted to make certain Charlie was good and dead!"

Hugo looked at me inquiringly, as though to ask if I caught on. "What does all this mean?" I questioned. "I don't understand."

"Just this," Hugo explained. "The robber was familiar with both Charlie Epworth's and my schedules! He knew that Charlie usually went to clean at seven o'clock and that I went off the street and to bed at six. He figured that gave him an hour in between to pull his job.

"Now, when Charlie came into the bank at six-fifteen, three quarters of an hour before he should've, he surprised the burglar at his work, so the burglar up and knocked him over the head.

"Why did he kill Charlie, when knocking him out would have kept Charlie from giving an alarm? Because Charlie *recognized* the burglar! It was somebody he knew—and he knew mostly *local* people!

"The burglar lives in this town! . . ."

That night I took a late train out of Millbrook for Keystone, a town about fifty miles away. I figured on selling there the rest of the week and getting back to Millbrook for the next week end. During the few days I was gone my business efforts met with little success. I wasn't able to put my mind on my work feeling as I did about the situation confronting Hugo.

When, standing there in front of the bank, Hugo'd told me of his deductions I'd been hopeful of their coming out all right. But now, after thinking them over, this hope was wearing thin. His picking of two incidental facts, drawing them to the definite conclusion that the bank was robbed and Charlie Epworth was killed by somebody in the town, seemed to me too long a shot. His logic was poker logic and I was afraid of applying it to real life. . . .

There were so many other directions his facts could have taken. The burglar, for instance, might have been vicious enough to kill the janitor for the hell of it. He could have learned the accustomed movements of both Hugo and Charlie by simply hanging around the town for a couple of days and keeping his eyes open . . . I'd have felt easier if Hugo had been staking his last chances to hold his job on a surer bet. . . .

JOHN MARTIN had several things to tell me when I got back to the Millbrook Hotel on Saturday night. He said: "They ain't caught the bank robbers yet. State police been working for a week now!"

I murmured my relief. Anyway, I thought, this gives Hugo a little more time.

John went on: "And Percy Lamar's changed his mind. Now he thinks the town *does* need a constable!"

I shouted joyfully: "That means Hugo keeps his job!"

John shook his head. "Nope," he said. "Don't mean no such thing. Percy still claims Hugo ain't fitted for the post. He's recommending somebody else. . . ."

Crestfallen, I asked without interest, "Who?"

"Dave Lamar!"

I was stunned. Then I thought, so that's the skinflint banker's scheme! All along he's been wanting to oust Hugo in order to give his son the job. Helplessly, I cursed Percy Lamar and his spineless, pimply-faced offspring. There was nothing I nor anyone else could do. The banker ran the town. If he wanted to see his son draw down the constable's salary, then that's what would happen.

John Martin's voice interrupted my thoughts. "I'm getting up the usual game for tomorrow night," he said. "Fact is, knowing you were coming back, I've already arranged it . . . okay?"

I answered vaguely. "All right, I guess—who's playing?"

"You," said John, "And me, Bill Peterson, Hugo and—" He hesitated.

"Who's the fifth?" I asked.

"Dave Lamar!"

"I'll be damned!" I snorted, "if I'm going to play with him. Not the way his old man is throwing Hugo out of work and the way he's shoving himself in. . . . Why'n hell did you ask *him*?"

"I didn't," John answered apologetically, "Hugo did!"

"What?"

"Sure . . . Hugo says that Dave lost a lot in the game last Sunday and he ought to be given an opportunity to get it back. Sounds funny to me. . . ."

"Me too," I told him, "But—well—if Hugo asked him I'll play. . . ."

Again the stud game was in my hotel room and the same five were playing. All of us had our coats off and were sitting tense in our chairs. The place was hot and stuffy and filled with smoke.

It wasn't like any poker I'd ever played before; it wasn't friendly. There was no laughter, or small talk about the

table; all was quiet but for the clink of chips and the occasional mutterings of serious voices announcing bets. I had a premonition that there was something at stake besides the money wagered.

Hugo was losing and Dave Lamar was taking his money. This fact was too strange for me to fully comprehend. Hugo was bluffing like he always did, but Dave was calling his bluffs! . . . Hugo'd raise and Dave would call and take his money, or Dave would check and Hugo'd bet and Dave would call and again sweep in the pot. The thing went on time and time again.

I couldn't understand either of them. Dave was playing so different from what he had the time before, and Hugo so unlike himself. Dave's caution was gone; Hugo's strategy thrown to the four winds. Dave was betting the limit on each card. Hugo was meeting his bets, raising—and losing!

Finally it seemed to me that Hugo was feeding David. It looked like he was losing on purpose! He lost a lot and after a while he turned to me and said: "I'm clean. Could you loan me a hundred?"

I GAVE him the money and afterwards was sorry I had. It dwindled down steadily—needlessly, it seemed—until eventually Dave had it all. Towards midnight Hugo, broke but apparently undisturbed, got up from the table and said: "That's the finish. I know when I'm licked."

With that the game broke up and everybody left immediately but Hugo. He lingered behind. Feeling sorry for him—loser in the card game and about to lose his job—I turned to him as soon as the door was closed on the others and said: "About that hundred—don't worry. Pay me back next year or the year after if it's more convenient."

He didn't answer, didn't even seem to hear. I looked at him and saw that he was excited, about what, I couldn't tell. He said: "Come on! I've got a job for you. Tonight I'm making you deputy constable. You're going to be in on what may be my last act of official business!"

Grabbing my arm, he hurried me downstairs and out the back door of the hotel.

His car was parked in an alley there. Rushing me into it, he started the motor, and headed toward the north end of town. . . .

Driving without lights, Hugo talked to me in a whisper, his voice barely audible above the soft purr of his motor. "While you were away," he said, "I figured something else out, something about the robbery. Remember I told you I'd narrowed the suspects down to somebody in the town? Well, I've narrowed them down even further than that! Listen. . . ."

I did, tuning my ears for more card game reasoning.

"Recall the details of the robbery? . . . The vault door was blown off with a shot of some explosive; an inside money box of quarter inch steel was chiselled open; Leslie Carr and Tom Jeter arrived only a few minutes after the blast. . . ."

We were entering a residential section of the town, a part with which I wasn't familiar. "Yes," I said, "What about it?"

"For a week I've been turning those facts over in my mind," Hugo went on, "And I've finally decided they don't hold together. The burglar couldn't have gotten to the money box without first opening the vault door and yet the money box was chiselled! To do that job would require at least a quarter of an hour—a quarter hour of work after the door was opened—a quarter hour after the explosion! But Leslie Carr and Tom Jeter arrived only a minute or so after the explosion, so it couldn't have happened that way."

Hugo drove past a large house on the edge of the town and parked his car in the deep shadow of a clump of trees down the road. He opened the door and motioned me out. We stood for a moment by the running board while he finished his story:

"The vault door was opened long before it was blasted off! After it was opened the money box was chiselled and the money was taken. *Then* the door was blasted. This was done to cover up the fact that it had been opened by means of the combination! And the burglar was someone who knew it! Someone who not only lives in this town—but someone connected with the bank! . . ."

THIS wasn't poker logic any longer, but was logic of a different kind. It was clear and analytical, applicable to actual events. Suddenly I realized that Hugo Saunders was on the right track, that he was miles ahead of the state police, that already he knew the identity of the murdering burglar.

I half framed a question. Hugo's hand went over my mouth. Catching my arm, he led me back along the road and into the driveway of the big house we had just passed. I didn't know whose it was.

We took a position to one side of the house, both the front and back yards dimly visible from where we stood. We hid in a clump of lilac bushes and waited.

After a while I heard footsteps along the driveway. "Ssh!" Hugo cautioned, "Here he comes!"

I peered through the darkness and saw a figure approaching across the lawn. He stopped at an old well to the right of the bushes where we were concealed.

I heard the creak of the well pulley and watched the shadowy movements of the man's arms hauling at the rope hand over hand. Just as the bucket came up and was rested on the well cover, Hugo said, "Get ready!"

The man's hands left the bucket and began searching through his pockets, pulling things out.

"Now!" Hugo shouted. "Rush him!"

The man fought like a maniac, but without effect. Hugo grabbed him about the neck and I tackled his thrashing legs. To quiet him, Hugo let go an uppercut to his chin that knocked him out.

Then Hugo struck a match and I saw the pimply face of Dave Lamar!

Hugo moved the match to the well bucket and beckoned me over. The bucket was dry. Inside, near the top, was a handful of crumpled one- and five-dollar bills. Hugo picked these off and pocketed them. "Money I fed him at poker," he commented, "and your hundred."

Beneath, neatly arranged, were stacks of new currency, almost enough to fill the bucket. "There," Hugo said, "is the money stolen from the bank. And there—" pointing to Dave Lamar's recumbent figure—"is the burglar!"

Well . . . Hugo was due to keep his job. Everybody in the town said he was—everybody but Percy Lamar, and he didn't have a say any more. Hugo and I had taken Dave Lamar to the jail and afterwards he confessed his double crime in the presence of several members of the town council we'd gotten out of bed for witnesses. Hugo was a hero and the council said they were going to vote him a raise in pay.

The constable had breakfast with me at the Millbrook Hotel. There, over the coffee, I found an opportunity to ask the questions which had been plaguing my curiosity all through the night. "You explained about how you figured the burglar was somebody in the town," I said, "and about how you narrowed that down to somebody closely connected with the bank. But how did you know which one to suspect?"

Hugo laughed, his old laugh, the one I hadn't heard since all this business of his dismissal started. "It was in the cards," he told me. "Remember that expression of mine? . . . 'You can always tell poker greenhorns—they bet according to their bankrolls, not their cards and their opponents?' That was Dave's giveaway. We had two identical card games, same players, same value hands. In the first, Dave—somewhat shy on the dough like his old man usually keeps him—played close to his chest. In the second, he splurged. I knew he had money in his pockets—plenty of it—to bet like he was doing. I asked myself where he got it. There was only one answer—the bank!

I smiled at Hugo admiringly. I said: "Well, you old poker playing fool, if you're so smart at card figuring and such, why'd you lose all that dough you had when he was betting wild?"

"Lose!" Hugo snorted. "Lose—nothing. I gave him the money. I wanted him to have so much he wouldn't be able to explain to his father where he got it! Then he'd have to go and hide it—*hide it where he hid the money he stole!* That's the way we caught him, see?"

I saw, all right; and I guess he could tell I did, by the expression on my face. . . .

CANDIDATES FOR COFFINS

By B. B. FOWLER

It seemed to Jerry Osler that everyone he met asked him only one question: "Where is Dell Tenner?" and when Jerry couldn't answer, guns blazed and bullets whined about his ears. But Jerry didn't know that he had been dealt a hand in a game where the lowest stake was—death!



Saki's pistol went flying through the air . . .

CHAPTER ONE

Three Play at Murder

JERRY OSLER left the roaring furnace that once had been the Continental Chemical plant, sprinted through the police lines and elbowed his way through the thickly packed crowd in the direction of a telephone booth. As he was almost in the clear, he saw the little brown man for the first time.

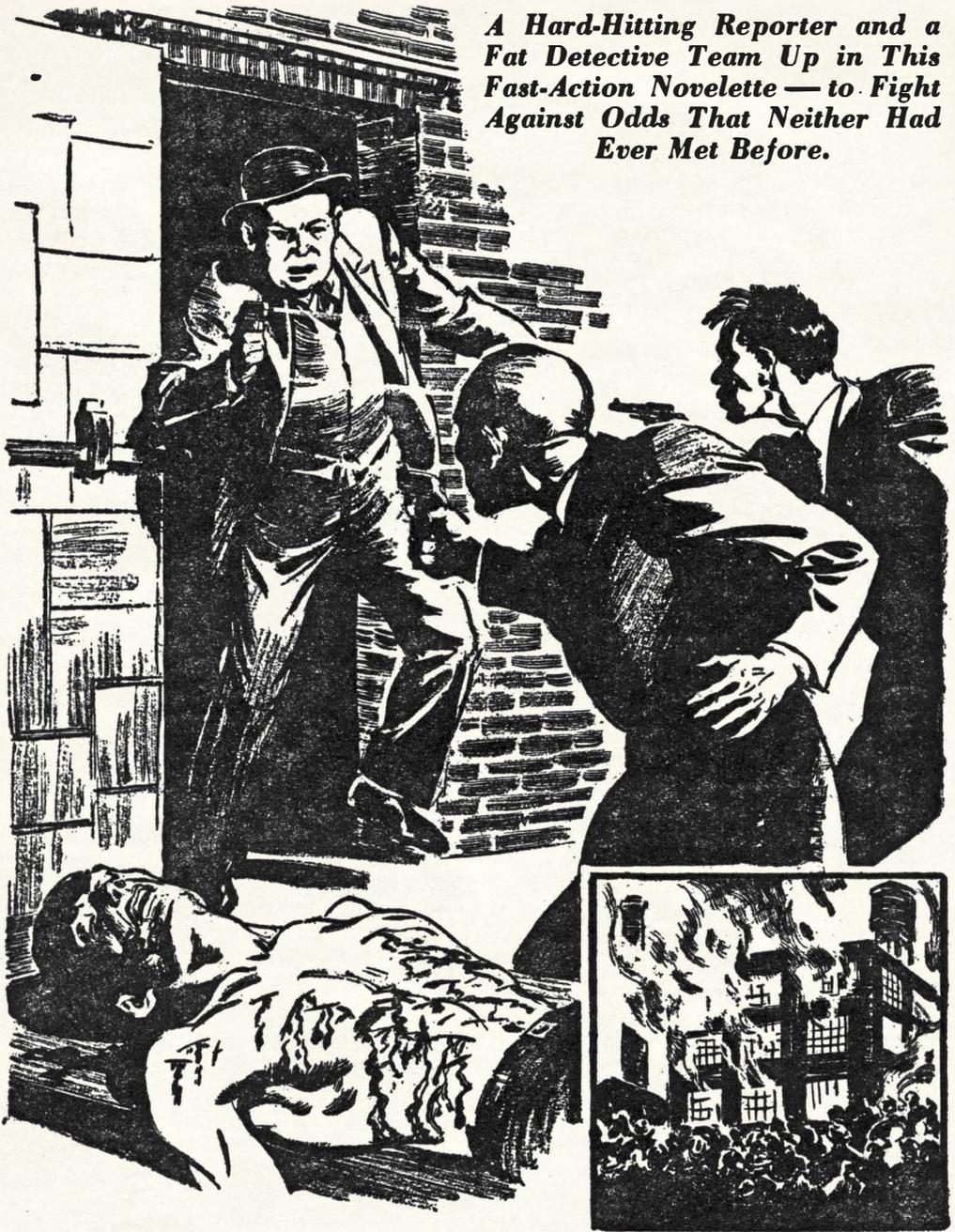
The man was small; his hat came only to the level of Jerry's shoulder. He had flat brown eyes in a flat brown face. The eyes glittered dully in the red glare of the

flames as he caught Jerry's sleeve and said in a voice that was like the hiss of a leaky steam valve, "Please, Mr. Osler, I hear you ask policeman about Mr. Dell Tenner. Kindly to tell me what you know about Mr. Tenner, thank you."

There was something about the little brown man that narrowed Jerry's grey eyes and tightened his mouth. He glanced back at the blaze and said flatly, "Dell Tenner works in the Continental laboratory. I asked about him because sometimes he works late and might have been there tonight. So what has that got to do with you?"

The little brown man opened his mouth

A Hard-Hitting Reporter and a Fat Detective Team Up in This Fast-Action Novelette — to Fight Against Odds That Neither Had Ever Met Before.



to speak just as another man barged out of the crowd. He was tall, loose-jointed and gangling, with a long, lantern-jawed face and a hatless bald head that shone in the eerie, dancing light. The same light glinted wickedly on the gun he held in his hand.

The little brown man saw him first. He moved while Jerry was still paralyzed in momentary amazement. The hands of the

little brown man were like steel talons as they bit into Jerry's arms. They whirled him around off balance, pushed him toward the bald-headed man and disappeared into the thick of the crowd.

The gun in the bald-headed man's hand made a hard, slamming noise and the flame of its discharge felt hot on Jerry's neck. The man swore thickly and slammed Jerry with a left hook that knocked him

sprawling backwards into the gutter.

When he got to his feet he could see neither of the two men who had assaulted him so astonishingly. Jerry rubbed his jaw where the left hook had landed and swore fluently. He cursed the bald-headed man and commented virulently on the probable antecedents and background of the little brown fellow. Still swearing he headed across the street for the telephone booth in the Acme Bar and Grill.

HE CONTINUED to nurse his rapidly swelling jaw all the time he gave his story in terse sentences over the wire. There had been an explosion in the laboratory of the Continental Chemical. No, it hadn't been an accident. They had found the watchman with his skull caved in. Also the safe had been opened. The explosion and fire had destroyed everything in it. It would be practically impossible to tell what, if anything, had been taken. He said nothing about the little brown man and the fellow with the gun. That part of the story was personal and without meaning. Neither did he say anything about Dell Tenner.

Dell Tenner was an experimental chemist in the Continental laboratory. Jerry had known him for about a year and he had come to look on Dell as more or less of a friend. It had become a habit to drop in once a week and drink a bottle of beer in front of the big fireplace of Dell's room. But lately Dell had seemed nervous and irritable and Jerry hadn't been to see him for a month.

When he had finished giving his story he hung up, then dialed Mrs. Watson, Dell's landlady. She told him that Dell had gone out that morning and had not returned. No, she didn't know where he had gone. She wasn't worried though; Mr. Tenner's rent was all paid up for the rest of the month.

When he came out of the booth, Jerry stood staring along the bar, still rubbing his jaw, thoughtfully now. All his habitual, lazy good-humor had vanished, leaving his face sombre and heavy.

He turned abruptly as someone behind him said, "Hiyah, Jerry. What's the score?"

Ted Ashley, financial writer for the

Argus, had one elbow on the bar, his pudgy fingers curled around a glass of beer. He was a shapeless hulk of a man with a moon face and little, bloodshot eyes.

Jerry walked over to the bar, leaned on it and said, "What takes you this far off the reservation? I didn't know you financial guys bothered with things like fires."

"I heard about it and came over," Ashley said in his thick, furry voice. His black eyes pulled down in a scowl and his lower lip protruded. "I've been after a story from Continental for a month. There's something that smells in this thing to-night."

Jerry nodded to the bartender and slid a dime across the counter for the tall glass of beer. He was just taking it down from his lips when someone plucked at his sleeve.

Jerry glanced over his shoulder, and the glass hit the bar with a thud as he saw the flat face of the little brown man.

Yellow teeth glittered in the light as the Japanese smiled widely and without meaning. He made a jerky little bow from his waist and said in his curious hissing voice, "Very sorry for unfortunate interruption to conversation. Would like very much ask you again about honorable Mr. Tenner."

As he swung from the hip Jerry said in a tight voice, "You lousy little stone-face, so you would push me in front of a gun that was just going off!"

The little brown man bounced off the front of the bar like a rubber ball. He lost his balance, rolled down the three steps to the bar entrance, then regained his feet.

He bowed jerkily again, but his false affability had all vanished now. His hissing voice said, "Much better you answer question, Mr. Osler. Oh, very much better, thank you. Will be seeing you again and asking question again, Mr. Osler. Very sorry, but will insist on answer."

Jerry made savage noises in his throat and grabbed his beer glass. He flung it with a snappy, over-hand motion. The little man ducked and the glass smashed on the door frame.

The little man dived for the door as Jerry reached for Ashley's glass. The

bartender leaned over, grabbed his wrist and said harshly, "Hey, guy, you can't do that. What the hell do you think this is, a carnival or something?"

JERRY said, "Okay, I'll pay for the glass," in a disgusted voice. It took on a fresh edge as he said, "I'd have been glad to pay for it three times over if it had only busted on that little guy's noggin."

Ashley stared at him with his lower lip protruding still further and his black brows scowling more deeply. "Now, just what the hell has got into you?"

As he slid money across the counter and got another beer Jerry told Ashley of the scene on the edge of the crowd. Ashley shook his head and said, "You guys on these beats can have your little fun. I'm the kind of guy that would rather follow the course of the stock market and read nothing more exciting than graphs and charts."

Jerry shrugged and stared somberly into his beer. He didn't care much for Ashley anyway. Just now the mystery of the little brown man and the fellow with the gun was all mixed up in some way with Dell Tenner and the explosion at the Continental Chemical. And behind it all, Jerry sensed, was a big story.

The idea followed him home. He mulled it over for a long time before he went to sleep without its becoming any more comprehensible. If only he could find some clue to start on. He was almost sorry he had hit the little brown man. Then he remembered the push into the blazing gun and was sore all over again. He was still sore when he fell asleep.

The bedclothes pulling down off his shoulders woke him up, shivering, late the next morning. He muttered to himself and hauled them back around his neck but inexplicably they slid down again. He heard someone chuckling and sat up with a start, rubbing his eyes and blinking.

The man at the foot of the bed was round and rosy and jovial. His cheeks bunched up and almost hid the twinkling blue eyes as he smiled. The smile broadened into another chuckle and then Jerry heard a voice that was like the stranger's face, round and full and genial. "So you're

the boy who is suspected of knowing something about Dell Tenner!"

Jerry shook his head to clear the sleep out of his eyes and said sourly, "What is this, a game? Why all the sudden interest in Dell Tenner?" Rage mounted as he went on, "Do I have to get out of bed and bounce you like I did the little brown man?"

The fat man leaned back in the chair, folded his pudgy hands across his well-upholstered middle and beamed at Jerry.

"Precisely," he said in his round, bright voice, "the little brown man. Precisely. A most persistent little brown man. My boy, I have a feeling that you will hear much more about the little brown man before you are finished."

As the last of his drowsiness fled, Jerry glared at the fat man. "Would you kindly tell me what the hell all this has to do with me? Would you also kindly tell me the meaning of the little brown man, the bald-headed guy with the gun, and, incidentally, about yourself? Either that or get out of here damn quick, before I really get mad!"

"Certainly, my boy. Certainly," the fat man said jovially. "I quite understand your attitude. My name is Cantwell, Sam Cantwell. Sam to you, my boy. The little brown man goes by the name of Saki. He is as deadly as a copperhead and as persistent as a bloodhound. The identity of the bald-headed man I do not know. He must be a new element in a game that is already complicated enough for me."

"The game!" Jerry snapped. "What the hell is the game?"

CHAPTER TWO

Outlaw Guns

SAM CANTWELL shook his head and some of the joviality seemed to flow out of his face. "That, my dear boy, I am unable to tell you at present. I can only tell you that your own feelings toward Saki are but a mild and pale shadow of my sentiments regarding that iniquitous little son of Satan."

"Well, that's something, anyway." Jerry ran long fingers through his shock of straw-colored hair and watched Cantwell with shrewd eyes. "But I'd still like to

know the picture and where you fit in." He grinned without humor. "Like Saki, I'm as persistent as all hell in my questions."

"A very pertinent question, indeed," Cantwell replied. But instead of answering it, he asked another, "I take it you knew Dell Tenner rather well?"

"You can take it or leave it," Jerry said flatly. "I knew him. He worked for Continental Chemical—mostly at night. Naturally I tried to find out if he was there when the place blew up. And all the satisfaction I get is questions from a lot of guys who want to know what I know." He snorted irascibly. "Nuts! Now listen, Mr. Cantwell—"

Cantwell cut in brightly. "Sam to you, my boy. I'm going to be frank with you. All these questions have to do with a mystery that surrounds the Continental Chemical and Dell Tenner. I dislike the poisonous Saki as heartily as you, but with a much more cogent reason. It would give me intense personal satisfaction to make Saki bounce on the end of a forty-five slug."

"But your part in this?" Jerry insisted. "Where do you fit?"

"Professionally, Jerry, professionally. I belong to that much maligned profession—private investigation. I am, in other words, a shamus. Just at present I am attempting to bring order out of chaos, justice out of injustice and serenity out of violence. The few facts I have in my possession would be of little use to you. Also, I cannot divulge the inner mystery. To do so would be a breach of professional ethics."

He smiled broadly and Jerry found himself grudgingly liking the little fat man. He opened his mouth to speak but Cantwell raised a pudgy hand and cut in, "One moment, Jerry. I appreciate your predicament. I appreciate it much more deeply than you give me credit for. The persistent Saki has other equally persistent compatriots working with him. He will not be satisfied to accept a sock on the jaw in place of an answer. Unquestionably he will be back to see you."

He paused, cleared his throat, and then continued: "Until Tenner is found by one of the groups who are searching for him

there will be merry, merry hell to pay. The little brown brothers who think you may know something will keep on trying to find out what it is. They believe now that you may know where he is. Therefore, my boy, you go in jeopardy. Have you a gun?"

Jerry shook his head. "I never had use for one."

"You will from now on," Sam Cantwell said sharply. "Make no mistake about that."

He slipped an automatic from his pocket and tossed it on the bed. "There's your gun. It's loaded. Here's an extra clip of cartridges. Don't go anywhere without this gun."

Jerry picked up the automatic and turned it over in his hand as Sam Cantwell asked, "I suppose you know how to use it?"

"Oh sure," Jerry said slowly, "I know how to use it."

"Excellent!" Cantwell beamed. "Keep it handy. If you see Saki again, take every care to part his hair with a slug. If you find him dead on your hands, don't worry. Sam Cantwell will see that no trouble comes of it. But, if you miss," he added, and his voice flattened, "expect a hearse and flowers at your door. He's a very bad little brown brother, a very tough little brown man indeed."

He paused in the door, a funny little fat man who looked as though he would roll like a billiard ball if he ever fell down. He had the face of a grown-up cherub. But he emanated some strange power. Jerry felt it as he smiled at him across the room.

"Now, my dear Jerry, I shall toddle on my way. Expect me when you see me—which will be soon."

As he closed the door Jerry swung his legs out of the bed and called, "Hey! Wait a minute!"

THE door closed firmly and Sam Cantwell was gone. Jerry sat on the side of the bed for a few minutes, turning all he had heard over in his mind. It was all incredible and mysterious. But the gun in his hand was heavy and substantial. He stared at it as he crossed to the bathroom. He laid it on the cold radiator, stripped

off his pajamas, and stepped under the cold shower.

The water hit the top of his head with icy needles and sent rippling shudders down his back. He turned the water off and stepped out onto the bathmat and reached blindly for a towel.

He was wiping the water out of his eyes when he heard a voice. He recognized it before he saw the man. Its hissing started a surge of warm rage in his breast. The voice said, "Please to get dressed and come with us, Mr. Osler. Very much better you should dress quickly and come. Yes, thank you."

Jerry let the towel sag and stared. There were two men in the doorway, the little brown man of the night before and another who was almost a carbon copy—but not quite. He was sullen and glowering where Saki was beaming and affable. He was a slightly large, though equally brown edition.

Saki bowed and smiled but his eyes were cold and bright. Both had guns in their hands.

Jerry exhaled slowly and said, "I suppose I can dress."

"Oh, yes, please," Saki said. "But please to be very fast, thank you."

"Okay, little brown brother," Jerry said. "I'll dress." He dropped the towel and reached slowly. When his hand touched the butt of the automatic he ducked behind the old-fashioned pedestal washstand and tipped over the marble top.

The guns in the doorway roared and slugs screamed as they carromed off the hard surface. Jerry stuck his own arm around the corner of his makeshift shield and pulled the trigger three times in rapid succession. He heard someone yell shrilly, and grinned.

He chanced his head into the open and saw them running across the room. Saki was almost to the door. The other man ran with a bad limp. He turned as Jerry dived for the door and fired again. The slug whined over Jerry's head as the reporter pulled the trigger on his own gun.

The second little brown man whirled around and fell flat on his face. Saki slammed the door with a thunderous bang and his feet made loud bangs in the corridor.

Jerry jerked the door open and fired twice again as Saki hit the head of the stairs. The little Japanese whirled, threw a shot at Jerry that went wild and raced down the stairs.

Jerry started to run after him and almost slammed into a woman who jerked her door open and jumped into the hall. She saw Jerry, as naked as the day of his birth, screamed in a high soprano and jumped back, slamming the door.

Jerry looked down at himself, grinned and dived for his own apartment. As he went he could hear the woman in the next apartment still screaming in her top register.

He picked up the phone, dialed Police Headquarters and got Lee Shattuck on the wire. He told him tersely what had happened and hung up.

Putting on a bathrobe he sat down weakly, the gun still in his hand, and waited for Shattuck. He stared at the little brown man who had not moved since he hit the floor. His head was turned so that the side of his face rested against the rug. His eyes were wide open and staring, his mouth slack. Jerry was conscious of a brief and poignant wish that Saki had been in that position instead of this one.

LEE SHATTUCK had a face like a lugubrious hound. The sag of his jowls started at the corners of his mouth and pulled his whole face out of shape. His drooping eyes were watery and looked as if he were going to burst into tears at any instant. His clothes fitted as loosely as did the skin on his face. They looked as if they might drop off any time he gave himself a hard shake.

He stared in watery sorrow at the man on the floor and then at Jerry. His voice was like a rusty hinge as he asked, "I suppose you got a good excuse for all this. I suppose you know they hire us to stop this kinda thing?"

"I had some such idea," Jerry said flatly. "But what are you going to do, Lee, when a couple of guys come and start pushing you around when you're having your bath?"

"I suppose," Lee Shattuck said gloomily, "you always take a gun into the bathroom with you."

The two plainclothes men who had come in with him stood by the door and gazed with mild curiosity and said nothing.

Jerry opened his mouth to answer when the door opened. Sam Cantwell stood in the doorway. He teetered on his heels and said, "My, my, my," in a tone of mild surprise. He gazed from Lee Shattuck to Jerry and then to the dead man and repeated, "My, my, my!"

Lee Shattuck said in a disgusted tone, "So you're in on this, are you, Sam? I might have known."

Sam nodded his head and said brightly, "Well, upon my word, to think that this should happen. Yes, indeed, Lee, I am in on it. I gave the gun to Jerry with orders to shoot if these little boys started after him."

He walked over to the dead man and turned him over with his toe. Lee Shattuck roared, "Hey, don't do that. You leave things the way they are."

Sam paid no attention to him. He stared down at the dead man with his bright eyes shining. His red lips pursed, then he said regretfully, "Ah, Jerry, why didn't you shoot Saki?" He raised his head and asked, "Our mutual friend was here, also, wasn't he?"

"Yes," Jerry snapped, "the dirty little so-and-so was here, too. I wish to gosh I had burned him down!"

"Now, boys," Lee Shattuck said patiently, "I know this is your business. I'm just a poor copper trying to get along. But the taxpayers put up for my salary and we kinda like to know why these things happen." His voice got deeper and sourer as he talked. "Now, mind you, I'm not trying to pry into your private business affairs, but suppose you tell me just a little bit about it."

"Of course, Lee," Sam said cheerfully. "What would you like to know?"

Shattuck glowered at the fat man. "I wouldn't want to embarrass you now, but you know how it is. I'd just like to know one or two facts so I can turn in some kind of a report to the boys down at headquarters."

The medical examiner came in with the official photographers. He was thinner than Lee Shattuck and a little gloomier. He got up, brushed his knees, and

said in a dry, toneless voice, "Through the heart. He never knew what hit him."

"You see how it is, boys," Lee Shattuck said. "If he wasn't dead, we could just ask him and save you all this trouble. But the way it is now, he's dead and can't tell us anything."

Jerry grinned and began to talk. When he was through Lee turned on Sam Cantwell. "You know something. You knew these guys would come after Jerry and you warned him. You even gave him a gun."

After that Sam Cantwell talked in his bright, jovial voice. But he told only an outline story. He was working for his clients. He wouldn't say who they were. When pressed, he blithely suggested that Lee see the commissioner.

After a lot of conversation they carried the dead man out in a basket. Lee Shattuck finally left. He paused in the middle of the room and asked heavily, "You got a permit for that gun, Jerry?"

Jerry shook his head and Shattuck turned away. He walked slowly as far as the door, halted with his hand on the knob and said, "You come down to headquarters when you get dressed and I'll fix that up for you." His big mouth twisted in a caricature of a smile. "After all, if you're going to go around popping guys off, we want it done legal."

CHAPTER THREE

A Sucker This Time

WHEN he had gone Sam Cantwell smiled brightly and said, "A great wag, our Sergeant Shattuck. But, also a shrewd and discerning man of the world. I think we shall see more of Mr. Shattuck on this case."

"Now," Jerry asked irritably, "don't you think you ought to tell me a little bit of what it's all about?"

Sam chuckled and shook all over. "Why, Jerry, my lad, the idea! I tell you—a newspaper reporter? Think of my professional ethics."

"So I've got to go around with guys trying to bump me and not know a damn thing about what it's all about?"

"You'll know soon enough," Sam said shortly. "For the present it is better that

you should know nothing. My clients are most firm on that point. They want no publicity at this stage of the game."

Jerry shrugged. Something told him that he would get nothing out of the fat detective by arguing with him. "Okay," he said sourly. "I'll just go along letting these little brown boys make passes at me. Maybe some day I'll get to know what it's about. For the present all I can do is go, praying that they keep on missing."

"By all means," Sam chuckled. "Pray deep and fervent prayers. But keep your gun handy while you are making your supplications. And don't you miss."

He walked to the door and wagged a pink finger playfully at Jerry. "For the present, my dear lad, a fond farewell. I shall see you again when you least expect me. If you should find Dell Tenner rap him up in cotton wool, put him in a safe place and scream for Lee Shattuck."

"If I find Dell Tenner I'll know what the hell this is all about," Jerry said bitterly.

"If and when you find him you'll get your story, my ambitious friend," Sam chortled. "And a deep inner instinct tells me that we are going to find Dell Tenner very, very soon. If you don't find him soon, the same instinct tells me that it will be too late."

As the door closed behind him Jerry yelled, "Nuts to you, fatty. I'm getting to dislike this game of yours." Then he grinned crookedly. He couldn't stay mad at Sam Cantwell. As well try to get sore at Santa Claus.

Jerry took his bathrobe off, held it a moment, staring out the window, watching Sam Cantwell walk out the front entrance and step along the street with a light, jaunty stride that belied his rotund chubbiness. He swung the bathrobe from him with an explosive, "Horsefeathers!"

He froze with the shirt in his hand and stared. He saw the dilapidated taxi crawl slowly along the street from the corner where it had been parked. It crept up behind Cantwell as he strode along the sidewalk. Jerry saw a man lean out of the rear window with a gun in his hand. Strong morning sunshine made his bald head gleam like polished ivory.

He jumped to the window with a yell of warning on his lips, then closed his

mouth with a snap as he realized the futility of trying to warn the little fat man. He felt sick and heavy inside as the scene before him shattered into sharp segments of swift action, split by the flat, hard crack of gunshots.

The taxi was almost abreast of him when Sam Cantwell moved. He threw himself sideways and rolled like a rubber ball into the shelter of a door. He moved with a speed that was bewildering. Bullets cracked corners off the stone doorway and little spurts of dust bloomed in the clear air.

Sam rolled farther inside the shelter of the doorway and jerked around. A big gun jumped into his hand and drowned the flat cracks of the automatic with booming echoes. The taxi leaped forward and shot down the street, with the bald head jerking inside like a billiard ball on a string. It went around the corner on two wheels and disappeared.

SAM CANTWELL stood up. The long-barreled gun had vanished as magically as it had appeared. He dusted his clothes off and stared down the street after the departed cab. From the window Jerry could see that his pink face was hard and tense.

He leaned far out of the window and yelled, "You'd better come back and tell me what it's all about before they send you to the morgue."

Sam Cantwell stared up and the joviality flowed back into his chubby face. He waved airily. "Think nothing of it, my boy. Think nothing of it. Old Sam has eyes in the back of his head. They'll never catch me as easily as that. Put your chips on Sam and toddle along on your way."

He waved again and stepped off down the street, his stride as jaunty as ever; a fat, inoffensive-looking little man in a shiny blue serge suit, and an absurd hat perched on the exact centre of his round head. Jerry watched him and shook his head slowly. "I'm a son-of-a-gun if I ever saw anybody like you, you little fat fox."

He pulled on clothes and went to the telephone. He caught Rand Hillyer at the city desk and gave him the story of the morning.

Rand growled into the phone, "What the hell is it all about? Why should these

babies start popping at you all of a sudden?"

"Damned if I know," Jerry said heavily. "But they sure are popping. I wish I could get me a nice suit of armor-steel underwear. I'd feel better then about coming down to the office."

"You'd better stay holed-up where you are," Hillyer advised. "Either that or let me get you police protection."

"Nothing doing," Jerry snapped. "There's a story in this, Hillyer. There's something big behind all these fireworks. And I'm going to find out what it is. Besides," he smiled as he thought about Sam Cantwell, "I've got an idea I've got some real support on my side."

He hung up and finished dressing. He jammed a disreputable hat over his eyes and walked out slowly. His stride lengthened as his stomach began to make demands. He began to feel that if he had some tomato juice and lots of coffee he'd feel still better.

He tried the suggestion at the corner restaurant and did feel better. He came out into the street in the late afternoon and headed for the *Argus* office. Inside he slouched deep in his chair and stared at his typewriter while he thought things over.

Whatever the mystery was, it centered around Dell Tenner. It had something to do with the explosion at the Continental Chemical. It was tied up with rosy little Sam Cantwell and several little brown men who were more than a trifle interested in the whereabouts of Dell Tenner, and a bald-headed man who was not working with the little brown men.

Thinking of Dell again he called his house and got Mrs. Watson on the phone once more.

Her voice sounded worried. "No, there's still no sign of Dell, Mr. Osler. He didn't come home at all last night. Do you suppose he got blown up in that awful explosion?"

"I'm positive he didn't, Mrs. Watson. Hasn't anyone else been asking for him?"

"That's the strange part of it," she answered. "Several people have called at the house looking for him. This morning the funniest little man called at the house and asked for him."

"A little fat man with rosy cheeks and

bright eyes?" Jerry asked and knew that Sam Cantwell had been checking up.

"Then there were the others," Mrs. Watson went on. "Two strange men, Japs or Chinamen or something, called. They wanted to come in and look at Dell's room. I wouldn't let them in. For awhile I thought they were going to force their way in. But they went away."

JERRY could hear the fear in her voice mounting. "And that isn't all. When I went to Dell's room this afternoon to see if he had returned without my noticing it, I found someone else had been in. All Dell's things were scattered around. His desk was emptied on the floor and all the dresser drawers pulled out. The room is a mess, Mr. Osler. Can't you tell me what it's all about?"

"I wish I knew, myself," Jerry said. His voice became soothing. "Now don't worry, Mrs. Watson. I'll bet Dell is all right. He'll walk back into the house and tell you what it means."

"I declare, I hope so," Mrs. Watson said. "But something tells me that he is in terrible trouble."

Jerry stared at the telephone for a long time after the connection had been broken. Either Saki or Sam Cantwell could have gone through Dell's room. Jerry was inclined to believe that it was Saki. He wished he could be as sure of Dell's safety as he had tried to make Mrs. Watson believe he was.

The mystery surrounding Dell was beginning to get him down. He felt sore at Sam Cantwell. The thought of Saki made him grind his teeth. He was slumped in his chair an hour later when Ted Ashley came in and stopped at Jerry's desk.

His moon face creased in a queer smile. "Well," he asked, "I hear it's getting hotter and hotter around where you are. They tell me you hit another little brown boy today, only this time you hit him with a slug."

He put his pudgy hands on Jerry's desk and his frown deepened. "Didn't you tell me that the guy with the gun last night had a bald head? You know, the guy who was gunning for the Jap."

At Jerry's nod, Ted went on, "Was he a tall, bony-faced guy with a big nose?"

Jerry sat up straight in the chair. "Yes, that's him."

"That's funny," Ashley went on in a wondering tone. "There's a guy like that downstairs now by the elevators. He's without a hat and he's got a dome like a billiard ball. He's watching everyone who comes in and out of the elevators."

Jerry leaped out of his chair and reached for his hat in the one motion. He hit the door of the newsroom traveling in long strides. He kept his finger on the down button until an elevator door clanged open. He put one hand in his pocket and felt the gun and shuffled impatiently on his feet as the elevator slid downward toward the street.

There was no man with a bald head in the foyer of the building. Jerry went across to the street door at a run. He dived out into the street in time to see the shining bald dome duck into a taxi. He raced forward yelling, "Hey! Hey!" as the taxi rolled out into the stream of traffic.

Another cab rolled along the curb. The driver thrust a blue-grained jaw out at Jerry and said out of the side of his mouth, "Want a cab, mister?"

Jerry dived for the cab. "Tail that hack ahead. Don't lose it and there's five bucks in it for you."

"He's yours now, mister," the cabby said as he meshed gears and shot into the traffic a few car lengths behind the bald-head's cab.

The cabby knew his stuff. He followed the other hack uptown, swung east on its tail and followed almost to the river down a narrow street of dingy houses. The cab had stopped before a tenement and Jerry's driver rolled his machine into the curb and applied the brakes.

Jerry leaned forward and said sharply, "What did you do that for? Why didn't you go on past and give the guy a chance to get in the house?"

The cabby leaned over the back of the seat, his thick lips twisted in a grin. One hairy paw held a gun that stared into Jerry's face.

"I stopped, mister," he said grimly, "because this is the end of the line." The grin on his face widened. "You were just a sucker, pal. You led with your chin this time."

CHAPTER FOUR

Questions of Blood

THE bald-headed man walked up and jerked open the door of the cab. He reached in and lifted the automatic out of Jerry's pocket and said in a harsh, grinding voice, "You get out here, buddy. We have a few things to ask you." To the cabby he said, "Okay, Dusty, hop out and come with us."

Jerry got out of the cab with the feeling that his stomach was going to drop down into his boots. He had walked into the trap as easily as though he had never heard the word before.

Dusty came around the cab and prodded him in the ribs with a gun. "Up you go, pal. Up the steps to the door in front of you." He glanced at Jerry's taut face and added, "No ideas, if you're smart. We'd like to talk. But if you try anything, we bump you."

Jerry climbed the flight of stone steps to the shabby tenement front. Inside, he went ahead of the prodding gun down a dim and odorous hallway to a door at the back. Dusty opened it and he went down a long flight of stairs to a basement where a single dusty bulb burned dimly.

There was one chair beside a rickety table in the basement room. Dusty growled, "Sit there, smart guy."

As Jerry started to sit down, Dusty hit him with a hand that was like a slab of beef and Jerry slammed back into the chair with bells ringing in his ears.

The bald-headed man asked gratingly, "Now, smart guy, where is Dell Tenner?"

Jerry licked his lips and stared at the bald-headed man. "I don't know. Why should I know anything about Dell Tenner?"

"Because you're his pal," Dusty growled. "Don't try to kid us. Tenner is hiding out and you know where. Now, do you tell us, or do you want more of this?" As he spoke he smashed Jerry with a right and left.

Jerry sucked blood from his split lips and said thickly, "I think you're crazy as hell. I haven't seen Dell Tenner for a dog's age."

"His memory needs jogging, Baldy,"

Dusty said as he hit Jerry again, hard.

A red mist swam before Jerry's eyes. He knew that nothing he could say would be believed. These men would beat him to death to find out something that he didn't know. Desperation lashed him into action. He leaped out of the chair at the bald-headed man. Something like a rock struck him on the back of his neck and his head seemed to explode. He felt himself falling into a deep darkness.

Vaguely, he could hear the explosions go on and on, hard and heavy and smashing. He heard someone yell hoarsely. Then gradually he came to the surface, driven by the agony that stabbed at his ribs.

He rolled over and sat up. The agony in his ribs was Saki kicking him. The little brown man was standing, staring down at him, a gun in his hand. Dusty was lying on his face, his head in a pool of blood. The bald-headed man was on his back, his sightless eyes staring up at the swinging bulb. Over by the door another little Japanese was on his side, knees pulled up to his stomach.

Saki's silken voice said, "Very glad I find you before Baldy finish you. Humble apologies for great insistence and am strictly sure you come with me now."

He kicked Jerry in the ribs again, very methodically and coolly. "Pleased to get up and come with me, Mr. Osler."

Jerry got to his feet stiffly. His head was aching and his ribs felt as if he had been squeezed in a press. He walked wearily up the flight of stairs at the point of Saki's gun, out through the corridor to the cab in front.

Saki pushed him into the cab and slid in beside him. "Very careful please, Mr. Osler, that you make no false move. Be very sorry if it become necessary to put bullet in you."

"Oh, sure," Jerry said savagely, "you'd be as sorry as hell, you cold-blooded little snake. I suppose you want me to tell you where Dell Tenner is. Well, to hell with you, I don't know."

SAKI made polite hissings through his teeth. "That not necessary, thank you. We have great good fortune to find Mr. Tenner. Very sorry it become necessary to ask Mr. Tenner question. Very

sorry Mr. Tenner not wish to make answer. Mr. Tenner very obstinate person."

Jerry saw the flat, black cruelty in Saki's eyes and shivered inwardly. Cold gathered in his spine and spread outward. "So, you picked up Tenner," he said tonelessly. "So what?" He stared at Saki. "Some time, little brown brothr, I'm going to roll you out like a rug. That's a promise."

"Some promise very difficult of fulfillment," Saki hissed. "Am very much afraid you are foolish man, Mr. Osler. Also am quite sure you know answer Mr. Tenner refuse to give. Very much better you answer question and tell us where Mr. Tenner hide what we look for."

"Very much better if you close your face," Jerry said harshly. "I don't know what the hell you're after. But I'm telling you now, I wouldn't tell you anything if I did know."

"Very much better you know," the little brown man said softly. "Oh, yes, very much better indeed."

After that there was no more conversation. Jerry watched the streets slide past the taxi window with the cold dread growing. The little brown man wasn't worried by Jerry's patent observation of the way they travelled. Which meant only one thing. He did not intend that Jerry should ever come back to report the way they had gone.

The taxi stopped in front of a loft building on the lower west side. Saki nudged him with the snout of the gun and hissed "End of journey, thank you very much. Be pleased to get out of cab and walk softly in direction indicated."

As he went through the door of the cab, Jerry gathered his muscles for a dive back of the cab. Then his muscles relaxed as he saw the other brown man step out of the doorway. The automatic in his hand was steady. His eyes were like snake's eyes, unblinking, hard and fixed.

Behind him Saki said softly, "Be very unfortunate, Mr. Osler, if you have ideas concerning escape. Be very sorry, indeed, if it become necessary to shoot you in belly. Very sorry, indeed."

Walking toward the door Jerry felt his spine stiffening. There was something obscene and reptilian about these men. He knew that he could expect nothing but

cold and relentless ferocity at their hands. He knew in that moment that he must take any chance, however long and slender it might be, if he were to live to leave this building.

He went up a long flight of stairs to a landing above. Saki walked behind him. At the top, a door opened and another little Japanese came out on the landing. Perspiration beaded his yellow forehead. There was fresh blood on his hands. Jerry felt sick.

THE floor of the loft was empty and barren. A few weak bulbs threw sickly beams against shadows that seemed to be pushing forward heavily from the walls and corners.

The two little men were silent for a moment. Jerry felt his scalp crawl and the sick feeling in his stomach grew horrible and nauseating. Somewhere out of sight someone was moaning. The man moaned sobbingly, monotonously. The sound of it throbbed sickeningly in Jerry's temples.

Saki was listening, too. He turned his head and stared at Jerry with a cold light in his flat, black eyes. "Mr. Tenner very stubborn young man. Be very pleased you see Mr. Tenner and see what happen to young man who refuse to answer important question."

He drew in his breath with a long hiss. "Mr. Tenner have paper extremely valuable. Mr. Tenner hide paper and refuse information of hiding place. Think perhaps you, who know Mr. Tenner very well indeed, be knowing where he hide."

"You can go straight to hell, you brown snake. I don't know anything. If I did I wouldn't tell you."

"We see soon how much you know. Very pleased you take observation of Mr. Tenner. Perhaps you see Mr. Tenner you remember thing we wish to know."

He jabbed the gun into Jerry's spine and pushed. "Be so kind to look at Mr. Tenner. Follow Olaka to door ahead, please."

Olaka opened the door. Jerry looked and caught at the door frame to steady himself. He felt his insides turning to water. Dell Tenner, or rather what was left of Dell Tenner was lying on a table. His face under the hanging lamp was a

muddy yellow. Blood and saliva ran out of the corner of his mouth as he moaned.

Jerry felt his legs melting away under him. He hung onto the door frame with desperate strength. He could hear Saki's hissing voice. It rasped along his nerves. "Very sorry it become necessary to use great force on Mr. Tenner. Very sorry but must do same with yourself if you do not answer."

Rage, more terrible than anything Jerry had ever known, began to burn in him like a destroying flame. It swept over him, wiping away the weakness, putting the strength back into his legs. Yet strength alone could not help him now. He had to play for a break. He clung to the door, pretending weakness and heard Saki chuckle drily.

The gun at his back drew away. Head hanging, Jerry caught a glimpse of Saki. He was watching him with the cold pleasure of a cat with a mouse; a cat that gives the mouse a fraction of a chance in torture.

Olaka was beside the door. There were two others in the room. Jerry had seen them behind the table on which Dell Tenner lay. But for him there was only one man—Saki. He had a gun. Jerry knew that he was due for death. But any death was preferable to what he had seen in the room. Death would be sweet if he could die with Saki's throat between his hands. Suddenly he saw Saki's eyes narrow and his head turned slightly, as though listening for something.

Jerry saw his chance—ducked and swung. His fist caught Saki on the chin and he went flying backwards, the gun slamming out of his hands. And as he went Jerry sprang after him. He knew the man behind him would shoot. But for the moment he had lost all fear of bullets. His rage was something so terrible that it washed his mind clean of any other consideration.

CHAPTER FIVE

Formula for Death

JERRY caught the little brown man by the throat and flung him backward. Saki twisted and struck sharply with the side of his hand. Jerry felt as if one arm

had been torn off. He kicked, and laughed aloud as he felt his foot smash into ribs.

A gun roared somewhere in the billowing shadows behind him. He wondered dully that he had not been hit at such short range, and plunged after Saki. He was faintly conscious of someone screaming in a high, thin voice, like a woman. The gun behind was waking thunderous echoes in the empty building. It was heavy and hard and smashing.

All this Jerry heard with a portion of his brain that observed and noted. The rest, the conscious part of him, was concerned with only one thing. He wanted to get his hands on the flat-faced Saki. He wanted to feel him come apart in his hands.

He caught the little Japanese again with his left, swung his right and laughed hysterically when he felt something give under his knuckles. He hit again and again. His breath was sobbing in his throat. Somewhere off in the distance someone was yelling and the voice sounded vaguely familiar.

Saki wrenched loose. He was making thin, slobbering sounds that were like broken sobs. He ran toward one of the high windows. Jerry went after him. He threw himself forward in a flying tackle. His shoulder hit in the middle of the little man's back and thrust him forward. There was a sharp, startling crash of breaking glass and the little brown man disappeared from view.

Disregarding the shattered glass, Jerry leaned through the hole Saki had made and stared down. He could see the little man's body, a dark huddle in the light from the street-lamps. Far away somewhere sirens screamed, ripping the night wide open with their screeching voices.

Somebody caught him by the shoulder and pulled him. He swung his right and found it caught in a hard grip. A voice said, "Easy does it, son. You can only kill a guy once. And I'll bet he's deader than Aunt Hannah's bearskin rug."

In the light from the window he could see Sam Cantwell's face. It was not chubby and pink now. His mouth was hard and thin and seemed to radiate lines that made his face look, for the moment, like chiselled stone.

Cantwell jerked Jerry's shoulder and said, "Come on. I fixed the other rats. I got the guy below and came in just as you made your break. It was like shooting pigeons when I cut loose."

His voice changed. "Dell Tenner is still alive. We want to see if there is anything we can do for him. Come on."

Jerry kept his eyes on Dell's face. He didn't want to see anything else. He had to hold himself together. Dell's eyelids fluttered and there was a gleam of recognition in his eyes. He tried to smile and managed a tortured grimace.

Little bubbles blew up on his lips as he tried to talk. Jerry bent his head and listened. His own face felt frozen and dead. From Dell's lips came only an unintelligible murmur of sound. Out of the murmur two words alone seemed to make sense. They were almost inaudible. "Brass rail." Jerry wasn't sure of that until he said it again. "Brass rail. I—"

He stiffened convulsively, sighed deeply as though he were unutterably weary and then was very still. One big bubble at his lips broke and ran in a thin red trickle down his chin.

SAM CANTWELL touched Jerry on the shoulder and said, "Easy, son. He's all right now. He won't feel any more hurt. He's dead. Come on out of here."

Jerry staggered out of the room and sank down on an empty packing case, his head in his hands. Sam Cantwell stood beside him, patting him on the shoulder and saying, "Easy, son, easy," in a thick whisper.

They were still in that position when Shattuck barged in at the head of his squad.

"What goes on here?" his voice boomed in the emptiness of the loft. He saw Sam and said, "You again. I should have known."

"Yes, it's me," Sam said. "Take a look in that room and shut your damned big mouth."

Shattuck came out with his face green and said, "Cripes! Cripes! Cripes!" over and over again, monotonously, in a choked, shocked voice.

Another man came in and said, "The

guy at the door is dead. Someone busted his skull with a sap."

"Not a sap," Sam Cantwell said harshly. "I did that with the butt of old Betsy. I slammed him down, the yellow, stinking son."

"There's another one out by the street," the cop went on. "He's in a hell of a mess. He's beat out of shape and all cut to hell. He looks as though he got run through a meat chopper."

"He went through the window," Jerry said dully. "The glass sliced him up." Then he remembered and surged forward with rage again wiping out all conscious thought. "Where is he? Let me finish that job."

The cop put his big hands on him and pushed him back. "Easy there, tough guy. You can't do anything more about it." He stared at Jerry's face and his lips twisted. "That glass didn't make his face look like it was under a pile-driver. And the glass didn't break his neck. I guess you gotta be satisfied. You can't hurt a dead man."

Sam Cantwell sighed softly. "Well, I guess it's just as well. He didn't know anything anyway."

Lee Shattuck said harshly. "I don't know how you guys feel after that"—he jerked his head toward the room where the light still burned—"but there's questions I gotta ask. I'll make it as easy as I can."

Jerry lurched toward the door. "Let's get outdoors," he said thickly. "I'm going to be sick if I stay in here."

He went, rubber-kneed, down the stairs. Halfway down he stumbled and fell the rest of the way. At the bottom someone tried to help him up. He shook the hands away and staggered out into the air and leaned against a squad car, panting and dizzy.

Behind him he heard Sam Cantwell's voice talking to Lee Shattuck. It was harsh and tired. He had been speaking

for some time before Jerry found strength to listen. ". . . I hate to say it, Lee, but Tenner asked for this. He was in charge of the experiment. He knew there was millions in it. He stole a copy of the formula and hid it. Then he arranged the explosion at Continental."

"What the hell did he do that for?" Shattuck asked sharply.

Cantwell sighed. "The Japs were after it. To them this formula for an artificial silk that was equal to the natural product was a national calamity. Japan is at war. Her silk exports are damned important. We buy close to a hundred million dollars of raw silk a year from Japan. That means foreign exchange to her. With this formula in use most of her export business would go flooey."

His voice changed. "Ted Ashley is in the know. Did you take my tip and pick him up? He got these guys, Baldy and Dusty, to go in with him and do the strong-arm work. Naturally, there was a little war between them and the Japs, and the Japs won."

Shattuck's voice was hard as steel, "Yes, we got him down at Headquarters."

Jerry straightened up, shivered, and said, "Ashley! Then I guess he's the one who started all this stuff about me knowing where Dell was."

Cantwell turned and caught Jerry's shoulder. "It's all over, kid," he said. "I guess we oughta have a drink. We both need it."

Jerry said weakly, "I could stand a drink."

HUNCHED over his fifth rye in the third place they stopped, Jerry said, "It's all nuts. Tenner thinking he could get away with that formula for himself. Ashley thinking he could grab it. I guess the Japs were the only realists in the bunch. They were after a stake they could really utilize."

Jerry shook his head slowly, and went

Editor's note:—We enjoyed so much this story about Sam Cantwell, the jovial, round-faced little detective with the twinkling blue eyes—and unerring gun-arm—that we've asked B. B. Fowler to write another story about him. Here's hoping he comes through with one in the near future. . . .

on, "I never would have suspected Tenner. I thought he was a right guy."

"A chance at a million makes a lot of right guys wrong," Sam said. He shrugged heavily. "And I get the wrongest deal of all. Continental hired me to turn up Tenner and the formula. I had a nice, fat fee coming. Now nobody knows where the formula is, so all I get is a razz. Well, such is life, kid."

Jerry talked slowly, "It was funny about Dell saying 'brass rail.' I wonder what he meant."

Sam shook his head. He picked up his glass, downed it, and said: "Speaking about brass rails, my boy, let's go look for another one. I'm sick of this place. Let's look for another to warm our feet."

Jerry grasped Sam's arm and said harshly, "Wait. Say that again!"

Sam said, "You're not drunk yet, Jerry. I just said, let's go find another rail to warm our feet."

Jerry leaped off the stool and almost yelled. "I've got it, Sam. I've got it!"

He almost dragged Sam through the door. He carromed off a man coming in and never saw him. He stood on the curb, one hand clutching Sam's arm, the other waving wildly for a taxi.

In the cab Sam asked. "What's the matter, kid, you gone nuts?" But there

was an excited gleam in his blue eyes.

"Why didn't I think of it before," Jerry snapped. "In the old days—at least, they seem old now—Dell and I were pretty close. I remember he used to call me and say, 'Come over to the house and warm your feet on my brass rail.' You wait a minute, Sam. You wait a minute and I'll show you."

He rang the bell and pushed past the startled Mrs. Watson saying, "It's all right. I want to look for something in Dell's room."

He stood in the doorway and pointed wordlessly. At the far side of the room there was an old-fashioned fireplace with a brass rail enclosing the bright tiles of the hearth.

Sam said softly, "I think you've got something there, son."

On their knees, they unscrewed the rail from the brass uprights. In the hollow front rail they found a cylinder of thin paper.

Sam stared at it, the beaming joviality flowing back into his face. "My lad, our fortunes are made. Continental will turn handsprings and reach for a check book when I show them this."

He smiled and said, "That calls for a drink. Come on, son. Let's look for another brass rail."

THE END



(Continued from page 64)

cessity—I cannot possibly afford to maintain two separate domiciles. My wife refuses to grant me a divorce and, under the laws of New York State, my hands are tied so far as divorcing her is concerned. I cannot go to another state for the purpose; and anyway, even if I could, a divorce obtained in this way would be questionable if not definitely invalid.

Ruth refuses to divorce me in spite of the fact that (or perhaps because of it) I deeply and sincerely love another woman. Ruth knows there is another woman. Nora and I have been quite candid and honest about it. Nora's husband died several years ago; she has a beautiful little girl five years old, and a small income. She is capable and charming and loves me devotedly. The happiness of her whole life and mine are bound up together. Yet Nora and I are kept apart by the unreasonable and inflexible attitude of my wife.

I've thought of leaving Ruth and taking Nora to live with me but, though Ruth would uncomplainingly resign herself to this, it would be brutally unfair to Nora and her little daughter. The barrier would remain between us; Ruth's refusal to divorce me is immovable.

Ruth and I have convincingly kept up the appearance of living together in ordinary concord, but in private we've battled over it again and again, hopelessly. "Can't you understand you've got to give me my freedom?" I plead with her. "We can't go on like this—it's intolerable. A divorce will make two miserable people happy, and it won't hurt you in the slightest—you'll lose nothing. You must do it. It's merely a matter of complying with the law."

To this she answers with maddening sophistry and insufferable finality, "Of what importance are man-made rules compared with the Great Spiritual Law?"

I can get no further with her. She has this pseudo-religious quirk in her brain which makes her appallingly selfish without realizing it. She clings to her "spiritual tenets" with a great blind zeal and will not violate her "scruples" against divorce. Nora's happiness and mine and everything dearest to us are sacrificed to her hollow bigotry. Pleading with Ruth is absolutely futile. I am inescapably shackled to her as long as she lives. *As long as she lives!*

I am going to kill her.

I AM long past the point where my conscience can bother me. Murdering Ruth is an absolutely vital necessity to me and to those who mean the whole world to me. Moreover, Ruth's death will end her own concealed but self-inflicted wretchedness. No, I will not be sorry when she is dead—I will have every reason to be glad.

I must do it cleverly, so I will never be caught. Nora must never dream the truth. I cannot let it be known that Ruth was murdered. What, then? Attempting to make Ruth's death seem a suicide would be too risky. Criminologists are uncannily wise. I know little about their scientific methods; I don't dare try to circumvent highly skilled police investigators. What's more, a "suicide" might arouse malicious rumors to plague Nora. No; it must appear to be an ordinary accident.

Where do most accidents happen? In this country an average of one hundred persons every day are killed in automobile mishaps. But we have no car. Contriving

(Continued on page 108)

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DETECTIVE TALES

(Continued from page 107)

a collision is, then, out of the question. What is another field where frequent fatal accidents occur? Strangely enough, it is one's own home. Statistics show this. Recently I read a documented article in a popular magazine setting out the dangers we meet daily in our homes, where we generally and erroneously believe ourselves to be safest. The stairs are dangerous; ladders are dangerous; but the most perilous part of the whole house is the bathtub, where fatal injuries are often suffered as a result of slips and falls. Then, too, many persons foolish enough to place electrical appliances (such as heaters or massaging machines) within reach of the water faucets (which are grounded) have unwittingly electrocuted themselves. And there are many other hazards, sometimes fatal. I seized upon this situation.

Ruth is going to die at home. As soon as I decided this I got rid of the magazine containing the article about home accidents. I must arrange it so that I am not near her at the time—the farther away I am when it happens the better. I must not hurry. I must be extremely careful but not too careful. Whatever shape my plan may take it must above all be simple, for I must guard against leaving the slightest hint that Ruth's death was not an accident. It will be better, too, if she dies as a result of some act which I have cautioned her against, not too emphatically, but entirely naturally, with normal solicitude, in the presence of friends. Ruth always disregards my warnings, so

There I have it! I will kill Ruth by taking advantage of some foolishness, some weakness, some unwise habit of hers. It will seem to have been her own fault.

I could place an electric heater on the stool near the bathtub. I would buy a cheap one, poorly insulated. The insulation is defective in far too many electrical appliances, and my small income would

(Continued from page 109)

fast on the run. This morning she rose while I was dressing. It was evident she had some plan for the day, for she began laying out her best things.

"I'm going in to town to meet Laura and look through the stores and see a movie," she told me.

When she went into the bathroom I spotted a pair of white gloves lying on her dresser. They had been worn since last having been cleaned but were not too soiled to wear again. I dropped one to the floor and stepped on it, leaving a black smudge. Replacing it, I went to the door of the bath. The shower was running.

"I'm sorry, but I'm afraid I dirtied one of your gloves," I called in. "It had fallen to the floor and I didn't notice it until after I'd stepped on it."

"Why don't you look where you're going?" she retorted. "It's the only pair I have. Now I'll have to take time to clean it."

I went down to the kitchen. I knew that Ruth, being in a hurry, would neglect the proper precautions. She would pour the naphtha into a basin and perhaps not open the window at all. In a few moments the room would be filled with explosive fumes. I took a candle from the cabinet. We and our neighbors keep candles on hand because the power supply, coming from a small independent plant, often fails. I had already decided on a place to put it.

A row of canisters sat on a shelf over the table. They were labeled *Flour, Sugar*, and so on, and were never used. I shifted several forward a few inches, lighted the candle, stuck it to the shelf with a spot of wax, then replaced the cans to hide it. Ruth would never notice that the canisters were slightly out of position. No noticeable light shone from the flame. There was a small window behind it, which would admit enough daylight to nullify its glow. That was all the preparation I had to make.

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Davis Plots the "Perfect" Murder

Putting on my hat and coat, I heard Ruth hurrying back to her dresser. "Sorry about your glove," I called up. "Good-bye."

"I will have to clean them," she flung down at me petulantly. "Good-bye!"

I GRIMLY hoped those good-byes would stick. I left the house at the usual time, in the usual way. I'm positive I betrayed no uneasiness to any of my fellow commuters. I felt and looked the same as on any other morning, not letting myself hope my great hope. All during the monotonous trip I checked over what I had done. I could not find the slightest detail which might arouse suspicion. The candle was the only possible flaw; but it would be destroyed in the fire.

Suppose I were questioned? Who would gain financially by Ruth's death? No one; she was not insured. Suppose a detective should shoot at me, "You wanted her out of the way so you could marry the other woman!" I would answer, "Ruth knew about Nora, as everyone did. Nora and I were perfectly above-board about our platonic relationship. Ruth took it calmly. Last night she consented to get a divorce." No one could disprove that. If I were asked to undergo a lie-detector test, I could refuse and no legal power on earth could force me to submit. That, anyway, was remotely improbable. What, then, was there to fear? Nothing. Absolutely nothing!

I could see only the good in what I was bringing about; and once I reached the office I waited patiently for a message that would grant my heart's desire.

It came a few minutes later, a few minutes ago. One of my neighbors, breathless with shock, telephoned me that there had been a frightful explosion in my house, that it was burning to the ground, and that Ruth had been carried out of the flames—dead.

I am free! _____

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THE CRIME CLINIC

FOR every murder you see blazed across the headlines of your newspaper there are many more about which you never hear. For murder moves stealthily, silently, hidden by a cloak of things commonplace. Do you know that expert criminologists estimate that of every hundred persons you know, six have committed murder—or are contemplating it? We are told that this is true, and if it is, our sympathy goes out to our law enforcement bodies stronger than ever.

These subtle crimes, utterly unsensational, are the tasks that try the courage and patience of the police. In some cases, of course, the killer is never brought to justice, for the reason that suspicion is never even aroused. In other cases, brilliant, inspired investigation—plus a dogged determination—sometimes lasting years, exacts the price for murder that society demands. . . . Less frequently, the tortured, gnawing conscience of the guilty person leads to a confession.

Here are some hypothetical examples: Lovely Mary Jones is a devoted wife. From all outward appearances she is contented with life, even though her father-in-law is obliged to share her home. But Mary is not happy; smouldering in her young breast is a bitter hate for her husband's father, resentment of his presence in her home.

Perhaps the old boy has some money her husband will inherit . . . perhaps she is motivated by hate alone. Be that as it may—she resolves to kill him. The old man has a very bad heart; the slightest shock, for him, brings closer the ever-present shadow of death. There are any number of little things Mary can do to accomplish her purpose. Quite innocently she lets the wind bang a door shut; or she drops a platter or a heavy pan with a resounding crash, a few feet from where the old man is trying to rest quietly. Everything Mary does is apparently by accident, yet each sudden, nerve-jolting shock is calculated by her to tax the old fellow's feeble heart, until at last—he is dead. . . .

Or—nobody knows that John Jones no longer loves his wife. She stands in the way of a flaming extra-marital affair. So, when she is smitten with a severe case of gripe, John surreptitiously brings about her death by his "tender care" of her. He allows her room to become over-heated, and then, when she is sleeping under a mild sedative, he opens her window—wide, and the door, too. Then he gently removes part of her covering, leaving her in a draft that spells pneumonia. It may take several nights . . . but the chances are, it will work. . . .

What is there for the law to work on in cases like these? Nothing more than the coroner's report—which will probably indicate no crime at all! If the medical examiner or some member of the family suspects foul play, there may be unearthed some infinitesimal clue, some tiny detail that can be enlarged to point an accusing finger. Otherwise, another subtle murder is chalked up by the gods that be, and retribution must be paid in the hereafter instead of now.

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Write your name and address carefully on the coupon below. I'll send you absolutely free a copy of my new book, "Everlasting Health and Strength." It reveals the secrets that changed me from a 97-pound flat-chested weakling into a husky fellow who twice won the title of "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man" against all comers! And it shows how I can build you into an "Atlas Champion" the same way.

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Get my free book, "Everlasting Health and Strength"! Mail my coupon today. Gamble a stamp to prove I can make YOU a new man!



NOTE: This is the latest photo of Charles Atlas showing how he looks today. This is not a studio picture but an actual untouched snapshot.



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**ARE HER
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BUSINESS GIRL—1938 MODEL—Office manager Olive Tucker keeps disarmingly calm despite nerve-nagging phones, buzzers, interviews. "If anyone needs healthy nerves, I do," Miss Tucker

smiles. "Camels never upset my nerves." Later—to the roof gym for a quick work-out. Shower—rub—a Camel—and she's off again! Tired? Miss Tucker's answer: "Camels give my energy a refreshing 'lift.'"

Cigarettes may *look* alike—but what an appealing difference there is in Camels!

You'll be interested to read what Miss Tucker, successful young office manager, said to Miss MacGregor about the difference between Camels and other cigarettes (at right).

"Olive, do you always serve Camels because you feel that there's a big difference between Camels and other cigarettes?"



"I'm very glad you've brought that question up, Helen. I've tried as many kinds of cigarettes as most people, I guess, and I'm amazed at how *different* Camels are. Camels are extra-mild—they never bother my throat. And Camels taste good, yet never leave that 'cigarettety' after-taste. In so many ways, Camels *agree* with me."

MISS TUCKER entertains thoughtfully! There are lots of Camels around. Miss Tucker says: "Camels are the favorite with my guests and are delightful for topping off a meal. During and after dining, I smoke Camels 'for digestion's sake.' Camels set me right!"



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