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# DETECTIVE

**12  
STORIES**

# TALES

**10  
CENTS**

**THE RIDDLE  
OF THE  
HEADLESS MEN**

*THRILL-PACKED  
DETECTIVE NOVELETTE*  
*by* **JOHN KOBLER**

**DEATH BREAKS  
PAROLE**

*A JOHN SMITH NOVELETTE*  
*by* **WYATT**

**BLASSINGAME**

**ERNST CUMMINGS  
BOSWELL HOWARD  
AND 6 OTHER STORIES**



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MC-1B... Wedding ring only... \$16.60  
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Only **\$24.75**  
Just **\$2.37 a mo.**

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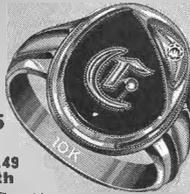
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Only **\$19.75**  
**2 Genuine DIAMONDS**

And the Charm and Color of Yellow Gold MC-6... The latest in style and our greatest in value! Exquisitely dainty, richly engraved Yellow Rolled Gold plate, square model wrist-watch set with TWO fiery genuine diamonds. Fully guaranteed dependable movement. Complete with newest type engraved link bracelet to match. Usual \$39.75 value and a perfect Xmas gift. **\$19.75 — \$1.00 down — only \$1.87 a mo.**



17 Jewel BULOVA Only **\$33.75**  
MC-7... The "Lady Bulova". An exquisite new lady's BULOVA in the exquisite new color of NATURAL charm and color of NATURAL link bracelet. **\$33.75 — \$1.00 down — only \$3.27 a month.**



17-J. BULOVA Only **\$24.75**  
MC-8... Lady's BULOVA and in the charm and color of NATURAL GOLD too! 17 Jewel Bulova movement. Never before a BULOVA value like this. Link bracelet. **\$24.75 — \$1.00 down — only \$2.37 a mo.**



17 Jewels Only **\$19.75**  
MC-9... Handsomely engraved Gent's case of Yellow Rolled Gold Plate; non-corrosive steel back. Fully guaranteed dependable 17 Jewel movement. Matched link bracelet. One of our greatest values: **\$19.75 — \$1.00 down — only \$1.87 a month.**



17-J. BULOVA Only **\$29.75**  
MC-10... The famous BULOVA "Chipper" and color of Natural Gold. Fully guaranteed strap. **\$29.75 — \$1.00 down — only \$2.87 a mo.**

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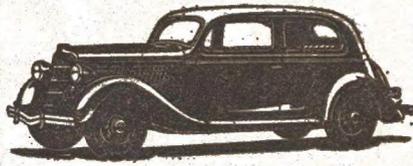
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*At Once*

**FORDS or  
\$500 CASH  
GIVEN**  
*as a bonus to my producers*

*to Run Home-Operated*

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**A Splendid Chance To Make Up To \$60<sup>00</sup> *in a week***

If you want an unusual opportunity to make a fine cash income operating a Coffee Agency right in your locality, send your name at once for full details about my Plan—FREE. This chance is open to one man or woman in each locality, or two persons operating in partnership. Agency is ideally suited for married couples: wife takes care of orders and handles calls at home; husband makes deliveries. Earnings start first day. Prosperous business quickly developed through remarkable, tested plan. Agencies pay up to \$60.00 in a week for full time; \$35 for part time. Producers are given their choice of a brand-new Ford Tudor Sedan or \$500.00 cash as a bonus, over and above their weekly cash income. Big weekly earnings and generous bonus besides make this offer one of the most liberal and unusual money making opportunities you have ever seen. Let me send you complete free details without obligation to you.

Ohio reported \$62.60 profit in a single week and later increased his earnings to as high as \$146.00 in a week.

**\$60<sup>00</sup> *in a week***

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Your thirty-day trial with complete business equipment is absolutely guaranteed against money-risk. Business easily handled. No large stock to carry, no overhead expenses. Make your home your headquarters. Once started, I'll give you credit—let you operate on my money. This offer is made by a large, old established and reputable company noted for the quality of its products—absolutely guaranteed. Send for full facts about opening in your locality. Complete details will be mailed free. Send coupon—ACT AT ONCE.

**ALBERT MILLS, President**  
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### No Delay—Profits Start at Once

No previous experience necessary—I provide everything you need to get going, guide you and help you. Thirty-day trial without money-risk to you. You can start a Coffee Agency and make good money your very first week. Olsen of New York reported \$24.85 profit for his first day; Mrs. Hoisick, of Nebraska, \$41.78 her first week; Whitcomb of

Albert Mills, Pres.  
4294 Monmouth Ave., Cincinnati, Ohio.  
Please send full free facts about operating a local Coffee Agency paying up to \$60 in a week. Also tell me about your Ford Sedan or \$500.00 Cash Bonus offer to your producers.

Name.....  
Address.....  
.....  
(Please print or write plainly)

# DETECTIVE TALES



VOLUME EIGHT

DECEMBER, 1937

NUMBER ONE

THIS SEAL PROTECTS YOU  AGAINST REPRINT FICTION!

All stories in magazines bearing this seal are written especially for this publisher and have never before been printed in any form!

### A Smashing Feature-Length Detective Novel

- 1 THE RIDDLE OF THE HEADLESS MEN.....By John Kobler 8**  
 Out of the pitch-black night came the grim marauder who severed his victim's heads and left their gruesome bodies gushing blood. Jo-Jo Mangin fought his way through an intricate maze of horror to find the fiend's identity—but the mysterious killer cunningly enlisted the aid of Mangin's girl—to lay the guilt at Jo-Jo's feet!
- 3 Vivid, Jolting Novelettes of Crime Fighting 3**
- 2 THE DEVIL'S CLINIC.....By Norvell W. Page 48**  
 How could Owen Masters, with only the aid of a grey-eyed young girl and a brave young doctor, hope to smash the criminal overlord who drew his bloody profits from the broken bodies of innocent young children? A pulse-jolting Owen Master's story—in which he lives two lives and risks them both!
- 3 SOLVE YOUR OWN MURDER.....By J. A. L. Chambliss 80**  
 It was Detective Lew Bryce's awful task to show his assassins a loophole in their diabolical scheme on his own life. Would he be condemned to death by his failure to find a flaw in gangdom's murder-masterpiece?
- 4 DEATH BREAKS PAROLE.....By Wyatt Blassingame 104**  
 Could John Smith smash the crooked parole-ring of gangdom and so save the life of his friend, Lieutenant Paul Rutgers? Against hopeless odds he fought them—with only the help of the golden haired girl who had once saved his life, and once almost caused his death!
- 4 Drama-Packed Detective Short Stories 4**
- 5 TIP FROM THE TOMB.....By Eric Howard 31**  
 The crooks feared white-haired old Todd while he was alive, so they killed him. But they sealed their own fate when they did so—for Todd solved his greatest case from the tomb!
- 6 THE LADY AND THE GUN.....By Charles Boswell 39**  
 Did the festering bitterness of six years in prison cause Laura Malone to break parole—as well as Officer O'Connor's heart? Or did she really commit that second murder . . . ?
- 7 MURDER ROMANCE.....By Robert W. Thompson 71**  
 Detective Dan Richard saw his beautiful wife keep a tryst with a gunman, and for him life became bitter. But it was even worse when she confessed to murder!
- 8 SEVEN STEPS TO HELL.....By Paul Ernst 95**  
 When Packy Boyd swore the law would never get him he meant it. He set a trap outside his hideout that would blow a cop to hell—even if that cop was Detective Bill Boyd, Packy's own brother!
- 2 Detective Short-Short Stories 2**
- 9 THE INVISIBLE WITNESS.....By Gabriel Wilson 68**  
 When Hubert Montague killed the woman he no longer loved, he thought that was the end of it—but he carried the mark of her crimson lips to the grave!
- 10 PICTURE OF GUILT.....By Ray Cummings 77**  
 John Magin was a camera expert. One moonlight night he photographed two corpses—and took a picture of his own death warrant!
- AND —
- 11 THE MODERN SHELL GAME.....A Feature 4**  
 —with variations.
- 12 THE CRIME CLINIC.....A Feature 124**

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# Panic Loomed...The Show Went On!

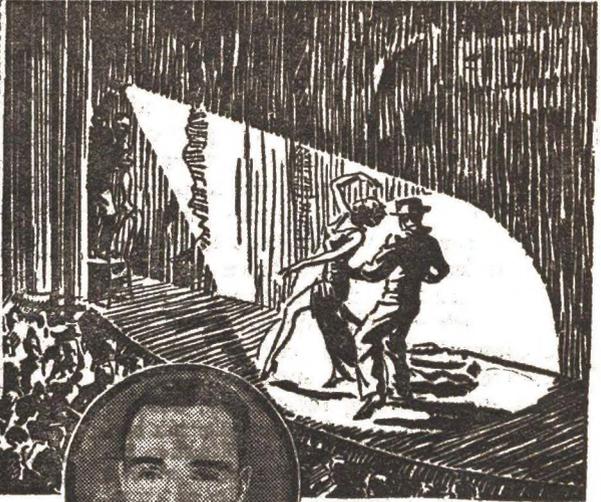


## Crowded Theatre Goes Dark as Fuse Blows

"The dog-and-pony number was finishing," writes Stage Manager Frank M. Polhamius, Jr., of 195 Fuller Lane, Winnetka, Ill., "when an overloaded main fuse blew out. As the stage went black, panic threatened the lives of thousands crowding the full house.

"Part of my equipment as stage manager is my trusty 'Eveready' flashlight. Before the audience could sense that anything was wrong, I called for the curtain, dashed to the wings and played my flashlight on the apron of the stage like a baby spot.

"Fortunately, a dance team was ready to go on. In a split second they were on the stage and going through their routine in the spot furnished by my flashlight. DATED 'Eveready' batteries in that

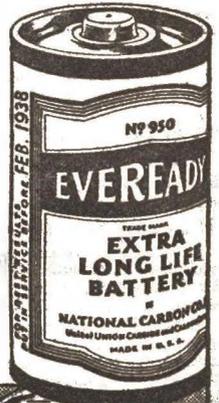


flashlight had lighted my way around dark theatres for many weeks before they

were called upon to meet this spine-chilling emergency. So you can bet I realized in those critical moments just how much it can mean to buy batteries that are *fresh* and full of life. No one can ever know how many lives were saved by DATED 'Eveready' batteries that night.

(Signed)

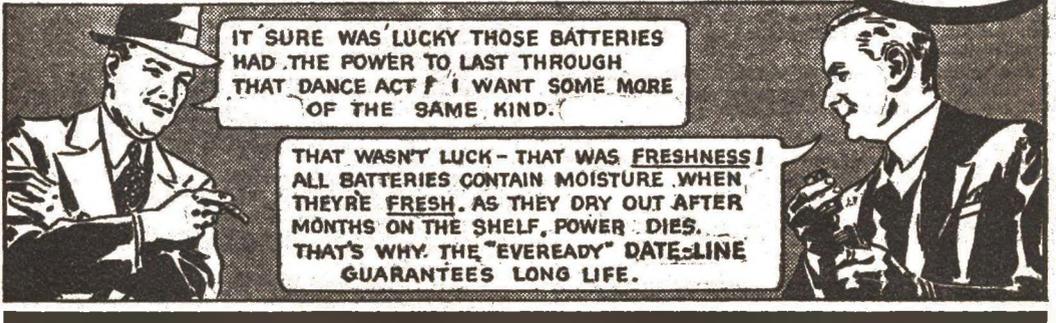
*Frank M. Polhamius, Jr.*



## "EVEREADY" BATTERIES ARE FRESH BATTERIES

The DATE-LINE guarantees FRESHNESS

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IT SURE WAS LUCKY THOSE BATTERIES HAD THE POWER TO LAST THROUGH THAT DANCE ACT. I WANT SOME MORE OF THE SAME KIND.

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# THE MODERN SHELL GAME

"Guaranteed to cure poison ivy, barber's itch, falling arches, spots before the eyes, headache . . ." Such was the cry of the confidence man of past years. All this swindler needed was a number of bottles filled with colored liquid and he was ready to defraud an unsuspecting public. But since that time the public has grown smarter, very much smarter, and Mr. Crook has been hard put to produce ever more intricate, more involved schemes for fraud. And not the least of the worries of the confidence man and swindler has been the resourceful, quick-witted work of police detectives all over the country. No great city is without a detective bureau that smashes down on fraud and swindling relentlessly, without mercy. The cleverness of the swindler has been great, but the brilliance of the detective has been even greater. It is interesting to recall a few of the more elaborate swindles of recent years, gaining thereby an insight into the twisted mentality of the criminal.

An expensively dressed lady of dignified appearance walked into a Boston department store recently and asked to look at some evening

gowns. With little hesitation, she picked out a gown and asked the clerk to wrap it up—for payment she offered a \$500 dollar bill.

Since the store had been warned to be on the look-out for counterfeit money, the clerk was told to keep the woman in conversation while the bill was sent to a bank for examination. After a short wait the woman demanded either the dress of her money—when she found out the reason for the delay she was furious. When the bill was returned from the bank—pronounced perfectly good money by them—the woman refused the dress and walked indignantly from the store. Later that day she returned, saying that she had been unable to find a duplicate dress in any other store, and that she would consent to buy the one picked out earlier in the day. It was paid for with a \$500 bill. Yes, you guessed it—it was not the good bill the bank had seen, but a counterfeit one. The whole act was but a scheme to insure the acceptance of the bogus money.

In Washington State a gruesome fraud was exposed a few months ago. It was the fraud of faked automobile accidents. The swindlers in this case all carried heavy automobile accident insurance. Taking two cars, they would meet on a lonely road and "stage" an accident. The occupants would get out of the cars and the cars would then be rolled down an embankment, smashing at the bottom. Afterward, the swim-

## How do you know you can't write?

**H**AVE you ever tried? Have you ever attempted even the least bit of training, under competent guidance?

Or have you been sitting back, as it is so easy to do, waiting for the day to come some time when you will awaken, all of a sudden, to the discovery, "I am a writer"?

If the latter course is the one of your choosing, you probably *never will write*. Lawyers must be law clerks, Engineers must be draftsmen. We all know that, in our times, the egg does come before the chicken.

It is seldom that any one becomes a writer until he (or she) has been writing for some time. That is why so many authors and writers spring up out of the newspaper business. The day-to-day necessity of writing—of gathering material about which to write—develops their talent, their insight, their background and their confidence as nothing else could.

That is why the Newspaper Institute of America bases its writing instruction on journalism—the training that has produced so many successful authors.

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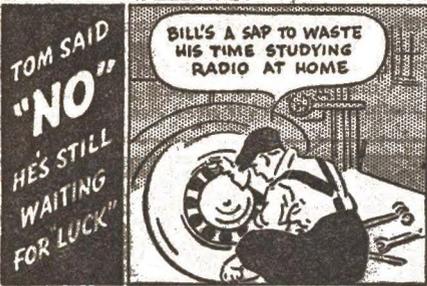
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Many people who should be writing become awestruck by fabulous stories about millionaire authors and therefore give little thought to the \$25, \$50 and \$100 or more that can often be earned for material that takes little time to write—stories, articles on business, fads, travels, sports, recipes, etc.—things that can easily be turned out in leisure hours and often on the impulse of the moment.

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Do you want to make more money? Broadcasting stations employ engineers, operators, station managers and pay up to \$5,000 a year. Spare time Radio set servicing pays as much as \$200 to \$500 a year—full time servicing jobs pay as much as \$30, \$50, \$75 a week. Many Radio experts operate full time or part time Radio businesses. Radio manufacturers and jobbers employ

testers, inspectors, foremen, engineers, servicemen, paying up to \$6,000 a year. Radio operators on ships get good pay, see the world besides. Automobile, police, aviation, commercial Radio and loud speaker systems offer good opportunities now and for the future. Television promises many good jobs soon. Men I trained at home have good jobs in all these branches of Radio.

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envelope or paste it on a penny postcard—NOW!

**J. E. SMITH, President**  
National Radio Institute, Dept. 7NBS  
Washington, D. C.



**J. E. SMITH, President**  
National Radio Institute, Dept. 7NBS  
Washington, D. C.

Dear Mr. Smith Without obligating me, send "Rich Rewards in Radio," which points out the spare time and full time opportunities in Radio and explains your 80-80 method of training men at home in spare time to become Radio Experts. (Please Write Plainly.)

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## DETECTIVE TALES

diers would return home, notify the insurance companies, and proceed to "injure" themselves. They cut themselves with knives, smashed and bruised themselves with hammers, and abraded their skin with sandpaper. When the insurance doctors called, the groaning "patients" would point to their many wounds and claim paralysis and shock. It may sound fantastic, but within five years this particular group collected over fifty thousand dollars from insurance companies within the State of Washington.

A man in Chicago had a brilliant thought recently: he became an agent for song writers. When songs were sent to him, he would write the composer that a publishing house was interested but that he needed money for "promotion". Getting the money, he would then write the composer, on a faked publishers letterhead, that more money was needed for a "recording". If this money came, the agent-publisher-recorder would make a record of the song, singing it himself while his stenographer played the piano. After that, the composer heard no more news of his masterpiece.

All these cases may sound clever, but it is well to remember that in every case the criminals were apprehended and given stiff terms for their offenses. It was through clever detective work that these frauds were stopped, and but for this detective work many more innocent people would be the victims of conscienceless vice.

# SPECIAL SALE! NATIONAL'S FAMOUS SUPER-QUALITY ENGINEER'S WATCH NOW ONLY \$2.97

Send NO money

ACCURACY guaranteed by 100-year-old-million-dollar factory. Solid Gold offset case, guaranteed 25 years. It has a handsome locomotive crown, time-keeper dial, railroad back. Compare with a \$30 watch.

**SEND NO MONEY**—\$2.97 (plus postage). Examine watch carefully. Your money back if not amazed at the value. If you order at once, you can get a second watch for only \$1 more. Sell it to a friend for \$3.97 regular price and your own will cost you nothing! No string to this offer, no catch in it! But you must act **AT ONCE** during this special Expansion Sale. Send coupon or postal today! **FREE** knife and chain to match with every watch!

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I will pay on arrival. Nothing more to pay. Money back if not delighted. I **RISK NOTHING**.

Name.....

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be doing - ONE  
YEAR FROM TODAY**



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Will you still be struggling along in the same old job at the same old salary—worried about the future—never able to make both ends meet?

One year from today will you still be putting off your start toward success—thrilled with ambition one moment and then cold the next—delaying, waiting, fiddling away the precious hours that will never come again?

Don't do it, man—don't do it.

There is no greater tragedy in the world than that of a man who stays in the rut all his life, when with just a little effort he could advance.

Make up your mind today that you're going to train yourself to do some one thing well. Choose the work you like best in the list below, mark an X beside it, and, without cost or obligation, at least get the full story of what the I. C. S. can do for you.

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# THE RIDDLE OF THE

By **JOHN KOBLER**

(Author of "Corpses, C.O.D." etc.)



*Who was the grim marauder that severed his victims' heads and left their limp bodies gushing blood—always in pitch-black night? . . . Jo-Jo Mangin thought he had fought his way to the horrible answer—until the mysterious killer cunningly enlisted the aid of the girl young Mangin loved—to lay the guilt at Jo-Jo's feet!*

## CHAPTER ONE

### Horror on the Sidewalk

**N**IGHT, moonless and black as ravens' wings, hung over the waterfront. No star glimmered through the dense, massed cloud-banks that sailed low with the lashing wind. Beneath this oppressive, jet canopy the East River

churned toward the sea. Occasionally a coal-barge or a tug slid silently by, casting a baleful gleam over the oily waters. Occasionally a fog-horn moaned dismally like a soul in torture.

Along South Street, paralleling the river, only the chunky, ten-story *Argus* building throbbed with life and movement; but shut up within itself were the rattle of typewriters, the clanging of telephones,

# HEADLESS MEN

*A Feature-Length  
Novel of Pulse-  
Jolting Menace  
and Eerie  
Mystery*



**The knife was poised in midair!**

the roar of presses, the bustle and din of a great city newspaper. Outside there was silence, impenetrable, murky silence. The shabby gin-dens where a derelict could get a shot of "smoke" for a dime, the grimy flop-houses, the shipyards and factories were lost in black obscurity, broken at intervals by street-lamps. These splashed pools of light on the cracked

pavements that were like oases in the limitless desert of the night.

It was two A.M. Somewhere a patrolman, cold and shivering, pounded his lonely beat. A scrawny cat mewed in an alley. A scrap of paper skittered along the gutter. All else seemed lifeless, dead.

Then presently, some ten blocks north of the *Argus* building, a man emerged from a side-street and, his shadow merging with the deeper shadows of the night, began threading his path slowly between the widely-spaced street-lamps. None but the sharpest eyes could have seen him as he appeared for an instant in a pool of light, then vanished and moved forward silently, almost stealthily, until he reached the next lamp.

He was a frail, wasted little man, carrying his head bird-like to one side and hunching his bony shoulders. There was an odd, unnatural rhythm to his gait. It was not that he was drunk or weary. He walked straight enough, but he walked with a lilt, an elation, as though he were floating.

When he penetrated the next circle of light his step slackened, relaxed. He seemed suddenly relieved. Then, plunging again into the darkness, nervousness descended upon him and he quickened his pace, hugging the shop-fronts, trying to pierce with his eyes the night around him, until once more he attained the security of light.

Two forces appeared to struggle within him—the stimulus of an inner elation, an intoxication of sorts, and uneasiness—fear.

In this strange manner he progressed some ten or twenty blocks. As he neared the street known as Old Slip, he halted abruptly. This time he was certain. There was something there—in the dark—behind him. He crouched low, twisting his neck about, trying desperately to see. He shivered violently. Ahead, thirty feet away, stood another lamp. He steeled himself, and began hurrying toward it, as though his life depended upon his getting there. But before he could reach it, a soft, whirring sound shot past his head. He heard a sharp crack, the tinkle of glass—and the lamplight was blotted out!

He stood in utter darkness.

He wheeled, seeking with flailing arms to stave off the unseen terror he sensed was descending upon him. He emitted a little scream. It froze in his throat. A wild flurry, like the beating of giant wings, engulfed him. Bands of steel seemed to pinion his arms, encircle his throat. He tried to scream again. A sharpness, icy-cold and thin, kissed his jugular, bit through skin and flesh. He felt no pain, only a dizziness, a chill around his heart. Denser darkness misted his vision. His knees wobbled, buckled under him. Gouts of blood issued from his throat, spouted across the sidewalk.

Oh, God, God, he's come for me. In the night he's come for me. And I'm dead, dead. . . .

The first rays of dawn picked out a body lying half on the sidewalk, half in the gutter. Where there should have been a head gaped a bloody horror spilling blood over the curbstone.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Welcome Assignment

THE city room of *The Argus*, New York's largest tabloid, was a howling bedlam of ink-stained, news-dizzy men. Copy boys raced back and forth among steel desks madly waving sheaves of yellow copy paper. A battery of rewrite men maintained a steady pounding of typewriters that crackled like machine-gun fire.

But over the seemingly indifferent men hovered the horror of what had happened.

An early edition of *The Argus*, still redolent and wet from the presses, lay open on the city editor's desk. Brand, toughest slave-driver this side of hell, with a weather-beaten face and a cast-iron heart, struggled to preserve his habitual poker-faced calm. But the headline that streaked across the front page made his deepset eyes glitter:

HEAD HUNTER BUTCHERS  
THIRD VICTIM. FIEND STRIKES  
IN SHADOW OF ARGUS BUILD-  
ING.

He looked up, barked curt orders at the reporters waiting around his desk. Their whirlwind progress through the frosted-glass door augmented the wild din.

A fresh lead came over the wire: Police were trying to match the dead man's fingerprints.

The copy boys, stripped of ties and coats, grabbed breathlessly for fresh copy paper.

Brand leaned back and surveyed the chaos with satisfaction. . . .

But there was one comparatively quiet spot in that hectic office. Inside the tiny, glass-enclosed cubby-hole beyond Brand's desk, a man and a girl spoke in swift, tense words. To them, too, had come the nameless fear of the thing that had struck outside—in the dark.

Joe Mangin—"Jo-Jo the Dog-Faced Boy" to his colleagues because unless he shaved three times a day he was apt to resemble Barnum's pet freak—was saying excitedly, "How do you like it, Lynn? This kill-crazy guy pulls a job right under our noses; and do we scoop the town!"

To *The Argus's* eight hundred thousand subscribers Lynn Starling's impertinent little face was familiar. Every morning the tip-tilted nose, the small smiling eyes, the cupid's-bow mouth, moist-lipped and red, appeared on page 18, heading the woman's column. But the eyes weren't smiling now.

"I know. A man's killed a block from the bar where you're drinking 'em up. You stagger out and you don't even see him. You leave that for another reporter. You were drunk again last night! Drunk as a hoot owl!"

Jo-Jo rubbed his jowls sheepishly. "All right, I was drunk. I admit I had a couple of snifters. But, hell, a fellow's got to have fun once in awhile."

"Fun! You promised to lay off that stuff. Joe Mangin, you're—say—"

She stopped, as though struck by a troubling thought. "I can't quite figure," she said slowly, "how you came so close to that body and missed it. You say you were the last to leave Mack's place. Yet you didn't see a headless corpse lying a few feet away. The cops will be interested to know how you managed that."

Jo-Jo's broad smile was abruptly replaced by a frown. The grin came again, almost immediately, but his eyes were puzzled, hurt.

"You're not hinting, Lynn, that I bumped the poor goof?"

At the look in his eyes, the girl relented. She came close to him, put her small hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry, Joe," she said. "I—I guess, like everybody else, I'm a little on edge."

Jo-Jo shook off a disagreeable sensation. He took her hand. "Look, honey, I'll quit drinking. No kidding this time. Only you've got to break down and give me a chance. You know how I feel."

**F**OR an instant they forgot the inhuman crimes of the head hunter. Jo-Jo was smiling, but he meant what he said. He had meant it ever since Lynn, fresh from college, had won a job on *The Argus*. The answer had always been the same.

"Marry you, eh? What a pile of sick headaches I'd be letting myself in for."

"You don't care much for me, do you?"

"Care?" She bit her lip. "You know I—" But she couldn't bring herself to admit that this big, world-weary news-hawk meant a very great deal to her.

She might have said more, but at that moment the door burst open and an excited young man, blond and red-cheeked and absurdly boyish, stormed in. He shouted, "Brand will *have* to send me out on the headhunter killings! He'll have to!" He stopped abruptly and glared at Jo-Jo.

Lynn's brother, Bob, was the kind of lad who speaks his piece first and thinks afterwards. He said, "You leave her alone, see? I'm not having my sister mixed up with a knock-about, drunken tramp."

Jo-Jo flushed angrily. "See here, youngster, Lynn's been around. I guess she can take care of herself. I'm crazy about her—and I want to marry her. Any crime in that?"

"It's a crime for a guy like you to love anybody. Hell, you were so plastered last night you didn't even see that body under your nose. You didn't do the job yourself, by any chance?"

There it was again! That mocking, half-serious suggestion. Jo-Jo didn't like it. He didn't like it at all. "Is that supposed to be funny?" he growled.

Lynn slid off her perch on the desk and stood between them. "Bob, you're acting like a kid. It's none of your business what Jo-Jo and I do."

"No? Well, I'm making it my business."

There was a moment of tension, of banked fury between the two men. Ever since Lynn had got her kid brother a job as cub reporter it had existed. Jo-Jo had felt no animus against the lad at first. He had never quite understood why Bob was so dead set against him. Maybe it was a subtle kind of jealousy. Bob adored his sister, worshipped her.

Jo-Jo, trying to understand, had held himself in check, had accepted the younger man's insults and contempt, but now he felt a burning behind his eyes, a sudden anger. He spoke menacingly, "Some day, youngster, I may have to spank you—hard!"

In another moment they would have been at each other's throats. Bob was advancing, his eyes blazing, when the door swung open and Brand rasped, "Break it up! What is this, a house party?"

Bob relaxed, murmured, "Sorry, Boss." Jo-Jo just grinned.

Brand said, "I'm giving you your first big chance, Starling. Bring home the bacon and you'll be out of the cub bracket."

Bob's face lit up. "Sure, Boss. I'm ready to go!"

"Then listen sharp. The cops believe this last head-hunter killing was done by the same bird who got Dr. Samuel Corning and Albert Small last month. Remember the set-up in those two crimes? Corning's body is found in his sedan, parked on a lonely road near his home in White Plains. The head's gone. The headlights of the car have been smashed—*just like that lamp light was smashed last night!*

"The last man to see Corning alive is his partner, Dr. Frank Poynton. They had offices together in the Medical Arts building. Corning drives Poynton home, drops him and goes on. But Poynton leaves again and doesn't get back until midnight, according to the elevator boy. The cops grill him and he doesn't explain his movements. They let him go.

"Then two weeks later Small, the well-known broker and playboy, is fished out of the East River. Again, the head's gone. Back at his flat the cops find everything in a mess, the electricity short circuited.

"Now, this third guy is knocked off in the same way. The cops figure the killer smashed the street lamp with an air gun or sling shot. They can't identify the body. All the marks have been ripped out of his clothes. They do find some 'decks' of morphine in his pockets. So probably he's a hophead. Did you digest all that, Starling?"

The boy nodded.

"All right. Now, everybody knows the cops suspected Poynton in the Corning killing. Only they couldn't pin anything on him. I want you to try! Check up on him. Find out what his habits are, how

he lives, who he sees—or anything else.”

In his boyish zeal Bob was half-way across the office before Brand finished. The city editor yelled at his retreating back, “Hey, did you get it all?”

“Sure, I got it.”

“Then beat it.”

The next moment he vanished through the door. Lynn gazed after him tenderly. There was a certain doubt, a fear in her eyes. But no one saw.

Jo-Jo laughed good-naturedly, forgetting how close he had been to battle, “That’s a man-sized order for the kid.”

Lynn echoed, “Yes—a man-sized order.” She shuddered, thinking of the head hunter.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### Lurking Shadow of Murder

THE rumor was that Brand had no home, that he lived on news-type and drank printers’ ink and slept somewhere in a filing-cabinet. Anyway he was always the last man to leave the office at night.

Dead calm reigned. The paper had been put to bed. Brand sat alone at his desk. He was reading the out-of-town newspapers.

Jo-Jo blew in. His coat pockets were stuffed with rolled up sheets of copy paper—the “reporter’s notebook.” They were covered with his characteristically generous, sprawling notes.

Brand looked up. “Anything?”

“Naw. Cummings gave me a lot of hoey. The usual thing. An arrest expected at any moment. Enough for a stick in the morning maybe. How about your end of it?”

“Jones managed to identify victim number three. Fellow called Romero. Juan Romero. He was a hophead all right. They’ve got him listed down at the Narcotics Bureau. Seems he was quite a guy once. Second violinist with the philharmonic. Then dope got him and he started

sliding. Been living from hand to mouth.”

“Dope, eh? I see.” Jo-Jo pursed his lips reflectively. “Say, by the way, what about our white-haired boy? Hear from him yet?”

Brand groaned disgustedly. “Hell, no. He must think this is a monthly magazine. Not a word from him since morning. He gets the gate for this—”

Another voice suddenly knifed across his. A woman’s voice, high and tortured. It was Lynn. She said, “You won’t have to give him the gate. He—he’s—” She swayed and collapsed in a cane-bottom chair by the door. Her lips were bloodless, white as death.

The two men rushed over to her. Jo-Jo encircled her shoulders with his arms. “Lynn! Honey! What’s happened?”

She tried to tell them. “Bob—he’s—something horrible has happened to him.” Then suddenly with strange calm, she said, “He’s dead!”

Even Brand blanched under the shock. Clumsily, he tried to show sympathy. Then, news-values always uppermost in his mind, he urged her to speak.

She was mistress of herself now. She gave it to them coherently, accurately. “I went home for supper tonight. Bob and I live together, you know. At eight he hadn’t come in. I wondered if he had found something that was holding him up. Then around nine the ’phone rang. I knew his voice at once. . . . It was—” She shuddered, faltered a moment. Jo-Jo squeezed her hand. She went on. “I’ll try to tell you exactly what he said. There was no hello, no greeting, just words coming breathlessly. I think he was scared—poor kid—he just managed to gasp out, ‘Sis! I know who the killer is. I’ve seen him! He—he’s coming!’ There was a silence. And then I caught two words: ‘Eyes’, and ‘cats’. I heard a shot; then a loud thud and the ’phone went dead. Oh, God, Jo-Jo, the poor kid, the poor—”

Her story finished, she gave herself up to wracking sobs.

Brand was scratching his head. "Eyes—cats—what the hell could that mean?"

Jo-Jo, cradling Lynn in his arms, murmured, "Yes, I guess Bob found something, all right. He must have been right in the room with the killer." With all his heart he wished he had not quarreled with the boy. If he really were dead. . . .

The trio was silent a moment, waiting for Lynn to recover. It was Jo-Jo who finally said, "We've got to find him. Maybe—it's a long shot—but maybe he's alive. Maybe he's only hurt."

"Find him?" Brand snapped. "Of course we've got to find him. It's your job, Mangin."

Lynn jumped up. "I'm going too."

Jo-Jo's mind was working fast. "Now look, the only chance we've got is to follow the same trail he took. It lead him to something big enough to have cost him his life. We've got to go there, too. You ordered him to work on Poynton. My hunch is to find Poynton first."

Brand nodded vigorous agreement. "Wait, I'll find out if he's home. We'll get him out of bed if we have to." He thumbed through the telephone directory, then called a number. Two or three minutes passed, and he hung up. "No answer. He might be at his office." He consulted his wrist-watch. "It's only ten. Maybe there are other guys in this man's town who work as late as we do."

Jo-Jo said, "We can try."

**F**IFTEEN minutes later a taxi deposited Jo-Jo and Lynn in front of a tall, grey-façaded building in the pseudo-Gothic style. Graven in the keystone over the arched entrance were the words: Medical Arts. Jo-Jo craned his neck. No lights shone in the sheer, smooth face of the twenty stories.

He said, "Looks pretty hopeless. There doesn't seem to be any one in that build-

ing. Come on, we'll ask the elevator boy."

They strode into the lobby. It, at least, was lighted. On a chair next to the elevator a colored boy dozed peacefully. As they walked towards him they passed a glass door which connected the lobby with an adjoining shop. "Charles Potts—Pharmacy" was lettered in gold-leaf on the door.

As they passed it Jo-Jo and Lynn became aware that a man was standing in the doorway beaming at them. They stopped, turned and faced him. The first reaction upon seeing him was to smile. He was an odd-looking little creature, built like a barrel, no more than five feet tall, with ruddy cheeks and friendly eyes that peered at the world through round, thick lenses. His expression was essentially dull, almost stupid, but his happy, wide grin was somehow irresistibly comical.

He just stood there, teetering back and forth on his chubby legs and beaming on them. At last he said brightly, "I know who you folks are. Reporters. Right? You can't fool Charley Potts."

Jo-Jo returned his smile. "That's right. We're looking for a Dr. Poynton. Would he be around at this hour?"

Charley Potts meditated a long while as though he were pondering a highly complex problem. Presently he muttered, "Dr. Poynton, hey? Well, I'll tell you. He sometimes does stay up there in his offices late. But I ain't seen him to-night. No, sirree."

Lynn nudged Jo-Jo. "I guess it's no use." There was black despair in her voice.

Charley Potts bounced up to them. "Guess you folks have had lots of fun with these here killings. There was another reporter here tonight."

Their eyes widened. They surveyed the little druggist with new interest. "Another?" Lynn repeated.

"Yes, sirree. Fellow with red hair

came breezing through here no more'n half an hour ago. He was in a hurry, too. Didn't even wait for the elevator to come down. Just ran up the stairs. . . . Say, what paper you people from?"

Jo-Jo told him. The druggist slapped his leg. "Well, now, what do you know about that? This feller said he was from *The Argus*, too. I asked him. I always ask folks where they're from."

Lynn and Jo-Jo exchanged a sharp glance. In both their minds exploded the same thought. *There was no red-haired reporter on The Argus!*

Jo-Jo gripped her hand, dragged her after him through the vestibule, leaving Charley Potts, still delighted with himself and the world, grinning from ear to ear. The pounding of their feet on the stone floor brought the slumbering Negro elevator boy bolt upright.

"Yes, suh. What can ah do for you, suh?"

"Dr. Poynton's office! Make it snappy!"

"Land's sake, mister, there ain't no one around at this hour. Ah ain't seen the doctor since six o'clock. Ah cain't take you folks up theah."

Jo-Jo hurried into the elevator. There was a terrible urgency in his tone. "Don't argue! I've got reason to believe he's in his office. He could have gone up while you were sleeping, couldn't he?"

"Sure thing, ef he took the stairs. But what fo' would he wanna do that?"

"You tell me. How about a guy with red hair? Seen him around this evening?"

"No, suh. I ain't."

"All right, then, take us up or I'll drive the thing myself."

The Negro capitulated. The elevator shot up five stories, jerked to a halt. He slid the metal gates back. Jo-Jo and Lynn stepped out into a corridor. *It was pitch black.*

THE Negro was terrified. "Say! They —they oughta be a light on up here. You think—" Darkness everywhere. Had the killer again smashed the lights?

"Where is Poynton's office?" asked Jo-Jo impatiently.

The Negro pointed at a spot mid-way down the corridor.

"The third door, ef you kin find it in the dark!"

But they were already groping their way toward the indicated door. Jo-Jo's hand closed over the brass doorknob. He turned to Lynn, "This is illegal, but we haven't got time to consider that."

They heard the Negro, afraid to follow them in the dark, calling, "Hey, you folks cain't do that! Come out of there."

They entered the room. It, too, was dark, dark as night, dark as the jaws of



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death. Lynn felt the small hairs at the back of her neck prickle. She pressed close to Jo-Jo. "I don't like it. There's something in here—"

"I know." His hand slid cautiously along the wall, feeling for the light switch.

As their ears grew accustomed to the tomb-like silence they detected the faint ticking of a clock. It merely heightened the heavy, oppressive atmosphere.

Jo-Jo's hand at last came in contact with a switch. He pulled it quickly, without thinking. At once he regreted it, for the sudden blaze of light revealed with merciless clarity a soul-shaking horror. It was as though a mad butcher had wielded his cleaver in that room. The walls, the carpet, the furniture were splattered with blood. Fresh blood. The sweet, sickening odor of it lingered in the air.

Lynn saw it first and stifled an outcry. A man lay spread-eagled on the floor, gashed in scores of places by some large, razor-sharp instrument. He lay on his back so that his throat, slit and pouring blood, gaped at the ceiling. Elsewhere his clothes were ripped and torn, matted with blood from other wounds. But this time there was a head, though it was hanging only by a shred of flesh. Jo-Jo judged the man to be in his thirties. He was tastefully dressed.

Lynn leaned weakly against the wall, drained of all emotion, even fear.

"At least it's not Bob," Jo-Jo reassured her. "There's still a chance he's alive." He crossed to the telephone standing on a wooden tabor, reported to police headquarters.

As he replaced the receiver his eyes fell on the desk drawers. They had been pulled out and thoroughly searched. Papers lay in tumbled disarray on the floor under the desk. Jo-Jo contemplated them thoughtfully. "Our friend wanted something pretty badly. I wonder . . . Lynn, are you all right?"

"I'm all right. Only I wish we could

cover that thing up." She averted her eyes. "I'll take you home. The cops can wait."

He hooked his arm through hers. Her fingers suddenly tightened over his hand. "No—listen—there's some one coming down the hall!"

Jo-Jo held his breath, listened intently. It was as Lynn had said. Steadily, surely, light steps tap-tapped in the hall, approaching slowly, growing louder. In her unnerved condition she gripped his hand more tightly. "Jo-Jo, you don't think—the killer—"

"No—but whoever it is we're ready for him."

Nevertheless, he drew her back into the room, keeping his eyes fixed on the door. With each advancing step in the hall his heart knocked at his ribs. He braced himself against the desk, waited . . .

The man who finally appeared in the doorway was so tall his head almost scraped the top of it. He was painfully thin, and his black Chesterfield accentuated the impression of emaciation and tallness. The face was distinguished, lean and hard-muscled, the jaws fringed by a carefully trimmed Van Dyke. He wore thick-lensed pince-nez. But there was a supercilious, somewhat cynical curve to his nostrils that Jo-Jo instinctively disliked.

THE man talked in precise, clipped accents. For a brief instant he failed, in the sudden blinding flare of light, to see the slaughtered body. He spoke angrily.

"Just who are you and by what right do you break into my office?"

"I'll answer that in a moment. Are you—?"

"Dr. Poynton."

"Well, then, Doctor, your office has been used as a slaughterhouse tonight."

By this time the doctor had absorbed the horror of that room. Lynn and Jo-Jo

watched him closely, trying to plumb his emotions. If he had any, he didn't betray them. There was an instant of shock, a slight lifting of his eyebrows, and his skin turned a shade lighter. That was all.

Jo-Jo said, "I've taken the liberty of calling the police."

And that didn't trouble him either.

"Quite right. This—this is an appalling thing. My secretary, poor devil. Stanley Romain. I left him here at six. He was going over some proofs on a medical book I am writing. He must have been—"

"Yes. Some one he knew pretty well must have walked in. No, wait, that doesn't jell. The lights were out. Even the light in the hall was out. Some one crept up on him in the dark. Can you imagine any reason, Doctor, why your secretary was murdered?"

Poynton seemed about to answer. Then, as though angry with himself for having been lured into speaking at all, he checked himself. He repeated his original question. "By what right do you break into my office?"

Jo-Jo answered, "Take it easy, Doctor. Earlier today a reporter, Bob Starling, left the office of *The Argus*. He's been missing ever since. We have reason to believe he came to this building. Did you see him?"

"No. Certainly not. There was no one here today."

Lynn turned away. "There's no use, Jo-Jo, it's hopeless. Bob is dead—I know it."

"Nothing is hopeless. Not until we prove it." He turned to Poynton. "If you'll allow me, I'd better call my office."

He didn't wait for an answer. He picked up the 'phone on the desk, got through to Brand . . .

A few moments later they stood in the street. Jo-Jo moved towards a taxi-stand, but Lynn held him back. "No, please, Jo-Jo, let's walk. I—I need air."

"Sure, kid, sure." He held her elbow

lightly and guided her across the street. He could feel tremors of anguish and fear shaking her body. Yet there was something in this emotion of hers that eluded him, something beyond concern for her brother, something deep and hidden.

THEY walked on, entered Central Park. It was deserted and cheerless at that hour. Jo-Jo pulled his overcoat collar closer about him, then seeing Lynn shiver, removed it and wrapped it around her shoulders. She thanked him absently. Her mind was turned inward.

"Gee, kid," Jo-Jo said, "I'm sorry I blew up about Bob. I've got nothing against him, nothing. You believe that, don't you?"

"Of course I do. You say that—you say it as though I thought you had something to do with— Oh, I must be going mad. Such horrible thoughts keep popping into my mind."

It was certainly, thought Jo-Jo, a horrible idea indeed, for her to suggest, to hint even that he— By God, Jo-Jo wanted to clear up this case—damned soon!

They had penetrated to the most wooded part of the Park. There the lamps, like friendly beacons, were more distantly spaced. They walked in almost total darkness.

"Let's hurry," Lynn pleaded. "I don't like it in the dark. It—it's so cold."

Her nervousness communicated itself to Jo-Jo. He glanced sharply around him, quickened his steps. In the distance they could see the twinkling lights of the tall Central Park West apartment houses. They looked friendly and reassuring.

As they approached a thick clump of bushes Jo-Jo suddenly stiffened, dug his fingers into Lynn's arm. There was something moving in those bushes, something that was not the wind.

He whispered to her urgently, "I don't like it, kid. There's something there ahead. Stand still. Don't move."

She obeyed automatically, her senses numbed with a sudden, overpowering terror. Her eyes were riveted on the lamp ahead of them, near the bushes. As she looked a sibilant, rushing sound like the flicking of a long whip whistled through the air. Something struck the bowl of the lamp. The light went out. It was as though a thick, black curtain had descended before their eyes.

Jo-Jo thought: The killer who strikes in the dark! He pulled Lynn away from the narrow footpath. He spoke low in her ear, "We've got to go back, quick!"

But she couldn't move. She stared, fascinated, into the darkness where a moment before a light had glowed and a movement in the bushes had made itself seen.

There was another movement now. The trees stirred restlessly, close to them. Jo-Jo's mind was frozen with fear. He drew Lynn to him with his left arm, his right raised against the thing he knew he could not stop—the killer's blade that could slash through a man's neck! . . .

They stood there for what seemed an ageless moment, unable to move, their senses painfully magnifying every sound, and each second Jo-Jo felt the stealthy approach of the murderous thing that lurked among the trees. Then, just as he feared he must scream, or strike out into that awful blackness—anything to break that fearful tension—firm steps sounded behind them and a flashlight cut the shadows. Mercifully a patrolman was coming towards them.

At the same instant a shrill howl of pain rose from the bushes. There was a violent threshing sound and something streaked off into the night.

Jo-Jo shouted to the policeman. "There was a man hiding there! Come on, after him!"

All three rushed ahead. They ran fast, panting. They ran ten, fifteen minutes, until they came out the other side of the park. They found nothing . . . .

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Where Will They Find My Head?

LYNN entered the small, but exquisitely decorated little flat ahead of Jo-Jo and made light. Jo-Jo followed. She closed the door behind them, and went on ahead into the living room. Exhaustion had drawn haggard lines under her eyes. She tried to smile. It was a wan effort.

She said, "Be a dear, will you? Go out in the pantry and mix some highballs. This time I'll have a drink with you."

But a curious uneasiness was stirring in Jo-Jo's mind. He had stopped in the tiny hallway to deposit his overcoat—the overcoat he had placed around Lynn's shoulders. A heavy dragging at the pocket made him reach in.

His hand came out holding an air-pistol—a powerful air-pistol, such as might have been used to shatter an electric light bulb.

He cursed softly. Who put the thing into his overcoat? Some one, within the last half hour, had deliberately placed it there. And the only person with him had been Lynn.

He frowned. That, of course, was incredible, impossible! Why should Lynn—There was no time for him to think. She was calling to him from the living-room. Hastily he replaced the air-pistol, made an effort, as he joined her, not to betray his feelings.

Apparently he succeeded, for she turned to him calmly and repeated, "How about those drinks? Make 'em strong, will you?"

He walked obediently towards the pantry. He tried to make some jesting remark. But he couldn't. For now he knew she wanted him out of the room.

He went, searched the pantry until he found whisky and glasses. Then, turning on the water tap, he tip-toed to the swinging pantry door, peered through the panel of glass. He saw Lynn in the vestibule.

She was bending over his overcoat. She was looking for something. She straightened up suddenly and Jo-Jo ducked back.

He returned, carrying two drinks. He congratulated himself that he had not given himself away.

When he stood outside Lynn's flat a half hour later, doubting her, yet not wanting to doubt, he searched his overcoat. His copy-paper was missing. His copy-paper covered with notes in his handwriting.

His mind flashed back to the strange, half-joking, remark Lynn had made in *The Argus* building about the possibility of his having killed Romero! And again in the Park, when she had made him feel that his quarrel with Bob was somehow connected with his disappearance. The significance of those two remarks, the planting of the gun in his coat, the theft of his copypaper, all helped to freeze the blood in his veins.

Did Lynn believe that he was the killer? Grimly he swore to solve the mystery of the head-hunter killings, if he had to do it single-handed. There was more at stake now than a news story . . . .

When Jo-Jo strode into the city room Brand called to him and showed him an old, faded photograph lying on the desk.

Brand asked, "Ever seen that before?"

Jo-Jo studied it. "It's familiar . . . . Sure, why it's Corning, isn't it? Younger though, when that was taken."

"I don't know. The name I have is Dr. Peter Conroy."

Jo-Jo's mouth tightened with surprise. "Judas, the Conroy case! Back in 1920."

"Right. Know what to do with this?"

But Brand didn't have to ask. Already Jo-Jo had scooped up the photograph, thrust it into his pocket and was heading for the door. . . .

**F**OR three hours the same questions had been hammered into Poynton's brain. But the doctor, a trifle grayer, a

trifle stiffer, seemed to have lost none of his iron control. For three hours Mason and his men had been grilling him. His calm answers had infuriated the chief of detectives.

No, he had no idea why Romain's murderer had rifled the desk or what he'd been after . . . . As for Corning, he had known him for thirty years. They had been to medical school together, but he knew nothing about his murder. That night, the night after Corning dropped him at his apartment, he had gone out again, walked in the park. That was all.

"One moment, chief!"

Eight pairs of eyes swiveled to the doorway. Jo-Jo had made a dramatic entrance.

He waited a moment, then said, "I just thought you master-minds might like to know that Peter Conroy, the defendant in the Conroy poison case, and Dr. Corning are one and the same!"

Mason hit the ceiling. The effect on Poynton was even more startling. For the first time he lost his detached pose. Two crimson spots glowed in his cheeks and he bared his teeth in a snarl of rage.

"You blasted, snooping, little sneak! Couldn't you leave his past alone?"

Mason crowed triumphantly. "So, Doctor, there was something?"

Jo-Jo intervened. "Poynton doesn't have to talk. It's all in the news clips. The rest he's given away himself. In 1920 Peter Conroy, a struggling young physician, was arrested on a charge of lacing his rich young wife's tea with cyanide. He got off mainly because they couldn't trace the cyanide to him. And he faded from the scene. But he came back, decorated with a beard, started all over as Dr. Corning. He built up a new practice on the proceeds of his wife's fortune. He tied up with Poynton here, Poynton who had stuck to him through everything. You'll find that Poynton was the leading defense witness . . . . Right, Doctor?"

Poynton spat at Jo-Jo, "Damn your soul, Peter was innocent! Jane killed herself."

"Why didn't you tell us all this before, Doctor?" Mason asked.

Surprisingly, the doctor's manner altered. He became almost gentle. "For Eulalie's sake. His second wife. She never knew. I didn't want to open up that old scandal. I may as well tell you now about Roman. Peter kept locked up in his desk-drawer all sorts of relics of that terrible trial. They had a morbid fascination for him. Well, now they're missing."

Meanwhile Jo-Jo, unnoticed by the tense group of detectives, had wandered into the adjoining office. This, he knew, had been used by Corning as a consulting room. He shut the door and began looking around. Bookshelves reached from floor to ceiling. There were books on the desk, too, scores of them. Jo-Jo never knew whether it was pure chance or whether subconsciously he had been seeking something of the sort, but the title of one book leaped to his attention: DISEASES OF THE EYE, by J. J. Osler and Samuel Corning.

Diseases of the eye! The title teased his imagination. Almost intuitively he sensed that he held in his hands the key to the mystery of the man who killed in darkness. Yet he could not pin down his hunch. He made a note of the title and slipped out as quietly as he had entered.

A few moments later he entered the pharmacy in the lobby. Charley Potts stood behind a pyramid of bicarbonate of soda tins. His fat, wagging head barely showed above the high counter. As he saw Jo-Jo his face became wreathed in smiles.

"Well, well," he chortled, "Mr. Reporter. Another killing, eh? Tsk-tsk—it's terrible, terrible. How people can be so thoughtless!"

"Thoughtless? Yeah, that's a good word for it."

Jo-Jo stepped into the telephone booth and dialed a number. In a moment Lynn's cool, melodious voice came to him. It was easier now to keep the doubt and anguish out of his voice, not seeing her. Maybe he had imagined everything. He said, "It's me, kid, how are you holding out?"

"Oh, all right, Jo-Jo. But Bob—if only—"

A violent tapping on the glass door distracted him. It was Charley Potts. His absurd, jolly face was crushed against the panel. His pig-like eyes were O's of excitement behind the thick lenses. Jo-Jo motioned him to go away. But the drug-gist tapped louder, bobbed up and down in a frenzy of anxiety.

**F**INALLY, Jo-Jo replaced the receiver, stepped out of the booth. "Say, what's the matter with you? Couldn't you see I was talking?"

"But Mr. Reporter, the red-haired fellow! I just saw him!"

"You did what?"

"I saw him, I tell you. He came out of the building—can you imagine the nerve of that, with all the cops looking for him?—he came out of the building and jumped into a cab. I tried to stop him, but I ain't so a-gile no more. I just heard him give an address and they were off."

"What address? Quick!"

"Yeah, I heard that, all right. It was out Columbus Avenue way—'Six-thirty Prospect Street', he said."

Jo-Jo didn't wait for any further description. He dashed out into the street, hailed a cab, repeated the address.

Charley Potts lingered in the doorway.

The happy, fatuous smile had returned to his features and he was murmuring, "Charley Potts will solve this case, first thing you know. Yessirree!"

Prospect Street, some fifteen minutes south of Mt. Vernon, was little more than a shanty-town of dismal, peeling, frame-houses. In the deepening night, lit by a

single street-lamp, they appeared ghostly, unreal, despite the lights that flickered here and there behind curtained windows. Jo-Jo dismissed the taxi at the corner and walked down the street. His eyes sought number 630.

At the farthest end he found it. It stood apart, remote from its neighbors. It was larger than the others, a big, clumsy, squarish house, but equally shabby, equally ghostly. It presented an unbroken front of dark windows. For a moment Jo-Jo thought he had come to the wrong address. Surely, there was no living thing here.

Then he remembered. Darkness, black, impenetrable darkness had been the theme of the head hunter killings, a sinister *leit motif* that seemed to knit together the eerie series of sudden, horrible butcheries. Jo-Jo squared his shoulders and trod softly and cautiously up the worn front stoop. He tried his searchlight. The battery was dead.

He avoided the front door, sidled over to one of the windows opening on the porch. He cupped his hands over his eyes and peered through the window. It was too dark to distinguish the room inside or what it might contain, but he sensed that the house was unoccupied and unfurnished. Again, the certainty descended on him that he had come to the wrong house. Had Charley Potts misunderstood the address? Or had he deliberately invented the whole story in his passion to play detective?

Jo-Jo began cursing himself for an ass. To be sent on a wild goose-chase by that roly-poly brainless little oaf! But something inside him urged him to go inside, to make sure.

He tried the window. To his surprise it yielded. He raised it wide and lifted one leg over the sill. The other leg followed. He seemed to be in a large, high-ceilinged room. He sensed this, rather than saw it. Unable to see anything, he

sniffed instead. A flat, dead odor assailed his nostrils, the odor of things long forgotten.

His hand found the wall and he followed it until he came to a break, an entrance of some sort. He passed through this and, still feeling along the wall, crept some distance down what must have been a hall or vestibule. His toe struck against a sudden rise in the floor and he stumbled. He saved himself from falling by grabbing at the first thing he felt. A stairhead.

It was then he heard a faint sound behind him, so faint that he thought for an instant it might have been his own step. But, no—there it was again. A scraping, a slight shuffling. Jo-Jo's spine turned to ice. He was not alone in that house. Some one was watching him, following him and *that some one could see in the dark*, for there was no hesitation, no fumbling to that shuffling sound.

If only there was a light-switch, if only his searchlight worked. He tried it again, on the chance. And at that instant a blast of light exploded. But it was inside his own head—with a terrific pain at the base of his skull. As consciousness left him, he thought: Where will they find my head in the morning?

## CHAPTER FIVE

### The Man Who Sees in Darkness

**I**T WAS dawn when Jo-Jo, lying on the floor at the foot of a broken stairway, stirred, opened his eyes. A boiler was pounding inside his head and with each shock excruciating pain shot through his whole body. It took all his strength to lift his hand to his head and feel the damage. He felt the cut, the dried blood which had matted his hair. No mistake about it, he had sustained a brutal blow. But he was alive. That was something.

Slowly he managed to drag himself to his knees. He scrutinized the room. His

intuition had been correct. It was unfurnished. Dust lay in thick piles on the uncarpeted floor. The wall-paper hung in stained tatters. Was this, then, the killer's hide-out?

A thousand questions raced through his brain. Why had the killer felled him? Why, having done so, had he not murdered him like the others? Why this empty house and why—Jo-Jo was staring into the large central room and his heart suddenly missed a beat. That thing on the floor—contorted and bloody and—Yes, it was headless! Like Corning, like Small, like the others, the man's throat had been slashed clean through by some super-keen blade. The head was gone. Where the body had fallen the film of dust had been disturbed, and leading away from the body were footprints.

An impulse caused Jo-Jo to place his own right foot in one of the prints. *It matched exactly.* This merely confirmed Jo-Jo's mounting suspicion. He had been framed. The incarnadined horror had been lugged in while he lay unconscious and the footprints made with his own shoes. But why? How?

He estimated the chances of establishing his innocence. With rising panic he realized that every one of the killings might be laid to him. The law required no proof of motive. Each time he had been away from the office when it happened, each time he had been alone. How could he prove that he was not the inhuman monster who slit his victims' throats and tore off their heads? It fitted, all of it! And when it came to motive, there was his quarrel with Bob. Some one had counted on that, too.

There was only one solution for him now. He must escape. He must hide until he could unmask the killer. He knew the right key. But he must find the lock it fitted.

He turned to flee that house of desolation and death and, turning, saw at once

that the frame-up had been thorough. A patrolman had him covered with a revolver. Revulsion stood in his eyes. He contemplated Jo-Jo as though he were some obscene, monstrous thing.

The cop said, "Your bloody game's up! One wrong move and—" He waved the gun expressively.

Jo-Jo appreciated the hopelessness of his position. He was caught in a room with a murdered man. His footprints trailed away from the body. The story of his wild trip from New York would sound mad, improbable.

Yet there was one thing he must learn from his captor. He faked surrender. "All right, you win. I'll tell you everything. But—how did you know I was here?"

The patrolman, delighted at the prospect of an easy confession, said: "A call came in at my booth. No one knows who made it. The party said somethin' funny was goin' on out at number six-thirty. So I came. Step lively, now."

It was then that Jo-Jo noticed the papers protruding from the patrolman's hip-pocket. He recognized them. *His own copy-paper, lost when he left Lynn's flat!* Cold sweat broke out on his forehead. "Where did you get those?"

"So they're yours, eh? Well, that's real obligin' of you. Found 'em in the garden outside, and since no one's left this house since I've been watchin', that kinda proves you have been here some little while."

Another turn of the screw. Jo-Jo's mind reeled. Papers stolen from him—stolen by Lynn?—used against him to make the frame-up airtight. He felt sick at heart. What could Lynn have to do with the killings? It seemed impossible that this girl he loved and trusted was somehow trying to frame him! His mind rejected such a possibility. And yet . . .

He went ahead of the patrolman. He walked swiftly down the hall toward the front door, swiftly so that his captor had

to walk fast to keep close behind him. Then he staked everything on a wild gamble.

He dropped abruptly to his knees. The patrolman, unprepared, tripped over Jo-Jo's arched back. He recovered instantly, but that one moment of unbalance gave Jo-Jo the break he needed.

He lashed upward with his fist, connected . . . .

**T**HE customers had left the little Italian restaurant on Ninth Street. It was two A.M., and fat, kindly Mama Inez was locking up for the night. As she approached the iron-grille entrance a voice spoke softly from the darkness outside.

"It's me, Mama Inez, Jo-Jo. You've got to trust me. I'm in trouble. They'll say I killed a man, but it's a lie, Mama Inez. You must believe me. I've got to hide—for awhile."

"Santa Maria! Signor Jo keel some wan? I no theenk so. You come. You hide in thees room . . . ."

He heaved a sigh of relief. Good old Mama Inez! He had known this friend would not fail him. Since first he had eaten in her place, she had looked on him as a son.

Respecting his weariness, she didn't ply him with questions, but led him to a small room behind the kitchen where there was a freshly changed cot. He flopped down without undressing. But before he closed his eyes, he scribbled something on a scrap of paper and handed it to her: **DIS-EASES OF THE EYE**—By J. J. Osler and Samuel Corning.

"This one thing you must do for me, Mama Inez—in the morning. Go to one of the medical bookstores in the neighborhood. Bring back that book. It's important."

She promised, closed the door softly behind her. Jo-Jo fell into a deep sleep . . . .

Before he opened his eyes he sensed that some one was in the room. As he

opened them the figure of a woman leaped into focus. Lynn! She stood there, twisting her handbag between slender, nervous fingers, eyeing him with mixed emotions. He thought: So she knew where I'd hide. She's come to finish the job.

Bitterness choked him. He glared at her viciously without speaking. Then he saw her cheeks were tear-stained. She ran suddenly to him and knelt by the bed.

"No, my darling," she sobbed, "don't look at me that way. It's not what you think."

He raised his body on one elbow, eyed her narrowly. All the accumulated doubts, the hurt, the suspicion stood in his eyes. "No? Then what? What have you come here for? To tighten the rope that's already around my neck—for something I haven't done?"

Her burning fingers fluttered to his mouth, trying to stem the tide of bitter words. "No, no, I swear it!"

"How did you know I was here?"

"It just seemed the only place for you to hide. I knew Mama Inez would take you in. I knew she'd trust me and let me in. And after I heard about them finding that copy paper—"

"I don't have to tell you how it got there."

The directness of her answer was like a blow between his eyes. She said, "No. I dropped it there myself the day before."

"You! You did this thing to me. But why, why—"

Again she pressed close to him. He could feel the trembling of her body against him. "Listen, please. Try to understand. I'll tell you now. I've got to even if it means Bob's death."

"Bob! But he—" He ran cold with apprehension. Had he been right? Was Bob Starling the head hunter?

"*Bob isn't dead.* I never thought he was. Please, dearest, you must listen. You must. That night, the night after Romero was killed, Bob did telephone me.

He did say what I told you. Then there was some sort of scuffle. And another man came to the 'phone. He—he told me he had Bob where he wanted him, chained up and helpless, that unless I did exactly as he ordered, my brother would die—die horribly. So help me, I believed him, I had to. I love Bob, Jo-Jo, more than anything—almost more than anything. I was ready to do whatever I was told. Don't ask where he is. I don't know. I swear it.

"The first thing the man made me do was to tell Brand that I heard a shot, that Bob was killed. I guess you know the rest; how he forced me to frame you, how I stole your copy-paper. He wanted to draw suspicion away from himself.

"And I did it. I tried to go through with it. I thought I could. But I can't. Now you're in terrible danger. It's your life or Bob's—and I—I've chosen yours."

JO-JO was amazed to find that he believed every word she told him. All at once his brain cleared, his heart felt light. He could lick this thing now. He was certain of it with a grim conviction.

Suddenly he was taking Lynn into his arms, stilling her agonizing fear, murmuring to her softly: "Lynn, kid, if you'd only told me—" Then, as suddenly, he was again a man of action, a machine. He put her from him. "There's still a chance. Bob isn't dead yet. The killer has no way of knowing you've come to me. If we can get to him first—"

"Oh, Jo-Jo, you don't know. He's watching all the time, everywhere. I feel it, when I go home at night, when I go to the office, eyes watching me, eyes everywhere." Her trembling became violent.

"Steady now, kid. You're going to need all the nerve you've got."

She forced herself to smile at him. "I'm all right."

"Good. Now, tell me this, do the cops know about me yet?"

"No. The description that patrolman gave was poor. But every man on the force is working on it. You can't lay low for long."

"Long enough. A few hours anyway. This is **what we've** got to do—"

A knock sounded on the door. Before Jo-Jo could answer, Mama Inez sang out, "Itsa me, Signor Jo. I got thees book you want."

He sprang across the room, tore open the door and took the book from her. "You're an angel, Mama Inez."

The Italian pointed her jaw at Lynn. "Shesa da angel, Signor Jo."

"Yeah. Maybe. I guess you're right. Look, I'm going to ask you to do one more thing. Tonight, as soon as it's dark—"

"But, Jo-Jo," Lynn interrupted. "It's night already. You've slept all day. I've been watching you."

"Judas! All right then, Mama Inez, right away. Get Frank Martini, you know—the taxi guy who always takes your trunks home. I can trust him. Have him drive up to your rear entrance. We'll be down in five minutes."

"I do, Signor Jo. Right away." She paused at the door. "Pleasa, be a gooda boy. Taka care of you'self."

She left them. Jo-Jo took the book over to the bed and sat down. It was a thick book. He stared at the first page and leafed through the whole volume with quick, nervous fingers.

Lynn rested her hand on his shoulder. "What is it? What are you trying to find?"

He motioned her to be patient and persisted in his frantic search. At last, half way through the book, his fingers came to rest on a short paragraph. It was headed: *Nyctalopia*.

Swiftly he absorbed that paragraph and as he read it his eyes became lambent balls. When he had finished, he slammed the book shut, emitted an exclamation.

Lynn took fire from his excitement. "Jo-Jo, what is it? What have you found?"

"It's—I've got the answer, I know it!"

And then he faltered, afraid to tell her too much, realizing for the first time the full extent of her peril. He understood at last the fearful power that menaced them. Conflict raged briefly inside him. Should he tell her everything now, or shield her from the full realization of the ghastly danger that lurked for her brother—and herself?

SHE tugged at his coat-sleeve. "Jo-Jo, tell me."

"No. Haven't the time to spare. I'm taking you with me. It's risky, but I'm keeping you where I can see you."

"But where?"

"To Poynton's office."

"Poynton! You don't think that he—Mason's given him a clean bill."

"I'm not sure—yet. Come on!"

They made for the door. And—abruptly—they were in darkness!

Deep within the bowels of the house they heard Mama Inez, her voice raised in distress. Then silence. And Jo-Jo, with his newly acquired knowledge, realized the imminence of their danger.

Lynn realized it, too, for she gasped, "He's followed me here!"

He warned her, "Don't say anything now. Stick close to me."

They were in for it. The room was small and windowless, the hall outside narrow and short. Thus, the blackness was absolute, deeper, more oppressive than anything Jo-Jo had ever known.

If they stayed in that room, they were trapped, helpless. If they stepped out into the hall and turned the wrong way they risked the killer's knife—the weapon that would strike from the shadows with lightning speed.

They listened breathlessly for the now terribly familiar steps that moved so surely in the darkness. At first there was only silence. With a spasm of remorse Jo-Jo feared for Mama Inez. It was late. Her patrons had gone home, and the killer had broken in upon her.

There was Lynn to think of, too, and he forced the painful image of the kindly Italian woman from his mind. It was then they heard the steps, almost, it seemed, directly outside the door. The hall was short. A minute or two would bring the killer close enough to strike.

God! This thing that attacked in the

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dark, giving a man no chance to fight, to defend himself! In the dark? Then Jo-Jo saw a ray of hope. He fumbled in his pocket, brought out matches. He whispered an order to Lynn: "Stand back, away from the door!"

Then he whipped out a sheet of copy-paper, struck the match, applied it to the paper. A ball of flame flared in the darkness. In it was reflected Lynn's startled, baffled eyes, the grim resolve of Jo-Jo's drawn face. He hurried into the hall with the improvised torch. It worked!

There was that agonized scream; the scurrying of a man's feet. Jo-Jo lit another sheet of paper. It was the last he had. He could not go in pursuit of the killer, not in the darkness, but this at least had averted the danger for the moment.

He cried out to Lynn, "Let's get out of here quick, while we can!"

She followed him along the hallway, whimpering, "The fire, I don't understand."

"There are some foul forms of human life," said Jo-Jo grimly, "that can't stand the light. Otherwise, we wouldn't be alive now."

They left the house, went on to the Medical Arts Building. But first Jo-Jo bought a flashlight.

## CHAPTER SIX

### The Killer

**T**HIS time Poynton was in. He was sitting at his desk when Jo-Jo and Lynn, without knocking, strode through the door. Jo-Jo slammed it behind him, leaned against the jamb.

Poynton looked up, stared hard at them from behind thick-lensed glasses. His voice was edged with fury. "You again? How dare you!"

Jo-Jo signed to Lynn not to interfere.

He walked to the desk, brought his face an inch from the doctor's. "Poynton, we haven't time to waste arguing with you. We're here for a definite purpose and we're not leaving until we satisfy it—not if I have to break every bone in your body."

He can do it, too, Lynn thought with a strange exultation.

But Poynton was neither alarmed nor flurried. He met Jo-Jo's threat with calm. "You must be a very optimistic young man if you think you can break in here and threaten me. Who the devil do you think you are?"

"Poynton," said Jo-Jo moving around the desk, "you're going to tell me everything about Corning and Small and Romero and the others. You know plenty. You know more than a man should know who's not in jail."

Poynton answered in a tone of such level, unfaltering sincerity that Lynn suddenly believed Jo-Jo was wrong. He said, "I know nothing more than I told Mason. Absolutely nothing. But even if I did, I would make no accounting to you."

Jo-Jo flexed his cheek-muscles. "I hate to do this, Poynton, but by God—"

He moved forward another step. But Poynton only smiled. His right hand slipped swiftly below the desk and reappeared holding a small automatic. "You fool, did you really expect to get away with this?"

But Jo-Jo was not that much of a fool. He backed away from the gun's muzzle. Poynton rose slowly. "I've had enough of your damned interference. I'm going to see to it that you and this girl never annoy me again."

It suddenly occurred to Jo-Jo that Poynton had a killer's eyes. He told him so.

Lynn gasped. "God, you wouldn't dare!"

"Frightened?" Poynton taunted them. "I have a perfect alibi. Two burglars

broke into my office and I protected myself."

"Oh, no you won't," Jo-Jo promised. "That's a little too rough, even for you, Poynton."

Abruptly he brushed past them and left the room. For a moment, Jo-Jo and Lynn stood rooted to the carpet in surprise, then they hurled themselves against the door. It had locked automatically behind the doctor. They were imprisoned.

"Jo-Jo, is he the one? Is it—?"

"Better not talk now. I—" He looked up at the ceiling. The overhead light was flickering. An oath escaped his lips. He flung himself again at the door. He couldn't budge it. He tried the door leading into the adjoining office. The light was flickering wildly. Lynn cried. "The lights! They're falling."

And all at once they were in the dark!

Jo-Jo's voice came in a whisper. "Lynn, where are you?"

"Here, darling, here by the desk. I'm—I'm not scared."

He felt his way toward her and, finding her, took her hand.

**T**HEY stood close, shoulder to shoulder, their eyes trained on the door. The flashlight in Jo-Jo's pocket pressed painfully against his flesh. Yet he would not use it now. Not yet. There would come a moment, he hoped, when. . . .

Lynn whispered to him. "Is—it—coming—now?"

He wouldn't lie to her any more. "Yes; now. Keep up your nerve, kid."

A few seconds passed, only a few seconds. They were eternities. When it happened it was so slow, so stealthy that it was some time before they realized it. Somewhere in the darkness there was a stirring, an almost indistinct creaking. The door was opening.

Jo-Jo squeezed Lynn's hand, warning her to silence. He took out the flashlight and held it like a gun. There was no mis-

take about the sound now. A soft step was gliding over the thick carpet. Lynn made a sudden, involuntary movement, jarring against Jo-Jo. The flashlight was knocked from his hand.

Instantly he dropped to the floor, reached for it. He heard it roll away and his heart became a throbbing wild thing, driven by paralyzing fear. Frantically he groped for his flashlight. A low chuckle drifted to their ears. The man was watching them, in the darkness, jeering.

Lynn felt the steady approach of the stalking killer. He was making for the desk where she stood. She stepped aside, mover to another part of the room. And the steps halted, changed their direction, moved after her.

All she wanted now was to be near Jo-Jo, to feel his hand closed protectingly over hers. She pressed forward, going in the direction of what she thought was the door. A man's body obstructed her—Jo-Jo! But it wasn't Jo-Jo. It was the other, the monster. She opened her mouth to scream. A hand like tempered steel closed over her throat. She managed a little choked cry.

Jo-Jo heard it. His impulse was to rush toward it, but he knew that way everything would be lost. He must find the flashlight. Another second, another instant it might be too late. God gave him the luck to find that flashlight! His fingers touched cold metal! He opened his hand, closed it again. He had found it.

Instantly he switched it on. The beam stabbed through the darkness, spotlighted two figures struggling in the center of the room: Lynn helpless in the strangling grasp of a short, fat man and the man's free hand about to plunge a knife into her throat. But as the beam of light struck his face he released her suddenly, covered his eyes with his hands and emitted a shrill screech of pain and rage—like the cry of a maddened beast.

Lynn, standing closest to him, saw with

widening eyes the man's features. She panted, "It's—Jo-Jo, look—"

"Yes—it's Charley Potts!" And at the tortured druggist he hurled, "How do you feel now, Potts? You can't move. You're paralyzed. You can't stand the light, can you? Not without your special glasses. No victim of Nyctalopia can. That's why you had to kill in the dark, wasn't it, Charley? That's why you made darkness wherever you went, so you could take off your glasses and work fast." An incoherent babbling answered him.

Lynn wasn't looking at Potts any more. She was looking at the flashlight. It was growing dim. She shrieked a warning at Jo-Jo. The next instant the light failed.

**W**ITH a wild cry of triumph Potts streaked from the room, slamming the door shut. His feet raced down the corridor. Jo-Jo hurled himself against the door. "Judas, we're locked in!"

But a thought more ghastly came to Lynn. She screamed, "Bob, if he's still alive—Potts will kill him! Oh, God, Jo-Jo, we've got to get to Bob!"

"Yes, and I think I know where he is, if we can get out of here."

Lynn's shoe scraped against something hard and metallic. She picked it up, handed it to Jo-Jo. "He dropped his knife. Try it on the lock. And hurry, Jo-Jo."

Jo-Jo gripped the weapon, thrust it into the woodwork between the lock and the frame of the door. Sweat stood to his brow as he drove the knife deeper and deeper into the door. Then, using it as a lever, he bore down with all his strength. He clenched his teeth, praying the blade wouldn't snap. The veins stood thick and hard on his temples as he strained, strained . . . The tension suddenly ceased. The lock loosened. They burst from the room.

They flew down the stairs, entered the pharmacy. Jo-Jo's eyes darted to the heavy door behind the counter. He

dragged Lynn to it. They went through. The room behind was a forest of glass jars, bottles of patent medicine, paraphernalia for making up prescriptions.

It was Lynn who spotted the trap door under a heavy table. Jo-Jo thrust his fingers through the ring and pulled. Slowly the trap door lifted. They were staring down a steep flight of concrete steps. They went down.

There was plenty of light there and the killer was prepared for it. He had adjusted his glasses. He was crouched over a figure, shackled by chains to a stone pillar. His right hand, gripping a keen-edged file was raised, was descending toward the man's throat. Another instant and the point would pierce the flesh.

Jo-Jo and Lynn reached the bottom step. Potts's back was to them. He whipped around, saw them. His features went blank with murder-lust. With a wild cry he turned from Bob and sprang at Jo-Jo. The two men's bodies crashed together, closed in mortal struggle.

They went down together, struck hard on the concrete flooring. And all at once there was no longer fear in Jo-Jo's heart, but confidence. It was a human thing he was fighting and with this he could cope.

Potts had found his throat and the terrible fingers were closing around it, but Jo-Jo brought up his right knee sharply, catching Potts under the jaw. His hold broke and Jo-Jo flung after him.

The uppercut did it. It crashed against Pott's jaw. Jo-Jo delivered another to his belly. Potts' body slumped forward.

Jo-Jo got up. He heard Lynn sobbing softly. He drew her over to where Bob, speechless with gratitude for his escape, sat chained. He put his arm around Lynn.

She looked down at Bob and gave a cry of joy. "Bob, dearest, you're safe now."

**H**E WAS not alone. For the first time Jo-Jo noticed that another figure lay

ten feet away. But it was lifeless. Dr. Frank Poynton had been stabbed through the heart.

Jo-Jo sucked in his breath. "Judas! Poor old Poynton. Potts must have been waiting for him when he left us locked up in the office. I was sure Poynton knew too much for his own safety."

Bob spoke with renewed vigor. "You were right. For one thing he knew that Corning *did* murder his wife, and that he got the cyanide from Potts. But Poynton was loyal, never let on about his friend's guilt. Even protected Potts. Then, when Potts murdered Corning, he made up his mind to get him. But in his own way. I think Poynton would have killed him with his own hands. He was waiting his chance. He never even said anything when Potts bumped off two more guys. A queer duck, Poynton, and a killer at heart himself.

"But," Lynn put in, "is Potts just a maniac?"

"Maniac, hell! Look around you. Look at those walls. God Almighty, those shelves are weighted down with morphine, heroine, cocaine. And that isn't all. Poisons, too, deadly poisons no ordinary druggist would handle."

"How did you get on to it, kid?" Jo-Jo asked.

"Through no fault of mine, I'll admit. I dropped in here to make a call when Potts stuck a gun in my ribs and ordered me below. Then he used me to frame you. The rest he told me—everything.

"This was the racket: dope-peddling and selling poisons to guys who had use for them. He cleaned up a fortune. Then he wanted to leave it while his skin was whole. But they wouldn't let him. Romero wouldn't. Threatened to tell the cops, unless he kept on feeding him dope. Small, too. Did you know that guy was a hop-head?"

"Potts had to kill Corning because he'd never be safe while that baby could tell what he knew. Poynton was next on the list. But first he killed Romain when he surprised him rifling Corning's papers. And to top it all he planned to frame some one to take the rap, just in case. He told me he picked up a hitchhiker, killed him and dumped the body in that house on Prospect Street—*hey!*" Bob interrupted himself. "*Why the hell don't you free me?*"

Jo-Jo's face split in a wide grin. "Not yet, buddy. You stay right there until you decide I wouldn't make such a sour brother-in-law."

Bob smiled back. After awhile he said, "Well, I don't want to stay here until Judgment Day. I'll perjure myself. You're a swell guy."

Swiftly Jo-Jo bent down, went to work on the chains.

Lynn, watching, felt a warm glow around her heart. And she breathed a fervent, silent prayer that she would never again have to choose between the lives of these two men she loved.

THE END

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# TIP FROM THE TOMB

By ERIC HOWARD

*Grey old Todd was dreaded by crooks when he was alive; but they sealed their own fate when they killed him—for Todd solved his greatest case from the tomb!*



Sprawled on the floor, he raised his gun, fired.

**U**P ON the top floor of the Great Western Power, Gas and Light skyscraper there is a bare little office with no name on the door. Inside is a grey little old guy with a pipe clamped beneath his teeth. That's where I'm headed that morning. Todd, the grey little old guy, is waiting for me.

He looks at his watch when I go in. "You're ten minutes late," he barks.

"Your watch could be wrong," I said. "Never. Sit down. Look at this." He pushed a green and gold piece of paper across his battered desk. This office of his is furnished with old junk; it doesn't look like the offices of the ten dozen vice-presidents of Great Western on the other floors. The decorated paper is a Great Western stock certificate; a hundred shares, per value fifty dollars, now selling at sixty.

"Thanks." I cracked, putting the thing

in my pocket, grinning at the old fellow.

Old Todd is in no mood for a joke.

"Look at it, man! It's a phoney."

"Nice piece of work," I said. "The signature of Benson, your president, looks all right to me."

"It's a phoney, just the same. We're getting lots of kicks on 'em."

"Tell me the sad story."

"Listen, Sweeney, you're supposed to be a detective, not a comedian. Save the humor for your leisure hours."

"Okay, boss. Tell me."

I STRAIGHTENED out my face and listened. It's a new one on me. Somebody has printed up a batch of these certificates, filled 'em in, forged the names of the officers of the company. A dozen men, most of them prominent, have been stung. It's worked this way: a good-looking brunette moll has the weeps in one of the best hotels, right in front of a prosperous, easy-looking man. The guy sees the brunette beauty in distress and wants to help out. The moll tells him the sad story. She's just come to town; she expected to visit her aunt or somebody, but whoever it is has gone on a trip. She's friendless and alone, and broke. The gent offers her money or makes her a proposition. Oh, no! She couldn't accept anything like that. But she has some shares of Great Western in her bag. She was going to sell them or borrow on them, after talking to her aunt. She doesn't know anything about business—she flutters helplessly.

The guy takes a look at the certificate. It's all right. Of course it's after banking hours, so he can't take her to a bank to arrange a loan. But he's big-hearted. He'll lend her money on them. How much will she need?

She puts the bee on him for all he can stand—a thousand, five hundred, two hundred. And insists that he keep the certificate. If he suggests a party, she's tired; but tomorrow night—all right! He's so

kind to help her this way, and so on.

He thinks he's done himself some good. The moll doesn't show the next night, of course. He doesn't hear from her again. Then he begins to wonder. He takes the certificate to his broker or the bank.

"You've been taken for a ride," they tell him. "It's been done before. Better men than you have fallen."

Most of them didn't holler. But some did. Blamed the Great Western. Now old Todd, chief of the company's department of investigation, is on the job.

"See what you can find out, Sweeney," he said. "Drift around and learn things. You might put that good-looking young feller you used before on it. Dress him up and let him hang around the hotels. The moll might try him. Of course we want the boys back of her—find their printing plant and so on."

"How much they collected so far?"

"Fifteen grand or so, from what we've heard. Maybe a lot more. Some of the victims wouldn't howl."

"You'll be hearing from me," I told him.

"I hope so. I want action—quick."

I HAVE an office in a cheap old building not far from the Great Western. Just a place to hang my hat, take an afternoon nap and so forth. When I get there, I call up Bob Ainsworth, the man Todd mentioned. Bob is a handsome young squirt who hates work and likes easy money; but not a crook. I've known him for some time. Now and then I use him. He says he can come down as soon as he's shaved and dressed.

I told him the yarn. "Put on your best clothes," I said, "and play around the big hotels. Watch for a brunette with sad eyes. If you spot her, give her a chance at you. Or watch her land somebody else. If she tries this Great Western dodge on you, lead her on and bring her here—to get the money. After that, I'll handle it." I

poured him a drink and one for myself. "I'll stick around here every night for a while. You can call me up to midnight."

That night about ten-thirty Bob phones me.

"We'll be right over to get the money I'm lending a lady on her Great Western stock," he said. "Listen, Sweeney, I feel like a dog, doing this. She's a sweet little number—a red-head, not a brunette—and she really looks sad."

"It's an act. She had her hair dyed or is wearing a wig. Bring her down, boy."

"All right. But go easy on her. She's just doing what somebody makes her do. Don't get rough on her."

"A Sweeney," I said, "is always a gentleman. Bring the lady down before she gets suspicious and scrams."

Pretty soon he knocks on the door.

"Come in," I called.

"This is a strange place," a girl's voice says, "to come to borrow money."

"My millionaire friend is eccentric," Bob assures her. "He hates to pay high office rent."

They walk in. The girl is a cute trick, very young, wearing good clothes, including a mink coat. She has large greenish eyes that go with that kind of hair, and lips that sort of pout.

Bob shuts the door.

"This young lady, Miss Greer," he says, "would like me to lend her a thousand dollars on a hundred shares of Great Western. Will you cash a check for me, Sweeney?"

"Sure," I said.

The girl looked at me as though she couldn't figure me having a thousand in cash and still using this old office. But when Bob pulls out a check book and starts to write a check, she's convinced, I guess. She digs into her bag and pulls out the stock certificate.

I picked it up and looked at it, just as Bob finished the check and ripped it out of his book.

"Wait a minute!" I said. "This is no good." I held the certificate up to the light. "The paper's wrong. These signatures are forgeries. You don't want to lend money on this, boy."

The girl opened her mouth, but didn't say anything, just looked frightened. Bob played up his surprise.

"Where'd you get this, Miss Greer?" I asked.

"You're detectives!" she cried. "I thought you were the minute I saw you," she said to me. "You've trapped me."

"Where'd you get it?" I demanded. "Who gave it to you? Who sent you out on this job? Who's the brunette that has been pulling it? Huh?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said, in a different tone. "I don't believe you. It is good. It's worth six thousand dollars. I've done nothing wrong. You can't keep me here. I want to go."

I got up and went over to her.

SHE wouldn't say a word. I felt like slapping her. You can usually make a man talk, if you crack him first on one side, then the other. But a girl . . .

I decided to call Todd. I didn't have the heart to treat her rough. I woke old Todd up and he said he'd be down in twenty minutes. We sat and waited. The girl wouldn't take a drink or a cigarette. Bob looked ashamed and the girl looked mad.

Todd got there in fifteen minutes. He came in, little and grey and hard, with a mean light in his eyes. I told him this girl had taken the brunette's place, had tried the same racket on Bob. He glanced at the stock certificate and nodded.

"She won't talk," I said.

"Get out!" Todd snapped. "She'll talk to me. Come back in half an hour." He turned to the girl and gave her his frozen smile. She looked scared. "We're going to have a chat, young lady."

It was like saying, "We're going to have a murder."

Todd was hard and cold, all steel.

Bob hesitated. But I shoved him out in the hall and put my arm through his.

"Let's get us a sandwich down at the corner," I said. "Don't worry about that dame. Todd won't even touch her; he'll just throw a scare into her."

We had our sandwich, I bought a paper, lit up a cigar and we drifted back. We stopped outside the office door. It was all quiet in there.

I grabbed the knob and pushed it open. I knew something was wrong! The girl was gone—and on the floor, lying on his face, with the back of his head bashed in, was old Todd!

I thumped my head. "What a fool!" I accused myself. "God, I might have known they'd be waiting to grab the girl!"

"It's murder!" Bob gasped.

"Nothing else but," I said, and reached for the phone, to call Hager, the homicide man at headquarters.

There was nothing to do, after that, but to look for the girl and to keep the police looking for her. Some chance of finding her! They'd keep her covered up, of course.

The man who took old Todd's place was a smug young fellow with polished finger nails, soft mitts and a cute mustache. The first thing he did was to refurnish Todd's office with a lot of new stuff and install a good-looking stenographer. His name was Hughes. He liked to be mistered.

I kept Bob on the prowl around the big hotels and the night joints. He might spot the brunette at work, or he might see the Greer girl somewhere. The way I had it figured, she was new to the job. The brunette would never have picked Bob, even in his best rags. She would be able to size them up better than that. The Greer girl, being young and scared, had gone for Bob because he was young, good-looking and looked decent. But the police

didn't know anything. Bob didn't learn anything. We were stuck.

**I** WAS standing in the entrance of the Great Western building, wondering what to do next, when a long black sedan pulled up. There's a woman in black, with a black veil over her face, in the car; a liveried chauffeur up front. For a second the woman lifted the veil—and it's the Greer girl!

I ducked back against the wall. She dropped the veil and got out of the car. She passed me, looking straight ahead, walking fast, and caught an express elevator. I missed it, but when it came down again I asked the operator where she got off.

"Not even widows are safe from you guys," he said, sarcastically. Then I palmed my badge—Hager fixed me up with that, for plenty of favors—and gave him a look.

"She got off on the top floor and went right in to see Mr. Hughes," he said.

"Thanks," I muttered, and scratched my head.

What was this, anyway? A jigsaw puzzle?

I waited until she came down. It wasn't long. Then I stepped up and grabbed her arm.

"Hello, Miss Greer," I said. "Nice to see you again."

She stiffened and then tried to break away. She was strong and dragged me a few feet.

"Jerry!" she called.

Then the chauffeur is coming at us. At the moment the sidewalk is clear and the entrance of the building almost empty. A few men are waiting for elevators. I hang on to the girl with my right hand and try to reach my gun with the other. This Jerry has a tough face and he's swinging toward me like he means business.

The girl gives me plenty of trouble, twisting and swinging like a hell-cat. Jerry

hits me right back of the ear, with a tight gloved fist, and I waver. Then he puts his arm around me and says, for the benefit of those who can hear, "Your father has had another heart attack, miss. Come along to the car, sir. I'll help you." He whispers to me, "Play nice or I'll sink a knife in your back, you damn flatfoot."

I was so groggy that I went to the car. He shoved me in. The girl followed and sat down beside me. I looked at her and saw she had an automatic in her hand, pointed at me. Jerry took the wheel and pulled out from the curb.

I might have made a grab for the girl's gat. I don't think she would have used it. But you never can tell about these inexperienced dames, especially red-heads. Besides, I had an idea they might be taking me somewhere where I could learn something.

They were.

JERRY cruises around as if he didn't know where he was going, just to throw off anybody who might be following. Then he turns into the basement garage of a big apartment house, and a moment later, with another tough baby opening the door, they hustle me to an elevator and we go up.

It's a swell apartment. There's a man sitting at a carved desk over near a big studio window. He looked up when they threw me in.

"Who's this?" he asked.

"A damn' private dick, workin' for Great Western," said Jerry. "He made a grab for Molly."

"Oh!" the man said. "Did you take his gun?"

"Sure," said Jerry. "He's harmless now."

The man at the desk got up and gestured to the Greer girl. She went out of the room. This fellow was a tall, husky, good-looking egg. But hard. I knew he was the boss. He had hands like a piano player—long-fingered, strong, well-kept. He was

black-haired and black-eyed, and his mouth had a curious twist to it. He had a don't-give-a-damn look.

"Sit down and make yourself comfortable," he said to me. "Just what do you know?"

"Plenty," I said. "I know you killed old man Todd. I know you're the boss of this racket."

He looked up quickly at Jerry, an angry question in his eyes. Jerry stared back at him, blowing smoke toward the ceiling. I guessed that the boss didn't know about Todd until then. That was funny, too; the Greer girl must have known.

The boss gestured to the other tough mug and beckoned Jerry out of the room. He came back in a minute and he looked worried and mad. He had made Jerry tell him about Todd.

"You shouldn't play with such rough boys," I told him. "This Jerry guy is a killer. He bashed in poor old Todd's head. You should 'a' seen it."

The boss drums on the table and looks out of the window. He mutters something under his breath.

"What'll we do with this cop?" asks the other tough guy. "We ought to put him somewhere. He knows too much."

"Damn it!" snaps the boss. "We had everything nice and Jerry had to get blood-thirsty. You lousy, ignorant thugs make me sick!"

The other fellow took this as a joke. He grinned.

"What's the odds?" he asked. "It was just a dick he killed. And here's another."

The boss walks over to him and suddenly socks him. The tough guy staggers and makes a wild swing. The boss stepped in and put those big, strong hands on his neck. He held him and shook him until all the toughness went out of him.

"I'll show you two who's running this," the boss snarled. "Now we've got to get out of town. We could have picked up another fifty grand here, using different

girls. And that damned fool had to kill a cop!"

"You had a nice little business," I said. "but one thing leads to another. Your sweet racket took in murder. Hager's on the job. Don't think they didn't see Jerry snatch me. You don't leave town, brother. You're all in it—you three gents, the brunette and the red-head. The red-head saw Todd killed. Maybe helped."

When there's nothing else to do, I bluff. But the boss didn't even listen to me. He stood at the window, thinking. The other fellow rubbed his neck and whined that he didn't mean nothing.

When I mentioned the red-head, the boss went through the door she had opened and into another room. Pretty soon he came back.

He had probably asked the red-head what she knew. I guessed she didn't know anything. Jerry had probably crashed in on old Todd with a gun in his hand and had sent the girl out of my office. Then he had gone after Todd.

The brunette that I've been hearing about comes into the room. She's wearing a white silk dressing gown, embroidered in gold, and smoking a cigarette. She's a luscious dame, and you can't blame the boys who fell for her.

"Oh," she said, very hoity-toity, "I didn't know you had guests, Vincent."

**T**HE boss smiled crookedly at her. "Just business acquaintances, Grace. Come

in. We've got to leave town at once. Jerry messed things up. This dick knows too much. We'll have to leave him here, tied up, for his friends to find. You and Molly get dressed for traveling. Pack just the things you have to have. We'll use the touring car."

The woman looks mad. "Just when everything is nice! You'd better leave him and Jerry here together—for the coroner. What about Ed?"

Ed is the name Mister Hughes' friends call him.

Vincent snapped his fingers and gave her a warning look. She went out.

"Hughes is in it, too, up to his ears," I tried another shot. "Hager knows that. Hughes may be locked up by now. What did he do for you?" I stared at Vincent. "Lifted the blank certificates, huh? Then edged himself into Todd's job so he could give you a hand on the inside. What's his cut? How come you didn't know Jerry croaked Todd? I'll bet you told him to."

Vincent walked over to me.

"You're a pretty good guesser. Too good. I didn't know about the killing. The cops hushed it. The papers said old Todd died of heart failure. Hughes has a drag down there and took over his job. Hager doesn't know anything. I guess we'd better follow Grace's suggestion and leave you two here, you and Jerry."

The tough mug looked scared. "You wouldn't do that to Jerry, Vince!"



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"Why wouldn't I?" Vincent snapped.

"He's my pal. He didn't mean to kill the old guy. He just hit him too hard."

Vincent laughed. The two girls came out, dressed inconspicuously, carrying small traveling bags. The Greer girl looked scared.

"What's wrong, Vince?" she asked. "Why—"

"Nothing's wrong, Molly. You just go down to the car with Grace. I'll be down soon."

"Nothing wrong but murder!" I cracked. "You're a nice looking kid and I gave you a chance. Now you're going up for life."

The tough mug made a pass at me, but I ducked.

"Murder!" the Greer girl said. "Oh, Vince!"

"He's lying, Molly. Go along with Grace."

"Was it Mr. Ainsworth?" Molly asked me.

You could see Bob had made a hit with her, even if he had turned her in.

Vincent shoved her out, and Grace pulled at her arm. She was badly scared, and kind of sobbing, as the door closed.

"Get Jerry!" said Vincent. "He's in the closet, in there."

"Vince, you ain't goin' to—"

"Get Jerry!" snapped Vincent.

The tough mug went after him. Vincent came over and stood in front of me. I saw a gun-bulge in his pocket. He was pretty sure of himself, all right. If I made a move, he'd sock me first, then shoot. He could sock, too.

"You do the pen work on the certificates?" I asked him. "It was nice work, the best I ever saw. You had old Benson's signature just right. At first we thought you'd printed the paper. Now I see you had Hughes lift some blanks and filled them in yourself. It was a pretty good idea. How much did you take out of this town? That pen work—boy, that was

sweet! I'll bet Benson himself wasn't sure about the signature."

He grinned. Crooks eat up flattery.

"Yes, it was good. The way I had it worked out, they couldn't have picked up more than one of us, ever. But Jerry spoiled that." He shrugged. "That's his hard luck—and yours."

I LEANED back in my chair, looking up at him, looking dumb.

"You wouldn't croak us," I said. "Your line is pen-work. You don't want to—"

He was smiling again, pleased by my repeated flattery. I shot my feet up and went over backwards. A second later I was back of the over-turned chair, and he was writhing and groaning on the floor, his face twisted, going for his gun, which was under him. I got up and kicked.

My number twelve caught him behind the ear. He was out. I rolled him over and was dragging his gun out when Jerry and the other mug came in. I felt hot lead across my cheek. I fired and saw Jerry, who was groggy, fall in front of the other guy. The tough baby leaped back into the other room and fired around the door.

Just then the main door swung open. The two women ran in.

"Cops!" said the brunette. "The place is lousy with them! Vince! Vince!"

The Greer girl was weeping, sobbing. I pumped away at the tough mug, then swung on the girls. How Hager trailed me, I couldn't guess.

The brunette threw herself down on Vincent and put her arms around him. The Greer girl sagged against the door and sobbed. The tough guy came out, shooting, and ran for the door. Lead sang all around me, but I was back of the chair. As he caught the door knob and swung the door open, I cut him down.

He fell into the hall, right at Hager's feet.

"What the hell?" yelled Hager in his deep, husky voice.

I never liked the sound of that voice so much as then.

I relaxed and grabbed my arm. I was losing a lot of blood.

"Hi, Sweeney!" said Hager. "Workin' alone again, huh? Not cooperating with the department. No wonder you get yourself shot up! Why the hell—?" He shuts up and waves to a couple of his men.

They slapped the bracelets on Vincent, still out, Grace, and Molly Greer. The other two don't need bracelets.

Hager pulls me up and puts me on a divan, shoving a pillow under my head. Then he tears away part of my shirt and ties it tight around my arm. It hurt and I yelled.

"Can't take it, huh?" Hager grinned. "Gettin' soft! Where'd you be now if I hadn't got here?"

That made me sore.

"What the hell did you do?" I asked him. "It was all over when you got here. That's always the way. I do the work, you get the credit. Say, how'd you know about this joint? One of your men see me snatched?"

He shook his head. "They never see anything, Sweeney. A dead man told me."

"Huh?" I was groggy and that sounded screwy.

"A dead man. Old Todd. He wrote me a letter. His widow found it and brought it down. Todd knew Hughes was crooked, spotted him at two or three things around the office. He knew Hughes wanted his

job, too. He didn't see the connection between Hughes and this mob, but he thought Hughes might try to put him away. I grabbed Hughes and he coughed up his insides. Then I came here—just in time to save your life, you ungrateful son."

I growled at him and he laughed. Then he got up and took a look at Vincent. He knew him.

"The best damn' forger that ever scratched a pen!" he said. "How are you, Vince? I thought they had you in jail in Canada."

Vincent glared up at him out of his black eyes.

"I never saw you before in my life," he said.

"Okay," Hager laughed.

VINCENT and Grace, his wife, got long stretches. So did Hughes. But Vincent and Grace cleared Molly; she was a country cousin of Vincent's, she didn't know much about the racket. They had got her into it, handing her a line about Great Western cheating Vincent out of thousands, and this was his way of getting back. The girl told a straight yarn and they let her off, on probation.

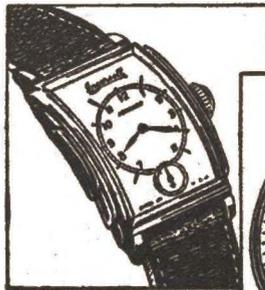
The last time I saw her she was hanging on to Bob Ainsworth's arm as if she would never let go, and he was looking down at her, smiling.

Incidentally, Bob has my job now. Yeah . . . they gave me old Todd's place.

## GIVE AN

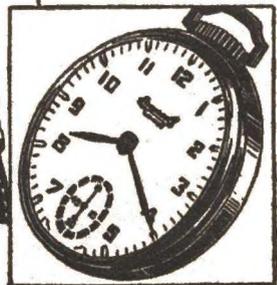
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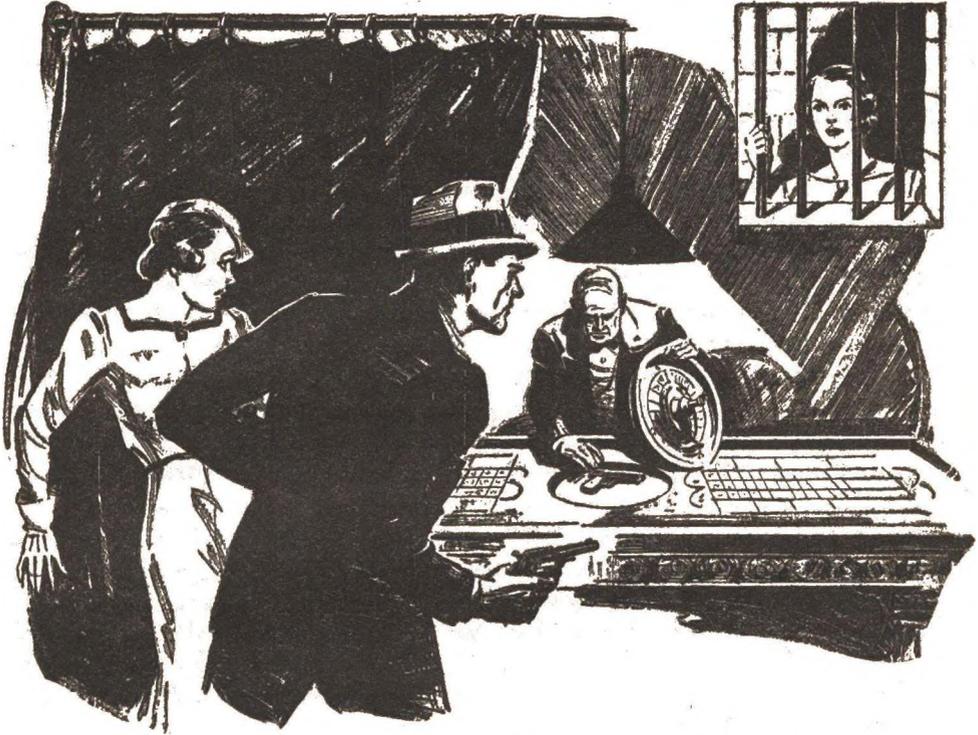
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# THE LADY AND THE GUN

By CHARLES BOSWELL

(Author of "Justice Has Wings," etc.)



He lifted the wheel—beneath lay an automatic!

*Was it the accrued bitterness of a six-year prison term that made Laura Malone break parole—as well as the heart of Officer Connors? Or had she actually committed that second murder? . . .*

THE gun lay quietly in a steel compartment behind a walnut panel. It came out rarely, then to speak abruptly a blasting, resonant syllable called *Death*, shortly afterwards to be returned to its place of hiding. It was a .32 double action Colt revolver, blue-black, with an ordinary hard rubber grip and a short barrel. It looked exactly like thousands of its brother revolvers; yet within its shining barrel were the microscopic variations which, to an expert, would mark and identify every bullet that left its mouth. . . .

A thin white hand pushed aside the panel and picked up the gun, for a time secreted it about a nervous body; then drew it—pulled its sensitive trigger . . . and later replaced it in its tomb of steel.

Following the explosion made by the gun a man—"Big Nose" Dick Cortear—sank to the floor in a pool of his own blood and died. For his murder a girl—Laura Malone—was sentenced to serve ten years in the penitentiary. They let her out in six years and eight months, giving her one third time off for good behavior.

**J**OSEPH CONNORS, parole officer, studied the case. The girl had been assigned to him for five years' close supervision and it was his job to know as much as possible about her. He read the story of her trial and conviction, the reports of her keepers in prison and the remarks of the matron in charge.

She had been a hostess in a swank gambling point called Golden Shadows. Connors knew the spot. It had been run by three men: Reddy Bligh, Gash Palermo, and Big Nose Dick Cortear. One night, an hour or so after closing, Cortear was found dead, a bullet through his head. The girl was arrested, indicted on circumstantial evidence.

Palermo had been a witness against her. He claimed Cortear had been making a play for her, that she had found it hard to discourage his advances. . . . Others testified that the girl had been left alone with Cortear in the club just before the killing. With this evidence the prosecution had its motive and its placement of the defendant at the scene of the crime. . . . The only thing the prosecution didn't have was the weapon. The gun that did the shooting was never found. Despite this the jury, a politically-minded dozen, brought in a verdict of guilty—second-degree murder—and the judge sent Laura Malone up for a ten-year stretch.

Parole Officer Connors remembered that at the time there had been some newspaper talk about the possible innocence of the girl. The papers had commented on the known bad blood between Big Nose Dick and Reddy Bligh—a notorious mobster and killer. . . .

And the papers had also raised the question of the gun. Admittedly the girl had been in the joint with the man. Afterwards she had gone directly home. She'd stayed there until she was arrested. . . . The gun wasn't found in the gambling house, on the street, in her apartment, or anywhere else. Where was it? If it could

have been found and its ownership proven, it would have been a valuable piece of evidence. For naturally the bullet that wiped out Big Nose had its own peculiar markings. . . .

Now Connors studied the girl. She sat before him in a chair tilted against the wall of his office. She was fair, slim, and pale from her long confinement behind grey and sunless walls. Eighteen she'd been when she was sent up—now twenty-five. She was, despite her pallor, beautiful. Her incarceration had left no marring external imprint upon her. Her eyes were still blue and frank, her lips still impetuous and full. There was a grace and freedom in her movements tending to belie the fact that she'd been stuck away in a narrow cell the best part of her youth.

Connors was tempted to agree with the newspapers. In his years of experience as a parole officer he'd seen hundreds of faces trying to look innocent and injured; but now he found it hard to believe that this girl's look of innocence was assumed; that she was really guilty of the crime of murder. . . .

The file Connors had been reading indicated that throughout the entire proceedings Laura Malone had steadfastly maintained she was not guilty. She admitted being in the gambling joint when the murder occurred. Why shouldn't she have been? She worked there. On the other hand, so she claimed, she had not been in the death room at the time of the shooting, not even on the same floor with the murdered man. She had not even heard a shot. Did she know of anyone else being in the club at the time? Yes, she thought she did. She had thought both Reddy Bligh and Gash Palermo were upstairs with the man who was killed. But, she had no definite proof. . . .

But Bligh and Palermo had plenty of proof. They had six witnesses to support their statements that they were ten miles distant from the club at the hour and

minute of the murder. Six against one . . .

And so Laura Malone served time. The gambling business of Golden Shadows was temporarily interrupted, but before Laura was six months forgotten behind thick prison walls, it was going at top speed again. This time it split its profits only two ways.

**A**T FIRST Connors found it hard to talk with the girl. She was, her appearance to the contrary, bitter. Behind the open blueness of her eyes their lay a smoldering yellow hate. She despised the world in general and officers—police officers and detectives—in particular, for what had been done to her. "If there'd been a better job of detection—a really conscientious job—the actual murderer would've been found," she stated vehemently time and again to Connors. "Why, they didn't even make a thorough search of the club building! If they had, maybe they'd have found the gun. Maybe finding it would have been too embarrassing for somebody. . . ."

Connors had difficulty in convincing her that he was not exactly a cop or detective. He explained that his position was one of trust, to her and to the state, and that it was his duty to reinstate her, to restore her standing, in her own eyes and in those of society.

"The first thing," he told her, "is to find you a decent place to live. And then a job, a good job—one that will support you and that you'll be happy doing."

He got her both: a small apartment in a respectable section of the city, and a job as hostess in a smart restaurant. She reported to him once weekly and with each visit he could see that her confidence in him was increasing. She was beginning to tell him things about herself, her job, the people she met. She'd given no thought to her old crowd, the bunch that hung about the gambling hall where she formerly worked. She wanted never to

see or hear of any one of them again.

Only occasionally did she mention prison, the incompetence—faked or real—of the detectives who arrested her and the crookedness of the prosecution that jailed her . . .

But she could not forget the gun—its whereabouts and the identity of the owner. The gun continued to weigh on her mind . . .

Connors found himself looking forward to Laura Malone's calls. They came to be the one bright spot of his otherwise dreary week. He found in her exactly what he'd always sought in a woman: companionship, understanding, and innate charm. It wasn't long before he knew he was in love with her, and despite the fact that she was his criminal ward he hoped to marry her. To save his job he knew he'd have to wait for five years, until she was completely rehabilitated in the eyes of the law. But he could wait. He could—without her knowing it—go on loving her whether they were together or apart.

The first time he asked to see her outside her required visits, she seemed astonished. Later he could see that she was pleased. They went to the movies together. Afterwards he escorted her to her apartment door and left in a state of high elation. From her expression when she looked up at him, from the tone of her voice, he believed she was beginning to be fond of him. . . .

During the next month they went out together a half dozen times. To Connors all that marred the pure enjoyment of these occasions was that she continued to harp on the subject of the gun. She seemed to live with the thought of this weapon in her mind.

"If only I could get my hands on it," she would say, a fervid light in her eyes. "If only I could find it and trace it back to its owner. Then . . . then I could clear my name!"

Connors grew certain the girl was in-

nocent of the crime for which she'd paid. Only rarely did the searing thought cross his consciousness that she might be guilty, that he was in love with a murderer, that he wished to marry and have children by a woman who had killed a fellow human, who might some day kill again. . . .

ONE evening when Connors stopped by the restaurant to see Laura, she was not at her accustomed post. The manager told him she'd telephoned saying she was sick and couldn't come to work. Connors went to her apartment to see if there was anything he could do; she did not answer her bell. Then the apartment house janitor told Connors he'd seen her go out an hour before.

Connors stopped in several places where she might be—the corner drug store, a beauty parlor. . . . He couldn't find her. He returned to his office to finish up some work, but he was too anxious and puzzled to get anything done.

Two hours later his desk phone rang. It was MacKnight, a detective attached to the Homicide Bureau.

"We're looking for one of your parolees," the harsh voice came to him over the wire.

"Who?"

"Laura Malone."

"For what?"

"A guy's been shot."

"Who?"

"Reddy Bligh—one of the partners at Golden Shadows—a gambler and a no good son-of-a-gun!"

"What makes you think Laura Malone did it?" Connors asked.

"Remember the killing of Big Nose Dick Cortear? The guy Laura was sent up for bumping off?"

"Yes."

"Well, the bullet that rubbed out Reddy Bligh today was fired by the same gun that killed Cortear. The markings on both

bullets are the same. Where's the girl?"

Connors faltered. The address was on his lips and then he closed them without giving it out. "I'll pick her up myself," he said instead. "Where are you . . . where'll I bring her?"

"O.K. Saves me a trip. We're still at Golden Shadows. We'll wait for you here."

"One other question," Connors said. "Did you find the gun—the gun that fired the bullets?"

"No."

The parole officer hung up the phone. He was more worried than he would allow himself to believe. He knew that Laura couldn't have been involved in this second murder and yet here was the suspicion of it staring him in the face. Where was she? Why had she called the restaurant saying she was sick, staying home, when she had not stayed home? Where had she gone?

He drove rapidly to her apartment building. Again there was no answer to her bell. He found the janitor, flashed his badge and obtained the apartment key, made a thorough search of her three small rooms. She was not there. There was nothing to indicate where she was.

Outside again, he went to a phone booth and called up every one of her friends whose names he could remember. He called the restaurant manager. She had not been seen.

A HUNDRED questions prodded at the sensitive tissue of his brain. He was certain that once he found her she'd be able to give a logical explanation as to her whereabouts—an alibi. It was his own inability to find her, he told himself, that worried him. But was it? Would she be able to answer as to where she'd been, particularly as to that exact moment when, for the second time, the gun was fired? The gun! The thought of this had troubled her. Now it troubled him. . . .

Was it possible that the woman he loved had murder in her heart? Could there be, beneath that exterior of innocence and sweetness, an urge to kill? He tried to dismiss the possibility from his mind; yet it lingered.

Detective MacKnight met him in the glittering foyer of Golden Shadows.

"Where's the girl? The Inspector's here—wants to talk with her."

"I couldn't find her."

"We'll broadcast a general alarm."

The thought chilled him—Laura stalked like a wild animal, a fugitive. "Not yet," he said. "Give me a little more time. She just wasn't home—that was all. She'll turn up."

"Yeah?" The detective regarded him curiously. "We ain't taking no chances!"

Connors was shown in to the inspector, in the murder room. Reddy Bligh's huge body still lay sprawled on the floor where it had been found.

Among others in the room—fingerprint men, photographers, men in uniform—was Gash Palermo, the surviving partner of the original three to operate the club. Palermo was thin to emaciation, his skin a pasty white as though it had never been exposed to the sun. His hair was black and oily over a high forehead that was creased by a livid scar.

Inspector Devine questioned the parole officer about Laura, her conduct, her work, her associations. He wanted to know particularly whether she'd been seeing any of her old cronies. Connors assured him she had not.

"We have a different story," the Inspector asserted grimly. "We understand that she has been in the company of the mob with which she used to run!"

"What's the source of your information, sir?" Connors questioned.

The inspector pointed an authoritative finger towards Gash Palermo. "He tells us that Laura Malone, since getting out of the penitentiary, has frequently been

out with Reddy Bligh. He says on the last occasion—last Saturday night—Bligh, on coming back to the club, told him the girl had threatened him . . ."

"He lies!" Connors found himself shouting the words. The inspector looked at him peculiarly. Connors was on the point of telling everything—how much he really knew about the girl, that he loved her, that he himself had been out with her the night the inspector mentioned! With difficulty he held this information back. To divulge it would not only cost him his job but weaken whatever he might say to Laura's credit. He controlled himself.

"I'm certain Palermo is wrong," he told the inspector quietly. "I've kept a very close check on this girl and I'm aware of all her movements. I'm positive she hasn't been in Bligh's company . . ."

"You know all about her," the inspector said; "where is she now?"

This was the question eating at his own mind. If only he could produce Laura he was sure she could establish her own innocence, void the suspicion that cloaked her.

As the parole officer was leaving Palermo bowed from his thin waist and allowed his sharp features to light with a flickering sinister smile.

**T**HEN Connors really started hunting. He returned to Laura's apartment, went through all the papers he could find. He copied down names and addresses. . . . In his car he scoured the city all through the night. He got people out of bed to question them. He looked everywhere there was the slightest chance of her being. . . . Finally the realization forced itself unequivocally upon him that she was in hiding. Hiding from what? From justice. . . .

At the first crack of dawn he went back to his office, to await the hour his duties would again call him . . . he flung open the door.

There, sitting at his desk, her head bowed in sleep over the blotter, was Laura.

A breath of relief rushed into his lungs. He awakened her gently, "Where have you been?" he questioned. "I've been looking all over hell and gone for you!"

"I know." She smiled, tired-eyed. "I guess the whole world has been hunting me."

There was a newspaper clenched in her hands. Its headlines carried the story of Bligh's killing.

"Bligh was shot," the parole officer said. "The bullet that killed him was fired from the same gun as the one that killed Big Nose Dick seven years ago . . ."

"The gun?" the girl questioned. "Did they find it?"

"No."

"Oh, God!" She bent her head again over the desk, her shoulders moving convulsively. Connors knew there were hot, baffled tears.

"The police are looking for you," he told her. "You've got to go to them. You've got to explain where you were. Gash Palermo has said you were out with Bligh last Saturday night—that you threatened him—"

"That's a lie! You know that's a lie; I was out with you!"

"Yes. I know."

"You told them he lied?"

"Not yet. First I want you to explain to them where you were at the time Bligh was shot. No other explanation is necessary . . ."

Laura's head came up. Her cheeks wet, her eyes glistening, she looked directly at him. "I can't," she said. "I can't tell them where I was. I can't explain . . ."

"Why not?"

"I can't tell even you!"

Her words stunned him. They were an answer to the suspicions that had been gnawing at him. He questioned, his voice low with the emotion he felt: "Laura . . .

you aren't mixed up in this thing. You didn't—"

"No! No!"

He sank down on a chair, emotionally exhausted. For a time both he and the girl silently, staring at each other. Both started to speak and both sucked back the partly formed words. . . . No longer was there a look of confidence in her eyes—the confidence he'd built in her. In its place was fear, fear of harsh police handling, fear of friendless prison bars and walls.

"You know you'll have to go to the police," he said finally. "It's your duty to go; it's mine to take you."

"I know," she answered.

"They won't hurt you," he told her. "I'm going to be with you."

"All right. I'd like to ask you one favor, though, before we start—I'm hungry. Could I have something to eat?"

"Sure. There's a restaurant across the street."

"I don't want to go there. People will recognize me. By now my picture is in all the papers. They might come after me in there. . . ."

"I'll go out and get some stuff," he said. "We'll eat here."

"Swell."

Connors bought containers of steaming hot coffee, some nut-filled buns, and returned to his office. The room was empty. On his desk was a white note with a single pencilled word: "Sorry."

She had tricked him—fool that he had been to trust her! Fool that he had been ever to have become interested in her in the first place! He ran down the corridor out into the street in the vain hope of catching sight of her. She was gone—again out of his reach. He had no explanation from her as to where she'd been at the time of the murder—because there *was* no explanation. She was at the scene of the crime. She had committed it. She was guilty as well of the first killing for

which she'd served time. . . . These thoughts became furrows across his consciousness.

**A** GAIN Connors searched for her—all day long, into the middle of the next night. He swore to himself that this time, if he found her, he'd hold onto her. Back and forth across the city his car zig-zagged. Afoot, in and out of buildings he went, restaurants, movie theatres. His eyes pierced crowds; they stared down empty alleys.

For the twentieth time he drove down the street on which was located Golden Shadows, a police guard in front of it. Three blocks from the club he caught sight of a girlish figure hurrying through the night shadows toward it. A familiar figure. . . .

Quietly he parked his car and moved after Laura, dodging once or twice behind trees, steadily gaining on her. A hundred feet from the gambling house, sighting the police in front of it, she stopped. Connors was almost directly behind her. He could hear her quick breathing.

What was she about? Why had she come this near the club? Did she have one more murder to commit? Was Gash Palermo, last of the three gamblers, this time to feel the bite of death?

Palermo! A wave of disgust broke over Connors as he thought of that slimy individual. The rat had lied! Why had he sworn that Saturday night Laura was out with Reddy Bligh?

He did not have time to figure out the answer. Cautiously, Laura was nearing the wall surrounding Golden Shadows. She did not go to the gate in front of the mansion but slipped past the corner along the wall running away from the street. Through the darkness, stepping carefully over flower beds and shrubs, he followed. Soon she came to a side gate, opened it; the hinge creaked. Inside the yard, along a hedge-bordered walk, she crept; Con-

nors staying twenty feet behind her. In a moment she was in the deep shadow of the house and lost to his sight. He waited until he felt she had advanced further and then he ran into the shadows. Far ahead, alongside of the building, he glimpsed her. She opened a basement door and went in. A second later he himself was inside.

He could not see but he could hear her ahead. Her feet were on a stair, cautiously ascending. A service stairway used when the house was a private mansion—Connors felt the newel post beneath his fingers. Quietly he went up until he came to a landing, first floor, main salon of the gambling club—now emptied of its jewel-bedecked guests and under police scrutiny. Another flight; the second floor was used as living quarters by the club's proprietors. Still another flight, top floor of the house—Connors knew that here were the private gaming rooms used by the wealthier and more adventurous of the club's patrons. It was here that both Cortear and Bligh had met their ugly ends. . . .

A sliver of light showed itself in the staircase above. A door had been opened, closed. Connors hurried up. Laura was no longer on the stairway. Connors' hands groped in the dark. He found a knob and twisted. A door opened. He peeped through the crack he'd made.

Laura stood in a small anteroom; a curtain hung at its far end and through that the parole officer could see a larger room, a broad gambling table in its center. Laura, looking ahead of her, parted the hanging curtains and stepped out into the main room. Connors followed as far as the anteroom and stood concealed behind the curtains. He watched.

The girl was moving about the gambling chamber, looking into the cabinets which lined its walls. She opened the drawers of chests, table drawers. Her hands beat lightly along the wall paneling as though she were testing it for solidity. She turned back the rugs on the floors

and examined the boards beneath them. She was hunting. . . .

Connors wondered what she was after. Suddenly there was a voice, coming apparently from the hallway Connors knew was outside the gambling room doors—a man's voice. It sounded as if the speaker were shouting to someone else down the stairs. The girl turned the rug back, straightened, and fled on tiptoe into the small darkened chamber where Connors was hiding. As she entered she wheeled around. Her back was to him. She did not see him; yet he was so near to her he could count the quick flutterings of her heart. . . .

**T**HE parole officer spoke to her. She jumped.

"Laura," he whispered. "Why are you here?"

"Oh!" she said, "It's you—you followed me!"

"Yes."

"Why did you? Why did you come here and spoil everything?"

"Why did you run away from me? You know I've got to turn you over to the police?"

"Yes. I'm going to give myself up—in time. Before that, though, I've got to have a chance to do something. . . ."

"What?"

As their eyes grew used to the semi-darkness, she looked at him deeply, as though she were examining the contents of his soul. "I should know that I can trust you," she said. "I believe that you care for me and that you would do anything to keep from hurting me. I should have confidence in you, but. . . ."

"But, what?" he questioned. "I do care for you. I've never told you. I do love you, Laura. . . ."

"That last time," she said. "When Cortear was killed. I was framed—railroaded. I was handled without consideration, mercy, or justice. The police—the

law—treated me inhumanly. In all those years I spent in prison I grew to despise the law, all that was connected with it. You are a part of that law. At first I despised you—then I liked you—then . . . I—more than that. Still I couldn't tell you this thing because it meant so much to me. . . ."

She halted, her breath coming fast. "Now that you've found me here," she continued, "I'll tell you. I should have confidence in you. . . . The reason I couldn't tell the police where I was at the time Bligh was killed was because I had no alibi. I was at the killing. I saw him killed. I was standing right here behind this curtain as we are standing now!"

"Who killed him?"

"Palermo! And I believe he killed Cortear too. Maybe they both killed Cortear to ease him out of the profits—Palermo and Bligh. Maybe that's why Palermo killed Bligh—to cut the business down to a one-man affair. The reason doesn't matter. The fact is, I saw Palermo shoot Bligh. *I saw the gun.* Palermo had the gun. He had it in his hand when he shot Bligh. He and Bligh came into the room together. Palermo didn't have the gun in his hand when he entered. I didn't see him reach into his pocket. He moved about the room—went to several places—spun the roulette wheel—was in here for a long time. . . . Then suddenly he shot Bligh. The gun seemed to come from nowhere. He was bending over the gambling table and then he turned and fired!"

"What were you doing here?" Connors asked her excitedly.

"I was hunting for the gun! I knew it must be here somewhere. It was too dangerous a piece of evidence for either Bligh or Palermo to have taken out of the house. I knew that either one or both of them must have killed Cortear because I knew that I hadn't done it—and only the three of us were in the house that time seven years ago. Whoever killed him

knew where the gun was and I didn't know, so either Bligh or Palermo or both of them knew. It had to be here—in the house. The place wasn't properly searched the first time, either because the detectives didn't want to search it or because they were too certain I did the killing.

“I WAS hunting for the gun when I saw Palermo shoot Bligh. But there was nothing I could do then. I ran down those back steps . . . tonight I came back to hunt for the gun again. It *must* be here . . .”

There was a sound in the big chamber. A door from the corridor opened. A thin dark man backed into the room and closed the door softly behind him.

The man turned. It was Palermo, his sharp face gleaming wickedly. He did not see the couple in the anteroom behind the hangings. He walked swiftly and quietly across the thickly carpeted room to the gambling table. For a time he stood over it, spinning the roulette wheel idly. Then his hands moved purposefully. He manipulated the wheel back and forth, much as a man might handle the combination of a safe. To the right he turned it; to the left; back to the right. Then he shoved at the whole wheel, pushing in the direction of the table end. The wheel, base and all, moved. A panel appeared beneath it. This he slid back.

Laura and the parole officer, peering between the curtain slits, could see a small steel box sunk in the table. The gambler lifted its lid. He reached his arm down. His thin, white, nervous hand came up holding a short, blue-black revolver. . . .

The gambler smiled down at the little gun. Connors voice boomed loud from behind the curtains. He had his own pistol out and had stepped into the room. “Drop it!” he bellowed.

Palermo didn't drop it. His quick fingers twisted the gun around in his hand.

It spoke. A slug of lead winged past Connors and buried itself in the wall.

Connors fired. Blood flew from the gambler's wrist. His gun arm sagged. . . .

Connors stepped towards him. “That'll be all,” he said, “unless you want it in the gut.”

Palermo nodded. He made as if to let the pistol fall from his hand. Suddenly his left hand darted out, caught the gun; again its barrel came up. Connors shot out a heavy foot. The gambler toppled over. The snub, dark weapon spun across the floor.

The corridor door burst open. The room was filled with uniformed officers. “What the hell?” a sergeant exclaimed, amazed.

\* \* \*

Thirty minutes later they were all downstairs in the big foyer of Golden Shadows awaiting the arrival of the inspector. A ballistics man had already examined the gun and the last bullet fired from it. “It's the same,” he told them. “This is the gun that fired the other two bullets—the ones that killed Bligh and Cortear.”

The inspector rushed in. He saw Laura standing alongside Connors. “You've found the girl!” he shouted. “Congratulations!”

“More than that!” Connors said. He told the story. Inspector Devine listened in astonishment. At the end he turned to the girl: “Well, miss, I guess that lets you out!”

“It does something else,” Connors said. “It'll get her an annulment of conviction in the case for which she served time!”

“Sure it will,” the inspector agreed. “Say—she's something of a detective herself, ain't she? Maybe I better take her on my payroll.”

“Nothing doing,” Connors replied as he drew Laura close. “I've got a place for her on mine—and I don't mean parole work, either!”

# THE DEVIL'S CLINIC

By NORVELL W. PAGE

(Author of "Crime's  
Capital City.")



*Could Owen Masters, with only a brave, grey-eyed girl and a fearless young doctor as his allies, hope to defeat the criminal overlord who drew his bloody profits from the sanity and the lives of innocent children? The dramatic, breathtaking story of a detective who lived two lives—and risked them both!*



## Another Owen Masters—Robert Storm Novelette

### CHAPTER ONE

#### Prescription for Health

O WEN MASTERS flung the coupe around the corner into Beasy and laid it against the curb. Intelligent grey eyes swept the dusk-filled street, lingered over a cavernous doorway near at hand, shot beyond. Two blocks away, a girl scurried through the white pool beneath a street light. She threw a re-

strained, fleeting glance about, ran a few steps as she mounted the curb.

Masters' lean, long fingers snapped open a satchel beside him and took out a smooth grey wig; busy black artificial brows. It was a work of moments to apply them, but—on the point of slipping to the pavement—he halted and stiffened in the seat. On the skirts of that white pool through which the girl had dived, there was movement, a furtive shifting of the shadows!

Masters' hand moved momentarily to the clip holster beneath his right arm, then, with a litheness that was somehow wary, he slid to the walk. The phone



Crouched behind the bed he fired at the writhing forms in the flames.

call had seemed entirely genuine, but powerful enemies sometimes work very subtly—and God knew the crooks who ruled Hudson City were his enemies and powerful! Masters moved toward the nearby doorway with a slouching, long stride and his height seemed shortened by inches. His square shoulders were stooped now and his head thrust forward as if too heavy for erect support. He could hear the flurried tapping of the girl's heels, heard them skip into a run. No other sound—and yet he was aware he had seen the shadows behind her shift as if a man had dodged about the edges of that light!

As he turned into the doorway, the girl's voice reached out to him, low and, somehow, desperate:

"Mr. Storm!"

Masters stood motionless in the dark entry while the girl's dusk-blurred figure took rapid form. She was running again.

"You are . . . Mr. Storm? Mr. Robert Storm?"

Masters' eyes which, falsely shadowed, seemed set deeply in his head, studied the girl. A vagrant ray of light made a gleaming aura in a lock of hair. Her eyes shone, wide open and frightened.

"You are Melinda Moore," he said, his voice deep. "My office is upstairs."

The girl drew back when he made way for her to precede him. "There isn't time!" she protested. No mistake about it this time. There was desperation in her voice. Her hands kneaded a small purse, grey like her suit. "Oh, please! Can't you go with me now! Without waiting!"

**T**HE shadows hid the slight smile that moved Masters' thin lips. Secretively, his eyes stabbed off into the darkness. Whoever had followed the girl was motionless somewhere in the canyon of darkness that was the street. A trap for him, or for the girl?

"You're wasting time!" Masters said gravely and once more indicated the worn

wooden stairs that led upward. The girl's teeth gleamed as she set them on her lip. She fled before him, stood twisting the purse while, deliberately, he unlocked a door whose legend read:

### ROBERT STORM Investigations

The office was barren, even dingy. Masters locked the outer door before he seated Melinda Moore and moved behind a battered desk.

"Can I trust you?" she blurted. "Oh, that's foolish! I've got to. There's nobody to turn to. Tom will keep on fighting. I think they'll kill him next!"

Melinda Moore was younger than Masters had thought her at first; perhaps twenty-one. Her eyes were violet and very large. Shadows lay beneath them. There was a tremor in her full soft lips.

"Fighting what?" Masters asked quietly.

Melinda Moore jumped to her feet, beat the desk softly with her purse. It made a heavy, solid sound. Was it done to cover up footsteps on the stairs?

"The crooks that run Hudson City!" she cried. "The criminals who sell horrible drugs to school children and the politicians who protect them! That's who he's fighting!"

A gleam shone briefly in Masters' deep-set eyes and once more a faint smile touched his straight mouth.

"That's a dangerous way to treat a gun," he said quietly. "Better put your purse down."

Melinda looked at her purse, flushed. "How did you know?"

Masters moved one stooped shoulder, looked downward as he strained his ears. He moved a finger idly and a tendon like a pencil slid under the pale skin. He had gained that hard strength in prison, in order to escape. The name Robert Storm had been born on that day.

Since then, Owen Masters had been vindicated and there was no need for "Storm" to survive. But in clearing himself, Masters had made enemies among the political powers. And yet, had there been no whispers of menace, Masters knew he would have fought on anyway. Five years behind the bars had incubated a burning hatred for the political corruption that could imprison an innocent man. So "Storm" sought investigations. . . . He decided abruptly that he trusted Melinda Moore. He shifted his weight forward a little, speaking rapidly in a low voice.

"A newspaper friend phoned that you, Melinda Moore, a nurse, had asked publicity for a Dr. Thomas Harris. This Harris ran across school children drug addicts in clinical work and went to the police. Afterward, he was kicked out of the clinic and other oppressions began. The newsman couldn't print it and sent you to me. Now, why the hurry to return to Harris?"

The girl's eyes clung to Storm's face. She wet her lips. "Tom—Dr. Harris—learned from a patient that drugs were being peddled in City Hospital. He went to the Chief of Staff and got laughed at. He threatened to go to the government. . . ."

Storm came sharply to his feet, "The damned fool," he said softly. "The damned fighting fool. How long ago did this happen?"

"Just a little while before I left!" Melinda cried. "Oh, you understand now. I . . . I haven't much money, but what I have. . . ."

**T**HE telephone rang. Storm was already half way to the door and he turned and looked at it, eyes glinting under the heavy brows. Melinda watched him. In a long stride, he caught up the instrument.

"Robert Storm," he said quietly, then

listened while the phone made rasping noises. "I see. I don't think I got the name. Captain Dickens? Thanks for the tip. . . What will I do?" he laughed softly. "Why, Captain Dickens, that's my business!"

He cradled the phone gently and sprang to the door, unlocked and wrenched it wide in one movement. He did that with his right hand and his left hovered at his coat lapel.

"Forgive me if I precede you, Miss Moore," he called softly and went leaping down the stairs. Before he had the door of the coupe unlocked, an automobile turned into Beasy from Market—three blocks away.

"Stay back!" he called, but the girl was already running toward him. He caught the gleam of metal in her fist.

"I can shoot," she said steadily. "Tom taught me."

Masters shook his head, "I don't think it's come to that yet. Get in." The car trundled past just as he kicked the motor to life. He whirled in a tight U-turn in its wake but the machine dawdled and he was in a hurry.

"I . . . I feel better already," Melinda whispered. "Who was that on the telephone?"

"That," said Masters thoughtfully, "was Captain Dickens, a police official. He thought it would be unwise for me to take your case. It seems there's going to be a warrant out for you." He laughed harshly. How well he recognized in these two the futile buzzings of innocents caught in the politico-criminal web of Hudson City! Tom Harris had more courage than sense! Masters' mobile lips made a painful line. Five years ago, he, too, had made some such weak sounds when the web had closed. But the years between had been . . . tempering. He flashed a glance into the mirror. That machine was trailing, but there was no time to dodge them. The phone call had shown that. He ground

down on the accelerator and shot ahead.

It was twelve minutes past seven by the dashboard clock when Masters spun the coupe into Akins Avenue and braked to a halt behind a parked car. A sign in the lighted window of a small apartment building read: "*Dr. Thomas Harris, M. D.*" As Masters sprang to the pavement, the sign leaped and the window smashed out into the street. Its shards made a tinkling sound. Inside a man groaned. Masters was already bounding for the door when the girl cried out, the sound blending strangely with the rising squeal of skidding tires. The sedan that had been trailing him slammed into the back of the coupe and three men exploded from it.

"All right, punk!" one of them called. "You asked for it!"

In the moment of silence that followed, Melinda Moore's automatic made a flat, spiteful sound.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Counselor Death

**A**N instant after the girl's shot, Owen Masters' own gun was level and ready.

"Back into that car, fools!" he ordered in Storm's deep, rasping voice. "Next time we shoot *at* you—not over your heads."

The three men stood irresolute, spotlighted by illumination from within the building and by the corner street lamp. Masters swore under his breath. In the doctor's office, something crashed to the floor. The doors behind him jarred in their frames.

"Back, damn you!" he cried. "I'll count five!" He thrust out his gun so that light glinted along the barrel. "Linda, take the one nearest you. I'll take the man behind him and we'll both get the third ape. Now. *One . . . two . . .*"

With a frantic curse, one of the men scrambled into the car and the others

broke after him. Melinda spun and ran toward Masters. He heard her breath come in dry, rasping sobs. She was fumbling in her purse. Masters stood rock-firm with his gun lined on the car. Something damnably strange about gangsters who fell away before a leveled gun. The reason could only be that their orders did not include killing . . . yet.

Masters waited until Melinda had unlocked the apartment door, then sprang through and past her. He wrested her automatic away.

"No shooting in here," he ordered curtly and bounded ahead toward the office door. This would have to be lightning swift. Those three outside undoubtedly were in league with the men who were attacking Tom Harris. Within minutes, they would close in. Masters flung against the office door. It was locked. The automatic, held flat in his left hand, smashed the glass and he reached through, unfastened it and bounded inside, all in one fluid continuous movement. The waiting room was a shambles, but the sounds of battle came from beyond. Masters hurled an overturned sofa and went charging into the surgery.

In one quick sweep, his eyes took in the scene. Behind the barricade of an overturned desk, Dr. Harris crouched, a smallish, badly beaten man, holding a long-bladed scalpel like a sword. Blood streamed from a cut across his temple and his clothes hung in tatters. His left arm hung limp. Creeping in on him from both sides were two thugs. They wore brass-knucks and each held a blackjack ready. Their faces snarled with anger and it was plain that, though both were hulking men, they were far from unscathed in the battle. So quick had been Masters' entrance after the smash of glass that one of them had only started to meet him when Masters leaped to the attack.

Laughter whipped from his lips. He ducked under the sweeping chop of a

blackjack blow and sprang on the other man, whose back still was half turned. In midleap, his right arm clamped about the man's head. With a twist of his body, he hurled the thug across his hip and sent him crashing against the wall. The doctor took a staggering stride forward to take the second man, but he was too weak, too slow. The thug whirled, jerked up his blackjack — and Melinda popped in through the doorway. She held a big vase in both hands and she smacked it down across the thug's neck and shoulders, began to beat his back with both fists. Masters stepped in and swung.

**WITH** the continuation of the movement, Masters sprang into the waiting room. He had no need to see the effects of his blow—and there were three other men. He threw a quick glance out the window. The car was gone! Swearing under his breath, he raced for the hallway. It was empty. He whirled back into the office; a deep frown dented his forehead. This was wrong, all wrong. He had to find out—

Harris was sitting, very erectly, on the overturned desk while Melinda dabbed at his forehead with antiseptic. He had a hard-boned, lean face with a thrust of jaw that Masters liked at once; the brows and eyes of an idealist. They made him seem young, terribly vulnerable. Masters swore at him irritably.

"What happened?" he demanded. He could see the effort it was costing Harris to sit so erectly.

"They came early for my evening office hours," Harris said slowly. "They were waiting outside the door. When I unlocked it, one of them hit me across the temple and the other across the kidneys. Then they beat me. It . . . it took me by surprise."

"It would!" Masters jeered at him. "You fly in the face of the political gods and haven't got sense enough to recognize

two thugs when you see them." He liked the man and it made him angry. The man's jaw was getting a stubborn set. "Will you listen to me?" Masters demanded.

Melinda finished with the head job and touched his arm. It made Harris white to the lips. "That's broken," he said. "You'll have to get me to the hospital. I think the third and fourth ribs on the left are fractured also. Sir, I don't know who you are," he addressed Masters, "but your arrival was certainly timely. I don't think they would have killed me, but they would have put me in the hospital for weeks. As it is, I shall be able to make my rounds tomorrow."

Masters stood over him. "I admire nerve," he said shortly, "but not foolishness. If you think they're through with you, you're crazy. What I don't see is why . . . Listen, we've got to call the police before other people do—if they haven't already. There's something crooked as hell brewing here."

He took a short turn up and down the wrecked office, beating his left fist softly into his palm. He stooped over the man he had thrown against the wall, crossed back to the other thug and squatted over him.

"Bring this man around, Miss Moore," he ordered sharply, "then phone the police!" He threw back the man's coat and cursed raggedly. "These men have got detective's badges on! Here's a warrant, two warrants . . ." His eyes shuttled across the pages. "Never mind bringing him around. *Call the police, damn it!*"

"But if they're police . . ." Harris began slowly.

Masters whipped to his feet. "Don't you see? They'll claim you were resisting arrest. You've got to behave just as if two thugs jumped you and you don't know anything about these warrants—which you didn't, I gather."

Harris said stiffly, "Of course not!"

Masters heard Melinda put in the call. "Tell them just what happened," he called rapidly. "Two thugs beat up Dr. Harris. Don't mention the badges or the warrants." He faced Harris. "These warrants charge you and Miss Moore with performing an illegal operation on a girl named Thelma Lawson. She died. There are no details!"

Dr. Harris struggled to his feet. "Thelma Lawson? Illegal operation . . ."

"Think, man!" Masters snapped.

"I've no need to think!" Harris snapped back. "I never heard of the girl and I never performed an illegal *curetage* in my life. Why, confound it, they can't do a thing like that!"

Masters laughed shortly. "You'd be surprised!" He took another quick turn up and down the room, looked down again at the papers, lifted them close to his eyes, then bent and thrust them back into the pocket of the unconscious man. "Im going," he said curtly. "Tell the police who I am and the rest of it. One of us has got to keep out of jail."

He heard the girl cry out after him, but his long-striding legs did not slow. When he sprang into his coupe, sirens were sounding in the distance. He kicked the starter and—nothing happened! He wasted no time, but flung from the car and ran. If he had needed proof of a frame-up, he had it now. The job of those three men who had followed him was to make sure that he, as well as Harris and the girl, fell into police hands. And they had almost succeeded. He ducked around the corner as a radio car came squealing into the street behind, cut his run to a swift walk.

The young doctor had certainly stirred up hell in a great big way, if the dope ring found it necessary to use Jake Steiner as a lawyer. But Steiner had made out those warrants on his own office forms . . . Masters' eyes glinted under his heavy brows as he signaled a taxi and gave

Steiner's office address as he had read it on the warrants. The whole thing might have been intended as a bluff. The beating as well as the warrants, was a threat to run Harris and the girl out of town. It was plain they didn't know Harris very well. That young man wouldn't bluff worth a damn!

Masters found his bitter lips curving in a smile. You had to like a fighting fool like that. However, Steiner wouldn't do a thing like that unless he had the evidence to back up the charges. It was a bluff—with a wallop behind it. There was such a girl as Thelma Lawson all right, and she had been operated on illegally and afterward died. Of that, there could be no doubt. There would be proof that Harris was responsible, God help him! He'd need a miracle to beat this rap. Masters' mouth drew out in harsh, uncompromising lines. He'd get Harris off, even if—Masters lifted his hands before his face and closed the fingers slowly as if about the throat of an enemy. There was a sense of intolerable strength and menace in the gesture.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Counselor Death

THE building watchman admitted Owen Masters at once when he mentioned an appointment with Steiner. Masters' guess that the lawyer would be waiting was further confirmed by bright lights within his office which made the name, painted on the door, stand out in strong black relief. The door was locked. Masters rapped imperatively.

It took several minutes of that before the door was jerked open. Steiner had his hand in his coat pocket and the pocket bulged too much to contain merely a hand.

"Look, counselor," Masters spoke rapidly in a whining voice. "I know this ain't no time to come to you, but . . ."

"It certainly isn't!" Steiner cut him short. "Call my secretary if you want an appointment."

He stepped back, moving swiftly for a man of his size. When Masters blocked the door, almost cringingly, Steiner threw back his large, bald head. His eyes were luminous, almost bulging, and they gave him a haughty look.

"Please, counselor," Masters kept up his pose of cringing. "This . . . this is damned important. It's going to break tonight and . . . Look." Masters fumbled a wallet out of his inner pocket, fingered out a thick sheaf of bills. "He gave me fifteen hundred for a retainer. It's a murder rap."

Steiner hesitated, then jerked his head for Masters to enter. "For a murder rap, the retainer is twenty-five hundred," he said shortly, "but I'll talk with you. The inner office."

Masters said, with relief, "Thanks, counselor." His tread on the soft carpet of the inner office was gingerly. He tucked his hat under his arm and began to count out money, mumbling the tally. "He only give me two grand in all, counselor," he said, "but I guess he can raise it. He's got to."

STEINER sat down behind the desk and the hooded light, bouncing off the desk, made a hard glitter in his protuberant eyes. "Who sent you? Who are you?"

"I'm a private dick," Masters told him, tonguing his lips. "Robert Storm's the name. I got a office down in . . ."

"Who—sent—you?" Steiner rapped his knuckles on the desk.

Masters looked around for a chair, found one and pulled it toward the desk. He sat on the edge of it and hunched himself forward confidentially. "It's this way, counselor," he spoke in a low, apologetic tone. "This client don't want me to tell his name unless you're going to take the case and he didn't give me enough re-

tainer, so I don't know what to do. Maybe if I could call him up . . ." He stretched out a hand for the phone on Steiner's desk.

Steiner swore under his breath, took the phone away. "There's one in the outer office you can use. I'm expecting a call. Now listen, I've got enough of this foolishness. Either come clean or get out."

Masters hid the triumphant gleam in his eyes. That would be the call about Harris; the one he had come to overhear. He'd have to stall. "If you'd just let me use the phone," Masters hesitated. "This bird hired me to keep an eye on his wife, see, and he goes with me to the hotel where I tracked her. When we bust in, she's croaked, and . . ."

"What's he afraid of, then?"

Masters grinned slyly, "Well, he knew what room to go in before I told him, and he tried to put his fingerprints around in the room, but I wouldn't let him touch the gun. He got scared as hell."

Steiner grinned slowly. "Oh, that way, eh? Listen, can he stand five grand? It'll be worth your while."

Masters stood up, grinning more widely. He winked. "You let me use that phone."

Steiner showed him a telephone and went back into his inner office, and while Masters was pretending to make a call the phone inside buzzed faintly. Masters made the door in one long stride and fingered the knob until he could open it a slit. Steiner was hunched over the instrument.

"The damned fools!" he cried softly. "All right. All right, I'll get over right away with the affidavits. Yes, I'll call Doxie. Who was the guy that busted it up? Who . . . Robert Storm! Wait, hold that wire!"

Masters whirled from the door and crossed the room in two silent bounds, crouched behind a desk. Steiner came out of the inner office with his gun in his

fist, threw a quick look around; darted toward the outer door. Masters' lips drew back in a smile. He exploded from behind the desk and his long fingers closed on Steiner's gun hand. Steiner tried to whirl around, but the other hand had slid over his shoulder and was clamped under his chin, pulling his head the other way. Masters stood easily on braced legs and let the strength flow down into his hands.

"I can crush your hand, or break your neck, Steiner," he said softly. "Let go."

The gun clattered to the floor and Steiner uttered a gasp of pain. Masters let go his hand and brought up his right fist to clip him just under the ear. Afterward, he carried Steiner swiftly into the inner office, caught up the phone.

"STORM was just here," he said excitedly in a muffled, husky voice, "but he got away. I'll be over." He clanged up the phone, and stooped over Steiner. The blow had been light, but the lawyer was still out cold. Masters glanced at his own fingertips. The collodion coating was intact. He ran swiftly through desk drawers, found a brief case and rifled through its papers. He swore under his breath. He had been right about the formidability of the case against young Harris. There was an affidavit from a man named Samuel Bigger saying that Thelma Lawson was his fiancee, that they were going to be married, but that Dr. Harris had told them they were both too young and had advised the operation which proved fatal. There was an affidavit from Thelma's uncle, with whom she lived. . . .

Storm bent over Steiner's unconscious body and went through his pockets, took out a half dozen calling cards. His plan was not completely formed, but these would help him to get those who had sworn out the affidavits to talk. And there was something strange about that Bigger affidavit, very strange. Men involved with a girl in a case like that usually ducked for

cover. Steiner made a small, moaning sound, tossed a hand. Storm thrust the papers back in the brief case and raced out of the office with it. Steiner would have duplicates, of course, but they wouldn't bear signatures. It would delay for a while the action against Harris.

It took Storm a half hour by taxi to reach the apartment house in which Samuel Bigger lived, and during that time he lay back against the cushions and kept his eyes closed. By now, there was a warrant out charging him with assault on officers of the police, hindering an arrest; and shortly Steiner would add assault and theft warrants. Fortunate that it was Robert Storm and not Owen Masters who did these things; very fortunate. A slow smile moved the solid lips. Any man of his acquaintance would call him mad for hurling himself against such powerful enemies, even if there were a huge fee involved. And there was no fee at all—none except that he battled the old enemies of corruption and crime; that he fought everyman's struggle for innocence and justice. They were swell kids, Tom Harris and Melinda.

Masters moved his powerful shoulders impatiently. He had done nothing so far except to involve himself in difficulties with the police. The petty delay he would accomplish by the theft of the affidavits would be more than wiped out by the consequent suspicion of Harris. . . . Steiner had mentioned a man named Doxie. Masters knew of a Carl Doxie, a ward leader under Boss MacNamara whom gossip once had connected with various rackets, but his part in this case was obscure, unless . . . Masters jerked erect in his seat. One other fragment of information clung to his memory. Doxie, a bachelor, was known as a ladies' man and once his name had been linked with that of a young girl! It was well known that he did not run with the molls of usual racketeering circles. And it had occurred to Masters

that there was something strange about the Bigger affidavit. . . .

When the door of Bigger's apartment opened, Masters bowed with a slightly pompous air and offered one of the lawyer's cards.

"From Steiner's office," he said nasally. "Mr. Steiner requested me to check up on certain portions of the affidavit. Also he wished me to inform you that he may have a chance to sell any letters from Thelma Lawson which you may possess."

Masters seated himself and opened the brief case, fingered out Bigger's affidavit. "Now about the date on which you went to see Dr. Harris. . . ."

"Look," Bigger cut in, "what about this business of selling the letters?" He tongued his upper lip and there was a moist slyness about his eyes.

Masters felt his heart leap. There were letters! He looked up in assumed impatience. "That is merely incidental, Mr. Bigger, and. . . ."

"Not to me, see," Bigger interrupted. "How much can we get from the newspapers?"

Masters shrugged. "Mr. Steiner accepted a tentative thousand dollars, but of course the letters will have to be carefully reviewed. We have a five hundred dollar option. . . ."

"Gimme," Bigger held out a grubby hand.

Masters glared at him to hide his triumph, took out his wallet. "I'll have to have the letters."

Bigger strode out of the room and came back with a packet of letters bound with a rubber band. He held them until Masters had counted out five hundred dollars. He snatched the money, tongued his lip while he recounted. "Boy, this is the best racket I ever stepped into!" he said.

Anger surged hotly through Masters' veins, but he held himself rigidly in check. There were eleven letters and he rapidly made out a receipt.

*Received, five hundred dollars in cash, for publication rights on eleven letters received by me from Thelma Lawson.*

Bigger had just scrawled his signature on the paper when the phone bell whirred. Bigger swore under his breath and crossed to the instrument.

"Yeah," he said, "Bigger speaking. Oh, hello. . . ."

Masters watched him narrowly, but the man's tense whirl was too quick to anticipate. He had snatched a gun from his armpit and its black eye bore straight on Masters' stomach.

"He's here now, Mr. Steiner," Bigger said thickly, "but I got a gun on him. Yeah. All right, hurry up with those cops then."

Masters checked a curse. The man looked too unintelligent to have made a quick guess like that, but it was clear enough. Steiner had told him someone had stolen the affidavit and . . . The devil with that. Police would get here within minutes. Bigger was half the width of the room away and had sidled around behind a heavy overstuffed chair, keeping his gun steadily trained on him.

"Sit down, guy," Bigger ordered softly. "Sit right down like a nice boy and wait for the cops." The gun jutted forward, and the man's trigger finger was white and tense.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Ambuscade

**I**T was useless to attempt to continue the role he had assumed, Masters knew, and there wasn't time to try bribery. He had to get out of this trap at once, or it would be too late. With these letters in his hand and a signed consent to publish them, he had a way open to free Harris—but if police caught him, he'd never have a chance to use it. A way out, a way out. . . .

Masters clutched the briefcase in front of him with both hands. "Don't shoot," he made his voice quaver. "For God's sake, don't shoot. I . . . I'll sit down!"

Bigger laughed and a sneer grew on his lips. His position relaxed a fraction. Masters groped backward toward a chair. He made his lips tremble as if loosened by fear, his eyes very large. And then he tripped on the rug. It was convincingly done. He threw up an arm to catch his balance, quavered again, "*Don't shoot. I . . .*"

He sailed the brief case straight at Bigger's face and at the same instant squatted and dived straight forward. Bigger fired wildly, ducked out of the way of the briefcase, tried to shoot again. Masters' shoulder drove into the big chair behind which he crouched, slammed it backward against the man's belly. The chair crashed to the floor, pinning Bigger under it, and Masters' hand darted like a snake to the man's gun wrist. The gun blasted once more, but its bullet buried in the wall and—it was over. Masters' bunched knuckles drove home to the jaw.

Instantly, he was on his feet. He snatched the brief case, reached the door in three long bounds and whipped out into the hall. He heard excited gabbling voices. A door jerked open and a man's head popped out and back again like a frightened rabbit. Masters took the steps in long leaps. He was two blocks away when the police radio car skidded to a halt before the apartment building. He cut around a corner and found a trash can, dumped the contents of the brief case into it and piled the wig and eyebrows on top the paper, laid the leather case over that, struck a match.

More police rocketed into the neighborhood, but they were looking for Robert Storm, a gray-headed man with bushy black brows and a stoop-shouldered slouching gait. Owen Masters had crisp brown hair and a confident, athletic car-

riage. And many men wore dark tweeds . . .

It was midnight when Owen Masters entered his penthouse apartment, and set to work on the letters Thelma Lawson had written to Samuel Bigger when he was away on a vacation the previous summer. They were pitiful things, those letters. Sammie's friend, Mr. Doxie, was being too nice to her. She was having more good times! Mr. Doxie had given her some "you know" and showed her how to use it. It made you feel so funny and happy. . . .

Masters cursed harshly when he read those lines. If he had needed anything to harden him to the course of duty he had plotted, he found it in those letters. Very plain that Doxie had taught this kid to use narcotics; very plain that because of that her death had followed. A nice kid looking for good times from life . . . Damn a political system that protected criminals and condoned the vending of narcotics to kids in their teens! Lives wrecked so that a flow of filthy money should pour into the coffers of greed. . . .

**A**FTER dawn, Masters caught a few hours' sleep, then was hard at work again. He engaged a private detective agency to locate and put a tail on Carl Doxie and on Boss MacNamara, the political leader of Hudson City, to make reports every fifteen minutes. He had photostats made of Thelma's letters; made some curious purchases at a radio shop and set a lawyer to work to obtain the release of Tom Harris and Melinda Moore in ball which he provided. Dusk was falling again when finally his lawyer managed to get the two into court on a *habeas corpus* writ. The newspapermen ignored the prisoners, closed in about Masters, who was in his own identity. When a millionaire came to court, it was news, especially a millionaire who had spent five years in prison himself.

Masters smiled faintly into the shrewd faces of the newsmen. There was grim restraint in the line of his jaw, a stiffness to the set of his shoulders. He nodded to Fulton Davies, the reporter who had phoned him the first tip on Harris.

Davies grinned, "Mr. Masters, may we quote you as saying Harris was framed?"

Masters' face was completely serious, "Say that I will prove that a fact within twenty-four hours! Davies, I want to thank you—" He pulled Davies aside—"for phoning me about Harris yesterday. I put Storm right to work on it."

Davies was still grinning, narrow-eyed. "He worked himself into a mess. Four or five warrants out for him."

Masters nodded, dropped his voice, "You said your paper wouldn't print Harris' charges. Suppose I could prove Boss MacNamara and Carl Doxie are involved in this frameup? Suppose I could prove both of them get money from dope sellers?"

Davies' grin pinched out. His tight-squeezed eyes bored deeply into Masters'. "What sort of proof?" he asked softly.

Masters' smile was tight-lipped. "I'll take you and another man you can pick as witnesses. You'll need a stenographer you can trust who is also a notary. Listen!" He bent close whispering.

Davies listened intently and his face flushed. "Wow!" he gasped. "Oh my God! Can we print those letters?"

Masters showed him the receipt Bigger had signed, "You can compare that signature with the affidavit."

"Don't have to, Mr. Masters," Davies snapped. "I'm your man. Say when."

"I'll pick you up here in half an hour. Have the others ready." He turned on his heel and Davies dropped his eyes and sauntered away. He said loudly, "Masters is a nut. I think he got stir-simple in the penitentiary. You know what he said?" He whispered to the other news men and they broke into hoarse laughs.

Masters ushered Harris and Melinda into his waiting car, flung Harris' apartment address at the chauffeur.

DR. HARRIS sat stiffly and frowned at Masters, "I'm much obliged for all this, but I still don't see why you should be interested."

He was still stubborn, but there was a sag to his shoulders that wasn't due to having his broken arm in a sling. Melinda smiled at Masters from beyond him. "We are grateful, Mr. Masters," she said, "but Mr. Storm only made trouble for us, you know."

Masters frowned, nodded. "Dr. Harris," he said. "If you'll play this my way, I can get these charges killed—against you and Miss Moore also."

Harris still frowned, "I can get Melinda out of it by pleading guilty for myself. They made me that proposition, said they didn't want to be hard on a girl."

Masters laughed softly. "They don't want this to go to trial, then. Good! Harris, this girl, Thelma Lawson, was a drug addict, made so deliberately by the man who seduced her. Here's the proof." He handed over one of the letters and Harris' face slowly darkened with anger. He clipped out a hard oath.

"Will you play it my way?" Masters asked.

Harris shoved out his square-cut capable hand, "I'll do it, by Godfrey, if it's the last thing I do!" His head was up and his shoulders back again and there was that stubborn jaw thrust out.

Masters laughed softly, feeling again a flood of liking for these two. "That's fine," he said. "Harris, you go to your apartment. I'll send some men to you later. Davies, a newspaper man. Do what he says. Miss Moore, I want you to go with me."

When they had separated, Masters took from his pocket the gun that he once had taken from her. She accepted it silently,

wide violet eyes questioning on his face.

"What will you do," Masters asked soberly, "to save that fine boy of yours?"

Melinda drew in a slow, shuddering breath, "Just try me," she said.

Masters nodded, "You're going to have to break the law," he said shortly. "You're going to have to risk your life."

Melinda Moore met his eyes with quiet confidence and her silence was stronger affirmation than words would have been. Masters nodded again, curtly. "Here's money. Rent a car and go to the Manfred Hotel and register as Hortense Sullivan. Here's a suitcase for you—" He prodded a grip on the floor with his foot—"Keep the car handy. I'll call you in less than an hour and identify myself as your brother, Godfrey. Understand?"

Melinda nodded quietly, left the car and Masters sped back to the courthouse. He forced himself to relax against the cushions. He was placing two lives in jeopardy besides his own, but if he could win . . .

At the courthouse, Davies and two others were waiting. Masters dismissed the chauffeur, and Davies' friend took the wheel. "Boss MacNamara's house," Masters told him. "He was there fifteen minutes ago, probably still is." He picked up a brief case, touched a radio switch in the car. "Now listen," he said.

"Now listen," said the radio.

Davies whistled softly, "How does it work?" The radio mimicked and Masters switched it off. He pulled up his trouser leg. Fastened just above the ankle was a reel of fine wire. "I'm wired for sound," he smiled thinly. "You three will stay in the car and I'll walk into MacNamara's office. Anybody will have to have damned good eyes to see that wire. If they discover the trick—" He shrugged. "I lose and I'll have to work out something else. If I can, I'll leave the microphone behind. This reel unstraps easily and I'll slide both under MacNamara's desk."

Davies shifted in the seat. "God, I'd

hate to be in your shoes if MacNamara finds out!"

Masters smiled thinly, "If he does, or if the wire suddenly goes dead, it would be a good idea to get away from there fast yourself."

Davies touched his tongue to his upper lip and tried a grin. "It's too late to back out now. What's the odds? They don't kill newspaper men in this town . . . That is, they haven't yet."

They were silent while the big car trundled through the night. Davies kept shifting in his seat. "What about those letters?" he burst out.

"They're safe no matter what happens to me," Masters told him quietly, "I'm carrying photostats only. Your stenographer better sit on the floor and it would be best to shield the light."

Davies laughed shakily, "Yeah. Sure."

THEY didn't speak again until the car stopped before the private house which MacNamara owned in the heart of an exclusive apartment district. It cost money to have a house there. Masters got out steadily, paused to fix his shoe-lace and hooked the wires of the microphone over a screw-head in the running board.

"Lay them flat on the pavement when I'm inside," he said, then he walked steadily up the steps. The reel unwound silently and without a catch each time his right leg swung forward. When the door opened, he stepped to the right just inside, while he fumbled for a card.

"Owen Masters," he said quietly, "to see Mr. MacNamara. I'll wait right here." He put a suspicious edge on his voice and glared hard at the butler, holding his eyes. The butler's lips moved superciliously. He closed the door and Masters drew in a slow, soundless breath. The wires were fastened down close to the floor now. He moved across to the other wall and drew the wires snug against the hinge side of the door, laid them rapidly along the base-

board until they were almost to the door of MacNamara's study, into which the butler had disappeared. When the butler came out, Masters straightened guiltily as if he had been listening. The butler glared at him.

"Mr. MacNamara will see you," he said, sneering.

Masters said, "I'll keep my hat." He stepped inside the study and waited for the butler to shut the door before he advanced, and Masters could hardly restrain a grin of relief. The wires lay against the baseboard outside. The door had pinned them when he came into the study. All he needed now to fear was that someone might enter after him and see them lying on the steps. It was dark here, except for the hooded light above MacNamara's desk which he promptly found struck him full in the face. Masters blinked under it, put his brief case on the floor and set a smile on his lips. It wasn't hard. Things were breaking . . . but he would have to work fast. No telling how long those wires would go undetected.

MacNamara had a long, dour face but he could twist it into a most ingratiating smile. It almost closed his small, close-set eyes, wrinkled his long nose.

"Well, well, well, Mr. Masters," he boomed. "Long time no see. Welcome. You're very welcome."

Masters said, "Thank you, Mr. MacNamara. I've brought some letters I thought you might be interested in." He stooped over and drew them out of the brief case, slid both case and the hastily unclipped reel under the edge of the desk. He straightened with the sheaf of photostats.

"Letters?" MacNamara intoned. "What kind of letters, Masters? I don't understand."

Masters said rapidly, "I'll explain. Dr. Thomas Harris has been accused with his nurse, Linda Moore, of performing an illegal operation on a girl named Thelma

Lawson. Thelma Lawson died. These letters I have were written by Thelma Lawson to a man she had been going with, named Samuel Bigger. Bigger is one of those who made an affidavit against Dr. Harris."

MacNamara was frowning, "That doesn't concern me in the least," he said flatly.

"But it does," Masters said. "It does concern you very closely, Mr. MacNamara. Let me read you one of these letters:

*"Dearest Sammie, I know I'm going to hurt you very badly, but I can't help it. Really I can't. Carl—I mean Mr. Doxie—has been so very nice to me I just can't help loving him. I know you'll think it's because Carl has so much money, but really, Sammie dear, it isn't that at all. Of course Carl has got a lot of money and he's in a lot of important deals with men like Mr. MacNamara, the political boss, you know. He told me so. . . ."*

"Wait a minute," MacNamara cut in harshly. "What are you trying to pull here!"

Masters smiled slightly, "I'm trying to prove to you that you'll be interested in these letters. Doxie did a lot of talking to his girl friend. These letters prove absolutely that it was Doxie and not Samuel Bigger that seduced her and made an illegal operation necessary. They prove also that Doxie made her a dope addict. Doxie told her a lot more things, too. . . ."

**M**AC NAMARA came to his feet. "I don't want to listen. I don't want to hear any more of these lies. Those letters are forgeries!"

Masters said softly, "You seem very sure of that, Mr. MacNamara. Why should you think these letters are forgeries? An agent of mine bought them last night from the man to whom they were written, Samuel Bigger. My agent has the signed consent of Mr. Bigger to

publish these letters." He smiled faintly.

"That was a fraud!" MacNamara snapped. "Your agent, as you call him, said he came from Bigger's lawyer. . . ."

"Ah," Masters said softly. "Then you do know something about the frameup against Dr. Harris?"

Masters rose to his feet, too. "These are photostats of the letters, Mr. MacNamara. Would you care to have me read more of them?" He raced on. "*Oh, Sammie, it really seems wonderful that Mr. Doxie should take me into his confidence so. He told me today that he made thousands of dollars a week out of people who sell the 'you know.' The stuff they call 'happy dust.' Of course, he has to pay Mr. MacNamara a great deal of this, but. . . .*"

MacNamara said violently, "This is a frame-up, damn it! Let me see those letters!"

Masters said, "Certainly, these are only photostats. There's a great deal more interesting matter in them, Mr. MacNamara. You'd think a man like Doxie would know how to hold his tongue, but he seems to have been pretty badly sold on little Thelma, who writes such charming letters."

MacNamara said hoarsely, "Damn it, Masters, these things are forgeries. You know they're forgeries! Doxie couldn't be such a fool as—" He cut himself off short.

"As to tell secrets like that to a girl?" Masters put in smoothly. "Why don't you get Doxie here and ask him?"

"I will," MacNamara said flatly. "By God, I'll . . ."

"Now, Mr. MacNamara," Masters said quietly, "I'll tell you why I brought those letters here. I'm not at all sure I could get them admitted as evidence in court, and anyway they wouldn't prove that Harris was innocent. There's nothing in the world, though, to prevent my having those letters published in the newspapers,

and you know what effect that will—"

The door of the study whipped open. "Hey chief!" a man cried in a strained voice. "There's some wires leading under the front door and into here. . . ."

Masters' hand blurred as it streaked to his underarm holster. He sprang backward and covered both MacNamara and the man in the doorway. "Hold it, MacNamara," he ordered flatly. "I'm pretty accurate with this gun." He lifted his voice. "The game's up, boys. You'd better run for it right now! Never mind me!"

The man in the doorway leaped backward and to one side and Masters did not try to shoot. He heard the motor of the car outside leap to life and roar furiously away. Masters darted to MacNamara's side, got his back to the wall where he could cover the boss and the doorway.

"Now, listen to me, MacNamara," he said flatly. "Every word that was said in here was taken down through a dictagraph. Remember what was said?"

"I didn't say a damned thing!" MacNamara said thickly. "By God, Masters, you can't get away with a thing like this. I'll . . . I'll have your life for this."

"Undoubtedly," Masters said smoothly, "if you can. But the letters are still in existence, and I think Doxie will talk if he sees he's caught. Talk enough to get my friend, Harris, free. You'd probably be able to fight off the letters, but you can't fight off Doxie when he talks. Now, MacNamara, walk with me to the front door. If any of your men makes a move at me, it's going to be too bad for you! Understand? All right, *march!*"

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Men Can Die

MacNAMARA was shaking, but it was with rage. Nevertheless, with a gun boring into his spine, he walked stiffly

toward the doorway, where his men were.

"Tell them," Masters ordered shortly, "if one of them makes a pass at me, you get it through the spine!"

MacNamara could hardly enunciate for his rage. "Let the rat go, boys," he said to the two men in the hallway. "He'll wish he had died before he tried this on me."

Masters grinned tightly and took MacNamara with him to the door, marched him to the corner and around it to where his chauffeur, acting on his orders, had parked another car. He waited until he had the motor running, made sure MacNamara had no gun and then pushed him to the pavement. Instantly, Masters was away. A gun roared out behind him, then he whirled a corner and was racing northward. After six blocks of top speed, he slewed to the curb by a cigar store and hurried into a booth, called the detective agency he had engaged to watch Doxie and found out where he was. Then he phoned Melinda Moore.

"This is your brother, Godfrey," he said swiftly. "Here's what I want you to do. You've already rented a car? Good. Drive to the corner of White and Foulard and park. A man will come out of the apartment house at 4614 Foulard. When the right one comes, you'll hear a whistle. I want you to empty your gun over his head. *Over his head.* Understand? There'll be some other shooting and some of it may come toward you. Keep as low in the car as you can and when you've emptied your gun, go to Harris' apartment and stay there."

There was tremor in Melinda's voice. "Is that all?" she asked, and there was no mockery in her voice.

"That's all," Masters said curtly. "I'll join you at Harris' as soon as I can. Remember, as soon as you empty your gun, drive like hell! Can you do that?"

"This is . . . to help Tommy?"

Masters smiled slightly into the phone, "Yes, my dear," he said gently. "To help

Tommy and all the other innocent people of this city and those kids who are being made into dope addicts to fill the pockets of crooks!"

Masters could hear her slow-drawn breath. "I'll do it," she said and the tremor was gone. In its place was crisp determination. Masters spun out of the booth and raced to his car. In seconds, he was boring toward the intersection of White and Foulard. MacNamara would call Doxie as soon as he could return to his home and locate his underling. Masters had to be there when Doxie left the apartment, or it would be too late.

MASTERS jerked his car to a halt a half block from the Foulard apartment house and, within a space of moments, saw a small sedan draw to a halt at the intersection he had named. He could just make out a girl's silhouette against the lights behind. Masters got out and stood beside the car. Minutes dragged past and no one left the building. Masters swore under his breath. Had he come too late?

Just as he had almost abandoned hope, the door of the apartment swung open noisily and a man fairly ran to the sidewalk, staring both ways for a cab. Masters laughed softly, recognizing Doxie. He pursed his lips and uttered a shrill whistle and at the same time began to stroll toward Doxie. He was counting a lot on Melinda's boast that she could shoot. Seconds ticked past after his whistle and nothing happened. God, had she lost her nerve? Had . . . .

The spiteful bark of the automatic was fiercely loud in the empty street. Doxie whirled toward the sound, made fluttering movements with his hands, and the gun continued to spurt flame.

"Lie down!" Masters shouted at Doxie. "I'll get the dirty killers! *Lie down, you fool!*"

He began firing, aiming his bullets carefully over the sedan. The third shot

he did not aim high. He fired it very deliberately, with precise aim. When he squeezed the trigger, Doxie yelped and his leg flew out from under him. He spilled flat on the pavement. Melinda's gun still barked. Masters ran up and knelt beside Doxie, continued to shoot as Melinda's sedan whipped around in a tight U and took the corner on screaming tires.

Windows were flying up along the streets. Masters holstered his automatic and spun to Doxie. "Did they get you after all?" he cried. "I couldn't seem to hit anything, damn it! I'll have to get you a hospital." He lifted his head and yelled at somebody leaning out of a window. "I'm getting this guy to the hospital. Call the cops!"

He threw an arm around Doxie and helped him to his feet. Doxie groaned. He was cursing savagely. "Double-crossed, by God," he whispered. His leg dangled. "Double-crossed all the way!"

Masters got him into the car. "What hospital you want to go to?" he demanded hoarsely.

Doxie was leaning back against the cushions, his white face beaded with sweat. "Wait a minute," he whispered. "Wait a minute; I got to think. If I go to the hospital, they'll find me, and. . ."

"They'd do the same thing if you go to your regular doctor," Masters threw at him. "Look, I know a doc who can keep his mouth shut." Without waiting for assent, he jerked the car into gear and swirled around the corner. He fought a thin, secretive smile that twitched at his mouth.

Doxie's flabby lips trembled. "You get me to that doctor and I'll make it worth while. You got guts butting into a rub-out like this."

Masters shrugged. "Me, I'm out for dough. I'm a private dick, so bullets don't mean a hell of a lot. Most of them punks can't shoot anyway. Look at this bunch.

They fire a dozen shots and one of them pinks you in the leg. Looks like amateur work to me."

Doxie twisted his head around, creasing the fat neck above his collar. "Amateur?" he whispered. He laughed hoarsely. "Oh, my God, amateurs!"

Masters began to talk rapidly, almost as if to himself. "All right, you know who did it and you know why. And they ain't amateurs. Maybe somebody wants to shut your mouth about something. There's one way to beat that racket. That's open your mouth and yell plenty. After that, if he makes a pass at you, you got a dozen cops to jump him. They'll even bury you in a hotel, or somewhere. . ."

"You talk like a fool," Doxie said irritably. "This guy owns the cops!"

Masters whistled softly and put on the brakes, "Say, I didn't know I was horn- ing into anything like that. Maybe I bet- ter. . ."

"Listen," Doxie pleaded, "listen, I'll give you two grand to get me to that doctor and keep your mouth shut."

Masters shook his head stubbornly, "If your pal owns the cops. . . Listen, I got to know more about this business. What am I horn- ing into? I know where we can get plenty for a story about a guy that owns the cops. This guy Masters will pay plenty for anything on the politicians. Owen Masters. And he'd cover us, too."

**D**OXIE stared at him, small eyes blink- ing. "God," he whispered. "God. . . Maybe. . . Get me to that doctor!"

Masters slowly threw the car into gear and got going. Doxie groaned at the lurch. "God, my leg is killing me!"

Masters shrugged, "That might be an easier way out. A big guy gunning for you whether you squeal or not. Your only chance is to get to cover and get protec- tion. Like this guy Masters."

"For God's sake, drive, I tell you!" Doxie moaned. "I'm trying to *think!*"

Satisfied, Masters threw the gas into the motor. Harris' apartment house didn't have a doorman and the elevator was automatic. He carried Doxie in and Harris opened the door, stepped back with an oath. Over Doxie's head, Masters winked at him strenuously.

"This guy's *important*, Doc," Masters said hoarsely. "He wants you to doctor him up and keep your mouth shut."

Harris drew himself up stiffly, but Melinda, white-faced and trembling, shook Harris' arm. "Do it, Tom," she whispered. "For God's sake, *do it!*"

Doxie groaned and Harris' eyes swung down at the leg. His face went stiff. "We'll have to stop that hemorrhage right away," he said shortly. "And that leg is broken. Luckily, I have a can of ether. In there on the bed."

Masters breathed a sigh of relief. He had primed Davies to tell Harris, but there was no accounting for what that stubbornly honest young man would do. He waited until Harris had him stretched on the bed, then ducked back to Melinda.

"The newspaper men are inside?" he whispered.

Melinda nodded, "In the bathroom," she whispered back. "Oh, I don't know how I managed to hit him. I was shooting high."

Masters said grimly, "Don't be a fool. You didn't."

Melinda stared up at him and her eyes widened slowly, but there was something like relief in the lines of her face. "But why?" she gasped. "Why?"

Masters jerked his head impatiently, ran back into the bedroom. Harris had opened a can of ether and set it on the floor, "Say, chief," Masters whispered to Doxie. "There's a guy staked out in the doorway across the street. You'd better let me get in touch with this guy Masters and let him send some guns to take care of you. Will you talk?"

Doxie moaned and tossed his head, "I'll

have to. God, I'll have to! Can that girl take something down?"

Masters said, "Sure, she can. She's expert at taking down shorthand." He winked at Melinda and she hurried away to get some paper. Masters opened the door of the bathroom, and Davies' white face stared out at him. "Get this," Masters whispered. "Doxie's going to confess!"

Masters doubled back to Doxie's side and said, "Start talking. I'll call Masters and make a deal."

Harris frowned at him, but he was preoccupied with working on the hemorrhage. It was difficult with one arm in a sling. Masters held down the connection bar on the telephone and called his own residence. "Listen, I got to talk to Mr. Masters right away. It's life and death."

Doxie said, "Hurry. Damn it, doctor, easy there. Ready, young lady? I'm Carl Doxie and I want to make a voluntary statement. I'm a political leader for the Ninth Ward and I run the rackets there for Daniel MacNamara, known as Boss MacNamara. These rackets include the selling of dope. . . ."

**H**ARRIS jerked erect and Masters stepped hard down on his instep. Harris winced and looked at him, finally understood the elaborate wink. Masters began to talk rapidly into the dead telephone and Doxie's voice ran on, thick with fear, pouring out the statement.

"I'm willing to take the rap," he said, "for my part of this because MacNamara double-crossed me and tried to bump me off tonight. He called me to his house and then sent gunnies to iron me out, and. . . ."

There was a crash in the hallway and the outer door of the apartment smashed in. Four men charged through with leveled guns and behind them Boss MacNamara stalked, long legged and evil, grinning. Masters' hand flicked toward

his gun, but he checked the draw and slowly lifted his hands.

"All right," he said amiably, "you got us, MacNamara, but you're too late. The boys have already gone to the newspapers with the full confession Doxie just made."

MacNamara still grinned. "That lie won't get by, either, Masters," he said. "One of my men spotted the license number on the car in front of my house. That same car is parked downstairs and the wires are still trailing out of it. They're probably in the bathroom there. Doxie, what kind of a fool have you made out of yourself?"

Doxie's face was mottled. He stared from MacNamara to Masters. "Did you call him . . . *Masters?*" he asked thickly. "Owen Masters?"

MacNamara nodded, "Come out of that bathroom, damn you, before we pump lead through the door!"

Fulton Davies came out with his hands lifted above his head and the other two men followed. Davies held out a notebook. "Here it is, MacNamara," he said quaveringly. "Every word of it, and . . ."

"You damned fool!" Masters said violently. "That was our only chance for life!"

MacNamara snatched the book full of pothooks and grinned like a wolf. "That about states it, Masters. It's a rub-out. Get them all out of here now before the cops come. One of them might turn honest on me, like Doxie. Doxie, I never knew you were such a damned fool, you and your women!"

Masters laughed, sat down on the side of the bed. "You win completely, except for one thing, MacNamara. I was just talking to Storm over the telephone, and he knows the whole story." His eyes, under lowered lids, were taking in the entire room. MacNamara with his four gunmen were spread out against the wall. Harris was behind the bed on which Doxie lay, and Melinda sat there with the sheets of

paper on which she had pretended to take Doxie's statement. The newspaper men were grouped against the bathroom door. They had the best chance of doing something but there was only fear in their faces.

"You can wipe out all of us, MacNamara," Masters stalled desperately for time—time for what? There was no hope. "There are seven of us, and there's always Storm. And the letters, don't forget the letters."

"I won't," MacNamara said softly. "You'll tell me where they are, and you're going to call Storm right into our little trap. You'll be glad to before we're through with you. All right, boys, get them moving. Let Doxie and the doctor and the girl have it right here. I haven't got time to fool with them."

**B**EHIND him, Masters felt for the can of ether with his foot. It was a mad chance he was going to take, but there was no help for it. There was nothing else, and Death stared them all in the face.

"Listen, MacNamara," Masters pleaded and made his lips tremble with fear. "Listen, I can get those letters and Storm to come here. Storm can bring them. Listen, let me buy these kids out of it anyway. You've got to!" He twisted his head about and moved his lips in soundless words at the two. "Ask for a smoke," he mouthed words. "Ask for a smoke!"

MacNamara was hesitating, not, Masters knew, from any intention of mercy, but because he wanted those letters damned badly. The sickly sweet odor of ether began to creep into the room from the overturned can. MacNamara shook his head, "We can't wait. Come on, bump them!"

Melinda's voice was faint. "Do you mind if . . . if I have a smoke?" she asked.

Masters felt his heart leap up. He laughed, "She's got more guts than I have. Do you mind, MacNamara?"

MacNamara's dour face moved wolfishly, "No. Why not?"

Masters twisted about, took a step sideways while guns followed him. "In my side pocket, Linda," he said. She reached across the bed and couldn't make it. Masters saw to it that she couldn't. He lowered one hand very carefully, grinning his amity at the gunmen who watched him, fished out the packet of cigarettes. He got out matches and reached his hands together awkwardly above his head to strike one. He struck the match all right, but it dropped from his hands. It dropped down on the ether-soaked carpet. . . .

The flash of flame was instantaneous and the can of ether let go like a grenade. Masters flung himself backward in the same moment, half across the bed, carried Harris and Melinda to the floor. His eyes were blinded, and intolerable pain streaked up his right side. He fought his hand upward toward the gun beneath his armpit. His ears were deafened from the concussion, but he could hear screams. They were . . . horrible. He got his gun out, pushed himself up from the floor. Guns were blasting. He saw a man coated in flames staggering straight into the inferno beside the bed. The man fell forward and some of the screams stopped.

The bathroom door was closed, Masters' seared eyes made out. He laughed and began to shoot. Harris and Melinda were urging him to his feet, shouting something about the window and the fire escape. The heat tore at his lungs. He staggered up, the gun motionless in his hand, empty; strained his streaming eyes toward the spot where MacNamara and his men had stood. High up, he could see the wall, but no one stood there now. The screams had . . . stopped.

Numbly, Masters yielded to the tugging at his arms. He straddled the sill, leaned against the wall and felt the grateful cold of the night bite into his face

and side. A black-faced man was climbing out of the bathroom window. Two others already stood on the fire escape, helping. Masters stiffened away from the wall.

"You damned fool!" he shouted hoarsely at the man in the window. "You had the story of your life in that notebook and you gave it back to him!"

DAVIES stiffly reached the platform and braced himself on the railing with a rigid arm. He laughed. It shook him, twisted his soot-streaked face curiously, but he kept on laughing.

"Did you really think," he gasped, "that I'd given him the right notebook? All pothooks look alike." He straightened up, but he was still laughing, weakly.

Masters strode toward him, "What are you laughing at, you fool?" he demanded.

Davies stopped abruptly, "Listen, Masters, I *saw* what you were going to do. And I stood there and waited for you to do it." He laughed loudly once, choked it off. "You see," he said confidentially, "I always figured I was a coward." He turned and moved toward the steps, walking very steadily, very erectly.

Masters chuckled and swung toward the doctor and the girl, stood blinking at them with his blurred eyes. "I want to thank you," he said quietly.

"Thank *us*," Melinda stared at him, then ran and threw both arms about his neck. "Oh, Mr. Masters, if it hadn't been for you and Mr. Storm, we . . . we . . ."

Dr. Harris cut in, "I'm the damned fool of this combination," he said bitterly. "If I hadn't been pig-headed in the first place . . ."

Masters squeezed Melinda and with a laugh clapped a hand on Harris' shoulder. "Fools, eh. Well, if God is good," he said, his voice deepening, "He will people the world with more of them—with just such pig-headed fools as you. . . ."

# THE INVISIBLE WITNESS

By GABRIEL WILSON

(Author of "Double Jeopardy," etc.)



*Hubert Montague killed the woman he no longer loved. But to his grave he carried the crimson mark of her dead lips. . . .*

HE thought: I once got a thrill out of this room. Good Lord, look at it. He said uneasily. "Sure—sure, Iris—you know I want to marry you, but—"

"You lie," the girl said.

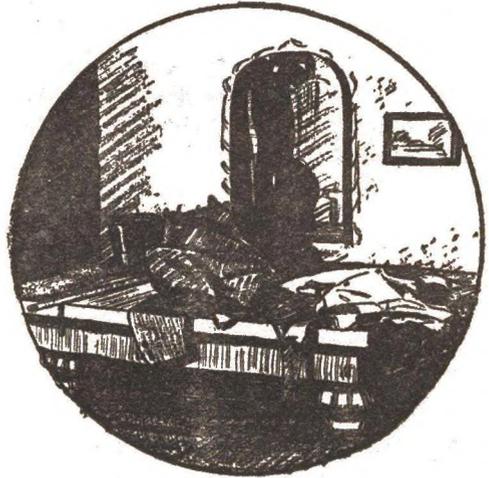
In the sudden silence young Hubert Montague sucked in his breath. His weak chin dropped; he ran his fingers through his sleek glossy black hair with a nervous gesture. His eyes roved the room—the eyes of an animal in a trap.

It was a small boudoir. There were deep red hangings, a red Chinese rug, a great broad couch with crimson velour upholstery and pillows. All of it was flooded with a murky light from ruby bulbs under the ornate tasseled pink-red shade of the Chinese dragon-lamp on the center-table.

Red light for passion . . . . It was Iris Deane's idea of their love—this room of the small apartment in which she lived alone. His room and hers . . . . Tonight it made him shudder . . . .

"Iris—" he said.

"You lie," she repeated. All the slim length of her seemed to stiffen. She was sitting bolt upright on the couch, facing him as he sprawled in the easy chair. He stared at her—fascinated. Once he had thought her beautiful in this maroon neg-



ligee, with a rose in the coils of her dark hair. A little passion flower, exotic in the garish surroundings she thought would please him.

But tonight he shuddered, with a sudden excited movement that made his heart pound.

"What—what do you mean?" he said. Then he too was sitting upright, tense.

"You're going to marry Barbara Hastings," she said. Her white arm with the lace of the negligee dangling from it made a gesture. "Don't lie to me, Hubert. People talk—Valley Cove isn't so far from here. You're going to marry her. I know why, of course. Because she's

rich—an' you can live a life of ease—luxury—”

He said suddenly, petulantly, “All right. What’s it to you?”

He saw anger blaze in her eyes. The bitter galling fury of a jealous woman.

“To me? To me, Hubert? Why it’s—it’s everything.” The leaping fire in her eyes suddenly dissolved in tears, but she brushed them away. “Do you think I’ll let you throw me over? That would be swell for me, wouldn’t it?”

“Iris,” he said, “take it easy—listen—”

“An’ what am I going to do? I’m going to tell her mother an’ all her friends about me—about us!”

But her anger wouldn’t hold. She slipped off the couch to her knees, hitched herself to his chair . . . . These damn dramatics—as though that would make any difference.

“Iris—don’t be a fool—”

“I love you, Hubert. It’s never been just—just passion with me. I figured it was, with you. That’s why I—I fixed up this room. I lied to you, Hubert . . . .”

Her damned arms were around his neck now—pulling at him—like a millstone—an albatross . . . .

**I** LIED to you; I’m not twenty. I—

I’m only seventeen. I lied when I got the job in the chorus two years ago. I’ve got no relatives, just me, an’ I—I thought I could make you love me, Hubert—”

He summoned anger. “Thought you’d trap me, you mean!”

She seemed not to hear; she was trying to kiss him. His stomach heaved with revulsion. Across the room he could see that both the window shades of this ground floor apartment were fully drawn. They were alone here. The apartment overhead was vacant. No one would hear—

His heart was suddenly wildly pounding in his throat.

“I guess,” she was stammering, “I guess I went at it the wrong way, Hubert.”

“You damn sure did,” he said. “I never loved you, you little fool! Your limited charms couldn’t hold me very long. I thought you knew that.”

He pushed her away and jumped to his feet.

“Hubert—”

Damn her dramatics. Her arms were around his knees.

“I can support you, Hubert. You can live here. I’m going to be a specialty dancer in the new show. More money—”

Then suddenly her body was pressed against him. Clinging to him—fettering him. Pleading. Whining. And then threatening again. “I’ll tell her, Hubert! By God, I will! An’ you know I can prove it! You’ve boasted about me pretty well around Grafton here. I’ve stood for that, an’ when I tell Barbara Hastings—”

The window blinds were down . . . . No one would hear . . . .

“I’ll tell her an’ her mother an’ all her friends! I’ll tell—”

The words blurred suddenly as his clenched fist shot out and caught her in the mouth. She staggered back. She was screaming . . . . God, anyone passing on the lonely street would hear her!

He found himself over her with a hand clapped to her mouth. Then as she gripped him, fighting like a little tigress, he smothered her face against his chest. Locked together, they swayed across the room, staggered against the table; a small chair went over; he was pounding her back with one of his fists, knocking the breath from her . . . . They hit a high pedestal. A goldfish bowl on top of it spilled over against them. He felt the chill of water; he saw the bowl and its two tiny fish crash to the floor.

“You damn little—”

Her fingers were gouging at his eyes. He flung her face down on the couch, with a knee on her back, his fists pounding

her . . . . She was only twitching now—arms and legs moving jerkily . . . . God, why wouldn't she die? He forced a pillow over her head. Tighter—press hard . . . a minute . . . two minutes . . . .

It seemed an eternity. At last she lay still. Gruesome dead thing now, that once had been beautiful; and Montague staggered back with the lust to kill fading from him and a calm triumph coming to take its place.

**H**E thought: I must get out of here now—

And do what? The question leaped at him. He had boasted of Iris Deane. He would be suspected. Damned fool, he had boasted in Rolly's poolroom tonight that he was leaving for Iris Deane's. That would be incriminating in the morning. But he had only left Rolly's fifteen minutes ago. If he dashed for Sergeant Blake now nobody would check on the time so closely . . . .

He stood in the center of the room, smoothing his hair, arranging his tie and the set of his dress coat. Nothing of his was here but his hat. He snatched it up.

The goldfish bowl! Water was splashed on his shirt-front. He gazed down at it . . . . Distant muttering thunder sounded outside, and he became aware that it was raining. Thank God! The rain would cover up the wetness of his clothes.

For a moment he stood before the big mirror on the wall, making sure of his appearance.

Carefully he raised one of the window blinds a little. He would say he had come from Rolly's; had found the place locked; had gazed in the window here, into the lighted room and seen the body.

He verified now that both windows were locked. Then with a last look at the sprawled body of the dead girl he adjusted his hat and slipped into the dim hall. The front door locked after him as

he closed it. The dark, rainswept street was empty. He stooped, gazed into the boudoir window under the shade to make sure that he could see the twisted crumpled figure—the disordered room horribly appropriate in its red appointments. But there was no way to tell, from here, that she was dead. He must remember that. He knew Sergeant Blake. The sergeant's frame cottage where he lived with his wife and two kids was only a few blocks away.

Within a minute or two Montague was pounding at the front door—pounding and shouting for help. When the big, burly, pajama-clad sergeant let him in, Montague gasped out his story. . . . Maybe she was murdered—maybe she still lived.

Then the sergeant's wife and his goggling kids were there—all blinking in the bright white light of the hall.

Montague's frantic babbling wavered—ceased. Something was wrong. He saw the strange tenseness of the sergeant's body. Fascinated, he watched the sergeant's hand steal toward the holstered revolver on the table. They were all staring at him, eyes wide, now unblinking. His own gaze traveled slowly, against his will, to the focal point of all those eyes.

There was something on his shirt front!

He brushed at the stain—futilely, childishly. His bosom was as red as . . . as red as it had been in that ghastly crimson room! Realization poured over Montague: he'd struck her—smothered her bleeding lips to his chest—and in that murky red light he hadn't been able to distinguish color . . . . He'd thought the wetness was merely from the goldfish bowl!

Montague slumped limply to the floor. The white light from the hallway cast a bright glaze on his once immaculate dress shirt—and turned the blood stains there to little laughing devils . . . .

# ● MURDER ROMANCE ●

By  
**ROBERT W. THOMPSON**

(Author of "A Date with Death," etc.)

*It was bad enough when Detective Dan Richard saw his lovely wife keep a tryst with a gunman. . . . But it was more than he could bear —when she confessed to murder!*



*You killed him—  
didn't you!*

**T**HE telephone bell made a low, discreet burr in the front room of the little cottage. City Detective Dan Richard, changing his shirt in a second floor bedroom, heard the sound and started to the door. His wife's clear, soft voice called from downstairs.

"All right, Dan, I'll take it; probably my sister."

Richard stopped at the head of the stairs, then shrugged and muttered, "Most likely Inspector Logan. A murder, I'll bet . . ." He swung his lean, smooth-muscled body down the stairs, padding softly in his slippers. At the bottom, he

ran his fingers through tousled blond hair. Just outside the door to the front room he paused abruptly. His wife was at the telephone, her back to him. Fading sunlight shone through the windows, picking sparkling highlights from her raven black hair. Her voice was a taut whisper:

". . . Nicky . . . Thank heavens Dan is upstairs. If he ever knew Nicky Settaro called me . . . He hates you, Nicky . . ."

Dan Richard leaned his tall body against the wall. His blue eyes narrowed under shaggy sandy brows. His square, hard jaw tightened. Nicky Settaro, kingpin of the protection racket in the city, calling his wife . . . Richard had been

making what amounted to almost a one-man crusade against the protection racket lately, had refused bribes of all kinds. He rubbed the knuckles of his right fist. They were still skinned a little; he had smashed Nicky Settaro on the jaw a couple of days ago when Settaro had attempted to buy him off for two hundred a month.

Richard fingered a lump on the back of his head, wincing slightly. Last night, just after he had alighted from the bus near his home, a car had driven alongside him on the dark road. A man had leaped from the car and tapped a hard, blunt object against the back of his head. He'd fallen, barely conscious, unable to recognize his assailant. Then the man had jammed a gun against his forehead. He remembered the low, hissing words perfectly: "I could kill you now, but I got orders not to—this time. Lay off, pal, or you're through!"

The gun was withdrawn and a moment later the car roared away. Richard staggered home, related the story to his wife while she bathed the sore spot. He was sure the attacker was one of Settaro's hired killers. The warning was plain: Richard would lay off Nicky Settaro, or else—

And now black-haired Julia, his bride of a few months, was talking to Settaro as though she had known him for years, calling him Nicky . . . .

There was no sound from the front room for a half-minute. Then the taut whisper, lower this time. "I'll be there. In front of the Bradford building at eight . . . Yes, I'll make some kind of an excuse . . ." Silence for seconds, then: "But if you ever say a word to Dan, I'll kill you! Understand, *I'll kill you!*"

Richard turned, a little dazed, and climbed upstairs, making no noise in his slippers. When he was in the bedroom again he heard the clatter of the phone onto the cradle. He fumbled at his shirt buttons, looking into the mirror. The color had faded out of his lean, strong face.

There were sweat beads on his forehead. His lips made a thin slash across his face.

When he was fully dressed, he reached into a bureau drawer, took out a pocket-size blue-steel automatic. He slipped it into his pocket, strode out and down the stairs. There was a bright light on in the spotless white kitchen. His wife was there, setting two places at the table. She turned as he entered, smiling up at him.

**S**HE was tall, full-bodied under her crisp dress. The white skin of her perfectly formed face was flawless, colored only by a spot of makeup on each cheek. Her dark eyes were clear, sparkling. The glossy raven hair over the smooth creamy whiteness of her face made a startling, lovely effect. Looking at her, Richard felt his heart swell against his ribs, just as he had felt it thump when he first met her, a little more than a year ago.

He sat down at the table, watching her. She seemed happy, untroubled. Richard sighed a little over his coffee. He set down the cup, asked:

"Was that your sister that called, Julia?"

"Yes." Her eyes were on the table, avoiding his. "I—she wants me to go over for a little while. She says she isn't feeling well. You don't mind, Dan? I'll be home before eleven."

"No, I don't mind. Matter of fact, I've got to go into town myself right away. I'd almost forgotten; Inspector Logan wants to see me about that diamond stick-up."

He was glad when he had finally kissed her goodby and was in the bus, leading toward the central business district. The light automatic made a bulge in his pocket. He slipped his fingers around the cold metal, and his eyes were frosty, determined. It was his plan to wait near the Bradford building until Settaro and his wife met, then to confront them. After that . . . His lips quirked in a tight, mirth-

less smile. What would happen after that?

In the quiet side street where the Bradford building was located, Richard stood in a shadowed doorway. There was little traffic; the street was one of old red-brick office buildings, filled with people during the day, but silent and untenanted at night. Richard's blue eyes were sharp under his sandy brows, watching the entrance to the Bradford on the opposite side of the street.

It was one minute to eight when a cab stopped in front of the building, and the tall, full figure of a woman alighted. She ran across the sidewalk as the cab pulled away. The outstretched hands of a man in the doorway closed over hers. In the dimness Richard thought he saw the white flash of his wife's teeth in a smile. Then she and the man were gone inside the building.

Richard hadn't moved out of the doorway. He took his hand out of his pocket, away from the coldness and hardness of the automatic. The white flame of rage inside him had died out. He was calm now, although the sweat was running on his face. He stepped to the sidewalk, headed for the bus terminal.

Nicky Settaro and Julia in a secret tryst . . . He had felt a sense of stunned unbelief before; now he knew it was true. Julia had come from the same coast city as Settaro. In fact she had lived here only a couple of months less than the racketeer. Richard had once joked about it to her, and now he remembered that she hadn't considered it the least bit humorous. The facts crystallized in his mind. Julia and Settaro must have known each other in their native coast city, and were now renewing their affair. Richard rubbed his wet, sticky palms against his coat. His heart felt heavy and dead in his chest when he thought about his bride of a few months and the racketeer he hated, together in the luxurious offices in the old Bradford building . . .

Back in the front room of the little cottage, Richard slouched in a chair and waited for his wife. There would be no hysterics; he would merely tell her what he knew. He would pack up and go to a hotel room; later he would arrange things with her in regard to money matters. And after everything was settled, he would get Settaro. He would smash Settaro's racket and put him behind bars if it cost him his life. Richard smiled a little, his eyes glowing and warm with the thought.

Julia came in not long after nine-thirty. She removed her coat and hat, seated herself on the arm of the chair beside Richard. He looked up into her face, and he was startled. Her dark eyes were wide, with terror in their depths. Her face was not smooth white cream now; it was grey, taut. Something had happened, Richard knew, something that had written fear into her face and eyes.

She put an arm over his shoulder, kissed him. She was very close, the clean sweet smell of her hair in Richard's nostril's, the nearness of her firm body lighting a flame inside him. He ran his fingers through her black hair; he couldn't say anything yet, he couldn't. When she wasn't near him, he could think out things dispassionately. When she was close to him, kissing him as she was now, he couldn't believe she had ever been untrue. He realized that he loved her too much to cast her off like an old, outmoded hat. The feeling he had for her was more than passion; it was love, deep-rooted in his being. He couldn't speak, yet . . .

**T**HE telephone rang. Julia stiffened, then slid off the arm of the chair. Her mouth was tight, little lines at the corners. Richard rose, went to the phone. A crisp voice crackled over the wire.

"Dan? This is Logan. Smokes Arnold and another mug just found Nicky Settaro's body in his offices . . . Yeah, knifed

to death. We got here five minutes ago. Looks like some rival rat gave it to him. . . Hurry over . . ."

"I'll be over in fifteen minutes."

Richard turned away from the phone with his face drawn and his round jaw hanging lax. "Somebody knifed Nicky Settaro. Murder."

Julia nodded without speaking. There was no surprise in her eyes; it was as though she had expected the news. She let out a long, hissing breath. Richard sighed, said:

"Inspector Logan wants me right over. Don't wait up."

"I'll wait," she said in her soft, clear voice. "I—want to hear all about it. Do they know—who the murderer is?"

"They don't know, yet."

He looked into her dark, shining eyes, still mirroring terror. Her lips were pressed tight against her teeth. Richard kissed her impulsively.

"Everything will be okay," he said huskily. He went out, jamming his hat over his blond hair.

A quarter-hour later, in the luxurious offices of Nicky Settaro, Richard nodded a greeting to Inspector Logan. The huge outer office was crowded with detectives, fingerprint men, a reporter or two. On the thick rug beside the heavy polished desk, the body of Nicky Settaro was stretched out, face up. Richard looked down for a minute at the handsome olive features, ran his eyes to the blood-clotted suit front, where the bone-handled knife was buried.

"Right into the heart," Inspector Logan said curtly. He was a tall, thin man with a long, dour face and a completely bald head shining in the light. "No fingerprints, nothing to go on yet. Settaro's right hand man, Smokes Arnold, found the body. That little punk, the Parrot, was with him. They're in the inner office now. Any ideas on who the killer might be?"

"No," said Richard. "No ideas—yet."

He went into the smaller inner office.

Smokes Arnold was slouched in a soft, deep chair, his heavy body at ease. His dark face was unconcerned, a cigarette hanging in a corner of his thin-lipped mouth. The stubs of a half-dozen cigarettes were on the floor beside him.

The Parrot sat on the edge of the only straight-backed chair in the room. His fingers tugged nervously at the checked cap pulled down over his eyes. His lips twitched under the nose so like a parrot's beak. Richard looked down at him, said: "Let's have it."

"Well," the Parrot said, "I meets Smokes at a bar a ways from here, see? I've been lookin' for him for two-three hours. Nicky wants to see him about somethin'. So we comes up and finds Nicky with the knife stickin' in him. His own knife, too."

Richard turned to Smokes Arnold. "That right?"

"Right." Smokes tapped a fresh cigarette out of a package, lit it on the end of the old one. He dragged in deeply, nodding. His voice was surprisingly soft and sibilant for so large a man. "Nicky used to keep the knife handy for paring apples. Great guy for eating apples, Nicky was."

"Who do you think did it?"

Smokes shrugged heavy shoulders. "I'm no dick. That's for you guys to find out."

"Yes," Richard said, "that's for us to find out." He spoke to Logan: "I've got an idea I'd like to work on, alone. I can't say what it is, yet. Okay?"

"Okay." Logan nodded, his thin dour face worried. "We've got to crack this, Dan. The papers will be riding hell out of the department if we muff it."

"I've got an idea," Richard said, "that we'll have the killer by midnight."

**H**E STRODE out, his square jaw ridged with knotted muscle. It was simple to reconstruct the murder in his mind: Julia and Nicky Settaro had been up in the offices together; they had quar-

eled; perhaps Settaro had threatened to tell Richard of their illicit relationship. Then Julia had snatched the knife from the desk. . . . The words she had spoken over the phone to Settaro were burned into Richard's memory: ". . . if you ever say a word to Dan, *I'll kill you!*"

Richard found that he was sweating, thinking of that. All the facts dovetailed; little doubt that Julia had murdered Settaro. And yet, deep within him, Richard refused to believe it. He wouldn't believe it until Julia herself told him.

Those few months with Julia had been the happiest he had ever lived. Things he could never forget whirled in his head: the tingle he felt at the touch of her hand, the whispered confidences, the feel of his lips against hers . . . He walked, many miles, aimlessly, in the tangle of downtown streets. It was almost eleven-thirty when he climbed into the outgoing bus for home. His face was drawn and grey. He was going to tell Julia exactly what he knew, and ask her frankly if she had killed Nickey Settaro. He *must* know the truth . . . .

There was light behind the drawn shades of the dining room and kitchen. Richard went in the rear way, fumbling for his key in the dark hall. He remembered that he had left it on the bureau, and punched the bell button. The buzzing sound cut into the silence.

It was a half-minute before Julia opened the door. She stood there a moment just inside the kitchen, the light at her back. It was when she turned her face to the light that Richard saw the tenseness of her lips and the pallor of her cheeks. Was she afraid that he suspected?

He tossed his hat onto a chair, smoothed his blond hair. "I've been up to Nicky Settaro's, Julia." He bit his lower lip, said huskily: "I heard you talking to him over the phone tonight. I heard you say you'd kill him if he told me about the two of you. I saw you get out of a cab at the Brad-

ford building. He must have threatened to tell me. Then you—"

"You know." She expelled a long breath, and the lines at her tight mouth deepened. "It was six years ago when I went with Nicky out on the coast, Dan. I was eighteen; he was five years older. A kid romance, Dan. We never . . . Dan, you've got to believe me!"

He said: "Then?"

"I didn't hear from him for years—until yesterday. He called me up, told me to meet him or he'd have you killed. Just like that. I laughed at him. He said he'd call again today and that I'd be willing to listen to reason. Last night he proved he could have you killed any time. I kept thinking, you might get off the bus some night, and they'd—they'd get you. I kept thinking, maybe it'll be tonight . . . God, Dan, I *had* to meet him!"

"What happened in the office?"

"He told me that for a week I'd have to—to come to him every night—at his apartment. His way, I suppose, of striking at the man he hated." Tears glistened in her eyes. "I know now he intended to tell you and then have you killed anyway."

Richard rubbed his knuckles slowly along his jaw. "Then you—killed him?"

For a moment she said nothing at all, her red lips went slack. Then she nodded slowly, and said in a whisper:

"I killed him."

Richard felt every vestige of blood drain from his face. Julia said steadily:

"I'll go along to headquarters with you in a few minutes, Dan. But first, I'd like to have you get my hat and coat upstairs. I'll—be waiting."

Richard nodded, looking into her pleading eyes. Then he turned and went out of the kitchen into the lighted dining room, his mouth a bitten slash.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw something that jerked him half way around. Smoke—curling upward from an inch of cigarette on a table ash tray.

His fists clenched and unclenched; he dug his right hand into his coat pocket. He whirled, looking out into the kitchen, took a step forward.

"Julia, there's—"

He stopped, his lithe body rigid. The pantry door, slightly ajar, burst open now and the thickset bulk of Smokes Arnold moved dangerously into the kitchen. His eyes were narrowed, malignant. There was a revolver in his fist, shining in the light. He swung it toward the girl.

Richard fired through his pocket. The bullet caught Arnold in the biceps, jerking his arm upward. He spun about, shot quickly. Richard felt a crooked worm of blood run down his cheek. His hand whipped out of his pocket and flame speared from his automatic.

Smokes Arnold pulled in a shuddering breath. His gun slipped from his fingers, banged on the floor. He clutched at his stomach, staggered, slumped to his knees, then crashed down on his face.

**J**ULIA stared at Arnold's slack body, then looked up at Richard and ran toward him. "Your cheek—it's bleeding! Thank God you got him first!"

"It was the cigarette in the ashtray that made me suspicious. You don't smoke; I knew there was someone else here. You lied," he said, looking down at her. "You didn't kill Nicky Settaro."

"No." She shook her head, smiling a little. "Everything else I said was true. Arnold came in while I was up in Nicky's place. I went into the inner office. I heard them arguing. Nicky claimed Arnold was holding out on him, keeping some of the money he should have passed over; he threatened to have him taken for a ride. Arnold killed him."

"Then what?"

"Arnold didn't want to kill me, just then. You see—" she blushed—"he wanted me too. He threatened to have you

killed if I didn't give in to him. He said he had a couple of torpedoes watching you every second—that within ten minutes he could have you murdered, if I talked." She shuddered. "After you were attacked last night, and could have been killed so easily—well, it made me afraid to say anything. . . ."

Richard swabbed at his wound with a handkerchief, nodding.

"But he was only bluffing, to keep me quiet for the time being," she continued. "He really hadn't hired any killers to watch you. So when Logan let him go he came here to make me go away with him. When he heard you coming, he went into the pantry. I had to say I'd killed Nicky, or he'd have killed you. So I told you to go upstairs, to give us time to get out. He had his car out front."

"You were going to walk out of here," Richard said huskily, "letting me think you'd killed Settaro."

"I couldn't let Arnold get you. But if I were to disappear, and the police checked back on me, they'd find that I was once Nicky's girl. That would make it look like I'd killed Nicky. Arnold would be in the clear."

Richard went into the front room, got Logan on the wire.

"This is Richard. Smokes Arnold just tried to kill me at my house, . . . Yes, afraid I had something on him . . . Sure, he admitted Settaro's murder before I got him. Get the wagon over in a hurry. My wife doesn't like the sight of blood . . ."

He cradled the phone, strode into the dining room. He put an arm around his wife, looking down at her lovely, white face. She asked in an anxious whisper:

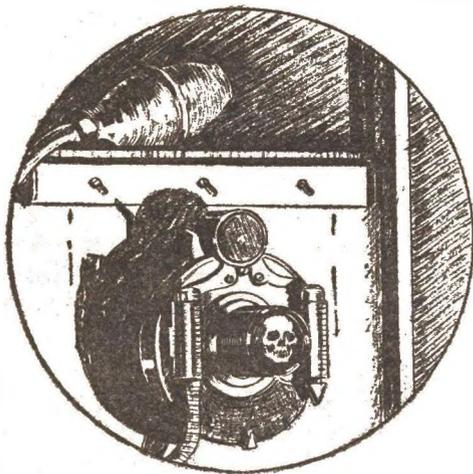
"It won't matter between us—because of Nicky Settaro?"

"Never heard of him." Richard laughed, his eyes warm and bright. "Darling, did I ever tell you what a lucky guy I am to have such a beautiful wife?"

# PICTURE OF GUILT

By RAY CUMMINGS

(Author of "Hours of Disaster," etc.)



*Magin knew a lot about murder and cameras. He took a picture of two dead people on a moonlit night—and photographed his own death warrant!*



**"SO** WHAT?" John Magin said. A big, powerful, thick-shouldered figure, he stood in the midnight moonlight of the terrace with arms dangling like a great gorilla. The moonlight shimmered with liquid silver on his immaculate white linen suit, on his iron-grey hair. Across the terrace, close to the ivy-clad wall of the luxurious country mansion, where a big closed window gave into the dark living room, young Alan Allaire sat in a wicker chair with the girl beside him. Both of them stared silently at Magin.

"So what?" Magin reiterated. "Out with it."

"You married my mother for her money," young Allaire said at last. "Don't you think I've always known it? But what I didn't know—until Miss Delcor came tonight and told me—"

Magin stiffened. This damn Broadway gold-digging chorus girl—Magin had forgotten her weeks ago.

"My mother died—very queerly last month," young Allaire said tensely. He sat up with a jerk. "I won't mince mat-

ters. You want me to talk freely? Well, unfortunately, you got drunk quite a few times with Miss Delcor. And she has just told me—"

The quiet accusing words came at big John Magin like little poisoned darts stabbing into him—like the poison he had so carefully given his rich, sixty-year-old wife—little doses, until at last she had mysteriously died, leaving him free, with this house and her money. Allaire, her twenty-five-year-old son, handsome, romantic-looking semi-professional artistic photographer, had the right, by her will, to live here. That was annoying to Magin. For two weeks now Magin had been trying to get rid of him. He hated him—

hated the thought of the dead woman's son in the same house.

To John Magin, returning now at midnight from a musical show at the Community Theatre in the little town a mile or so away, finding Vivian Delcor here with his step-son was like a lightning bolt from the cloudless summer sky.

"I couldn't stand it," the girl was saying. "I may be pretty rotten; I guess I am. But I got thinkin'—this old codger, it was all right for me to let him spend his money on me, for us to get drunk together, but when I realized he was hintin' at havin' done murder—"

Murder. . . The word leaped into the quiet moonlit terrace and stood like a hideous shape—malignant, menacing. . .

"So she had to seek me out and tell me," young Allaire said. He drew a long breath; the whole slim boyish length of him was tense as he stared at his step-father. "My mother," he added, "murdered by you. Arsenic was what you mumbled to Miss Delcor—"

"You're a liar," Magin heard himself gasp.

"Well, maybe. I'm only telling you what she says. It ought to be easy to prove. The—the body can be exhumed. I'll do that, of course. The arsenic may still be there."

The arsenic would be there, of course. The thought engulfed Magin with a torrential rush of terror. The moonlit terrace blurred before his gaze. . . . No one was in the big dark house; the servants were away this week-end. . . . No one was around the somnolent moonlit grounds of the big estate. . . . Just the three of them. Magin and his two accusers—here on the moonlit terrace. . . .

Magin's groping hand clutched at the rim of a huge iron urn that stood on the terrace beside him. He was hardly aware of swinging it, as like a great gorilla he leaped for his young step-son. Vivian Delcor screamed; but Allaire was only

half from his chair when the urn crashed on his head. . . . Dull sickening crunch. . . . the boy's body sank back . . .

"You too—you damn little—" The thick words blurred with his murderous passion. His huge fist floored her. He stooped, his strangling fingers on her slim white throat. . . .

**T**HE moonlight bathed the terrace with liquid silver as John Magin rose from the body of the dead girl. . . . Two of them dead, sprawled here in the moonlight with the blood-splattered urn beside them . . .

An alibi came quite suddenly into Magin's mind—a perfect alibi that would enable him to telephone the police and quite calmly report these killings. . . . A girl and boy here, brutally killed by some unknown lover of the girl—someone who had come here, found them together and in a wild jealous rage, had killed them. . .

The idea came as Magin saw, under the closed dark library window, there against the terrace house-wall, the small, high-powered camera which young Allaire often used for outdoor work. It lay there in its leather case. A box of small plates, a plate holder and the camera tripod were beside it. The brilliant full moon was ideal for a moonlight picture.

Magin was not a skilled photographer, but he had learned something of it from his step-son. Allaire would have set up his camera here—given an exposure of an hour or two. . . . That much at least was needed for the moon to impress an image. . . . Allaire hadn't done it; the unopened box of plates, the empty plate holder were evidence that the arrival of the girl had stopped him.

But Magin would do it now! Or at least pretend to do it. A little soft magnesium flare—an exposure of a second or two—would simulate a moonlight picture of the terrace, with the two murdered bodies lying here. To the police—as Magin

would explain it—the thing would look as though Allaire and the girl had set up the camera, started the two-hour exposure. Then the murderer had killed them, without ever noticing the camera. By chance they had fallen into range of the lens—and lying there for an hour in the moonlight, the camera had photographed them. . . . He'd explain that the impression of the murderer didn't appear on the film because he hadn't been in front of the camera long enough.

Unique and perfect alibi for Magin! Dead bodies being photographed by moonlight, for an hour while he and a party of friends had been at the theatre.

Swiftly now he set up the camera, across the terrace, facing the house-wall where the gruesome dead things lay huddled. The camera, as he placed it, was beside a huge spreading pot of ferns—the murderer could easily have overlooked it.

From the unopened box of plates, Magin took one, loaded the empty plate-holder, and put it in the camera. Then he padded up to Allaire's studio and came back with a little length of magnesium wire.

His match flared. He stood directly behind the camera, holding the magnesium aloft. For an instant the terrace brightened with soft blue-white light—simulation of moonlight. Magin left the camera shutter open—moonlight now would only deepen the image. . . .

Then, keeping well away from the camera, he walked into the house. When Magin telephoned the police, he was excited, babbling his news of the fiendish brutal murder in a most convincing way.

**T**HE police discovered the camera almost at once.

"Good Lord," Magin exclaimed. "Don't touch it—let me look—"

Magin said nothing of any alibi. "I'll develop it," he suggested. "Come up with

me, Captain—I know enough about photography to do the job right."

The Captain was no dim-wit. He saw at once that if a moonlight picture of the scene chanced to be here, it would prove that the bodies had lain there for some time. . . .

In the darkness upstairs Magin and the police captain tensely bent over the developing tray where in the ruby light the little plate lay blankly red-white. Magin inwardly was chuckling.

"Certainly unusual murder evidence, Captain," he murmured. "I wonder what we'll see—"

Little black and white shadows coming on the plate. . . . A house wall—

"By God, it is a moonlit picture," the Captain murmured. "I can see the bodies."

So could Magin. But here in the developer no details were as yet distinguishable.

"When the hypo clears it up," Magin explained, "we'll see it better. Just a minute, Captain."

He could hardly suppress his insane chuckling when he took the print from the hypo bath and handed it to the Captain.

"Hold it up, Cap—let's take a look."

With the light behind it, they stared at the small black and white rectangle. . . . Dim moonlit scene—the terrace, the house-wall, the window with the two broken bodies lying there. . . .

And then the Captain gasped. With a chill of sudden blurred terror Magin snatched at the plate. The Captain whirled, his automatic drawn, "No you don't, Magin. By God—I've got you—"

The moonlit terrace and the bodies were all clear in the picture, just as they should have been. But in the big dark window behind the bodies, was another tiny imaged scene! That window had become a mirror. And in it was reflected Magin standing carefully behind the camera, holding the magnesium flare high over his head!

# SOLVE YOUR OWN MURDER

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As he sprang he pushed the chair backward and lashed at Vincent's jaw.

## CHAPTER ONE

### The Devil Calls

**B**RYCE was playing solitaire on a card table set up in the living room that night, at the time the doorbell rang. It was only a quarter after nine and he knew it couldn't be Jack O'Hara, who had gone off to celebrate with his girl and probably wouldn't be back until after eleven. Not with that two thousand dollar prize money to start blowing.

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For an instant, as he put down the deck of cards, the pleasant fancy crossed Lew Bryce's mind that the visitor was Joan Arden—back already from her engagement in New York and ready to become Mrs. Lew Bryce. But as he stood up, he decided regretfully that that, too, was unlikely.

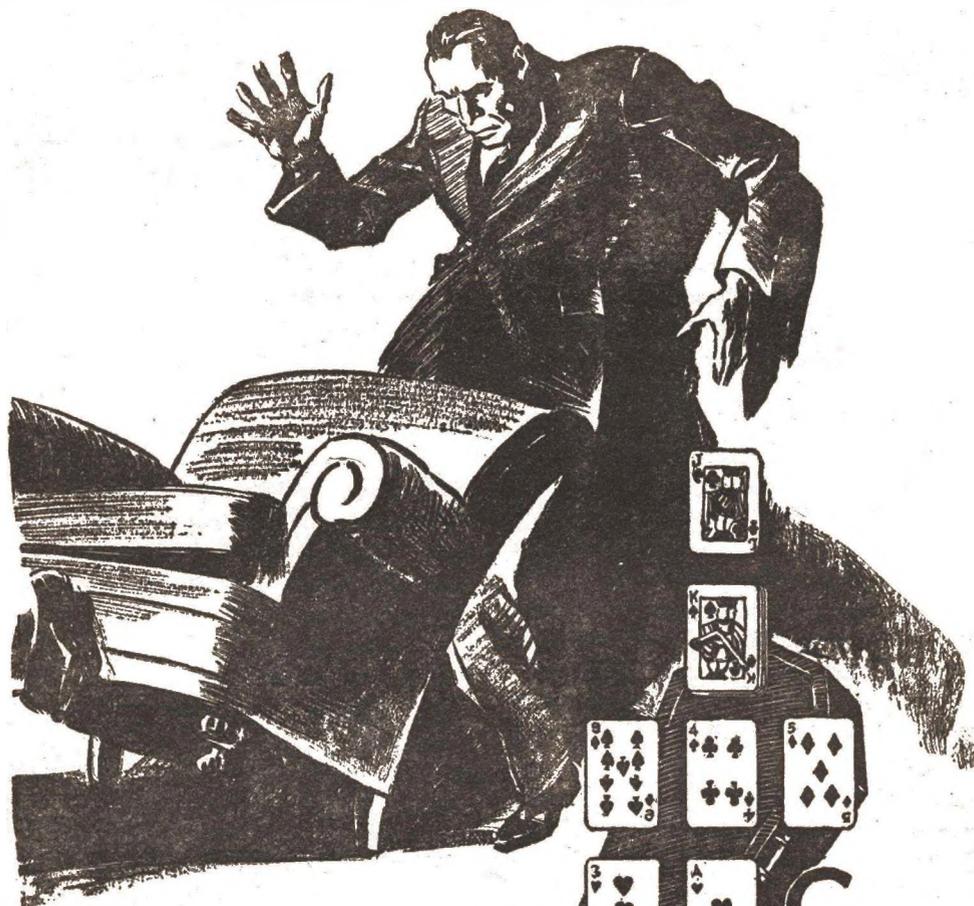
Puzzled, he opened the door.

"Greetings, Lieutenant."

There were three men in the apartment house hallway, which was on the third floor. The one who had spoken, tall, lean,

## By J. A. L. CHAMBLISS

(Author of "Case of the Murdering Corpse," etc.)



*Could Detective Lew Bryce prevent his own murder by showing his assassins a loophole in their diabolical plan—or must he be condemned to death by his failure to find a flaw in gangdom's murder masterpiece?*

rather prepossessing, well turned out, was Steve Vincent. He was smiling and held a heavy automatic which was pointed at Bryce. The others were a couple of Vincent's hoodlums, the two who looked least like hoodlums—Dick Marcy and Eddie Keeler. They were young men of average size dressed like rural college boys. Each had his hands in his coat pockets as if he were cold, though it was a fine June night.

Without saying anything, Bryce aimed a punt at Vincent's gun.

The kick struck Vincent's right wrist and knocked it high. Still holding to the gun, he ordered, "Grab him." The two young men rushed at Bryce, who was hanging to the doorknob with his foot still off the floor, and knocked him off balance and back into the room, the door swinging with him.

Bryce put a hard left jab in Eddie Keeler's right eye and then landed on his knees. Young Marcy kicked him in the

chest, throwing him away from the door. Keeler cursed and produced a blackjack and jumped at Bryce and hit him on the temple, but Bryce grabbed his retreating wrist, jerked it hard and brought Keeler to the floor with him. Then he grabbed at the ankle of Dick Marcy, who was swinging a second kick.

He caught the ankle and fell backward with it, and Marcy sprawled, but meanwhile Steve Vincent had come in swiftly, slamming the door, and had circled to Bryce's head.

"Stop being a sap!" he said angrily. "You have to fight just for the fun of it? Get up and act sensible or I'll kill you right here!"

Bryce drew back his right shoe and deliberately, grinning, planted it in Dick Marcy's face, knocking that young man four feet away. Keeler, on hands and knees, hit Bryce in the jaw. The detective-lieutenant cartwheeled and used both feet on Keeler's stomach, clearing the rug around him.

"Of all the stubborn punks!" Vincent was saying disgustedly, standing over Bryce with the automatic aimed at Bryce's head. "Get up!"

Bryce got to his feet as Vincent backed hastily away. Bryce's left cheek was swollen, blue and slightly cut; his black hair was in a tangle; his smoking jacket had lost its button. Keeler, coming forward, cursing, looked somewhat worse.

Vincent smiled contemptuously. "Had your fun, Mob-Wrecker? . . . Now it's our turn. Sit down!"

**B**RYCE walked around the card table and sat down at where he had been playing solitaire, saying, "What's up your sleeve, Vincent?"

"Better frisk him, Dickie," Vincent said without moving. "That's the first thing on the program." He was smiling maliciously now.

Marcy went behind Bryce and felt of

his clothes as Eddie Keeler, still swearing, went off to find the bathroom to bathe his face. Marcy reported Bryce "clean" and was told to look around the room and in the bedroom for guns. Then Vincent pulled up a chair and sat down across the table from Bryce, who was finger-combing his black hair and straightening the tie in the collar of his white shirt.

"Kinda spoiled your beauty, huh, tall, dark and rancid? How would that little dancer of yours like it if she could see you now? Bryce, the famous murder solver! The dark, hard, silent man! Planning on getting married, I hear, as soon as the dame finishes her contract? . . . Not bad for a dick. She's a pretty smooth little trick: I saw her dance here at the *Coliseum* the night before you saved her from a bold bad stickup man—and started your romance."

Bryce picked up the deck of cards, began palm-shuffling them, with an air of having his own thoughts. Marcy came in with a gun found in the bedroom—Bryce's regulation .38—and three other guns found in a closet—Bryce's and O'Hara's .38's and a .32. Marcy sat on the sofa. Keeler joined him.

Vincent looked at his watch. "Rustle some liquor, Keeler. We got fifteen minutes." And to Bryce: "We saw O'Hara takin' his girl to dinner into *Dabney's*, so we're not worried about him. Everybody knows how that partner of yours won two thousand bucks in that cigarette prize contest, and will be out scattering it around."

Bryce began laying out cards in a row. "Yeah, you don't have to worry about him," he murmured. "Whenever you get ready to tell me what's on your mind, I might listen."

Steve Vincent tilted back his chair, looking at the detective's bent head. A look of hate passed across his pale face, to be succeeded instantly by an expression of cunning, gloating satisfaction. He pushed his hat away from his forehead.

"You've been under my skin a long time, Bryce. If it wasn't for you—and maybe one or two other dicks—this would be a good town. I tried to be reasonable with you a year ago. I offered you a cut on my gambling take if you'd be sensible and not press the boys too hard. All I wanted was to eliminate the Caroni crowd and handle things myself. Well, they're eliminated, but it's cost too damn much! You worked so hard and you were so damn smart that now three of my fellas are in the Big House doing life!

" . . . And now it's my turn," Steve Vincent went on. "I've held off you. I'm no dummy. Nobody ever got rich killing cops; it's cheaper and a damn sight more comfortable to buy 'em. But you won't listen to reason and the boys won't stand it any more. They're afraid of you, damn you! This town isn't big enough for you and me. So it's time for you to check out of the picture."

"Ummmm-huh," said Bryce shuffling the cards. "Hmmmph." He stopped shuffling and looked hard at the table.

Vincent, watching him, said slowly through his teeth: "And it's too late to make a deal. At least, on money. 'Cause I've got this worked out. There'll be no kickback."

"I wouldn't deal with you," Bryce said coldly, though the truth was that the barest thought of that had flickered through his mind. His time had come. His number was up. He knew it—and he was thinking of a slim, grey-eyed, golden-haired young woman—the first ever to make him consider abandoning the comforts of bachelorhood. Wouldn't you know it would come at a time like this!

"Your only chance—" Vincent's voice was smooth and somber as if he were reaching the whole point of this dialogue—"your only chance is to solve your own murder! Do that—show me how I'll slip up, how the cops can pin it on me—and I won't take the chance. I won't kill you."

## CHAPTER TWO

### Tightening the Strands

**B**RYCE raised his head. Dark blue eyes were narrowed in his bony tanned face. But before he could speak, the telephone rang at the window end of the room, just as Eddie Keeler entered from the dining room with four highballs. Vincent kicked back his chair quickly and stood up, pointing his gun at Bryce.

"That's it, Dickie. Cover him;" and Marcy was already standing, aiming a nicked revolver at Bryce's forehead. Vincent tossed his gun to the sofa, walked to the phone, unracked it and listened without speaking. Suddenly he said, softly, in a voice not his own:

"Baby! . . . So you're in town! Where! At the Tracey? Room 945 . . .? Sure I'll be down! 'Bout twenty minutes! No, no, sugar, she's still in New York; contract hasn't run out yet. . . . Nuts to that. . . . I'll slip out the back way. . . . Yeah!"

Vincent slowly put down the phone, turned. Marcy, watching the puzzled scowl on Bryce's face, was smiling broadly. Vincent returned, picking up his .45.

"Let's drink and then scram. That's part of the setup. Bryce—that phone call. I'll tell you about it when we get to the Tracey. That's part of what you've got to study and find a flaw in, if you want to go on living and marry your dancer."

"So you're going to kill me at the Tracey?" Bryce said, and frowned. He took one of the highballs. "And after we get there, I'm supposed to solve my own murder, in advance, if I want to prevent it. . . ." He sipped at the highball, set the glass down. His eyes fell on the deck of cards in front of him; he began to shuffle them absently, his eyes on a distant point.

"That's the idea," Vincent nodded steadily. "It's on the level, Bryce. I want to kill you but I don't want to burn for it. You're the best murder dick in town."

Here's a chance to show how good you are, and save your own life."

"Takes thinking," Bryce muttered, and abstractedly dealt a card to the table, face up. "Only I don't think you'll keep your word, Vincent," throwing down two more cards. "What you'll do—after I've showed you the loopholes in your scheme—is go ahead and kill me, and then plug 'em up!" H continued dealing. "You'll just use me to make my own murder perfect."

He slapped down the deck and had recourse to his glass. "That's right, isn't it?"

"No, damn you, it isn't." Vincent snapped angrily. "Sure, I'll admit, if it's something I can plug up, I'll plug it up and go ahead and kill you. I'm not kidding you. I want you out of the way! But if you show me how I'll be caught, even if it's just fifty-fifty, because of something I can't change—then I won't kill you. Because I'm practical. I don't want to burn!"

"Who's going to judge whatever 'evidence' I turn up?"

"Me, naturally! It's my risk, isn't it?"

Bryce laughed shortly, harshly, as if the expression amused him greatly. He again picked up the deck of cards, dealt a few. "And if I convince you it isn't safe? You mean you'll turn me loose?" He studied the cards on the table as if interested in their artistic effect.

"I'll turn you loose," Steve Vincent affirmed. "That's the whole idea. I want your opinion of my method of murdering you. Now hurry up and finish your drink and let's get started."

"Take it easy," Bryce said, picking up his glass. "You said yourself there wasn't any great rush. Besides, just as a tipoff to start with, one of you ought to wash and dry and put away three of these glasses before we leave."

"No score on that one," Vincent said drily. "I'd already thought of it. . . . Take

these out, Eddie. Like Bryce just said."

Keeler quit the room bearing three empty glasses. Bryce set down his half empty glass and once more ruffled the deck of cards, laying down several more and musing aloud:

"It all makes sense, Vincent, because I know how crazy you are about your own sweet hide. Except, you know damn well if you turn me loose that won't be the end of it. I'll bring charges against you." He slapped down the deck. "False entry. Assault and battery. Kidnap." He finished off his drink and put down the glass very firmly and carefully, then added sarcastically: "Or do you also want my advice on how you can get out of *that*?"

Marcy cackled briefly in appreciation. Bryce put a cigarette between his lips and got a book of matches from his smoking jacket. He lighted the cigarette and put the match on the card table.

"Funny as a crutch, ain't you?" Vincent said from the side of his mouth. He swung open-handed, cuffing the back of Bryce's head and knocking him against the table, which rattled. "Come on, funny man, it's time we started. Down the stairs and out the back way. Get your things. Make a break and we'll slug you."

Bryce pushed back his chair and rose. He glanced at the table, paled, then looked into Marcy's gun. For a moment he seemed on the verge of leaping, but he shrugged and went to a closet.

**T**HE *Tracey* was the largest, if not the most fashionable, hotel in town. It was eleven stories high and possessed three entrances. Dick Marcy, who was driving Steve Vincent's Packard limousine, took it around to the Buchanan Street doorway, the most private of the three.

Vincent stepped out, followed by Bryce who was followed very closely by Eddie Keeler, whose coat pocket bulged. They entered the hotel through swinging doors,

Vincent holding back so that Bryce was forced on his heels by Eddie Keeler. Trekking straight along the side of the lobby to a bank of three elevators, they entered one. "Nine," said Vincent, and they rose.

Bryce, now wearing a grey snapbrim hat and a blue suit, and looming taller and broader than either of his captors, had hoped to see someone he knew in the lobby, most particularly Harry Hague, the house detective. But no one had noticed them.

They quit the barber shop odor of the elevator boy's blond head and, again in line, walked down a red tufted carpet past white, numbered doors. Bryce wondered if Eddie Keeler would have dared shoot him if he had swung on him, or run, or yelled for help, down there in the lobby. It didn't matter now; that chance was gone.

Vincent, having halted the procession, had been jabbing a bell button. A blond woman opened the door marked 945, glanced curiously at Bryce and said hurriedly to Vincent as they brushed past her: "It's all ready. Now gimme that money and let me get out of here."

Bryce was shoved into an easy chair by Keeler. It was a large double room with a tan carpet on the floor, a double bed pinkly counterpaned, a dresser, a chiffonier, a writing table and other objects. It smelled of the blonde's perfume.

While Keeler stood behind Bryce with gun out, Vincent opened a closet door and looked within, and Bryce saw several feminine garments. The woman had a hat on, was very nervous, would no longer look at Bryce. Vincent gave her a handful of bills and told her to scam.

"Now," said Vincent, as the door closed behind the blonde, "here's the setup." Looking grimly businesslike, he peeled off his hat and tossed it to the bed and got out a cigarette. "That broad who was here is from out of town. Pittsburgh. An old acquaintance of mine, and I got her

down here just for this. She checked in here this morning: this room's in her name, or anyway, the name she gave 'em. Three times today, while you and Jack O'Hara were at your precinct or wherever the hell you were—she phoned your apartment, asked for you and acted very excited to the telephone operator in your apartment house."

Vincent struck a match and lighted his cigarette, then, seeing that Bryce had also put one in his mouth, stepped forward and held the flame for him with an ironical grin.

"Then tonight she called again—" waving out the match—"the call I answered. See, here's the point. I had one of my fellas, a new man—you don't even know him yourself—go around to your apartment house yesterday and make up to that little chicken on the switchboard, tellin' her he was a private dick working for Miss Joan Arden. Get the idea? It'll look like Miss Joan Arden—" Vincent hesitated—"was keeping tabs on you while she was up in New York. So this new man of mine, acting like a private dick, bribed your telephone operator to listen in on all calls to your apartment. She heard the one tonight, the one I answered. Lucky she's new; there's no question but she thinks it was you—because me and Dick and Eddie came in the back way, so she thought you were alone up there."

## CHAPTER THREE

### The Sands of Time Fall

**T**HOUGH Bryce's face was stony, his eyes glowed as he understood perfectly. He glanced at the bed, at the closet door, then down at himself. "The bed open. The blond's stuff scattered around. And me shot in the head, with the gun beside me."

"And some of your clothes off," nodded Vincent. "But even that ain't all of it. See, this blond dame is a regular pay-

off Judy for a vice ring in Pittsburgh. Not only were you and she having a little reunion on the side, but she came to pay you off a couple of centuries that the vice ring in Pittsburgh owed you. See, you were a smart cap. You were clean on local graft, but you had a hookup out of town."

Vincent, opening his pocket, displayed four fifty dollar bills and a pencilled slip which listed several addresses followed by sums, which totalled two hundred dollars. "Payoff on your cut on Pittsburgh houses. It'll be lying where the cops can find it, and they can easy figure out the meaning. Another good reason for you shooting yourself. I can spare the two centuries."

Vincent squinted at the ash of his cigarette. "The way it will look, the blonde scrambled after you shot yourself, after Miss Joan Arden's private dick busted in, catching you in double trouble. The hotel management will know it was the blonde's room, and if the operator at your apartment don't talk, the cops will get a tip about her. Of course, the cops will look for the blonde and the private dick, but they'll both have taken a powder."

The door buzzer sounded and Dick Marcy was admitted. Bryce was a while speaking. He saw that he should have put up a struggle on the way here. He should have divined from the phone call to his apartment that Joan would be dragged into it.

Joan, of course, would deny having engaged a private detective to watch her detective lover, but how many would believe her? Believed or not, she would be dragged through a loathsome mess! She a professional dancer, and her cop fiance found a suicide in a hotel room, not only embroiled with another woman, but with evidence of his connection with an out-of-town vice ring! It might blight her future and ruin her professional reputation.

"You slimy louse," Bryce said to Vincent. "You didn't tell me you were going to drag in my girl!"

"Naturally I didn't. I wanted to get you here. That's why I didn't explain that phone call. All the more reason for you to see if there's anything wrong with the plan."

Bryce laughed curtly, showing a confidence he did not entirely feel. "There's plenty wrong with it. It's weak at every point. I can think of a half dozen holes off-hand." He broke off abruptly, staring beyond Vincent in thought, as the latter hitched his chair forward.

"Let's hear 'em, doctor. That's what you're here for. The Advisory Committee," but Bryce didn't immediately answer.

He was wondering now if he would be better off to refuse to reveal whatever flaws he discovered. Bluff Vincent. Scare him out of it. Cite one or two small potent loopholes, and imply there were even worse ones unmentioned.

**Y**EAH, but suppose Vincent wouldn't swallow it! The damned scheme had to be balked, not because of his life but because of Joan! It was no longer a game of wits with his life at stake—a game which he had been half-willing to play, but a test of his ability as a detective, with Joan's future life hanging in the balance. The risk was too great. But what else could he do? If only Jack O'Hara. . . .

"You're going to shoot me," Bryce said slowly, "here in this room, in the temple. Contact wound, I suppose. Got my revolver?" And as Vincent nodded: "Okay. Then you'll press my fingers on the stock, put the gun on the floor. Where will I be lying?"

Vincent shrugged. "It don't matter. We'll take off your coat and vest and tie, muss up the bed, scatter the dame's stuff around, pick up all our cigarette butts, wipe off your prints and blow. You'll be found like that. If you're thinking about the noise, the rooms on both sides

of us and across the hall are empty, and we'll use your .32."

Bryce looked at his wrist watch, "It's five minutes after ten. Say the shot isn't heard, I won't be discovered until tomorrow morning, probably by a chambermaid. Doc Harris can fix pretty closely the time of death. It will match up with when your blonde hussy was seen leaving the hotel, provided somebody saw her. That's your theory."

Bryce paused, let his face crease in a frown. "I don't know why you're so sure the cops will think I shot myself, when the blonde dame was on the scene and might have done the trick. Even if they take it for granted that I came to see her, there's nothing to prove we didn't have a fight over something, and that she got my gun and plugged me. But we'll leave that for a minute.

"All those phone calls, of course, and the one tonight were simply to establish that I knew the woman and came to see her secretly."

"You've got it swell," nodded Vincent.

"A ll right, here's the first question—about that private dick. Why didn't he stick around? Why let the blonde dame skip out, if he was a real private dick? And why did he bust in, anyway? For evidence? I'm not married yet—and besides, one witness isn't enough!"

Bryce shook his head slowly, "It's a lousy plot, Vincent. Aside from those details, it's full of holes."

"Show me!"

Bryce smiled, leaning back comfortably in his chair. He seemed now to be at ease. "You say 'Show me'. First let's understand each other. I'm not going to be dummy enough to show you any holes you can plug up." He added ironically: "Much as I'd like to help you kill this fellow Bryce and get away with it!"

"Stop being funny," Vincent snarled.

"But that doesn't matter," Bryce went on, "because there are plenty of angles

that you can't change. Have you ever tried taking any clothes off a man who's just been shot in the head? Don't you suppose he *bleeds*? Don't you know the blood will run every which way, if you move him around? Suppose they come in here and find me dead on the floor in my shirt-sleeves, and my coat on a chair and *blood on the coat*, which got there before you took it off?"

"Jeez!" whispered Dick Marcy involuntarily, from the bed. Vincent looked at him. "Shut up, mug!" But his eyes were narrowed in thought.

"Mean to say you hadn't thought of that?" Bryce asked in disbelief. "Cripes, pretty soon you'll be thanking me for saving you from the chair!" He ticked off more points on his fingers: "I'm supposed to have come up here alone, to see this—this woman. What about the blonde kid in the elevator that brought us all up?"

"How'll he know you were with us?" Vincent retorted. "I thought of that already!"

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Hopeless Outlook

**B**RYCE said: "He ought to remember that we came in together and got out together, and only one of us—that was you—gave him the floor number. That proves we were together."

"To hell with him!" Vincent shrugged. "Even if the cops find him he probably won't remember. And if he does and starts blabbing, I can take care of *him* on the side!"

"Suit yourself," Bryce said, as if the question were no concern of his. "I'm simply warning you. That's the sort of thing the cops look for. Now take the question of how I got here. According to the secret assignation theory, I sneaked out the back way from my apartment house and came here pronto. How? By a

taxi? . . . Okay, they'll try to find it. Don't fool yourself—that buddy of mine will talk to every hackie in town! So they'll find I didn't come in a taxi. Then how did I get here? I haven't got a car of my own: at least, it's up for repairs. The trolley line is blocks from my house. When they've checked up the times: of when I got the phone call and when the elevator boy saw me, they'll know I must have come in a car, so somebody must have brought me. Who? . . . The same two guys who were in the elevator with me? Who were they?"

Bryce spread his hands. "Figure on fixing it up with the elevator boy if you want to, but they'll have him down at headquarters looking at your picture before the sun gets hot tomorrow. And—" pointed Bryce, leaning forward, "don't try to fix that boy tonight! Then you'll sure stick your neck in it!"

Vincent had smiled coldly through the last part of this. "You're making a hell of a lot out of nothing. You haven't changed my mind yet. Got anything else?"

Bryce looked disgusted. "Plenty," he snorted, "but you're too dumb to listen to sense. You're like a guy that calls in a doctor and then goes ahead with his voodoo. Who is this blonde dame that I'm supposed to have been so nutty about that I rushed out to see her? And how did I get in with a Pittsburgh vice ring? Jack O'Hara and a dozen people know that when I've had anything to do with women, I didn't pick that kind and I don't use hotels. So what? Think they can't find her, get her description?"

"And your fake private dick that bribed the switchboard girl at my apartment house—hell's fire, that will smell phoney from the word go! The girl will describe him. Every shamus in town will be questioned. They'll know he's a fake, aside from whether or not they believe Miss Arden—and the setup will be clear: he

was just to get the girl to listen in on that phone call.

"And I'll tell you, too, that Jack O'Hara won't believe that phone call from the beginning: he'll know there was someone in my place who answered it, and if you punks left any prints or signs there, he'll have you hanging up by your thumbs."

"Says you," answered Vincent. "We didn't leave any prints or cigarette butts or anything else. I'll give you one score: the fake shamus is a weak spot, but *that don't pin it on me!* That's what I'm worried about! Let the cops think you were murdered if they want to, so long as they can't pin it on me! You've got to prove they can't keep from getting shot."

"On *us,*" amended Eddie Keeler from behind Bryce.

Vincent growled a response.

**B**RYCE said suddenly in a blank voice: "Let me stretch my legs and swallow some fresh air." Without waiting for answer, he stood up and walked to the nearest window, which he opened from the bottom.

Bryce stood there several minutes, breathing the fresh cool air, nine stories above the street. He looked out over lights and then downward, thinking of Joan Arden. Some of his confidence had left him. Vincent wasn't going to be deterred except by concrete, tangible, irrefutable evidence against Steve Vincent. But Bryce wasn't through yet. And if he couldn't convince Vincent, then he had to stall, delay, on the bare chance that Jack O'Hara . . .

Bryce turned, marshaling his thoughts. Cold and impersonal—that was the way to be. As if the whole subtle scheme concerned someone else and had been already perpetrated.

He sat down. Eddie Keeler was now lounging on the bed and Dick Marcy had taken his place behind the captive's chair. Vincent, an envelope in his hand, finished

making notes and looked up, grinning.

"Round two," he said. "Y' know, Bryce, I kinda like your style. Tough we've got to kill you."

Bryce looked through him.

"Take another angle," he said, and all were instantly paying attention. "They find me shot to death in a hotel room. Apparently suicide and a woman and all that, but leave that out. O'Hara says to himself, *'It's murder. That so-and-so Steve Vincent finally got Lew. He's been after him for months.'*" That's what O'Hara will think: you know it as well as I do. He'll be after you.

"Have you three men got an alibi for this hour and a half tonight? How many punks in your mob know about it, Vincent? I could name three stoolies of my own who'll probably pick up the truth and who would tell me, if it was O'Hara you were killing. I don't know O'Hara's stoolies any more than he knows mine, but they could probably do the same thing."

Vincent's mouth was a hooked line. "That don't prove it."

"That's just a beginning. Eddie Keeler there threw his girl over two months ago and now he's playing around with somebody else. That girl will talk. Grab Eddie and rig it right—maybe even frame him, because by God, if it was O'Hara, I wouldn't hesitate to frame him!—and Eddie will talk."

"That's a lie, Steve!" cried Eddie Keeler.

"Shut up!" rapped Vincent without turning his head. "Let him talk."

Bryce moved his head backward to indicate the young fellow behind him. "Marcy comes to the same thing, for different reasons. His parents are living and they're good people, on the level. I've talked to 'em. They're worried about—"

Dick Marcy, suddenly pale, ground out: "You leave them out, damn you, or I'll—!"

Vincent slapped air. "Button it!" and

Bryce went on slowly, playing for time:

"—They still hope he'll go straight. That's always an angle to work from, when a kid's mother is living and will work with the cops to persuade him to talk and save himself from the chair."

**T**HE gun pressed into Bryce's neck. "You lousy bull!" said Marcy in rage. "You'll try anything, won't you!"

Vincent, smiling, gestured at him. "Why get excited? I'm not worried—yet. . . . That all sounds dangerous, Bryce, only you haven't given O'Hara anything to start with!"

Bryce took out a cigarette, tapped it, lipped it, struck a match, and thought about Jack O'Hara. . . . But it was hopeless, he knew.

"While O'Hara's doing all this," he said, "what do you suppose the experts are doing right here in this room over my dead body? They're giving him something to start with!"

"Would a cop—would a man used to guns—shoot himself through the head or through the heart? There's something you don't know. If he was going to shoot himself through the body, would he open his coat and shirt to expose the skin, as some people do, or would he shoot through the clothes? A Homicide dick could answer offhand, but you don't know.

"How does a man fall when he shoots himself while sitting in a chair? How does the blood settle? If his legs are crossed, is that an indication of suicide or murder? You don't know! The police do."

"Nuts!" snapped Vincent, sneering incredulously, but at the same time looking vaguely worried.

Bryce laughed curtly. "'It's your risk,'" he quoted back to him. "What have you decided about taking off my clothes after you shoot me? No answer to that, have you? Have you noticed this carpet and how it takes footprints? It'd be queer as hell to find a suicide in a room

where only he and a woman had been, and then find signs of three other men!"

Vincent started forward, triumphant with a scientific rebuttal: "How could they tell after the cops have tramped in here themselves?"

Bryce shrugged and dragged on his smoke. But it was Vincent's point. And Bryce realized that one such point as that damaged his whole edifice.

The strain was getting under his skin. He looked at his watch. Ten thirty. How the hell could you solve a murder that wasn't committed? When you had to imagine the *corpus delicti*, and then make believe you had to reconstruct it? With you as the victim? . . . A foreboding of failure stole over him. "Keep talking!" he told himself. "Stall!"

"Boss," said Dick Marcy suddenly, "let's plug him and get it over with. I can slap a handkerchief over his head to keep it from bleeding till we—"

"Give him some more time," interrupted Vincent. "Don't you guys understand? We're doing this for our own good! We're being smart! We're making this cop work for us!"

"Listen," said Bryce, as if he hadn't heard their speeches: "This blonde woman from Pittsburgh. Has she ever been arrested?"

Eddie Keeler's laugh crackled from the comfort of the bed. "Lou Pearce? She's been jugged so many times she—"

Vincent turned to bark at him, but Bryce was already nodding and saying: "Okay. Now, here's something you lugs don't seem to realize. That woman is going to be the key to the whole business. Whether the cops believe I shot myself or that she shot me, she's going to be hunted and hunted hard. You say she used a phony name to register here. That doesn't mean a thing! She'll have left behind her a description; half a dozen feminine garments in this room with labels in 'em; fingerprints in this room and in

the bathroom and on the hotel register—and maybe something else.

"With only the prints, she can be identified by a wire to the F. B. I. in Washington if she's got a record, and by tomorrow afternoon two dicks will be on the train to Pittsburgh to arrest Lou Pearce."

"God Almighty!" ejaculated Steve Vincent. "I never—! Geez . . . ! Because that broad—"

"She'll tell the whole thing," Bryce nodded grimly. "How much did you pay her?"

VINCENT stood up, scratching his brown hair, and began pacing up and down quickly, agitated, paying no heed to their prisoner's last question. "They can, too!" he muttered. "She's heading back there tonight! . . . Go straight home! . . . They can grab her. . . . I never thought of the prints, her record, and with only two hundred she'll bust wide open and—"

He whirled and, completely ignoring Bruce, pointed to Keeler. "Get down and send a wire to Tony Schaeffer in Pittsburgh! Tell him to meet Lou Pearce at the station tomorrow morning and take her and hold her undercover! Or maybe bump her. . . . Wait . . . !"

He stood thinking, biting a thumbnail. Keeler was sitting up on the bed, watching him.

Bryce leaned back in his chair, reached up with his right hand to scratch his ear, snatched backward behind his head and clutched Dick Marcy's revolver and hand.

He dragged the gun and wrist down over his right shoulder even as Marcy exploded in a curse. His left hand whipped across, twisted Marcy's fingers. But the gunman of good parents held on fiercely, tugging, and grabbed Bryce's black hair and pulled his head backward, choking, "Get him! Hold him! He's almost—"

By that time Vincent had come out of his trance and leaped for Bryce, nearly falling over Eddie Keeler who had tum-

bled from the end of the bed in his haste to reach the chair. Vincent caught Bryce's left wrist with both his hands and jerked. The hand came free. Marcy gave a violent tug and recaptured his pistol. In a fury, he raised it to slug Bryce.

"Don't!" Vincent almost screamed, throwing out a hand.

The gun floated down harmlessly. Keeler, picking himself up, was glaring at Bryce with silent malevolence.

Bryce suddenly burst out laughing in loud, harsh scorn. "Damn!" he shouted lustily. "You apes are as nervous as a bunch of rabbits!"

Silently he straightened his hair and clothes. Vincent said from a yard away, nodding in malicious understanding: "Peeved, weren't you? 'Cause you told me about Lou Pearce, and that's a hole we can plug up! Sure, and I'm gonna! I'll send a wire to Pittsburgh as soon as we finish with you. . . ."

Bryce turned from the window a moment later, where he had been allowed one more breath of air.

"Five more minutes!" Vincent had said. "You haven't solved your own murder yet, and pinned it on me. I don't think you can do it. Got anything more on deck?"

It was ten minutes of eleven. Jack O'Hara. . . . But why think about him?

"Of course," Bryce said, returning casually to his chair, though his face was hard and set, "the same thing I said about Lou Pearce goes for the man who pretended to be a private dick. Maybe he didn't leave fingerprints when he talked to the telephone operator at my apartment, but—"

"SKIP him!" Vincent ordered impatiently and with a new air of having the situation thoroughly in hand and knowing more than his teacher. "That's old stuff. Give us something with a punch."

Bryce crossed his legs and lit another cigarette. His thoughts had all but

abandoned the problem; resigned to what was coming, he was marking down the room, the position of the three, the best moment and position from which to start a battle, for it went without saying that he was not going out without a fight.

That, indeed, was the irony of the whole thing. Vincent and his helpers were not under any conditions going to shoot him as they planned: simply by putting up a fight he was going to demolish their suicide setup; and yet that was the one argument which he could not bring forward, lest Marcy get an eye signal from Vincent and pull the trigger.

That was liable to happen in any case and any minute from now on. For Vincent, foreseeing a possible fight, would naturally lie about how much longer Bryce had to live. Maybe he was to be shot in the next minute.

"Well," said Bryce slowly, "I suppose I'll have to produce my ace in the hole. I didn't want to tell you about it. I wanted to see you three pinched and then explain how it happened. But I might as well kill a few more minutes until O'Hara gets here with a squad of cops."

He shook ash from his cigarette, reflecting that it would be nice to be as confident as he sounded. His little trick could not have worked. Not after Vincent's shaking the table.

The silence that had followed his words was broken by Vincent. "What's that you're saying?" he cracked. "About O'Hara and a squad of cops?"

Bryce smiled thinly. "We've been talking about solving my murder, but we haven't said anything about preventing it. I hate to give you a jolt, Vincent, but I haven't really been worried about this business of solving my own murder because I've known all the time that O'Hara was going to turn up and stop the show. Y' see, I left him a message at my apartment before we left, to come here as soon as he got in. He's probably on his way

now—he should show up any minute.”

Bryce wished he believed so.

“Crap, Steve!” said Dick Marcy scornfully. “He didn’t leave no message! This is a bluff!”

Vincent was bent forward, looking hard into Bryce’s eyes. He looked worried. “How did you leave him a message?” he demanded, slowly and hoarsely. “You couldn’t have! We were watching you every minute!”

“But still I left one,” Bryce answered, “and I’ll show you how. Got a deck of cards?”

The other lost all expression. For a moment no one spoke. Then Vincent snapped his fingers at Keeler and barked: “Where’s those cards you’re always carrying? Get ’em out!” He went back to Bryce. “Are you lying?”

“Give me the cards,” Bryce said, leaning forward in his chair, and took them from Keeler across the end of the bed. Even Marcy, the guard, moved around and bent to watch.

There was tense hush in the room until Vincent threw at Bryce: “When was O’Hara supposed to get back to your place?”

Shuffling the deck, Bryce replied carelessly, “Oh, shortly after ten thirty. . . . Get me a glass from the bathroom,” he ordered Keeler, who immediately piled off the bed and performed the errand. Bryce set the glass on the rug nearby.

“Of course, you gents know that Jack O’Hara just won a two thousand dollar prize in the Lucky Gold contest for solving ninety out of a hundred picture puzzles, so even dumb as you are, you can see he’s got a mind that works that way.”

**H**IE tossed out a card to the patch of rug encircled by the four men: it was the jack of hearts.

“We used to leave messages for each other with pictures and cigarettes and books and stuff like that, piled in a certain

way, and the other fellow would have to figure them out.”

This was pure myth, but Bryce’s life now seemed to hang on his build-up. He threw out two more cards, the nine of diamonds and the five of clubs, and arranged them side by side under the jack.

“And don’t forget, Vincent, that phone call came when I was sitting at the card table, so I knew you were going to bring me here—even the room number in the *Tracey*.”

This time he brought out the three of clubs and then the ace of spades and arranged them neatly under the other two.

“Beginning to look familiar? These are just the cards I laid out on the table while we were talking in my flat, which none of you apes paid any attention to.”

Rapidly five more cards went to the rug in a row—three eights and a pair of sixes.

Bryce, who had been bent double to the rug from his chair, now straightened up. “That’s all I put down, except the rest of the deck, which went down here—between the jack of hearts and the others.” He deposited it so, face down.

“And there,” he said, “is the message, except for two things. I took my high-ball glass,” picking up the glass from the rug, “and made a dent in the card table with half its bottom, alongside the ace of spades—like this—” he made a C mark on the carpet. “And after I’d lit my cigarette with a book match—” he got one from his pocket—“I bent it like this, into a ‘V’ shape, and dropped it on the deck before I got up from the table.”

Bryce relaxed in his chair, slanting another look at the three men. “Want me to read it for you?”

“Go on!” snarled Vincent. “Finish your act!”

Bryce pointed one by one. “First there’s the jack of hearts. That says, ‘Jack’ because the message is to Jack O’Hara. Then there’s the bent match on

the deck of cards, which says, 'V on deck.' V stands for Vincent. Next under that is a nine and a four and five, which says '945', the number of this room. Then a trey, an ace and the C mark in the card table, which is trey-ace-C, and that's *Tracey*, the *Tracey Hotel*. And last of all, to tell him what's going on here, there are three eights and a pair of sixes, a full house in poker, which says 'Full House.' It means you've got your boys with you."

Bryce grinned. "With only one Tracey in town, that setup is plenty for Jack O'Hara, when he sees those cards on the table and me not home."

No one spoke. Vincent looked at his watch. He walked to the door, listened, came back. Bryce kept grinning, but it was all on his face.

He had told nothing but the truth, and if his trick had been left that way, he would be truly confident of O'Hara's comprehension. What he hadn't told Vincent — what dashed all his hopes — was that his careful layout on the card table at his apartment had been ruined at the last minute. Vincent's swing at him just before they left had knocked a king from the top of the deck so that it covered the jack, confusing everything.

"Think he's comin'? Think he got it? Think we ought to scam?" These hurried enquiries from Eddie Keeler.

**V**INCENT had calmed himself. Spread-legged, he was staring at Bryce. A pulse throbbed in his temples as he said savagely, "I don't know but we're going to risk it! I've planned too long to rub out this dick! Be damned if I'm going to be scared off by a kid trick!"

He drew his gun. Bryce set himself. The time had come. He would go out fighting. But this way, in the face of a gun, was suicidal. If he could only now distract them, but for an instant . . . His mind jumped at the first thing that came to it.

"Forgotten something, haven't you? If you're going to send a wire to Pittsburgh to have Lou Pearce held, you'd better do it quick. The telegraph office closes at eleven o'clock."

This was not so, but Bryce was counting upon psychological effect at that moment of tension. He got it. Mentally taken off balance, Vincent lowered his gun, turned his head and made an unconscious movement toward the telephone.

Bryce came hurtling from his chair.

As he sprang, he pushed the chair backward so that it struck Dick Marcy in the midriff, knocking him against the wall. Bryce came at Vincent with his left arm cocked and his right ready for a hook, and Vincent took them both before he could pull up his gun. His head jerked sideways and he slipped to his knees. Bryce high-stepped a knee squarely into Vincent's face, whirling at the same time for the bed, where Keeler had already drawn his gun.

"Damn you!" gasped Keeler, and fired.

The bullet tore through the muscles beneath Bryce's left arm. He jumped, like a man going for a trapeze, and carried Keeler before him to the other side of the bed, his left arm useless, crossing his right to Keeler's chin. Keeler's head struck the wall with a hollow crack that was sickening. He turned perfectly white, went limp beneath Bryce, but his gun had fallen to the floor before Bryce could grab it.

Marcy, from behind the chair five feet away, leveled his bright revolver. "Stop it, now! Stop it, Bryce!" he pleaded fiercely. "I don't want to shoot you, but—"

"Okay, scam out of here!" Bryce threw at him, as he flopped over the bed end to get Keeler's gun. Drop your heater and beat it, or—"

But Marcy's gun went off; whether intentionally or accidentally there was no telling. Then he fired again and Bryce

grunted in a sick way and slid headfirst off the bed onto the floor. He had been hit high in the chest and his cheek was ripped open.

"Gawd! Gawd!" Marcy mumbled, staring at the huddled detective. "I killed him!" And, dropping his gun, like a crazy man, he dashed for the door.

Bryce lifted his head at the end of the bed just as Steve Vincent was sitting up at the side of the bed, neither seeing the other. Marcy was clawing at the door.

Feet beat outside. Marcy spun about. Bryce was groping for Keeler's automatic, Vincent was getting his legs under him, hearing Bryce, hearing Marcy, hearing the approaching feet—and raising his gun.

"It's them!" cried Marcy, rushing back and making a dive for where he had dropped his gun, just as Vincent fired at the top of Bryce's head, and missed it.

The door crashed open and a deep fuzzy voice yelled: "What in the name o'—Marcy! Drop that! What're you—Okay—!" and a .38 roared.

Marcy fell on his face. Vincent had jumped on the bed, his face working con-

vulsively, swearing in a mumbled stream, scrambling for the end to shoot Bryce. "I'll get you, anyway, I'll get you . . . !"

Bryce came up on his knees, shoved forth Keeler's automatic and shot Vincent in the forehead.

In the middle of the big room, Jack O'Hara, quite alone, looked around bewildered, said, "Mother of mine!" and ran for Bryce. "Lew! Lew! *What the hell is this?*"

Bryce had fallen to his side. A mist was coming over him. He wasn't sure O'Hara wasn't a ghost. "You blind?" he mumbled. "Can't you see what it is? How the hell did you get here? You didn't get my message, did you?"

O'Hara smelled of whisky. "Sure, I got it! But it took me a long time to figure out the King on top of the Jack, until I saw the bent match. Then I figured you had a bottle of King George V Scotch and were having a party up here, and so I hustled . . . but what the devil *did* it mean then?"

Something like a grimace twisted Bryce's face. "Party . . . Yeah! . . . A murder party."

THE END



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# SEVEN STEPS TO HELL

By **PAUL ERNST**

(Author of "No Shoes for Corpses," etc.)



*Packy Boyd swore the law would never take him. So he set a trap outside his hideout that would blow a cop to hell—even if the man who came to get him was Detective Bill Boyd—his own brother!*

Chick snarled at him, ratlike eyes smoldering, thin lips twitching.

"Thick between the ears, am I? Look. We lift some stuff from the Brazilian Import Company last week. Packy drives. While he's waiting for us, a cop comes up who knows him. We bust out just as the cop gets his flat foot on the running board. Packy lets him have it and they take the cop to the hospital where he almost croaks. Now they're out for Packy for holdup and for what he did to the cop. Sooner or later they'll pick him up and give him the office. Then he'll come clean with all the jobs he's driven us on, which is plenty! I still say we ought to toss him."

"And I still say you're thick between the ears," retorted Williams, glaring back at his lieutenant. "You'll never get another driver like Packy Boyd. You'll never get another kid that knows motors like he does. Why, he can take a hot car and put an extra twenty miles an hour on it with a supercharger and special gears. The kid's good."

"Good and hot," grated Chick Velie. "For God's sake, Hunk, use sense. We got Stooze Kamp. He's almost as good as Packy—"

"Packy knows more about cars in a minute than Stooze can ever learn. I'm tellin' you for the last time, lay off Packy. He can hole in here for a couple more weeks till his nose heals. After that he

**C**HICK VELIE spat out of one corner of his mouth without disturbing the cigarette that hung in the other.

"The kid's dangerous," he said. "His nerve's shot. If the cops ever picked him up now, he'd split wide open. We'd all burn or get life."

"So?" said Hunker Williams evenly.

"So we ought to make sure right now that he won't talk later!"

"You're thick between the ears, Chick."

can drive for us again. His own damned brother wouldn't know him with a new, straight nose instead of the busted beezer he used to have."

"That's another thing! We should monkey around with a guy whose brother is a flattie. . . ."

Chick's voice trailed off as Williams looked at him. He swallowed nervously, ashes from his drooping cigarette falling onto his unclean shirt front.

"Packy stays," Williams said evenly. "Don't forget it—and don't forget who runs the works around here. Now go on up and be palsy-walsies with the kid. Give him a little stuff, too. He'll be needing it."

Chick opened his mouth, clamped it shut again, and left the room without further comment.

The room was the dirty, grease-splotched office of a three-story building, on the front of which was the sign: Automobile Storage. Chick walked across a corner of the ground floor of the garage, where several dozen cars were kept in live storage, to the iron stairs going up to the second and third floor dead-storage space.

**I**N THE windowless back of the third floor three cars with great paper coverings over them were arranged in apparent lack of design to form an alcove which was almost pitch dark and into which you could not see till you had walked right up to it.

Chick went to this space, one wall of which was the building wall, and the other three the paper-covered automobiles. In the dim light he saw the cot that had been placed there, and the figure on the cot.

The seated figure looked up.

The haggard face of a youngster of nineteen turned toward Chick. He was a big fellow, tall, well filled-out for his years. But his face gave away his youth.

Narrow gauze bandages were held in place alongside his nose with strips of adhesive tape.

Packy Boyd half rose from the cot.

"Chick! Nothing's wrong, is there? The cops aren't outside, are they?"

Chick stared stonily at him, but made his voice amiable.

"Naw, kid. What are you worrying about? The cops won't get you here. And in less'n three weeks your nose'll be healed up. Nobody'll spot you then, and boy, will you be good with the janes! Instead of having a beak smeared all over your face like you used to have, you'll sport a regular movie mug."

Packy clutched at the offered comfort.

"That will fix me up, won't it? Did the plastic surgeon do a good job? Will the scars show?"

He lifted one of the bandages at the side of his nose. Chick peered in the dimness.

"Naw," he said, voice warm and hearty though his eyes were bleak. "It'll never show."

Packy sighed. "I hope not. Because if they get me . . . God! I can still see Harley lying on the sidewalk with blood coming out of his lungs! Why the hell did I let him have it?"

"Because he'd have nailed us if you didn't," Chick said. "If you hadn't let him have it, he'd have picked us up with ten grand worth of orchid bulbs in the sacks. Forget it, now, kid. You plugged a cop after he'd recognized you. But you got away, didn't you? And now Hunk's doc has fixed it so your map won't be so easy to spot."

Packy Boyd's trembling hands went up to pick at his lips. After all, he was only a kid, only nineteen, in spite of the fact that he knew as much about motors as the men who designed them, and as much about fast and desperate driving as the average race track driver.

"I'm not going to let 'em take me, see?"

he said shrilly. "They'd put me away for twenty years—maybe more. I'll kill any dick that tries it! You hear?"

"Sure, I hear," said Chick Velie, eyes bleak and stony though his voice was amiable. "And I know you mean it, kid. You got guts. But maybe you'd better have a little stuff, just the same. It's good for what ails you."

His hand came from his coat pocket with a little folded paper in which were whitish crystals . . .

Packy grabbed for it, and after a while the trembling of his young hands eased.

**I**N THE office of Chief Vandon, Bill Boyd leaned over the desk and stared appealingly into the chief's eyes. He was tall, heavy-shouldered, with light brown hair and a small cleft in his chin. He looked very much like his young brother—but with ten years of steadiness and hard work added.

"Give me the job, Chief," he urged.

"It's not up your alley, Boyd," Vandon said. "You're in another department, on the vice squad. You don't go after the holdup and racket boys."

"I want to go after this one."

Vandon rubbed his blue-stubbed jaw.

"I don't get it. You want to be assigned to bring in your own brother. What's the idea?"

Boyd straightened up slowly and walked to the window. He looked out at the grimy, traffic-filled street in front of headquarters.

"I want to save him a little grief, if I can," he said. "Packy was straight till about a year ago. He looked tough, with his nose busted and flattened over his face, but he wasn't. He was a decent kid. Then he got in with Williams' gang. He drove for 'em. The last job was this one where they got ten thousand bucks worth of orchid bulbs from the Brazilian Import Company. He got caught up, there. Harley spotted him, and he shot Harley."

Boyd's lips quivered, then grew firm again.

"He's always been decent till lately. But he's got it in him to be an awful tough customer. Now, I'm afraid he'll shoot first and talk afterward if any of the boys catch up with him. But he won't try that on me, his own brother. That's why I want the assignment to get him. I want to save him from murder. Let him serve time for the holdup and the resist. It still wouldn't be too late for him to go straight when he got out, and to make a man of himself. The kid's a wizard mechanic. He'd get along. Chief, let me take him."

Vandon looked at the inkwell.

"You know what Harley said—the kid was hopped up when he shot. He's taking dope now, Boyd. Maybe you won't keep him from having murder on his soul by going after him yourself. If he was hopped up—he might forget he was your brother and remember only that you're a cop out to put him away."

Boyd sighed.

"I'll take the chance, Chief. He can't have been on the stuff for very long. And I can't believe he'd drill me. We were . . . pretty close till a year ago."

Vandon shrugged. "I don't like the smell of it. And it's going to look bad to a lot of folks—your asking for the chance to arrest your own brother."

"What the hell do I care how it looks to other people?" Boyd said harshly.

"You know he'll go up for a long stretch if he's caught."

"I know," said Boyd heavily. "But there's a chance he'll go decent when he gets out. That's better than burning for murder, isn't it? And he'll murder—and burn—if anybody but me goes after him."

"Okay, Boyd," Vandon shrugged. "You're assigned." He put out his hand. "Luck to you, fella. And you'll need it. I only hope he looks at you as a brother and not as a dick—if you can locate him."

"I'll locate him," nodded Boyd. "I got a lead that I think is pretty good."

He grasped Vandon's hand, and left.

**I**N THE garage owned by Williams under another name, Packy Boyd worked under the rear end of a small standard sedan. Under the upholstery of the back of the body he had put a bullet-proof sheet of steel. The windows had been refitted with bullet-proof glass. Now Packy was changing the gear ratio of the rear end to 3.2. The car had a speed of about eighty-five miles an hour as a stock job. The new gear would add ten miles or more an hour. After that addition would come an adapted supercharger Packy had perfected, which would give it another ten miles an hour.

The gang had cracked up on their get-away from the Brazilian Import job. No matter. When Packy got through with this new stolen car, they'd have a bus able to hit close to a hundred and ten miles an hour, and bullet-proofed in the most important place—the rear.

Packy was whistling a little as he worked. He liked this work. Once he had played with the idea of making the rounds of the racing car manufacturers and trying for a mechanic's job. But this paid better. And usually he could keep from his mind the price he paid in return.

Kamp, stocky, swarthy little mechanic with a glass left eye, who had been Williams' driver and greaseball till Packy came on the scene, stopped tightening the propellor shaft. He stared at Packy with his venomous right eye. He hated Packy's guts; had hated them ever since the kid replaced him as head man here; but he didn't let himself show it much.

"Feelin' kind of light-hearted today, ain't you, kid?" he said.

"Kind of," said Packy, squinting at the new ring gear.

"What's eating you? Couple days ago you had the jitters for fear a cop'd sneak

up and pull you outa your hideout."

Packy grinned at Kamp.

"I don't have 'em any more. Not after a simple little invention of mine. And that reminds me, I ought to let you in on it because you come up to the third floor sometimes, and you might try it some night."

Kamp stared. "Why shouldn't I go to the third floor?"

"I'll show you. Come on to the stairs."

They were working on the second floor. Kamp followed Packy out from under the sedan and went to the stairs with him.

"I've got things fixed so I don't have to worry about the nights," Packy said. "Days are all right. I could see cops coming and give 'em the works if I had to. But nights had me going. I can't stay awake every night, and I've been nuts for fear the bulls would sneak up on me while I was in bed and take me that way. This changes all that."

He pointed up the steps.

"Seventh stair from the top. See anything wrong with it?"

Kamp squinted in the gloom. The staircase had no windows, received light only from the doors at top and bottom. The stairwell was pretty dim.

"I can't hardly see the step itself," he complained, "let alone see if anything's wrong with it."

"Even if it was lighter in here, you wouldn't see anything," Packy boasted.

"What is there to see?"

"I've fixed the step as a trigger to a trap," Packy said. "Like this: I've raised that step a half inch. Under it I've put three rubber hygrometer bulbs, filled with ammonia. Rubber tubes go from them to the riser between the landing and the last step. I'm asleep up here—cop does a sneak up the stairs to get me—he steps on the loose seventh stair—ammonia squirts right in his face. While he chokes in the fumes, I beat it. Neat, huh?"

Kamp nodded. "Neat enough! But

some of the rest of us might catch it.”

“Nope. During the day, the step is held up by two steel blocks. It’s only at night, after I’ve gone up to the third floor to turn in, that the trigger is set. At that time, you’re the only guy around, playing watchman. You’re the only guy that might get it. That’s why I’m showing it to you now.”

Packy stared proudly at the innocent-looking seventh step in the dimness.

“Pretty good, I call it. Sure-fire. Even if three or four dicks came up here, the first would spring the trap and there’d be enough ammonia squirted to send ’em all to the floor, choking for breath.”

“Neat enough,” Kamp said slowly, a second time.

Packy grinned, and went back down to the stolen car whose speed was being improved. Kamp lingered an instant longer, with callous thoughtfulness expressed on his usually dull face.

“But not as neat as it might be . . .” he muttered, after a moment. “I thing I can rig a better trick than that.”

He went back to join Packy.

**W**HEN Detective Boyd had said he thought he had a line on his kid brother, and the rest of Williams’ gang, he had had in mind the nature of the loot taken from the Brazilian Import Company.

Orchids! Neither Williams nor any other crook, as far as Boyd knew, could tell an orchid bulb from a dried onion. Therefore, Boyd figured that Williams must have had the advice of some crooked expert before he tackled the job. Also, someone familiar with the small warehouse of the Brazilian Company must have put the bulbs in a specified place so that Williams would know what to take when he got there. Again someone in the flower business must have arranged a definite place where Williams could sell the stolen bulbs. You don’t go up and

down the streets, or to shady pawn shops, trying to saw off orchid bulbs.

It all spelled inside help to Boyd. So he began his tailing with the Brazilian Company itself.

In four days he found that one of the Brazilian shipping clerks got a salary of a hundred and fifty dollars a month, on which he contrived to live in a hundred and twenty dollar apartment, drive a two thousand dollar car, and buy off-color, half-carat diamonds for a girl whose affections were as phony as her straw-colored hair.

In nine days he listened in on a tip from the shipping clerk to an unnamed person that the Company was getting more orchid bulbs in about two weeks. He traced the call, found the unknown listener had been in a public booth at a drugstore, and happened to get a description of him from the soda clerk that checked vaguely with a description of Hunker Williams.

On a night two weeks and two days after his assignment to the task of arresting his kid brother, he stood across the street and down the block from the storage garage. He was on the track and he knew it. In the past two hours he had seen Williams and a rat named Velie go into the place and leave it again. He had let them go. There was no definite charge against them yet; Packy was the only one identified with the orchid job at present.

He was dead sure Packy was in that building. So for two hours he had waited in order to get the kid alone. It was one in the morning now, and he was alone on the street with his thoughts. Grim, dreary thoughts! The kid, a swell mechanic who ought to be on his way up in an auto shop somewhere, working for a rat like Williams! The kid, a hophead and a cop-shooter! At best, he’d go behind bars for a stretch that would make him almost a middle-aged man before he got out. But that was better than burning in the chair

—which he'd surely do if anybody else tried to arrest him.

Boyd's lips thinned. Packy was a big, tough, wild youngster. He'd surely kill the next cop who tried to put bracelets on him. But not his brother Bill! He'd fight like hell for freedom with his fists. But surely he wouldn't pull a gun on Bill, even if he was hopped up!

"Aw, I know he wouldn't do that," Boyd muttered. But he realized deep down inside him, even as he was saying it, that he knew no such thing.

"The hell with it," he breathed. "Let's go. Let's get it over with."

Inobtrusively, hat down so that it covered his face, he crossed the street and went to Williams' garage. The big garage doors were closed, though the night was warm. There was a small door in one of the big ones, however, and this was innocently unlocked. Too innocently! Boyd could have sworn he heard a far bell ring a warning signal when his foot touched the floor inside the threshold. But he stood there a moment and no one came up; so, gun in hand, he began to look around the dimly lit first floor room. He expected every moment to feel lead tearing into his body from behind one of the many parked cars that offered such excellent cover for an enemy. But he continued to hear no sound in the place, and after a little while he went toward the iron stairs he saw in the side wall.

**P**ACKY was sound asleep on his cot when Kamp stole noiselessly over the third floor and touched his shoulder. Instantly, like a wild thing, Packy was wide awake.

"What's up?" he said.

"Talk lower. There's a dick in the place, kid."

"What!"

"I said, there's a dick in the place. I watched him while he looked over half the first floor, then I came on up to tip

you. I guess he's on his way up now. Get dressed. There's going to be things to do."

Packy cursed softly in the darkness. "I am dressed. Do you think I sleep in pink satin pajamas these days? I've got to lam, Kamp!"

"No you don't, kid," Kamp whispered. "At least not in any hurry. You got till daylight to get out of here. And when you go, you can take this dick with you, and come right back again like nothing at all had happened."

Packy's breath hissed between his teeth.

"Are you nuts, or what?"

In answer, the swarthy little mechanic began to laugh, almost soundlessly, in the dimness. Packy caught his shoulder and shook it.

"A cop on his way up—to get me—and you act like it's nothing but a joke! Get out of my way!"

"Wait a minute," whispered Kamp. "You're forgetting your trap, ain't you? The seventh step from the top?"

"What's that got to do with me getting out of here? The dick gets a dose of ammonia in the face on his way up. So what? That gives me time to get out past him, that's all."

"No," said Kamp, with the flat laughter still sounding in his voice, "that ain't all. The dick gets more than ammonia in his face, kid."

He stopped. Both heard the muffled sound of something falling on the floor below. The detective was searching the second floor, now; had knocked something over in the darkness.

"I kind of made that neat little trap of yours still neater," Kamp went on in his low whisper. "You had battery bulbs filled with ammonia under the seventh step, with tubes coming out under the top step. That's kid stuff, Packy. I took out the bulbs and put a double-barreled, sawed off shotgun under the top step.

Then I looped a wire under the loose seventh step, going to the shotgun triggers. Get the picture?"

Packy said nothing. He was very silent as he sat there on the cot with the law on the floor below—the law coming to send him up the river for a twenty-year stretch.

"The dick comes up," Kamp said. "He steps on the seventh stair and bang! A double charge of slugs takes him right in the head and chest. Then, later, you take him out in the country in a sack, in that big green sedan, and dump him in a ditch. That's all. Nobody'll know the dick was ever here. If any one asks about the sound of the shotgun, it was a backfire. See?"

"How do you know the joint isn't surrounded?" said Packy in a strangled tone. "How do you know this guy is alone?"

"If he'd come with a squad, he'd be in here with a squad," retorted Kamp. "Nope, he's alone. And the shotgun is the best way out. Lot's surer than a little squirt of ammonia."

Packy's sigh was like a sob. But he said: "I guess you're right, Kamp. Better to have a dick die than have him live to take me to the big house. But a double-barreled shotgun full in the face from four feet away . . ."

Kamp's hand squeezed his arm for quiet. They distinctly heard the rasp of a shoe on the bottom step of the third flight.

"In just a minute he'll get it," breathed Kamp. "There's tarpaulin on the second floor. Roll him in that. I'll swab up the blood while you're dumping him in the country."

They heard another step on the stairs. This one was not furtive at all. It was open and unconcealed. And with it came a firm, even voice:

"Packy, it's me, Bill. I've come to take you. Come on down, and come with your hands in the air."

**U**NDER Kamp's hand, Packy started convulsively. He got to his feet, shaking off Kamp's grip.

"What the—" began Kamp.

"I know you're up there," the voice from the stairs carried clearly. There was the sound of another ascending step. "Come down to me—or I'll come up to you!"

"My God, it's my brother!" said Packy. "And he's six steps away from the trigger stair!"

He started to run to the stairs; Kamps fingers vised in the slack of his coat sleeve.

"Kid—where are you going? What're you going to do?"

"I'm going to the stairs and keep him from hitting that step."

"Listen! Wait! That guy's a dick! Don't you make it? A cop! No matter who he is, it's stir for you if you tip him off!"

Packy yanked at the restraining hand.

"Let me go!"

"But, kid—"

"Damn you, let me go! That's my brother down there!"

"I don't care if he's your grandfather!" snarled Kamp. "If you think *I'm* going up, just because they take you and you squeal—"

That was all he said. Packy's fist got him on the side of the jaw. Packy didn't even know that Kamp's gun had come out as he spoke. He leaped the sprawled figure and ran to the head of the stairs.

"That you, kid?" came Boyd's strong, level voice as Packy's running steps sounded.

Packy suddenly remembered the operation on his nose. He stopped running, hit the top landing at a walk. He looked around the corner of the stair doorway, ready to duck back if Bill had a gun in his hand. Let him see him! The light in the stairwell was bad; there was only one miserably dim bulb, high in the ceiling.

Bill couldn't see the slight scars of the operation, and he might not recognize him.

"Who're you calling 'kid'?" he grated, husking his voice. "What're you doing in here, anyhow?"

Boyd stared up the flight of steps. He could barely see the face of the man who was peering around the door-jamb. But he could see that there was a straight, good-looking nose where his kid brother's nose would have been flattened and homely.

"If you're the law, let's see your warrant," snarled Packy. "If you're not, lam out of here before I let you have it with—this!"

A .38 flashed into his hand as he spoke, and levelled down at Bill whose hands were empty and at his sides. Bill looked up . . .

"Are you alone in here, Packy?" he said. "I thought I heard some one else in the place."

"What's the idea, calling me Packy—"

Packy stopped. Dim as the light was, he could see sure recognition in Bill's eyes. He had gambled and lost. The straightened nose might have fooled any one else in town. It might even have fooled his brother for a little while, had it not been that Bill was judging more by voice than by sight, because of the dimness.

Bill took a step up. "Throw down the gun, Packy."

**P**ACKY moistened his dry lips. Bill was on the fifth step up, just five steps from the seventh stair.

"All right," he said, in his natural voice. "I'm Packy. You win. But listen to me, Bill, and get it straight the first time, because there won't be a second chance. I'm not going in with you or any one else. I'll kill first. Even you. So turn around and beat it out of here unless you want to die."

Boyd took another step up.

"Bill, I've got you covered. And I swear I'll let you have it!"

Another step was ascended. Boyd was three steps from the seventh stair.

Packy's face and hands were covered with sweat. He felt the butt of his automatic slide greasily in his palm.

"Bill—don't make me kill you!"

Boyd came up another step. "You won't kill me, kid. That's why I came for you. You wouldn't kill the guy that brought you up after Dad and Ma died."

His voice was as cool as fate and twice as certain. His hands were still hanging emptily at his sides. Then he reached into his pocket and got handcuffs. Packy's startled curse rang out. The gun twitched in his hand—but did not go off. . . .

Boyd smiled.

"I knew you wouldn't do it," he said softly. "Thought I was going after my gun, didn't you, kid? And you didn't shoot. Come on, now. Come down here and let me take you in. Then take your medicine and—"

"Go to the pen for half a lifetime?" panted Packy. "Not for you or any one else on earth! If it was my own mother coming up these steps I'd. . . ." He stopped, and gulped.

"You'd kill her?" said Boyd. "I hardly think so, kid." He held the cuffs in readiness. "Coming down?"

Packy said nothing. He stood there shivering, with his .38 hanging lax in his hand, watching Bill's foot rise to go up another step.

Half a lifetime behind bars if those cuffs clamped around his wrists! And he could go free if he kept his mouth shut. He didn't have to kill Bill. The gun under the top step would take care of that for him. And Kamp had put the gun there, hadn't he? It was Kamp's lookout, not his.

Boyd took the slow step. He was one stair from the seventh, now. Packy felt his teeth chatter, clamped them shut.

"Bill," he said hoarsely, "you're licked. You'll die if you come up any more. Please take my word for it—*Stop!*"

Boyd was on the eighth step. He stared intently at Packy.

"Don't move another step!" panted Packy.

"Why not, kid?"

At least twenty years in the pen if Packy didn't keep his mouth shut. And he had sworn he'd kill before letting himself be put there.

"Because the next step up is a death trap, Bill," he said.

And Boyd only stared at him, calmly, levelly.

"Yeah?" he said.

"As heaven sees me, it is. There's a shotgun under my feet. The seventh step trips it—and you get it in the face."

Bill smiled. "You wouldn't fool me, would you, Packy? Come down, or I come up."

"Bill—I'm not coming down! I'm not going up the river for you or anybody—*Don't step on that stair!*"

**B**OYD stayed on the eighth step. He shook his head a little.

"There's no gun under the stairs."

"I swear by all that's holy—"

"Look," Boyd said patiently. "I know you better than you know yourself. You've always played rough. Now, you might shoot a guy—but you'd never rig a trap that would blow his head off his shoulders without giving him a chance. It's not in you, Packy."

"I didn't rig it," Packy chattered. "One of the other guys did. I had it fixed so ammonia would be squirted out and it was changed—"

"That's pretty thin, kid. For a guy who's always been able to think fast, you ought to fix up a better one than that."

"I'm telling you," shivered Packy, with a crack in his voice, "don't touch that

seventh step! Go over it if you have to—and I'll beat your can in when you get up here. But don't step on the seventh stair!"

Boyd's body was lifting for the next step, the seventh from the top. A sound that was neither moan nor shout came from Packy's lips.

This was his brother. But if he died, it was Kamp's fault. And his body could still be taken to the country and dumped, and Packy would still be free, hiding out here just a little longer till the last scars of his nose operation healed completely. Then, with Bill gone, there would be no one on earth to spot him. . . .

Bill's foot came up to tread on the seventh step.

A scream came from Packy's lips, and he jumped.

He was just a youngster. He didn't want to die, any more than he wanted to be taken away for a long stretch behind bars. Probably he didn't think he would die. Probably he thought he could light on the eighth stair, where Bill was. . . .

"Pack—" Bill's beginning shout rang out in the stairwell.

Then Packy's frantic hands had hit him and sent him falling back down the stairs, while Packy's feet moved desperately to land on the stair below the seventh.

They didn't quite miss. His heels clicked down on the stair's edge.

Bill Boyd lit on his shoulders at the bottom of the stairs as the roar sounded; a roar like that of the whole building exploding. He lay there a moment.

"Packy," he said, finally, not looking up the stairs.

There was no answer. He heard something drippin. . . . After a moment Boyd got up, slowly, and walked toward the second floor stairs. He did not look back at the third floor flight—nor at the seventh stair from its top. . . .

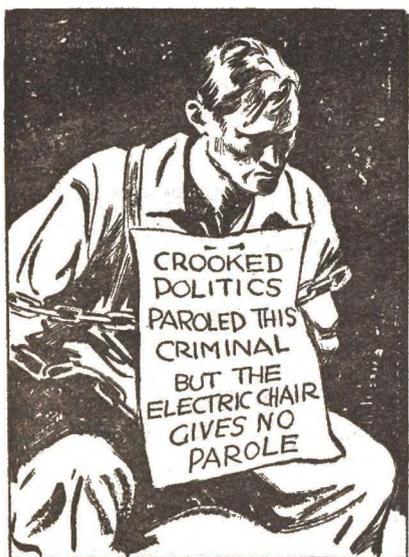
# DEATH BREAKS PAROLE

*How could John Smith, parole fighter, save his friend, Lieutenant Paul Rutgers, from the death that gangdom had promised him—with only a golden-haired girl to help him—a girl who had once saved his life, and once almost caused his death!*

## CHAPTER ONE

### Spying On Death

JOHN SMITH crouched by the small upstairs window. His eyes were glued intently on an office building directly across the street—all day he had remained in that position, keeping his lonely watch. And it was a lonely watch—in every sense of the word—for the hand of every political power in the city was turned against him, and the politically-controlled mobsters were out for his life. John Smith had had the nerve to oppose and fight the vilest parole racket



Smith dived headlong for McArthur's gun as the revolver roared.

## By WYATT BLASSINGAME

(Author of "Death Comes Dancing," etc.)

that ever blackened a community's name; and in fighting that racket he was attacking the political bosses' most lucrative source of income. Yes, John Smith was very much alone.

As the sun sank lower in the summer sky Carl Heikle came out the door across the street, stomached his way across the

sidewalk and stopped by the curb. Hot August sunlight poured over him. With the handkerchief from his pocket he mopped at his pink cheeks and forehead.

Pete O'Brien followed him. O'Brien was the political boss of the 13th District and one of the most powerful figures in the state. He looked like a small, weaz-

### ***A Smashing John Smith Novelette in Which One Man Fights an Under- World Empire!***



ened monkey. His face was so wrinkled that no expression could show there. His clothes needed pressing. He and Heikle, his confidential secretary, went off together.

Smith gazed after them, his face setting in hard, fierce lines. "So that's the guy," he said aloud. "And what am I going to do about it?" The gesture of his small hands showed fury, desperation—and helplessness. His fight against the parole system had bogged down in a blind alley when death closed both ends. He knew that Pete O'Brien was, if not the mysterious figure back of the most foul of all rackets, at least close to that figure. And what could he do about it? Nothing. And throughout the city criminals hunted for John Smith, the "Parole Killer," planning to murder him on sight.

The newspapers said that John Smith, private detective, had left town. Actually, hair and skin dyed to change his appearance, he was living in a small, highly respectable apartment on Prytania, and had rented this room across the street from O'Brien's office in order to keep watch on the politician.

Smith continued his vigil for another half hour, but nothing more happened, and at sundown he was driving out of Prytania in the small, nondescript automobile he'd bought under an assumed name.

He climbed one flight to his apartment, reached for the doorknob and stopped. The muscles of his face were suddenly rigid. His left hand went under his coat lapel, came out holding a police .38. His right hand folded around the doorknob.

Most persons would not have heard the sound beyond the door, the very faint whisper of feet on a thick rug. But Smith had once lived ten years guided by his hearing alone. A bullet from a Parole convict's gun had glanced off his forehead and for a decade he'd been blind before an operation restored his sight. During those years he'd trained his hearing until it was

sharp and delicate as that of an animal.

Three full minutes he waited, his ear against the door. Tiny beads of sweat stood on his forehead, colored with the dark powder they had oozed through. Then his nostrils widened in a long breath. He twisted the knob, pitched the door open, and went inside, crouched far over and twisting.

A GIRL was looking out the window across the room. She turned, startled. For a long moment they stared at one another.

Then the girl grinned. "What the hell?" she said. "Do you always come in like that, or is this a special act for my benefit?"

Smith was still crouched, the gun in his hand, and too surprised to move. When he did it was to look toward the rear doorway where Bushelmouth Johnson, the negro who acted as both valet and assistant for Smith, was standing.

"Ah, couldn't stop her, Mistur Smiff," Bushelmouth said. "Dere ain't nothin' you kin do to dat lady. She jes peers in de doe and she say, 'Heyo, Bushelmouf.' An' I tole her; I say, 'Dis ain't me. Dis is Sam. An' dere ain't no Mistur Smiff live heah nether so tain't no need to ask fer him.' Dat's what I tole her, Mistur Smiff, but she wouldn't pay me no heed."

The girl was still grinning. "It's not Bushelmouth's fault, really. Or maybe it is. I was lucky enough to see him on the street this morning and trailed him here."

Smith had straightened slowly. He put the gun back in its holster, closed the door behind him. "I was a fool for letting Bushelmouth go after groceries," he said, and waved the negro out of the room. He was thinking that if Marion Dark had found him then someone else might have also. And discovery for Smith meant death.

The girl had a face like a cherub, with

soft gold hair curling close to her head and very wide and innocent eyes. Smith had met her once before and whenever she cursed, which she did mildly but frequently, the words came as a distinct shock.

Now she said, "You're a hell of a host. Don't I get to sit down? Don't I get a drink or some hospitality around here?"

"YOU get both," Smith said, and gestured toward a chair while he yelled for Bushelmouth to make a couple of highballs. "I'd like to thank you," he said. "The last glimpse I had of you, you were driving out of an alley in the Vieux Carré. Perhaps it was coincidence, but you came at the exact moment to head off another car and save my life. And a little while before that you'd been trying to take a picture that would get me killed. Which side are you working for?"

"I told you I wanted to work for you. I told you I wanted to fight the parole system."

Smith swallowed, muscles standing out in his neck. "But I—"

"Isn't it too late to keep up that pretense?" she asked. "Every crook in town, and that includes the politicians, knows who the Parole Killer is."

The ice tinkled in Smith's glass. Over the rim he watched her. "You look as if you had wings, or should have," he said. "You look as if you belong on mother's knee. And you want to get a job that's almost sure death."

"You don't look so damn tough yourself," she said, "even with that mustache. And that blond hair dyed black. You look like a dude."

She stood up sharply. There was a vibrant tenseness about her that clashed with the softness of her face. "I came to tell you about Lieutenant Paul Rutgers," she said. "Maybe you'd like to know that the politicians are kicking him out."

"What!" The round, marble blue eyes

seemed to freeze, the face to grow stiff.

"A few months from now he'll be off the force with no pension and no way to make a living—unless some crook has 'accidentally' killed him."

Smith was standing now. He was a small man, scarcely taller than the girl before him, but well made. "They can't do that," he said huskily. "The newspapers are playing Rutgers for a hero. The public won't—"

Without Rutgers on the police force to help him there'd be no chance of finishing his fight against the crooked parole system. Without Rutgers to cover him the first time, Smith was forced to kill a criminal in self-defense. He would have the police as well as the underworld after him, politics would railroad him through a crooked trial straight to the chair. And Smith liked the little, desperately honest policeman. Now Rutgers was going to lose his job, his future, perhaps his life because he'd helped John Smith fight the parole racket.

Smith was thinking suddenly of the ten years of darkness, of never knowing if he'd see again—years caused by a paroled convict's return to crime. That was his personal score against a foul system, but there was more than that. He knew that almost every famous criminal had been paroled. Dillinger, Pretty Boy Floyd. Baby Face Nelson killed three G-men after his *third* parole. Every G-Man ever killed on duty was murdered by a paroled convict. Parole—a crooked system run by crooked politicians who fattened on theft and murder.

"Don't underestimate the man you're against," Marion Dark said. "He couldn't afford openly to kick a hero off the force. But you saw in the morning paper about the two gamblers murdered out on the edge of town?"

"Yes."

"Rutgers is going to be sent to solve that. Only he'll have a desk job so he

can't do any real work. And the politicians will make sure that the crookedest cops on the force are the ones he has under him."

"But the cops," Smith said desperately. "They're—"

"Sure. Most of them are honest. But the politicians keep a few diamond studded boys on the force. Those are the ones Rutgers will have. He'll stay out there where he can't help you until the public has forgotten him. They forget quick. And then he'll be kicked off altogether."

"The public—" Smith said and stopped. It was only the public who could actually *win* the fight on parole. Only the public could throw out the old, crooked politicians and demand honest government. But the public didn't realize how rotten the system was. That was why Smith had used tactics which made parole a front page story. And the public was becoming aroused. The crooked political bosses were frightened. They had determined to get Smith and every man who helped him.

SMITH crossed the room, hands clenched hard. "If Rutgers caught those killers—" he said.

"Caught—hell. Ryan Hardick and Nick Tomelli did the job. But they are Pete O'Brien's boys; what can Rutgers do? If he had any proof, O'Brien would give the order and somewhere the proof would vanish. If he had any witnesses they'd either vanish, or forget. O'Brien had those guys killed because they weren't paying tribute for their gambling house—and so he'd have a reason to send Rutgers so far in the country there won't be anything he can do but grow tomatoes."

Smith's face got fury-white. Red veins came in his eyes. His mouth set hard and ugly. What the girl said could be true. O'Brien was nominally leader of only the 13th district, but his power was statewide. There wasn't a chance of convicting a man O'Brien sponsored. The prose-

cuting attorney and the judge would have their orders; even the Governor, if it came to that. Murder made safe by politics.

"Listen," Smith said after a moment. "How do you know all this?"

"How does any detective learn things? Stool pigeons. Pipe lines. You want to hire me?"

He didn't answer. His highball glass was empty now, but he still held it, fingernails whitened from pressure. "This Ryan Hardick and Nick Tomelli you claim did the shooting—what proof have you got?"

"None. There weren't any witnesses."

"And what proof would convict them?"

He knew the answer before she said, "None, with O'Brien passing out orders and money."

He crossed the room twice, noiseless on the thick rug. "What do these guys look like?"

She said, "I thought you might want to know. Here's a couple of pictures the state made of them once, before they had O'Brien's backing. They are out on parole now."

She held out two regular prison photographs, front and profile. Smith looked at them, then at the girl. "This fellow—"

"Hardick," she said.

"This Hardick, he's superstitious?"

"He kills because he likes it," Marion Dark said. "But a black' cat stands his hair on end. He goes to church twice a week. He enjoys knocking off other people, but he wants to avoid his turn, and at least to be ready when it comes."

"I've seen those two gentlemen," Smith said. "Thy came out of O'Brien's office today, twice. And both times they stopped and put on a kind of act."

"You can't use that for proof."

"Maybe," he said. But he had to use something for proof. Here was his one chance to carry on the fight. If he could break this case it would put him closer to the head of the parole system, it would save Paul Rutgers, and it would add more

fire to the growing public indignation. But how break it when it was admitted that nothing could convict one of Pete O'Brien's boys? Murder had been made safe, by politics.

It was five minutes after the girl left that the phone rang. Lieut. Rutgers corroborated everything she had said.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Swamp Death

**N**EXT to the building housing Pete O'Brien's office was a small furniture store. Smith was studying the window display when the men came onto the sidewalk, but the mirror of a dresser in the window allowed him to watch them. One was small and plump, the other dark with bushy brows. Ryan Hardick and Nick Tomelli.

It was eleven o'clock in the morning. Traffic rattled along the street and a block away a streetcar made a grinding rumble, but Smith, straining his ears, could hear what the men said.

Tomelli, the dark fellow, grabbed Hardick by the arm, said, "Have you got it?"

"I thought you had it," Hardick said. He looked frightened and dug through his pockets.

"Me? Why, damn you, I . . ." The bushybrowed man wet his lips as though he were afraid. He plunged his hands into his pockets.

"It musta been left," Hardick said. "We gotta get it!"

"If the cops found it. . ." Tomelli looked sick. "Jesus! I don't wanta burn!"

"Let's go!" Hardick said. "Hurry!" They started down the walk.

Smith kept looking in the store window as they passed directly behind him. There was something crazy here, something that he didn't understand.

What he'd heard sounded as though somewhere they'd left vital evidence on the gambling house murders.

"I think I'd better investigate," Smith said to himself. He turned away from the window, walking carelessly but fast.

Hardick and Tomelli were a half block away near their parked car. Tomelli, meaning to circle to the drivers seat, swerved so that he passed on one side of a telephone pole while Hardick was on the other. The plump man stopped short, cut back so as to go on the same side of the pole with Tomelli. Smith could see him muttering and Tomelli cursing at him. That guy was superstitious all right.

Smith's car was parked not far from theirs. He swung out into traffic behind them and took up the trail. Hardick drove fast, but kept inside the traffic laws and it wasn't hard to tail him. Evidently he was more worried about getting where he was going than about being followed.

At first Smith thought they were going directly to the gambling house where the murder had been committed, but a few blocks away they stopped. Tomelli made a telephone call before Smith could park, then came back to the car again. Smith tailed after them, out through the suburb, about ten miles along the Mobile highway, then onto a shell road cutting back into the bayous.

Here he let the car ahead get out of sight. He didn't want them to know he was following and this was a desolate road with few crossings. It would be comparatively easy to trail them.

**B**UT there was something fishy about this whole business, he thought. He couldn't get over these men going through the same actions, perhaps even saying the same words, three times in two days. It didn't make sense.

And what could they have left out on this lonely road? In places it was scarcely wide enough for two automobiles to pass. Black bayou water bordered it on each side, thick with lily pads, and beyond the strip of water was impenetrable swamp.

Cypresses held their lace-worked leaves high into the sunlight. Below them were the gaunt skeletons of oaks wrapped in drooling moss. Underneath the moss it was almost twilight-dark, dark water and muck, underbrush, dead logs rising out of the slime. Once Smith saw a moccasin slithering off into the water as the sedan approached.

And then, in his rearview mirror, he saw the car following him. A sudden chill went along his spine. His mouth got dry. He put his left hand under his coat and loosened the .38 in its holster. His eyes left the road for a moment, staring out into the swamp.

The road twisted through trees. Shells whirred under his tires as he went into the curve. His right hand was very tight on the wheel, his left hand barely touching it but tense and ready to jerk upward at any instant. It was almost as though he had known he would turn the bend and see the road ahead blocked by the car he had been following.

There was the sputter and roar of machine gun fire. Flame lashed at him from the car that was pulled sideways across the road and parked. Holes pricked through his windshield and then the whole thing was gone in a mass of flying glass. He felt no pain but all at once blood was flowing down his cheek.

The .38 special was in his left hand. He fired three times, carefully but fast. Not more than twenty yards separated the cars and he saw the spiderwebbing on the glass windows where his bullets struck. The car ahead was bullet-proofed!

From behind came another blast of machine gun fire as the second car came up. His back window blew out. Bullets ripped into the car body.

Actually Smith had been moving, sliding down for protection between the seat and the dash, with that first sight of the machine ahead. His own car never stopped, the whole thing lasted less than

five seconds, but he had the impression of infinite time, of thoughts plodding slowly, one after another, through his head.

It was a trap, arranged from the first. And it was the girl who had put him on the trail of Hardick and Tomelli! Once before she tried something which might have resulted in his death. And once she had saved his life. But this time would be the end.

Smith was on his knees, one eye cocked above the dash. He held the steering wheel with his right hand crossed under his left arm. The left hand held the .38. He picked out the narrow slit through which the machine gun was blasting, steadied his revolver.

The car lurched wildly as he fired. He knew that his front tires were gone. The sedan was slowing down despite his knee on the accelerator. One of the back tires was shot, and flung shells made as much noise as the machine guns. Bullets whanged into the steel body, dug through or went screaming out into the swamp.

**H**E DIDN'T have a chance and he knew it. He couldn't even drive fast enough to wreck the car ahead and die with the satisfaction of knowing that he took two criminals with him. He couldn't circle the car and he couldn't back up because of the one behind. They had him.

And then he thought of the water bordering the road. He didn't know how deep it was, but he had to risk it. He kept his knee on the accelerator, pushed the brake with his left hand, jerked the steering wheel with his right. The car went into a wild skid. It turned completely around. It teetered at the road's edge. It plunged over sideways.

What happened in the next few seconds Smith couldn't say. He felt his body slammed back and forth. His head hit the dash and new blood flowed over his face. His gun was gone. His leg was tangled between the brake and the clutch and felt

as though it were broken. Water closed over him.

He knew that if he got free of the car they would kill him. Even if he swam under water to the edge of the swamp they would see him there and shoot him down. He struggled, felt one hand rise above the surface. Then his head was up and he was gulping dark air.

He'd managed to turn the car completely over so that it sank with the wheels up. The water was only about five feet deep and now there was a small pocket of air close to what had been the floor of the automobile. There wasn't room to get his whole head out of the water. He had to keep his neck bent sideways, but he could breathe.

He heard men calling to one another, the crunch of shell under leather. Tomelli said, "Well, that's that."

"It wasn't no fun," Hardick's voice complained. "We didn't even get a look at the guy."

A strange voice, one of the men from the rear automobile probably, said, "Oh, it was him. After you telephoned we drove right past him once. He'd dyed his hair, but it was Smith all right."

It was getting hard to breathe in the narrow space between water and car. The air was thin and hurt his lungs. He tried to breathe slowly, to hold the air as long as possible.

And then he heard Tomelli's thick voice saying, "There may be a little air left under that car. The guy could still be alive."

Hardick said, "Like hell he is. I musta cut him apart with the tommy."

"But there's a little space," Tomelli said again.

One of the men from the back car said, "The boss is gonna give us hell if we don't get the body outa there. You know how he kept saying to fix the stiff so nobody would find it."

"How the hell you gonna get it?" Hardick asked.

"We got to find a wrecker," the other man said. "We got to get that body!"

"Won't nobody come along this road. We got time. Let's go."

"But there's a little air under there," Tomelli said again.

ONE of the men said, "Oh hell, you can fix that if you're worried. There's gas all over the water. Throw a match on it. If the guy's alive he'll cook."

John Smith thought he was going to be sick. Such a terror as he had never known crawled cold and slimy through his veins. His chest hurt and there was a dull roaring inside his head that seemed to repeat over and over, "If the guy's alive he'll cook."

"I'd rather be shot," he thought. He couldn't crouch there in the dark and roast like a trapped rat. He would dive, either drown trying to get out of the car or come up to the surface and be killed with a blast of machine gun bullets. It was better that way. He took a breath of the hot thin air.

It struck like a blow on the back of the neck. It jolted him, knocked his head forward, knocked the air out of him. He couldn't believe the sound until it came again—the wild shriek of a police siren! A sudden burst of gunfire!

One of the men in the road said, "For God's sake, what. . . ?"

"Let's scram!"

There was the noise of running. Then Tomelli's voice, "But suppose the guy's alive? There's air. . . ."

Hardick answered from up the road. "You stay and chuck a match on him." Car motors burst into life. Smith heard Tomelli running along the shell road. He didn't know whether or not the gunman had dropped the match which would burn him. Both cars roared off.

He couldn't wait for the sound of fire. The oxygen was gone from the small air pocket underneath the car. He had to dive, try to get free even if he came up

into a hot, searing sheet of flame. . . .

### CHAPTER THREE

#### Bay Saint Louis Corn

SMITH'S head broke the surface and he gulped air into bursting lungs. The water lilies tugged at him, threatened to pull him down again. He floundered about, saw that no wave of fire rolled at him and for moments he was too relieved to see anything else. He beat his way through the lily pads and crawled onto the shell road.

He stood there panting for moments before he remembered the police siren and the gunfire which had saved him. But now the road stretched pale and empty to right and left until it curved and the dark swamp walled it in.

Far off to the right was the fading sound of automobiles. That would be the two cars with the gunmen. He was certain that no other machines had passed, but when the sound of those cars was gone there was only the faint whisper of the wind against the cypresses, the sleepy lagging chirp of a cricket, the drip-drip of water dropping from his clothes to the road.

What had happened to the police car?

He couldn't figure it out. He started walking back down the road toward the city. He took three steps—and stopped.

Somebody beyond the curve was walking toward him!

Instinctively his left hand came up toward his shoulder holster before he remembered it was empty. There wasn't any place to hide so he just waited. The crunch of the shoes got louder and then Marion Dark came around the curve.

For a half minute they stood and looked at one another. The cherub face was puckered with fear and grief that kept the facial muscles stiff even after the emotions were gone. And then she said, wonder-

ingly, "I was afraid—you're not dead?"

"Not yet," Smith said. "You put the finger on me all right, but your trigger men didn't do a clean job."

She kept staring at him. "I don't understand," she said. "I didn't. . . ."

"You didn't put me on the trail of these guys, knowing they were laying for me all the time?"

She said, "You damned fool. I told you they killed those gamblers. They did. But I didn't tell you to go up and introduce yourself to them, then come out where they could kill you without interruption."

Smith's round blue eyes studied the girl and she looked back at him steadily. If she was telling the truth, how had this trap been planned ahead of time? How had Hardick and Tomelli know he would trail them?

And then he thought about their strange actions outside the office doorway. Suppose O'Brien, or whoever was the power behind him, had figured that Smith, knowing O'Brien to be connected with the parole racket, would watch O'Brien's office? And suppose he had known that Smith would learn of Hardick's and Tomelli's connection with the gambling murder, had allowed Rutgers to learn that much so he would tell Smith. Knowing that, O'Brien could be almost certain that Smith would follow the killers if he overheard their remarks about leaving evidence. Then Tomelli had made his phone call, and the trap, already planned, was set.

THEY had not wanted to murder Smith openly because of the way the public, already aroused over the parole racket, would howl. Smith's death might gain the very thing he fought for in life: indignant citizens voting out the old, graft-corrupted politicians, demanding honesty from their officials. So O'Brien, or the shadowy figure back of him, if there was one, had wanted Smith simply to disappear. "The

boss is gonna give us hell if we don't get the body outa there," one of the gunmen had said. "You know how he kept saying to fix the stiff so nobody could find it." With Smith's disappearance the fight against the crooked parole system would simply fade from the front pages. The public would forget. The old system would continue.

"It could have been that way," Smith thought. "Maybe that guy's smarter than I've been willing to admit." And it could have been the girl.

"If you didn't put the finger on me," Smith asked, "how did you happen to be here?"

"A hell of a guy you are!" she said angrily. "I wish they had killed you!" She turned and went swiftly back down the road.

Smith stared, then he was loping around the curve to catch up with her. He walked beside her toward her parked car. "I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't want to make you angry. But I—can't trust anybody in this job. I've got to be careful." He was angry at himself for apologizing, angry because he wanted to. And yet he did want to. He wanted to explain, to say he hadn't meant to hurt her.

She turned to look at him and he was surprised at the misty sheen of her eyes. But she was grinning again. "I come out and save your life," she said, "and what kind of thanks do I get?"

"You saved my life? You mean. . . ."

"You were tailing Hardick and Tomelli and I was tailing you. When that car full of apes cut in behind you on this road I knew what was coming. There wasn't time to get the police. The shooting started while I was trying to make up my mind what to do. So I used my siren and back-fired the car trying to bluff them away. I didn't really think I was doing any good. I thought you were dead."

Smith's wet hands made dark spots on her shoulders as he turned her to face

him. "If they'd caught you—" he said huskily, and didn't finish. "You took that chance. . . ."

The girl laughed, a little nervously. "I didn't take any chance—not for a sawed-off private cop. I was careful to turn my car around first. I'd have been half way back to New Orleans before those guys could have reached the curve."

They were driving along the shell road when Smith asked, "What was the idea of taling me? Who are you working for anyway?"

She glanced at him, then her blue gaze went back to the road. "I came along for the fun," she said. "But I'd like to work for you."

"Why don't you try the truth sometimes?"

She hesitated. Then said, "I told you the truth."

"Maybe," Smith said. He wanted desperately to know. If she were honest, she could help him. If she was lined up with the crooks and he trusted her it meant death.

"Ah don' know as I feels right 'bout us bein' heah," Bushelmouth said. "Hit's housebreakin', Mistur Smiff."

"Shut up," Smith said.

"Yassur. But hit don' seem right to come bussin' in dat nice 'young lady's 'partment an' she ain't eben heah to say 'come in' er 'git out'."

"Shut up," Smith said.

"Yassur. How come you think she gwine come floozyin' in heah wid a couple dem cemetery-fillers? She don' look to me lak the kinda gal would have no tripe wid such folks. I don' bleav she do it."

Smith said, "Shut up."

"Yassur. But Ah—" He looked at Smith's face and became quiet.

"They're coming," Smith said softly. His lips were hard and thin. His eyes pulled Bushelmouth after him as he backed out of the living room into the rear

of the apartment. "Do exactly what I told you," he said, and grated the words through clenched teeth.

A moment later the hall door opened. Smith heard Marion Dark say, "Sit down, boys. Take it off your feet." Then she called, "Ethel! Come on out. We've got company."

Bushelmouth answered, "He say to say she say she ain't heah right now on account she gone to de drugsto' fer a minute and she be right back, but dat—" Smith's hand landed hard over the negro's mouth. It didn't cover the vast expanse of shining teeth, but it stopped the words.

In the next room the voice of Nick Tomelli broke sharp, nervous. "Who the hell's that? What did he mean?"

Marion giggled. "That's Sam, the nigger who cleans up for us. He's not very smart." She called, "Make us three drinks, Sam."

Smith kept his hand pushed on Bushelmouth's lips although he had to reach high to do it. He called, "Yes'um," then said in a tight whisper that only Bushelmouth could hear, "You use your hands when the time comes. And keep your damn mouth shut."

"Yassur," Bushelmouth said. "But—" The look in Smith's eyes stopped him.

Smith mixed the drinks himself, handed them to Bushelmouth. The negro started to say something, caught Smith's gaze, choked on the words. Muttering to himself and shaking his head, he took the tray into the front room.

**T**HERE was a long-barreled revolver in Smith's left hand as he watched through the cracked doorway. Hardick and Tomelli were on a sofa to her right, Marion between them. The plump man had his arm around the girl and her gold hair cradled on his shoulder. But Tomelli sat bolt upright. His bushy brows were pulled into one continuous line across his forehead. He looked nervous. When

Bushelmouth handed him a drink he smelled it, tasted carefully.

"Here's to a pleasant evening," Marion said. "Success to the plans on foot."

"You must be reading my mind, baby," Hardick said. "I'm glad you feel that way about it." He lit Marion's cigarette, his own, then jerked the match away as Tomelli reached for it.

"Three on one match," he said. "You're crazy."

Bushelmouth had circled the sofa and come up behind it. He stood for a moment gazing down at the men, a puzzled look on his broad face. "Why in hell doesn't he go ahead and conk them?" Smith wondered. He tried to hurl his thoughts at the negro, "Go ahead! Go ahead!" Tomelli was getting nervous.

Bushelmouth raised a fist that looked like a head of a nine pound hammer. There was a sort of wistful expression on his face. He balanced carefully. He brought the fist down on the top of Hardick's head.

The plump man's whole body went down as though it had been driven into the sofa. His head seemed to vanish into his shoulders. He stayed that way a moment, then the springs of the sofa raised him gently. He swayed and was crumpling when the girl put her arm around him.

Bushelmouth had stepped to the edge of the sofa beside Tomelli, but made no motion to hit the gunman. Tomelli had been dazed for only a second, not understanding what had happened. Then like an uncoiling spring he came upright. His hand flashed under his coat and out. There was the gleam of light on blue steel.

A groan caught in Smith's throat as he plunged through the doorway. He cried hoarsely, "Hit him, you fool!" His own gun was raised shoulder high to strike but he saw that he couldn't make it. He jerked it down, finger tightening on the trigger.

But he had figured without Bushel-

mouth. The negro waited until Tomelli's gun was free of his coat—and then he swung. The blow had the free flowing motion that once had made Bushelmouth Johnson a top flight heavyweight. It had all his two hundred and thirty pounds behind it. It landed flush on Tomelli's jaw.

The Italian seemed to leap into the air and backward. When his feet touched the floor he skidded as though he were on roller skates until he hit the wall. It bounced him forward and he went down hard on his face.

Smith had pulled to a stop, panting. "Bushelmouth," he said a little plaintively, "why in God's name did you wait so long to hit him?"

Bushelmouth shifted his great feet and looked embarrassed. "Well, Mustur Smiff, Ah—well, you know. . . . He had de gun out befo' ah hit him."

Marion was still on the sofa cradling Hardick against her shoulder. "He damn sure did," she said.

"Well, you didn't say nothin' 'bout hittin' folks widout no guns, Mistur Smiff. But you 'member one time. . . ."

Smith sighed and said, "Oh, my God." From his pocket he took a dollar bill and handed it to Bushelmouth. "Okay," he said. "Go on out and get it."

"What's all this?" Marion asked.

"Bay St. Louis corn whiskey," Smith said. "Bushelmouth doesn't like the legal stuff."

"Hit tase lak ole coffee mix with dish-water," Bushelmouth said. "Hit ain't got no mule."

"I told him that if ever he saw anybody pull a gun on me and he hit the guy before he could shoot, I'd give him a dollar for corn whiskey. So now, after I figure out a method to get these guys without making any noise and having the neighbors call the cops, Bushelmouth stands there waiting for the man to get his gun out so he can make a dollar. I didn't put any Micky Finns in that liquor because I

was afraid to risk them noticing you pick a certain glass, and anyway there would have been several seconds during which they'd have known they were doped before they passed out. They might have started shooting, so I sent Bushelmouth out to conk them from the back." He shook his head wearily, then set about tying up the men. They would be out for minutes yet.

"I still don't know why you asked me to bring these boys up here," Marion said. "Even if you beat a confession out of them, make them sign it, you wouldn't get anywhere. Not against Pete O'Brien."

"I want these boys to write out their own confessions," Smith said. "I want 'em to include the man who hired them for the job. Maybe then I can make a trade."

"They'll never do that. You're crazy."

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Politics Can't Help You in Hell

"**M**AYBE it won't work," Smith said. "But I've an idea, and I can't be any worse off." He told Bushelmouth to lug Tomelli into one of the bedrooms and gag him. Then he waited until Hardick, propped upright on the sofa, regained consciousness.

"Okay," Smith said then. "We can get down to business now. I want a written confession to those gambling murders, Mr. Hardick. The exact time you and Tomelli went there, all the details, how much you were paid for the killing and who paid you."

Hardick stared back at Smith. He was a rather innocent looking man at first glance, but now Smith could see in his eyes the thing which made him a killer. "You can go to hell," Hardick said softly.

"I don't want to have to beat you to death," Smith said. "But I will if necessary."

"You can go to hell," Hardick said

again. He sat very still, like a rock.

Smith worked on him a little with the barrel of his gun. He didn't expect to get anywhere this way. This was bluff, build-up for what was to come later. "Listen," Smith said. "I don't mind killing you if I have to. Had you rather go out this way or take a good long prison term?"

"I don't know anything about those killings," Hardick said. "If I did and if I talked, I wouldn't get any prison term. I'd rather bump off this way."

That was how O'Brien kept his boys in line, Smith thought. He'd read of gangland killings, victims horribly butchered and tortured. Any death was preferable to what a squealer would get, so the boys kept quiet.

"Okay," Smith said. "If you think this is going to be easy, I'll try a different method."

Marion Dark had watched from an overstuffed chair, sipping a drink. She looked frightened now. "You mean you're going to try—that thing?"

"I am," Smith said, and went out of the room, leaving his gun on the table. Marion got up and backed to the far corner. "For God's sake, be careful," she called. "It might kill all of us."

Smith came back wearing heavy leather gloves. With both hands he gripped a black and green snake just behind the head. He walked over close to Hardick, the snake's tail coiling around his arm.

The gunman was a sick yellow. His eyes bulged out of his head. "What—what are you going to do?"

"Have you ever heard of the Green Mamba of Africa?" Smith asked. "Next to the King Cobra it's the most deadly snake in the world. It doesn't kill as fast as some, but there's absolutely no anti-toxin for its bite. You swell up about four times your normal size and you turn purple and die."

"Wha—what—" The words were too thick for Hardick's throat. His skin was

a mottled yellow and green. The muscles of his neck worked. "You—you wouldn't—couldn't kill—"

Smith pushed the snake closer. "Somebody's killed a lot of crooks lately," he said. "Pinned signs about parole on their chests with knife blades. You're on parole, aren't you?"

"I—I. . . ." Saliva spilled over the man's chin. His popped eyes were blood-shot.

"If you don't believe I'll kill you," Smith said, "Just keep quiet for five seconds." He began to count.

"All right," Hardick whimpered. "I killed 'em. Me and Tomelli shot 'em. We were running another gambling house in the same district and. . . ."

The snake was less than half an inch from Hardick's eyes. "You're lying," Smith said. "Who paid you for killing them and how much?"

"Nobody paid. I—"

"**T**O HELL with you," Smith said. He made a gesture as though to push the snake forward, then tried to pull it back. Hardick screamed. At the same instant, Marion, who had come close behind Smith, stumbled. She hit his arm, knocking it forward. The snake struck just above Hardick's eye.

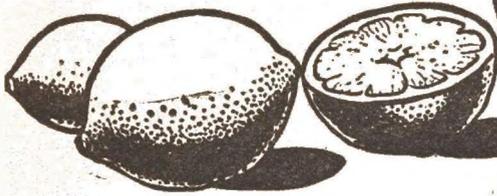
The man went mad, more from fear than from pain. Smith had to gag him momentarily. He writhed, chewed at the gag, froth spilling from under it. Finally, exhausted, he lay still and Smith removed the gag. "Get me a priest," Hardick begged. He was whimpering, sobbing like a baby. "I got to be ready before I die."

"I'll get you the priest," Smith said, "—if you write out a confession for me first."

"Get the priest!" Hardick cried. "I'm dying!" His face was already swollen and turning purple.

Smith untied one arm for him, gave him paper and pen. "Write it all out," he said

**LEMONS HAVE AN**



# ALKALINE FACTOR

**(IMPORTANT TO COLD RESISTANCE)**

"Who paid you the money, everything?" Hardick yelled, "No! Not to you. Get—"

"I'm not calling anybody until you write it for me," Smith said. He thrust his face close to Hardick's. His voice shook with tension. "You'll be going to hell in an hour and Pete O'Brien and all his politics can't help you then! He's the man who's sending you there. Are you going to die with that on your soul? Are your last words going to be a lie about murder you've committed?"

"All right!" Hardick sobbed. "All right!" He grabbed the pen and wrote.

When he finished, Smith said, "Okay, pal. You'll have plenty of time for anything you want. That was a black snake with green paint on it. They hurt worse than a bumblebee, but they're not much more deadly. I've watched how seriously you dodge bad luck. I thought you'd be serious about the last thing you ever did."

Hardick stared at him. He was still panting, sobbing. Along with his panting he began to curse, steadily. "You'll embarrass the lady," Smith said, and gagged him again.

It was easy after that. He brought in Tomelli, showed him the confession and got another one. Both stated that Ross McArthur had paid them a thousand dol-

*(Continued on page 118)*

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(Continued from page 117)

lars for the murders. McArthur was nominally leader of the district in which the killings had taken place, but most persons knew that he took O'Brien's orders.

"Well, you've got that much," said the girl. "But what have you got? I told you that a confession wouldn't convict one of O'Brien's boys. Something will happen to those two before they reach the court room. Or the judge will find a flaw. Or the jury'll be bribed."

"Maybe," Smith said. "But at least it's going to put McArthur in mighty hot water. The publicity will force him out of his job. And if we can get a conviction on these boys, then McArthur would talk to save his own hide. And then we'd have O'Brien."

There had been noise in the room, excitement. Smith didn't hear the cat-soft pad of gun shoes beyond the door. The first he heard was the click of the latch. He dived for the table where he'd left his gun, and was too late.

"Stop!" a voice snapped. "Don't move!"  
Smith stopped. His hands well out from his sides, he turned slowly.

HE HAD never seen the man who stood just inside the door, an automatic in his hand, but he recognized him from pictures. Ross McArthur was tall and thin, with thin brownish hair. Rimless glasses blurred watery eyes. Fear had drained his face an unnatural white. His hands shook. His finger was so tight around the trigger that the gun might go off at any instant.

"I heard you say they'd written confessions," he blurted. "I want them. Give them to me quick and let those boys go. I won't shoot unless you cause trouble. But I will if I have to," he said quickly. Terror had made him as dangerous as a hop-head. Sweat stood in thick beads on his forehead.

## DEATH BREAKS PAROLE

"Sure," Smith said. "I'll get them for you." He moved casually toward the table where the confessions and his gun lay. "How'd you get here?" he asked. He was trying to block McArthur's view of the table.

McArthur said, "I got a tip what was happening." Then he saw the gun. He yelled, "Wait!" His hand was white where it gripped the automatic. The trigger was half back, all the slack gone out of it. Smith knew that any jar, any added fright would send lead ripping through his body.

And then, from the foot of the outside stairway, he heard a soft slurred voice singing:

*Now dat my ole dog dead  
De rabbits gwiner eat my peas and bread.*

McArthur slid across to the table, put Smith's gun in his pocket, then the confessions. He backed away to where Hardick and Tomelli sat tied. With his pocket knife he began to cut them free.

Steps wavered slowly up the stair. The singing voice was very soft.

*Ah got a hogeye gal name Lulu Bell—*

Hardick and Tomelli shook off their cut ropes, stood up. "We gotta find our guns," Tomelli said. "I ain't leaving this guy alive again." He began to search for the weapons Smith had taken away.

McArthur said, "Hurry up! I want to get out of here." Already he was backing toward the door.

*In the hall a voice crooned,  
She got hair on her haid lak a horse's mane*

*An er mouf as big as a table—*

Bushelmouth Johnson stood in the doorway. His song cut short. He gazed with consternation at McArthur and the gun.

Hardick yelled, "Look out! The nigger!"

McArthur jumped. The gun roared. Smith was spinning and the bullet tugged at his coat. McArthur's gun kept blasting as he whirled toward the door.

(Continued on page 120)

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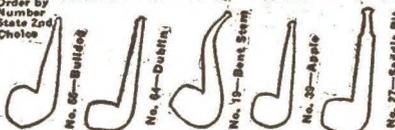
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**DETECTIVE TALES**

(Continued from page 119)

Bushelmouth stepped forward. His lips were pulled up in a huge, beatific smile. The sound of his fist striking was as loud as that of the gun.

In the ringing echoes of the shots the noise of the step was buried but Smith heard it. He was still moving and he didn't stop. He dived headlong toward the point where McArthur had fallen. From the rear doorway one shot cracked.

SMITH hit the floor with one hand on McArthur's gun. He rolled and fired. During years of blindness he'd practiced shooting at sound. But now, rolling, the bullet went wide.

Another shot thundered. He saw McArthur's body jolt, quiver. Smith shot at the light and darkness plunged into the room. From beyond the door he heard the swift clatter of steps. He leaped to his feet, raced after the steps. Over his shoulder he yelled at Bushelmouth to hold Hardick and Tomelli.

The kitchen door was locked. He hammered against it, heard the sound of the back window closing and knew it was too late. He twisted, jumped back for the living room. Pale light filtered into it from the open door. Evidently the two gunmen had tried to make a break past Bushelmouth for they lay placid on the floor now. The girl stood where she had been. Near the door, rigid.

"Get everybody out of here!" Smith snapped at Bushelmouth. "Out the back! The cops will be here in a minute."

"Yassur," Bushelmouth said. He began to load limp bodies over his shoulder. "Dat's two bucks in one night. Hot damn! Business sho is eloquent."

"Come on," Smith said to Marion. "You're going too."

Carl Heikle said into the telephone, "Mr. O'Brien's not here tonight. He's an awfully busy man, you know, awfully busy. Tries to look after everything for his constituents himself, tries to do it per-

## DEATH BREAKS PAROLE

sonally. You see, it keeps him mighty—”

“I know,” Smith said. “It keeps him busy.” He could picture O’Brien’s big blond secretary resting the telephone on his ample stomach, tilting back in his chair.

Smith said, “I’ve got two written confessions saying that Ross McArthur hired Hardick and Tomelli to commit those gambling murders. I took them up to my office and persuaded them to sign. But O’Brien or the real head of the parole system, somebody, saw them come there and tipped off McArthur. He wanted McArthur to do the dirty work, but followed and came in the back to make sure. When McArthur failed, this fellow killed him.”

“**M**MURDERED!” Heikle said. “That’s too bad. Too bad.”

“Yeah, isn’t it. But everybody knows that McArthur took orders from O’Brien. If the papers get these confessions, the resulting stench will knock Pete O’Brien right out of his office.”

“Why, er—er. . .”

“But if O’Brien will stand aside and let Hardick and Tomelli go to the chair—we’ve got their guns, the ones they used for the killings, and enough evidence without the confessions. O’Brien’s got power enough to get those men free, but not enough to keep in office if he does it. Is it a deal?”

“Why, er, of course, I couldn’t . . .”

“Of course,” Smith said, “Mr. O’Brien looks after those things personally. If he agrees, let him mention it in the personal column of the *Democrat* tomorrow. I think he’ll agree.”

Smith read the morning paper with much satisfaction. In the personal column a line said:

*Plan okay; let the boy toast. Pete.*

Most of the front page was divided between two stories. Lieutenant Paul Rutgers had caught the murderers he’d been after. He’d captured them single handed

(Continued on page 122)

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## DETECTIVE TALES

(Continued from page 121)

in a vacant house on the outskirts of his precinct, handcuffed them and gone out to call the wagon.

When he returned he'd found them chained to chairs with the bodies of their victims on a table between them. The bodies had been stolen from the morgue. Pinned to each man's chest was the sign:

**CROOKED POLITICS PAROLED  
THIS CRIMINAL**

But  
**THE ELECTRIC CHAIR GIVES NO  
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Another story dealt with the murder of Ross McArthur, prominent politician. His body had been found in the very heart of the city, and the papers were demanding that Rutgers he sent back to headquarters to take this case.

On page twelve was a one-stick story saying the police had been notified of a disturbance in an apartment house on Gentilly Road, but investigation had found no sign of violence. The occupant had been shooting firecrackers, they believed. The police who had answered that call, like the vast majority, had been honest. Rutgers had got in touch with them. They hated the parole system as much as John Smith, and were glad to help.

"Well, I've got those confessions," Smith thought. That would be a little evidence when the final showdown came. And it should come soon. He knew O'Brien was connected with the system, but Smith still needed proof.

He began to wonder about the girl. Sometimes her tips worked, sometimes they almost got him murdered. He couldn't figure her out. But the crooks would know now that she had helped him. She'd had to move into another apartment, but even so they might find her.

"If they do anything to her," he said fiercely, "If—" He was suddenly afraid. He wondered where she was now.

**THE END**

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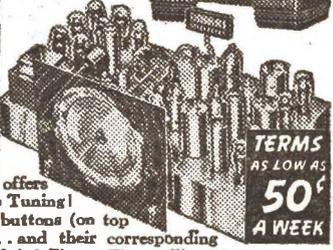
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## THE CRIME CLINIC



**T**HE policeman was a huddle of blue slumped down against the wall. His cap had fallen off, and his blond hair was plastered down over his forehead. His face was startlingly white and shiny.

Patricia Grey was kneeling beside him, her eyes darkly horrified, wanting to help him but not knowing what to do. At that moment officer Lenz burst out of the station house.

"Poley!" Lenz cried in a choked voice.

Poley's head moved just a little when Lenz dropped down on the wet stones beside him. Poley was very young, and there were little bubbles of blood on his lips that mixed with the rain and slid down redly over his chin.

"Poley," Lenz groaned. "Poley, boy. What happened?"

"He jumped in front of me," Patricia Grey said in a whisper. "He jumped in front of me and pushed me when the man shot. And the bullet hit him. . . ."

A motorcycle engine kicked into life near them. Its siren moaned, rose to a screeching howl. Suddenly it appeared, bouncing out over the ramp of the Police garage entrance further up the alley. The engine made sustained thunder between the walls, then it skidded wildly out into the street and was gone, siren wailing, the uniformed driver bent forward over the handle-bars.

"Who?" Lenz asked hoarsely. "Who, Poley? Did you see him, boy?"

Poley's head moved an inch from side

(Continued on page 126)

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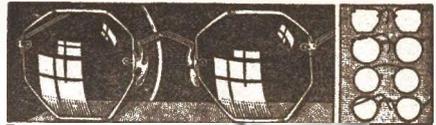
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(Continued from page 124)

to side. "No. Just glimpse. Tommy gun." He coughed with a hollow, moist sound.

"Oh, God," Lenz said, shuddering at the sound. He put both hands over his face.

Poley's red lips twisted into a travesty of a smile. "Come on . . . guy. You said . . . coppers gotta . . . be tough."

"God forgive me," Lenz said hoarsely. "You get . . . that guy, huh?"

Lenz's face was a tortured, jerking mask. "I'll get them, boy!" He held up his clenched fists. "Oh, where's that damned ambulance. Why don't somebody do something?"

Poley's breath bubbled a little. "Hey. Come on. Why . . . I'm all right. Quit worryin'. Why . . . I feel fine. . . ." His voice died weakly, and his head slumped forward on his chest.

Judge Martin touched Patricia Grey's arm, lifted her gently to her feet. He shook his head slowly and sadly.

"You can't help him any more, my dear. No one can."

They started to walk down the wet street, through the drizzling rain. As they passed under a street lamp Patricia was startled by the look in Judge Martin's eyes. They were glinting dangerously and his mouth was a thin, firm line.

"There are things to be done," Judge Martin said softly and in a measured tone, as though speaking to himself.

Judge Martin returns in a Norbert Davis novelette, *Charge It To The Corpse!* in the January edition of DETECTIVE TALES.



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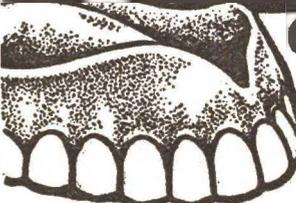
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20x4.75-19	2.45	20x4.75-19	1.35
20x4.75-20	2.50	20x4.75-20	1.40
20x4.00-19	2.55	20x4.00-19	1.45
20x4.00-20	2.60	20x4.00-20	1.50
20x4.00-21	2.65	20x4.00-21	1.55
20x4.00-22	2.70	20x4.00-22	1.60
20x4.00-23	2.75	20x4.00-23	1.65
20x4.00-24	2.80	20x4.00-24	1.70
20x4.00-25	2.85	20x4.00-25	1.75
20x4.00-26	2.90	20x4.00-26	1.80
20x4.00-27	2.95	20x4.00-27	1.85
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20x4.00-44	3.80	20x4.00-44	2.70
20x4.00-45	3.85	20x4.00-45	2.75
20x4.00-46	3.90	20x4.00-46	2.80
20x4.00-47	3.95	20x4.00-47	2.85
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20x4.00-66	4.90	20x4.00-66	3.80
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20x4.00-87	5.95	20x4.00-87	4.85
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30x8.00-44 4.70 2.70 7.40  
30x8.00-45 4.75 2.75 7.50  
30x8.00-46 4.80 2.80 7.60  
30x8.00-47 4.85 2.85 7.70  
30x8.00-48 4.90 2.90 7.80  
30x8.00-49 4.95 2.95 7.90  
30x8.00-50 5.00 3.00 8.00  
30x8.00-51 5.05 3.05 8.10  
30x8.00-52 5.10 3.10 8.20  
30x8.00-53 5.15 3.15 8.30  
30x8.00-54 5.20 3.20 8.40  
30x8.00-55 5.25 3.25 8.50  
30x8.00-56 5.30 3.30 8.60  
30x8.00-57 5.35 3.35 8.70  
30x8.00-58 5.40 3.40 8.80  
30x8.00-59 5.45 3.45 8.90  
30x8.00-60 5.50 3.50 9.00  
30x8.00-61 5.55 3.55 9.10  
30x8.00-62 5.60 3.60 9.20  
30x8.00-63 5.65 3.65 9.30  
30x8.00-64 5.70 3.70 9.40  
30x8.00-65 5.75 3.75 9.50  
30x8.00-66 5.80 3.80 9.60  
30x8.00-67 5.85 3.85 9.70  
30x8.00-68 5.90 3.90 9.80  
30x8.00-69 5.95 3.95 9.90  
30x8.00-70 6.00 4.00 10.00

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Hall's Catarrh Medicine relieves phlegm-filled throat, stuffed up nose, catarrhal bad breath, hawking, and Sinus headaches caused by nasal congestion. Relief or Your Money Back. At all Druggists'. Send Post Card for Free Treatment Chart. 65 years in business. **F. J. CHENEY & CO., Dept. A-12, TOLEDO, O.**

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BY

*Charles Atlas*



Men—meet William J. Goldstein, of Metuchen, N. J., winner of my 1936 Sterling Silver Cup! A smashing example of what my *Dynamic Tension* can do! Look at his sculptured stomach muscles—perfectly proportioned arms—beautiful leg muscles—giant shoulders. Read what he says, "It seems like just yesterday that I mailed you that coupon. Look at me NOW! Your *Dynamic Tension* is the only system that can develop a build like mine—right in the privacy of a fellow's own home! No weights. No pulleys. No freak drugs or diets. I'm proud of the way you have made me an 'Atlas Champion!'"

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Let me show you the amazing results produced for thousands of other men! I'll send you FREE my famous book, "Everlasting Health and Strength." It shows actual photos. It tells exactly what I can now do for your body! Write your name and address carefully on Coupons. Mail to me personally today. I'll rush your free copy to you AT ONCE! Charles Atlas, Dept. 8312, 115 East 23rd Street, New York, N. Y.



This is the actual photograph of Wm. Goldstein in which Physical Culture Magazine reproduced in a full page in a recent issue.

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Dept. 8312,  
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