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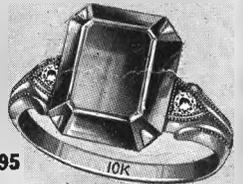
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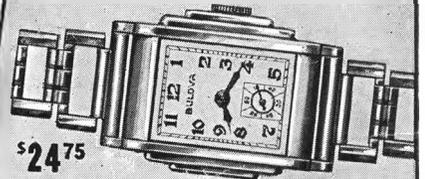
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4—THRILLING COMPLETE MYSTERY-ACTION NOVELETTES—4

Just

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To give you a lesson in lead etiquette if your date happens to turn into a corpse before you get a chance to meet her.

Pad silently along the corridors of

Suicide House..... Erle Stanley Gardner 30
Where, dangling from a rope's end, its fourth victim casts gruesome shadow silhouettes upon the wall.

Enter that evil room in which

The Red Wizard—An Izzy O'Shea Story..... T. T. Flynn 82
Trades in terror, practising his ghastly arts on credulous murder pawns.

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Excuse to Kill—A Clay Holt Story..... Carroll John Daly 114
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2—SMASHING SHORT DETECTIVE STORIES—2

Climb into that ramshackle

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With a quartet of big-time gun artists who look as much out of place there as hicks would in a limousine.

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To confuse the murder issue—even if it is a new version with fancy terror trimmings.

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Cross Roads of Crime..... Richard Hoadley Tingley 140
Who is the unnamed man? Together with the answer to last issue's mystery set-up.

If you don't

Spare the Rod..... Editor 139
We're going to have to change this into a firearms department. More interesting gun business.

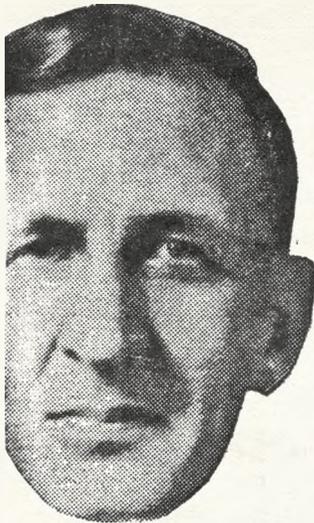
Cover—"He Held Her Head over the Brazier"..... Walter Baumhofer
From "The Red Wizard."

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Watch for the January 1st Issue

On the Newsstands December 14th

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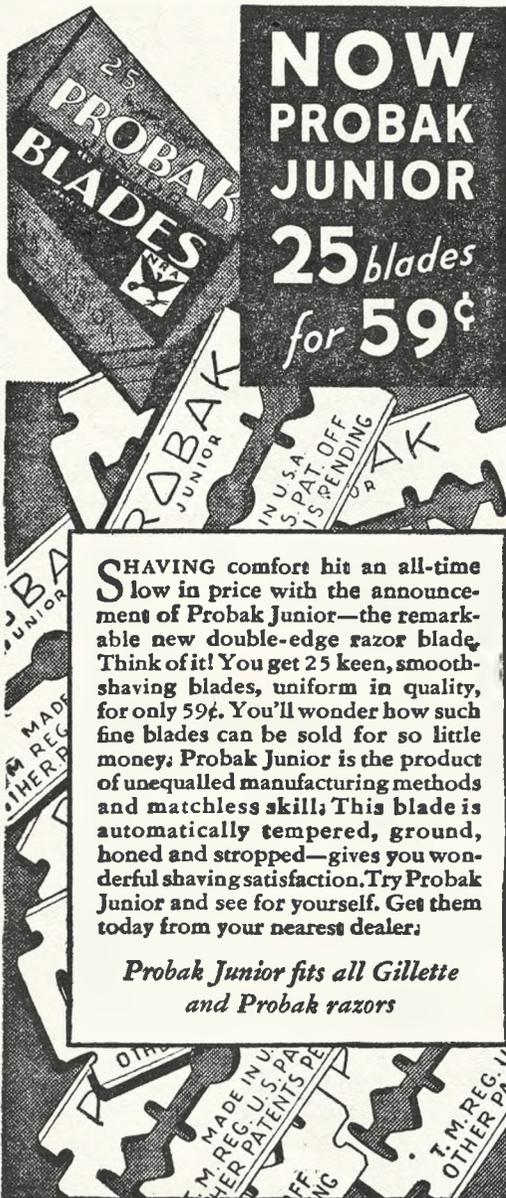
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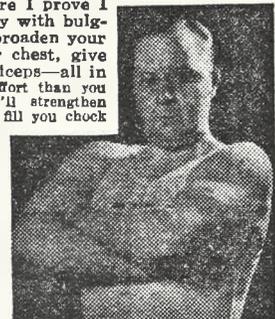


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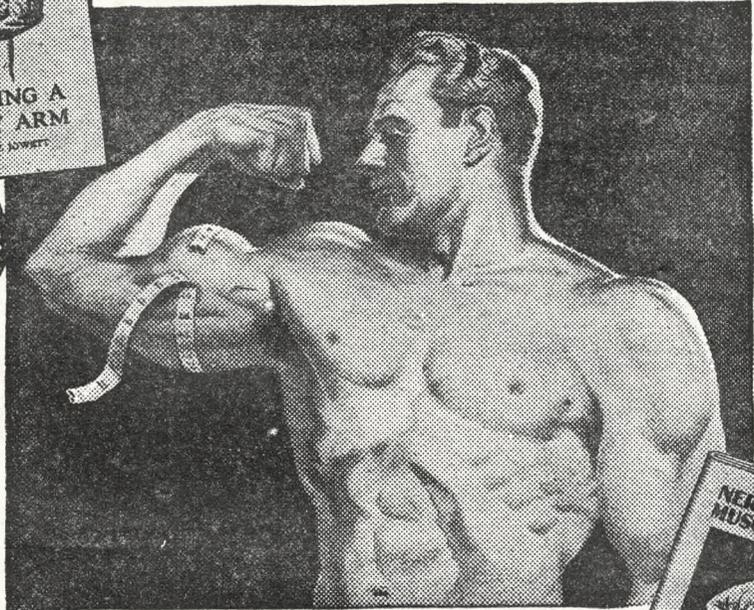
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LEAVE IT TO CARDIGAN



Cardigan had been stood up plenty of times in the course of his career but never before through having his date turn into a corpse. That was just a little more than even that hardboiled dick from Cosmos could stomach—and called for a lesson in lead directed at the chiselers who'd turned his evening into a murder party.

CHAPTER ONE

Blind Date

THE Viking Inn was not patronized by San Francisco's hotcha crowd. It was a three-storied brick building with a wide cinder driveway on one

side leading to a spacious parking lot in the rear. On Wednesday and Saturday nights there was dancing in the main dining room. On the third floor there were a few private dining rooms, and from the windows of these, on clear nights, you could see the winking harbor lights.



She sank her teeth in Cardigan's neck at the same moment Demayo clipped the big dick on the Adam's apple.

At eight of a clear, windy night in November Cardigan got out of a cab in front of the Viking—stood waiting for change while the rowdy wind tussled with his shabby old ulster, beat the floppy brim of his hat against the crown. The street was dark here. The Viking's modest electric sign threw little light.

An attendant opened the huge, glass-paneled door from within and when Cardigan went on into the lobby there was no

by
Frederick Nebel

Author of "Pardon My Murder," etc.

one there but the cloakroom girl. She was new and he did not know her. He heaved out of his overcoat, gave it and his battered fedora to the girl and turned away saying: "Any calls for me, I'll be upstairs in Number Three. Cardigan."

She swallowed and her eyes dilated. "Three?" she squeaked.

He was on his way and did not notice the startled look in her face. "Yeah, Three," he said over his shoulder. He was

in a hurry but he paused momentarily to look into the main dining room, where the orchestra was playing and people were dancing. Then he turned toward the foot of the staircase and climbed upward on thick-carpeted steps, his big hand sliding on the broad, polished banister. As he reached the top of the staircase a waiter almost collided with him. The waiter's face was pale, harried, and his lower lip trembled. He said: "Excuse, please," in an excited, preoccupied manner and went rapidly down to the main floor.

Cardigan strode up the corridor and took the next stairway, and when he reached the top he saw the door of the service pantry open and a busboy standing just outside it, wrapped in thought. At sight of Cardigan, the boy dropped his eyes, fidgeted and turned back into the pantry. Cardigan started for the front of the corridor and saw another waiter coming toward him. This man seemed also to be deeply preoccupied, his feet moving rapidly, his eyes downcast and fixed on the flashing toes of his shoes. He gave Cardigan a sidelong scared look, then seemed to spurt faster and disappear magically down the staircase.

Cardigan frowned, shrugged, moved on a matter of a few yards and opened a door on his left. He started into the small, private dining room but stopped with one foot across the threshold.

"It's about time you showed up," complained Sergeant McGovern. He was sitting on the table, a lank, hard-cased man with a dark, bony face and blunt dark eyes. His overcoat was open and his hands were sunk in the pockets of his dark gray trousers. "When a guy don't want you, Cardigan, you're sure to be all over him like a rash, and when he does want you, nuts, you're all other places."

Detective August Hunerkopf put in: "Mac means on account of he was trying to get you on the phone over to your

apartment. I said to Mac like this: 'Mac,' I said, 'maybe he ain't to home.'" He was a rolypoly man, fat-cheeked, gentle-eyed. "I said that after Mac tried to get you three or four times."

McGovern ignored his assistant and said tartly to Cardigan: "You had a date here for seven thirty, didn't you?"

"Yeah, sure. I got stuck in a barber shop."

"Who'd you have a date here with?"

CARDIGAN'S brows came together. He looked from McGovern to Hunerkopf, then to a uniformed policeman, then across the room to George Jonsson, the owner of the Viking. Jonsson's lips were compressed and his blond middle-aged face wore a taut, fixed expression. Then suddenly a small, frail man rose jerkily from behind the table, pulled down the sleeves of his coat, took off his spectacles and slipped them into a vest pocket. The skin on his skull was white, tight and ribbed with veins. He was Peabody, from the medical office.

He spoke quickly, in a dry crackling voice: "Obviously she was strangled. Her throat held thus—between two powerful hands—the pressure so powerful that, yes, her neck was also broken. Pity. Young, beautiful. Neck very slender. Easy to break. How do you do, Mr. Cardigan. Dear me, I haven't seen you since the time, you remember, that bank guard had his brains blown out. Very interesting, that case. I do declare—"

Cardigan took three long strides that carried him past the table. McGovern got off the table, took his hands from his pockets and folded them behind his straight, rigid back.

The girl lay on the floor, on her back, with her head a little on one side. Her hair was bronze and there was a great deal of it, wave on burnished wave, and not one wave seemed out of place. She was

slender and her hands, pale, quiet now, were beautiful.

McGovern grunted: "Who is she?"

Cardigan's face was dark, knotted. Fire moved in the depths of his eyes.

"I said, who is she?" McGovern growled.

Cardigan looked at him; through him; beyond him. "I don't know," he muttered.

McGovern's mouth gaped. George Jonsson started.

"She said," Jonsson declared defensively, "that she had an engagement here with you. You phoned yourself for a reservation and asked for this room and a table set for two."

"Hear that?" McGovern barked angrily.

"I heard it," Cardigan muttered indifferently; and then with a sudden flash of anger: "Keep your pants on. Who do you think you're yelling at? I made a reservation. O. K., I made one. But I don't know the girl's name."

McGovern scowled. "That sounds just like a story you'd tell. You made a reservation for two for seven thirty. The girl arrives at twenty past, mentions your name to George. Then you show up at eight and tell me to my bare face that you don't know who she is. That makes sense, I suppose. I suppose that makes sense. If that makes sense, I'm a cigar-store Indian!"

To this Cardigan paid no attention. He dropped to one knee, leaned on a knee with one elbow, his big hand dangling. Muscles were knotty on his big, heavy face. In his eyes was a fierce struggle, as though he were trying desperately to figure something out and was angered that he could not do so.

Hunerkopf said: "Mac, I would say like this. Give Cardigan time to think."

"You keep your oar out of it, Augie!" McGovern rasped. "Give him time to

think! Yeah, give him time to think up one of his famous bug-house fables!"

Cardigan stood up, towered, and glared at the irascible sergeant. "Why don't you try shutting that big trap of yours for a minute? I told you I don't know the girl. I never saw her before. Do you want me to write it down? Or maybe you can't read either."

"You can skip the cracks," McGovern grunted hoarsely. "If you didn't have a date with her, who did you have a date with?"

Cardigan pointed to the body. "With her."

HUNERKOPF frowned studiously and put his head on one side to think this out. McGovern held his arms out, palms up, and looked bleakly around the room. "Somebody's screwy around here. If it's me, somebody tell me."

Cardigan was getting up steam. "Now hold on; now wait a minute," his rough voice said, reverberating in the room. "If it all looks screwy to you, it looks just as screwy to me. But get this, all of you—I never saw this girl before and I don't know her name. I was in my office this afternoon and a girl called up and out of a clear blue sky she said she had some very valuable information for me. I told her to shoot. She said she didn't care to say anything over the phone. I told her to come to my office. She said that'd be dangerous. Then she said the best thing would be for me to meet her somewhere tonight. Not at my office, not at my flat, and not at her place. I asked her what case the information was connected with. She wouldn't say. Then I suggested a private dining room at the Viking. That was swell. I told her to hang on and I called George on another phone and asked for Number Three and he said O. K., and then I told the girl it was all set and that if she got here before I did she should go

right up to three. She asked where the Viking was and I gave her the address. Then I asked her name. No go. But whatever the information was, somebody sure figured it would be better left untold."

McGovern did not look appeased. If anything, he looked more enraged in a suppressed, red-faced way. "What," he ground out, "information would you guess she was going to give you?"

"You know as much about that as I do."

McGovern brought his brows together. "You ain't even interested, I suppose."

"To be frank, Mac, I'm not. It's tough to see a swell-looking dame busted up that way. I'd be a rat if I didn't think so. But on the other hand, I'm no amateur. I don't slam around town cracking down on heels because I like it but because I get paid to do it. This girl calls me up, hands me a fast one and I take a Brody and come over here, figuring I might get in the way of some heavy sugar. As it turns out, she's dead. That lets me out. This job, Mac, is yours. All your own. Wrap it up and take it over to headquarters and go into a huddle with it. That's what you're getting paid for."

"You listen to me, Cardigan!" McGovern barked. "If you think you can waltz out of this as easy as that you're nuts!"

Cardigan's face darkened. He said: "You're trying to get in my hair, Mac. I've told you the truth. The case is yours. There's nothing in it for me. I've got plenty of work to do without putting my nose into something that sounded screwy as hell in the first place."

"I know when a guy is lying," McGovern snapped, "and you're lying like a rug, Cardigan!"

"Please," George Jonsson pleaded, "not so loud."

McGovern spun on him. "I'll be as loud as I like!" he boomed. "And another thing, Mr. George Jonsson," he went on

darkly, "I think the story you handed me contains a lot of sliced baloney, too. How do I know you're not mixed up this? This yarn you handed me about some mysterious stranger sounds too pat. It sounds goofy. You been scared stiff ever since I got here. Why the hell are you so scared stiff?"

Jonsson moistened his lips, his blue eyes level. "Naturally, since I have a big establishment here, I don't like to have a scandal. I've never had one. A thing like this can hurt my trade a lot."

"Maybe I'll hurt it a lot and like it," McGovern barked.

JONSSON'S mouth grew firm, his blue eyes shimmered. "I guess I wouldn't put it past you," he said in a quiet, taut voice. "Ever since the time I refused to let you bring half a dozen people in here for dinner and drinks without you paying for them—"

"That's a lie!" yelled McGovern, his face red. "I tell you this thing here don't figure, it ain't right. Somebody's lying and it's you just as much as Cardigan. Hurt your trade? I'll hurt it, kid! I'll have the dump closed by law till I get this crime cleared up! How do you like that?"

"I wouldn't put it past you," Jonsson said quietly, his fists doubling. Then he turned to Cardigan, took a breath, said: "See here, Cardigan. You said you wouldn't take a case unless there was money in it. All right. I'll put money in this one. I've been in business here for years. If McGovern's bent on giving my place and me a dirty name just for spite, at least I've got a right to hire someone to prove he's wrong and to kind of clear this case up before it gets too big. I want to hire you—"

"Now wait a minute!" shouted McGovern. "You can't—"

"Lay off," Cardigan growled. "He

can't? He can't what? He wants to hire me. O. K. I'm hired. The Cosmos Agency is hired to solve this killing." He dropped his voice sarcastically: "It's about the only way it would get solved anyhow."

McGovern's lips curled. "If you're trying to ride me—"

"Ride you?" Cardigan growled. "Damn it, you crab all over the place because I refuse to be interested, and then when I do get interested you bust out in a lather of indignation! Go scratch yourself, will you?"

McGovern said bitterly: "I'd like to bust your kisser for you, wise guy."

"Try it sometime, Mac," Cardigan said dryly; and then to Jonsson: "Who found her here, George?"

"Alex, the steward on this floor. At about half past seven or so—just about five minutes after she came in the room here. Alex just looked in, no reason I guess, or maybe just to see if he could get her something until you showed up.

"He found her just like she is now, laying the way she is there now. The man, the fellow came in the room with her, he was gone. And he didn't leave by the door. I know that because all the time Alex was standing by the pantry door on this floor, down the corridor. So the man had to leave by the window. The window was closed when I showed them into the room and it was open when we saw the girl dead here. There's a fire escape out there and the platform runs along from the front to the rear, just outside the window, and there's a ladder down to the alleyway where the cars drive in. Alex—"

"Just a minute, just a minute," Cardigan broke in. "You're probably referring to Mac's 'mystery man'. The way I figured, I was to meet the girl alone."

George Jonsson nodded. "You see, she met a man. I was escorting her up the lower stairs, just after she came in, and this man he came out of the wash room

on the second floor and was coming down the stairs. 'Why, Dave!' she said, like that, surprised; like she hadn't seen him for years. He looked, I don't know, for a minute, kind of very surprised and maybe a little scared. Anyhow, he looked uneasy—but he was polite, like you'd be when strangers were around. She asked him to come up here a minute, she was expecting somebody—you—and he did. And I showed them in the room and left. He had his overcoat on and his hat with him, like he was leaving when we met him. He didn't eat here. He just spent an hour or so in the bar."

"Know him?" Cardigan asked.

"No. I asked Jimmy—you know, the barman—and Jimmy didn't."

"Was he tight?"

"No, I'm sure he wasn't. He must have left by the window. Alex swears not by the door."

"He have a car?"

JONSSON nodded. "When he arrived, Alf, my doorkeeper, saw him park right out front. Alf went out and asked him not to park there, account of the taxis. He showed him where the alley was and the space in back. The fellow then parked in back. Alf says it was a big roadster, a tan one, with all the curtains closed. After Alex found the body here, I ran down and called the police and told Alf what had happened and about the man, whom I described. Then Alex mentioned the roadster. Then he ran around back to see if the roadster was gone. It was gone. The fellow went down by the fire escape. No other way."

Cardigan asked: "Do you remember if the fellow called the girl by any name?"

"I remember that he didn't mention any name. He seemed, well, confused—like he was embarrassed at seeing her."

Cardigan turned to McGovern. "How about her effects? Any handbag?"

McGovern tapped his overcoat. "I got it."

"Let's see it."

"I'll take care of it," McGovern growled rebelliously.

"What's the sense in acting like a kid with a hunk of candy?"

Hunerkopf said: "I would say like this, Mac. Let Cardigan look at it. A head in the hand is worth two in the bush, or something like that. No, I mean two heads—"

McGovern tossed a small, circular bag on the table. There were no initials on the clasp. Inside, Cardigan found a few one-dollar bills, a five, a ten, and some silver. A vanity compact. A small comb. A lipstick in a metal tube. A slip of paper, small, as though it had been torn from a larger piece. On this was scrawled, in pencil:

11-10

A

26

He made a mental note of this without in any way attempting to decipher what the letter and the numbers signified. Then he shrugged and shoved everything into the bag, snapped shut the clip and tossed the bag back on the table.

He said to Jonsson: "When you saw this man, do you remember if he was wearing gloves?"

"Yes, he was. Because he started to take one off and the girl told him to never mind. You know, like you'd take a glove off to shake hands."

Cardigan turned to McGovern. "Did you take a tour down the fire escape?"

"Me and Joraleman," he said, nodding to the uniformed cop.

"Find anything?"

Hunerkopf put in helpfully: "He only found a collar button and give it to me, account of I wear stiff collars. Here's the button. There ain't no connection, I don't think. It was back in the alleyway."

Cardigan took out his penknife, drew the blade across the button. "Real gold," he said, tossing it back to Hunerkopf. And to Jonsson: "What did the guy look like, George?"

"Tall, thin but fairly strong looking. Young. Well, say about thirty. Sandy hair and a neat-clipped sandy mustache. Derby. One of those blue overcoats, double-breasted, and he was wearing a gray silk scarf."

Up through the building came the faint tremor and pulse of the jazz band playing a tango.

Then McGovern's hard, suspicious voice. "Cardigan, you sure you're telling me the truth about this woman? You sure you don't know who she is?"

"So help me, Mac."

"And you got no idea what information she was going to give."

Cardigan spread his palms. "I wish I did. I'd be sitting pretty."

MCGOVERN drilled him with a hard look. "If you're lying to me, Cardigan, I'll—"

"I know. Land on me like a ton of brick." His eyes flashed and he whipped out: "You make me sick, Mac! I'll bet every time you shave you're so damned suspicious that you think the face in the mirror is somebody else's!" He headed for the door. "Though if anybody else had a mug like yours, ten to one they'd do something about it. Maybe trade it in for some head cheese."

"Ha, ha, ha!" guffawed Hunerkopf, shaking all over. "I say like this. That is a good one! Ha, ha, ha!"

"August!" boomed McGovern, whirling and going purple. "You're a disgrace to the department, the way you encourage this palooka by laughing that way! Shut up!" He whirled toward the door. "And as for you, Cardigan—"

But Cardigan was gone.

CHAPTER TWO

Demayo

THE Cosmos Agency, of which Cardigan was the San Francisco head, was on the second floor of an unpretentious building in Market Street. It contained a reception room, a private office, and a record room.

It was almost nine at night. Patricia Seaward was working late, bringing the quarterly reports up to date preparatory to sending them to the head office in New York. She was at work at Cardigan's desk, in the private office. A green-shaded desk light was the only illumination in the room and it isolated Pat and the desk in a pool of light.

When Cardigan came in, his battered hat riding low on his forehead and the shapeless collar of his overcoat turned up to his ears, she said: "Oh, back already from your mysterious date!"

"I was stood up," he said, and went on into the record room.

She called after him: "I thought there was something untoward about that."

His heavy voice rolled back: "I like the polite word you use." Then he reappeared carrying two file boxes which he set down on top of the radiator. He turned on the ceiling lights, said with a muttered bitterness: "She was there all right, but she was deader than a door-nail, Patsy."

"What!"

He carried a chair over to the radiator, sat down and opened one of the file boxes. "It was like this," he said, and told her the whole story, at the same time thumbing and perusing the papers in the file box.

"Oh, dear—oh, dear!" she said when he had finished talking, her palms pressed to her cheeks. "Oh, the poor girl, chief!"

He nodded. "The guy that could put

his paws around a throat like that and give her the works—"

Pat shuddered, then cried: "But it's wonderful of you, chief, to go to work on it for the girl's sake, even though—"

"Pass up the bouquets, Patsy," he cut in. "It did give me a jolt to see a good-looker like her that way, but you ought to know better than chuck that 'wonderful' stuff at me. I'm in this now because George Jonsson hired me. McGovern was making some pretty tall passes at George and George got back at him by hiring me to clear up the case and so give him and his place a clean bill."

"But don't you think this case might be in connection with one we have on deck?"

He said: "That's why I'm looking in the hot files. The chances are that the dead girl was a stranger here. I had to give her the address of the Viking. Nobody at the Viking had ever seen the sandy-haired guy before. The girl had class, good clothes."

He worked in silence now. Out of twelve hot cases he drew, in the end, three briefs and studied them carefully, one by one. Finally he sat back, lit a cigarette.

"There's three here that are possible. There's one that's highly possible. Brief one eight four. We worked hard on it here and in the east six months ago and never turned a stone. Congressman Luke Buford got an appropriation and hired us. It was about who was responsible for the uprising in southern China led by Sam Portero. Sam Portero was born in Spain but he came to America when he was a kid and was naturalized here.

"Oil concessions were involved. The rumor got around that a combine in the states financed that uprising. It was an oil combine supposedly hooked up with a munitions and arms combine. The munitions and arms were supposed to have been shipped to Canton and billed as gen-

eral cargo, machinery, hardware. We were to root out information as to what hulls carried the cargo, who the shippers were, who the stuff was shipped to. Well, all that evidence vanished. The uprising failed—but several thousand people were killed, among them some American engineers, tourists, a teacher—and all of these last three groups were innocent bystanders. The rumor was that the hub of the combine was here on the west coast.

“O. K. In this brief, One Eighty-four is the following note: ‘It is believed that a woman was involved in these unlawful transactions. It is believed that this woman was an American, that she acted as messenger between the heads in America and those in China and that she was highly instrumental in bringing the uprising to life. It is believed that this uprising was instigated solely for the acquisition of valuable oil properties and it is our desire to punish by due process of law those responsible for the wanton killing of American citizens.’ In later notes it refers to her as the ‘mystery woman.’”

CARDIGAN stood up, went to the desk, took a slip of paper and on it wrote, from memory:

11-10

A

26

“That, Patsy,” he explained, “was on a slip of paper in her bag. The paper looked fresh. Likely the notation was made a short time before—today, anyhow. What do you think it means?”

“Well, maybe the eleven-and-ten’s a street address, the way you’d take it over a phone. The A may be an apartment. Maybe the twenty-six is a date.”

He stared at the slip of paper for a long minute, his shaggy brows bent. Then he said: “No, I don’t think so. Get me

the railway station on the wire. Pullman ticket office.”

A moment later she handed the phone across to him. He said into the transmitter: “Is there a train leaving there at ten past eleven tonight? . . . There is. Now can you tell me if there’s a Pullman Number Twenty-six? . . . Thanks a million,” he finished, and hung up.

Pat was looking up at him eagerly.

He said: “There’s a southbound train out at ten past eleven. In the make-up is a Pullman sleeper Number Twenty-six. The A—well, that stands for Drawing-room A or I’m a monkey’s uncle. O. K., Patsy. You look tired around the eyes. Powder your nose and go home to bed.”

“But really, I’m not a bit tired.”

“You heard me, didn’t you? Clear out. You’re dead tired.”

“But—you’re not going to get in trouble?”

He chuckled under his breath. “Scram, Pats. There’s no trouble to get into.”

When she had gone he took a long drink of rye straight, lit a cigarette and went over Brief 184. Time and time again the picture of the lovely girl, dead on the floor, drifted across his mind’s eye. He was roused by the ringing of the telephone bell.

“Hello,” he said.

“This Cardigan?”

“Yup.”

There was a crackling on the phone, then silence. He jiggled the hook. He told the operator he had been cut off. She said his party had hung up. He popped the receiver into the cradle, stared at the instrument, then shrugged and took another drink. At twenty past ten he put on his hat and overcoat, turned out the lights, stepped into the hallway and locked the door.

He walked down the stairs, through the dim lobby and out to the street. As he was walking away a voice called:

"Hey, Cardigan!"

He half turned, saying, "Yeah?"

AND there he caught a glimpse of metal in the open window of a sedan parked at the curb. He whirled and at the same time threw himself violently into the recess leading to a shop door. A gun boomed twice, thundering. Glass sprang apart with a snarling, ripping sound. Glass splinters showered against his face. He had thrown himself so hard out of the way that his head had struck the doorway frame and for an instant he was stunned. He heard the roar of an accelerated motor, the clash of gears. His hand went in beneath his coat, got hold of the gun beneath his left arm. Crouching, he swiveled on both feet—saw the sedan a block away, speeding. No use. There was no cab near.

Shaking and with cold sweat standing out on his face, he got quickly away from the store—crossed the street and walked on, his coat collar turned up, his hat yanked down. Once he glanced back and saw a couple of cops standing before the store. He kept on. He figured out the fluky telephone call: they had merely phoned to see if he was at the office. Like a dummy he had looked around when that fellow called out his name.

He muttered: "Some nervous citizens think I know more than I do." Now the sweat on his face was hot and the wind that blew against his face was bitter cold. He was hurrying, and then he realized he was going in the wrong direction. As he turned about, he caught a glimpse of a familiar figure trying to duck out of sight. Cardigan grunted. As he came up to Hunerkopf, the rolypoly detective was bent over and looking mysteriously about on the sidewalk. He pretended surprise at seeing Cardigan.

"Oh, Mr. Cardigan! Well, well. Gosh, I almost slipped and broke my neck. I

think I slipped on a banana peel, but bless me if I can see anything! Do you see anything, Mr. Cardigan?"

Cardigan's big face looked very sour. "All I see, Augie, is one fat detective trying to be funny."

"Well, well, well," said Hunerkopf innocently, still looking around for the mythical banana peel. "Well, maybe I just—well, just slipped."

Cardigan was dead certain that McGovern had sent Hunerkopf to tail him. Hunerkopf must have seen the shooting, but he was afoot and he had not taken off after the sedan; his job, of course, was to tail Cardigan. This angered the big Cosmos op, but instantly he realized that getting angry would not shake off Hunerkopf.

So he said: "Let's go across the street and have a beer and a ham-on-rye."

"Me, Mr. Cardigan, I like *braunschweiger* on rye. I say like this. It is very kind of you."

They crossed the street, entered the small anteroom of the Fox Tavern; left their hats and coats there with the check-room girl and went into the main room, into a paneled booth. They ordered and then Cardigan, looking at his hands, said: "I'd like to wash up, Augie."

He went to the rear, through a doorway that led into a small corridor. Here a narrow staircase led upward and Cardigan took it to the floor above, followed a corridor to the front and took another stairway down to the anteroom. He got his hat and overcoat, pushed out into the street, ducked into a taxi and thumbed his nose at the tavern as the cab shot away.

IT was five to eleven when Cardigan entered the railway station. He found out on what track the 11:10 train was to leave. He wangled his way through the gate to the platform, tramped along past the long line of semi-darkened Pullmans.

A number of persons, apparently passengers, were idling up and down beside the train. Porters were arriving with baggage and swinging into various vestibules. Cardigan came up to Number 26 Pullman; the number was on a white card in one of the windows.

He pushed into the Pullman vestibule, taking his time, and entered the corridor, passed the dressing room. He paused outside drawing room A. The long aisle before him was walled in by green berth curtains, some of them drawn, some still open. He knocked on the drawing room door. No one answered. In a moment he opened the door, stepped in.

The berth was made up. There were some bags on the floor. There was a portfolio lying on the berth; beside the portfolio, a man's brown fedora. Cardigan picked up the hat, looked at the sweatband. The initials R. D. were perforated in the leather. These initials were also stamped on the portfolio. Then Cardigan saw a woman's fur coat draped on a hanger.

He was startled by a knock on the door. For an instant he did not know what to do. The knock sounded again and then without pause he opened the door. A messenger handed him a telegram addressed to Ramos Demayo, Drawing Room A, Car 26, 11:10 P. M. train. He signed for it, closed the door. The envelope flap was only partially sealed. He worked it open without tearing it. The message read—

CANCEL TRIP AND SEE US IMMEDIATELY. BAUM.

Cardigan thrust the message back into the envelope, sealed the flap. He spun, tried the lock on the portfolio. It was secure. He whirled away from it, bent over and tried the lock on the nearest piece of baggage. It snapped open; but when he opened the bag he saw that it contained a woman's garments. An article fell out.

Picking it up, he saw that it was a leather traveling clock. It sprang open, like the covers of a book. On the inside of one cover was the clock's face. On the inside of the other, a woman's picture. He felt a rush of blood in his body. It was the picture of the girl he had found dead at the Viking!

Quickly he snapped shut the leather case, returned it to the bag. Closed the bag. He opened the door, stepped into the passageway, saw no one. He bent and slipped the telegram beneath the door. People were coming into the Pullman. Glancing at his watch, he saw that it was five past eleven. He made his way to the opposite end of the car, stepped to the station platform and strode long-legged to the gate, through it and to a nearby point of vantage.

AT eight minutes past eleven he saw a porter come out through the gate lugging hand baggage. A man and a girl followed him. The man was tall, slim. He wore a brown fedora and a brown overcoat. His face was lean, dark, and worried now—the brows bent and the mouth tight. He looked to be in his late thirties. The girl was small, blonde, with beautifully clear skin, a young red mouth, large dark eyes, disturbed now and incredulous. Her tiny feet moved rapidly in order to keep up with the long, lithe strides of the dark man.

Outside, there was a string of cabs, people hurrying. Into one of these cabs the porter was piling the couple's baggage. Cardigan heard the dark man snap: "Hotel Norman!"

Cardigan went down the line, swung into a cab and said: "Go to the Hotel Norman."

He noticed that his cab got away ahead of the other one.

"Step on it," he said to the driver.

The Hotel Norman was in Bush Street,

near Taylor. Cardigan entered the severe, modernistic lobby. He could hear, faintly, the sound of supper music coming from the Redwood Room. The lobby was alive with the movement of people, their talk, their sporadic laughter.

He saw the dark man and the girl enter a few minutes later, followed by a bellhop carrying their bags. The dark man registered, and as he did so Cardigan walked across to the elevator bank. When he saw the couple and the bellhop coming toward the bank, Cardigan stepped into an open car. About six other persons were already in it. Then the dark man and the girl entered, followed by the boy with the bags. Cardigan stayed in the rear of the car. He heard the boy say: "Six out."

There was a stop at four, then at six. The boy stepped aside for the couple to go out and said: "To the left, sir."

They went out and Cardigan went out and without pausing he turned to the left and strode past them, making his way down the corridor. He was near the end of it when he heard a key grating in a lock somewhere behind. He kept on a little, then turned and saw the boy carrying the bags out of sight. The couple had already gone in. He retraced his steps, spotted the door and went on to the elevator. Room 611, he memorized. Thoughts were wheeling and banging around in his head.

Down in the lobby, he stood smoking a cigarette. He saw the boy who had taken up the bags come out of the elevator. Five minutes later he saw the dark man come out and stride purposefully toward the doorway. The doorman saluted and said: "How do you do, Mr. Demayo." The dark man muttered something, strode out. A block away he caught a taxi and Cardigan nailed one in front of the hotel.

The trail led out Bush. Demayo evidently was in a hurry, for his cab was speed-

ing. Cardigan sat forward on the edge of his seat, taking drags at a cigarette, spurting out jets of smoke from one corner of his mouth. Demayo's cab made a right turn into Gough, went out past Lafayette Park, made a left, sped on and made a right. Now it went slower.

"Stop here," Cardigan said.

His cab stopped. A block and a half farther on, the other cab pulled into the curb. Demayo jumped out and stretched his legs in a fast walk across the sidewalk.

"Now go past the place," Cardigan said.

His cab rolled past as the other cab was getting under way. Cardigan spotted the house and got off at the next block, paid the driver and began walking back. It was a fine stone house, three-storied with an ornate entrance one step up from the sidewalk. He saw large windows and the drapes behind them looked pretentious. It was, he decided, a private residence.

CHAPTER THREE

Alias Mr. Armstrong

THE house next to it—flush with it, for there was no alley-way between—was vacant. Cardigan saw a small, neat sign in one of the windows and went up close in order to read it. The place was for rent or sale. The agency which handled it was Colin Avery's. Cardigan walked three blocks before he came upon a cruising cab. He rode to the Hotel Citadel, in Polk Street. In the telephone directory in the booth off the lobby he found Avery's business phone number and his home phone number. He rang the latter and a servant answered.

"I'd like to speak to Mr. Avery, if he's in and if he hasn't gone to bed . . . This is Mr. Armstrong." A moment later he had Avery on the wire and he said: "I hate to trouble you at this hour but I'm

leaving town early in the morning and I want to ask about a rental. I expect to return in a week with my family . . . I'm referring to a house in Buchanan Street." He gave the number and received some details; and then he asked: "How about the neighbors? My wife's an invalid and we need quiet."

Avery assured him of quiet neighbors. On the left, he said, lived Nicholas Burford, the architect. On the right lived Braddock Young, the airplane manufacturer. Cardigan hung up. Braddock Young! His eyes narrowed, flashed, and one side of his mouth tightened. He chopped off a short, harsh laugh, banged out of the booth and took an elevator to the eighth floor. His knuckles rapped on the door of 808.

Almost instantly it was opened by Pat Seaward and he saw that her face was flushed, her eyes warm with anger. And he saw why. Beyond, in the small living room, stood McGovern and Hunerkopf. Instantly Pat tried to cover up. She knew how Cardigan and McGovern went for each other on the slightest provocation.

McGovern barked: "Oh, there you are! We been wondering where you were. Don't you ever sleep?"

Cardigan was blunt. "What do you apes want here?"

"It is like this, Mr. Cardigan," Hunerkopf said. "We been looking for you. I ate my *braunschweiger* and I ate your ham-on-rye too, account of, shucks, I had to pay for both. Also the beers. That was a good one on me. I ate some stewed prunes too. Nothing like stewed prunes to make you feel fit like a fiddle and ready to go—"

"August," growled McGovern, "please shut up now. Please, for crying out loud, shut up!" He swiveled, drilled Cardigan with hard, bold look. "What about that shooting in Market Street?"

"What about it?" Cardigan whipped back at him.

"Cardigan, like I said at the Viking, you ain't telling the truth. You knew who that jane was. You knew what she was there about. Because after you leave there, what happens? Some guys unhook their guns and go to town on you."

"You've a screw loose, Mac. Who said they went to town on me? I heard shooting and I ducked. I don't know what you're talking about. I told you the truth at the Viking. You can like that or lump it. But when you come around here and start putting the screws to Pat, you step on my toes. The more I see of your ugly puss, the less I like it—and I didn't like it when I first saw it, several years ago. You're the kind of thing guys see in nightmares and—"

"Please, chief," Pat pleaded. "It's all right. Don't—"

McGovern was not easily abashed. "So you're not going to tell me about that shooting, huh, Cardigan?"

"I don't know anything about it. I was an innocent bystander."

"You're lying, fella."

"There's no use trying to convince you, so let it go at that. I'm lying. O. K., I'm lying. That settles that. So now get wise to yourself and blow. I get sick at my stomach looking at you."

McGOVERN strode hard-heeled to the door, gripped the knob, turned, said grimly in his foghorn voice: "O. K., baby. Some day—"

"I know. Some day you're going to land on me like a ton of brick. Skip it. You're only a lightweight."

"Nuts!" snapped McGovern, whipping open the door. "Come on, August."

Hunerkopf, on his way to the door, said to Cardigan: "Yes, sir, that was a good one on me, Mr. Cardigan. That was sure a good one. I say like this. Victory to the swift. Them prunes—"

"August!" barked McGovern from the corridor.

Hunerkopf backed out, bowing politely to Pat.

Cardigan closed the door, led her to the other side of the room and began telling her what had happened, bringing the events up to his telephone call in the booth below. She was speechless with interest.

"And this Braddock Young," Cardigan hammered on. "He bought out Lotker Motors and merged it with Zeluff Planes, Incorporated. Zeluff Planes was originally subsidized by Shapiro-Bierck Chemical, manufacturers of munitions. Young was on the Shapiro-Bierck board of directors. It begins to hook up. Demayo I can't figure out. Nor the girl with him. Nor the girl who was killed at the Viking. But there's a hook-up. That sandy-haired fellow, Jonsson told me about, is in it too. Where, I don't know."

"Oh, chief, I'm afraid it's getting very dangerous. People who would kill that girl—"

"Calm, Pats. You've got to do something now."

"Oh, I want to," she said earnestly.

"Girls as rule don't carry other girls' pictures with them when they're traveling, do they?"

"I'd say not as a rule."

"O. K., Pasty. But if a girl had a sister she might carry her sister's picture. That right?"

"It's very logical."

"All right. Now call up the Norman Hotel. This girl must be registered there as Mrs. Demayo. Ask for her. When she gets on the wire, say, 'I've got something very important to tell you in regard to your sister.' If she has a sister, she'll show interest. Then ask if you can come over to her hotel right away."

Pat spent a matter of three minutes on the phone. As she hung up, she nodded.

"Oh, chief, I just can't tell her her sister's dead!"

"You don't have to. Tell her you're a woman doctor and that her sister phoned you and asked you to come over. Say you went over and she wasn't in. Tell the girl you're worried and ask her if she's seen her sister. Ask her to go with you to her sister's place. That way, you'll find out where the sister lived. The key will probably be in the door of the Demayo apartment. As you and the sister leave, you take the key out, say you'll lock the door—but don't lock it; just pretend to. I'll be watching for you in the lobby of the Norman. Now I'll go out first. Ten to one McGovern and Hunerkopf 'll be watching for me. I'll lead 'em astray while you go to the Norman. I'll lose 'em and get over there in a hurry. As soon as you get to the dead girl's apartment, phone the Norman and leave a message for me at the desk—address and so forth. Got it?"

"O. K., chief."

Cardigan went downstairs, walked away and found out he was being tailed. It took him fifteen minutes to shake off McGovern and Hunerkopf.

THE supper crowd at the swank Norman was pretty lively. The music was hotter, the voices louder, the laughter at a higher, more spontaneous pitch. Men and women in evening clothes looked swank, smart. Cardigan, in his lopeared hat, his shabby old ulster, bulked at one end of the lobby like a sore but rugged thumb.

It was half past twelve when Pat and the blonde got out of the elevator and headed for the doorway. The blonde stopped a moment at the desk, to leave her key and say something to the clerk. Then she left with Pat.

Cardigan popped a cigarette into a tray, strode to a waiting elevator and was lifted

to the sixth floor. He swung his feet down the corridor to 611, opened the door and entered a small, square foyer. There was an archway at the left of the foyer leading into a spacious, well-appointed living room. Beyond was a bedroom and off the bedroom a tiled bath. In the lower drawer of the lowboy he found the portfolio. It was still locked, but he had come here with a purpose. From his pocket he took a jackknife and pried the catch open.

There were half a dozen briefs, each typewritten, each stapled. There were several blueprints—of airplanes, Cardigan decided, after a moments study. On one of the briefs, dated only a week before, was a list of rifles, side-arms, machine-guns. Below was a note: *Delivery can be made immediately.* Other notes referred to field guns, ammunition, steel helmets. *Twenty-five ordinary tractors can be shipped as such and completely armed at point of concentration.*

Then he came upon this: *Former liaison emissary has become difficult and bearer replaces her with full authority. Recommend you destroy all evidence, especially her code.* He looked up, remembering the bronze-haired girl at the Viking. He could feel the blood pounding in his temples. And then he read: *Bee Wuy assures complete backing.* At first Cardigan thought he was running into something Chinese. And then the truth snapped in his brain like an electric spark. Bee Wuy meant B. Y.—Braddock Young!

He spent half an hour over the briefs, then rolled them up and thrust them into his overcoat pocket. He stuck a newspaper in the portfolio, slammed shut the catch, found it held, and then replaced it in the lowboy.

Downstairs at the desk, he found a message from Pat: *Hotel Wendover. Room 512. She fainted.*

The Wendover was up on the top of Powell Street. It afforded a splendid

view; a slim, smart hotel of tan brick, with a small, oval-shaped lobby and a black marble desk. Cardigan, banging in through a side entrance, did not stop at the desk. He went up in an elevator to the fifth floor, got out, headed in the wrong direction at first and then retraced his steps and found 512. He had raised his knuckles to knock when he heard a loud thump on the door, a low, rasping snarl. The hair on his nape stiffened. He wrapped his left hand around the knob, turned it slowly, found that the door was not locked. His right hand went in beneath his left armpit, came out with his .38 revolver.

He went in fast. He saw Demayo, black with rage, whirling Pat around the room by her arms. Her hat was off and her hair was flying and she looked only half conscious.

"Cut it, Tarzan," Cardigan grunted, an ugly look on his face.

Demayo let Pat go. She stumbled rubber-kneed to a divan and fell down upon it, choking. Demayo's hand started for his hip.

"I wouldn't," said Cardigan in a sad, terrible voice.

Demayo spat: "Who—what—who are you? What are you doing here? What—who—I—"

"Marbles in your mouth, Demayo?"

"Get out—get out! I'll call—"

Cardigan bared his teeth and his left fist crashed against Demayo's jaw. Demayo landed in a wing-chair.

"I feel a little better already," Cardigan growled in a low, vindictive voice.

Demayo was panting. "I—I—"

"Get your breath. You'll need it." And over his shoulder: "How are you, Patsy?"

SHE was sitting up now, getting the ends of her hair together. She was breathless and shocked but getting control of herself quickly. "I'm all—right," she gasped.

The little blonde lay on another divan, stirring now, making small whimpering sounds.

Cardigan muttered: "Get her sister's name, Pat?"

"Norma Driscoll."

Cardigan looked dully at Demayo. "You married to the blonde?"

"Yes—of course."

"When?"

"A few hours ago."

"A quickie, huh?"

Pat said: "On their way to the train. Nancy told me. That's Nancy."

Cardigan muttered: "What a hangover she's going to have. Where's the guy that killed Norma Driscoll, Demayo? You know, the tall lad with the sandy mustache?"

Demayo's mouth tightened and his black eyes shimmered. "I don't know—what you're talking—about!" he rasped in a high, strained voice.

Cardigan said: "How'd you like to get your teeth kicked out on account of not knowing what I'm talking about?" He paused, regarding Demayo levelly. Then he asked Pat: "How'd he happen to get in here?"

"He said the man at the Norman desk told him Nancy had left word she was going here. She stopped at the desk on our way—"

"I get it," Cardigan nodded. He addressed Demayo: "Norma Driscoll I'm talking about. And the young lad with the sandy mustache. Who's Baum?"

At mention of the name which Cardigan had seen attached to the telegram, Demayo sprang from the chair, stood drawn up to his lean, wiry height, his whole body vibrating tensely, the blood dark beneath his dark skin.

"Why," Cardigan went on levelly, watchfully, "was the former liaison emissary getting troublesome? Did she botch the Portero business in South China?"

The veins that stood out on Demayo's forehead seemed on the point of bursting. Cords in his swart neck stood out like swollen rubber cables. He was alert to act—should Cardigan relax.

Cardigan said: "Twenty-five ordinary tractors that can be shipped as such and—"

Demayo fairly screamed: "She told—" and then gagged on the words.

Cardigan shook his head. "No. Your briefs, Demayo. I cased your hotel apartment."

Demayo caught a glimpse of the papers protruding from Cardigan's pocket. With a strangled cry he flung himself on the Cosmos op, his eyes burning on the pocketed papers. Cardigan blocked him, used his left hand to grab Demayo's throat, clamped it between his big, powerful fingers.

He snarled: "The girl was knocked off like this, Demayo! Like this! Like it? Like hell you do! Now who was that guy? Who was the sandy-haired bum that did it? You thought it was swell playing Tarzan with my pal over there—now I'll play Tarzan with you!"

THE blonde came to and screeched as she saw Cardigan going to work on Demayo. She jumped up, flung herself across the room, jumped on Cardigan and sank her teeth in his neck. He yelped "Ouch!" and then Pat got hold of the blonde as Demayo drove a hard fist against Cardigan's Adam's apple. Cardigan gasped, his eyes bulged, his tongue shot out. Pat saw in a flash the jam he was in. She saw Demayo go for his gun. With all her small strength she threw the blonde in Demayo's way and Demayo slammed to the floor while the blonde shot head-first onto the divan her legs flying.

Cardigan got his wind. Demayo, thinking his wife had deliberately jumped

on him, got to his feet and as she sprang up from the divan he clipped her on the jaw and put her out like a light. Cardigan caught him from behind, locked his arms behind his back.

"Take his gun, Pat," he said. "The guy's going modernistic on us."

She took away Demayo's gun.

Cardigan swung him into the bathroom and handcuffed him to a vertical steam pipe. The expression on Demayo's face was dark and bestial. His lips sputtered wetly but he could not get any words out.

Cardigan went back into the living room saying: "Patsy, you stay here. Tarzan's fixed and you look after the bride. I've got my bearings now and I'll be a horse's neck if I don't know where this sandy-haired guy is. No, that's not steam escaping. It's Demayo whistling *The Peanut Vendor* through his teeth. I'll be seeing you, angel. And I'll leave these briefs with you."

"But, chief—I know you'll get hurt!" she cried. "Don't go! Get McGovern here—"

"That bunch of sour grapes? Nix. He gets in my hair—"

"Oh, chief!"

"Pats, you're a nice girl. Nice eyes, nice hair—and you're worth your weight in any pinch. Now look after the little blonde. She'll need comforting when she comes to. I'm going out and collect some marbles."

"Chief—"

"Goom-by, angel!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Leave it to Cardigan

RIDING in the cab, the cold night air felt good. He had worked up quite a sweat in the apartment. His hat had become crushed in during the work out but he did not bother to straighten it out. The knot of his tie was way over to one

side. A bunch of hair sprouted alongside one ear. He looked like a wreck but he felt fine; he felt like an express engine under a full head of steam.

When he got out of the cab, the wind was driving up the dark, deserted street. He gave the driver a large tip—not deliberately, but absent-mindedly.

"Geeze, t'anks, mister."

"Send the kids to college on it."

"I ain't got no kids—"

"Well, when you get 'em."

"Ah, I ain't never gonna git married, mister," the driver sighed. "Not since I lost me gal, Gwendolyn."

"Sorry to bring it up, pal."

"S O. K., mister. I still got me mudder."

Cardigan strode off and the taxi swung about and disappeared. The Cosmos op came up to the house that had the vacancy sign in the window and he saw that in the house beyond there were still lights. Besides the ornate main doorway, there was a smaller doorway sunk in a shallow areaway and this doubtless was the service entrance. Cardigan tried this and found that it was locked. He then went to the main door, plunked the bell-button and whistled a popular tune. The door was opened by a short, chubby-faced butler.

"I went to see Mr. Young," Cardigan said.

"Whom shall I say is calling?"

"You can say it's a messenger from Mr. Demayo."

Little eyes squinted between thick folds of flesh. The butler nodded watchfully, said: "Step in."

Cardigan entered a large entrance hall from which rose a wide staircase. The butler went up this staircase, followed its turn midway, disappeared. Cardigan thrust his hat into his left overcoat pocket. In a minute a large, powerful man came down the staircase. His hair was steel gray, wiry, his face broad, his neck short

and thick. He carried himself erect, limber on his feet for all his hard weight.

His voice was blunt, pointblank: "Demayo sent you?"

"You Braddock Young?"

"I am. Come on, come on—what does Demayo want?"

"He wants to get out of a jam. He slammed into a jam, got hurt and he's afraid the cops might take him."

"Why didn't he phone me?"

"I guess he didn't want to fix it so that they'd be able to trace a phone call here."

Young's eyes were troubled but his voice was still blunt: "I never saw you before. Who are you?"

"I knew Demayo in China. I was in on the Portero business. He's wounded and in a jam. I think some woman, maybe she was from the government—I think she swiped some papers from Demayo's hotel room. He tried to get her and she shot him and scrambled."

Young's eyes snapped wide open and a quick pallor came into his face. He put his hands behind his back, paced up and down, chewing on his lip, scowling fiercely at the floor. Then he stopped short, snapped: "How badly is he hurt?"

"Pretty bad. He's tucked away in a spot I know but we've got to get him out of there and to a doctor. He said you'd know a doctor."

"The fool!" growled Young. "The damn fool!" He took a breath and his eyes narrowed.

"If you'll give me some men and a car we can get him out," Cardigan said.

"Yes," Young snapped. "We'll have to do that. Come upstairs with me."

CARDIGAN followed the man upstairs to a wide hallway, then into a large, square living room in which wall lights glowed. Two men were standing on either side of it, each holding a highball. Both were young. One was husky,

blonde, with a fat little mouth. The other was short, stocky, with strong-looking legs, a thick chest and dark, coarse hair. Cardigan looked for a third—the sandy-haired man—but did not see him.

Young snapped petulantly: "Demayo's in trouble," and then stopped short. He scowled. "What's the matter?"

The husky blond man was gaping. The dark stocky man began to look very sinister; his black eyes began to crackle and his upper lip began to quiver into a wolfish curl. Cardigan took his gun from his pocket and said: "I get it."

Braddock Young whirled, stared incredulously at the drawn gun. The other two men did not budge, did not take their eyes from Cardigan.

"You two guys know me," Cardigan said. "You're the guys that hauled off and took a crack at me down in Market Street."

Braddock Young looked like a man who was witnessing a terrible catastrophe. He choked: "Who is he?"

Cardigan said: "Cardigan. Your two gunmen seem to 've lost their tongues."

"My God!" whispered Braddock Young, a frozen look on his face.

Cardigan chuckled. "That was a gag about Demayo. Part of it. Demayo is in a jam, but he's not wounded. I've got Demayo tucked away. I've got his wife too—Norma Driscoll's sister. I've got you three guys. Now there's one more guy I need to fill out this little jigsaw puzzle. Tall guy. Young. Sandy mustache, sandy hair. He likes to choke people to death. He's the whimsical bird that killed Norma Driscoll at the Viking."

Young was getting an icy control of himself. "You're talking rot now!"

"Am I? Don't let that idea run away with you. Our agency was given this case a long time ago, but we didn't get the breaks. I got them now. Some people had an idea this munitions and arms com-

bine was a fairy tale. Norma Driscoll was your contact agent for the Portero rebellion and Demayo's the one for this new fuss."

"Indeed," said Young coldly, tensely, "a fairy tale."

"What are you stalling for? I've got Demayo. I've got the briefs he was carrying. I've read them. You're in them as *Bee Wuy*. I can track down the type-writer that was used to make them. I can track down the paper. I can track down the blueprints. All I need now is the sandy-haired guy that knocked off Norma Driscoll. George Jonsson of the Viking will identify him. He'll get the death penalty but if we wangle a life sentence on condition that he spring the whole story, he'll spring. Norma Driscoll had valuable information for me. Since she was knocked off, somebody else has to come through, and I'm going to get all the marbles in before I go to town."

He kept watching the doorway from the corner of his eye, expecting the fat butler to show up any minute. The two men by the fireplace were watchful, practically standing on their toes, ready to go into action on an instant's notice. Young was cold, rigid, his mouth a tight, hairless line.

SUDDENLY the short, stocky man barked at Young. "What the hell is all this about munitions and arms and Portero?"

Young made no reply but the blond burly man muttered: "Button up, dummy!"

"I don't care!" complained the stocky man. "This guy is talking all over my head. And don't tell me to button up, Baum."

"So you're Baum," Cardigan said to the burly man. "Why did you send that telegram to Demayo on the train?"

Now it was Baum's turn to look shocked. "It seems like you been a lot

of places at one time, buddy. But nuts to you on that question."

"O. K.," Cardigan said briskly. "And nuts to you and the rest of you. You won't talk now, so I'll make the best of it. Not a move out of any of you." He backed across the room toward the telephone.

Young cried: "What are you going to do?"

"What do you think?"

Baum snapped: "He's going to call the cops."

"Smart boy," Cardigan said.

The lights went out. No one in the room had moved. The butler must have thrown a master switch, for even the lights in the corridor went out. Cardigan moved swiftly to the right in the darkness, cocking his gun.

"I'm going to take this wise guy!" Baum muttered hoarsely.

"No shooting here!" Young cried.

"You got a gun?"

"Yes—but no shooting here!"

"Sam's got a gun too," Baum growled. "The wise guy can't get to the door. You cover the door, Young. O. K., Cardigan. You're bottled up at the wrong end of the room. Say uncle."

"I could never pronounce the word," Cardigan said.

Silence enveloped the room. Until Young said: "You've got to listen to reason, Cardigan. We don't want any shooting here."

"I get that too. Not here. You mean you want those two hoods of yours to take me around to some dark alley. Well, I don't care what you like, Mr. Young. I've got that door spotted in my mind and I'm going to start shooting at it."

His left hand came in contact with a low, heavy coffee table. He gripped it, lifted it, hefted it. Then he flung it toward where he thought the fireplace was. There was a crash commingled with

a hoarse, terrified shout, and gunfire stabbed the darkness near the fireplace. Cardigan lunged ahead in the darkness, making for the door. He missed, crashed into the wall; felt his way swiftly along the wall and thus gained the doorway. He slipped out, groped down the corridor and felt his way to the head of the staircase and then sped down to the entrance hall. It was dark here. He was not trying to get away, he was trying to locate another phone. He bumped into a piece of furniture and sent it crashing to the floor. Rebounding, he fell through a doorway into another darkened room; blundered through the room overturning chairs, and went through a swing door into another room. Here, during an instant's silence, he heard the drip of water. He felt around, touching various objects. This, he decided, was the kitchen. He lit a match, spinning as he did so, with his gun leveled. But he saw no one. There was a wall telephone at the other side of the room. By the time he reached it his match went out, but he didn't need a match. He got the receiver off the hook. But a beam of light enveloped him and a taut, quiet voice said: "Put 'em up."

Cardigan did not turn. He knew he was caught cold and he raised his hands above his head.

"Hang up that receiver," the voice said.

Cardigan hung it up.

"Now turn around."

CARDIGAN turned around, saw the gleaming eye of a flashlight, a hand holding a gun—nothing more. Abruptly there was a crash in an adjoining room—a chair going down—followed by an oath, then Young's angry cold voice yelling: "Bekins! Where the hell are you, Bekins?"

The eye of the flashlight went out. Cardigan ducked and slammed through another swing door into complete darkness. There was another crash, muffled

by thick walls. In his haste, Cardigan knocked over more objects, stumbled upon a narrow staircase that he found led upward. It was enclosed on both sides and ended at a closed door. He opened this and could tell by a window that he was in another corridor. The window was familiar. Then he knew that he was in the same upstairs corridor he had been in before. The noise, the banging and stumbling, was down below. And shouts for Bekins. Bekins doubtless was the butler.

A moment later Cardigan found the living room, groped across it to where he knew the telephone was located. It began to occur to him that he might have taken on more than he could handle. His enthusiasm following the set-to with Demayo had been too great. Pat was right. Pat was always right. Where the hell was that telephone?

He got his hands on it as the lights sprang to life again. He whirled, shocked by the sudden glare.

Baum stood in the doorway. "Drop it, Cardigan!" he snarled, and fired. The bullet smashed into the instrument, glanced away, took the skin off the knuckles of Cardigan's left hand as the gun in his right hand exploded. The bullet turned Baum quarter way around, brought a twisted look to his face, and his gun went off a second time. Cardigan felt his right hand struck, saw his gun spinning magically away. He dived after it, reaching with his left hand.

"Stop!" ripped out Baum, his gun exploding a third time, its third bullet furrowing the floor in front of Cardigan's face.

Young and the short, stocky man burst into the room and Young snapped: "I told you no shooting here! My God—"

"Cram it!" snarled Baum. "He asked for it and I had to give it to him and now let's finish it!"

"Not here!" screamed Young. "Take him to the waterfront!"

"To hell with you! Here!"

Cardigan was on his hands and knees, sweat pouring from his face. Young tried to grapple with Baum. The stocky man kept his gun trained on Cardigan. Baum kept fighting Young again, snarling: "Here, I tell you! Here! I'm going to finish this baby here!" He struck Young out of the way and Young tottered away. Baum squared off, snarling across the room: "You lousy gumshoe! You asked for it and I'm going to take you apart—"

A gun thundered in the doorway and Baum stiffened, turned around and staggered across the room, walked into the wall like a blind man, fell to the floor.

Young and the stocky man spun toward the doorway.

"Back up," a tense, quiet voice said. "Back up."

Cardigan got to his feet, hefting his gun in his bloody left hand. A tall, slender young man came through the doorway. In one hand he held a flashlight, in the other a gun. His clothes were streaked with dirt, he was collarless, and his sandy hair was disheveled. He had a small, sandy mustache.

"Drop those guns," he said.

Young and the stocky man dropped their guns.

The sandy-haired man said to Cardigan: "I didn't know who you were downstairs. I thought maybe you were one of this crowd. I know now you're Cardigan. My name's Dave Connors."

"I've been searching high and low for you," Cardigan said, "but for a reason that now begins to look screwy."

"What reason?"

"I thought you killed Norma Driscoll."

DAVE Connors laughed drily, bitterly. He pointed to the stocky man. "Ask him who killed Norma Driscoll. Look at

his hands. I hadn't been in that Viking room with Norma five minutes when this chap and Baum stuck their guns through the window from the fire escape and told me to come out. I went. I thought they wanted me, but I didn't know why. So I went. Baum forced me down the fire escape. At the bottom, I noticed that this other bird wasn't along. Then I looked up and saw him coming out of the window. Then he came down and they drove me off in my car. Handled me rough before that and popped out a collar button. They brought me here and when Young saw me he said: 'Well, Mr. Cardigan, we'd like to know just how much you know.' They thought I was you. It took me a while to convince them, and then they got jumpy. They took me to the basement and tied me up. I got free of the ropes but everything was locked and a little while ago, when the butler came down, I nailed him and took away his flashlight and gun. I don't know what it's all about. Norma didn't say much. Didn't have time. She just said she had date there with a detective named Cardigan. These two birds thought I was you, I guess, because I came in the room with her."

"Did you know her long?" Cardigan asked.

"Several years, but I didn't see her often. She traveled a lot. I—I was going with her sister Nancy, down in Los Angeles, at the time. I don't live here. I came up a month ago, following Nancy—but she'd gone in a big way for a chap named Demayo. I know Norma was against that. She seemed to know Demayo—from other days."

Braddock Young said in a dull, hopeless voice: "She did know Demayo—from other days. The idiot, I told him not to make a play for the young sister—but he knew it all. Demayo was down in Shanghai before the Portero business and Norma met him and fell in love with him. So

much so that she acted as liaison officer for our combine. She got deeper and deeper and then Demayo chucked her over. She kept her mouth shut about all this business until he made a play for her sister. I told him it was dangerous. He bribed the telephone operator at Norma's hotel to keep him posted on the calls she made. So he found out when she telephoned you. He knew the Viking, knew where Room Three was located. There was only one thing to do. He told Baum to do it. Baum got Sam and they went to that fire escape. I," he added brokenly, "had to sanction it. Nothing else to do. Norma knew too much. We were all entangled in this combine. Get the police. I'm ready. I'm glad it's over."

A bell rang.

"It's the doorbell," said Young.

Cardigan said: "You keep them covered, Dave," and went downstairs, both hands dripping blood, but his left hand still holding the revolver.

When he opened the door he saw Hunerkopf standing there. The rolypoly detective was eating a very large apple. He saw Cardigan's bloody hands and said:

"Oh, my, oh, my! Miss Seaward phoned over to headquarters and gave us a tip we should come over and keep you from getting all smashed up. I had to come alone on account of Mac had an awful attack of indigestion on account of he was so mad at you. *Tsk, tsk*, look at your hands. I guess it is like this: I'm too late."

"No, Augie, you're not. You're just in time to pick up the pieces. Put 'em together and they spell murder. We've got the guys that knocked off that girl at the Viking."

"Good. I always say to Mac like this. Leave it to Cardigan. Yes, sir, Mr. Cardigan. Have an apple? Or I got some plums too."

CARDIGAN was sitting in his office next day, his hands bandaged, when Pat came in and said:

"Oh, chief, they're together again!"

"Who?"

"Dave Connors and Nancy. Poor Nancy—after Demayo struck her that way, and when she came to, she couldn't believe what happened. And then later when she found out Demayo and those others had planned her sister's death—chief, it was awful, the way the poor girl was broken. And then Dave Connors came around. He's loved her since she was a kid. And then good old Mr. Hunerkopf came around, kind as he always is, with a large basket of assorted fruit. He tried to be so kind and was so intent on being kind that he hardly realized he was eating up all the fruit he'd brought Nancy. But the papers are full of how you crashed this big case!"

The door banged open and McGovern came in, his heels drumming, a deep scowl on his face, his hand thrust forward.

"Cardigan, I got to shake your hand. It was pretty work."

Cardigan held up his bandaged hands. "You would think of it at a time like this. No can do, Mac."

McGovern turned to Pat, barked: "O. K. Can I shake your hand?"

"Love to, Mr. McGovern. I'm awfully glad to see you and Mr. Cardigan on good terms again."

"Don't mention it," McGovern said. "Too bad, though, he didn't ring me in on it. I could have showed him how to handle it right."

"Showed who?" Cardigan bristled.

"You!"

"Why, you poor excuse for a cop—"

"Yeah!" barked McGovern. "I would have taken those guys—"

Pat held her ears. "Oh, Lord, they're off again," she moaned. "Oh, dear; oh, Lord!"

SUICIDE HOUSE

There from the rafter at a rope's end it swayed, casting its gruesome shadow silhouette upon the wall—the fourth dangling body in two short months. What was the horror that was turning the Drumwood mansion into a suicide trap? Why did the household—one by one—murder themselves for no apparent reason?



CHAPTER ONE

The Drumwood Curse

FREMONT C. SMALL, the rheumatic financial genius who directed the destinies of that unique firm known as Small, Weston & Burke, sat be-

hind the huge desk, looking as insignificantly diminutive as a single candle on a birthday cake. His red-rimmed, irritable eyes surveyed me in irascible appraisal.

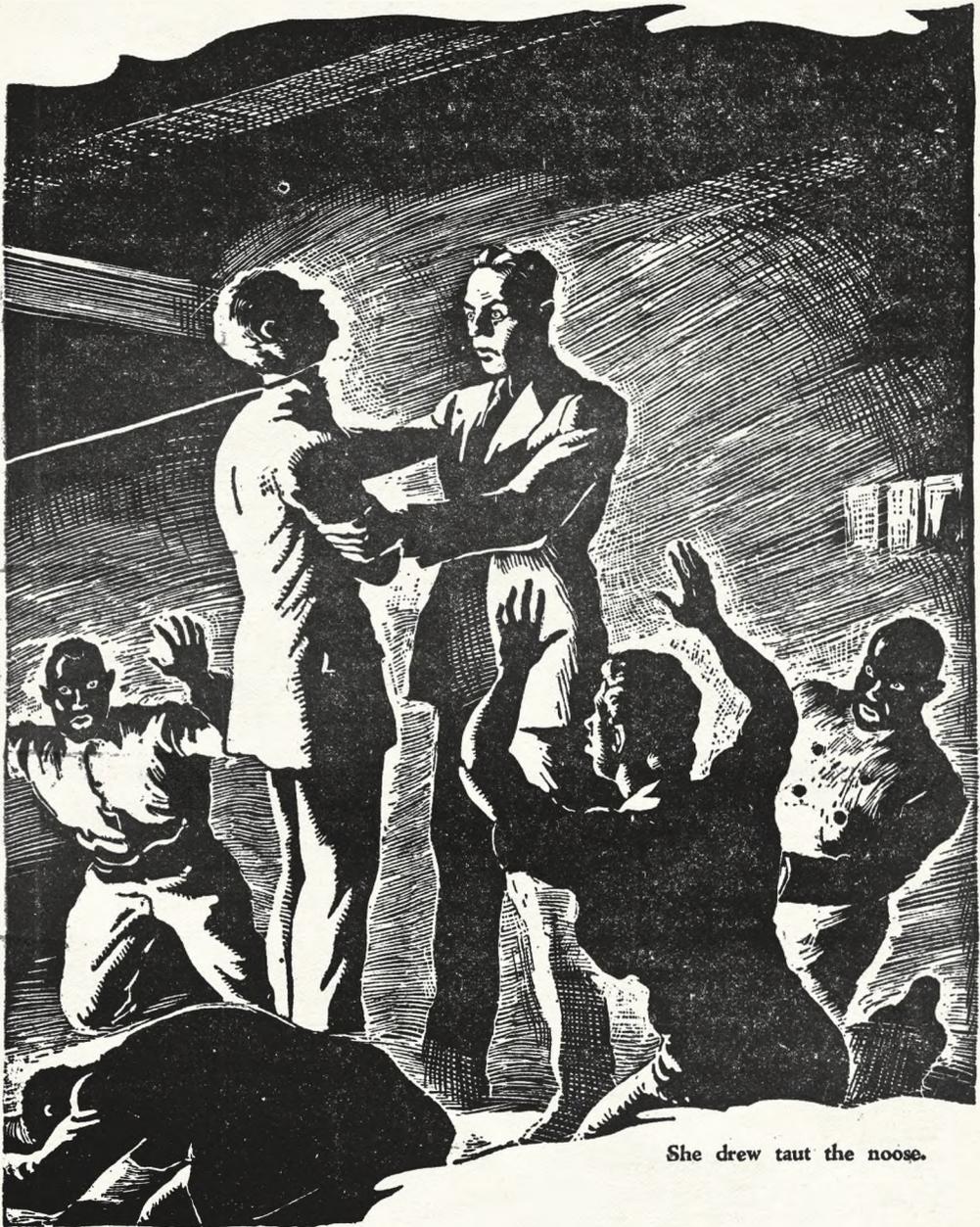
Across the desk sat a young woman garbed in severe black, her eyes wide and dark, as though with alarm.

"Miss Lois Soper," said Small, in his

A Small, Weston
& Burke Story

by Erle Stanley Gardner

Author of "The Witch Cat Murders," Etc.



She drew taut the noose.

harsh, shrill voice, "may I present Mr. Weston, one of my partners."

I knew, of course, that this was no casual introduction. The look of alarm in the eyes of the woman would have been enough, even had it not been for the oblong of tinted paper, obviously a check which had been torn from the woman's

pocket checkbook, reposing on the massive desk.

I had never discovered the secret of Fremont Small's financial success. Perhaps it lay, at least in part, in his unique ability to appraise character. I have never known him to make a mistake in judging the relative strength and weakness of

those wealthy, publicity-shy, often terrified people who came to us as clients. But when one considers that respectable private detective agencies would have furnished men of sorts to work for a daily rate, it is all the more remarkable that Small could demand and receive fees running into the thousands. In order to do that, he relied upon word-of-mouth advertising, trusting that our reputation would reach the ears of those wealthy enough to pay our prices, and of sufficient social importance to make them fear sensational publicity.

To that end, Fremont Small selected those whom he permitted to know the real nature of our activities, with the care of a social leader selecting a list of guests for an important dinner, and Small was equally careful to keep us in character. We were never to assume the roll of detectives, never to carry a weapon, never to report to a client the nature or extent of our investigations.

WE were retained with the understanding that we'd give swift results, attended with no undue publicity. "Results," Small was wont to say, "are the only things that will justify the fees that we charge. Always subordinate methods to results. Use your brains to avoid danger. If you carry guns, there will be times when you'll use them. If you don't carry them, you'll learn to rely on your brains. Our clients come to us because they wish to avoid notoriety. From the moment you boys take care of a case, everything in it must be susceptible of a logical, innocent explanation which will satisfy curious newspaper reporters. With the aid of a friendly doctor you can explain a sudden death, but how the devil are you going to explain the sound of revolver shots in the house of a client—or a corpse with a bullet hole in the center of its forehead?"

In vain, Burke and I remonstrated with

him, claiming that he knew nothing of the danger to which we were exposed. He remained obdurate, pointing to the fact that in the past we had always managed to circumvent danger in some way, and insisting that the future could, by the wildest stretch of imagination, hold no more menacing terror than some of the cases which had gone through our office.

Now Lois Soper smiled at me, hesitated a moment, then extended a slim, tapering hand. I shook it. The fingers were cold as ice. "Mr. Small has been telling me about you," she said.

I nodded and smiled reassuringly.

Small picked up the check, regarded it in dour appraisal, then jammed one of his warped, rheumatic fingers on the call button which was recessed into the edge of his desk. Watching his face, I saw him wince with pain as his enlarged knuckle felt the pressure of the finger.

He was a small man, bent and warped by the malady which gripped him. His breath was always unpleasant. His manner was that of extreme irritability, but his bloodshot eyes saw everything. His intellect was the most remarkable I have ever known. He was a cold-blooded, efficient, reasoning machine, apparently without human emotion, although I felt certain that there were times when he felt toward me something akin to affection.

A secretary opened the door from the outer office. Small indicated the check. She took it from his twisted fingers, paused to see if there were further instructions.

Small frowned, shook his head, and remained frowning until she had noiselessly closed the door to the outer office.

The fingers of his right hand groped for and laboriously picked up a newspaper clipping from the desk. He beckoned to me. I crossed over and took the clipping from his fingers. He nodded his head, indicating that I was to read it.

It was merely a short paragraph to the effect that George Hilton, a chauffeur employed by Albert Drumwood of River-view Terrace, had committed suicide by hanging himself to a rafter in his bedroom. The suicide, the clipping explained, was due to despondency over ill health. The suicide, it was also pointed out, was a rather remarkable coincidence in that Ned Barclay, a chauffeur who had previously been employed by Drumwood, had committed suicide in precisely the same manner and in the same room some sixty days earlier.

I HANDED the clipping back without comment. Small said, in his harsh, shrill voice: "Lois Soper is secretary to Albert Drumwood."

I nodded my head and let it go at that. There was no need for comment until I had all the facts.

Small scowled as though he disliked making explanations, and went on in close-clipped, business-like sentences. "Drumwood didn't like the coincidence. It took some diplomacy to keep the newspapers from expanding the situation into something sensational. Apparently he thought there was far more to it than appeared on the surface. I don't think Miss Soper has been entirely frank with us upon this point. At any rate, Drumwood determined the matter was to be thoroughly investigated."

I nodded my head reassuringly at Lois Soper, and said, with the inane politeness of one who is trying to make conversation: "And so she employed us."

Fremont Small snorted his irritation. "She did nothing of the sort," he said. "Drumwood employed Frank Drake, a private detective."

I raised my eyebrows. I had heard of Drake and knew something of his reputation. He was far above the ordinary in ability, and had achieved some financial

success by aping the manner in which we worked.

"How long ago was this?" I asked.

Small consulted a memorandum made in his cramped handwriting, and said: "Four days ago."

I tried to determine whether Small wanted me to break the news to Lois Soper, and flashed him a quick glance of interrogation. His eyes, however, were elsewhere.

I turned to Miss Soper. "I'm sorry," I told her, "but we can't work on a case while Mr. Drake is working on it. Not that we've anything against him; it is simply a matter of policy. He would be bound to interfere with our investigation, and we would probably interfere with his."

"No," Small said, "he won't interfere."

There was something sardonic in his tone. Instinctively I turned to Lois Soper for an explanation. The terror was distinct in her eyes now. I saw her mouth quiver as she started to speak.

"Mr. Drake," she said, "committed suicide last night. He hung himself in his room."

Despite my attempt to keep an expressionless countenance, I could feel surprised incredulity tugging at my facial muscles. "Not in Drumwood's house," I said.

She shook her head in mute negation.

"No," Small remarked, "thank God for small favors. He hung himself in his apartment, where he had gone to get some papers."

"Do the newspapers know what he was working on?" I asked.

Small started to shrug his shoulders, and winced with pain at the motion. "How the devil do I know what the newspapers know? Apparently not. If they do, they're keeping quiet about it until they can get some definite information."

"Look here," I said, "either those sui-

cides are simply coincidence, or else they're murders." I turned to stare significantly at Lois Soper. "Has there," I asked, "been any investigation made to determine whether what was apparently a suicide, was, in reality, a murder?"

"Mr. Drumwood," she said, noncommittally, "has probably given the matter some thought, but I doubt if any official suspicions have been aroused. On the surface, at least, the cases were all suicides."

"And what," I asked, "do you want us to do?"

IT WAS Small who answered the question—answered it in his most harshly belligerent manner. "Get below the surface," he said. "You'll go to Drumwood's house. You'll pose as a student of the occult. You'll find out what caused these people to commit suicide. You'll do it in a manner that will arouse no curiosity, result in no publicity. That is what we are being paid for."

Then, as though to lessen the harshness of his words, he added, with what might have been a softening of his voice: "You did good work on that Johnson case, Bert. I'm putting the four thousand dollars which is your share of the fee in the bank this afternoon. Take care of yourself on this case. I don't want to find you hanging by the neck from a rafter in your room."

I turned to Lois Soper because I thought she would, perhaps, be more likely to give me an answer to my question. "Why am I to pose as a student of the occult?" I asked.

When she answered her voice was so low as to be almost inaudible. "Because," she said, "Mr. Drumwood believes there is a voodoo curse which has caused the deaths of these men."

I successfully kept the surprise from showing on my face, but, before I could formulate another question, Fremont

Small anticipated what I was to ask. "Drumwood," he said, "has Negro servants. Does that answer your question?"

"Not exactly."

He nodded his head. "Precisely," he agreed, "and yet, that is the only explanation I have been able to get from Miss Soper. I have told her that this negro servant business is too nebulous to form a foundation for any concern about a voodoo curse."

She spoke hastily, after the manner of one who seeks to forestall further comment which may prove embarrassing. "Please believe me," she said, "when I tell you that I have given you every explanation within my power. I can't tell you anything more."

"Because you don't know," Small rasped, "or because you have been instructed not to?"

She gave a quick intake of her breath, bit her lip and then said, slowly: "Please don't insist upon an answer to that question."

Small made a gesture of dismissal. "Go on down there, Weston," he said, "and report."

CHAPTER TWO

Close-Mouthed Client

ALBERT DRUMWOOD was one of those horse-faced individuals with big teeth, a long, bony nose, and steady, conservative eyes. I looked across the desk at him and decided that his face would seldom furnish any clue to his thoughts.

"It would," he said, "be disastrous to have any notoriety."

I had heard the same statement so many times from so many different clients that the nod of my head was mechanical. I felt his eyes bore into mine, and tried to make my face assume just the proper expression of polite interest.

"Miss Soper has told you all the facts that you need to know," he said.

"It depends," I told him, "on what facts you think I need to know."

It took him a moment to puzzle that one out, and then he said: "Well, what facts *do* you need to know?"

That gave me my opportunity to stare steadily at him and say, significantly: "All of them."

"Are you intimating that Miss Soper didn't tell you everything?"

I chose my words cautiously. "Miss Soper," I said, "undoubtedly followed your instructions to the letter. She impresses me as being a very efficient and loyal secretary."

He picked up a pencil and slid it meditatively through long, bony fingers. His eyes no longer sought mine, but stared absently at the pencil as his fingertips slid down to the end, then let the pencil tilt forward, only to once more slide down the polished wood.

After a moment, he apparently reached a decision. He laid the pencil gently down upon the desk and raised his eyes to mine. There was no slightest flicker of change in the expression of his countenance.

"I'll give you a tip," he said, "it's only a hunch. You can play it for what it's worth. Try and get along with Bella."

"Who's Bella?" I asked in quick interrogation, trying to smash through that cool composure which made a mask of his countenance.

"I think," he said, slowly, "her last name's White—Bella White."

"What else about her?"

"She's a mulatto."

"Go on."

"She's my housekeeper's assistant."

"Why should I try to get along with her?"

"You will have to figure that out for yourself."

"Is there any possibility that she could be connected with the suicides?"

For a moment there was a faint trace of irritation in the scowling lines which appeared down the center of his forehead. But I noticed he did not speak until after he had, apparently by a conscious effort, erased the scowling lines from his forehead.

"It is obviously impossible," he said, "for anyone to have any causal connection with these suicides. A person may have some connection with a murder, but not with a suicide."

"Was this murder?"

"Was what murder?"

"The death of George Hilton."

"No."

"Of Ned Barclay?"

"No."

"Of Frank Drake?"

He hesitated a moment, then looked up at me and said, slowly: "Apparently you think I am holding back information."

I let him have it squarely between the eyes. "I do," I told him.

"Why do you say that?"

"Because, when a man goes to the length that you have gone to investigate a series of suicides, it means that there are at least some very grave suspicions in the mind of that man. As you have so aptly remarked, one does not cause a suicide, but one might cause a murder."

HE picked up the pencil again and slid his thumb and forefinger down the length of the pencil, upended it, and repeated the process.

At length, he raised his eyes to mine and said, slowly: "Perhaps you are right. Perhaps I have been holding something back. On the other hand, perhaps we are both wrong in assuming that one can have nothing to do with causing a suicide. You've heard of voodooism?"

I nodded my head but said nothing. He

was doing the talking. I was willing to listen.

His voice was calm and even, his face remained without expression. The only evidence of nervousness was the continual sliding of the pencil between his fingertips.

"The servants, all but the housekeeper," he said, "are Negroes. It would be strange if the events which have taken place didn't arouse some superstitious fear in them. Two of them have told me they believe the suicides were the result of voodoo magic. Their faces have been gray with fear when they made the statements. One of them told me that Bella knew a great deal of magic."

"You have talked with Bella about it?"

"No. You can do that if you wish."

"And this tip of yours that I should try to get along with Bella was due entirely to the statements these servants had made to you?"

The face remained without expression, but the tempo of his pencil-sliding increased rapidly for a moment, then slowed. He raised his eyes to mine and said, simply, "Yes."

In that moment, I knew he was lying, and I think he realized that I knew. He lowered his eyes to the pencil, then raised them once more. If he felt any confusion, it did not show in his face, but there was a slight quickening of his speech as he said: "I do not wish to influence you, Mr. Weston, in your investigation. You will be received at my house as a guest. You will occupy the room which Frank Drake occupied. Eva Saunders, the housekeeper, has been advised of your coming. You will be given the run of the house. I will not be available at all times, but if anything important should develop, you can get in touch with me through Miss Soper."

"She lives in the house?" I asked.

"Yes," he said, "she has been with me

for years—before my wife died, in fact. In some ways she is like an adopted daughter. I have become very much attached to her. You will find her thoroughly dependable."

I got to my feet, smiled, nodded, and waited to see if he offered to shake hands.

He didn't.

I left his office, and paused in the anteroom long enough to make a single, significant note in my notebook. "When Albert Drumwood is caught in a lie," I wrote, "his face shows no expression, but he tries to cover his embarrassment by giving brisk instructions in a tone of finality."

God knows, I didn't need to write that down in order to remember it. It was merely a gesture, contributing to my own satisfaction. Perhaps the time would come when Drumwood would read my notes and realize that, after all, he hadn't fooled me as much as he had thought.

EVA SAUNDERS, the housekeeper, showed me to my room.

"Richard," she said, "will bring up your baggage."

"Richard?" I asked.

"The chauffeur."

"Oh," I said, "he's colored, isn't he?"

She nodded her head.

I studied her as she opened the door to the bathroom, raised the curtain, opened the window, looked over the racks to make certain that I had plenty of towels.

She was a tall, thin, austere woman, with a mouth that was a thin, firm line, and eyes that were deeply sunken in their sockets. She was garbed in severe black, the type of woman one could not associate with smiles. Everything about her was grim, efficient, and mirthless.

I decided to shoot a question at her and see if I could take her off guard. "All of the servants are colored," I said.

"I'm not colored."

"You're not a servant."

"I'm a housekeeper."

"That's not answering my question."

"Did you ask a question?"

"I said that all of the servants were colored."

"Yes, sir, they are."

"Do you know any reason for it?"

"Why," she said, "they all came from Africa."

I controlled my annoyance. "I meant, do you know any reason why only colored servants should have been selected?"

"Have you asked Mr. Drumwood?"

"Not exactly that question."

"Then I'm certain I couldn't add anything to what he said."

"But he didn't say anything."

"Then of course I couldn't add to it."

I stared at her until her black, shoe-button eyes met mine. "Has it occurred to you," I asked, "that you're being impertinent?"

Her face showed surprise. "Impertinent?"

"Yes."

"In what way?"

"In the manner in which you're treating my questions."

"I'm sorry, sir, I didn't intend to be impertinent. You're a student of the occult?"

"Yes."

"Do you believe in magic?"

"That," I said, "depends."

"Do you believe in spirits?"

"I believe in many things," I told her. "I have seen enough to realize that if one would progress, he must be free of prejudices. He must disbelieve in nothing. Therefore, let us say that I am open to belief in spirits."

Abruptly, she changed the subject. "Would you like a sandwich, a glass of milk, or some wine or a hot toddy before you go to bed?"

"No, I think not."

"I had rather expected you for dinner."

"I was delayed."

"Is there anything I can do?"

"Yes," I said, "you have an assistant Her name, I believe, is Bella."

"You mean Bella White?"

"Yes."

"What about her?"

"I'd like to talk with her."

"Shall I tell her you wish to see her?"

"No, that's exactly what I don't want, but I'm wondering if you couldn't send her to me, so that she wouldn't know I had been asking about her."

"I could have her bring you a sandwich and a glass of milk."

"Please do so then."

"Very well," she said, and strode toward the door, her long, thin legs moving with mechanical regularity, but she was covering ground as rapidly as would have been the case with an ordinary woman who was half running.

SHE had barely reached the door, when the chauffeur came in with baggage in his hands and under his arms, his face twisted into a good-natured grin, showing the rows of white teeth.

"Yassuh," he said, "where is ah putt'd dese things down?"

I indicated the places.

Eva Saunders, standing in the doorway, watched the chauffeur with the expressionless eyes of a spider.

Richard seemed inclined to hesitate. "Yo' shuah everything's all right, boss?" he asked.

"I think so," I said.

"Maybe yo'd like some of dese things moved aroun' a little bit."

I started to shake my head, then thought perhaps there had been some motive back of his suggestion. I hesitated.

Eva Saunders, staring at us from the doorway, said, in a calmly conversational tone of voice: "Bella is going to come up with some milk and a sandwich."

She made just that one significant statement, and then closed the door, but the effect was magical. Richard suddenly sprang into fevered activity. "Yassuh, boss, yassuh. Ah guess yo' shuah nuff all right now."

He seemed to fairly scuttle toward the door.

I reached out a restraining hand, caught him by the sleeve.

"Wait a minute, Richard," I said, "I thought you were going to move some of this stuff around for me."

He rolled his eyes. I could feel his body tense.

"Yassuh, yassuh," he said. "Done put it right where yo' said."

"But, perhaps I'll want it moved."

"Yassuh, yassuh, ah'll come back and move it."

"But I may want it moved right away."

"Yassuh, yassuh, ah'll come back right away, boss."

He jerked his hand toward the door. I tightened my grip.

"Wait a minute, Richard," I said, "are you afraid of Bella?"

Standing with my hand on his arm, I could feel the shiver which ran through his arm. He turned to stare at me, his lips parted. A shrill, high-pitched, almost hysterical cackle rattled from the roof of his mouth.

"Afraid of Bella," he said, "ha-ha-ha—that's a good one. Why should ah be frightened of Bella?"

I relaxed my grip and my vigilance for a moment, purposely. "You're not?" I asked.

"Lordy, no suh," he said, "no suh, indeed. No suh at all." He jerked the door-knob with his hand, flung the door open, hesitated a moment, said: "Yassuh, good night Marse Weston."

He lurched forward without even looking over his shoulder, jerked the door

back, and was in the corridor almost before I had time to get my breath.

I didn't try to call him back. I wanted to be alone when I talked with Bella.

Somehow I knew it was she from the moment the knob started to turn. There was something softly surreptitious about the way the knob twisted, which indicated the coming of a sinister, silent figure. A half second later, there was a tap on the panels of the door.

"Come in," I called.

I noted that she had opened the door a god two inches before she had knocked, but that she had waited for my call before entering the room.

I watched the door, eager for a first glance at her face. I saw a pair of wide, dark, luminous eyes, red lips, a yellow, creamy skin, the lips parted in a slow, voluptuous smile; even rows of white teeth showed in pearly array.

"What kind of a sandwich did you want, Mr. Weston?" she asked.

Her voice was rich and throaty. It was not a cultured voice; nor, on the other hand, was it an illiterate voice. It was free of the slurring accents of the Negro. There seemed something rich and caressing about it.

"Have you any chicken?" I asked.

"I think so."

"You're Bella?" I asked her.

"Yes, sir."

It was impossible to read the expression of the eyes. There was a burning something there, a something which seemed to dominate her facial expression. It was the reddish glint which appears in a sky over the place where a fire is raging—the reflection of some angry red inner flame. But, her lips were red and smiling. There was slow, langourous imputation in that smile. I could readily appreciate how she might dominate people of her own race.

"We'll try cold chicken, Bella," I said.

She slipped out and the door closed silently.

I looked around the room. I had been late purposely. I hadn't wanted to do a lot of talking. I wanted an opportunity to get my impressions first-hand. I also wanted to spend a night in the house, and absorb something of its atmosphere before any prolonged conversation with Drumwood.

CHAPTER THREE

At the End of a Rope

THE room was well furnished and comfortable. There was an old-fashioned atmosphere of massive stability about it. The bed was a huge affair, made of wood, with cheap springs, a thick mattress and huge casters. There had been a big bolster over the pillows. Now, it had been removed, and stood in the corner against the wall. The bed had been turned down invitingly. A large window was open, letting the night air pour through. I crossed to the window and looked down. There was nothing below me but a vacant wall. The cool night air felt soothing to my flushed forehead. The moon was three quarters full. It was sliding down the western wall of the heavens, paling the stars into insignificance, turning the ground into black blotches of shadow, interspersed with golden highlights where the moonlight illuminated some tree or shrub.

I felt a draught of air along the top of my head, thought for a moment I heard the sound of surreptitious motion behind me. I pushed my head back through the window, turned to survey the room. It was empty, but the door to the hall was open. I could have sworn that Bella White had closed it behind her.

I frowned at the open door irritably. Of course, there was a chance that the

wind could have blown it open, but it was peculiar that I had felt no gust of wind, save that draught which had given me my first inkling that the door was open. And that draught was merely a passing current of air, certainly not enough to have opened a door.

I glanced back out at the well-kept grounds, studying the tops of the trees, in order to verify my impression that it was a calm night with no wind.

I turned back to the room and strode toward the door. It was at that moment that I heard the scream. It was a woman's scream—so shrill with terror it knifed its way through my consciousness and caused a chill to run up my back.

I dashed to the corridor.

A woman, clad in a flowing silk negligee, which fluffed out about her, stood silhouetted against the light which came from the end of the corridor. The light was strong enough to shine revealingly through the shimmering silk, showing a dark outline of perfect contours. Her back was to me. As I reached the corridor, she screamed again, and then fell forward.

It wasn't until she fell that I saw the thing that had prompted her screams.

It was a dangling body, suspended from a rope which had been slung over one of the huge rafters which stretched across the hallway. It was, apparently, the body of a man, and the rope was noosed around the neck. The head lolled drunkenly over one shoulder. There was a current of air circulating through the hallway, and the body swung in the draught.

IRAN forward, past the woman who was lying, face down, on the carpeted corridor. I knew that she had only fainted. It might not be too late to do something for the one dangled so grotesquely from the rafter. I stretched out my hand to touch the hanging figure, expect-

ing to find inert flesh beneath the clothing. To my surprise, my hand encountered a substance which yielded with a peculiar crunching sound. The figure was unexpectedly light. It swayed under my touch like some horrid pendulum of death, sending weird shadows slithering about the corridor, sliding up and down the plastered walls.

I stared at it in incredulous surprise.

The thing was a dummy! An effigy! Complete in every detail, to the gloved hands, to the shoes which covered the feet. Under my touch, it swung slowly around, and I found myself staring into a face which was so real that, for a moment, I recoiled in horror. Then I realized that it was a face which had been cunningly fashioned from wax; a face so human as to be startling; a face which was dark and discolored, as though the victim had met death by strangulation. Even in that moment of startled surprise, I found myself paying tribute to the cunning of the hands which had modeled the wax.

I turned, looking up and down the corridor.

Apparently, no one had heard the woman's screams. If they had, they had paid no attention to them. The woman was still unconscious, lying, face down, on the floor. With the exception of her I was alone with the dangling figure.

I remembered my instructions—to get results. Methods were to be subordinated to results. Wherever possible, I was to avoid any form of publicity.

I had no means of knowing how many people were in the house. I had a general idea, however, that there were several. There had been a hat rack in the corridor fairly well loaded down with men's hats. The house was a huge affair, and there was about it an atmosphere of tenancy, as though the place were well-filled.

These thoughts raced through my mind

as I stood staring at the swaying dummy, knowing only too well that it would be virtually impossible, once this dummy was discovered, to keep the grim happenings of Drumwood's house shrouded in secrecy. And, once let the newspapermen get on the track, they would not be long in linking the mysterious suicides with some sinister curse which hung over the place. Some of the newspapers would follow the voodoo theory of black magic; some would hint murder; some would simply put up the series of coincidences to their readers and let the readers draw their own conclusions.

There was a vacant bedroom to my left. The door was open. In the light which filtered through the open door from the hallway I could glimpse a huge bed, massive chairs, a dresser. The top of the dresser was bare; the bed was made up and unruffled. Obviously, the room was not in use.

I kicked open the door, pulled out a chair, whipped a knife from my pocket, dragged the chair under the place where the dummy was dangling, reached up and cut the rope, where it circled the rafter.

A moment later, and I had the dummy in the untenanted bedroom. There was still no one in the corridor save the woman who lay sprawled out upon the floor.

I LOOKED around the room for a place of concealment. The bolster which covered the pillows at the head of the bed took my eyes. I whipped back the rose-colored spread, pulled out the pillows from the bolster, crowded the effigy into the place which had been occupied by the pillows, flung the pillows onto a shelf in the closet and then ran down the corridor to the silk-clad figure.

I raised the body in my arms. At my touch, I could feel the start of returning consciousness. She opened her eyes,

gasped, shuddered, and tried to scream again.

I closed her lips with my hand. "Take it easy," I said, "and tell me what's happened."

I could see the dark pupils of her eyes staring with terror, could feel her shudder.

"It's Norman," she said.

"What is?" I asked.

"Norman," she said, "my husband—he's hung himself. He's committed suicide, like the others."

"Calm yourself," I said. "You've had a shock. Something's happened. Tell me what it was."

I managed to twist her weight about on my arm as I talked, so that she was facing down the corridor.

She raised her arms. The silk slipped back from the bare flesh. I had a glimpse of white skin, with the smooth texture of a rose petal, a tapering finger tipped by a red nail. She pointed down the corridor and said, "Can't you see him? He's hanging there! He's committed—"

She broke off in incredulous dismay. Her eyes stared at the place where the thing had been. Slowly, the arm drooped to her side. "Good God!" she breathed.

"Can't you tell me what it is?" I asked.

Her voice sounded strained, came in a half-whisper. "Norman," she said. "He'd committed suicide—was hanging from that rafter. I saw him as plain as day. The wind was twisting his body around. There was a rope around his neck. I saw his face. The light shone full on it. It was horrible! The features were dark and distorted, but it was Norman. I'd recognize him anywhere."

"Norman's your husband?" I asked.

"Yes."

She suddenly became aware of the fact that I was holding her, half supported, in my arms. She started to push herself away, then gave a little throaty laugh,

said, "Thank you so much for your assistance," and tried to get to her feet. I helped her stand up, stood with a supporting arm around her waist. I could feel her shiver beneath the silken garments.

"Probably," I said, "it was an optical illusion of some sort. You saw something which cast a shadow. It may even have been your own shadow. And—"

"No, no," she said slowly, "I tell you I saw it. I tell you I recognized him. It's awful—simply awful! I'll never forget the look on his face."

"But there's no one there," I pointed out.

She paused to think for a moment. "How long was I unconscious?" she asked.

"Not very long," I told her. "I heard you scream, and started for the door. You were screaming the second time as I opened the door and stared out in the corridor. You fell forward as I looked."

"And you didn't see anything?"

"Yes," I told her, "I saw you."

"No, no, you know what I mean. You didn't see anything dangling? You didn't see any body?"

"No, of course not."

"What did you do?"

"I ran directly to you."

"Right away?"

"Yes, right away."

"And then what?"

"I picked you up and you started to regain consciousness almost immediately."

She brushed her well formed, tapering hand over her eyes. "The thing isn't possible," she said slowly.

I made no comment.

She continued to stare. After a moment I said: "Wouldn't you like to step down to my room? I've got a flask in there, and a nip of brandy would probably do you good."

She stared steadily at me. "You're Mr. Weston," she said.

I nodded my head.

"Mr. Drumwood told me about you. You're interested in occult phenomena, aren't you?"

Again I nodded my head.

"Ghosts, and things like that?" she asked.

"All forms of mental phenomena," I said vaguely. "Telepathy, hypnotism, premonitions and suggestion."

"And you don't think I saw the thing that I saw?"

I laughed and took her arm. "Come," I said. "We can best discuss it while you're taking that nip of brandy."

I turned her toward my room and heard the quick intake of her breath as she saw the figure which was standing quietly but a few feet behind us.

I came to an involuntary halt, stood staring at the motionless figure of Bella White, holding a tray in her hands. "Well," I said irritably, "what is it?"

"I just brought you the things you wanted," she told me.

"Then why not put them in my room?"

"I thought perhaps Mrs. Ringold was sick."

"How long have you been there?" I asked her.

The dark, luminous eyes stared at me steadily. "Lord," she said slowly. "I don't know."

"What were you doing? Watching me?"

She nodded her head slowly.

"What did you see?"

"I saw you helping Mrs. Ringold," she said slowly, in that rich, throaty voice of hers.

It was Mrs. Ringold who asked the next question: "Did you see anything else, Bella?"

The face of the mulatto showed puzzled

surprise. "What else?" she said. "Just you two, that's all."

"You didn't see anything else in the corridor? Anything moving?"

BELLA WHITE shook her head slowly from side to side, but I noticed that her eyes remained fixed and did not move as she moved her head. I followed the direction of their gaze. They were fastened upon the rafter over which the rope had been flung and from which the dummy had dangled.

"Come," I told Mrs. Ringold. "You'd better get that brandy."

"Which is your room?" she asked.

I indicated it.

She hesitated for a moment, then started moving toward the room. "Bella," she said, "go and get my husband at once. Tell him I'm in Mr. Weston's room. Tell him I had a fainting spell. Ask him to come at once."

"Yes, ma'am," Bella said. "I'll set down this tray and then go at once. I—"

"If," Mrs. Ringold said rapidly, "there's anything wrong with him, if there's any reason he can't come, come and tell me at once. Do you understand?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Then hurry! Go ahead and hurry. Get started. My God, I can't stand the suspense of this! Are you going to move or not?"

The mulatto swiftly glided through the doorway, set the tray, with its sandwiches and the bottle of cold milk, down on the table. I remember absently noticing the bubbles of moisture which were collecting on the outside of the cold bottle as I drew up a chair for the woman to sit in.

She pulled the silk robe about her, and, for the first time, apparently became conscious of the scantiness of her attire. "I'm sorry," she said, "so sorry to have inconvenienced you. You'll have to pardon my appearance. It's rather an inti-

mate way of meeting one, don't you think?"

I made no answer whatever.

"You see," she said, "I stepped out into the corridor. We'd retired. I thought I heard a noise."

"Where's your room?" I asked.

"Around the corner of the corridor."

"Around this next corner?"

"Around two corners."

"Where did you think you heard the noise?"

"That's a funny thing," she said slowly. "I thought I heard a noise like someone groaning and then the kind of a noise that would be made by a body that was thrashing about in agony. I got the idea that someone was being hung, that his feet were kicking."

"Go on," I said.

"I started out in the corridor. The corridor seemed empty. There was nothing in sight. It seemed a foolish fear of mine."

"Was your husband in the room when you left?"

"I think so. I'm not entirely certain. We occupy twin beds Yes, I think he was in his bed I can't really be certain."

"Go on," I told her, "and give me the facts, please."

CHAPTER FOUR

One Who Was Hanged

SHE was talking now, rapidly enough, pouring facts into my ears as though she were eager to relieve her mind of the strain under which it labored.

"I didn't see anything down the short stretch of corridor. I turned to the left. I still didn't see anything. This building is somewhat in the nature of a huge hollow square, you know. It isn't entirely closed, but it's like a rather deep 'U'. There's a little jog over on the east end.

I rounded that jog and hit the main corridor. It still seemed empty. I came down the main corridor and turned to the left. There's another little jog there by the stairs, you know. I decided to keep on walking. I came out into the corridor and then I saw it."

"You don't think there's any possibility you could have been mistaken?"

"How?"

"You don't think your nerves were wrought up?"

"Why should my nerves have been wrought up? By that time I really hadn't expected to see anything, and when I saw it, it made me speechless. I came running forward. I guess I screamed. The thing swung so that I had to look at it. It was my husband's face."

"You saw the face?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Distinctly?"

"Quite distinctly, yes. Please don't cross-examine me about it. I know that you're interested, because it's the type of stuff that you like to investigate. But it's all too hideously real to me. I can't consider it the way you do—as an interesting phenomena. It's too unspeakably horrible! Tell me, do you suppose it's an omen of some sort?"

I schooled myself to be deceptive. "That's depends," I told her, "upon how clearly you saw it."

"I saw it very clearly."

"You thought it was real?"

"I know it was real. I tell you My God, why doesn't that mulatto do something? Why doesn't she come and tell me what she found? I know what it means. I know that Norman is dead! He's hanging somewhere from a rafter—dangling in the wind! He's killed himself, and—"

There was the sound of steps in the corridor. The door, which was half open, was violently pushed all the way back. A

figure hulked on the threshold. I heard the woman's startled half-scream. Then she was up out of the chair with a flutter of silken garments which streamed out behind her as she ran, with a glad cry, toward the man who stood in the doorway.

One look at him and I recognized him. Beyond doubt, it was the face that I had seen on the dummy.

"Norman!" she exclaimed. "You're safe! Then you're all right! Nothing happened to you!"

He took her into his arms, glared accusingly at me.

SHE buried her head against his coat, and words streamed from her lips with hysterical rapidity.

"Norman, I heard something in the corridor. I didn't want to alarm you. I got up and started to investigate. I thought I heard the sound of a body thrashing about. I was intensely nervous. I started walking down the corridor. I came this far, and then I saw something hanging from a rafter. I know it was something that was hanging there. I tell you, Norman, it was a body. It was the body of a man hanging there. I saw the face. Oh, God, Norman, it was awful! It was your face. It was all distorted and dark. I screamed and tried to run forward, but my legs were like lead. I knew that I was falling. I screamed again. And then I lost consciousness.

"This is Mr. Weston. He's interested in occult phenomena. You heard Mr. Drumwood speak of him. He's going to stay here for a few days as a guest. He picked me up. I don't know how long I was unconscious. He was holding me when I regained consciousness."

"The figure?" he asked. "The thing that was dangling?"

"Gone," she said.

"You saw it?"

"Plainly."

"You think it looked like me?"

"It was you, Norman. Oh God, I don't know what I'm saying! It was awful! It was. . . ."

Her voice trailed away into silence. She held her head against his chest and sobbed.

He looked at me, and there was no cordiality in his eyes.

"I found her in the corridor," I said. "I heard her first scream. She screamed a second time just as I got the door open. I reached her as she pitched forward. She was only unconscious for a second or two. She recovered consciousness almost as soon as I picked her up."

He started to say something, then caught himself. His eyes were accusing and hostile.

"I take it," I said, "that you had retired, Mr. Ringold?"

His eyes flared into hostility. "Meaning," he said, "that you're probably wondering how it happened that I am fully dressed, if I had retired."

"It was," I said, "merely a question."

"Why did you ask it?"

"Because I wanted to know."

"Why did you want to know?"

"Because I'm interested in investigating occult phenomena."

"Baloney!" he said.

I shrugged my shoulders, said nothing.

After a moment he added: "Forgive me if I seem upset. I can't help but feel that your attitude toward my wife shows a certain lack of sympathy. You regard her more as a laboratory experiment, rather than as a human being. It happens that I had retired. I woke up, looked over at Alice's bed and saw that it was empty. I got up and dressed right away and started to look for her. I had been walking around for fully five minutes when I heard her voice in here."

"Didn't Bella White find you and tell you to come here?"

"No, I didn't see her. I was prowling around, looking for my wife."

"I was wondering," I said slowly, "if Bella heard your wife scream. If she didn't, there's no particular occasion for mentioning the occurrence to anyone else in the house. Do you think there is?"

"You seem," he said, "to have taken pretty complete charge of the affair."

The woman slid a bare arm around his neck. "Please, Norman," she said, "don't be that way."

HE pushed her aside, stood glowering at me. "Frankly," he said, "this whole thing sounds like something you two have made up out of whole cloth, and it's not very convincing."

"Just what do you mean?" I asked.

"I mean," he said, "that my wife thought I was asleep. She slipped out into the corridor. I got up and dressed and started to follow her. I find her here."

"You're crazy!" I said. "Your wife fainted. I took her in here. I sent a servant for you."

"Exactly," he said, "after you realized I had started to look for her you cooked up this story."

I stared at him angrily. "Good God!" I said. "Are you such a fool as to think your wife came here to keep a rendezvous with me—a total stranger?"

I read the answer in his eyes.

"It's absolutely absurd," I went on. "I never saw your wife until a few minutes ago. Only a fool would even entertain such a thought!"

"No one but a fool," he said, "would believe the story that you've trumped up."

"Under those circumstances," I said, "seeing that we seem to be in such complete lack of sympathy with each other, it might be an added inducement to you to refrain from mentioning anything about what your wife saw."

She pushed her body up against his.

"Oh, please, Norman," she said. "Please don't get one of your insane jealous fits. My God! Can't you understand that I'm telling the truth? Can't you appreciate the situation? Don't you realize that what I saw was a terrible shock to me? Don't you know that—"

"Shut up, Alice," he said gruffly.

I motioned toward the door. "I'm a bachelor, myself," I told him. "One of the reasons I remain a bachelor is that I don't care to put in my life in a continual round of domestic bickering. Not caring to have quarrels of my own, I certainly don't care to participate in your domestic difficulties. Any time you wish to retire I'll eat my sandwiches, drink my milk and turn in."

He would have said something, but at that moment the door opened and Bella White stood in the doorway.

"Well," I said, "where have you been?"

"I went to get Mr. Ringold," she said, "as I was instructed." The fire had gone from her face now; it was a dead mask, as though she was purposely keeping her thoughts to herself.

"Where did you go after that?" I inquired.

"Down to the kitchen," she said. "I forgot to bring you up any salt. I thought perhaps you'd like some on the chicken."

She stepped forward, moved her right hand from her side and deposited a salt shaker on the tray.

Ringold turned to her. "Bella," he said, "where was my wife when you saw her?"

"With this gentleman."

His face was twisted with emotion. "Where?"

"In the corridor."

"How far from this room?"

"Halfway down the corridor, sir."

"What were they doing?"

She hesitated a moment and then said: "Mr. Weston was just helping Mrs. Ringold to her feet."

"Now, don't you see, Norman?" Mrs. Ringold said pleadingly. "Can't you understand that—"

He gave some inarticulate exclamation, whirled her about, flung his arm about her shoulders, jerked her toward the door.

"Come again some time," I told him, "when you feel in a more amiable frame of mind."

My invitation was punctuated by the banging of the door.

BELLA WHITE stood staring at me, her face still that emotionless mask. "That," I told her, "is all, Bella."

She nodded, stood staring for a moment, then said slowly: "I told Mr. Ringold what you wanted me to tell him, didn't I?"

I made no effort to keep the irritation out of my voice. "You told him the truth, didn't you?"

She hesitated for a moment and then said slowly, "Yes."

"You don't seem very emphatic about it."

"I knew he was a jealous man," she said.

I frowningly considered that statement.

"If I had told him that I saw you coming out of a bedroom," she said, "he would have killed you."

I stared steadily at her. "Bella," I asked, "are you trying to tell me that you saw me coming out of a bedroom?"

She smiled slowly, a smile in which her thick, well formed lips did all of the work. Her eyes remained steady, masked and expressionless. "I told Mr. Ringold what I saw," she said, and with that she turned and slipped unobtrusively, almost surreptitiously through the door.

I started to call her back, then thought better of it. I wanted to get down to the bedroom and examine that dummy, and I didn't want to waste any time doing

it. Naturally, I had to wait until things quieted down a little. I tackled my chicken sandwich with a certain savagery, determined that in the morning I would report to Mr. Drumwood a certain independence on the part of his servants. In the meantime I would make a further investigation of that dummy.

I couldn't help wondering if Ringold had been hung in effigy by someone who hated him. I could well understand that he must have enemies in the house. His wife was far too beautiful and his disposition was far too jealous for this not to be the case. On the other hand, why should anyone go to so much trouble, merely in order to express their dislike for the man? Was it possible that there was more to it than that? That the thing was an attempt on the part of some shrewd student of psychology to alarm Ringold? Or was it, perhaps, the work of some ignorant and superstitious servant, who thought that by hanging a figure in effigy he could wish a similar fate upon the original of the figure? I remembered having heard of such things in connection with a study which I once made of certain voodoo ceremonies.

I pushed the tray back, gulped down half of the glass of milk, stepped to the door, stood for a moment listening, then opened it cautiously. The hallway was deserted. I walked rapidly down to the bedroom where I had left the dummy. The door was half open, just as I had found it and just as I had left it. The bed showed smooth and unruffled where I had adjusted the rose-colored spread back over the bolster.

I determined that I would study that dummy in detail. I wanted to see more of the clothes in which it was garbed, wanted to see more of the handiwork which had made it such a wonderful imitation, and, particularly, I wanted to look at the face of the dummy, now that I had seen the

face of Norman Ringold when that face was twisted and distorted with dark jealousy.

I closed the door, listened for a moment to make certain that no one was in the corridor or pausing in front of the door. Then I turned back the spread and pulled out the bolster.

The cavity was filled, not with the dummy, that I had left, but with pillows.

I gave an exclamation of surprise and annoyance, stepped to the closet, jerked open the door, looked at the shelf where I had tossed the two pillows.

The shelf was empty.

I searched the room thoroughly. There was no trace of the dummy. Apparently it had vanished into thin air.

CHAPTER FIVE

Walking Papers

SOMEWHERE in the house a clock chimed the hour of half after midnight. I was laboriously preparing, in code, a report to Fremont C. Small concerning the happenings of the evening. The house seemed silent, wrapped in sleep. Yet, somewhere in that house was a man, or perhaps a woman, who had hung that gruesome figure up to the rafter in the hallway. That person was undoubtedly the same one who had removed the figure, unless there had intervened some peculiar chain of events which could not have been anticipated. And that person knew that I had deliberately cut down the effigy; that I had concealed it for purposes of my own. I could imagine the feelings of such a person toward me.

I continued, however, making my report, not even overlooking the fact that Bella White's unexplained absence gave her ample opportunity to have slipped into the room and removed the figure from the bolster while Ringold and his wife were talking with me.

I had just about concluded the report, when there was a gentle tapping on the panels of my door. I hesitated a moment, then flung it open. My shoulder braced to deliver a terrific punch, in the event the occasion should require.

To my surprise, my visitor was Albert Drumwood, and, standing back of him and slightly to one side, was a thick-necked, flabby-faced individual whose flabbiness was confined entirely to his body. The keen incisiveness of his mind was attested by the glittering eyes which surveyed me in quick appraisal.

"May I come in?" Drumwood asked in a voice that was almost a whisper.

I stood to one side. The two men silently piled into the room. I closed the door behind them.

Drumwood kept his voice low, in that tone which was almost a whisper. "Mr. Weston," he said, "shake hands with Mr. Teale."

The man with the flabby face and the hard eyes extended his hand mechanically. The hand was as soft as a glove filled with mush.

"Mr. Teale is my lawyer," Drumwood went on.

The glittering eyes bored into mine from above the pouches which seemed in such odd contrast to the cold glitter of the eyes themselves.

Drumwood went on talking. "Mr. Weston is a member of Small, Weston and Burke, Harry. You'll remember, it was at your suggestion that I consulted Mr. Small."

The lawyer nodded.

Drumwood glanced expectantly at the door. "I want to have a chat with you, Weston," he said. "I'm expecting Lois Soper here any moment. I knocked on her door as I went by and asked her to join us."

"It is," I said, "rather a late hour for a conference."

"I saw your light," he said, "and decided to come in."

I stared steadily at him.

"I was," he went on, "detained at the office on business. I wasn't able to get here sooner."

I continued to stare at him. He took a deep breath and suddenly started giving quick instructions. "Teale, sit down over there. I want you to talk with Weston. I want Weston to tell you exactly what his impressions are. I want you to—"

I interrupted him. "Might I show you an entry in my notebook?" I asked him.

He raised his eyes in surprise. "Why, certainly," he said.

I handed him the notebook in which I had made the notation concerning his habit of giving swift orders when he had been caught in a lie. A slow flush mounted to his forehead as he read it.

"Now," I said, "perhaps you will tell me exactly the reason for your visit."

BEFORE he could speak, there was another knock at the door. Teale, the lawyer, glanced inquiringly at me. I nodded my head. His flabby hand mushed itself around the brass doorknob. The door opened. Lois Soper stood on the threshold. She came in so silently that I knew she had been instructed to make no noise.

When the lawyer had closed the door I turned my eyes back to Drumwood. "Well?" I asked.

He gave a reluctant smile.

"I'm afraid," he said, "that you're a very shrewd man, Mr. Weston. To tell the truth, that little mannerism of mine is something of which I was entirely unconscious. I wasn't deliberately misleading you; I was simply trying to protect the source of my information."

"And the real reason for this visit?" I asked.

"Frankly," he said, "I was telling you

the truth when I said that I had been detained at my office. However, the reason that I came here as soon as I reached the house was because Bella told me you had had some trouble with Ringold."

"What else did she tell you?"

His eyes shifted uneasily, and then he said: "She told me that she saw you coming out of a bedroom; that Mrs. Ringold was lying on the floor, as though, perhaps, she had preceded you from the room and had stumbled and fallen."

"That," I said, "would have been impossible. She fell with her head toward the door of the bedroom."

"Nevertheless," Drumwood said, "the situation is unusual."

I laughed sardonically. "I make my living," I said, "from unusual situations. It is an unusual situation which has brought me here."

"Granted," he said hastily. "But the point is, you've had trouble with Ringold."

"No," I said, "I think the man is insanely jealous, that's all."

Drumwood nodded.

I waited for him to say something, shifting my eyes to Lois Soper. She had been studying my face, but promptly averted her eyes as soon as I shifted my gaze to her.

"Well," I said, "go on."

Drumwood cleared his throat. "I'm afraid," he said, "that I'm going to have to ask you to discontinue your investigations, Weston."

"Meaning just what?"

"Meaning that I have decided not to make any further investigation."

"Meaning that you're terminating my employment?" I asked.

He avoided the question.

"Will you kindly explain," I asked, "just what the devil you're driving at?"

"It is," he said, "very unfortunate that

you have had trouble with Norman Ringold."

"Why is it unfortunate?"

"Because Ringold will ask me to have you removed from the house. That is, he will ask me to see that your visit terminates."

"And what if he does?"

"It happens that I am not in a position to deny Ringold anything that he asks at the present time."

"Why?"

"Because of certain business affairs which need not concern you in the least."

"If I'm going to investigate this situation," I told him impatiently, "everything that bears upon your relationship with anyone in this house is going to concern me."

"But," he said blandly, "you're not going to investigate the situation."

There seemed to be no particular answer to that.

TEALE interposed a suave word, speaking in a resonant, throaty voice, which he kept at a low pitch with difficulty. "I feel certain that you will understand Mr. Drumwood's position. Circumstances have arisen which make it almost imperative for him to terminate his connection with your firm. I feel certain that you are enough of a business man to understand."

"You understand," Drumwood said hastily, "it's not a matter of money."

This time I caught Lois Soper's eyes before she could turn them away. I saw that they were filled with sympathy for me.

"When," I asked, "is the termination of this employment supposed to take place?"

Drumwood heaved a sigh, as though I had given him the opening for which he had been waiting. "Immediately," he said.

"Immediately?"

"Yes. I'll get Richard to move your things out. He'll drive you back to town. I know that you won't mind."

"You mean that I'm to leave and go back to town at this hour of the night?"

He cleared his throat once more, hesitated, and glanced appealingly at the lawyer. It was Teale who answered the question, still using that suave, throaty voice. "You're a business man, Mr. Weston," he said. "I think you'll understand the situation. A financial adjustment will be worked out between my client and your firm tomorrow."

Despite my attempt to control my feelings, my voice rose, and I knew that my fists were clenched. "Look here," I told Drumwood, "if you think you can hire and fire me like the hired help you keep around here, you're crazy. If you want to terminate the employment of our firm, that's one thing; you can do it, and do it decently, in the morning. I'll make arrangements to leave your house at the earliest convenient moment."

"When will that be?" Drumwood asked.

"I don't know, and I don't give a damn. It can't be too soon to suit me, but it will be some time after I've wakened in the morning."

Drumwood once more glanced appealingly at Teale.

"It would," Teale said, "be rather embarrassing if you should be here for breakfast."

"I won't be here for breakfast," I told him savagely. "But I'll have coffee and toast and a couple of boiled eggs served in my room. Then you can send your chauffeur around to pick up my stuff and drive me back to town."

"If," Drumwood said, "you could conveniently leave tonight—"

"I couldn't conveniently leave tonight," I told him. "And I have no intention of inconveniencing myself to suit the whims

of a man who is as unstable as you are."

"That is your final answer?" Teale asked.

"That is my final answer."

"If it's a matter of finances," the lawyer said, "I feel certain that we could—"

"It's not a matter of finances," I said. "It's a matter of self respect."

APPARENTLY Drumwood was willing to consider the matter closed. I was too exasperated to let the thing drop. "If this man, Ringold, was so damn important," I said, "why didn't you tell me about him in advance?"

Drumwood had the grace to be apologetic. "I didn't know how temperamental he was," he said, "until this evening. I didn't have any opportunity to warn you about him."

"And would you mind telling me what gave you such a sudden insight into his character?"

"His jealousy of the sculptor."

"The sculptor?" I asked.

"Yes, Howard Loft, a sculptor who's staying here for a few weeks. He's doing a bust of me. Mrs. Ringold studies sculpture. She was in a class of Loft's. I didn't know it; I don't think her husband knew it until this afternoon."

"Loft is rather well known, isn't he?" I asked.

"Yes, he's become famous."

"And you commissioned him to come here and do a bust?"

"Yes, I wanted him to live here while he was doing it, because it was impossible for me to pose for him except here in my own house."

I was doing some swift thinking. "And, may I ask if Ringold is jealous of this other man also?"

"Yes, he is."

"And," I asked Drumwood, holding him with my eyes, "of you?"

There was no mistaking the genuine-

ness of the surprise which flashed across Drumwood's face. He smiled and shook his head. "No," he said, "thank God, he's not jealous of me! That's one thing that I've been spared."

Teale said suavely: "I may tell you, without violating any confidence, that Mr. Drumwood and Mr. Ringold were associated in business together. It was a partnership which handled considerable money. At that time Mr. Drumwood had the greatest confidence in Norman Ringold."

"Does that partnership still continue?" I asked.

Teale looked at Drumwood. Drumwood nodded his head, as though giving permission to speak, and the lawyer said: "It continues at the present moment. I may say, however, that it probably will not continue longer than tomorrow."

Drumwood turned to Lois Soper. "You've brought your book and pencil?" he asked.

She nodded. Drumwood got to his feet, nodded to Teale. "I'm very sorry, Mr. Weston," Drumwood said, "that this interview was necessary."

"You're not half as sorry as I am," I told him.

The three of them filed out of the room silently. From the hallway, Lois Soper turned and flashed me one more swift glance of sympathetic understanding. Then the door closed.

CHAPTER SIX

Voodoo Vigil

I STOOD in the center of the room, so mad that the pulses were pounding in my ears. Damn the man! Did he think I was a common servant, to be put out in the middle of the night? Why, if I'd been the most menial—

I suddenly became conscious of a pecu-

liar throbbing noise, a noise which seemed to pulse through the night air, a vague, indefinite sound which was as hard to locate as the rumble of distant thunder. I paused to listen, concentrating every faculty upon my sense of hearing, which is extraordinarily acute.

Even as I listened, the noise ceased.

I switched out the light, stepped to the window, stood looking down into the dark yard.

The moon was well down now in the west. The shadows were as though they had been splotted in with charcoal, and yet I was certain I detected motion in those shadows. I stood staring, and once more got that feeling of movement, this time from a different location. I strained my eyes down into the darkness, but couldn't see things distinctly. All I could get was that sense of vague motion.

I was too mad to be prudent, too exasperated with the events of the night to pause to consider my own status in the case. I opened my grip, slipped on a pair of rubber-soled shoes, groping with my fingers in the darkness. I had turned out my lights and I dared not turn them on again. I felt my way to the door, opened it and slipped down the lighted corridor to the stairway. I knew that there would be a side door which opened on the grounds. I intended to give the motion which was in those shadows a closer inspection, and, for the moment, I was too preoccupied with the strange mystery of that house to even remember that I was entirely unarmed.

I moved swiftly and silently down the stairs. I found the side door that I wanted without difficulty. There was enough illumination in the moonlit sky to make the frosted-glass panel in the door plainly visible. The door was unlocked. I opened it and slipped out into the darkness.

I was instantly gripped with that sense

of not being alone, which is, perhaps, a reaction of the subconscious mind.

I turned to the right. There were dark shadows here, but there were other shadows clustered within those dark shadows. The shadows slowly moved. A voice, speaking in an undertone, said: "We's all heah, Princess."

My eyes had accustomed themselves to the darkness. I saw vague shapes. Once more, I heard the peculiar booming sound, and this time, I recognized it for what it was—the rhythmic stamp of bare feet on the ground. For a moment the stamping continued. Then it ceased. I sensed figures shuffling into motion, twisting their way through the darkness along a walk which was all but invisible.

I groped my way, trying to follow as best I could.

These people all seemed to have some definite and commonly understood objective. I could not sense the numbers. There might have been no more than four. On the other hand, there might have been a dozen. I could feel them in the darkness, hear the sound of their bare feet slithering along the paved walk, making that same peculiar, dry, rattling noise which is made by the scales of a crawling snake.

I SOON realized that they were headed toward the garage, and I dropped behind. When there was an opportune moment, I slipped back of one of the ornamental trees and stood very still, until the sound of their bare feet, padding and sliding along the cement, had diminished to nothing.

I guessed that there would be a small window somewhere in the garage. I found it, and found too, luckily, a box, placed it beneath the window, climbed cautiously against the side of the building, and peered through the cobwebby glass.

I saw that the cars had been moved back, leaving a broad space in which

there were seven people of varying ages. They were crouched on their haunches, swaying back and forth to the rhythm of some unheard melody. They were all blacks, and, I presumed, all servants in the Drumwood household.

I recognized Richard, the chauffeur, saw the voluptuous curved form of Bella White, the mulatto, looked over the others, trying to place them.

Abruptly, there was a commotion. The garage door opened and a giant black came in, leading a man by the arm. The man was blindfolded, but, as I looked, Bella White stepped forward and jerked the bandage from his eyes.

The man blinked about him, with surprise.

I could see Bella White's lips move, as she asked him a question, could see the nod of his head. I noticed that he indicated a large, wooden box which was being carried by the black who had piloted him into the garage.

Bella White seemed much interested in the contents of the box. She moved forward. The Negro flung back the cover. The mulatto stared long and steadily at that which lay within the box, and then gave a slow nod of approval.

She said something else. The white man raised his hand. I saw that she was administering some sort of an oath. Once or twice, the white man winced, as though the language of the oath was such as to jar his composure. At length, he nodded his head. I could read the sound of his lips as he said, "I do."

Bella White scooped her hands inside of the box and brought out an object which was veiled heavily. However, beneath the heavy veil. I thought I was able to recognize the carved form of a wax dummy. The features, however, were indistinguishable, being covered by the heavy veil.

The man who had been blindfolded evi-

dently asked permission to withdraw, a permission which was arbitrarily refused. He was forced to step on the running board of an automobile. One of the big blacks stood at his side. The mulatto came swaying forward, with snake-like motions. A circle was formed. Bella started to chant. The others took it up. Time was kept by a clapping of the hands, a clapping which was not sharp and explosive, as is made by bringing the fingers of one hand down upon the palm of the other, but the peculiar sound which is caused by bringing the cupped palm of one hand upon the cupped palm of the other.

A big Negro swayed forward, his eyes riveted upon Bella White, with a look which a bird might give to an approaching snake.

I became so interested in the psychological aspects of what was happening, that I overlooked, for the moment, the significance of this voodoo ceremony, but concentrated my attention upon the expression on the face of the big black.

I saw the wide eyes, filmed slightly, as though with sleep or drug, the tense muscles of the face, the glittering beads of perspiration which glistened on his skin.

The black approached the center of the circle, stood there. Bella White began circling about him, swaying her body all the time, in rhythm to the clapping and the muffled chants. Then the black seemed to wilt in his clothes, shrinking upon himself. His knees gave way. He dropped to the floor of the garage, kneeling.

It needed but a glance at the circled faces to convince me that this was no mere entertainment this was no mere mummery this was a ceremony which was being performed in dead earnest.

I GLANCED once more at the white man who had been escorted into the garage, and who occupied the seat on the

running board of the car. His face also held something of that dreamy look. His body was swaying back and forth from side to side, as the mulatto swayed, and perspiration stood in huge beads on his forehead.

Bella White bent over the man who had knelt on the floor. He dropped in a crumpled heap under the steady stare of her glittering eyes. He lay motionless, but his eyes were wide, fixed, and staring.

Someone handed the mulatto a glass of water. She took a sip from it, blew it out from her lips in a fine spray. The spray struck the face of the reclining man. He gave a quick series of spasmodic jerks, then lay still.

Abruptly, the clapping ceased. The chant came to an end, but the mulatto's tigerish body continued to sway in those peculiar snake-like undulations.

Black hands pushed a box toward the center of the circle. Bella White opened the box, and pulled from it a rude figure of a man, squat, black and misshapen, yet carved with a certain rude artistry.

The light fell so that I could see the features of the image. I saw a broad, flat nose, thick lips, glittering black eyes. There was a peculiar slant of the face, from cheek bones down to the lower chin.

I couldn't understand how such skill could have been used in fashioning the features, while the body was so out of proportion, but, while I was considering that problem, I suddenly realized the nature of the ceremony which I was witnessing.

The image was laid upon a rude altar, which was also taken from the box. Bella White shoved a needle into the image, thrusting it through the chest.

Something like a moaning undertone became audible, as the interested circle of spectators gave a long-drawn exhalation.

During all of this time, the mulatto had

never for a moment ceased those writhing undulations of her lithe body.

So intent was I upon watching what was taking place in the center of the circle, that I didn't see the white man when he was pushed forward. He went unwillingly enough, but he stood no more chance of resisting the pressure which sent him into the center of the ring than an isolated rock could have withstood the pressure of an avalanche which was thundering down the side of a mountain above it.

Someone shoved the covered object into his hands. He held it clumsily for a moment. Then, Bella White came swaying toward him.

I could have sworn that he drew back from her—that is, that he tried to draw back, but that when he had moved but an inch or two, he was unable to move farther. It was as though he had moved up against some wall of solid masonry. Slowly, almost unwillingly, he removed the veil from the image.

For the second time that night, I found myself staring at a perfect reproduction of the features of Norman Ringold. But, this time the features were not distorted. They were placed in repose, the eyes open, the mouth serene and untroubled. It was as though the man had been posing for a picture.

Bella White moved with extraordinary swiftness. Her hands shot from her sides. A noose of light cord settled about the neck of the figure. She drew it taut. The other end of the light cord she tied about the wrists of the squat, misshapen, black figure which lay upon the altar, with the needle through its chest.

A chorus of sound came from the lips of the spectators. I could have sworn that it was an expression of surprise, of startled incredulity.

Bella White ceased swaying. She stood straight, erect, and somewhat defiant, staring about her at the circle of specta-

tors. Slowly, she nodded her head. Then, she turned and stalked with dignity toward the door.

Someone threw a glass of water on the face of the crumpled black who lay upon the garage floor. He stretched, stirred, and opened his eyes, staring about him as though he had just emerged from a drugged sleep.

Abruptly, the lights in the garage were extinguished.

I KNEW that it would never do for me to be discovered. I slipped away from the garage, ran around to the other side of it, and was attracted by a red, glowing object which lay on the ground. For a moment, I couldn't understand what it was. I ran toward it. Then realized that it was the glow which came from the end of a burning cigar.

I stooped and picked it up. The cigar had been dropped to the ground within a matter of seconds. The end which had been in the mouth of the smoker was still moist. The other end was glowing and red, with no ash accumulated. The band was still around the cigar.

It must have been dropped by someone who had been standing at the window at the other end of the garage, watching the ceremony, just as I had watched it.

I could not decipher the brand of the cigar, from the paper band which circled it, in the darkness, but I did slip the band off the cigar, and around my little finger. Then, I groped my way in the darkness to the house.

Behind me, I could hear the sound of bodies moving. Once I thought I heard a hoarsely whispered comment, but I had reached the door and was in the corridor before any of the servants returned to the house.

I had things to say to Albert Drumwood. The hour was late, but that didn't affect my determination in the slightest.

I was determined to see him, and see him at once.

I didn't know the location of his room. It was necessary for me to return to my own quarters. I brushed my hair, washed my hands and face, rang the bell to summon one of the servants, and waited.

It was nearly ten minutes before there was a knock at the door. "Come in," I called.

The door was opened. Bella White stood on the threshold. "You wanted something?" she asked.

"Yes," I told her.

"It's late."

"I thought perhaps you'd be up."

She didn't say anything to that, but stood waiting.

"I want to see Mr. Drumwood," I said.

"First thing in the morning?" she asked.

"Now."

Her eyes stared steadily at me. There was an expression in them which wasn't exactly insolent, but it certainly wasn't obedient. It was the sort of appraisal which one would give to a person who might well turn out to be a dangerous antagonist.

"I think Mr. Drumwood has retired," she said.

"Then we'll wake him up."

She stood to one side, and waited for me to close the door behind me. Then, she led the way down the carpeted corridor.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Suicide House

AS she walked ahead of me, I could not help noticing the graceful lines of her figure, the hint of lithe animal vitality which seemed to radiate from her rippling muscles with every motion. Her clothes served in a way to conceal, and yet, they

did not conceal they merely emphasized. Beyond any question, the woman was beautiful in a feline manner, the beauty of an unleashed animal. And, watching her walk, I could not help but feel that she was conscious of my gaze and was giving to her hips just a slightly added sway. But she did not once look back.

She paused before a door. I thought for a moment that she was going to say something, but she changed her mind, and tapped gently on the panel. I could hear the sound of motion from behind the door. Then, the door opened a crack, and Drumwood's voice said: "Who is it? . . . Oh, it's you, Bella. What on earth do you want at this hour of the night?"

"Mr. Weston," she said, "insists on seeing you."

She was standing with her back to me, standing in such a position that she was blocking as much of my vision as possible.

"I don't want to see him," Drumwood said. The door started to close.

I pushed Bella White to one side, lowered my shoulder against the door, thrust forward a foot, heard Drumwood curse, felt the weight of the mulatto as she tugged at my arm, trying to pull me back from the door.

Drumwood was off balance. The door swung open. I went in. The mulatto stood on the threshold for a moment, then, as I turned on one heel to kick the door shut, I caught a glimpse of her face. She was smiling. It was a goodnatured smile, the smile of one who can afford to be magnanimous in defeat.

The door slammed. Drumwood frowned at me, his face flushing with rage. Teale, the lawyer, sat on the edge of the bed. On the other side of the room, seated in a chair, his collar wilted, his face white, his hands shaking as he conveyed a cigarette to his lips, sat the man who had been in the garage during the peculiar voodoo ceremonies.

"Pardon me," I said, "if I intrude."

"You do," Drumwood told me. "You're not only intruding, but you're making a beastly nuisance of yourself."

I nodded and let it go at that.

"Well?" asked Teale, the lawyer, and there was the glint of humor in his hard eyes.

Drumwood was smoking a cigar. The band was still on it. "What is the meaning of this?" he asked.

"I simply wanted to compare cigar bands," I said.

"To compare what?"

"Cigar bands," I repeated, and stepped forward.

Before he could divine my intention, I had raised my hand and held the cigar band which was around my little finger close to the band on his cigar. They matched perfectly.

"What the devil?" he asked.

I was now sure of my ground.

"In the event you are cross-examining this gentleman," I said, indicating the man who occupied the chair across the room, "as to his connection with the voodoo ceremonies you have just witnessed, I want to add a few questions of my own."

MY REMARK was a verbal bombshell. Drumwood recoiled as though he had been struck. The man, who was holding a cigarette in his mouth, dropped it from quivering lips. It lay unheeded on his lap until it had burned a hole in the leg of his trousers. Only Teale, the lawyer, remained perfectly composed.

"Good God," Drumwood said, "are you—"

"Just a minute, Albert," Teale said, "I think perhaps I can handle this to better advantage."

He turned to stare steadily at me, with his eyes hard as diamonds, his face as

soft and pasty as bread dough which has been sitting on the back of a stove.

"You've said too much," he said, "and too little."

I stood with my back to the door. "Suppose then," I said, "you say something."

Teale's eyes never wavered. He said, in steady, level tones: "You understand that your interference might have been costly. You were called off of the case before any of this stuff came up."

"What stuff?"

"This ceremony you're referring to."

I turned my head toward the man, who was clawing frantically at the smoldering cloth of his trouser leg. "Is that Howard Loft, the sculptor?" I asked.

He flashed me a swiftly apprehensive glance, nodded, and said: "Who the devil are you?"

I turned to Teale. "Has it ever occurred to you gentlemen that such cross-examination as you are giving Mr. Loft is worse than useless, because Mr. Loft, himself, doesn't have the information that you desire?"

"It's occurred to us," Drumwood blurted, "that if you'd mind your own business, we could get at the bottom of this thing a lot faster, and—"

"Wait a minute, Albert," Teale said, "this man knows something. Let's find out how much he knows before we do anything rash. It's a whole lot easier to go ahead than it is to back up. Let's not go ahead until we find out just how far we're going."

"You mean," I asked, "that you'd like to have me answer some questions?"

"Yes," he said.

"I'll answer them when I've had some answers to some questions I want to ask, and not before."

"You can go to the devil," Drumwood said.

"Wait a minute," Teale cautioned,

"let's find out what the questions are first. What do you want to know, Weston?"

"I'm anxious to know something about the servants. Are they domestic Negroes?"

"I think," Teale said, "you'd better answer his question, Albert. Perhaps there's been too much pulling at cross purposes here."

Drumwood said, slowly: "No, they're not domestic Negroes. They were brought in from Africa years ago by one of my relatives who did a great deal of exploration. He became attached to these people, who had worked with him, and when he died, he left his property to me, with the request that I take care of the servants."

"In other words," I said, "you owe the servants an obligation to support them. Are you satisfied that they reciprocate that obligation with loyalty to you?"

"No," he said, "I'm not certain, but I haven't any reason to believe otherwise."

I jerked my head over at Loft. "What's your connection with it?" I asked.

He fidgeted uneasily.

"That," Teale said, "is what we're trying to find out."

"I've told them frankly," Loft said, looking at me appealingly, "that I don't know. I thought that you understood, from what you said."

"How about Ringold?" I asked. "Did you reach some kind of settlement with him?"

Teale nodded. "It was," he said, "easier than we expected."

"What were the terms of the settlement? Was Ringold going to get some cash?"

"After all," Drumwood told me, "this is none of your damn business."

"Yes," Teale said, "naturally, Ringold was to get some cash."

"Was there," I asked Drumwood, "as a part of your partnership agreement, any partnership insurance? In other words,

did you and Ringold each have an insurance policy in favor of the other, to be used in lieu of a dissolution of the business, in case of death?"

"Why, yes," Drumwood said.

I glanced at Teale. "Where's Miss Soper?" I asked.

"She's in her room doing some typing. And, now, I think it's about time that you answered some of our questions. What we are particularly anxious to know, is how you knew of what was taking place in the garage. We want to know the significance of—"

I interrupted him. "Wait a minute," I said, "I want to know more about Lois Soper."

"What do you mean?"

"She's drawing up agreements?"

"Yes."

"Those agreements are dissolving the partnership?"

"Yes, of course."

"You understand that they're going to be signed tonight?"

"Yes, the matter is going to be cleaned up."

"I think," I said, "that I'll wait until after I've talked with her, before answering any further questions."

DRUMWOOD took a step toward me. "Damn your insolence," he said, "you've come into this house and acted as though you owned it. After all, you're nothing but a detective that I hired to—"

"Careful, Albert," Teale warned, but he also moved toward me.

"I think, Weston," he said, "your own actions in this matter are open to explanation. I think it would be a lot better if you told us frankly just what you're driving at."

I reached for the knob of the door. Drumwood grabbed at my hand. I shoved my shoulder into his chest and pushed him back.

Teale said: "Here, none of that," and grabbed me by the shoulders with his mushy hands.

I had the door half open when I heard the sound of the blow. I turned around, and found that Loft had swung a short arm jab which had caught the lawyer on the side of the head.

Loft squeezed through the open door, started racing down the corridor.

"You damn fools!" he screamed.

"Stop that man," Teale yelled. "He's a criminal."

I raced after Loft. Behind me came Drumwood, breathing dire threats, interspersed with curses. The lawyer brought up the rear. He was still groggy from the punch the sculptor had delivered.

Loft flung himself at a door. He knocked twice, then twisted the knob. The door was locked. Loft lowered his shoulder, dashed himself against the door.

Teale, the lawyer, shouted: "You can't do that. You can't break into the girl's room like that!"

I gave a running leap, crashing my own weight into the door, at the same time that Loft lunged for a second time. Under the combined impetus of our lunge, the door shivered inward.

Lois Soper was hanging by the neck from one of the big rafters in her room. Her body was spinning around like a top. Her feet were still kicking.

I had my knife out, without being conscious of even having reached for my pocket. I jumped upward, slashed with the blade. Loft ran under her, held out his hands. The keen blade cut through the rope. The girl's inert body dropped into the sculptor's hands.

Drumwood, standing in the doorway, with his mouth sagging open and his eyes bulging, was utterly incapable of speech. But, it was Teale, the lawyer, who jumped at conclusions, and shouted his accusations at us.

"You two have done this," he screamed. "You're responsible for this. It's murder, and, by God, you'll be held strictly accountable!"

Loft ran to the bed with the girl. We loosened the noose around her neck. Her face had just commenced to turn dark with congested blood. She couldn't have been hanging more than a few seconds.

She was dressed as I had last seen her. There was a typewriter desk, with a typewriter on it, as though she had been typing but there wasn't the faintest vestige of any typewritten document on the desk, or, as far as I could see in a hasty inspection of the room, anywhere else.

Loft knew something of first aid. Together, we started our work on the unconscious girl. Teale was sputtering accusations. Drumwood ran about the bed, utterly helpless, very much in the way. I paid no attention to either of them, save to bring my heel down on Drumwood's toe when he came too close to where we were working.

AFTER four or five minutes, I saw her eyes flutter. I motioned to Loft. We ceased our artificial respiration. She gave a tremulous sigh, and began breathing, quick, gasping intakes of breath at first, then a more regular breathing. But she didn't open her eyes. I felt for her pulse. It was weak and irregular, but getting stronger. I leaned forward and put my lips close to her ear.

"Miss Soper," I asked, "can you hear me?"

I saw the muscles of the eyelids quivering, as though she were trying to open them, but they remained closed. Her pulse was growing momentarily stronger, and her breathing was now regular. But she seemed drifting into a state of placid repose.

I turned to Drumwood. "You said she was working on some papers," I said, "I don't see any on her desk."

Teale lunged toward the desk, stared at it, then started opening and closing drawers in the desk.

"Good heavens," he said, "those releases. Ringold never will sign without those releases."

He jumped toward the bed. The flabby weight of his huge bulk pushed Loft to one side. "Those releases, Lois!" he shouted in her ear. "Where are the releases?"

The words called her to the margin of consciousness. I saw her lips quiver as she tried to speak, but the effort was too great. She sighed and seemed to drift into deep repose. I turned and nodded my head to Loft. While Drumwood and Teale were bending over her, I stepped to the door. Loft joined me in the corridor.

"Thanks a hell of a lot," he said, "for understanding about that voodoo business. Bella asked me to make a wax image of Ringold. I didn't have any idea why she wanted it. She offered to pay me from her wages. She kept insisting. I had been trying to get her to pose for me. A bronze of her would be marvelous. So she reached a bargain with me. She'd give me as many poses as I wanted, in return for the wax figure. I made the figure."

"Did anyone else know the identity of the figure?" I asked. "Anyone other than Bella White?"

"No. I don't think so."

"I thought they seemed very much surprised when they saw who it was," I said.

Loft nodded.

"How did they happen to take you there?"

"That also is something I don't know," he told me. "I insisted on making a delivery personally to the mulatto. When I insisted on doing that, they insisted on my coming to the garage with them."

"What were Drumwood and Teale trying to find out?"

"They wanted to find out all I knew about it, and they wanted to find out more than I really knew about it."

"Were their questions," I asked, "directed at how it happened you picked on Ringold as the one who should be the original of your wax figure?"

His face showed surprise. "Yes," he said, "Teale kept asking me that over and over again. He thought I was holding something back from him."

I thought for a moment, then said to Loft: "Let me make this suggestion. Go to your room, lock the door, barricade it. Put a chair under the knob. Close the windows, lock them. Stay in your room, and don't leave under any circumstances."

"Why?" he asked.

"I can't explain," I told him. "Simply do that."

HE stared at me for a moment, and then said: "Well, Weston, I'll say one thing. I don't know just what your connection with this business is. I heard Drumwood say you were a detective. However, you've called the turn so far. I'm playing ball with you. How about Lois Soper? Is she safe?"

"I think so," I said. "I think that the papers she was incorporating in the agreement with Ringold were the important things."

"But she must have tried to commit suicide," Loft insisted.

I shook my head. "Not necessarily."

"Good God, you don't mean that there's anything in this monkey-business of the servants, do you?"

I met his eyes. "Do you?"

He fidgeted, then said, slowly: "Now it seems like a nightmare. At the time, there was something to it. I can't explain what it was. Perhaps it was their very earnestness. Perhaps it was the fact

that they themselves believed in what they were doing, and that belief engendered conviction in my mind."

I started snapping questions at him. "Did you make another wax image of Ringold?"

"You mean one in addition to the one that I made for Bella White?"

"Yes."

"No. Absolutely not."

"How friendly are you with Mrs. Ringold?"

"Look here, Weston," he said, his face flushing, "you're going just a little—"

"I'm talking against time," I told him. "If there's any reason for taking offense at the question, the question itself must be justified."

"There's no reason for taking offense at it—that is, there's nothing in the insinuation which is at all justified."

"Then you're not very friendly with her?"

"Not in the way you mean."

"I didn't mean anything. I was simply asking."

"Well, you've got your answer."

"Loft," I told him, "I want to think out something. There's an angle to this thing that I don't exactly understand. I want you to promise me that you'll go to your room, lock the door and keep the door locked."

"Why?"

"Because. I think you're in danger. I think we're both in danger."

"Danger of what?" he asked.

"Danger of committing suicide," I told him.

He stared at me as though he thought I might have been crazy.

We had been walking slowly down the corridor as we talked. I opened the door to my room, stepped inside, smiled a quick goodnight at him, slammed the door, and locked it. I thought that by setting him a good example, I might con-

vince him, and, there were one or two things I wanted to think out.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Feathered Death

I SAT down at the desk in my room. The window was open, and I closed, locked it, and pulled the shade. I was possessed of some unaccountable fear, some presentiment of impending evil. I felt that unseen eyes were watching me, that some menace was lurking in the midnight shadows of my room, ready to spring upon me with some dreadful intent.

I felt certain that Lois Soper had not tried to commit suicide. Obviously, then, an attempt had been made at murder. But who had made this attempt? How had it been done? And what would be the next move?

Thinking these things over in my mind, I recalled, one by one, the events of the evening—that gruesome dummy which had been hanging from the rafters, the twisted, distorted features, the manner in which I had concealed that dummy, intending to study it at my leisure, and the manner in which someone had discovered the location of the dummy with such casual ease as to make my efforts at concealment seem ludicrous.

I remembered that Norman Ringold, insanely jealous, had been fully clothed; that his wife had said he was asleep in the other bed when she had left the room, as she had walked down the corridor. That I had seen her coming past my room clothed only in a filmy negligee, and—

The answer to it all crashed home to my consciousness with an illuminating flash of comprehension.

Suddenly, I knew. And, as I realized what must have happened, I realized also that there was the sound of surreptitious motion somewhere in the shadows of the

room, a motion such as might have been made by the rustle of garments, or, by the rustle of a bare arm against cloth.

I was seated at the desk. My back was to the room. My eyes had been fixed intently upon the surface of the desk, studying out what must be the inevitable answer to the problem which had been presented.

Coincidentally with the recognition of the nature of that sound, I flung myself forward and down.

I heard a peculiar explosive sound, a species of *phutt*, such as might have been made by the sudden pulling of a cork from the neck of a bottle.

I twisted my head, but the bed cut off my vision. I heard something whistle through the air and *thunk* into the wall just over the desk.

I dropped to my hands and knees.

A pair of black bare feet, with a segment of bare ankles, were visible beneath the bed.

I flung myself in a rush on my hands and knees, flattening to my stomach as I crawled under the bed, lunging out with my hands, trying to grab one of those bare ankles. They moved in a quick jump. I heard the sound of sardonic laughter. The feet and ankles were removed from my vision. I heard the soles of bare feet pounding the floor in quick steps, and then utter silence.

The door had been neither opened nor closed. It remained locked, as I had left it.

I was trapped under the bed. The person who had been on the other side, had jumped beyond my vision, must know that I was about to emerge from under the bed; must have anticipated the exact spot where I would emerge. There was but one way to overcome the handicap. That was by backing up.

I crawled backward, emerging feet first, and expecting momentarily to feel

the stab of steel, or the thudding impact of a blow.

There was nothing.

I was, however, conscious of swift motion from the other side of the room. Then, again, silence.

I emerged from beneath the bed, my coat up over my head. My trousers had slid up along my shins to my knees. I must have presented an undignified and not very formidable specimen of manhood, but I shook back the folds of the coat, and got to my feet, braced for the rush of an attack.

There was no attack.

The room seemed tenanted only by myself. Silence gripped the house. Somewhere a cricket chirped cheerily. There was no other sound.

I glanced over toward the desk.

About on a level with the spot which had been occupied by my shoulders, was a small, black fuzzy object, sticking into the dark wainscoting.

THE door was locked, the window was locked. The closet door was open, but I knew that the intruder had not entered the closet, because the bare feet must necessarily have crossed the path of my vision had the prowler gone in the direction of the closet. He had, then, gone in the other direction.

That which had hitherto been a suspicion in my mind, now became a certainty. I looked over at the pillow bolster which stood so innocently in the corner of the room.

I remembered how I had concealed the dummy in the bolster, and how it had so promptly disappeared. There was only one possible explanation. The person who had taken that dummy from the bolster had not been in the least baffled by the peculiar nature of the hiding place, because that was the place where the dummy had been originally concealed. It had been

hidden in the bolster, had been taken out and hung to the rafter. When I had replaced it in the bolster, the person who searched for it had found it without difficulty, because that had been the first and logical place such a person would have searched. That meant, however, that the person must have known I had been in the bedroom. One person had admitted to that knowledge. That was Bella White.

Had there been some other person who had known, then, of my presence there?

The answer would doubtless be concealed in the pillow bolster of my own room.

I moved toward it.

In that moment of tense suspense, I would have given almost anything for the reassuring feel of a good gun clasped in my right hand. I was dealing with some sinister and peculiar form of murder, and doubtless the answer to much that had happened lay concealed in the pillow bolster which stood so innocently in the corner.

It seemed like an impossible place of concealment. Surely no man could have crowded into such a narrow space. It was one thing to have pushed and crammed a dummy into a bolster. Quite another thing for a man to slip into such a place of concealment, and yet. . . .

The bolster moved.

I sprang forward.

My eyes saw the flurry of motion, a black blur of menace, and then, even in the midst of the necessity of gathering my muscles for a spring, I recognized a feeling of astonishment. I had been expecting some full-sized menace, some heavily-muscled black. I saw, instead something that was hardly four feet tall, something that was not an ape, nor yet did it seem to be a man. It was black, misshapen, heavily-muscled, but, nevertheless, a dwarf.

I caught the menace of the glittering

eyes, and, as I did so, there suddenly dawned upon my consciousness the full import of the dwarfed, black figure, through the heart of which Bella White had run a needle, and into whose hands had been given the end of the cord which had been drawn taut around the neck of the dummy that had represented Norman Ringold.

The dwarf raised a long, narrow tube to his lips. I saw his cheeks distend. I tried to leap to one side, and knew instinctively that I would be too late. The blow-gun would discharge its deadly missile before I could dodge.

It was, after all, a stumble that saved me, and I was saved by the matter of a scant half-inch. I stumbled and went forward. The dart shot from the blow-gun with that peculiar *phutt* which I had heard when the other missile was aimed at my back.

There was no chance to regain my balance. I saw the glitter of a wicked knife above me, as the dwarf dropped the blow-gun and whipped the blade from his belt. My fingers closed about the ankles. The man kicked loose from my grasp as though he had been a greased eel. I knew that he had greased his skin heavily with cocoanut oil, a device generally used by marauding savages who prowl about in the night time, making it almost impossible to hold them.

I flung myself about on the floor, lashed upward with my feet. The dwarf swooped with the knife. My toe caught him on the loin cloth. I felt something stick into the side of my shoe, felt the man give an exclamation of pain. I kicked my foot loose. He upraised his hand to throw the knife. I tried to get to my feet and knew that I was at his mercy. He had jumped back, held the knife in his hand, after the manner of an expert, and one glance at the peculiar discoloration of the point and blade showed me that it

had been heavily treated with poison.

I was as helpless as a pinioned chicken waiting for the descending blow of the knife which would sever its head.

SOMETIMES in dreams I have struggled against a gripping inertia which has made my motions entirely futile. I have moved my leaden legs, trying to run, without making any progress. I have swung a reluctant fist against the jaw of an adversary, only to experience that feeling of futility which comes from utter inefficiency. I felt that way at this moment as I lay on the floor, struggling to get to my feet and come to grips with this black dwarf, yet knowing that the knife would cleave through the air with deadly accuracy before I could reach the man.

I saw the glitter of his eyes, watched them with fascination. I seemed to live for ages in that split second during which I was trying to get to my feet.

As I watched, there was something strange which happened to those eyes. They lost their glittering gleam of savage ferocity. They filmed and grew unsteady, they drooped. The hand which held the knife seemed suddenly nerveless. The fingers opened, the blade dropped to the floor. My savage lunge forward brought me to my feet just in time to catch the inert body as it suddenly went limp.

I stared at it, incredulously.

What had happened?

Of a sudden, I caught a faint trickle of blood from the man's right hip, and remembered the kick which I had inadvertently given to the loin cloth.

I deposited the body on my bed, gingerly opened a fold in the loin cloth. Half a dozen darts for use in the blow-gun were concealed in the fold. My kick had crashed two of these darts into the man's hip.

I felt along the greased wrist for a

pulse. It was there, faint but steady.

I took two of the darts, took also the blow-gun in my hand. Then I turned to the door, unlocked it and stepped into the corridor. I was going to take a gamble, with the odds a hundred to one against me.

I rushed down the corridor. At Drumwood's room I didn't pause to knock, but turned the knob. The door was unlocked. I pushed it open. Drumwood, attired in pajamas, seated in bed, a reading lamp over his head, a book in his hand, stared at me in a surprise which turned to annoyance.

"What the devil," he began, "are you trying—"

"Shut up," I told him, "and listen. I'm going to tell you what's happened. Your life may depend on it."

I don't think it was my command which brought about his silence. I think it was sheer surprise. During that surprise, I told him, in rapid, staccato sentences, what had occurred during the course of the evening. When I had finished, he was climbing out of bed.

"Good heavens," he said, "a dwarf! Now what the devil is the meaning of that?"

"It means," I said, "that darts, loaded with a heavy narcotic, have been fired into the backs of persons who were doomed to die. The effect of those darts was like a powerful hypodermic of swift-acting narcotic properties. At that, it's probably a dilution of one of the deadly poisons which they use on their blow-guns, poisons which will paralyze game almost instantly.

"When the victim was unconscious, he was trussed to a rafter. The result was that death was due to strangulation. Naturally, it looked like suicide."

"But why should my chauffeurs have been killed? Why should—"

"For the same reason," I said, "that a

scientist uses a guinea-pig. The person who planned this murder wanted to make certain that it was going to work. He laid the foundation by planning a series of experiments. He wanted to be absolutely certain that there would be no failure when it came to the crucial moment when he was to strike his final blow."

"And who was to be his victim?" Drumwood asked.

"You were," I told him bluntly.

I SAW disbelief in his eyes, and went on, speaking rapidly. "Can't you see, you had taken out an insurance policy for a great deal of money. The beneficiary in that insurance policy was Norman Ringold. The partnership business had virtually ceased to exist. The insurance policy was still in force. When the papers which you were drawing up tonight were signed, the insurance policy would have been assigned back to your estate. Therefore, the person who was back of all this, wanted to strike before that policy was assigned."

"You mean Ringold?" he asked.

I shook my head. "Not Ringold," I said, "because, if it had been he, it wouldn't have been necessary to have stolen the papers from Lois Soper. He could simply have delayed signing until after your death. Whoever stole the papers from Lois Soper knew that Ringold was going to sign those papers when they were presented to him. It became necessary to delay the presentation of those papers for your signature and for the signature of Ringold. That was done by stealing certain releases which had been given to Miss Soper to incorporate as a part of the agreement of dissolution."

"But," Drumwood said, "it couldn't have been the blacks. They wouldn't—"

"No," I said, "it wasn't the blacks. They were carrying on a little voodoo ceremony of their own to protect them

against the evil influences that were in the house. The fact that they killed Ringold in effigy showed that they thought he was back of it. They evidently suspected the presence of the dwarf. Perhaps some of their number had seen him."

"Then, who could it have been?" Drumwood asked.

"The answer," I said, "is mathematical. Both Ringold and his wife admit that Ringold was asleep in bed when Mrs. Ringold left the room and started down the corridor, trying to trace an imaginary noise to its source. Yet, by the time she had reached the corridor in front of my room, a distance of less than one hundred feet, Ringold had managed to dress himself, even to the extent of putting on his collar and tie. Allow a lapse of perhaps a minute and a half for the time during which she was lying on the floor, and, by that time, Ringold had left his room. He searched for her five minutes, then came to my room. A man simply couldn't have dressed in that short space of time. That means Mrs. Ringold lied."

"But I still don't see," Drumwood said, "what that has to do with it."

"It means," I said, "that Mrs. Ringold had concealed a dummy figure of her husband. She wanted this dummy figure discovered, hanging from a rafter. That would have directed suspicion toward the Negro servants. This dummy had been planted in one of the bedrooms down the corridor from mine. She got out of bed, went down the corridor, had this dummy concealed in the bolster on the bed. She took it out, hung it from the rafter, walked back to stand in front of my door, and then screamed until she had attracted my attention. When I opened the door, she pretended to faint. She knew that I was a detective sent to investigate the things that were happening in the house. She felt that I would discover and report the dummy. That would have directed sus-

picion to the Negro servants, making it look like some sort of a strange voodoo ceremony by which people were hypnotized into committing suicide."

"But, I thought you said I was the one that was to be killed?"

"You were. That was to have vested a large amount of property in Ringold's name. Then, upon his death, that property would have gone to Mrs. Ringold."

"And you mean to say that she stood in with this black dwarf, that she conspired with him to commit these murders? My God, man, it's incredible!"

I SHOOK my head. "On the contrary," I said, "I doubt if she knew very much about what exactly was taking place. She was being instructed. Remember this, that the dummy which I found was a skilful piece of work. There were just two people in this house who could have made such a dummy. One of them was Loft, the sculptor. The other one was Mrs. Ringold, who had studied sculpture."

"You'll find that Mrs. Ringold was the more or less innocent tool. The person who expected to profit by all this was the person who introduced the dwarf into the house, and had Mrs. Ringold so completely under his power that she would do anything he told her to, regardless of its nature."

"Surely," Drumwood said, "that couldn't be one of the servants. That couldn't have been anyone in the house. I don't think she ever had male visitors. Her husband, you know, was insanely jealous, and—"

"That," I said, "can best be determined by finding out who is with her now."

I opened the door, stepped out into the corridor. Drumwood kicked on slippers, pulled a bathrobe about him.

"Where's her room?" I asked.

"Straight down the corridor," he said.

He ran awkwardly, his slippers feet shuffling along the corridor.

"Be careful, now," he said, "remember Ringold is insanely jealous. Remember that you've got nothing but suspicion, a lot of damn deductions. It's clever deduction, but it's just deduction, and the weakest kind of circumstantial evidence."

I nodded, but said nothing. He indicated a door. I turned the knob. The door was locked. I remembered how Bella White had tapped on the panels of my door with the tips of her fingers. I knocked gently on the door in the same fashion. There was a moment's pause. I thought I could hear the sound of whispers; then a woman's voice said: "Who is it?"

I made my voice low and throaty. "Bella," I said.

"What do you want?"

I mumbled something unintelligible.

A moment more, and the door opened a crack. Mrs. Ringold placed a cautious eye to the crack in the door, saw me and started to close it. My foot was in the way.

"What's the meaning of this?" she demanded.

I pushed at the door. She gave a half scream, tried to shove the door shut. Drumwood tugged at my shoulders and said: "Come, come, Weston. There are the proprieties, you know."

I gave a hard shove. Mrs. Ringold staggered backward. The door opened. Ringold was lying on the bed, fully clothed, his arms and legs sprawled out. He was unconscious. A rope had been placed around his neck. Standing in the far corner of the room, his face white, his hand at his hip, was Harry Teale, the lawyer.

Drumwood jumped past me into the room. "Good God!" he screamed. "You, Teale!"

Teale's hand came out from his hip

pocket. I saw the expression on his face even before I caught the glitter of light on steel.

I was without a weapon. The distance was too great to rush him. He could have killed both of us before we could have reached him, and, he intended to do so. I saw it in his eyes. I had one chance, and only one chance. I had fitted one of the darts to the blow-gun as I had explained to Drumwood what I had discovered.

I raised the blow-gun to my lips. I knew that it was going to take a supreme effort. I placed my tongue over the opening, blew with every ounce of force at my command, suddenly removed my tongue.

Teale's gun crashed. The bullet splintered the panel of the door, missing Drumwood's head by a fraction of an inch.

For the moment I was afraid I had missed him with the dart. I saw that he was tightening his finger on the trigger for a second shot. There was nothing else for it—I must rush him. It was sure death, but, after all, I had no obligation to my profession, and it was probably sure death anyway.

I dropped the blow-gun, lowered my head, charged forward, momentarily expecting the crash of the gun, the impact of the bullet, the blackness of death.

I heard Drumwood shout, heard a crashing jar on the floor.

I stopped my rush, raised my head. Teale had collapsed like a sack of meal. Imbedded in the thick folds of his fleshy neck, was the feathered dart which had been shot from my blow-gun.

CHAPTER NINE

Weston Reports

FREMONT C. SMALL glowered at me with his bloodshot eyes. His sour breath was offensive to my nostrils. His lips curled back from his cheeks in what

was almost a snarl, instead of a grin. His tone was sarcastic.

"Congratulations," he said, "on the manner in which you have solved your case. You have certainly kept my pledge to our client. I promised him that we would avoid any notoriety."

His warped fingers twisted the newspaper on his desk around so that I could see the headlines.

SUICIDE HOUSE stood in black letters three inches high across the page. Below that, in slightly smaller letters, was a subheadline — VOODOO CEREMONIES HYPNOTIZE DEVOTEES TO DEATH. The page was decorated with photographs, around which an artist had made line drawings of bodies dangling from rafters.

I raised my eyes from the paper and met Small's accusing glare.

"Our client hasn't complained," I said.

"No," Small told me, "but he will."

I shook my head.

"You were sent out there," Small said, "to find out what was causing this suicide business and put a stop to it. In place of that, you've permitted another suicide to be the last straw which broke the camel's back and brought down the newspapers with a hullabaloo of publicity. How the devil did it happen that so prominent a man as Harry Teale, the lawyer, committed suicide? And how the devil does it happen that the police were able to find the dummies of other members of the house, with ropes around their necks? And who was this dwarfed black pygmy who was found naked by the highway, whose death apparently resulted from an overdose of some peculiar narcotic?"

I stared steadily at him, hoping that my silence would bring an end to his ill-tempered outburst. However, it did not. He continued in the same voice of harsh, querulous complaint.

"The least you could have done was to

have removed the clue which pointed to the voodoo ceremonies. Those things simply egged the police on to make an investigation. This mulatto woman spilled the whole thing to them—how the servants knew that black magic was being perpetrated by some mysterious pygmy, who had been imported from the African jungles on a strange mission of vengeance and death; how he used black magic which made people commit suicide; how the other servants tried to find out who was back of it all, and put a stop to the proceedings."

"Suppose," I said slowly, "it should appear that if Harry Teale had not committed suicide, he would have been hung for murder? Suppose it should have appeared that he capitalized upon the credulity of Drumwood, that he fascinated the wife of Norman Ringold, one of Drumwood's business associates, and made of her a cat's paw? Suppose that it should appear these suicides had not been suicides at all, but well planned murders, and that explaining the motives for these murders would necessarily have exposed certain financial secrets of our client, secrets which would have been disclosed in court and would have ripped the financial structure of certain banking institutions wide open?"

"Suppose that it should further appear that our client was sufficient grateful for the manner in which the case had been handled so that he gave us an additional check?"

WITH something of a flourish, I took my wallet from my pocket, extracted a tinted oblong of paper and slid it along the desk to Small's gnarled hand.

Small blinked his eyes, stared malevolently at me and said: "You've got some evidence to back this up?"

I took a second paper from the wallet. "Teale's confession," I said. "We left

him in a room. He was under the influence of a powerful narcotic at the time. He recovered, took a rope, which he had intended to use in the murder of Norman Ringold, and hung himself."

Small frowned and made a grimace. "I don't give a damn how many checks we got," he said, "the case was poorly handled. I don't care how grateful our client is. I don't care what complications you encountered. All of this publicity is bad. When the newspapers start on a story, you can't tell where they're going to stop. One of these days they'll uncover the true story."

"When they do," I said, "they won't believe it. It's too bizarre."

Small sighed. "Anyway," he said, "you handled the case without a weapon."

That was once I had an opportunity to grin at him. "No," I said, "as a matter of fact, I didn't. Teale pulled a gun at the last minute and tried to shoot his way out."

For once, Small's face showed surprise. "What did you do?" he asked.

"I shot him."

"What with?"

"With a blow-gun."

For a long moment our eyes locked, mine defiant, Small's bloodshot and disapproving.

"That," he said slowly, "is proof that the case wasn't properly handled. You should have manipulated it in such a way all that notoriety was avoided. You should never have let the case culminate in a shooting."

"What the devil else could I have done?" I demanded, my patience wearing thin.

Small fastened his remorseless eyes upon me.

"You could," he said, "have tipped the jealous husband off to the fact that Teale was intimate with his wife. The resulting blow-up would have protected our client, and the newspapers wouldn't have made so much commotion over a shooting which was the result of jealousy. Those things are too damn common."

I turned impatiently away and flung out of the door. But, somehow or other, there was a vague feeling of disquiet in my mind, even as I slammed the door behind me. What would have happened if I had done as Small suggested?

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

RACE THROUGH THE NIGHT ABOARD

THE GHOST TRAIN

WILLIAM EDWARD HAYES'

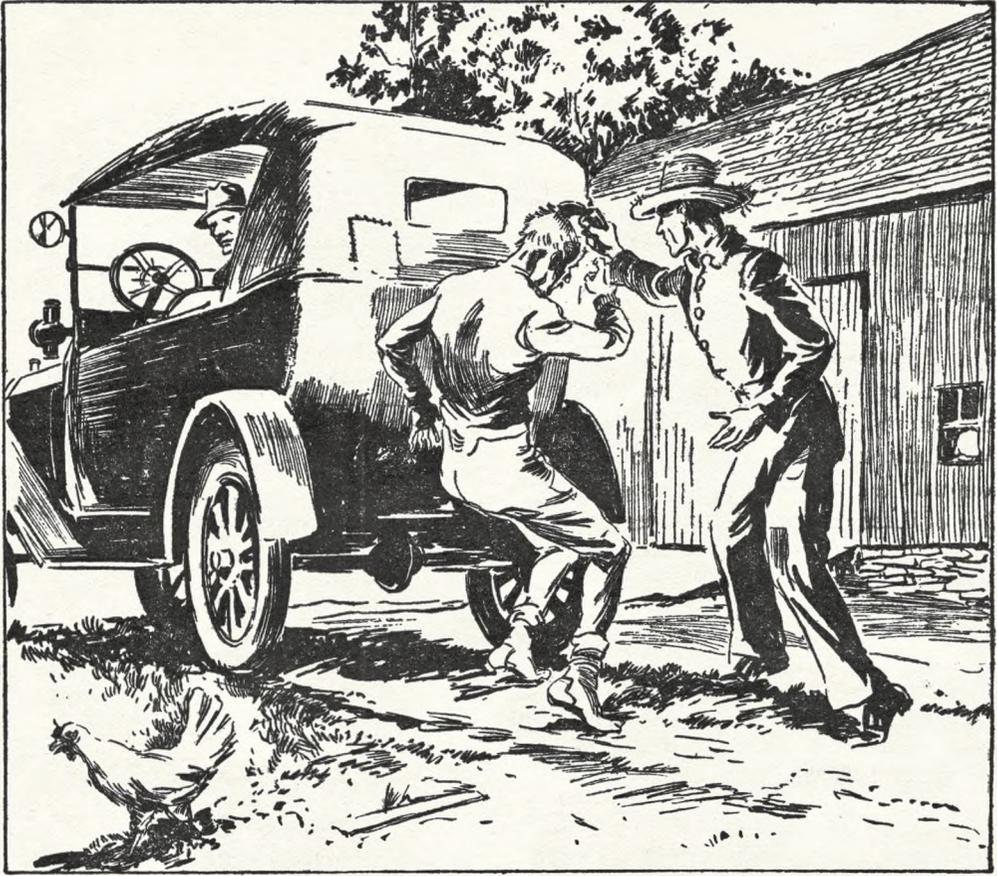
newest smashing complete novelette of death and danger on the railroad.

It's got action—excitement—mystery—and the most thrilling fight to a finish in a swaying locomotive cab you'll encounter in a year's reading!



DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE
for
JANUARY 1st

It will be out
on
DECEMBER 14th



He slugged him with the butt of his gun.

Model T

by Donald Barr Chidsey

It was a ramshackle old can of a car, and that quartet of hold-up muggs thought it would be just the thing to use for evading the posses out there in the back-woods. What they didn't realize was that city slickers can look as much out of place in a Model T as hicks can in a limousine.

THE car thumped and banged its way over the narrow, rutty road.

Three of the men hadn't supposed one like it existed any longer, even in this back country. The fourth man had been a native.

The two in the back seat, bouncing up and down, back and forth, hung on desperately. One of them yelled: "Listen!"

And Johnson, the driver, threw out the clutch.

Ahead, and a little to the right, they heard the far, agonized wail of a siren.

"They got in front of us! I told you they would! It was a crazy idea, taking this damn side road!"

Johnson said: "Keep your shirt on. Am I running this, or maybe you are?"

They'd have got ahead anyway, by just using the telephone."

Another siren sounded behind them, several miles away.

"They certainly love to make those things go," Johnson muttered.

The car squealed around a curve. They came in sight of a farmhouse, the first building they'd seen for three miles. It wasn't much of a farmhouse. It was a drooping, discouraged, woe-begone, jerry-built structure from which the sun had long ago wrung whatever paint might once have adorned it. Behind it was a barn not quite so frowsy, but frowsy enough. The barn doors were open. A few bedraggled chickens had been pecking about there, but they squawked away when Johnson swung the car inside.

"Are you nuts? Why, those guys are right—"

"Shut up, and do what I tell you to! Close them doors!"

Johnson himself ran out of the barn and to the side of the house where a farmer stood blinking in amazement. The farmer seemed not to be a trigger-action thinker. He was a long, sad fellow who looked as though he had a hookworm, and probably did. His mouth hung open, tobacco juice dribbling from its corners.

Johnson snapped: "You here alone, hayseed?"

The farmer said nothing, and never changed his expression. Ahead, the siren sounded further away, but the one down the road was coming nearer—and coming fast.

Johnson drew an automatic and slapped the farmer on the side of the face with his open palm.

"Don't stand there gawping at me! I asked you, are you alone?"

Slowly the farmer nodded. Johnson grabbed an arm and pushed the bewildered countryman toward the road.

"Then you stand there, and when that

car comes along you point down the way we was going, see? Just point—that's all you need to do. They won't stop if they see you pointing. But make it good and plain, guy, because I'm going to be right behind you here and if you try anything funny I'm going to bust your spine in six places!"

The siren shrilled nearer and nearer. Johnson, crouching behind an ancient Ford in the front yard, his gun trained on the farmer's back, grinned thoughtfully; marveling that these pursuers were so stupid as to keep sounding that thing. But then, this must have been a big occasion for them. A once-in-a-lifetime thrill.

A CAR screeched around the curve.

There were four men in it, two armed with shotguns, one with a rifle. They waved and yelled something—a clipped-off sound as they sped past. The farmer stood pointing along the road in the direction of West Marby. They'd thought they'd understood.

The dust, twice churned so violently within five minutes, sifted back into place. The siren wailed away, further and further.

"All right, you guys! And you"—Johnson told the farmer—"get busy and haul this junk out of the back seat of your rattletrap—all these cabbages or whatever they are. But leave that burlap there."

He explained to his fellow fugitives:

"Just speed ain't going to get us anywheres now. We can't go as fast as a telephone call, can we? Did that ever occur to any of you? Now the way I see it is this. West Marby's only seven or eight miles from here, back on the highway, and about twelve miles further is the place where we can get into that swamp Joe tells us about. Once we get there, we're set. Joe can take us out

any one of a dozen different ways."

"But the road between—"

"Will you let me finish? This whole end of the state's looking for a big blue Cadillac with four men in it. Am I right? There ain't many crates like that anywheres around here. But the place is loaded with antiques like this." He kicked the Ford, which seemed to take the abuse without protest, like an old, half-blind horse, tired and patient. "Me, I'll drive. I'll take this clunk's jumper and hat and pants. Joe sits in the front seat with me and does any talking there may need to be done, because he's one of the back-country guys himself. The other two of you kneel down in the back seat and try to look as much as you can like a flock of potatoes or something, under that bur-lap. So then we just wander into this hick dump, see? And we just wander through it."

The farmer, who stood there in his underclothes, which were very dirty, was beginning to understand things. He essayed a last laugh—or something like that—as they prepared to start.

"If yawl think yawl're gonna git tuh the swamps in that cah— Ain't hardly gas-o-line in that to take yawl tuh Maa-by."

Johnson said: "No kidding?" and hit him in the mouth twice. The farmer swung wildly with both arms, but Johnson dodged the blows, grinning derisively. He hit the farmer again, in the jaw, and he went down. Johnson leaned over him, deliberately hit him twice behind the right ear with the butt of the automatic, and then the farmer was still. Johnson hauled him to a place behind the house, as a man might drag a bag of charcoal.

"Might have known that's the way it'd be," he grumbled. "These clunks out this way buy their gas with a medicine dropper." He looked up, saw that there were no telephone poles along this road.

He got into the car. "So then we'll stop and buy some," he decided. "And don't you damn potatoes wiggle!"

IT was the most exciting day West Marby had ever known, the day of the bank robbery at Bockton, the metropolis, sixty-one miles away. Everybody had heard that the four robbers, toting a black suitcase which contained \$10,000—or \$100,000, or maybe it was \$1,000,000—had escaped by driving out along State Route 14, going east. East meant toward West Marby, which village seethed. School had just let out, and the main street—almost the only one—was filled with excited children. Cars raced back and forth. Men were getting out shot-guns, organizing search parties.

It seemed almost certain that the robbers would be caught, since in all the country between Bockton and the Keepee-haha Swamp there were no large towns or villages—none where four strange city men, or a blue Cadillac, wouldn't be noticed instantly and reported. Nor did the countryside itself offer any good place of concealment. It was, generally, flat and unwooded. It could be searched swiftly, by large posses keeping close together.

Jud McKeever and his helper stood in front of Jud's Service Station and wished they were able to join the hunt. They were both deputy sheriffs, of course. Practically every able-bodied man in these parts was a deputy sheriff.

But business was business, so Jud and the helper just stood there and watched. The helper's name was Lanny.

The old Ford which trundled up the apron was in no wise different from dozens of other old Fords Jud handled every day.

"Ah 'spect about two gallon'll be what Ah wants."

There was nothing unusual about this,

either. Jud McKeever sold most of his gasoline in two and three-gallon lots, for the farmers thereabouts never had been prosperous. Jud, chatting amiably, put in the gasoline. This took some time, because the tank was under the front seat, and the two men had to get out of the car. While the men were climbing back, Jud picked up an empty oilcan, tripped, dropped the can into the back seat where it fell upon something covered by burlap sacking. He retrieved it hastily, drawling apologies.

"Yawl want oil?"

He had lifted the hood before the man next to the driver said quickly: "Ah 'spect oil's aw-right."

The driver fumbled with something in his lap, and finally presented a five-dollar bill. It was big money for West Marby.

"Yawl ain't got nothin' less'n that, have ya?"

The driver shook his head. Jud shambled back into the station, where Lanny was standing next to the cash register. He was thinking the same thing that the men in the car were thinking. That it wouldn't be safe to seem in a hurry. He stood directly in front of the register, with his back to the street, so that the men in the car could not see him scribble a note to Lanny. Nor could they see him take a long .38 revolver from the drawer of the table which supported the register, and put this inside his shirt.

Fortunately Lanny was able to read. He was a smart lad, Lanny. He slipped out of the station by a back door, and presently the clatter of another Model T sounded back there. It faded into the distance—in the direction of the Keepeehaha Swamp—not on the main highway but on a parallel back road.

"Lots of excitement 'bout them bank robbers," Jud remarked as he handed over the change. "Sure hope they gits 'em."

The driver said nothing. He started to feel around with his right foot.

"I'll turn it over for you," offered Jud, and went to the front of the car. This was really an old car, this one. Jud took his time about the job. But then, he usually took his time about most things. "Come in agin," he shouted over the din, when finally the engine had been started, and he waved sleepily.

THE instant the Ford had clattered and crashed past where he stood, he was jumping at its spare tire rack. There was no tire on it—five tires would have been unheard-of extravagance thereabouts—but the rack itself was firm. Jud saw that some of the school kids were yelling and pointing at him as the car moved along the main street; but, in the general confusion, this attracted no attention from the men in the front seat.

They passed the village limits. They came to a cross road where another old Ford was parked, with Lanny standing beside it. Opposite was a square, solid house, its porch screened by honeysuckle.

The car popped softly, throatily, juicily. It stopped.

"Geez! Get out and crank her up, Joe! This lousy—"

Then something, possibly the way Lanny was standing over there, told Johnson that they were trapped. He let out a wild yawp, started to pull his gun, tried to open the door by his side—to learn that there wasn't any door there. He leaped over the side, his gun unlimbered.

Lanny didn't wait for anybody else to start the shooting. He dropped to one knee and fired twice from behind the protection of his own machine.

Johnson sat down on the running board, leaning far over, his arms wrapped around his stomach. Blood began to ooze through the worn jumper.

Joe had sprung out of the other side of the car, and one of the men in back had scrambled from under the burlap. From behind the honeysuckle of the house, a rifle cracked like a whip. Lanny fired again, in concert. Joe ran five or six steps, holding his pistol straight out in front of him. Then he fell flat on his face.

The man from the back seat didn't have his gun quite drawn when he ran full-tilt into Jud McKeever.

"That'll do ya," Jud shouted. "Raise 'em, friend!"

The man was a fool. He tried to get his gun out. And Jud shot twice into the man's body.

Then a sudden, terrific silence.

Presently Jud yelled: "Hold it! There ought to be another one in there." At the sacking he called: "Had enough? Come out slow, an' with your hands first, an' with 'em empty, an' you won't get hurt."

With caution the fourth man emerged, not a vestige of fight left in him.

IT was the way the car was driven up to the pumps which first stirred his suspicion, Jud McKeever told the boys later. The man who was driving it was accustomed to a much bigger car. Jud could tell that by the space he allowed when he turned. Then there was the fact that the driver, for all his earthy jumper and trousers and hat, had clean and well kept fingernails. And when he had been obliged to get out, so that Jud could put

in gasoline, there was no longer any doubt about it.

"Boy-oh-boy! You could of bought a whole new set of tires for what that man must of paid for them shoes he had on!"

The oilcan had confirmed it. If men were crouched, tense and unseeing, underneath that sacking, naturally any little thing hitting them would make them jump a bit, no matter how good their nerves might be.

Somebody asked: "But if you was so sure about it, why didn't just you an' Lanny hold 'em up then an' there, instead of having to split the reward money with Pop Merritt, the way it is?"

"With the street full of kids an' all? Them fellas was all tighted up. They'd of started shootin' in all directions."

"Still an' all, maybe Pop an' Lanny wouldn't of hit them when they passed. Then where would you of been, if they hadn't of stopped?"

"They had to stop. I shut off the gas feed when I lifted up the hood there, an' I knew exactly how far the gas in the carburetor'd take them to. I knew Pop'd be there on the porch, stewin' because he wasn't able to git out on the hunt on account of he's got rheumatism. So I had Lanny tell him. I knew they'd stop right where they did because many's a time Lanny's cut off my gas before I left here, jus' for the craziness of it, an' I've done the same thing to him, too." Jud chuckled. "Can't tell me much about a Model T, brother! I may be dumb about some things, but I sure know about them there autos."

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

MURDER BY PROXY

**A Thrill-Packed Morton & McGarvey Novelette by
DONALD BARR CHIDSEY**

DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE for JANUARY 1st will be out on DEC. 14

Anderson thought there was something phony about the Sloan murder from the very first. But it wasn't until he took a little thing like the weather into consideration that he realized the killer was just trying to confuse things with a new version of an—

OLD

ALIBI



by
W. W.
Van Dale

For an instant his body stopped in its downward plunge.

DAVE ANDERSON planted his huge hand on the door and swung it wide. Inside the small office sat two persons. One was Dutch Peters, head of the agency, the other was a stranger.

Peters indicated the man across from him. "Dave, I want you to meet Ambrose Saltman."

Anderson nodded, leaned back against the wall, and tipped his old felt hat. Saltman was a small man with pasty, badly wrinkled face. His eyes were colorless, filled with fear.

Peters said: "Mr. Saltman has received

a threatening letter and wants us to take care of things. Here's the letter. Not much to it."

Anderson read the brief message, written in a hasty scrawl: *Tonight at midnight you die.*

Anderson hummed. "To the point, all right."

"Yeah." Peters reached out and retrieved the paper. "You take care of Saltman, Dave; see that nothing happens to him."

Anderson straightened. "O.K." He opened the door to let Saltman precede him from the room, but the little man

hesitated, looking with worried eyes at Peters.

"But—is that all? Just one man?"

Peters said: "Anderson won't be alone tonight."

Partly reassured, Saltman passed his eyes up and down Anderson's bulky form, looked once more at Peters, then turned for the door and passed through it. Anderson followed him to his limousine at the curb where a chauffeur opened the door. Anderson took a place at the little fellow's side.

"Any idea who could have sent that letter?"

Saltman, hands on his thin knees, turned and shook his head. "No. But—a man of my age—and in my business—is likely to have a number of enemies." He shuddered. "It's awful. I've a feeling that something—terrible is going to happen. I—"

"You're in the—the jewelry business?" Anderson asked.

Saltman nodded, swallowing hard. He stared at the cars that passed in the thick traffic, afraid attack might come from any source, unexpected and swift. Anderson drew down the shades.

"Why didn't you go to the police?"

Saltman stirred. "I—don't trust them."

"Hot ice, eh?"

Saltman spluttered. Anderson said: "Don't worry. As long as you pay your bill it's O.K. by me. You have a partner?"

Saltman nodded. "Ben Laushway. We've been in business together over twenty years."

The car swung left into a quiet street bordered by large estates. Anderson knew the section well; only the wealthiest of the city could occupy homes on Sycamore Avenue. More than that, Anderson knew that Saltman and Laushway had gained their wealth by being two of the shrewdest fences in the game.

The car made another turn, into a private drive, swinging before a modern

brick home which had large white pillars before it.

"You'll have to stay put tonight. No going out and no guests."

"I got to go out. I have an appointment."

"Break it."

"I can't."

THE butler opened the door, took Saltman's hat and coat while Anderson flung his hat to a chair. "Leave it there."

The butler bowed and withdrew.

"What's this appointment you can't break?"

Saltman moved into a side room, evidently his study. It was richly furnished; thick Sarouk rugs covered the floor. Three walls were lined by bookcases; on the fourth was a huge fireplace with a high window nearby. All around, in different locations were comfortable chairs with bridge lamps alongside. Almost tripping over a long wire to one of the lamps, Saltman flopped into a chair, and passed an unsteady hand before his eyes.

"This appointment—it's an opportunity I've dreamed of all my life. I'm to see Tom Sloan at eleven."

Anderson's eyes sharpened. "He's your rival."

Saltman lifted his head, and something akin to a smile took possession of his emaciated features. "Yes. And he's come to me. He needs help. Wants to sell stuff he's been keeping for years, all the best that's come to him. He's got to sell. He's in a jam."

"Postpone it. See him tomorrow."

The smile passed from the little fellow's face. He rubbed his hands, drily. "I—can't do that. It's got to be tonight. Unless—" he added, "I send my partner."

"Then send him. And that's final."

Saltman groaned, and after an anguished moment nodded.

The servants had gone. Saltman paced about the large study, and glanced every so often at the door, then at the clock on his desk. It was eleven thirty.

"Take it easy. Nothing's going to happen to you." Anderson sat near the door, one leg astride an arm of his chair; he smoked casually.

"I wish I could be sure." Saltman took a few more turns around the room, then came up to the detective. "You're going to stay with me, in this room? I'm—afraid; I have a premonition—" -

"Forget it. I'll be right here. And there are men all around the house."

"You'll lock the door?"

"Sure."

Anderson rose, turned to the door. Saltman stuck close to his heels. "You're sure your men are where they should be." And then he added: "I've never had this feeling. It's like an omen, something heavy inside, bearing down—"

Disgruntled, Anderson turned to tell the old fellow that men from Peters Detective Agency stayed where they were told to stay and didn't need checking up. But after all, the man's life had been threatened and he was paying good money for protection; and he did look about ready to flop from fear. Anderson nodded.

"All right. I'll check up." He stepped into the hallway. Saltman took a step after him, then hesitated on the threshold.

"I'll stay here. I'll lock the door." He swung the door. A frown came on his face, peering through a crack. "How'll I know it's you, when you get back?"

"You'll know my voice." Exasperation edged into Anderson's tones.

Saltman clung to his point. "But how will I know you are alone? Someone might be with you, with a gun in your back. I—" His voice broke; he sobbed: "I'm afraid."

Anderson glared at the man. He had never been the kind to have courage; he

was the sort to let others take the risk. His occupation proved it; others staked their lives to steal and they brought their loot to him to have it disposed of; he paid out little and kept most of the profit. It was the same now. He wanted to hole himself up.

Anderson did some quick thinking. He knew the room well. There was only one large window, and he had a man posted outside of it. There was no chance anyone would break in upon Saltman from that source, not without a fight being put up that Anderson would hear.

"All right," he decided. "Lock the door. I'll stay out here."

Saltman locked the door. Anderson started on a round of the house. He visited each of his men. Each was in his proper place, alert. Anderson returned to the front hall and took a position outside the door of the study and waited.

TWELVE O'CLOCK! The hall clock struck the hour. One, two, three, and on.

Anderson had his massive back to the door of Saltman's study. He heard a faint gasp from within the room. Anderson knocked on the door.

Saltman let out a strangled cry.

Anderson knocked again, louder. "All right in there?"

Silence. Then: "That you, Mr. Anderson?" It was Saltman's voice, shaky, childish.

"Yeah. How's things?"

"I'm afraid. Has—has anyone come? Anything happened?"

"No. Nothing's going to happen."

"I—wish I could be—sure. But—" His voice trailed off as he walked away.

Anderson stepped to the outer door. The clock in the hall had stopped its deep booming. He opened the door a few inches. "Everything O.K., Fleming?"

The dick on the top step turned and

grinned. "Sure. But it's a swell night for a murder."

It was at that. The wind had started howling, and the threat of rain was in the air. Wind caught the door, almost crashed it back against the wall. Anderson grabbed it in time.

"Keep an eye over there where Fullerton is outside the window to the study."

"Right."

Anderson stepped back into the house, heard Saltman pacing around, steadily. Anderson went on to a door that led to the kitchen. Everything looked in order there. And outside the rear door another man was located. Once more Anderson swung about; he glanced into the drawing room and dining room and a couple of little alcoves on his return to the hall. Nothing suspicious met his alert eyes anywhere. He flopped into a chair.

Twelve fifteen. The telephone bell jangled harshly.

Anderson rose; there was a telephone further down the hall.

A sound came from within the study. Anderson spun round, headed for the door, listened, then pounded.

"Open up!"

No answer. No sound of approaching feet. He smashed on the door with open palm.

He heard Saltman's voice. Saltman was talking; he had merely gone to answer the phone.

Anderson hurried to the instrument in the hallway, swooped it up in his hand. It might be the anonymous sender of the note that had called.

He got just the tail end of the conversation. The caller's voice, whoever it was, sounded greatly excited and tense, almost choked.

"I— I'm going to leave the country. They'll—come after me. My God! Murdered. Dead. I—" The conversation wound up in an agonized groan.

"Wait!" It was Saltman.

But he was too late. The man who called hung up. "Dead." Saltman said the word. Anderson heard it. "Shot—dead."

The operator broke in. "Number, please?"

Anderson slammed the receiver down, barged to the door of the study, knocked with clenched fist.

"Open up, you little runt, or I'll break the damn door down."

For an instant, there was no response. Anderson put his shoulder to the door to test its strength. And then, weakly: "Wait. Wait."

Anderson heard the key turn in the lock. He spun the knob and pushed open the door. He caught Saltman by the shoulders. "Who was that?"

Saltman was pale and trembling. His mouth was open. He tried to swallow. His eyes roamed away from the detective and he started to turn. Anderson held him secure.

"Answer me, or by God I'll shake it out of you. Who called?"

Saltman faced the detective again, and blinked. "That—that was Ben." Then he collapsed.

ANDERSON held him in his arms, stared at him, then picked him up and carried him to a chair. Saltman had not lost consciousness. He started rolling his head, letting out little gasps.

"What did he do it for? What—"

"You mean Laushway?"

Saltman looked up and nodded.

"He—went to see Sloan? And Sloan—has been murdered?"

Saltman lifted his hands and covered his face. "It's horrible. I can't understand it. I can't believe—"

Anderson was thinking fast. Sloan was dead. Laushway had been first to find the body. Perhaps he had committed the

murder. And he was packing, getting ready to leave town, hastily.

Anderson knew where Laushway lived. Two blocks distant. He made for the door, rushed to the phone. Saltman scurried along after him.

"What are you going to do?"

Anderson spun the dial, got his connection. "Hello, Parkinson? Listen, there's been a murder. Tom Sloan. Yeah, the fence. Laushway knows something about it; he's planning to clear out. He's at his place at the Barrington Apartments now."

He clamped down the receiver, mind racing. By the time Parkinson got to the apartment building, Laushway would have lammed. But if he, Anderson, were to go after him—

Saltman was safe. Anderson had men all around the house. He stared at the little jeweler, whining at his side, then dashed along the hall and scooped up his hat. Saltman leaped after him.

"Where you going?" he cried.

Anderson made no reply.

"You—going to leave me? You're going after—Ben?"

"What the hell do you think?"

Saltman seized the detective by the arm. "But you can't. I hired you. You're working for me."

"You got nothing to worry about."

The little man hung on. "But—I tell you, you can't. He's my partner. I won't let you."

Anderson swung on him. "Listen you, I'm a private dick, but no one's committing murder under my nose and getting away clean if I can help it." He straight-armed the little man back against the wall.

Saltman squealed. Anderson swung open the door.

"Fleming. Stay in here. Lock this guy in his room. I'm off for a few minutes."

Anderson raced down the drive in the blackness of the night. The wind moaned

about him, caught at his trousers and twisted them about his legs, almost tripping him. A few heavy drops of rain broke against his face.

And as he ran he thought of that telephone call. Had it anything to do with the letter Saltman had received? Had Saltman been intended to be the recipient of the bullet instead of Sloan? And if he had been—how did Sloan fit in?

Anderson came out on the next street and spun to the left, crossed a narrow road, quiet in the dead of night, and slid to a stop before an imposing building. He glanced at the name showing on brightly polished brass under a glowing amber lamp. The Barrington. Anderson slapped open the door, stepped into a small vestibule.

On his right was an electric elevator. He stepped into it, and as he did a buzzer sounded. The elevator rose to the sixth floor. Stopped. The door flung open.

THERE directly before Anderson, stood a slim, rather tall man. His dark eyes had a haunted look. He brushed into the elevator. Anderson stayed where he was, noticed the suitcase, with part of a cravat hanging out.

The man turned to Anderson. "I'm in a hurry. So if you're getting out—"

Anderson shook his head: "I'm not. I came for you, Laushway."

The man's eyes widened. He said nothing for a minute, shaking perceptibly. "Who are you?"

Anderson ushered him from the elevator. At the door of it, however, Laushway refused to go further. "I'm in a hurry. I haven't time to—to—"

"To talk about Sloan's murder?"

Laushway stared, paled; his lower lip trembled uncontrollably. "How—how—" He could say no more. Anderson took him again by the arm and this time half shoved him out of the elevator. They

stood outside the door to Laushway's apartment.

"Open the door," Anderson said. "We'll go inside and wait until the cops come."

Laushway turned to him suddenly new hope in his frantic eyes. "You're not a detective?"

Anderson shook his head. "Private dick."

Reason returned to the tall man; a cunning, shrewd look flashed into his eyes as he passed his scrutiny up and down Anderson, hastily.

"I have money. I'll pay. I—"

"Save your breath," Anderson broke in. "If you're guilty, you'll fry, skinny as you are. If you're not, I'll help you. Come on, take out your keys."

Laushway studied him for some time. Anderson prodded him on the elbow, whereupon Laushway drew a packet of keys from his pocket and unlocked the door, docilely, with a deep sigh. Then, like a flash, he streaked onto the room, swung the door behind him.

Anderson's foot caught the slamming door; he grinned, shouldered him way in. "Not so fast."

Laushway backed to the wall, wild, terror stricken. In his hand he clutched an automatic. "Get out. Get out—or I'll shoot."

"Don't be a fool."

"Get out!" Laushway's voice was shrill, cracked. Anderson held his eyes. He knew that expression. Laushway was near the breaking point. He was almost out of his mind, would stop at nothing. Anderson lifted his blocky shoulders.

"O. K.," he said. He swung slowly. Then, lightning-like, he reversed his swing, lowered his huge body, and flung himself on the slim Laushway.

Laushway let out a shrill cry, surprised and frightened by the sudden charge. The gun in his hand loosened, unmindfully,

and Anderson seized it, wrenched it from his grasp.

"I told you you were a fool." Anderson grunted, backed away, then glanced to the wall, and found the light switch. He snapped it on. Dim light flooded the little room. Anderson nodded to an adjoining room, and pocketed Laushway's gun.

Moaning and shaking, Laushway turned and entered the larger room to the left. It was a moderate sized living room, comfortably furnished. Anderson followed the jeweler closely, and snapped on the lights as he entered.

TO ANDERSON'S right was a broad window with a low sill. Light from an opposite apartment, across the air well, illuminated the panes of glass and made the now pouring, splashing rain look like glistening jewels as it broke into hundreds of drops, streaking downward. A sudden crash sounded, deafening, reverberating. Thunder. The lights in the room dimmed, and the lightning from without streaked and flashed.

And like a wildcat, Laushway charged. He landed in frenzied fury against the detective's heavier body. Anderson went sidewise, headed for the low window.

He flung out his arms. Glass crashed, splintered and jingled to the floor. Anderson felt his body swing outward. His fingers caught on something. He grasped it, held on. He was dangling, swinging wide in a fast-descending arc. Glass showered all about him, powdery bits falling into his face, larger pieces slicing, scratching, bringing quick spurts of warm blood.

Now— For an instant his body stopped in its downward plunge. Balanced. Swayed dizzily over the hard court below. The drapery to which Anderson clung barely supported his weight. It was flimsy stuff. And the brackets were weak; wood cracked, screws wrenched loose. The ma-

terial gave and stretched. Precariously, Anderson held on, and inched himself inward. Now, another careful, smooth turn of his body—

He got his knee on the sill, climbed inside, let out a caught breath, and shook the glass from his face. Blood splashed from a cut on his chin, slithered over the smooth floor. He applied his handkerchief to the wound, looked around. Laushway had cleared out.

Recovering his hat from the door and battering the jagged glass from it, he bounded toward the elevator. Blood streaked down his chin to his neck.

Anderson noted by a small dial over the door that the elevator was still descending. He turned; a few feet to the right was a door. He opened it, and saw that it led to a staircase. He started down, two and three steps at a time, occasionally leaping almost half a flight to the landing beyond.

He reached the street some minutes after Laushway, looked in all directions. Laushway had disappeared.

A car streaked to the curb. Anderson shot dark eyes at the men that leaped out. Inspector Donald Parkinson was at their head. Two detectives trailed him.

Anderson said: "Spread out. Cover the block. He's skipped." Anderson dashed across the street, plunging into the blackness between the houses opposite, came out on the adjacent road. He saw no one, went on, peering behind thick hedges, under heavy bushes, in pitch black corners. Vainly.

He returned to the Barrington in a sullen mood, soaking wet. The wind had increased its fury; it screamed and whistled like devils gone mad.

Parkinson had already returned to the apartment building. He saw Anderson and walked to meet him. "What the hell happened?" Rain streamed down his broad face, the wind flattened the felt brim of

his hat down over his eyes. "How did you find out about Laushway?"

"I was at his partner's house. Doing some work for him. Laushway called on the phone, told of the murder, and said he was clearing out. So I beat it over here. And got this." He indicated the deep cut on his chin, daubing at it again. Blood was smeared by the rain all over his face.

"How did you get that?"

"Laushway pulled a gat on me. Then shoved me out of a window; the hangings saved me. When I got back into the room, Laushway was gone."

Parkinson nodded. One after the other of his men returned, both alone. Parkinson turned to one of them. "Go upstairs. See what you can find. I'm going over to the place Sloan was murdered. Report there." He turned to Anderson. "Coming along?"

Anderson shook his head, and started back to Saltman's place.

FLEMING opened the door in response to Anderson's pounding. Fleming was pale; his eyes held a baffled look. Anderson seized him.

"What happened?"

Fleming glanced out into the night, shut the door.

"Saltman?" Anderson barked.

Fleming shook his head. "Fullerton. He's dead."

Anderson stared, said nothing for a moment. Then: "Where is he? How did it happen?"

"Back there. In that little room on the right. I heard a shot and looked out. And there he was, outside Saltman's window. Dead."

Anderson headed down the hall, and threw open the door to the small alcove. There, stretched on the floor and under the warm rays of a floor lamp, lay Fullerton. Anderson stared at him a while, one of the best men he had. A hard look

crept into his eyes. He turned. Fleming was at the door, standing out in the hall.

"Saltman's been raising hell," he said. "Wants to know where you were, what you were doing. He must be almost nuts by now."

Anderson said nothing. Neither did he move.

"Looks like someone tried to get the old man through the window, but Fullerton surprised them. So they got Fullerton."

Anderson lifted his eyes. "Fullerton's no slouch. If he surprised anyone he had the drop on 'em—and would have kept it." He stepped to the door.

"Saltman's O. K.?"

"As far as I know, he is. He was a few minutes ago."

Anderson made for Saltman's door, knocked. "Open up."

Saltman could be heard hurrying to the door; he hesitated at the lock. "Who—is it?"

"Anderson. Let me in."

The knob turned; the lock failed to click. "Are—are you alone?"

"Open the door." Anderson's voice carried a sharp note, impatient.

Saltman spun the key in the lock and opened the door the merest fraction, peering out. Anderson snatched open the door, throwing the little man back into the room as he brushed in. Saltman gawked, eyes wide with fear. He peered around the huge form of the private detective, saw Fullerton, then scurried and shut the door and locked it. He turned his bloodless face to the detective.

"What—was that shot? It came from outside my window there. I— And where were you? And—Ben—"

Anderson, near a chair, stepped over the lamp wire, confronted the man. "What did you hear?"

Saltman swallowed. "What—did I hear?"

"Outside of the shot. Were there any words, anything?"

Saltman shook his head, then a moment later shook it again, more vigorously. "No. Nothing. Just the shot."

Anderson studied him, snorted, made for the window and drew back the heavy draperies.

"Don't do that. Someone might be out there, trying to kill me."

"They had their chance. And didn't take it."

Gregory, who had been posted out back, was before the window. He turned, nodded.

Anderson faced Saltman again, hugging the wall, out of range of the window.

"You mean a man was murdered, right outside your window, and you didn't hear a thing other than the shot. With you listening as you have?"

Saltman shook his head, eyes sharper. "I heard only the shot. That's all. Just—the shot." His lips tightened, and he seemed to shrink into the wall as he cringed there, like some strange animal. He stared hard at Anderson. "The storm killed all other sounds. I heard—only the shot."

Anderson's eyes bored into his, "Whoever got Fullerton killed him deliberately to get a shot at you through the window. Which they didn't do. Or—"

A TERRIFIC gust of wind smashed the driving rain against the glass of the window. The wind made a sound in the fireplace, like a deep gasping sigh. Anderson stared at the fireplace. He had given it little attention earlier in the evening.

He stepped toward it, eyes hard. Saltman watched him closely. Before the hearth were several dark spots on the thick rug. Anderson stooped. Touched one with his fingers, rubbed the ends of

his fingers together. And looked up, into the fireplace itself. Then he whirled to face a man gone mad, whose face was livid, whose eyes flamed with the fire of insanity. Saltman confronted him, shaking, sweating, in his strangely steady hand a revolver.

Anderson, feet spread apart, glared at the little man. "You rat. You got me out of the room to look over the house. You killed Sloan. You have a secret entrance through your fireplace here. You slipped out, killed Sloan, slipped back in. If it hadn't been raining, you wouldn't have wet your rug." He stared at Saltman's feet. His shoes were still wet. Anderson grunted, took a step forward. Saltman went back.

"You hired me to protect you, pretending your life had been threatened. You wrote the damn note yourself. Then you had Laushway take your place, and had him call on Sloan to put through the deal. And when your partner arrived—he feared he would be suspected of the killing. That might have given you Sloan's jewels and your partner's half of your business. A double clean-up."

Anderson took another forward step. Saltman held his ground. And grinned. A low hectic laugh issued from his skinny throat. Anderson pointed a finger.

"Then you got Fullerton. He'd seen

you. Either that, or you were afraid he had. So you went out again after I left to chase your partner and shot Fullerton."

Saltman was beside his chair now. Suddenly the grin went from his face. Murder flashed in his flaming little eyes.

Anderson took another step. He saw Saltman's finger contract, steadily.

Now— Anderson's foot edged under a loop in the lamp wire. He kicked, viciously. The lamp toppled down, directly before the jeweler.

Saltman jumped. Then fired. But the falling lamp had surprised him, spoiled his aim.

Anderson dove, and closed with him as another shot ripped out. He felt a tug on his coat sleeve as the bullet tore through, missing his arm. His fist swung, crashed against Saltman's jaw. And Saltman sagged, all fight suddenly gone from his puny body.

Anderson straightened and pocketed Saltman's gun. The door smashed in, and Fleming, gun drawn, charged into the room. His eyes passed from Anderson to the jeweler, an inert lump aside his chair. He looked back at his chief.

Anderson said: "Call up Parkinson. He's over at Sloan's place in the Colonial Arms. Tell him to come over to hear a new version of an old alibi. We've got a killer for him."

IN THE JANUARY 1st ISSUE

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Gripping Complete Murder-Action Novelettes by

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Masters of Detective Thrill Fiction

COFFIN CARLOAD

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and

TURN ON THE HEAT

A Peter Kane Story

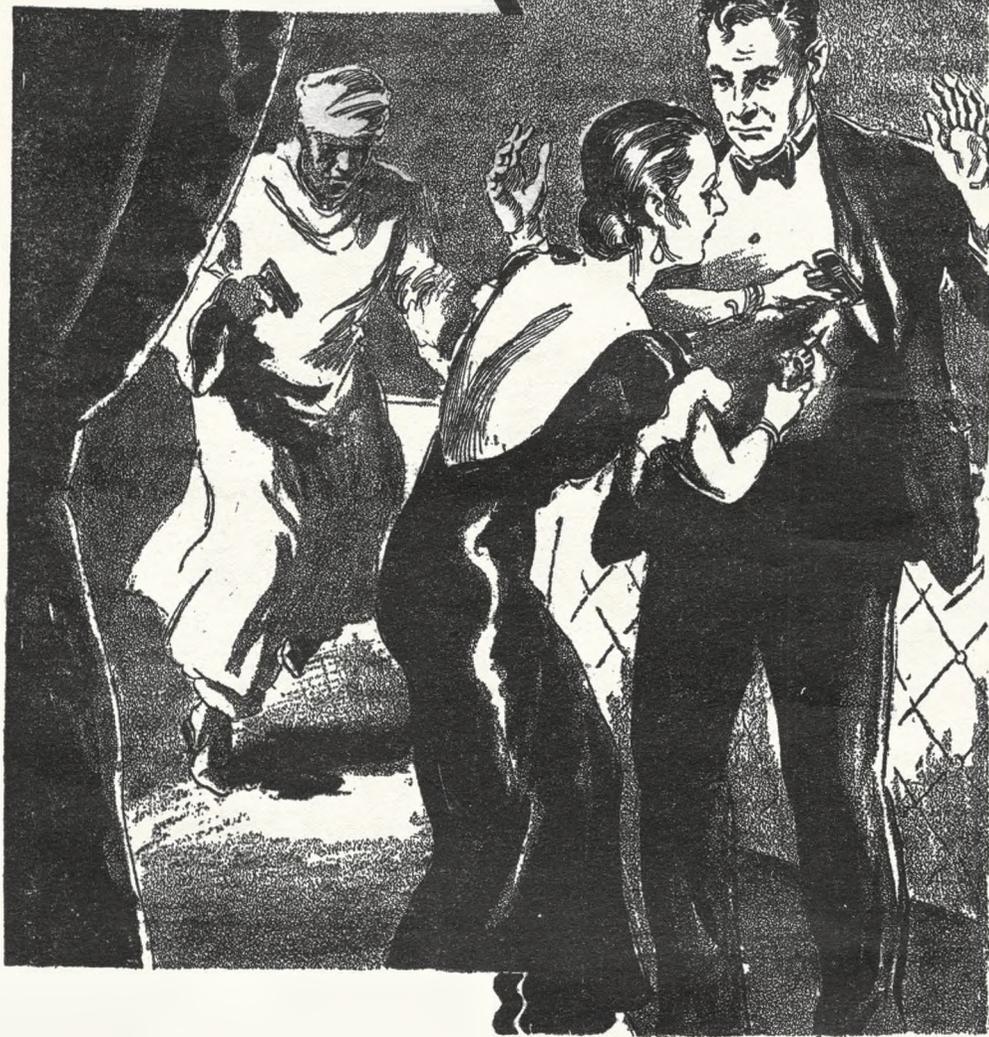
By **HUGH B. CAVE**



DIME DETECTIVE
for
JANUARY 1st

It will be out
on
DECEMBER 14th

THE RED WIZARD



CHAPTER ONE

Debutante Kill

THE big office of Martin Sadtler, on the second floor of the Clarion Building resembled, as usual, the lair of a whirlwind. Martin Sadtler—that bull-necked, bull-voiced dynamo of energy, who had made his first million raising great bridges and tall buildings, and

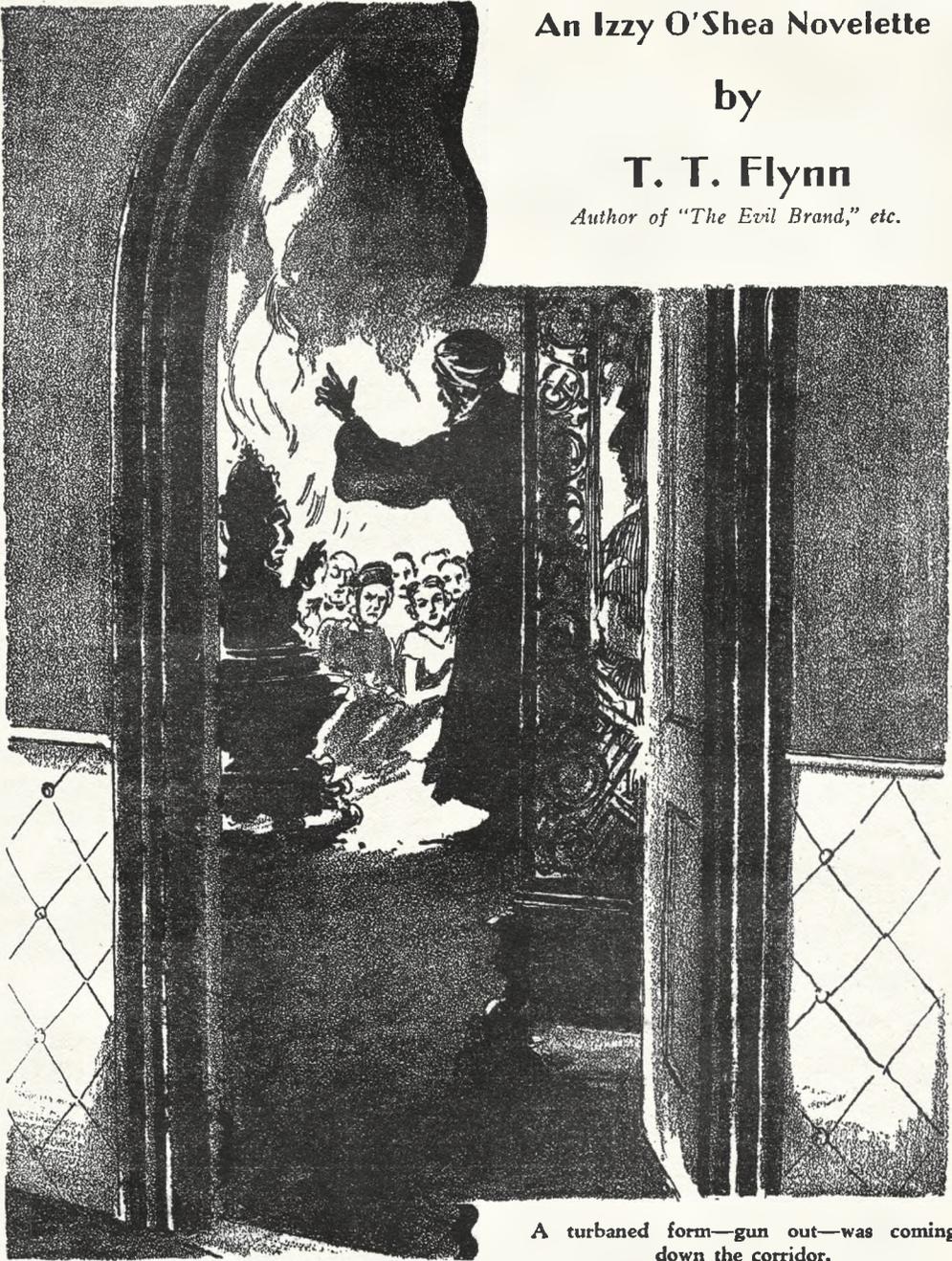
*Chandra Lal. he called himself, secrets of the East. But O'Shea, in-
for what he really was, knew the
that master of all evil. the Brain,
murder if*

An Izzy O'Shea Novelette

by

T. T. Flynn

Author of "The Evil Brand," etc.



A turbaned form—gun out—was coming down the corridor.

claiming knowledge of all the vestigator extraordinary, knew him bearded giant was only a tool of and could point a path straight to taken unawares.

his second million by jacking up the circulation of the *Clarion* to dizzy heights—was in fine form. He rushed about with such fury that a casual visitor could well have believed the *Clarion* was rushing out extras on some great national disaster. But Martin Sadtler and the *Clarion* were merely functioning normally.

Harris, the perfect male secretary, disrupted the feverish routine when he popped through the doorway and said with a touch of awe—

"There's a young lady outside who says she's just killed her father-in-law. She wants to talk to you about it."

"Eh? What's that?" Martin Sadtler jerked his eyes from the letter he had been scanning.

"She says," Harris repeated, "that she has just killed her father-in-law."

Martin Sadtler slammed the letter down. "Hell and damnation! I heard you the first time! What does she want? I can't help her father-in-law. If he's dead, he's dead! Tell her to go to the coroner."

"Yes, sir," said Harris, turning to the door. "I imagine the coroner will be interested. Her father-in-law is Harvey Jamison."

"Huh? What? Wait, you idiot!" Martin Sadtler's bellow plucked Harris back from the door. "Why in the devil didn't you say so in the first place?"

"Yes, sir," said Harris.

"Is it the Jamison of the Guaranty Trust?"

"Yes, sir. She mentioned shooting him before he started to the bank!"

"You idiot! Why didn't you tell me? Jamison's daughter-in-law! She was a Deane before she married Jamison's eldest son."

"Yes, sir."

"Stop yessing me. I'll fire you again for that! Show her in. And you'd better get a doctor. I imagine she's all to pieces."

"Yes, sir," Harris said in a peculiar tone. "I'll send her in."

Martin Sadtler pushed back the papers on his desk, snatched a thick black cigar from a cedar humidor, changed his mind, slammed it back, started to the door.

Solicitude went with him. A young girl who had just killed her father-in-law would need careful handling. Un-

doubtedly she was near collapse. Sympathy, kindness, gentleness would help her talk properly, get her pictures taken in the art department, make her realize that only in the *Clarion* would she find that help which would see her through the trial to the best advantage.

On second thought he charged back to the desk, flicked a lever on the inter-office annunciator and snapped: "Sadtler speaking!"

The weary tones of Bill Knight, down at the city desk, came back promptly. "O. K., boss, let's have it snappy. I'm in a hell of a hurry."

Bill Knight was the only man in the organization who could talk to Sadtler that way; but then there was only one Bill Knight.

"Hold the next edition! Make room on the front page for a full-column spread! The biggest break of the week is just coming in."

"Yeah?" said Bill Knight. "What is it? I've got a sweet front page now."

"Jamison, of the Guaranty Trust, has just been killed by his daughter-in-law! And we're getting it, exclusively, I think."

"Holy smoke!" Bill Knight's voice exploded out of the annunciator box. "I can use plenty of that. Where's the daughter-in-law? Where's the body? When did it happen?"

"She's coming into my office now. Have a good man ready to see her. I'll leave this turned on so you can get it."

MARTIN SADTLER turned away as Harris opened the door and she came in. "My dear young lady," he said, going to her, "this is a shocking thing for you, I know. I hope I can assist—"

Martin Sadtler broke off, batting his eyes. For the slim young woman who walked serenely into his office was smiling.

"Good morning, Mr. Sadtler," she said, and gave him her hand.

Martin Sadtler's hand was limp. His look at Harris, standing in the doorway, was shot with dawning suspicion.

Harris interpreted the look aright. For he appeared weak and limp himself as he said: "This is Mrs. Jamison who—uh—wanted to see you about her father-in-law." And behind his glasses Harris's eyes had a dazed look as he retreated and closed the door.

Young Mrs. Jamison glanced about the office. "You have a lovely place to work," she remarked.

Thinking of Bill Knight, down on the city desk with his ears glued to the annunciator, Martin Sadtler almost choked. His tenderness vanished. His sympathy took wings. His gentleness roughened with some of the usual Sadtler gruffness.

"Young woman!" said Martin Sadtler severely. "Why did you use a wild story like that to get in here to see me?"

"Wild story?" The smile remained on her face—almost a fixed smile. Stylish clothes, perfect make-up, rather diminutive, she seemed almost gay as she took the chair before the desk with perfect composure. She leaned back, rested her head against the leather roll at the top and smiled up at him.

"Look here!" said Martin Sadtler with rapidly mounting suspicion. "You're not Mrs. Jamison. You used her name to get in here."

She only smiled. Her eyes were a queer dark violet, which somehow did not match the rest of her manner. Unsmiling and set, they moved ponderously when they moved at all. For the most part, since she had entered, they had been fixed in a straight stare.

"Of course I am Mrs. Jamison," she replied. "Mrs. Harvey Jamison, Junior. Would you care to see one of my cards?"

From a soft leather purse she took a bit of pasteboard, handed it to him.

The card was engraved, *Mrs. Harvey Jamison, Jr.* Authentic enough. For that matter she herself was authentic enough in clothes, bearing and manner. The diamond ring nestling against her wedding ring could have been pawned for the yearly salary of one of Martin Sadtler's star reporters.

Martin Sadtler drew a deep breath, waved the card weakly at her.

"What's this about your father-in-law? He's all right, isn't he? Nothing the matter with him?"

And Mrs. Harvey Jamison, Junior, replied promptly: "I'm sure father is all right. You see, I just shot him about fifteen minutes ago."

THERE are times when speech is inadequate to take care of a situation. This was one of them. Martin Sadtler, whose skill with words and profanity was famed far and wide, stood there in his own office and found nothing to say.

And down at Bill Knight's desk in the city room strange reactions were also taking place. Something like a hoarse croak issued from the annunciator on Sadtler's desk. Bill Knight sounded as if he were having a spasm.

Martin Sadtler reached over and cut off the instrument, isolating him in the room with his visitor. She was smiling brightly.

His heavy cheeks flushed. These younger members of the social set went to great lengths at times to put over a joke. Without speaking to her, Sadtler picked up the telephone, said to the girl at the switchboard: "Get me the Guaranty Trust—Mr. Jamison's office."

He waited. Mrs. Jamison said: "I'm sure you won't find Father Jamison there. I left him in the garage at the house. The chauffeur is sick today and father

was going to drive in himself. I'm sure no one has found him yet."

In the telephone the crisp voice of a woman said: "Mr. Jamison's office."

Martin Sadtler barked: "Mr. Jamison, please. This is Martin Sadtler, of the *Clarion*."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Sadtler. Mr. Jamison has not arrived yet. We are expecting him any minute. The house has informed us he left for the office half an hour ago. Will you leave a message?"

"Tell him to call me when he arrives."

"But I'm sure he won't arrive," Mrs. Harvey Jamison, Junior, remarked gayly. "He was quite dead when I left him. See, here is the gun I killed him with."

From the leather purse she took a small automatic pistol, with mother-of-pearl inlaid in the grip. A dainty little thing; a harmless-appearing weapon in her small hand. And yet when Martin Sadtler snatched it, he saw that the gun was chambered for large-caliber bullets.

He sniffed the muzzle, got the rank smell of burnt powder. The gun had been fired very recently.

He switched on the annunciator, snapped: "Knight, send a man to Jamison's house! Have him look in the garage and see what he finds."

"O. K.," said Bill Knight sourly. "If he finds any old inner tubes, I'll tell him to bring 'em back. What shall I do with this page? I've got about ten minutes to put it to bed."

"Let it go as is," Martin Sadtler decided. "Er—uh—I'm looking into the other matter."

"Yeah—I heard you," Bill Knight said dryly before he was cut off.

She sat there in the leather chair quietly, as if certain everything were right with the world, with herself and with Martin Sadtler. In her early twenties, her face was unmarked by trouble. She was pretty, calm and very poised. Her hands were ut-

terly relaxed, her legs under sheer stockings were quite the prettiest legs that had been in that office for a long time.

Martin Sadtler sat on the edge of his desk, took a deep breath, managed to speak calmly and with control.

"So you killed your father-in-law?"

Her smile had swiftly faded. She said slowly, carefully: "I shot him twice. Once in the head and once in the neck. He moved, but I'm quite sure he is dead, Mr. Sadtler. I wish you would believe me." A faint frown of worry came on her forehead.

"Hrrmmmmph—I believe you, in spite of myself. Why did you kill him?" Sadtler said.

The faint frown remained. She turned her head so that her glance met his intently. And once more Martin Sadtler became conscious of the fixed stare in her deep violet eyes.

"Why—why, I don't believe I know," she admitted.

MMARTIN SADTLER winced. He was suddenly baffled. He couldn't make anything out of this. It was fantastic, insane. So he spoke harshly.

"You shot your father-in-law—and don't know why you did it?"

She said, "No," and seemed more puzzled than ever.

He turned the little automatic over in his thick fingers. "Why did you come here to me? And bring this gun with you?"

"I thought you should know," she replied. "Didn't I do right?" She seemed more anxious than ever.

"Of course, of course. But—er—we've never met. I hardly know your father-in-law, Mrs. Jamison. What made you so sure I should know about this?"

And Martin Sadtler could not have told himself why the increasing gruffness of his manner suddenly departed, so that

he was talking to her with all the gentleness he had originally intended.

She was not cheerful now. She was trying to think. The strain of it was apparent on her face. And slowly she shook her head.

"I really don't know," she confessed. "It just seemed to me that you must know. So I came here and—and—"

"And now what are you going to do?"

"Do?" Her mind groped. She said uncertainly: "I don't know. What should I do? Please tell me."

Martin Sadtler shifted impatiently on the edge of his desk. He found himself watching her face with growing intensity. He was seeing things there which he had not noticed up until this moment. At first glance her pretty face was well matured; but moment by moment it seemed more like a child's face. The smiles, the brightness, the self-assurance had been mechanical, on the surface. Under that she was blank—blank as the stare in her deep violet eyes.

"Don't you realize what you've done?" he asked her. "You've committed murder. You have the law to face. It means the police, arrest, lawyers, a trial."

Martin Sadtler was talking to her as if she were a child, a small girl, who needed such things expounded. She evidently did need some explanation, for her eyes were very wide, and understanding still seemed remote.

"I killed him," she said, as if her mind clung to that one concrete fact. Then added: "And I came here and told you about it."

"Had you quarreled with your father-in-law? Was there any trouble?"

She said: "There must have been, mustn't there?"

Martin Sadtler got to his feet. "Will you excuse me for a moment?" he begged.

She did not answer. As he went to the

door, she was staring at the molding on the opposite wall.

Harris jumped up from the desk in his cubby-hole office through which all things passed to reach Martin Sadtler. Harris's eyes were bright with curiosity, which increased by bounds as Martin Sadtler said: "Ask Doctor Johnston to come to my office at once. If he is unable to make it, try Doctor Reese, at Mercy Hospital. And I'm seeing no one for the next hour or so."

Back in the office, she was still staring at the molding without noticing the low urgent buzz from the annunciator on the desk. He answered it. Bill Knight's voice crackled sharply,

"I've got a quick report. Want it?"

"Let's have it."

"The body's there. A gardener had just gone into the garage and discovered it. The thing's out now. I've stalled the page. I can slap this in it."

"Anything known other than the finding of the body?"

"Not yet."

"Run a story about the body. Lay off anything else until it gets out."

Bill Knight argued: "We've got a scoop here. Plenty big. Lemme have all of it."

"You heard me!" Martin Sadtler barked. He cut off the annunciator just as the telephone rang at his elbow.

Mrs. Jamison paid no attention to his remarks. Her eyes were still fixed on the molding. Sadtler watched her with fascination as he answered the telephone.

"Yes?" he said impatiently.

A calm, even voice, tinged slightly with mockery, said: "Martin Sadtler?"

As the voice registered, Martin Sadtler straightened alertly; became tense. Mrs. Harvey Jamison was forgotten. He reached for a push-button and jabbed it viciously.

"This is Martin Sadtler!" he snapped into the telephone.

"Ah," said the voice, and the mockery was more pronounced. "I see that you recognize me. Quite right, my dear Sadtler. This is the Brain speaking."

HARRIS popped in, blinking behind his glasses. Martin Sadtler clapped his hand over the telephone, said hoarsely: "Trace this call! It's the Brain!"

No other name could have whirled Harris back to his desk as that one did. Harris knew the bitter hatred Martin Sadtler bore for the man who called himself "The Brain."

Sadtler's own daughter had been kidnaped by the Brain. Sadtler's star reporter had been murdered. Sadtler, himself, had been threatened as he challenged crime in general and the Brain in particular in smashing editorials signed with his own name.

The Brain personified vicious cunning of a new type in the underworld. The man, whoever he was, was not a super-criminal. But he had brought intelligence to crime, fear and discipline which the underworld had not previously known.

While Harris hastened to trace the call, the calm, slightly mocking voice continued to address Martin Sadtler.

"I have a bit of information for your next edition, Sadtler. You have chosen to inform the world about me, to continue your tirades against crime."

Martin Sadtler found his voice; and it came bitter and harsh with anger. "I've only started, damn you! I'm in this with every dollar and all the influence I've got. I'll have you hunted down like a sheep-killing dog! And when it's over I'll be there to see you cook in the electric chair!"

The Brain chuckled.

"A charming picture, Sadtler," the Brain said. "I trust it adds zest to your days and nights. I suppose even a blundering fool like you must have something to occupy his mind. Meanwhile, I suggest

you stop trying to have this call traced. You can't. My information is this. Harvey Jamison, president of the Guaranty Trust, was shot by his daughter-in-law a short time ago. That is something sensational to print in your paper."

"What do you know about that business?"

Martin Sadtler's knuckles were white about the telephone. His glance involuntarily shifted to the girl in the chair. She was still sitting there in that passive manner, gazing at the wall. Smile gone, she had turned wooden, remote, unheeding.

"I know most of the things which happen in this city," the Brain said calmly. "I know the daughter-in-law is in your office now. I merely called to remind you, Sadtler, that since you find it necessary to rant and rave about crime, you might include such highly respectable people. Murder is murder. You want sensation. You have it in this case. There may be more of it to keep your mind off me."

"What d'you mean?" Martin Sadtler yelled.

He received no reply. Sadtler slammed the instrument on the desk and charged out into Harris's little office.

"Got it traced?" he demanded furiously.

Harris was holding a telephone. He shrugged uneasily. "The operator is still trying to trace it."

"Hell and damnation!" Sadtler exploded. "There would be delay at a time like this! Here—give me that!"

Sadtler juggled the hook furiously; but he had to wait long seconds before the operator replied.

"I'm sorry, we're unable to trace the call. Your party has been disconnected for some time. Will you speak to the chief operator?"

"Damn the chief operator!" Sadtler yelled. He deposited the telephone on Harris's desk with force enough to wreck it, and fixed Harris with a glare.

"The Brain is at it again, Harris!"

"Yes, sir."

"He knew about Jamison's death—knew the daughter-in-law was here!"

"Yes, sir."

"He's mixed in it some way!"

"Yes, sir."

"Stop yessing me! Haven't I got enough on my mind without you bleating like a spectacled parrot every time I open my mouth? I'll fire you yet!"

"Yes, sir," said Harris enthusiastically.

For a moment it looked as if Harris was to be fired again. Sadtler swelled, took a deep breath—and suddenly calmed, demanding: "You get a doctor?"

"Yes, sir. Doctor Reese is coming from Mercy Hospital."

"Good. Call Izzy O'Shea and tell him to come at once. This is something for him to crack."

CHAPTER TWO

Distinguished Counsel for the People

IZZY O'SHEA'S feet hit the floor with a thump. "The Brain is at it again. I knew he couldn't keep quiet for long."

Blacky, of O'Shea and Black, was cool and smart as always as she swung around from her own desk accusingly. "You come to life as soon as there's a chance that you'll get killed or have to kill someone," she sniffed.

Izzy O'Shea chuckled as he stood up. He was tall, loose-jointed, and had black curly hair and a youthful, sensitive face. He moved awkwardly. But his hand suddenly vanished under his coat and came forth with speed almost impossible to credit. In the palm, masked from sight, he held a small, chubby Mauser automatic.

Blacky visibly shuddered.

"Every time you do that, Izzy, I go creepy. You—you have death in your eyes."

Izzy chuckled again as he removed the clip, examined it, put it back, and replaced the Mauser under his coat.

"Softy," he said. "You've never seen a killer when he goes for you. There's no time to make eyes."

Izzy opened the top drawer of his desk as he spoke. From it he took two extra clips for the Mauser.

"I'm off," he said. "Wait here. I'll call you."

A half hour later, Izzy O'Shea was confronting Martin Sadtler.

Still hatless, he seemed taller, more awkward than ever as he shambled into the publisher's private office and looked helplessly at the scene being enacted there.

Martin Sadtler stood by his desk, fists jammed against his hips. He was scowling. In a deep leather chair before the desk a young woman sat relaxed, head back. Over her a man was bending, shining a tiny, brilliant light into her eyes. His other hand held her wrist. As Izzy came into the room the doctor straightened and released the wrist. It dropped limply to the padded arm of the chair.

The doctor's short, black mustache covered an incisive mouth. He spoke curtly to Martin Sadtler. "She's in a stupor. Can't seem to get through it here. I'll call an ambulance and take her to the hospital."

"Go ahead, Doctor," Martin Sadtler agreed, pushing the telephone over. "Hello, O'Shea. Take a look at this. Some of The Brain's doing. This is Harvey Jamison's daughter-in-law. Jamison of the Guaranty Trust. She shot Jamison a little while ago and came here to tell me about it. Doctor, d'you think she may have taken poison?"

"I doubt it," the doctor said, waiting, telephone in hand for the connection to go through. "She appears to be hypnotized."

THE doctor got his number, asked for an ambulance, put the telephone down.

"Hypnotized," Martin Sadtler repeated softly. "HMMMMMM. Something new. Doctor Reese—Mr. O'Shea, a detective who'll be working on this."

"Detective?" The doctor looked a bit puzzled as he took in the tall, awkward figure before him. He was not impressed. "Don't go off half-cocked about hypnotism," he advised both of them. "It's vastly overrated. Fiction stories are usually fantastic about it."

Martin Sadtler looked disappointed. "What a story it'd make."

"Doubtless," Doctor Reese agreed dryly. "But you'd probably be wrong in most of your facts. Hypnotism is possible, of course. I've done it. Witnessed an operation several years ago that was performed on a patient under hypnosis. But it takes an expert and the right conditions, including the right patient. Each case has to stand and fall on its own merits."

"What happened?" Izzy O'Shea questioned apologetically.

Martin Sadtler gave him the story tersely, forcefully. The doctor was an interested listener.

Izzy O'Shea fidgeted awkwardly during the telling. However, his eyes were bright, alert, scanning everything in sight, coming back to the young woman in the chair. She was conscious, in full health, seemingly aware that they were speaking, but unconcerned with them. Her cheeks were pale, her dark eyes fixed, unseeing.

Izzy O'Shea inspected the gun she had brought, handling it gingerly with a handkerchief. Her purse was on the floor by the chair where it had fallen. He picked it up.

"Did you look in this?" he asked.

Sadtler shook his head.

Izzy stepped to the desk, turned the contents out on the blotter. A vanity case, bills, small change, a jade-colored mechan-

ical pencil, a little red leather-covered memorandum book comprised the lot. He inspected the memorandum book.

While he was doing that, Martin Sadtler spoke curtly.

"Get her back to normal as soon as you can, Doctor. She's got to tell us more. This isn't just another murder case. She's not the killer type. She belongs to one of our best families. She's never been in any scandal, never had any trouble. I had her looked up in the morgue while I was waiting for you. Just a normal, happy young wife—then she shoots her father-in-law. It smells funny to me."

"I'll do the best I can, Mr. Sadtler."

Izzy O'Shea suggested thoughtfully: "If it happened to her, it might happen to others. Your wife, for instance, Doctor. Not a very pleasant picture, is it?" he sighed. "Well, I guess there's nothing more I can do here. I'll be getting on."

Martin Sadtler's eyes bored at him. "I see you're taking that notebook out of her purse. Got something in mind?"

"No," said Izzy. "I just thought I'd look at it later. I'm going out to the Jamison house. You two might forget about this notebook for a while. Uh—are you going to turn her over to the police?"

Martin Sadtler hesitated. "I don't know," he confessed. "I don't think they know about her yet."

"Don't," Izzy advised. "They'll railroad her through without a chance on what she's admitted. She's helpless now."

Martin Sadtler scowled at him. "Want me to break the law, huh?"

"Just bent it a little," Izzy grinned.

"She shot the man. No doubt of it. She admitted it and she'll never have a chance. Can you feature," said Martin Sadtler, "a nitwit jury egged on by a hard-boiled prosecutor paying much attention to anything like hypnotism?"

"Not after the crusade you've been mak-

ing against crime in the *Clarion*," Izzy grinned. "The public is all primed for a victim. She's as good as anybody for the slaughter. And she'll probably be the fall guy," said Izzy, turning to the door, "unless you keep her away from the law long enough to turn something up in her favor."

From the doorway, Izzy finished: "If the Brain has anything to do with this, there ought to be a lot in her favor. Give me time to find it!"

Izzy O'Shea shambled awkwardly out.

Doctor Reese looked after him, shook his head, said under his breath with the suggestion of a snort: "If that young fellow is a detective, then I'm still an interne. He'll fall over himself one of these days and never get untangled."

Martin Sadtler smiled grimly.

"That's what I thought when I first saw him," he said. "I've changed my mind since then."

THE Jamison house was cut stone, solid, substantial, as befitted the solid and substantial head of a big bank. At least an acre of ground surrounded the mansion. The lawn was well kept, the big elm trees tall and spreading. Bushes screened the driveway.

The news had spread. A stolid policeman kept onlookers from crowding across the lawn to the house. He lifted a restraining arm to Izzy, said gruffly: "You can't go in there."

"Queer," said Izzy. "I'm from the *Clarion*. You people trying to cover something up?"

"Why'n't you say so in the first place?" the cop grumbled. "O. K."

Activity centered about the big stone garage behind the house. Patrolmen, detectives, newspapermen were there. The garage doors were rolled back. A coroner's assistant was inspecting the body in the front seat of a big gray sedan. A

police photographer was setting up his camera. A fingerprintman was dusting powder on the car door.

Loucke, the dandified assistant district attorney, was talking to two newspapermen as Izzy came up.

"It wasn't suicide," Loucke was saying. "He couldn't have shot himself in the back of the neck that way. We'll make an arrest in a short time."

"How about a conviction?" Izzy chuckled at Loucke's shoulder.

The assistant district attorney wheeled, frowning. "You here?" he burst out with irritation. "Now what? The family hasn't retained you, have they?"

"I'm investigating for the *Clarion*, sweetheart. And if the distinguished counsel for the people does his stuff right, maybe he'll get his picture in the paper. That'll make the day perfect, won't it?"

"Listen, you mug!" Loucke said through his teeth. "You're in my hair too much these days. Want me to run you away from here?"

"Try it," Izzy invited cheerfully. "The *Clarion* will pan you so hard the mayor will yelp for your resignation. The *Clarion* is out for action. I'm the action today, sweetheart."

Loucke's thin face was red with anger. But he eyed the two grinning reporters beside them, shrugged, said sulkily: "Harvey Jamison was murdered. His wife collapsed when they found the body. The servants say they all thought Jamison had driven off to the bank. The gardener looked in the garage a little while ago, saw the car, and found Jamison dead behind the wheel. He had been shot through the head and through the neck."

"And no one heard the shots?"

"No."

"And the garage doors were closed?"

"You heard me say so," Loucke said sarcastically.

"Leisurely killers they have around here

to close the doors after Jamison was shot," Izzy murmured.

"How do you know they were open?" Loucke challenged.

"Distinguished counsel for the people pulls another one of his famous dumb cracks," Izzy sighed. "I doubt if Jamison was going to back his car through closed doors."

Loucke reddened angrily, "I didn't say anything like that. If you're here for information, get it. And keep your mouth shut."

Loucke turned on his heel and went into the garage. Izzy shook his head sadly.

"And that," he said to the two reporters, "is what the taxpayers support to put down crime. Next he'll probably be accusing Jamison's daughter-in-law of doing this."

Leaving that little thought for what it might be worth later on, Izzy O'Shea shambled awkwardly into the garage. He knew most of the headquarters men there. One or two greeted him; the rest paid no attention to him.

The coroner's assistant backed out of the car and spoke to Loucke. "It's a homicide. The gun was carried away. The body's yours."

Harvey Jamison, a thick-set, gray-haired man—hatless now—was slumped forward over the steering wheel. The car stood at the left of the wide garage, beside stairs leading up to the second floor.

"What's up there?" Izzy asked one of the headquarters men.

"Chauffeur's living quarters."

"He up there?"

"Nope. Off sick somewhere."

Izzy walked up the steps. A door at the top was locked. He took out a bunch of keys, tried one after another. The fourth one worked.

Closing the door quietly, Izzy walked through the apartment, finding three small rooms, a tiny kitchenette and a bath. A

man's accessories were about the bedroom. The chauffeur was apparently unmarried.

The bureau interested Izzy. In the top drawer, under a stack of shirts, he found letters and snapshots. The letters were addressed variously to William Patten, Bill Patten and a Bill Pitts. All were from out of town. One, postmarked *Ossining, N. Y.*, Izzy read.

He whistled softly, grinned, put it in his pocket. The dozen or so snapshots he studied closely. Two of the latter followed the letter to a place in his pocket.

He was looking further in the drawer when Loucke spoke angrily behind him.

"What the devil are you doing in here, O'Shea?"

Loucke had slipped into the apartment furtively. His purpose was evident a moment later.

"Prowling without a search warrant, eh?" Loucke sneered. "I'll get you for this, O'Shea. You've no official status around here. What'd you get out of that drawer?"

Izzy's grin was apologetic and good-natured as he reached behind and pushed the drawer shut.

"Like to hang something on me, wouldn't you, sweetheart?" he said. "You don't want to know what I found."

"Let's have it!" Loucke said brusksly.

"Sorry. Can't have," Izzy refused.

Loucke smiled nastily.

"So that's how it is?" he said. "I can't have it, eh? Why, damn your cheap nerve, we'll take it away from you and throw you in jail." Loucke turned to the door.

"Wait a minute," said Izzy.

He said it quietly, but there was something in the tone that made Loucke turn.

"You heard me, sweetheart," Izzy said gently. "You don't get it. And if you call any of your hard cops up here to get rough, I'll break the story with a bang. It's a letter from a con at Sing Sing, Loucke, saying that he bought out through

the D. A.'s office here for three grand—and the same deal can be pulled again if a certain party that's under indictment here gets in touch with you."

"Tommyrot!" Loucke burst out.

But Loucke stood there, his thin face suddenly gray, bleak, hard. His hand was in his coat pocket. It tensed and the pocket showed the bulge of a gun muzzle. The cords in Loucke's throat tightened, jerked; in his eyes sullen furious purpose glowed brighter, brighter—

"Don't do it, Loucke," Izzy said softly. "You can't handle a gun fast enough. They'd give you a swell funeral—but it wouldn't do you any good."

Loucke stood rigid, wavering. He was keyed to the breaking point. A wrong word or move would make him shoot from the pocket, Izzy knew. For Loucke's mind was driving him now; things only Loucke knew and feared were lashing him on to recklessness.

Izzy smiled, did not move. For long seconds soundless tension held them—and suddenly Loucke shivered, relaxed.

"What are you going to do with that letter?" he asked thickly.

"Nothing," Izzy said cheerfully.

"You're lying!"

"No," Izzy denied. "I'm not after your scalp today, Loucke. I could hold it against you, but I won't. Look."

Izzy struck a match, put the flame to the letter and dropped the last blazing fragment into an ash tray on the bureau.

"Now you can sleep as well as any other dirty crook," Izzy grinned. "Sweet dreams, sweetheart—and wouldn't you like to know what I'm going to do next?"

Izzy was chuckling as he walked past Loucke and went down into the garage.

Loucke turned silently, watching him out of sight. He went to the bureau and began to search it hastily.

He crammed the letters and snapshots into his pocket, started out of the apart-

ment. In the small living room he noticed a telephone. He hesitated, picked it up, gave a number, and when the connection was made he talked low and earnestly for several moments.

When he descended into the garage, Loucke was pale, but calm and composed.

CHAPTER THREE

Brain Guy

IT WAS not hard to get into the house, despite the failure of the newspapermen who had tried. Izzy rang the front doorbell. A white-capped, white-aproned maid answered. Grave, shaken by what had happened, she looked out suspiciously. But Izzy's smile had melted colder receptions than this.

"I've a message for Mrs. Jamison," he said.

"Mrs. Jamison can't see anyone. Her doctor is with her now. I'll take the message."

"Can she talk?" Izzy asked, edging inside.

"*Can* she?" said the maid, and caught herself and bit her lips and looked as if she had said the wrong thing.

Izzy grinned at her.

"I'm from Mrs. Harvey Jamison, Junior. Is her husband here?"

"He is in San Francisco on a business trip," said the maid tartly. "She could have told you that."

"I doubt it," said Izzy. "She's had an accident."

"Oh, dear, what next?"

"Hard to tell," Izzy said sympathetically. "What time did she leave the house this morning? Before or after—er—Mr. Jamison?"

"Before," said the maid. "About an hour before. I was changing into my uniform when I heard her speak to the cook and go out and drive away in her car. I'll

tell Mrs. Jamison something has happened to her."

Izzy waited in the hall while the maid ran upstairs. He was smiling thoughtfully to himself; and when the maid hurried down again he asked her a question before she could speak.

"Did young Mrs. Jamison come back here after she left?"

"No," said the maid. "Come upstairs, please."

A sober hush held the house. The activity outside was not audible. Their steps were almost soundless on the deep-piled carpet covering on the stairs and upper hall floor. In the hall a woman's angry voice beat through a closed door.

"Don't stand there talking like an idiot, doctor! I'm not hysterical! I know what I'm saying!"

The maid stopped before a door. A man's harassed voice was speaking inside. "But my dear Mrs. Jamison, you must try to control yourself. The shock—your heart—"

The maid shook her head helplessly and opened the door. Izzy stepped in, stopped, staring across the rose-and-pink boudoir.

The doctor was nearest to him, a thin, wispy man with a brown vandyke, who looked flustered, helpless, harassed before the large full-bosomed woman who was pacing the floor, tugging a damp handkerchief between her fingers.

Mrs. Harvey Jamison was formidable. Still in an unbecoming pink negligee, her hair had not been done for the day. Her eyes were red with recent weeping. But that had given away to excited anger which burst on Izzy.

"Are you the person with a message from my daughter-in-law?" Mrs. Jamison advanced on him without waiting for an answer. "A message—at a time like this! I expected her to do some such thing! Hating me! Trying to humiliate me! Why isn't she here? Where is she?

What does she mean by sending a stranger here?"

Izzy faced her meekly—and let any scruples about the truth go by the board.

"She doesn't know anything has happened at the house," he lied meekly. "Your daughter-in-law has had an accident, Mrs. Jamison. She is under a doctor's care. She wanted me to—"

"It doesn't matter what she wanted, young man! She wouldn't have had an accident if she had waited until after breakfast to leave the house. Always running, day and night. Refusing to stay here because she doesn't like to live with us. Ingratitude. Humiliation for us and her husband. Was she with that greasy Hindu, Chandra Lal?"

"Chandra Lal?" said Izzy. "Chandra Lal?" His brow wrinkled in thought; then he got it. "The Wizard of Delhi," he said.

"He calls himself that, young man! I'm not a fool. She hasn't pulled the wool over my eyes. I've had her watched. I know where she spends most of the evenings when she's out of the house alone. I've followed her to that house on North Drive myself. This is the last straw! Tell her she needn't come back here to the house. My son won't care to have anything more to do with her."

"He might have something to say about that."

Izzy received a glare for his suggestion. "My son," said the furious dowager, "will do what I tell him to do!"

"I believe you," said Izzy. "Where is the chauffeur today, Mrs. Jamison?"

"He telephoned and said that he was sick. I am going to discharge him. He has no business being sick."

"Of course not," Izzy agreed. "What kind of a car was your son's wife driving this morning?"

"She was driving a Ford coupé. One that I bought and let her use myself.

I don't care to talk any more, young man. Doctor, where are my smelling salts? Can't you see that I'm almost prostrated?"

IZZY drew a deep breath as he went downstairs, leaving Mrs. Harvey Jamison berating her meek little doctor. He had heard of women like her, but it was still hard to believe.

The maid let him out. He drove to the nearest drug store, entered a telephone booth in the back, telephoned the office of O'Shea and Black.

Blacky's crisp voice showed quick relief. "I've been wondering whether you had managed to get yourself killed," Blacky said.

Izzy chuckled.

"Very much alive, madam. I've a little job for you. There's a Hindu named Chandra Lal who lives out on North Drive. He called himself The Wizard of Delhi last winter. He's supposed to be something of a little tin god with a bag of magic tricks. I understand he turns your mind inside out and tells you who darned the run in your stocking last May and what you're going to have for dessert on a Saturday evening next year. He put on his act at a lot of society functions last winter. Haven't heard anything about him lately until today. He seems to be interested in young women now."

"Is this a gag?" Blacky demanded acidly. "I'm not interested in Hindu wizards."

"He might sweep you off your feet," Izzy chuckled. "Find out who he is, where, why and what. And—be careful."

Blacky's voice changed suddenly. "Izzy, is this connected with the Brain?"

"I'm wondering."

"Are you all right? What have you been doing?"

"I've been seeing a mother-in-law," said Izzy. "And I'm still a bit sick at my stomach. But if the Brain has a finger in this

I think we're going to slip up on his blind side. He's clever—but I don't think he ever met this kind of a mother-in-law before."

"What am I to do with this wizard, Izzy?"

"Tell him your mind is weak," Izzy chuckled. "Ask him for an extra special, red-hot treatment. Look dumb, innocent and wealthy. From what I've heard of him, he'll snap at that kind of bait."

Next Izzy called Martin Sadtler and learned that Mrs. Harvey Jamison, Jr., was still at the hospital with her condition unchanged.

"Any progress?" Sadtler demanded curtly.

"A little."

"Snap to it, man! We've got to do something about all this quick!"

"I've a job for one of your bright reporters," said Izzy. "Have him get the license number of a Ford coupé registered under the elder Mrs. Jamison's or her husband's name. Then have him look on the streets around the Clarion Building and see if the car is parked there."

"Doesn't make sense."

"It will," Izzy promised. "I'll call you later."

Izzy walked out of the drug store into the bright sunshine on the sidewalk. And a man stepped forward to meet him, hand outstretched.

"Hello, O'Shea. Haven't seen you for a long time."

Izzy's hand started out automatically to meet the other. Then stopped.

The man was medium height, well dressed, thin. He was smiling. But his chin was long, his mouth cruel. His eyes had a fixed, intent glitter which did not match the smile. And the face was a stranger's face which Izzy suddenly placed as his hand drew back. He looked quickly about.

A second man was just moving to them

from the drug store window; a taller man with a soft black hat pulled well down over his forehead, and one hand rigid under his coat.

One look was enough. Izzy O'Shea exploded into deceptive, flowing action. The gangling awkwardness he presented to the world suddenly was gone. His foot flashed out, smashing to the knee cap of the smiling man in front of him. The smile was still there when the agony of a wrecked knee cap made itself felt.

THE loud oath of pain reached Izzy's back. He had spun like a phantom on the ball of his right foot. His hand might or might not have moved—but as he came around, the stubby little Mauser automatic was cuddling in the palm.

Perhaps the second stranger, only a triple arm's-length away, never saw the little automatic. It was almost invisible. The hand merely seemed to be pointing ineffectually as the second stranger yanked a much larger gun from a shoulder holster under his coat.

His face was grim, hard; his purpose plain. He had been ready to kill from behind while Izzy's hand was held in friendship. He was going to kill now.

The grin was still on his face as a sharp report crashed from Izzy's palm and his own gun exploded ineffectually. It was still there as he pitched to the sidewalk with a bullet hole above his right eye. It happened in two short breaths, from first to last, as Izzy O'Shea whirled again with that phantom-like speed. The crashing report of the shot was still in the air; the first stranger was still cursing loudly with pain as he hobbled on one foot and pawed under his coat.

Izzy's face was cold, set, mask-like, eyes flaming twin points.

Perhaps the first man knew what to expect as Izzy spun back. Perhaps he had heard about Izzy O'Shea. Perhaps

he only read it on the spot as he looked into Izzy's face. He tried to dodge as he whipped out an automatic and shot.

But the gun was uncertain in his hand. The bullet missed, crashing into the drug-store window. And suddenly the gun was spinning to the sidewalk; the hand which held it was bleeding, as Izzy's second shot drowned out all other sounds.

The man staggered to the car, holding his injured hand. Groaning, swearing, he shrank back as Izzy advanced on him.

An automobile had stopped out in the street. Pedestrians had scurried for cover. A man coming out of a grocery next door stopped, staring.

Izzy called to him. "You saw what happened! They tried to kill me! Tell the police about it! I'll take this man to a doctor!"

Izzy had the first stranger cornered against his coupé. He yanked the door open. "Get in!" he ordered.

"I'll find a doctor. I'll—I'll walk. I'm all right. God—don't!"

Izzy's fingers clamped deep into a cowering shoulder. He yanked the man over, snapped a fist to his jaw—and the stranger reeled back into the car seat.

A moment later Izzy sent the low, speedy coupé hurtling down the street. And as it went, he peered in the rear-view mirror and verified the Ford coupé which had been parked behind the larger car while Izzy was in the drug store.

He twisted the vehicle around the next corner on two wheels, did the same at the next corner, looking to see that no automobiles were following. From there on he drove slower, zig-zagging across town.

Beside him the stranger was groaning, holding his injured hand. The sweat of fear and pain glistened on his pale face.

Izzy slapped a handkerchief at him.

"Use that!" he directed curtly. "And stop that groaning! What's your name?"

"Listen, O'Shea—I—I ain't talkin'."

A backhand clout knocked the man into the corner of the seat.

"What's your name?" Izzy asked again.

"Joe Kennedy," the man mumbled.

"Who sent you two after me?"

"Nobody. I—"

Izzy knocked him back in the seat again.

"You two mugs didn't have a quarrel with me," Izzy said. "Who put the finger on me?"

"I don't know," Kennedy stammered. "I got a telephone call. He said you were at Jamison's house—an' to pick you up an'—an' see that you didn't make any more trouble."

"Who is 'he'?"

Kennedy—if that was his right name—squirmed restlessly.

"I don't know who he is. I've never seen him. He gives orders an' pays well for it. All I know is his voice when I hear it in a receiver."

THE hard bleak lines in Izzy's face were smoothing out. The ghost of a smile crept around his mouth.

"That," said Izzy, "begins to sound like the truth. How did you start taking orders from—the Brain?"

Kennedy proved that it was possible to get still paler when Izzy uttered that name. He shivered.

"The Brain?" he parried. "What do you know about the Brain?"

"More than you do, sucker. What's the Brain got on you?"

"I don't get you."

"You will when the cops get their hands on you. Or maybe Bill Patten will be willing to talk."

Kennedy's mouth opened soundlessly. "Who's Bill Patten?" he inquired weakly.

"Jamison's chauffeur. Remember the time you and Patten and the two brunettes went canoe riding together?"

"For God's sake!" Kennedy whispered thickly. "Where'd you get that?" He

licked his lips, answered it himself with a sudden gust of anger.

"Bill's been ratting; I was afraid of that! He'll—he'll get his throat cut for this!"

"And who will cut his throat?"

Kennedy said sullenly: "You ought to know." He adjusted the bloody handkerchief around his hand, wincing as it hurt. "When do I get this fixed? I'm—I'm bleedin' to death."

"It won't hurt as much as getting your throat cut," Izzy said calmly. "Where is the chauffeur, Bill Patten, now?"

Kennedy shrugged his lack of knowledge.

Izzy stopped the car. "Get out," he said briefly. "Find your own doctor. I've had enough of you."

Kennedy gave him an unbelieving look, slid out, scurried to the sidewalk, looking back over his shoulder as if afraid of violence even yet.

Izzy O'Shea drove to the Clarion Building and was admitted to Martin Sadtler's office at once.

"Well?" Sadtler demanded.

"Get that license number?"

"Yes," said Sadtler. "And the car's not in the streets around here."

"Better send a man out to the drug store at Twenty-eighth and Clifton. There's a Ford coupé parked there which may be carrying those license plates."

Sadtler looked annoyed.

"The *Clarion* is retaining you to fight crime in this city, O'Shea; not to turn our reporters into private detectives working for you."

"I don't have a big organization," Izzy reminded the editor. "It saves me time and trouble. Besides, I don't want to go back there just now. I just killed a man in front of the drug store."

"You *what*?"

"Don't shout," Izzy said mildly. "I can hear you. I killed a man—shot him—left

him on the sidewalk. Your man can get the story while he's there."

"I was afraid of that!" Sadtler burst out. "I'm behind you, O'Shea. The *Clarion* is all for you. But there's a limit. Murder is murder! Why didn't you put him under arrest?"

"And have him beat the case or get paroled before long?" Izzy yawned. "It was all right—perfectly legal—witnesses and all. He had his gun out, shooting first. There were two of them. Acting for the Brain. By the way, did you tell anyone that I was going to Jamison's home?"

"Perfectly legal!" Martin Sadtler repeated scornfully. "I suppose that justifies a killing? No, dammit, I didn't tell anyone where you were going. Why?"

Izzy was still thoughtful. "These two men picked me up at the Jamison place on telephoned orders. The Brain knew I was there. How did he know it?"

"No good asking me, O'Shea. I can't tell you."

"I tangled with Loucke in the chauffeur's quarters above Jamison's garage," Izzy mused. "Got something on him—and let him know it there. He's been out for my neck, anyway, you know. This jarred him so bad he was ready to shoot it out there. But he didn't; and after I went out he telephoned someone. I heard his voice; couldn't hear what he said."

IZZY inspected his fingernails with an expressionless face as he voiced the suspicion that had persisted in his mind.

"We don't know what the Brain looks like," he said. "Haven't the slightest idea who he is. But within fifteen minutes after Loucke made that telephone call, these two gunmen tailed me away from Jamison's. I'm wondering if Loucke could be—the Brain."

"Loucke—the Brain?" Sadtler said it quietly, grimly. "I never thought of that before," he muttered. "I wonder. Loucke has virtually run the district attorney's of-

fice for months since Henderson had a breakdown. Loucke has made a rotten record, too. He's been unfriendly to the *Clarion* since it has been demanding a clean-up of crime. I—wonder."

Sadtler shot a hard glance across the desk. "What did you get on Loucke?"

"Not telling," said Izzy calmly. "I don't want it published. Do more harm than good. But I found these in the chauffeur's bureau drawer."

Izzy tossed the two snapshots on the desk. "One of them's the chauffeur. The other chap was with the man I just killed. He's an old friend of the chauffeur's. He's taking orders from the Brain. The chauffeur telephoned that he was sick. No one was on hand to drive Jamison to work. He had to go into the garage to get his own car. Some one waiting there shot him, and was so little worried about it that he took time to close the garage doors before leaving. It wasn't the daughter-in-law. She had left an hour earlier. And it wasn't the chauffeur, for there was too much danger of his being recognized around the neighborhood."

"The daughter-in-law might have gone back. They'll claim that in court, anyway, unless she has an iron-clad alibi for every minute since she left the house."

"She won't have," Izzy guessed. "If they get her in court, she'll have a rocky time. To top everything, she's been fighting with her husband's parents. That'll make it worse. 'Fraid she hasn't got a chance unless we get the one who really did it."

Martin Sadtler made an impatient gesture. "Your job's to smash the Brain, O'Shea. That's more important than what may happen to this young woman. The man's a megalomaniac. He's put himself above all law. He's growing more reckless and dangerous."

Izzy nodded, awkward, apologetic once more.

"Of course," he agreed cheerfully. "But since he's had a hand in this apparently pointless death, I'll be a lot closer to him if I can break this case. In fact," said Izzy, "I've got a hunch I'll be closer to him whether I break it or not. He's out to get me. He's got to show his hand when he tries it. He'll show too much of it—and then I'll have him."

"If he doesn't have you first," Martin Sadtler grunted. "I may as well be frank, O'Shea. I'm looking for a report of your death any hour."

Izzy grinned. "So am I," he admitted.

The annunciator buzzed sharply. Sadtler flicked it on.

"Knight speaking," said the box on the desk. "Just got something over the telephone which may interest you. A couple of kids looked into an old shed out in the Fourth Ward a little while ago and found a dead man in there. His throat was cut. Been dead about twelve hours or so. He's been identified as a private dick named Gibson."

"Don't know him," Martin Sadtler snorted. "Why bother me with something like that? City desk getting too much for you?"

Bill Knight snorted himself, audibly. "When it is," his voice rasped out of the box, "you'll know it. There was an angle to this I thought might strike you. In Gibson's pocket they found a bill for a hundred and twenty-five dollars for 'services rendered,' made out to Harvey Jamison. Does that mean anything to you?"

"Dammit, no! Why should it?"

"I just thought I'd let you know," Bill Knight said with resignation, and the box went silent.

Izzy slapped a fist into his palm. The good nature had left his face again.

"Got anything in your morgue on a Hindu named Chandra Lal?" he questioned.

"If his name was in the paper, we've got it."

SADTLER gave an order through the annunciator. Within five minutes an office boy brought in a manila envelope. Sadtler spread half a dozen clippings on the desk.

"Here's the first one," he said.

Izzy read it with a slow, widening grin of satisfaction. It was a one-column, full-length picture, with a bit of text underneath, evidently clipped from the society page. Pictured was a tall, turbaned and bearded Hindu dressed in his native costume.

Prince Chandra Lal, of Delhi, India, was the honor guest last night at a dinner and reception given by Countess Marghitka Marask, of Hungary.

"Countess Marask!" Izzy snorted, tossing the clipping back. "I wonder what the guests would have thought if they knew their hostess tied in with the Brain? What a nerve that woman's got—and what a front!"

"Plenty of front," Martin Sadtler said, reading another clipping. "The guests that night were skimmed off the top of society, including His Honor, the Mayor."

"And with that send-off, Chandra Lal walked right on through society," Izzy said, glancing at the other clippings. "He's been chief entertainer at every function he's attended. Here, in this one he's called 'Master of the Occult.'"

"And in this one," Martin Sadtler grunted, "he's the 'world's foremost interpreter of the old Delhi mysteries'—whatever that means. By golly, I've got a mind to clean out the society desk for printing yap like this!"

Izzy shuffled the clippings together and laid them on the envelope.

"It's enough for me. I'm having Chandra Lal checked—but I don't need to know

any more. Jamison's daughter-in-law was spending a lot of time around him while she was being shadowed by a private detective."

Startled, Sadtler said: "You're saying this Chandra Lal had a hand in the death of that fellow, Gibson?"

"Perhaps," said Izzy, grinning, "if we could get in touch with the old Delhi Mysteries, we might know."

Sadtler exhaled a soft breath. "What have you got in mind?" he asked.

"I'll know this afternoon. I wonder if your man has gotten out to the drug store yet and looked at that Ford coupé?"

From his office Sadtler could get any kind of information in a few moments. Bill Knight gave it over the annunciator.

"Just got a call in about that shooting, boss. They're lugging the body away and looking for the man who did it. Seems he was put on the spot there by two men. He killed one of them and took the other away with him. There's a Ford coupé standing at the curb, carrying license plates which belong to Jamison, Senior."

Bill Knight's next remark was shrewd, keen, eager.

"Jamison's name is popping up everywhere we turn this morning. I smell plenty of dirt and a hell of a whopping story if we get them all hooked up. How about shooting the works?"

"Lay off," Martin Sadtler directed his city editor curtly.

And Bill Knight left no doubt as to what he thought about that. "This place is getting screwy," he got over the annunciator before Sadtler cut him off.

CHAPTER FOUR

Chandra Lal

IZZY went to Mercy Hospital and asked for Doctor Reese.

"Is the patient any better?" he questioned when the doctor met him in the

reception room. The doctor was cheerful.

"Quite a bit better," Doctor Reese assented. "She slept for an hour and was almost normal when she awoke, except she's rather weak now."

"I'd like to ask her a few questions."

The doctor smiled dryly. "Afraid it won't do much good, O'Shea. There's a gap in her memory covering the events of this morning. I've already tried to question her."

"Nevertheless, I'd like to see her."

"Come along then. But she won't know you. I'll tell her you're a doctor."

The doctor took him along a corridor and ushered him into a small private room. She was lying on the bed, fully dressed, looking pale, tired. She gave no sign of recognition as the doctor introduced Izzy.

"This is Doctor O'Shea, Mrs. Jamison. He wants to ask you a few questions."

"If it's about this morning," she answered wearily, "I can't remember a thing."

"How about last night?" Izzy asked.

Her head turned quickly on the pillow and he had all her attention.

"I can remember last night," she said.

"Did you see Chandra Lal last night?"

She half raised off the pillow, supporting herself on an elbow.

"What makes you ask that? What do you know about—about him?"

"Quite a bit, Mrs. Jamison. You were there, weren't you?"

Her glance clung to his face. Not frightened. Rather—it seemed to Izzy—puzzled.

"Yes, I was there," she admitted. "But I don't see what that has to do with how I came to be in this hospital."

Izzy smiled at her reassuringly.

"I suspect it has quite a bit to do with it," he said. "If you'll be frank I think I can help you. You've been seeing quite a bit of Chandra Lal, haven't you?"

"I have. He's a very remarkable man."

"No doubt about it," Izzy agreed. "This morning, Mrs. Jamison—when you left the house early—did you see him?"

She stared at him. Her forehead wrinkled with the effort of remembering.

"Why—why, I believe I did," she admitted haltingly. "I seem to remember there was something I had to see him about. Something terribly important. I got up early and drove out to see him. I—I remember going into the house and talking to him and—and that is all—"

"I think that's enough," Izzy said. "If you can get a little sleep now, I'll come in and talk to you later."

Outside in the corridor, Izzy spoke to Doctor Reese.

"Keep her here as long as you can. She didn't do that killing. It's better for her if she never goes home."

Reese looked at him keenly.

"What about this Chandra Lal? Where does he come in?"

Izzy answered carefully: "He's a Hindu. A man who dabbles with the mind. He's made quite a splash in society. None of his patrons seem to know that he was sponsored by one of the cleverest and most dangerous crooks the city has ever known."

Doctor Reese shot Izzy a keen look. "Hm—hm—hm—the mind. I see. Interesting. She has displayed all the symptoms of a remarkable case of hypnosis, carried to greater lengths than I've ever thought possible."

"Would you say it was impossible, Doctor?"

"The mind is a queer thing," he said. "We don't know so very much about it. Repeated hypnosis, with a susceptible and willing subject, can be carried to remarkable lengths. I'm not prepared to say what the limits are. I doubt if medical science could say exactly."

Izzy grinned at him.

"Thanks," he said. "That's all I want-

ed to know. Keep an eye on the young lady. Her name hasn't been brought into this yet. I think we can keep it out."

HENRY'S buffet was smart, busy, public. And yet, seated at a rear table with his back to the paneled wall, Izzy could see all of the long narrow room and everyone who came in and went out.

"Sloe gin-rickey," he said to the waiter. "And Swiss and crackers."

He was sipping the rickey when Blacky walked in, tossed her purse on the table, sat down, reached for the menu and began to fan herself.

Izzy lifted his eyebrows.

"Is it a gag?" he asked. "When I left you this morning you looked normal. Now you blow in looking like a cross between a prayer meeting and a librarian. Have we been introduced?"

Blacky's smart costume had been changed to a dark gray one, sober, mousy, rather dowdy. Blacky's hair was slicked back severely; all make-up was off her face and she wore a pair of shell-rimmed glasses which gave her face a severe, studious cast.

But Blacky's reply was anything but studious.

"He's a devil!" Blacky said, fanning herself vigorously.

"Try a piece of ice on your neck," Izzy suggested. "It'll cool you off quicker."

"I'm not hot," Blacky replied tartly. "I'm trying to get some fresh, clean air. I need it. The man's evil, Izzy. I—I can still feel him all about me."

Izzy chuckled. "You sound like beauty who met the beast. Don't tell me you didn't go for that gorgeous guy from Delhi in a big way?"

Blacky shuddered.

"I took my old aunt along," she said. "The one who has a million or so of gilt-edge bonds in her safety deposit box. She never could look anything but what she

is, the cream of the crop in respectability. And I was the utterly respectable—and presumably wealthy—niece.”

Blacky sighed, opened the menu, gave her order to the waiter who appeared at her elbow. When he was gone, she said: “I guess we put it over, all right. A ratty little American secretary looked us over rather closely and then led us somewhere back in that big house and gave us an interview with Chandra Lal. He was dressed in red silk, turban and all. But his English was perfect and—and unctuous through his black beard.

“The man’s evil!” she insisted. “I could feel it all the time he was talking. It was in his eyes. They never left us. Poor Auntie was like a sparrow before a snake. She was fascinated.” Blacky’s voice grew anxious. “I don’t know whether I did right in taking her there or not,” she added. “The man simply bowled her over. She thinks he’s wonderful. She’s—she’s going back tonight to some gathering in which he assured her she would be interested.”

“Great!” Izzy applauded.

“Not!” Blacky snapped. “With one interview that man has my poor aunt jumping through hoops! What won’t she be doing after he really gets to work on her?”

“I hate to think,” Izzy replied. “But I’ll go along with you, my pet. We’ll see how many hoops Chandra Lal can lead us through.”

“But”—and Blacky’s voice was greatly troubled—“you intimated Chandra Lal had some connection with the Brain. We can’t take my aunt into that.”

“Have to,” Izzy told her firmly. “It’s probably the only chance we’ll have to find out a lot of things about him that we’ve got to know. We’ve broken into something here that no one else seems to know about. The police can’t do anything about it, because there’s no proof.

Maybe we can’t get any. But it looks to me as if we’re slipping up behind the Brain when he least suspects it.”

Izzy drained the rickey and chuckled.

“And we can thank Mrs. Harvey Jamison, Senior’s disposition for it all. She’d probably have a stroke if she knew what a service she’s done us.”

AUNT MARTHA came into the room exactly as Blacky had described her—a wisp of an old lady dressed in rustling black, with a little, old-fashioned black hat bobbing on her head. Her face was diminutive and ageless, and now flushed a little from the excitement of the adventure in prospect.

“So this is Caroline’s young man?” Aunt Martha queried, holding out a tiny little hand.

Izzy found himself bowing over the hand. The little old lady looked as if she expected it.

“Caroline has so often told me what a fine young man you are,” Aunt Martha added, putting her head to one side and surveying Izzy with frank interest. She nodded, smiling, entirely oblivious of Blacky’s confusion. “And I quite agree with her,” Aunt Martha stated calmly.

Blacky avoided Izzy’s eyes. “We’d better go now,” she said hastily.

“We’ll go in my car,” Aunt Martha declared.

So they rolled off in a limousine of ancient vintage, driven by a chauffeur who looked as if he had once been the coachman. Aunt Martha was excited.

“I don’t see many people,” she said to Izzy. “And this—this man Chandra Lal is so unusual, so different, so—so understanding. You feel at once that he knows everything.”

“Uh—Caroline was telling me about him,” Izzy agreed. “I hope you won’t be disappointed.”

“I’m certain I won’t,” Aunt Martha said

firmly. "I feel sure he can help me to get a—a great deal more out of life. In—in India, as he said today, they have studied such things for thousands of years. Doesn't it sound reasonable that—that he has a great deal to offer?"

Her look up into Izzy's face was so pathetically eager that Izzy agreed stoutly that Chandra Lal undoubtedly had a great deal to offer.

And Izzy wondered what Aunt Martha would think if she knew about the little Mauser automatic which lay snugly under his coat; and the mate to it which was secured to the inside of his left leg by a thin delicate harness of soft leather.

Finally the limousine turned off North Drive and rolled back through an avenue of trees. Izzy had often been out here during Prohibition before the swank gambling place had been padlocked. It had lain idle, until recently. Now, it was spruced up again, well lighted. There was a score of automobiles parked at the end of the drive. Most, Izzy noticed, were expensive.

Quiet—that was what impressed Izzy as they walked to the broad flagstone terrace in front of the house. Quiet. Isolation.

The city was not far away; but for all practical purposes, it might as well not have existed. Even the automobiles on the highway could hardly be heard as they speeded on. The house loomed big, massive and silent before them, and but a faint light seeped through its heavily curtained windows.

Not a soul was in sight but the uniformed drivers over by the rows of parked cars. The broad terrace was deserted. The house itself might have been deserted. Iron grills were closed before the front door. When the three stopped before the grill-work they were limned in a pool of light which gleamed feebly from an antique lantern overhead.

Blacky pressed the bell—but there was no need. Izzy had noted a small aperture in the door. An eye had peered out at them. The door was already opening as Blacky's finger pushed the button. At the same moment the iron gates swung open.

AUNT MARTHA gasped softly with delight as a tall, turbaned Hindu dressed in cloth-of-gold stepped noiselessly out of the front door and bowed a welcome to them.

"Did you ever see anything like this?" she whispered to Izzy as they walked in.

"I never did," Izzy whispered back; and to himself he admitted that it was a neat piece of staging.

The Hindu was clean-shaven, his dark face sharp, impassive, and his dark eyes were sharper still as Izzy came abreast of him. He followed them into a high, vaulted entrance hall whose antiqued plaster walls were hung with cloth-of-gold. A touch of long lean fingers closed the door. He bowed again and addressed Blacky in a soft, impassive voice.

"Who is the gentleman, please?"

"My friend," said Blacky. "I asked him to come with us."

The Hindu bowed again, spreading his hands palm up.

"So sorry. No strangers mus' come into house. So sorry, so sorry. Friends mus' wait outside," he said apologetically.

Blacky answered the Hindu indignantly. "If my friend can't come in, we'll all leave. I never heard of such a thing. We told him about Prince Chandra Lal and asked him to come with us."

The tall Hindu looked at the tall, gangling, apologetic young man who was the subject of the discussion. Awkward, good-natured, harmless; any stranger could see that at a glance.

No expression appeared on the Hindu's face as he bowed again. "Wait, please. I see."

He walked soundlessly to the back of the hall, disappeared through a door there.

The silent hall gave the impression that unseen eyes and ears were alert. Nothing happened to credit that feeling, but it was still very real to Izzy when the tall Hindu glided in as noiselessly as he had departed. "You give name?" he said to Izzy.

Izzy replied casually: "David Lewis."

The man inclined his head, bowed toward the stairs at the back of the hall and gestured with long supple fingers for them to go up.

The stairs were wide. Aunt Martha walked between them, her eyes shining with anticipation. At the turn of the stairs, Izzy looked back. The tall Hindu was standing in the middle of the hall looking up after them with no expression on his face.

"This—this is all so mysterious," Aunt Martha said excitedly. "Prince Chandra Lal said it was a meeting, but I've never seen a meeting like this."

"You'll probably get your money's worth," Izzy assured her quietly.

He was wondering what they would find. Upstairs here, in the old days, partitions had been torn out to make the gambling room. Now the half-lighted stairs were very clear up to the small, hall-like space at the top, where before guests had halted at heavy steel doors, grained to imitate fine wood. Beyond the steel doors had been the big main gambling room.

The same doors were still there, padded with soft red leather now. One near at hand swung open now, and with Aunt Martha in the middle, Izzy and Blacky walked into a vast room filled subtly, faintly with a vague red glow.

Sinuous coils of incense hung low and heavy in the air. Rich tapestries on the walls showed hunting and battle scenes of old India woven in metal thread. A

deep-piled red carpet on the floor absorbed all sounds of movement.

The effect was startling as the door swung noiselessly shut behind them. No lights were visible; only that subtle red glow which seemed to come from all points and yet no point in particular.

Izzy blinked, peering about, for it was hard to see at first. Then, as his eyes adjusted to the vague, sullen light, he became aware of many people seated on the deep red carpet.

They were seated haphazardly, as if they had walked in and sank down in any vacant spot which presented itself. Many of them half reclined on cushions. Small piles of silk-covered cushions, here and there on the rug, indicated where others were expected to recline.

THE room was still, very still. No one paid any attention to the trio. All eyes were fixed on the end of the room, where twin braziers on twisted metal legs sent up lazy spirals of blue incense before a large three-headed statue of Siva.

The faint red light was a trifle brighter at that point; and it was on the man who stood between the braziers in that brighter glow that all eyes were fixed. He made a weird, impressive picture. He was tall, and a high turban of blood-red silk made him seem taller. His robes were heavy red silk. A dark sweeping beard covered the front of his chest. And from the depths of that beard a soft, soothing voice rolled out the length of the room, rising and falling slightly in a hypnotic monotone which was incredibly soothing.

Izzy noted the effect of that voice while he led Aunt Martha to the nearest cushions. About them the incense was heavy, cloying. The silence seemed to press down; and through it the voice came without interruption or changing intonation.

It was Chandra Lal—speaking softly

of a world within a world, open to those who put themselves into the past and the future.

The eyes of the listeners were riveted on the speaker and the slow steady movements of his hands. Chandra Lal's eyes, voice, manner, dominated everything before him. Aunt Martha sank against the pillows with a soft sigh, and in a few moments was as rapt as those about her.

Standing behind the listeners, Izzy saw the speaker as Blacky had described him. The flowing beard, the soft soothing voice were the outer mask. Behind that, sheer dominance, vast will emanated from the man.

Looking about, Izzy's growing suspicions turned to amazing, unbelieving certainty. These rapt listeners had been caught up by forces of which they were unaware. A spell had been woven over them. They sat there in a species of hypnotic trance.

Incredible, and yet Izzy saw it. In this red drenched room a blight—an evil blight, had fallen over the company.

At that moment, a woman looked back at him. Their eyes met, and the watchfulness which Izzy had carried into this house flamed into the certainty of acute danger.

No mistaking that flawless oval curve of cheeks from chin to wide Magyar cheekbones, that slender, pale, delicate beauty—angelic, mystical soft.

The world knew her as the Countess Marask, of Hungary; Marghitka Marask, the woman who had introduced Chandra Lal to society earlier in the year.

Izzy knew her as "The Angel."

She was an angel to look at, lovely, soft and pure; and behind that she was cruel, hard, merciless. An angel—an angel of death.

And now in the dim sullen red light she recognized him. Slowly she stood

up and walked to the side of the room to a door hidden behind a screen.

CHAPTER FIVE

Angel of Death

THE door, concealed by tapestry, opened. Blacky had not noticed the little by-play, had never seen the Angel, wouldn't know her. Aunt Martha was sitting motionless with her eyes fixed on the slow-moving hands of Chandra Lal. Izzy stooped, whispered to Blacky: "Watch it! The Angel just left the room."

Without waiting for a reply, he went toward the hidden door.

Izzy stepped through to the dim passage on the other side. The soothing, soporific monotone of Chandra Lal went on and on without stopping. The man apparently had paid no attention to the movements of the Angel or Izzy. The door started to swing shut—and a gun barrel came hard against Izzy's side, and the Angel said: "Don't move, O'Shea!"

She had waited there beside the door for him.

Izzy stood still, damning himself.

He lifted his hands slightly in front of him so she could see that he was not going for a gun. You could judge a man at times like this; a woman you couldn't, especially if she hated you as the Angel hated him.

"I'm not moving," Izzy said calmly. He smiled thinly. "Fancy finding you here."

"What brings you to this house?"

In the dim light she seemed even more delicately beautiful than ever. But her thin eyebrows were a hard arch. She was not smiling. Izzy continued to smile.

"A friend," he said, "spoke so highly of the great Chandra Lal that I came to have a look. I understand the man can tell me the past and the future. For instance—the Brain. I wonder," Izzy said gently,

"if Chandra Lal can tell me where to find the Brain."

The Angel plainly had been under no spell. Against the background of her soft white face with its wide Magyar cheekbones her eyes seemed to flame with changing shades of green.

"Who is this woman you came with?" she asked.

"A friend," said Izzy. "A little old lady you don't know. A very wealthy lady, with influence. With her is her niece."

"I know about her," the Angel said. "She came here today. Her niece was with her. And so—you know them both?"

Izzy grinned. "You seem to know Chandra Lal's business. Any connection with him?"

His question remained unanswered.

"What do you really want here?" the Angel asked again.

"I thought I might have a few words with Chandra Lal."

"About what?"

"Curiosity, my dear Countess."

She made a sudden decision. It's import to him was foreshadowed by the way her gun muzzle dug harder into his side.

"You wanted to see the Brain," said the Angel calmly. "You shall. He is coming here tonight. First you can see Chandra Lal. Wait—you have a gun, of course."

She knew where the little Mauser was. She had seen it taken from him once before. With coolness and efficiency that Izzy had to admire she reached under his coat for it.

"Just in case you feel that a woman can be easily handled," she said, and prodded him along the hall.

Izzy chuckled as he went. "I hardly class you as a woman," he remarked ambiguously.

MIDWAY along the hall they were met by a tall turbaned Hindu who came

hurriedly. At least he looked like a Hindu until he spoke, with no attempt at an accent.

"I'll take him," he said, drawing an automatic from under his robe. "Did he make any trouble? Lal slipped me the word that something looked screwy."

"This," said the Angel, "is Izzy O'Shea."

"Hell—that guy!"

Startled, vicious, alarmed—that exclamation.

It told all that Izzy wanted to know. His apprehension for Aunt Martha and Blacky increased.

Izzy was increasingly uneasy about them as he was herded along the passage, through a door just around the first turn, across a small reception room, through another door into a dimly-lighted, narrow, severely bare room furnished only with a rug and a dozen carved chairs spaced along the walls. A single metal brazier stood in the center of the room. From a pierced metal dome covering its top, faint blue vapor drifted lazily up.

The fumes were heavy, sweet—sickish sweet. The incense in the great room where Chandra Lal had addressed the rapt listeners had smelled the same. It had puzzled Izzy then. It did so now. It was familiar. He had smelled it before somewhere. At night, it had been. In another dim room. And then he remembered.

That other dimly-lighted room had been squalid; and the grimy cots along the walls had been occupied by half a dozen men and women inert and sodden from the opium they had smoked.

That was the smell—opium. Just enough of it in the air here to dull the brain, slow the movements, make the mind susceptible to clever manipulation.

The Angel inclined her head at him, spoke to the big-turbaned guard. Seen close, the brown stain on his heavy face was plain now.

"Watch him," the Angel directed. "I have his gun—but he is always dangerous. You have heard about him. Keep him in this room."

She disappeared through a door at the other end of the room.

Izzy stood near the brazier with the fumes heavy about him; thicker than they had been in the big room. He wondered if he was succumbing any to the fumes—and could not be sure. His mind seemed clear enough, but perhaps his body wouldn't follow it.

He nodded at the brazier. "Doesn't that stuff get you?" he asked the guard

The man scowled. "What stuff?"

"Opium."

That drew a sneer. "Wise guy, ain't you? Know all the answers."

"I expect," Izzy guessed, "you get used to it. Like you do that stain on your face and that circus make-up." He grinned goodnatureedly.

The guard stared at him, sneered again. "Somebody went screwy when they tagged you as a bad one. Hell, I've seen poolroom punks who had more on the eight ball."

"I'll bet," Izzy agreed sadly. "Maybe I shouldn't have butted in here." He sighed. "But then everybody makes mistakes now and then."

"You made a hell of a mistake this time, fellow."

The guard was standing an arm's-length away, gun held carelessly in his hand, contemptuous, sure of himself. Izzy grinned again, apologetically—and then he looked past the guard to the door through which they had entered. His eyes widened, he spoke past the guard.

"I didn't expect to see you here."

Involuntarily the guard looked around and Izzy was on him with that startling, phantom-like speed which few men ever saw, and those few to their cost.

IZZY'S fist exploded against the point of the man's jaw with a sodden *smack*. The smashing force of it carried the guard on around, falling as he went. He didn't even pull the trigger of the gun as he went down, or move after he struck the floor. The knockout was clean, complete and long-lasting.

Izzy pushed the palm of his other hand over the bruised knuckles, bleeding slightly where the skin had been broken.

"Too bad," he said. "I'd much rather have shot you."

His face was hard as he stooped to take the larger automatic. On second thought, he left it there and took the second Mauser automatic from the soft leather holster nestling against his calf.

The little gun was almost out of sight in his hand as he slipped swiftly from the screened door where he had met the Angel.

Blacky and her Aunt Martha were in the big room—in danger. Before any other move was made they must be gotten out to safety.

Thinking that, Izzy came to the narrow door without meeting anyone. He slipped the Mauser into the holster under his arm and stepped through into the big room.

Unheeded, the door swung shut behind him as he stopped short, staring about.

The same sullen red light filled the big room. The same two braziers sent their curls of sweet heavy smoke lazily upward. The same horrible faces of the great god Siva grinned down from the length of the room. But the soporific monotone of Chandra Lal was not there. And the audience seated on the floor was not there. All that was left were the pillows against which they had reclined.

The big room was silent, deserted. Blackie and her Aunt Martha had vanished along with all the others.

The gun was in Izzy's hand again as he stepped across the room to the heavy

steel doors through which Blacky, her aunt and himself had entered. The doors were closed now.

He tried the handles on the inside. They should have turned easily. They did not. The doors were locked, solidly, securely.

Izzy put his back to the doors, surveyed the room warily. Quiet was all about him—the quiet of impending death. He moved to the head of the room where Chandra Lal had been standing.

Tapestry curtains reaching from ceiling to floor came together behind the big statue. Beyond them might be—anything.

Izzy slipped through the curtains with a quick movement, found a door, passed through that—and almost bumped into a slender, dapper little man who was passing.

THE little man took one look, squealed something in fear, started to run. Izzy kicked out a foot, tripped him, and as he fell, dove after him and caught the back of his coat collar.

A yank brought the man up to his feet again. His face was thin, sallow, shrewd. He staggered off balance, rolling his eyes back at Izzy.

"I—I haven't done anything!" he stammered.

Izzy shook him, not too gently. "Who said you had? Who are you?"

"I'm Chandra Lal's secretary. Who are you?"

"The name is O'Shea," said Izzy getting a firmer grip. "Izzy O'Shea. What happened to all the people in that room?"

The other gulped, paled. "O'Shea? Izzy—" He gulped again. "They w-went home," he stammered.

"All of them?"

"Y-yes."

"The two women who came with me?"

"Yes."

"Why did they all clear out so quick?"

"I d-don't know."

Izzy sighed. "You're lying, and I haven't

time to make you tell me the truth. Take me to this phony wizard, Chandra Lal, before something happens to you. Something pretty bad," Izzy said, shaking him again.

"I d-don't know where he is."

"You've got about two seconds to get an idea about it," Izzy said. "I don't know all these rooms; but he's around here close. Lead me into any trouble and I'll get you first and think about it later."

He did not need to raise his voice to carry conviction. His prisoner nodded dumbly, started on, hunching under Izzy's grip on his coat collar.

"He should be in here in—in his private reception room," he got out with an effort.

The passage ended at a door. Beyond it was a small waiting room furnished with another thick rug and comfortable divans against the wall. And in here, too, a small brazier in the corner gave off the cloying, sweetish incense.

Across the room a second door was standing ajar; and through it the low voice of Chandra Lal was audible. It was the same voice—and not the same. Still soothing, slow, deliberate, it now was sharper, more intense as it droned on.

"You are killing this man Izzy O'Shea . . . you are shooting him with this little automatic because you do not like him . . . you are shooting him as the automobile stops in front of your house . . . now you are shooting the chauffeur as he tries to take the gun away from you . . . you are walking into the house and telephoning the police, and waiting with the gun in your hand for them to arrive . . . you are sleeping . . . sleeping . . . sleeping . . . getting ready to do this . . ."

Izzy felt his nerves tightening for the first time. Blacky had been right. Evil was in that droning voice. Quiet, lurking evil which made itself felt now in every inflection.

“ . . . you are sleeping . . . you are remembering . . . you are getting ready to do this . . . you are going to tell the police exactly what you did . . . O’Shea is dead . . . you shot him . . . sleeping . . . sleeping . . . sleeping . . . O’Shea is dead . . . you shot him . . . ”

Izzy’s flesh crawled. Nightmares had such things as this.

THE voice faded and there was a scuffle of sudden movement in the room. Before O’Shea realized what was happening, his prisoner, with strength born of desperation, apparently, tore loose from Izzy’s grip on his collar and leaped for the door through which Chandra Lal’s voice had come. Izzy was after him immediately but not quick enough to stifle the gasp of warning from the other man.

At the disturbance, a turbaned figure posted at the door whirled, revolver raising, and Izzy, just behind his late quarry, retrieved his hold on the secretary, shoved the little man violently against the guard. The latter, caught unaware, by the force of the little man’s headlong though unwilling tackle, lost his balance momentarily, and gave way.

“There’s a little kick left in O’Shea, yet,” Izzy said softly. “Drop her Lal!”

A smoking brazier stood in the center of the room. Sitting in a chair, to one side, her head thrown back into the path of drifting fumes from the brazier, her eyes wide and fixed on the red-turbaned head of Chandra Lal, was Blacky’s Aunt Martha. And held, with her head not a foot from the glowing embers in the brazier, into which Chandra Lal, with his free hand was pouring something from a bottle which increased the fumes, was Blacky, eyes dilated in horror.

At the sound of Izzy’s voice Chandra Lal sprang back pivoting the girl into the arms of the Hindu who had guarded the door and who by now had recovered himself and was once more on the alert.

As Chandra Lal swung to face Izzy, his voice cracked harshly. “What is this, Walker?”

And Izzy’s prisoner stuttered: “He m-made me bring him in here.”

Chandra Lal stood still, tall, powerful, sinister in his red robes. His face, under the beard, was sharp, hawk-like, his nose long, his mouth a tight impassive line. His skin was dark, but his features were more Nordic than Hindu.

“So,” Chandra Lal said. “O’Shea—here!”

“More or less,” Izzy agreed, keeping his prisoner in front of him.

He saw Blacky looking at him. The man who held her was big, powerful. The revolver ready in his hand.

Chandra Lal, strangely, was calm, undisturbed.

“I see the reports about you were not far wrong,” Chandra Lal said. “You got away.”

“I’m here,” Izzy said.

Aunt Martha still sat there, staring up into the bright light over her head. She seemed to be sleeping. Chandra Lal did not move. His lack of excitement was puzzling. The slow smile that touched his thin lips was puzzling. “Light,” he said.

AND back of Izzy, behind the open door, a switch clicked. Bright light struck into every corner of the room. Izzy cast a look over his shoulder and saw a man standing behind the door with an automatic in his hand.

Izzy grinned. “I seem to have walked out of the frying pan into the fire. Were you looking into the future with those mysteries of old Delhi?”

The red-garbed figure bowed slightly. “You heard me looking into the future, O’Shea.”

“I’d call it taking a leaf out of the past,” Izzy retorted. “Working the same game on me that you used on Jamison.”

Izzy looked over his shoulder. The man standing behind him, back of the door, had a flat, square face which was oddly familiar. This second look placed it. It was Jamison's missing chauffeur, who had been in the two snapshots taken from the bureau drawer.

Patten looked anything but sick now as he stood there with the automatic.

Aunt Martha stirred slightly. Her eyes dropped from the bright light, past Chandra Lal to Izzy. But she did not move.

Izzy coughed apologetically. "I gather I'm to be—removed. I can understand that. But I can't understand Jamison's death. You're not the Brain, are you?"

Chandra Lal shrugged. "I'm not the Brain. Jamison was killed because he checked his daughter-in-law's movements, and threatened me with arrest and publicity. That," said Chandra Lal, "is something I do not want. So—"

Izzy grinned goodnatureedly.

"You're good," he admitted. "I couldn't see how a girl could admit a killing she didn't do. But I do now. You've probably gone further in that line than anyone else ever has. You're wasting talent in a cheap racket like this."

"For sixteen years," Chandra Lal said, "I was a hypnotist on theater stages—and made little from it. But these fools, these society people"—he spoke contemptuously—"have money, information, weak points. Many of them are excellent subjects to work with. The incense helps. It is my own discovery."

Izzy grinned. "I'll bet this all was the Brain's idea."

Chandra Lal spoke with annoyance.

"He furnishes the protection. But I supply the brains here. I drew Jamison's daughter-in-law here this morning. I drove her to Sadtler's office in my car, sent her in. Anyone can shoot a man."

Chandra Lal's brown hands gestured smoothly, rapidly.

"Two shots—escape out the back door. All easy for the chauffeur who knew the routine of that house. But the police would have caught him if he had not brought the gun back to me, to return to young Mrs. Jamison. I was the one who made it safe—who stopped Jamison—who saved the racket, as you call it. It has been profitable. It will continue to be so."

Izzy smiled—without humor. The stubby gun in the palm of his hand was not visible as he looked at Blacky, standing there a prisoner.

"What about the young lady?" he asked softly.

Chandra Lal looked at Blacky indifferently. "She should have known better than to come here with you," he said.

A door at the other end of the room opened as he finished speaking.

INTO the room stepped a tall, hatless figure. A grim, gruesome apparition wearing a black shapeless mantle which covered head and shoulders. From two staring eyeholes in that black mantle, eyes contemplated the room. A muffled voice spoke through the cloth: "Boasting again, Lal?"

The red-clad figure started as if a lash had been laid over its shoulders. Turning, Chandra Lal faltered: "I—I didn't know you were here."

Izzy stood tensely watching the black mantled figure. This was the man he wanted. This was the Brain—that sinister unknown from whom the underworld now took orders.

And Chandra Lal listened wordlessly while the Brain spoke without emotion, without feeling, as if behind that black mantle lay nothing human—only a brain, cold, calculating, cynical.

"You fool!" the voice said "You talk. You boast. A little success, a little power over these idiots who come to you, and

you believe you are all they think you are. What is O'Shea doing in here?"

A slight movement beyond the door showed the Angel there, listening.

Aunt Martha sat very still in the chair. But her eyes were not fixed and dead now. A faint flush of excitement had crept up into Aunt Martha's pale face.

Blacky stood passive in the grip of the man behind her.

Chandra Lal fingered his beard nervously. Ill at ease, he was no longer the red-garbed, sinister, commanding figure.

"O'Shea got free some way," he explained haltingly. "He forced my secretary to bring him in here. But he's harmless. His gun was taken away from him. See—those two men are armed. He can't get away."

The Brain spoke evenly: "So you had to boast to him? This man O'Shea is cleverer than you will ever be. More dangerous than you will ever know. I wanted him killed on sight—and you let him stand there and listen to your boasting. Catch his arms. Bring him here to me. Before I leave, I will see this matter settled myself. I will settle it."

Aunt Martha gasped soundlessly, slid lower in her chair. The cold finality of the order warned of death, quick and certain.

Izzy knew it as he saw the Brain draw a gun. Jamison's chauffeur, standing behind him, held a gun. The man who held Blacky also was armed. All exits from the room were blocked.

Izzy grinned—as only Izzy O'Shea could grin at times like this.

"I'll come myself," he said, and pushed his prisoner ahead of him.

The Brain called sharply: "Catch his arms! No more tricks from you, O'Shea!"

"No tricks," Izzy said—and the smile wiped from his face, leaving it a cold, set mask in which his eyes burned queerly as

he snapped his prisoner around behind him at Jamison's chauffeur.

THE little secretary squealed with fright as he came against the big man and an arm swept him aside. Izzy saw the automatic leveling, saw murder in the broad flat face. His hand flicked forward, pointing. The smashing report of the shot drove the big man careening back against the door, from where he pitched to the floor, eyes staring, face already stiffening in death.

Izzy ducked around as a shot crashed from Blacky's side. The bullet burned his arm as he dove toward the spot where Chandra Lal had been standing. But the tall figure in the red robe was not there now. Chandra Lal had bolted toward the opposite end of the room, toward the Brain, at the first sign of trouble.

Through ringing ears Izzy heard the Brain's cry of anger. "Get out of the way, you fool!"

Blacky's guard had fired the second shot. Blacky, struggling now, was held by an encircling arm while the man aimed past her side. He fired again, but Blacky's movements made him miss.

And Izzy's swerving rush brought him to them, directly into a third shot. He couldn't shoot yet; couldn't risk hitting Blacky. He took the blast of the third shot full in front of him as Blacky's hand slapped at the gun desperately.

A sledge-hammer blow struck Izzy's side. But the momentum of his rush carried him on—on until his hand shoved over Blacky's shoulder. He saw the horror, the fear on the man's face as it started to duck. With no feeling Izzy saw the fear blotted out by the blast from the little Mauser automatic cuddling in his hand.

And then Blacky was free. The man behind her was down on the floor. Izzy lurched around toward the other end of

the room where Chandra Lal had just rushed past the Brain to the safety of the door.

The tall, black-mantled figure was already whirling for the door also. He was at the heels of Chandra Lal as Izzy's hand came up and the Mauser barked.

The tall figure staggered as it vanished in the hall beyond. And as Izzy followed unsteadily, he heard two rapid shots beyond the door.

Izzy's rush carried him through the doorway into a short, narrow passage. And there to the right a still figure lay face down on the floor before a closed door at the end of the passage. The turban had fallen off. The red silk across the back was darkening in two spots with the spreading stains of fresh blood.

Two bullets had been fired in Chandra Lal's back. He was dead. Quite dead.

IZZY stepped over him and tried the door. It was locked. Sharp stabs of pain were growing in his side. He put a hand there. A rib seemed to be broken. He turned back, met Blacky.

"Izzy!" Blacky gasped. "He shot you!" Her face was drawn, anxious.

"Nothing much," Izzy denied. "Only a rib. It'll be all right. Get your aunt. Let's get out of here."

Izzy's face was still a bleak, blank mask, as cold as his voice as he surveyed the room. Blacky's aunt was out of the chair, looking from one dead body to the other.

"They're dead, Mr. O'Shea," she said. "You—you killed them, didn't you?"

Izzy's face softened. "I'm afraid so," he admitted. "I'm sorry it had to happen this way."

Aunt Martha declined his arm with a little toss of her head.

"Bosh!" the little old lady said with spirit. "You go on ahead with that gun and see if there are any more. I don't

know what made me go to sleep, but I woke up in time to see what was happening. They were going to kill you and Caroline, weren't they?"

"I'm afraid they were," Izzy admitted.

Aunt Martha set her lips and looked up at Izzy sternly.

"I have been a God-fearing woman all my life, Mr. O'Shea. I do not approve of killing. But—but I think you did quite right. I will testify that you were forced to do this. Don't you worry."

Scandalized, Blacky said: "You're a bloodthirsty wretch, Aunt Martha. I can't believe it's you talking."

"Neither can I," Aunt Martha admitted, then squared her shoulders and let Blacky take her to the door.

The dapper little secretary had vanished. The reception room was empty, the hall outside deserted. On a hunch Izzy led the way past the three-headed statue of Siva into the great room. His hunch was right. The steel doors were standing open.

THE front door was standing ajar an inch or so; the iron grillwork beyond was wide open. The terrace was deserted; the parking space beside the house held only the old limousine in which they had come.

The aged chauffeur stepped to meet them, speaking with hurried relief.

"I—I was just going to get the police, madam. Everyone left, and then a car drove up hurriedly, and a man ran into the house and—and a few minutes later I thought I heard shots, and then a man and a woman ran out to the same car and raced away. And another machine rushed away from the back of the house. It was all very peculiar. When you did not appear I made certain something had happened to you."

Aunt Martha sailed past her chauffeur, head up. "Nonsense, Peters. I was all right. We have been killing people."

"M-Madam?" Peters stuttered as he hurried to the car door and opened it.

"Killing people, Peters," Aunt Martha repeated. "It is very exciting. No—don't help me in. I'm not old any more this evening."

"Perfectly scandalous roughneck," Blacky said as she followed her aunt into the car. "I actually believe she was thrilled when two men detained us in the big room, Izzy." Blacky's voice grew apologetic. "I knew what it meant then, Izzy, but it was too late. I didn't even have a chance to use my gun. The lights went out for a moment and they came up behind me."

Aunt Martha's sigh was almost wistful. "I don't think I shall come here any more," she said reluctantly. "I—I'm afraid of this Chandra Lal now."

Blacky patted her hand. "You don't need to be," she said gently. "Chandra Lal is gone. He left unexpectedly—on a long trip."

"Where did he go?" Aunt Martha asked.

And Blacky said thoughtfully: "I think he went to learn all there is to know about those old Delhi mysteries."

Blacky looked soberly at Izzy. He knew what she was thinking—of those two spreading spots on Chandra Lal's red-silk costume.

"I hope he clears them up as well as we've cleared this," Izzy said. "We've

proved that Jamison was killed by his chauffeur instead of his daughter-in-law—and I had to kill the chauffeur back there, which saves the trouble of a trial. The daughter-in-law is cleared and, I think cured of her foolishness over frauds like Chandra Lal. Chandra Lal and his graft are wiped out. Lord knows how much grief and misery we've saved there."

"But—the Brain, Izzy?"

"I know," said Izzy. "He got away again. But it won't help him much. We're closing in, chopping at him a little here and a little there. It's only a question of time now."

"If," said Blacky, "he doesn't manage to kill you first."

Izzy patted Blacky's arm.

"He won't," Izzy promised, suddenly grim. "If there's any killing ahead, the Brain will be on the receiving end. And now will you please have the chauffeur stop at the first drug store before we see a doctor. I want to telephone Loucke and give him, with our compliments, some of this information he'll never get otherwise."

Izzy chuckled. "I'll bet," he said, "it will ruin Loucke's night. He'll want to indict someone, and there's no one left to indict. Not even us, no matter how much he'd like to do it."

Blacky laughed. "Give Loucke my regards too, Izzy."

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

What was the meaning of the mysterious series of numbers tattooed on Magee's chest? Why should any man turn himself into a walking column of figures, the sum of which is bound to equal Murder? The answer lies needled into the skin of

THE TATTOOED CORPSE

by

WILLIAM E. BARRETT

in

DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE for JANUARY 1st Out on DEC. 14th



Until Clay Holt took on the Borden case and went to Gordon City to smash it he never would have guessed he could be so pleased at finding an—

EXCUSE TO KILL

A CLAY HOLT NOVELETTE

by

Carroll John Daly

Author of "The Clawed Killer," etc.

CHAPTER ONE

Money Man

THE DOOR to Clay Holt's private office opened suddenly. Clay's feet crashed to the floor. He started to straighten in his swivel chair, then leaning back bounced his feet on the desk again.

"So it's you, Awful." He put disappointed eyes on the primly neat figure, the severely unattractive face behind the

She came in like a whirlwind on the heels of the second man.

spectacles. "If I hadn't seen you with the mask off I could stand it. But, with a face like yours, why distort it?"

"Because you're a 'fold-up' for a pretty face," his secretary said frankly. "This is a business office. You hired me to make it one, because—because"—she grinned, showing the gold tooth which he knew now was a fake—"well—because of my 'pan.'"

"Right!" He glared, then his blue eyes brightened. "You closed the door, so let me have it. I believe we have a client."

"Yes," she said very solemnly, "we have. It's a face that won't take your mind off your business. Hard and cold and cruel."

Clay looked at the card she placed on the desk, repeated the name aloud.

"Stanford Fairchild Borden. It's a lot of name, but not much harm in it. We'll see what's on his mind and how he's fixed for jack. Show him in."

She did. And she was right. It was a hard, cold, unemotional face. The man was old, without definite age, yet he held himself erect as he leaned on his cane.

He said, without preliminary: "The young lady, no doubt, has given you my card. I want to tell you right in the beginning that I have money."

"That's a good start." Clay motioned to a chair. "In fact, I don't know any better one—unless, that you're willing to spend it."

Mr. Borden said stiffly: "I am in the habit of paying for what I want." He took out a wallet, tossed ten century notes onto the desk. "I'll put another thousand to that when the case is complete. I didn't at first think you quite the man for the job; quite—uh—well, perhaps not quite suited for the work."

Agatha Cummings said from her seat on the window sill: "I think the word he meant was—unscrupulous."

Borden turned his head and looked at

her. It was a long, piercing, steady gaze. Nothing of anger or even disapproval in it; just appraising. Finally he said: "Must she listen in on us?"

"She's got a better head than mine," Clay said indifferently. "Better memory."

"What I say is something that is better forgotten, one way or the other." And leaning forward suddenly: "You'd shoot a man to death! Wouldn't you?"

CLAY stiffened. The swivel chair pounded forward, his feet set more firmly on the floor. "You're not," he said very slowly, "hinting that you'd like to pay two grand for a bit of murder."

"When I talk," said the man, "I don't hint. I say what I want. I tell what I'll pay and I listen to the other man's price, and take it or leave it."

"You better begin talking then." Clay turned his head and looked out the window. The more he saw of the man the less he liked him.

"Good!" said Borden. "I've got two daughters. Five years ago the older, Eleanor; not much brains—beautiful and dumber than hell, walked out and married a clerk; a clerk in my own factory. He got a wife and lost his job. Now—that clerk was more stupid than the girl. I offered to buy him off and he talked of love and romance and—baloney, and took my girl out of the state. But I watched him and I kept my word. Just as soon as he got a job I cracked down on him, and he was 'out.' The girl was a fool. She stuck to him; starved with him." The man's hard eyes never changed. "And he shot himself so she'd come back to me and get a decent living for the boy. Yes—that's right; there was a child. I'm the grandfather of this clerk's child."

"Well"—Clay felt the hair on his neck rise—"she came back then?" He didn't say any more; he couldn't.

"No." Borden shook his head. "She

didn't come back and I didn't care. She wrote that I had been the cause of her husband's death. She married again. I don't know if she did it just to spite me; I don't know if she did it just for a home for the clerk's child; I don't know if she knew her second husband's real character. But she married a criminal; a murderer; a man who got his money running liquor over the Border. A tall, handsome, black-haired scoundrel."

"She brought him to see you, eh?"

"She did not. He came alone. I guess his graft went with Repeal. He came about Eleanor and the boy. He wanted money, and when I showed him the door he tried to bulldoze me. He'd drag my name through the mud! And when that didn't go he threatened bodily harm to her. He'd make her life miserable; make her suffer unless I paid — mental and physical suffering! He didn't paint a pretty picture."

"He'd torture her; that's what you mean?"

"It's not what I mean; it's what he said that I'm telling you."

"And what did you do?"

"I told him—if he ever showed his face in New York again I'd have him arrested, convicted of blackmail and attempted extortion; and ordered him out of the house."

"You didn't put up any money then?"

"Not a cent." Borden was emphatic. "Not one cent."

"Then what?" Clay tried to put an indifference in his voice, but it was difficult. The man was repulsive.

"I told you," Borden spoke the words with measured evenness, "I had another daughter. She has my blood, fought for what she wanted—fought for it even when she was a child. She became twenty-one a few months ago, received a large sum of money left to her by her grandfather; left

first—understand, to me; entirely to me, to be given to her on her twenty-first birthday if in my opinion and judgment she was capable of receiving it."

STANFORD FAIRCHILD BORDEN paused, cleared his throat, ran a huge handkerchief over a moist forehead. There was admiration mixed with the anger in his voice.

"She was clever. For a couple of years I studied her; particularly questioned her concerning her sister, Eleanor. Yes, sir; she took charge of every cent of that money, took over every certificate, every security. Then, when she safely had it, she stood up at the dinner table and told me exactly what she thought of me. Some of it was true; some of it wasn't. Then she left me and went directly to Gordon City, down near the Mexican Border; you know. Straight to her sister! Damn it! I discovered later that she had been corresponding with her, sending that sister her own allowance. Now—I want my daughter back; my younger daughter, Sarah Lee."

"You hear from her?"

"I did for a while. Then a silence. Then my letter to Alca Reiz—that's Eleanor's husband—that if I didn't hear at once from Sarah Lee I would notify the police." He nodded. "There's something wrong, Mr. Holt; terribly wrong. That letter brought a quick response from Sarah Lee. I have it here with me now. Read it."

Clay read the note, passed it to Agatha Cummings, then took it back and read it through again. It was short enough. And tragically hopeless in tone.

Dear Father:

You and I have both been wrong. You, in waiting so long and not acting at all. I, in acting so very suddenly and thoughtlessly when I did finally act.

I have been swept into the great mael-

strom that you created—unconsciously, of course, for Eleanor. To notify the police would be to complicate a simple—a very simple tragedy. There is no law; no force of law that can cover this situation; no law, as you understand law up home in the city.

Above everything, do not seek the police. There is nothing they could do; nothing for them to do, except perhaps aggravate or hurry an inevitable tragedy.

You are too late. Do nothing if you wish to see me again.

You never knew; never understood. But I worshiped and loved my sister. I love her now and shall always continue to do so.

As for you and me! Her shadow; figuratively and literally, has come between us.

I am sorry that it was necessary to play that shabby trick on you to get my money. But I am not sorry that I played it; only sorry that the pretense was necessary. Please try to believe and understand me.

Sarah Lee.

"Well," Clay said, "did you go to the police? Do you understand she is a prisoner?"

"No, no—not exactly to the police. But I have had information from Gordon City. Sarah Lee is not a prisoner; she has been seen there on the streets. I don't understand it." And suddenly: "I love my daughter. I want her back. Will you go down to Gordon City and bring her back?"

"You mean—against her will? Suppose she refuses—"

"I don't know, I don't know." And then suddenly: "No; perhaps not that. But I want my daughter back. I want her free to come back."

"But, if she isn't a prisoner, if she's staying—"

"But she is; I know she is. Perhaps, a willing prisoner. Something to do with Eleanor." He raised his hands. "Yes, I'll even take Eleanor back to get Sarah Lee."

Clay Holt tapped the desk.

"You have investigated, then, before coming to me."

"In a way—yes."

"Detectives?"

"Yes, yes. But it was entirely unsatisfactory. I came here because other efforts have failed. Now—what do you advise?"

Clay Holt looked over at his most efficient secretary, saw the almost imperceptible shake of her head. He said to her: "What do you advise, Miss Cummings?"

The girl answered, as if she had already decided: "I would advise Mr. Borden to go to the police or to the Federal authorities, or go straight to Gordon City himself."

BORDEN grinned. At least, his mouth opened and false teeth showed. "I do not expect a high-class surgeon to advise me to go to a free clinic, nor suggest that I operate on myself. I believe; in fact, am certain that my daughter has fallen into a clever trap of desperate criminals and for some reason is unable to protect herself or appeal to the law. I do not intend to go down there, get shot in the back and leave her helpless. If you refuse, Mr. Holt, I must take my business elsewhere."

"I see." Clay was coming to his feet, smiling at the continual shaking of Agatha's head. "Right now I'm pretty busy," he glanced at the money on the desk, "and this case takes me out of town." He pushed the money slowly toward Borden. "Besides which—"

Borden cut in. "I'll pay all expenses besides that two thousand, for an investigation and a thorough report on just what is taking place at Gordon City and why Sarah Lee does not return. It's a lot of money for these times. In a way, you were recommended to me by my daughter, Sarah Lee. Unconsciously, perhaps.

But I recall now. It was at breakfast and she had one of those common tabloid sheets. Your picture was there. She said, 'If I were ever in trouble, there is the man to help.' I remembered it afterwards; remembered it when I found that same picture of you this morning in her room. You would recognize her by this." The wallet was out again; a photograph taken from it, handed to Clay.

AGATHA CUMMINGS had come from the window, was looking over Clay's shoulder. She saw the tall, slim girl; the sharp, aristocratic features; the intelligent, alive eyes. But she took in also the graceful lines of the body, the slenderness of arms and the delicate curves above small ankles. Her shoulders moved, her hands parted slightly. She knew before Clay spoke; before Clay said: "I'll look into the thing, Mr. Borden." Clay's eyes lowered again to the picture. "She's a damn fine looking girl, and if she wants to get out of Gordon City I'll take her out."

"I'm afraid, Mr. Holt, that it isn't as easy as all that." The old man was not so stiff now, not so determinedly hard in his manner. "Certain people may even try to prevent you reaching there or staying there. I think—I'm afraid this Alca Reiz is bad—very bad."

"Well—well." Clay half held the picture to the light. "I'll just run down to Gordon City and see how really bad Mr. Reiz is."

Borden had walked toward the door, so he didn't hear Agatha's soft hushed whisper close to Clay's ear. Although Clay heard it, he didn't turn his head. He just smiled and nodded. Agatha Cummings had said: "Just a sucker; just a sucker for women."

And Clay's thought was—but what a woman!

Clay was still looking at the picture

when the outer door closed and Agatha Cummings returned to the office. He laid the photo down on the desk, looked at the girl, smiled boyishly.

"It's a pile of jack. Easy money! Why didn't you want me to grab it?"

"Well—" She thought aloud. "The man himself. He lied to you, Clay."

"Rot! He couldn't have. No man would deliberately paint himself up such an egg."

"I don't mean that. I didn't like the way he suggested killing this husband of his daughter. I didn't like—maybe I didn't understand his crack that other detectives were unsatisfactory." And as Clay looked at the photo again, "Maybe I'd better go with you."

"No—not down there." Clay shook his head. "I've got to protect that girl from others; from herself maybe. But what could you do?"

"I might protect you from the girl after you had protected her from herself."

Clay whistled softly, pretended to study the photo again, watched Agatha Cummings from the side of his eyes.

"She's got dough," he mused. "In her own name too, and her old man will leave her a pile more. Marriage isn't such a bad idea at times—and what a looker!" He moved toward the door. "O. K., Awful. Get me a ticket on a fast plane to—well, the nearest place to this Gordon City where I can hop a rattler. See you at the airport!"

CHAPTER TWO

Death Threat

IT WAS a long ride to Gordon City; a damned long ride on that train, and Clay cursed Agatha mentally. Surely she could have picked a better route!

It was raining when he reached the Gordon House. It wasn't much of a ho-

tel; but then, it wasn't much of a town. But after all, he wasn't exactly on what he expected to be a pleasure trip.

As he passed between the dry potted plants that were masquerading as sumptuous grandeur he knew that he was watched; that eyes were on him. He spun from the desk suddenly, looked back across the lobby; at the two men on the couch and the one in the chair beside it. The heavy-set man who took the cigar from his mouth and whispered to his friends. They turned their heads, looked in every direction but his; letting him know, as if they had spoken the message aloud, their indifference to a stranger arriving in town.

Clay grinned. He was in the enemy's territory and the enemies were there—three of them. The first move was up to them. He turned to the desk, took the pen the clerk offered him, hesitated above the register, then in sudden impulse dismissed the alias he had planned and scratched: *Clay Holt, New York, N. Y.*, in great sprawling letters. Hell! He wasn't ashamed of his name.

Clay followed the boy into the elevator, stood patiently while it climbed slowly to the third floor, then kept on the boy's heels to Room 309. The room wasn't so bad and the bathroom had a shower. Despite the rain, the train ride had been dusty.

The boy gone, Clay regarded the key in the lock for a moment, started to turn it, hesitated, and finally leaving the door unlocked went into the bathroom. He left the bathroom door partly open, ran water quickly into the basin and did not remove his jacket as he washed. Between the splashes of water he listened, kept his eyes on the glass above his head and so into his bedroom beyond.

The knock came. He had not exactly expected it, yet it wasn't unexpected. He nodded, was glad that he had not locked

the door and finally called out: "Come in. Come in!"

After his second call he heard the door open, a heavy cough, then silence. The door did not close.

Clay splashed water, quickly dried his hands and face, mechanically felt of the heavy .38 beneath his left armpit and called out: "Just a minute; didn't expect you so soon. Doing a bit of a wash. Sit down!"

The answering voice was hard, with a drawl in it. The hardness, natural; the drawl, more of a stage property. It said: "I'm afraid, Mr. Holt, you miscalculate this visit and will be unpleasantly surprised. I'm not the man you evidently expected."

"No?" Clay called from the bathroom, though he was close to the door and could have stepped into the room. "Maybe not. I was expecting a guy with a flat nose, queer eyes that were rather far apart, and had a funny chin that was meant to show great strength of character and determination; a chin that was desperately trying to protrude, when nature built it to—"

"I want to talk to you now. Come out!" the voice cut in. There was no drawl to it now; theatrical or otherwise, but the hardness remained and was real.

CLAY stepped easily through that door. The man was taller and broader than he had thought when he saw him in the lobby. He took in the rest of the room too; the door, just open a crack, and the point of a shoe that held it so. The man spoke quickly.

"We like plain words here in Gordon City," he said. "We like to hear them and we like to say them. So here's your orders: You've got ten minutes to leave town. There's no train, but a fast car will drive you to Middle Junction."

"Never mind that. I'm not taking your advice."

"Advice!" Thick lips formed a sneer. "You didn't get me, buddy. I don't advise. I give orders. You've got ten minutes to leave—"

"Sure!" Clay yawned close to that face; flashed a quick glance from the man's empty hands to the hall door and the toe of the heavy boot. "I heard all that. So—what?" His own hand moved suggestively; his jacket fell open a bit. The butt of a gun was plainly visible.

The man stepped a foot backward, paused, waited, and when Clay did not move, he growled: "We don't just talk here in Gordon City." His head leaned forward but his body remained where it was; his hands still hung at his sides. "So if you want to go on living—get!" And when Clay moved slightly: "No rough stuff, mister. There's a couple of friends in the hall."

"Good!" Clay nodded. "I won't take advantage of you, Flatface. If you intend to go through with it, call in your friends." And the smile going and his lips tightening, "By God! you're going to need them—both of them."

The man glanced toward the door, took another step, hesitated, pushed his felt hat far back on his head. And the door crashed open.

It was not just pushed open or even thrust open; it simply crashed open. Things happened too quickly for Clay to be sure. He saw the figure of a man stagger into the room as if hurled into it. He saw too the gun in the man's hand and acted quickly, as he always acted.

The bigger bruiser, who had made the threats, was between him and the armed enemy. Clay's right hand swept to his left armpit; swept out again almost in a single motion. But where the inward sweep was quick and light, the outward one—though just as quick, was hard and vicious. Clay's body swung to the left, giving his right hand with the gun in it

greater distance—greater play as the heavy barrel crashed with a dull thud against the man's head just back of his ear.

The heavy man swayed; his eyes dulled. He staggered sideways, gave slightly at the knees, half straightened, then clutching at his head collapsed to the floor.

Clay's eyes didn't grow dull; they simply widened. He knew now why the gunman at the door had not slipped quietly into the room and knew too that he had not hurtled in by his own wish. Something had dashed against him; something had driven him into the room. And that something was a woman—a girl. A young girl with wide frightened eyes, black hair, delicate curves to a slender form, and—

Clay knew. Sarah Lee Borden, the girl he had come over two thousand miles to find, was there in that room with him. Sarah Lee, who— But the man with the gun—the gun he still held dangling in his hand as he looked with surprise at the girl, then at his friend on the floor!

"Drop it!" Clay ordered sharply. "Or lie down on the floor with it."

THE man looked straight at Clay Holt; straight at those narrowing eyes, at the suddenly tightening knuckle of the trigger finger. His own eyes widened; his mouth hung open. Then nervous fingers parted and the gun thudded gently to the carpeted floor.

The girl, who had run toward the window, suddenly turned, looked at Clay.

"Don't. Don't!" she cried out. "Leave town, as they wish. Leave. Don't—" She ran toward him with outstretched arms, as if to fling those arms about his neck.

She was his friend; at least, she was the show that real money back in the city was behind. But friends often turn enemies. Even friends who mean well. Even friends who—

Clay's left hand shot out, stiffened. He

didn't hit the girl, didn't even push the girl. He liked to think that she shoved her own chin against his palm; against the heel of that open hand, and that he didn't straight-arm her or even push her. The girl stopped dead, started walking backwards, gripped at the foot of the bed and slid slowly to the floor. Clay said: "That's right. Make yourself comfortable for a few minutes." And to the man at the door: "Back against that door and keep it closed. If it should come open I'll put more weight against it; lead in your body." And to the man on the floor, who was getting up now: "If you want to do a little killing, now is the time."

The man said: "Let us do this thing peacefully. I only came to talk with you." He was looking down the yawning hole at the end of Clay's gun. "You can have my rod, mister. Will you take it or will I give it to you?" He sank into a chair.

Clay moved his shoulders. "I don't want it," he said indifferently. "You keep it." And when the man's eyes closed shrewdly, speculatively, cunningly, "I'm like you are, Flatface. If you're found dead it looks a lot better if you have a gun on you."

The shrewdness went out of the sitting man's face; a dull sort of fear crept into his eyes. Clay spoke to the man by the door: "That goes for you too, brother. Pick up your gun." And as the man half bent: "But only if you intend to use it."

The bending figure straightened almost at once; the gun lay untouched on the floor. The girl sat stiff and straight, her hands braced behind her, her head nodding in perplexed wonder.

"Now," said Clay, "we all understand things. Come on, Flatface. You were making me a proposition; want to finish it?"

The man came to his feet, looked at the door, moved cautiously toward it. And when Clay made no move to stop him,

said hoarsely: "All right. I'll beat it along. You've had your warning. You'll die for this."

"Is that a threat?"

"That," said the man, "is gospel." And hesitating with his hand on the door knob, he lifted bulging folded newspapers from his pocket and tossed them at Clay's feet. "Reading matter!" was all he said.

Clay stepped forward, clutched the man's shoulder and despite his size and strength spun him roughly around.

"Listen, Flatface! I don't like threats of death hanging over my head; that is, hanging for any length of time. But you don't seem sure of yourself—so, the next time our paths cross and if opportunity presents itself, I'll just pop you over." The man's smile was a ghastly failure. Clay went on: "Since I don't know how long I'll be in town it's your move out—not mine. Good night!"

The man opened the door, watched his friend back into the hall. Then he turned to Clay, his feet spread apart, the dullness now out of his eyes, his chin again attempting to protrude. He sneered his words.

"So that's the message you want me to take back to the one who sent me!" And when Clay did not speak, "Anything else?"

"Yep. That!" Clay's left hand shot suddenly up from just above his knee, turned into a fist and collided with the masquerading jaw. Just the dull thud, the slight lifting of a heavy body that fell into arms behind, and Clay closed the door. This time he locked it.

CLAY HOLT turned, kicked the gun on the floor under the chair, walked toward the girl who was climbing to her feet.

"Good Lord! Miss Borden," he said, "what makes you play around with such rats?"

"Rats? Rats!" She clutched at her chest; and suddenly, "You struck me—you struck me." She moved toward the door. "You're going to take—try and take me back to New York by force?"

"Not me!" Clay didn't stop her. "And the shove was necessary. I didn't want you hanging around my neck just when it looked like a little shooting." He paused, his eyes brightened. "By God! I wish I had chanced it. You're a damn beautiful woman."

Her hand was on the door knob, already groping for the key before she turned, came back almost to the center of the room and said: "Get out of town! Get out at once. Those men will kill you. That was Joe Frazier; the one who did the talking. He's bad—all bad."

"Nonsense!" Clay's grin was boyish now. "He's simply misunderstood. Don't worry about me."

"But I do—I do. Why are you here?"

"To clear up your trouble and make it possible for you to return to your father." And mistaking the look in her eyes, "Of course, if the return to your father is agreeable to you."

"I can't go back. You don't know, you don't understand. I've been drawn into evil when I meant—meant only good. I've got to wait and hope. No one can help me."

She was nearer to him now. Clay took her hand, held it, pulled her closer to him when she ceased to try to draw from his grasp.

"Sure I can help you! Just give me a chance. If I can't—bing, like that I'll tell you so." Her head was near to his shoulder; he liked it too. Her hair was soft and— "Hell!" he said. "You're crying."

"I can't help it. They are going to kill you, Clay." The name slipped out easily, naturally. "There's no other way. I came to tell you. They—he let me come."

"So someone controls your movements!"

"Yes." She straightened, her eyes wet. "Not physically. He couldn't do that, wouldn't dare do that. If I just dropped out of things my father would notify the police. Then—well, it would all come out. The police must not know."

"You're in trouble with the law?"

"No—yes. I don't know. But I don't care about that. It's not myself. All my life I've been so sure of myself; afraid of nothing, intimidated by nothing. When I first came here I laughed at things; that is, to myself—not to her, my sister. I could handle the situation! I even pretended—God!" Her body shook. "I let the beast make love to me. Now it's all real. It's just lately that I'm afraid of failure." And clutching her hands at her sides, fingers biting into palms, "But I won't fail her. I won't—I won't!"

She was very beautiful when she was like that. Fear, anger and determination gripping her all at once. It gave Clay a feeling of pleasure in his work. To protect a woman like this; protect her and be paid for it! What job could be better? He shook his head. Her eyes bothered him. He said, half aloud: "You're beautiful, Sarah Lee, and you're going to mar—perhaps ruin that beauty. Your eyes! Dark rings under them. They're nice now, but—"

She wasn't listening, cut in quickly.

"You'll go, won't you? You can only hurt things, not help them. Don't ask me. Don't—I can't tell you. I don't want your death on my hands; they are stained with blood now."

She jarred erect, backed from him. There was a knock at the door, followed by another—and then a voice, smooth, even, soft; yet it carried clearly to the man and the girl in that room.

"Tell Mr. Holt it's all right, Lee, dear. It's I—Alca."

Clay looked at the door, moved his shoulders. The girl said: "We couldn't keep him out, and he knows I'm here." She walked to the door, almost listlessly turned the key, pulled the knob and stood back.

CHAPTER THREE

Alca Reiz

THE man was tall, with black hair slicked back from a high forehead. He was handsome too and there was nothing weak about his chin nor the mouth above it, nor the hard, black, penetrating eyes below the sharply defined thin eyebrows.

He put an arm about the girl, shook her head playfully, ran a hand through her hair. She stood quietly and took it. Then the man said, and there was no accent in his voice: "Mr. Holt, eh? Clay Holt! Lee is always doing things to help others. I knew she'd come here; felt it." He extended a hand toward Clay, parted thin red lips. "No hard feelings! You've caused me lots of trouble. I mean, your breed—or I should say, your profession."

He held the hand out a long time. Finally Clay took it, said—though he wished to recall the words for the girl's sake a split second after he had finished: "Sure I'll shake hands. I'm not fussy."

The polished smooth face wrinkled into smiles, even the eyes seemed kindly. It was simply the thin lips that gave him away. Eyes, voice, and the wide smile could not hide the cruelty of those lips.

"Now—now, Mr. Holt, we won't have any unpleasantness. I know why you're here; I'm willing to make it easy for you." He frowned. "At least, less dangerous for you."

"I just met your friends." Clay dropped the hand. "Things seem about as dangerous as a girls' boarding school."

Alca Reiz threw back his head and laughed. It was a nice laugh, a pleasant laugh, a musical laugh—if one didn't follow the thin lips that seemed less prominent when the mouth opened.

"They are not my friends, Mr. Holt, and in their own fashion they are dangerous." And when Clay did a little teeth-showing of his own, "Oh, perhaps not to a man like you; a man of your valor." Reiz' sneer was pronounced. "Yet, a bullet from behind a clump of bushes entering a man's back is almost as annoying as a pistol waved in his face with curses and threats behind it."

"If you've come with another warning, another threat, I'm not leaving town."

"Warning? Well, perhaps that's right—but hardly a threat." He looked down at the folded newspapers on the floor, bent and lifted them; spread them out on the table. "Ah! Impartial observers! A warning from the press, dated not so far back. You see"—this as Clay looked over his shoulder—"his name was Davis—Joe Davis; from New York too. A private investigator, found shot to death and his body just across the river—Mexican side. Most distressing! And I believe the same men who warned you warned him too."

"Including you?" Clay looked directly into those dark eyes.

Black eyes remained steady, thin lips straight and grim. Finally Alca Reiz spoke. He said: "Including me."

A LONG moment of silence. Another paper; another headline. Clay's mouth fell slightly open. He knew the name this time. Phil Straus, former cop who had opened his own agency after leaving the force. Reiz read part of the story aloud.

"Found shot to death on Main Street, his gun already in his hand. Poor chap! Too bad he never got a chance to use it."

You seem shocked, Mr. Holt! Perhaps you knew the man. Crack shot!"

"Yes," said Clay, "I knew him." There was nothing of humor in his eyes now, in his words either. He was looking at Alca Reiz' jaw, closing his left hand into a fist again. It was with an effort he kept that hand at his side. But Reiz said: "So be advised. Or, if your pride keeps you here, allow me to help you."

"Help me to a headline, eh?" The temptation was strong again to smack the man down. But Clay didn't. He raised his right hand, pounded a finger against the white shirt, said: "Phil Straus was no longer a young man; his quick draw was a thing of the past, his speed on the trigger never was so hot. If he could get his gun out before being killed—why, I'd have shot at least three of them to death."

Alca Reiz raised his hand, brushed Clay's pounding finger aside. Very carefully and in evident disgust he flicked at the whiteness of his soft shirt where that finger had rested. If the disgust was acting, it was damn good acting.

"We might as well clear up a strange misunderstanding that has already killed two men; those two city detectives, and will perhaps cost you your life," and after a steady look at Clay and a shake of his head, "which for some unaccountable reason Lee wishes to save. Of course I know why you are here. To take Lee back to a father who has mistreated both her and her sister—my wife, Eleanor. Mr. Borden's actions in trying to make trouble for me, as he did for Eleanor's first husband, are contemptible. Unfortunately, this is a Border town. People drift here from all over the country, who are not of the highest character. It is not a large city. Strangers are seen, watched, and their business investigated. These two detectives were suspected by a certain undesirable, dangerous and even influential element of being sent here on other interests

than my family affairs. You too, no doubt, are now suspected of using my affairs as a masquerade for your real purpose in this town. I don't doubt that someone fostered such an idea; even encouraged it, and so we have had two deaths and another pending."

"You didn't happen to think of such an idea yourself Mr. Reiz; let certain undesirable people believe that it was not your domestic activities but their criminal ones these other detectives, and now myself, came to look into?" Though Clay's voice carried heavy sarcasm, Reiz missed it or at any rate chose to ignore it. He smiled pleasantly.

"It would save me trouble, of course, and I must admit that I have not tried to enlighten a certain element as to the reason for these visits. But I did not foresee such violent deaths. With you, dear boy, I—"

"The hell with that!" Clay cut in sharply. "I'm not leaving Gordon City, and that's final. What are you going to do about it?"

"Why—I am going to invite you to my home, to give you the protection of my roof; let certain parties understand that you are not unduly interested in their activities."

"What a nice start for a body to be found across the river!" Clay laughed without mirth.

STRONG shoulders, though not too broad, shrugged expressively. "Then you won't come!" A moment of hesitation. "Of course, from what you say; what you believe, I am to understand you are afraid."

"I'm not afraid," Clay said. "The river is big enough for many bodies. I'll come."

"No!" The girl was across the room, had Clay by the arm. Fingers bit through his jacket into the flesh. "No, you can't come. You can't come, because—"

"Because—why?" Alca Reiz turned on her sharply. "His coming will make things more pleasant for you; his coming will make things more bearable for Eleanor. More peace of mind, more happiness, less of torture for—"

"No, no!" the girl cried out, turned to Reiz, put hands on his shoulders, stood there when he placed an arm about her waist, pulled her close, his face brushing her hair. Clay saw her body shudder in that half embrace, saw her pull her body together—not away, exactly.

Reiz ran a hand through her hair, half turned her so that they both faced Clay. Reiz spoke softly.

"I mean—the torture of her mind, that her father doubts her happiness with me. Eleanor is not quite herself, Mr. Holt; she has her spells. Her former husband's terrible self-inflicted death has at last caught up with her. But I'm through with suspicions. I want you to come and see for yourself. See my wife, my home, our little sister, Sarah Lee, and go back to their father and tell him the truth. I want him to have a satisfactory report from at least one detective."

Clay nodded. It struck him suddenly what Borden had meant; exactly what he meant—that the other detectives had not been satisfactory. But how could they be when they were dead?

Clay said simply: "I accept your invitation and kind protection, and will make an honest report—alive."

"Fine. Fine!" Alca Reiz half bowed, and turning to Sarah Lee Borden, "Tell him, Lee. Let us have no doubt. Tell Mr. Holt that he will be perfectly safe at our house and that you stay with us because your sister needs you."

Sarah Lee opened her mouth, closed it twice, before she finally spoke. "He is right, Mr. Holt. I stay because my sister needs me."

Alca Reiz swung suddenly. His eyes

flashed dangerously. His words were an order; a direct command.

"I said to tell Mr. Holt that he will be perfectly safe." And, facing the girl, with his back to Clay: "You forgot to tell him that." A long moment as Clay looked over his shoulder and saw the girl's eyes; eyes staring straight into Reiz'; eyes that for the moment seemed to have no expression other than their intensity. "Tell him," the man said again—slowly, as if each word were a separate sentence. "Tell him that he will be perfectly safe at my house."

THE girl's eyes turned slowly, rested full on Clay's. There was his quick thought that they were beautiful eyes; deep and— But he killed that thought. Something else! Clay figured the whole thing out. Alca Reiz had looked at her and spoken; Reiz had stared into her eyes and given her orders that she dare not; perhaps even could not, disobey. Clay had heard of hypnotism, seen it on the stage, read about strange cases in the papers. But he had never believed in it before. Now—the girl must speak as Alca Reiz directed. He knew what her words would be. And she spoke.

"Mr. Holt," she said, "I must tell you the truth; the absolute truth as I see it, believe it. Every day, every hour, every minute, every second even, you will be in great danger—danger of your life, at Alca Reiz' house. You would be a fool to go there."

A dead silence. The girl faced Clay a moment, then faced Alca Reiz, then swinging that slender body went to the window and stood looking out of it. The words she had spoken were not the ones Clay expected, and certainly not the ones Reiz expected.

Alca Reiz took a step forward. For a moment it looked as if that suave calmness were going to desert him. A sudden

red shot over his face, and was gone. Sparkling black eyes were hateful balls; white, even teeth closed upon a thin lower lip. Anger, hatred, sudden, seemingly uncontrollable passion in his face. But he did control it; at least, in his words and physical actions. It was a full minute though before he spoke. His smile was rather forced then, as if painted on his cruel handsome face.

"Lee's little joke!" He tried desperately to keep the words from sticking in his throat.

"No, no!" the girl cried out again, swung from the window toward Reiz, but it was to Clay Holt she went, to Clay that she spoke. "You won't come. You won't come to the house?"

"Of course I'll come." Clay took her arm, smiled; but his fingers closed tightly about that arm in warning, a warning for her to be silent. He knew that she was endangering herself to protect him.

Alca Reiz bowed stiffly.

"I will send for you tomorrow then, before supper. Come, Lee."

"I think," said the girl, "I'll stay a bit and talk; just talk with Mr. Holt."

"That is not my wish." Reiz walked to the girl, took her by the arm. "It is better that you come now."

Clay stepped forward, his hand raised to tear the man's grip from the girl's arm. Words were already forming on his lips; but his hand didn't move and his words were never spoken. Alca Reiz went on.

"Dear Lee, it's raining. You know how nervous your sister is. You wouldn't leave her alone on a night like this." And when the girl straightened and seemed about to appeal to Clay, "Alone with me."

"That's right. That's right." The girl turned to Clay, stretched out her hand, gripped his. Her hand was cold; a creeping sort of chill that was reflected in her eyes. "Don't leave the hotel tonight." She just breathed the words.

And they were gone out the door. It closed behind them.

CHAPTER FOUR

Mystery Note

IT WAS late. There was nothing to do in a hurry. Sarah Lee Borden might be, undoubtedly was, in danger. But then, she had been in that danger for some time. Twice Clay moved toward the door. It would have been simple and would have afforded him a great deal of pleasure to go down that hall, grab the girl, knock a few teeth out of Alca Reiz' sneering face and get the whole story.

But would he get the story? Wasn't the girl, too, playing a part? She was afraid to talk and she was afraid not to talk. And she had courage. Hypnotized! He laughed at that thought now. Clay jerked down his vest, looked at himself in the mirror above the dresser, rubbed a hand through his hair, smiled, nodded slightly; then locked the door.

Five minutes later he was taking a shower. Despite the freshness of cool water splashing from his muscular body to the floor he didn't draw the rubber sheet across the tub, and his heavy gun was dangling from one of the curtain pins, away from the flowing water.

Two murders, eh? Things were deep; things were bad. He was going to the house of the enemy; an enemy, who—if the girl's eyes and lips and every action could be believed, would kill him on sight. Clay grinned, yawned, and lifting his gun from the curtain pin patted it gently.

Back in the bedroom, Clay opened the only window and looked out. The rain still beat upon the deserted street below. But it wasn't the rain Clay was interested in just then. It was the distance to that street; the assurance that a ledge or fire-

escape wasn't unpleasantly close. He nodded his satisfaction.

Clay Holt slept; peacefully, easily, without a dream to disturb him. The promise of death, quick and violent, was not new to him; nor did he have the slightest worry that the gun beneath his pillow, that was warmed by the grip of his right hand, might go off by mistake.

Clay didn't know exactly what awoke him. He was a light sleeper. Guys in his position who weren't light sleepers, often slept on forever. And he didn't sit bolt upright in bed and switch on the light. He simply opened his eyes, drew his right hand from beneath the pillow, held the gun steady and waited; his ears alert for the sound that must have awakened him, his eyes unblinkingly trying to accustom themselves to the darkness.

Clay never moved until he had located the sound that had disturbed his sleep. It was by the door; outside the door, and a movement so stealthy as to be almost inaudible. He waited; things were clearer now. He could even make out the black of the lock against the white of the door, perhaps even the projecting key. But no noise came, and though he strained his eyes in an effort, that key did not turn in the lock.

And not a sound. Not a— And Clay jerked to his feet, raised his gun, half tightened his finger upon the trigger.

THE knob of that door had rattled violently. Another second, and it would burst open and sudden death would enter the room. Clay's lips tightened, his gun steadied. This was no quiet country show; this was to be a blast-out in good old big-city style; that is, if any gun went to work before Clay closed a finger on the trigger. His teeth set, his lips curled. He would be shooting from darkness into light. The boys sure would—would—

He stiffened slightly, then relaxed. No

ugly face showed behind a tommy gun. The door did not burst open; did not open at all. Just that sudden rattle of the knob—and silence.

Clay stepped forward, stopped, grinned. So that was it. They thought he'd jump from the bed and dash into the hall to investigate. He smiled.

Another minute, and Clay—his body pressed against the wall, turned the key, gripped the knob with his left hand, twisted it slowly, pulled the door and jerked back. The door creaked slightly, swung inward, back against the wall.

A quiet—a dead quiet, except perhaps for a slight creak far down the hall. Queer, that! Not even the breathing of men; of one man, nor nervous uncertain feet upon the worn carpet of the hall. And he saw it, there on the floor; almost in the room. A small white envelope; white, with stripes smeared across the center that must have been made by the bottom of the door itself.

He half stooped, straightened again, shook his head. They might be clever after all. Clever? He thought of Alca Reiz. There was nothing dumb about him; nothing of the hard, stupid brutality of Joe Frazier and his lugs.

He hunted about the room, found the costumer, upended it, and using it as a pole reached the envelope. Slowly he dragged the letter into the room. Nothing happened; no shot crashed. He replaced the costumer, edged to the door and closing it spun the key. Then he switched on the light. The note would tell him if things were on the level. And the note didn't. It read simply enough—

EVERYTHING CENTERS AROUND
THE KID AND THE OLD BILLINGS
PLACE.

A FRIEND.

Clay lit a butt and killed half of it.

A friend, eh? That was pretty old stuff. But what was the idea? A trap to get him to go some place? Then he remembered that there was a child; the clerk's child. Did the note refer to that child, or did it mean the swell-looking kid—Sarah Lee? He grinned at that. Perhaps Sarah Lee had written the note herself; her way of giving him information without it ever being discovered that she gave it. But most likely, he thought, it was a trap; a gun trap at the Billings place.

Things were quiet for the next five minutes. Clay looked at his watch. It was ten minutes of three. Hell! he was tired; he needed sleep. He'd inquire about that Billings place in the morning.

BUT in the morning he didn't inquire about the Billings place. He didn't like the attitude toward him in the hotel. Oh, nothing tangible, that he could lay a finger on; but he was afraid that, if the note was on the level, word of his inquiry would go back to Alca Reiz. No. He'd play the game quiet and easy; at least until he found how things stood. Then, if the boys wanted blasting—why, blasting it was.

Still, he might pick up bits of information here and there. So—having seen his movies and thus studied rural life, Clay tried the barber shop first. He didn't talk much, but he listened. Why look for trouble when he'd be right in the midst of it that very night? Why not let Alca Reiz believe that he was willing to be convinced that things were on the up-and-up. Yes, he was a good listener; and what he heard didn't make him feel any better. He had wasted many hours arriving at Gordon City. A different plane, a different landing, and he could have gotten a train ride that wouldn't have amounted to anything. The efficient Miss Agatha Cummings, eh! He grinned. He'd remember to give her a ride for the ride she had

given him. And that was about all he did learn.

Clay left the shop and looked the town over. It was small and not very busy. Active enough. People passed about, congregated on street corners—and didn't go any place. The boys who used to be swaggering liquor runners were now simply street-corner loafers. As for the Border Patrol! It was there all right, but the protection wasn't much. Clay knew the system. Only suspected people were watched crossing the Border; the ordinary tourist wasn't bothered at all—that is, while he remained the ordinary tourist.

Twice Clay nearly asked about the Billings place, but each time decided against it. He took a lonely road and strolled down it. The rain had ceased but the going was muddy. The town was dead. And suddenly it wasn't dead!

He wasn't conscious of the hum or perhaps just the soft click of the bullet until it burnt across his left leg. He swung, half crouched, pulled a gun, tossed the nose from side to side; thought that he heard the hum again, wasn't sure of the direction or even of the sound but he saw the hole in his sleeve, close to his hand.

Not a soul! Not a real sound! Just the enemy, deady and silent and unseen, popping away with a silenced rifle or perhaps a powerful air rifle. But he didn't believe it was an air rifle.

And Clay was off, running down that road toward town. He wasn't a coward and he wasn't afraid. But a bullet in the back can be damn annoying, just as Alca Reiz had said. This wasn't big-city warfare, as he knew it. All around him trees and bush and grass. Wild country! He didn't have a chance. He just zig-zagged back toward town.

THE approaching car pulled up, and so did Clay. A trap, eh? And he grinned

rather sheepishly as the head poked out the car window and the man spoke.

"Nice work, Holt. So they can even make you jump, down this way."

Clay's smile broadened. He recognized the Department of Justice agent. A big man in a big business, who had, some time before, offered him a job. He said: "I was running to warn you, Frank. Guys up the road shooting out of season."

"Out of it! There's no closed season here." The man's brows went up. "There were a couple of boys killed who came on the same job you did." And his face setting a bit hard, "And a lad who came on an entirely different job; one of my boys. Better get out of town. It isn't your racket. You don't belong."

"You know why I'm here?"

"Sure!" Frank grinned. "Family trouble. But the little lady is getting herself mixed up with a business that her father's dough can't straighten out. Get from under, boy."

"There's nothing against my client." Clay straightened. "Nothing at all."

"There's nothing against anyone," the agent said slowly. "There never is, until things break. And it'll be a bad break for Miss Sarah Lee Borden. There's certain guys who never take the rap alone."

"Something coming over the Border?" Clay leaned on the car, speaking in a voice of idle gossip.

The agent grinned.

"There's always something coming over the Border. Some guys never learn." And looking down at the tiny globules of red beginning to grow into a little pool on Clay's shoe, "Hop in the car and have a doctor look at that. You're out of your class, Clay. You're quick on the draw; you're a good shot, but you can't hit what you can't see. Right?"

"Right!" Clay's teeth clicked down. "Right as long as you can't see. But I'm a guy who wants a look."

There was a little more talk on the way to town, but it was of the city and mutual acquaintances. Nothing more was said of Clay's reason for being in town, though it was apparent that the government man was well aware of it. Only at parting, Frank said: "Take a tip and jump back to town." And with a grin, "You don't need such violent exercise."

Clay smiled, said nothing. First blood was with the enemy. The gun wound was of little importance. The doctor dressed it with the familiarity of long practice, muttered something about his being luckier than others in town and dismissed him with a pat on the back.

CHAPTER FIVE

House Guest

CLAY was still feeling a bit sour that afternoon when the car called for him. He was somewhat reluctant, too, to enter it; but after all, he thought, the safest place he could be, outside of his hotel room with a gun in either hand, was at the house of Alca Reiz.

The car was a big open touring, with no other occupant than the driver. Things seemed all right. Clay climbed in and the car sped from the curb. It went down the main street, followed the car tracks to the bridge, swung left without crossing it, then shot quickly toward the hills. The driver was good, the car fast; an object in a quickly moving car is hard to hit.

A long rise in the hill, a good road, and the driver slowed down. Clay leaned forward. He had a job to tackle, was willing to take chances but he didn't intend to go in for suicide. He said to the driver: "More speed, guy. This boat can do it."

The man said, without turning his head though his dark face was visible in the oblong mirror: "There's a dangerous

curve a bit ahead; a damn dangerous curve."

"Yeah?" Clay's gun shot into his right hand, the nose jammed hard against the driver's neck; cold steel made a circle in the flesh. Clay said: "Dangerous for you as well as for me, buddy. Don't forget that! If anyone takes a pot shot at me—and some of the boys are not bad at it, I'll blow your brains out; or if that's expecting too much—why, I'll just put a bullet in your head."

The man spoke and despite the "*Senor*" and the sudden affected accent, it was apparent he was an American.

"*Señor*, I—"

"Right through the neck, and up." Clay's gun bored deeper.

The man's foot jammed on the brake, the car came to a sudden stop, backed into a slight clearing. He spoke hurriedly.

"I have thought, *señor*, that there is a shorter way, and that perhaps the rains have washed out the mountain road."

"You have thought also," said Clay as the car turned, started back down the road, "that a bullet in the neck is a bullet in the neck even if swift and sure vengeance follows your death." And as they swung right and entered the main road again: "Remember! No tire trouble, no car trouble, no running out of gas."

THEY made speed after that. Clay sat back and grinned. The man was a good mechanic, had good luck, or the car just performed. Anyway, a few minutes later they rolled into the long entrance of Alca Reiz' place. A low rambling dwelling that might at one time have been a ranch, but it wasn't now. There was lawn about it, that gave off on rolling country—overgrown and uncultivated.

Clay hopped out of the car onto the porch and almost into the arms of Sarah Lee Borden. Her eyes were wide with fear, her mouth hung open. Then she

smiled, extended both hands to him and finally said: "You came. You came! Oh, God! I didn't think you'd—"

And a voice behind her; soft, low. Alca Reiz said: "She thought something might prevent your coming. I told her it was sheer nonsense. Come in, Mr. Holt. You are safe now."

"I hope so." Clay nodded, stepped into the large living room. Nothing mean about this. Comfortably, carefully furnished. A man's room; a man's house. Clay didn't waste time. "Now—I'm to see Mrs. Reiz, I believe. You wanted an honest report."

"Certainly! Lee, dear, you'll prepare your sister for a visitor." And as the girl moved toward the stairs and disappeared beyond the sharp turn by the paneled wall: "Perhaps I'd better go myself. You'll make yourself comfortable for the moment, Mr. Holt."

Clay did. He went across to the huge fireplace, pulled out a chair, started to drop into it—and stopped. The girl was there; Sarah Lee, whom he had just watched go toward the stairs. She read the surprise in his face, said quickly: "I stepped into the alcove on the stairs and he passed me. You shouldn't have come. I told father no one was to come."

In frank admiration Clay's blue eyes surveyed the girl. "I saw your picture and—"

"You came for me—for me then!" She stepped forward, hesitated, placed small hands on his broad shoulders. "If I had known a man like you before, perhaps things would—would— Clay, Clay, something terrible is going on in this house."

"Just what? Quick!" He looked toward the stairs. "You sent me a note?"

"Note?" She seemed surprised, shook her head, dismissed it. "Alca Reiz holds something terrible over Eleanor's head. She can't leave him. I don't know what she has done; what it is."

"And the child! Doesn't she think of the child?"

"Child!" Lee Borden hesitated. "I have never seen the child. He is away at school." A long moment. "Eleanor says he is away at school." Her lips tightened. "But I can't talk to her of the child."

"But surely you see and talk to your sister—often, alone."

"Seldom alone. Oh! there is the opportunity. But I think Alca forbids it and she fears he will discover it. She does whatever he says; almost like a frightened child."

"She loves him?"

"No. She hates him and fears him."

"He beats her; abuses her?"

Lee looked puzzled.

"Not physically, anyway. But he tortures her somehow—horribly. God! we were so close, and now—she wants me, she needs me. But she lives in a world of some indescribable horror. There are times when she has knelt at my feet, begged me to be nice to Alca, do anything he says to do. And once—well, she spoke of divorcing him so he could marry me. Maybe, if I told you of the time she came screaming to my room that—"

THE girl stopped. Her hands dropped to her sides, she swung toward the stairs. Feet beat upon wood, descended the last two steps. Alca Reiz was there.

He didn't speak to the girl, just looked at her. A peculiar look of uncertainty—yes, and desire. Certainly desire, more than simple admiration. He spoke to Clay. "Mrs. Reiz will see you. She has not been over well; you will be considerate. Follow me!" Without another word he turned on his heels and led Clay up the stairs.

Eleanor Reiz sat in a low soft chair. She was old; much older than Clay had thought. Then he realized that she wasn't old in years; just the drawn face, hollowed cheeks, hair that was more white

than gray. But the pity of it all was—her face. Like the face of a corpse which had thrown off its shroud and stepped from an open grave. She was dressed as if she were going to a party, Clay thought. She came to her feet slowly and with an effort.

Clay stood there and let Alca Reiz put her through a series of questions that she answered as if they had been carefully rehearsed. She was happy! Alca was very kind to her! Her father had treated her terribly!

And right in the middle of the questioning Clay remembered the note and snapped in a question of his own.

"Where is the child?"

The woman paled. It showed plainly, despite the heavy rouge. Reiz said quickly: "The child, Edward, is away at school." And when the woman looked at him, gripped the arm of the chair and Clay opened his mouth, Reiz continued quickly: "That's not a pleasant subject, Mr. Holt, and we don't intend to give you the name of the school. After all, your client is Mr. Borden. We—Mrs. Reiz and myself, are afraid he might attempt to take the child from us—even illegally."

"Yes," the woman echoed, "even illegally."

Clay said: "I see. I'd like to speak to Mrs. Reiz alone." And when Reiz started to shake his head, "I wouldn't like my report to carry any suggestion of coercion; undue influence."

Reiz turned, left the room, closed the door behind him. Clay shot forward, then drew back. There was no key in the lock. Mrs. Reiz spoke before he could.

"You don't think I'd say anything to hurt my child tonight; not tonight of all nights." She walked across the room, looked in the mirror, adjusted a fur about her neck though the room was hot and stuffy.

"Mrs. Reiz," Clay spoke quickly, "you

can tell me anything with perfect safety to yourself. Your father—"

"My father!" Her eyes widened. Clay cursed softly. That was a bad start. He changed it.

"Your sister trusts me. Tell me everything. For yourself; for your child."

"My child—yes." She rubbed the fur close to her cheek. "He loves the touch of it; the funny long fox's nose, the shining eyes." She swung her head, tried to peer down at the small head of the fur. "I used that hat pin for the eye that was lost. A Mexican woman, who—"

"Mrs. Reiz," Clay cut in. Her eyes looked so queer, so bright and feverish when she spoke of her boy that Clay wanted to startle some sense out of her. "Your husband wants to marry your sister. He'd just as soon get rid of your son, and—"

AND that was all. If Clay wanted to get a rise out of her he did, beyond his wildest hopes. She screamed; stood there and screamed, then dashed toward the door. She didn't reach it. Alca Reiz threw it open and was in the room.

The woman threw herself on him, cried out: "My boy, my baby boy! What have you done with him? This man says—" And after that hysteria, running feet upon the stairs and Sarah Lee, too, was in the room.

Clay left, wandered down the stairs. The woman was—well, maybe not crazy as hell, but certainly on the border of complete insanity.

Neither Eleanor Reiz nor Sarah Lee Borden joined them at dinner. Alca Reiz asked no explanation from Clay for his wife's sudden hysterics, nor did Clay offer any. Reiz entertained with stories of the Border, of the days before Repeal, of the easy indifference of the authorities, the tricks that were used.

"And today?" Clay asked.

"The tricks could be used," said Reiz, and with a shrug of his shoulders, "but there is nothing worth bringing over."

"I thought, maybe, dope!"

"Ah!" Reiz looked up suddenly. Then: "Nonsense! You've been talking with federal men. The surprise is—that they talked with you. Frank Brander was one of them, eh?"

"So you saw me!"

"Hardly." Shoulders moved. "But Gordon City is a small town now and strangers are discussed. You—" He paused, took the note the servant handed him, looked at it, folded it up, opened it and looked at it again, came to his feet, turned to Clay. "I offered you the protection of my house. You have seen Mrs. Reiz; you can now make your report."

"You wish me to leave?"

"I don't care if you stay or leave. I just thought perhaps your business was completed. I will be very busy, and unable to entertain you."

"I'd like to talk to Miss Borden before I go."

"You can't talk to her. She's with her sister."

"I will stay until morning, but I will talk to her tonight." Clay too was on his feet now, backing from the table, close to the wall. He didn't like the look in Reiz' eyes; at least, he didn't like it while he was sitting down.

Reiz said very slowly and very distinctly: "And how do you propose to see her if I forbid it?"

Clay's mouth twisted. He thought of the hole in his leg, the torn sleeve, the driver refusing to take the turn at the top of the grade, and said: "I'll go straight to her room and—"

Alca Reiz didn't speak for a long time. Finally he said: "Come!" He turned his back, led Clay upstairs and tapped upon his wife's door. "Lee," he said, "Mr. Holt insists on seeing you."

Lee Borden opened the door. Her voice was husky.

"What did you do? What did you say to her?" Sobs came from the room, and then Lee spoke again. "Please, Clay! Not tonight. I'll talk to you in the morning at your hotel."

"I'm staying here. Mr. Reiz has been kind enough—"

"Please! In the morning." The door closed.

There was nothing for Clay to do. After all, he had no right there. Vague suspicions, of course, that were fast becoming a certainty—but a certainty of what? He didn't know. Without a word he followed Reiz downstairs. Yes, he even played billiards with him. But what could he do? Nothing!

It was only half past ten when Reiz showed him to his room.

TH**ERE** was a lock on Clay's door. The drop to the ground was not far. As far as he knew, there were only two servants in the house; the one who must have cooked dinner and the squint-eyed old bird who served it. He hadn't seen the man who drove the car since his arrival.

He thought of Agatha Cummings, back there in the office; the way she could have figured things out. Sure! She always could figure a case out after it was over. He never did ask her advice before the case opened. She'd put everything down on paper and figure it that way. He took out a pencil and held it over his little note book. He'd jot down all his clues; be just a "book learnt" detective. But what clues did he have? In fact, he didn't think he'd recognize a clue if he saw one. There was the hole where the bullet did tricks with his leg, another hole in the sleeve of a coat. That was all, except the note from "A Friend." He took that note out and studied it, and made faces.

He looked at the bed, started to undress, thought better of it, sat down and

killed a couple of butts, then put the light out and stretched off in a chair. Silence in the house! Just the ticking of a clock someplace; steady, even ticking.

He got up, stretched. Bed and sleep and a different view in the morning! But—maybe something would happen in the night. Alca Reiz had been disturbed about the message he got at dinner. Clay went to the window, looked out again. It wasn't far to the soft earth below. He'd like to take a look-see about that place.

Clay didn't waste time on decisions. He jammed his dark slouch hat down on his head, swung quickly to a sitting position on the window sill, made sure; at least, as far as he could be sure, that no figure lurked beneath his window. Then he turned his body, knelt so a moment, his hands braced on the sill, and let himself fall full length.

For a good thirty seconds he hung there before starting his body swinging. The bush below had looked thick; had thorns maybe.

So he swung his body out and in. And he heard the clock; heard it plainly. Heard it miss a tick, give a sort of mechanical growl; a spinning of springs. Clay Holt pressed his feet against that building and kicked himself far out into the blackness.

A roar. A flash. Or a flash and a roar. Clay never was sure which was first. He only knew that all hell broke loose in that single moment. He knew the truth or guessed it, or perhaps had it hammered into him as he twisted and turned in the air. The ticking clock had been a time bomb.

FL**AMES** shot before him as that window, that room—yes, even the whole side of the house seemed to disappear—lost in that great burst of fire.

Other lights as Clay's body hit the soft wet earth. Great headlights of a car outside on the road that led from the prop-

erty! But he wasn't sure of that. One thing, only, was certain. Alca Reiz had planned to blow him to pieces and then roast the remains, if there were any remains. Were any! He thought of that as he climbed to his feet and staggered back from those darting, blasting tongues of flame that seemed to reach out and try to grasp him; suck him back into the seething hell of the old building.

But the woman; the wife! Sarah Lee! Were they to be killed too; away from the actual blast itself or would they be simply trapped and burned to death?

Clay backed further from the flames, mechanically raising his arm to block the terrific heat. He ran to the front of the building, hoping that things might not be so bad there. But it was as bad; as bad on the other side too. The rear also, as he dashed between the licking fire and the rather large garage in back of the house that had not yet gone up in flame.

Of course he didn't think clearly then or he would not have passed up the garage and the chance of a car that might be there. He was at the front of the house again, down the narrow private road toward the gate. One thing was certain. He couldn't rush through those flames and save anyone in that house. A mere glance convinced him of that.

He wasn't a child. What had knocked him silly was the explosion. He was just getting over it, his brain was just clearing. And it was with that clearing that he thought of the garage and a car.

And the car was there! A small coupé came from the back of that house, bounced off the driveway to avoid the darting sheets of yellow, flashed back on the gravel again and bore straight down on Clay.

The fire clearly lit up that car and its single occupant. The squint-eyed man who sat stiff and straight behind the wheel. Clay raised his left hand for the

man to stop; his right with the gun in it, to provide the reason why the driver should stop. But the man at the wheel wasn't going to stop. He bent forward and dashed at Clay Holt.

Clay squeezed his finger once and jumped aside, close to the stone post beside the open gates. Glass cracked in the wind-shield, a hole appeared, the man seemed to fall forward. The car slowed, almost stopped, turned suddenly and hit the gate post across from Clay.

THE squint-eyed man muttered something about his right side, clutched at it—gasped: "He meant to kill you. He took the women away. But me—me! He left me to die—die like a rat. And I would have if he hadn't kept the car down the road to make sure the blast came. I didn't think that he might be waiting for something. I just saw the car, started out to see if anything had gone wrong, and it came—just blew things right to hell, and—"

"I'm not interested in your troubles." Clay fastened his hands on the man's throat. "Where did he go? Are the women with him?"

"The women are with him; he took them away. That note was about government men. Yeah—that's it. And he left me!"

"Where did he go?" Clay asked again.

"I don't know."

Clay's fingers closed like a vise, bit deep. The man gagged, coughed, sputtered in choking sobs.

"God! I'd tell if I knew. He left me to die like—"

"Tell, or die like—" Clay's fingers tightened. He could see the man's lips losing color, his tongue protruding; he felt his convulsive movements. And Clay Holt loosened his grip. Certainly the man could not talk, dead. And an idea struck him. He asked suddenly: "Do you know the old Billings place?"

The man tried to speak, choked violently, nodded his head. A moment later he said: "Yes. It's not so far from the river; not so near either. It was a speak in the old days; it ain't used much no more. Old Billings is dead. His wife still lives there, and—"

"My God!" Clay shouted above the crackling fire. "I'm not going to write the history of it. Does Reiz go there often?"

He dragged the man to his feet, ran quick practiced hands over him, tossed a gun to the right, a long-bladed knife to the left. "Get in there and drive to the Billings place."

The man complained about his side. He protested and he groaned, but he did drive to the old Billings place; that is, as near as Clay would let him go to it. Clay looked at the distant outline of the lonely two-story house. He was disappointed too; it was in complete darkness.

The man said, and his voice was ingratiating: "You're a good guy, mister. Want I should wait for you? If you need the car in a hurry—"

Clay looked at him innocently.

"Thanks. Sure!" He smiled. "But not in the car. I want you to stay a few feet away from it so you can run and warn me if anyone comes. Just keep out of sight in the bush there." This, as the man climbed from the car, his step steadier, his wound apparently forgotten. And also, Clay thought, there was a glint of shrewdness in his mean small eyes.

"Sure. Sure!" the man said as he passed Clay. "I'll stay right there."

"No. Right here," Clay said quietly, raised his right hand and brought his gun down upon that bare head. The man gave at the knees and slumped to the ground.

The night was fairly dark. Except for a small clearing that was covered with high grass and thick weeds, the house was surrounded by fairly thick woods.

Clay didn't waste any time. He went

on a dog trot through those woods, reached the clearing, and instead of decreasing his speed ran the faster across the opening, toward the Billings place.

His gun was in his hand, but no figure loomed out of the darkness; no gun barked a warning of danger. He reached the side of the house. Not much time to waste here. He had no reason to think Alca Reiz had been here; and if he hadn't, Clay would have to start the search all over again.

CHAPTER SIX

Gun Play

CLAY pressed close against the house. He wasn't exactly winded; he kept himself in too good shape for that, but he wanted to breathe easily and naturally before he went into action, if there was to be action. The windows of the house! At least the ground-floor ones near him were closed—and locked, he discovered a moment later. Just darkness and silence.

He was standing, his back against the house, hidden in the deeper shadows of the little balcony above him, when he saw the light; or was it a light—that sudden splash of yellow on the grass before him? He waited, but it did not come again. Then it did; just a shimmer that was gone almost at once. It must, of course, come from a window above that balcony.

Clay hesitated, reached up, just touched the strip of wood with his fingers, then jumping lightly, gripped that support with both hands. It wasn't hard and it wasn't exactly easy, but the wood was worn smooth and no splinters stuck in his fingers. It was his own size that gave him trouble; the working of a leg around that support so that he might grip the outer edge of the balcony itself, which he could not reach from the ground.

He made it, hung from the balcony as he had hung from that other window an

hour before, gave a silent prayer that this house would not explode in his face. Easily and even gracefully, he reached the balcony, swung himself over the rail and crouched there by a partly open window.

Clay knew now what had caused that shimmer of light. Heavy curtains parted slightly; just a crack, in a gentle breeze. It was visible looking from darkness into light, but hardly noticeable inside that room.

Voices came as Clay bent close and glued his eyes to that crack. There was the soft sobbing of a child, the louder curse of a man, then the cry of a child in sudden pain, followed by the shriek of a woman. And he saw the picture behind that curtain.

Clay Holt was pretty well hardened to the sordid things of life; fear, pain, death, horror. Nothing bothered him much. But now—something stuck suddenly in his throat, dropped into his stomach with a sickening thud, to run up into his throat again almost at once. Yet, as that lump raised, so did his hand—and there was a gun in that hand.

Clay didn't press the trigger. The temptation was strong, but Alca Reiz had started to talk and Clay was in a position to listen. What he heard now might save the girl he was paid to protect. But he did shiver slightly; at least, he felt the chill along his spine. And he knew too that he had been very close to murder; at least, to shooting a man who had no chance to defend himself, straight through the side of the head.

THE scene behind that curtain was a difficult one to stomach. The first thing he saw was the two women, straight and stiff on two kitchen chairs. They weren't bound there, just held there in fear—or perhaps, horror. A man stood behind them. It was the big bruiser of the hotel room—Joe Frazier. His face was grim,

his mouth tight; but with a slight twist at one corner, as if he enjoyed the little act.

Facing the women, with his feet spread apart, was the handsome, slender Reiz. In his right hand he held a whip; a thick-handled heavy dog whip.

Against the wall was the tiny body of a small boy. His hands were raised above his head, tied there to a coat hook. Though his feet touched the floor, his body occasionally swung slightly as his knees gave and sobs shook his emaciated frame. His back was bare, white and smooth; white and smooth but for a single red welt across it where that whip had cut. Clay raised his gun again. But Alca was talking.

"And there, my dear Lee, is the whole story. Your sister stayed with me because of the kid. When she was especially good"—thin lips parted; his smile was cruel—"and by that I mean—supplied money, through you, I took her here in the night and let her have the kid for a bit. When you didn't come through, and there were times when you didn't, I brought her here also—and though she did not see the child she heard him."

Sarah Lee Borden wet her lips, moved forward in the seat; tried to speak, but no words came.

Alca Reiz said: "You moved from that chair once; move now and the whelp will feel the lash again." And as Sarah Lee dropped back in the chair, "Your sister can have the kid. It's up to you."

This time Sarah Lee spoke, though the words came from far back in her throat.

"And all that you want is—is me?"

Alca Reiz laughed.

"I have you, my dear. All I really want is your money. Come what may, you and I are crossing the Border tonight. You or she, or that detective, Holt, must have talked. The federal men know about the stuff that crossed the Border.

"I'll give you the money," the girl said. "Let us go. I'll promise you the money—what you ask."

The man laughed.

"You mean it now, of course; but not when you are free. It's all quite simple. You and I and the brat leave the country tonight. Eleanor is free. You are to sign your money over to her. She will send it to me so that she may have the kid. You see, I know Eleanor, and know that while I have the child she will send the money."

"And we have only your word of freeing the child and me."

"Only my word." He nodded. "But when the money has come I won't want the kid. As for you! Few women have ever left me, but you may if you wish. The truth is, you fascinate me. If you have not the same feeling toward me, the money had better come quickly."

The girl said: "Why did you get me to carry drugs over the Border; get my sister to make me do it? And why, later, did you tell me it was drugs?"

"My dear girl, I wanted you also to fear the law. I wanted you to know that if I were caught through you or Eleanor, that I would talk. I can send you to prison, my dear Lee, and I am the only one who can. The government suspects me, more than suspects; but only my evidence could convict you. But enough of that!" He half raised the whip. "Come! I want you to go with me quietly and willingly. I want all arrangements made with Eleanor now, so that she can get the money—your money."

THE girl hesitated, looked at the child, looked at the window, then at her sister, Eleanor. Eleanor cried out. There was no reasoning in her words, in her voice; she was thinking only of her boy.

"Money! What is money? Lee, Lee, give it—give it."

Lee Borden cried: "I can't. I can't. That beast! I—"

Alca Reiz raised his whip, half faced about. The child moaned, twisted a thin body. Eleanor shrieked—and Lee Borden was on her feet, rushing toward Reiz.

The whip snapped, the girl jarred back. A woman and a child screamed and Clay Holt crashed through the window and was in that room.

Clay was taken by surprise. His eyes were on Reiz rather than on Joe Frazier, and he hadn't thought that Frazier held a gun in his right hand that was hidden behind the erect, tense body of Eleanor Reiz. That right hand of Frazier's came up; came up with a gun—a gun that spat fire before Clay was fully aware of it.

Glass crashed in the window behind Clay. He swung his own gun, twisted his lips slightly. Joe Frazier! Bad, eh? Why, his eyes were wide with fear, his hand was shaking. He had missed Clay by a good foot. But the second shot might—

There was no second shot. Clay squeezed his finger once. A single hole appeared in Frazier's forehead. His mouth dropped further open, his huge body turned and crashed to the floor.

Clay heard the girl cry out the warning, saw her body hurtle across the room as Reiz' arm shot out. He heard too the roar of the gun. Then the sudden stab in his right side—and he was facing Reiz; facing him as Reiz' fingers closed again on that trigger.

Two shots that sounded as one; two shots that seemed to have been fired simultaneously. The two men were very close together, but Reiz' bullet followed Frazier's through the window and out into the night. Then Alca Reiz also followed Frazier to the floor. His death was not such an easy one nor such a painless one. Clay's bullet had entered the man's throat as he threw his head back.

"Not such pretty shooting," Clay said half aloud, walked over to Reiz, saw the

final convulsive shudder, moved his shoulders and turned toward the boy. "Reiz was rather decent to give me an excuse to kill him, Lee. That let's you out with the government. Anyone else in the house?"

"No," the girl said. "He sent away the old woman who took care of the boy." And when the child was free and held tightly by his mother: "Clay, Clay! I—I—" Sarah Lee had fainted in his arms, but not before her lips had sought and found his.

THERE was little more. The child had been the link that held Eleanor to her husband, Alca Reiz. Frank Brander, the federal agent, sought only justice. Lee and her sister and the child were free to go. Clay's wound was little more than a scratch.

On the train back to New York, Clay Holt faced Sarah Lee Borden over a little table for two in the dining car.

"Clay"— Sarah Lee hardly more than breathed the words— "when you held me there—when you—I—I knew—realized—well, it's hard for a girl to say it; but there's nothing you could ask, nothing I would refuse you, nothing I would wish to refuse you."

Was there an invitation in her voice—her words? Far more than an invitation, Clay felt. Then—hell! why not? She was a grand girl; a grand woman. The life he led was a mere existence. Now, perhaps, a hunting lodge in the country, a couple of dogs, maybe a winter cruise around the world! And the alternative? Excitement, adventure, action—or maybe just a bellyful of lead. He gripped her hand, started to speak, looked up—and stopped dead.

A woman swept down the aisle between the tables. Clay didn't need to describe her mentally to himself. He had seen her before; just once before like that. It was

Awful, a gorgeous, beautiful Awful. She nodded, smiled, went to a table, sat down.

Clay came slowly to his feet, muttered something to Sarah Lee, and swinging down the aisle with the moving train dropped into the seat opposite the girl. He said abruptly, but his eyes were bright: "What are you doing here? Hell! Princess, I was just—"

"Yes, I know." She nodded. "I saw the cow look in your eyes. I came to see if you were getting your full fee before I resign."

"Resign?"

"Certainly. I'd never work for a married man who chased them. The strain in the office would be too great."

Clay leaned forward.

"Now listen, Gorgeous. I never intended—hell! I better go back and tell her I—" He started to rise and stopped, shrugged his shoulders and sat down again. Sarah Lee had risen and left the dining car. From the quick appraising look she gave both of them, Clay knew there was no need to tell her anything.

"You cleared up everything?" Agatha Cummings killed the dazzling look in her own eyes as she got down to business.

"Sure. Sure!" Clay nodded, then frowned. "Except a letter I got, which saved lives, money, even torture." He told his assistant everything.

The girl nodded, spoke quickly: "You should have listened, asked questions. It was plain from the beginning that everything centered about the child; the child that wasn't there. A dozen people in town could have told you where the child was."

"Yeah. But I didn't want to talk. And you sent me hours out of my way on the trip down. That was because—because—" He stopped, stared at her. "Because you wanted to be down there ahead of me."

"Because," her smile and her eyes knocked him this time. "Because I am your friend. Sure—" "A Friend."

SPARE THE ROD

A COUPLE of issues ago we promised to turn over this department to Leslie F. White—DIME DETECTIVE'S gun and ballistics expert—and give him free rein to clear up, once and for all, the various controversial gun angles that you readers have been bringing up so often lately. We've written Mr. White, but he hasn't crashed through yet with the dope.

In the meantime we're going to let you see a letter that came to our desk a few days ago from an arms fancier in North Carolina. Mr. Pitts—he's the man who wrote it—seems to know what he's talking about and he has plenty to say. Here it is.

The subject of automatics and revolvers has been an unnecessarily neglected item in detective fiction. . . . There is really no adequate excuse for so many of the mistakes made along this line.

Authors keep calling a revolver a pistol and vice versa. This may not be considered the wrong terminology by some, but to me "pistol" is the title of an automatic.

An automatic pistol is so-called because its "action" is automatic. It can be fired just as fast as you can pull the trigger. And there is a certain type that will fire continuously, if the trigger is held back, until the magazine is emptied.

Every time a bullet is fired, the empty shell is ejected and another cartridge springs into the firing chamber.

Now, concerning the revolver: the cartridges are loaded into a revolving cylinder. Each time the trigger is pulled back (the correct term is "squeezed"), the cylinder revolves until a cartridge is in alignment with the barrel—at the same time the hammer cocks itself—and at this point the cylinder is locked into place, then a slight squeeze on the trigger releases the hammer, thus firing the bullet.

To my knowledge there is no such thing as an absolute *silencer*. However, I believe silencers have been applied to revolvers, but not with the desired effect. A loud "pop" is still audible.

Not so long ago I read a story where the author had the villain with a Colt automatic, with that peculiar cylindrical attachment on the end of the barrel—a silencer! Now—if you don't believe in silencers . . . that is all wrong. If you do believe in silencers—it is still all wrong. Why? Because this cylindrical object could not be fastened to the end of the barrel of a Colt automatic. The actual barrel of a Colt is covered by a "slide"—and every time a bullet is fired, the recoil jerks this slide back to eject the empty shell, to cock the firing pin, and to allow another cartridge to spring into the firing chamber—then it snaps back into place.

Now—with a sweeping gesture—let me shatter the common belief among many detective-fiction writers: that there is no such weapon as an automatic revolver.

There is an automatic revolver.

It is a British make weapon, called the "*Webley-Fosbery Automatic Revolver*." It is the only automatic revolver made—very accurate—and is by far the fastest-firing revolver in existence. Twelve inches long, overall, with a 6 inch barrel. And if I'm not mistaken it can be bought with the tidy sum of \$60.

Anyhow, here's a practical suggestion for detective fiction writers: secure gun catalogues from the various gun manufacturers, read a few reference works on the subject of automatic pistols, revolvers, and other firearms.

Even then—I fear that some bone-picking reader will ferret out some little slip, and will write the editors with fiendish glee.

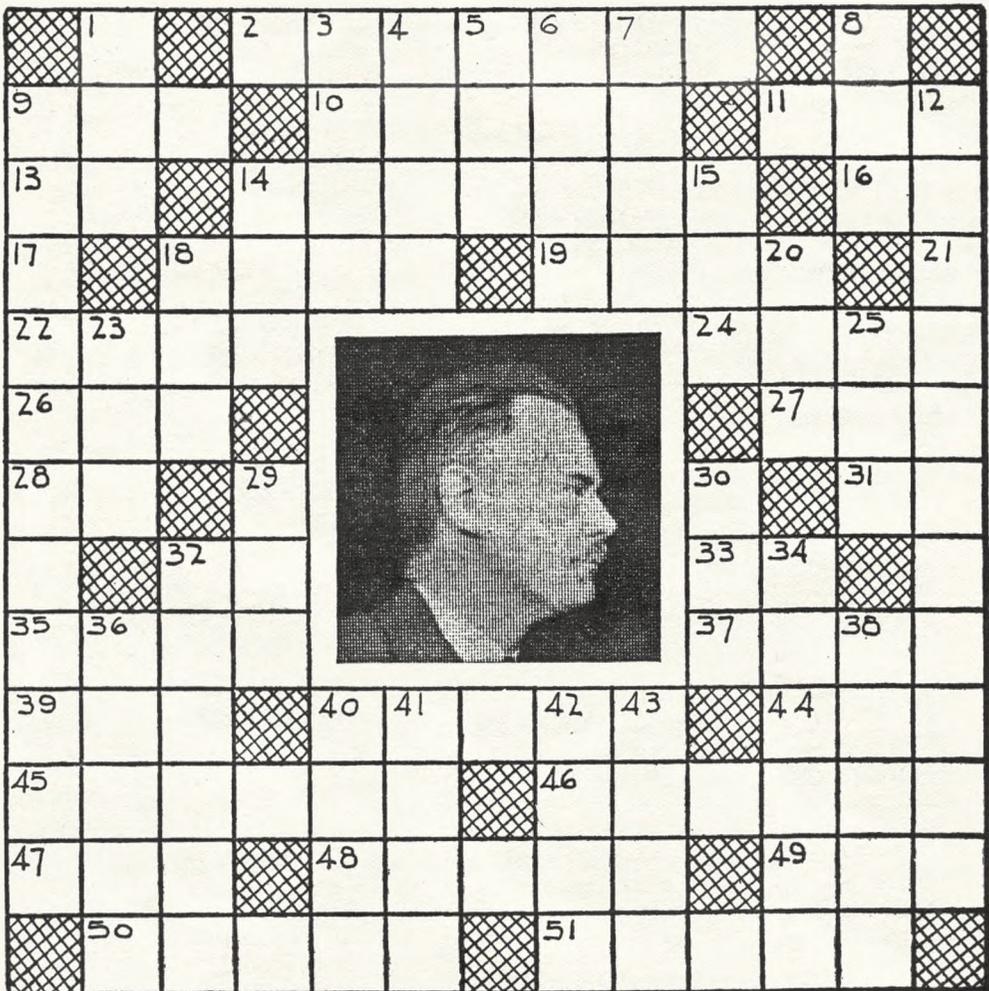
We're inclined to agree with Mr. Pitts' final conclusion that, no matter how carefully an author works, or how firm his intentions to be absolutely accurate in matters of detail are, errors will creep in and there will always be, we hope, bone-picking readers to spot them. That isn't going to make us mad a bit.

Don't spare the rod—or the author either! We can take it!

CROSS ROADS OF CRIME

by

RICHARD HOADLEY TINGLEY



Int. News Photo

The pictured man has been prominent in New Jersey since a famous kidnaping and murder case in March, 1932. Who is he?

ACROSS

- 2 City where the pictured man lives
- 9 Modest
- 10 Ancient heroic poem
- 11 Policeman
- 13 Prefix; together
- 14 The pictured man's title
- 16 Instead of
- 17 First letter in the pictured man's first name
- 18 Rodents
- 19 Enlarged
- 21 Exclamation of joy or lamentation
- 22 As soon as
- 24 Pedal digits
- 26 Help
- 27 Before
- 28 About
- 31 A Southern state (abbr.)
- 32 River in Italy
- 33 To wit
- 35 Title of a ruler in Tartar countries
- 37 Denomination
- 39 Over; poetic
- 40 Person indifferent to pleasure or pain
- 44 A son of Gad; Genesis 56:16
- 45 Religious leader
- 46 Middle name of the pictured man
- 47 Away
- 48 Attorney of Hunterdon County, N. J.
- 49 Urge on
- 50 To pry into other folk's affairs
- 51 Leads

DOWN

- 1 Notwithstanding the fact that
- 3 Tumult
- 4 Wings of houses
- 5 Ancient name of an island in the Aegean Sea, sometimes called Ios
- 6 A distinct flavor
- 7 River in Germany
- 8 Also
- 9 Last name of the pictured man
- 12 Attempting to convict in court
- 14 Am able to
- 15 Permit
- 18 Stop on this signal
- 20 Misery
- 23 Hasten
- 25 An eagle
- 29 Male offspring
- 30 Possesses
- 32 Pastor
- 34 Appeared
- 36 Listens to
- 38 Steep, rocky cliffs
- 40 Famous district in London, England
- 41 Snare
- 42 Unit of linear measure
- 43 A fuel

ALPHONSE, "Scarface Al," Capone's name came to be synonymous with booze-racketeering, murder and all gangland activities during the last roaring decade. Educated in the rackets in Brooklyn, his ambitions forced him to look for new gangster worlds to conquer. He took his vicious ability at organization and his plans for domination to Chicago where he established himself, with a tommy gun as a mouthpiece, the czar of the underworld. Under his direction, beer and whiskey flowed freely during the term of the Eighteenth Amend-

A	L		M	A	S	T	E	R	Y		A	S							
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P	R	O		G	A	M	I	N		I	D	A							
H	E		L	O	G		N	O	W		E	R							
O		R	E	ALPHONSE CAPONE						A	C		F						
N	E	E	D													D	A	T	A
S	A		G														P	A	C
E	R		I													H	O	L	E
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I	N		N		T	I		B	A		E	N	D						
O	G		M	I	S	T	E	R	S		T	O							
T		B	Y	E		A		T	O		P								
A	N	Y		S	I	X	E	S		R	Y	E							

Last Issue's Puzzle

ment and a bloody trail of murder, vice and political corruption followed the never-ceasing struggle for control of Chicago's illicit trade. Too clever to do anything but direct the policies of his gang empire, no crime was ever pinned on Capone personally—until Chicago decided definitely it wanted to be rid of him. The Century of Progress was to attract millions of visitors. Capone's name and

indulgences might keep many away. So, federal agents finally laid an income-tax-evasion indictment at his door and Scarface Al was removed to Leavenworth to languish until a few weeks ago when he was remanded to Alcatraz. In 1932, during the excitement over the Lindbergh kidnaping, Capone claimed to have definite knowledge of the crime and offered to solve the case in return for his freedom.



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TERROR TALES
15c

In This Issue

When Love Went Mad!

Complete Mystery-Terror Novel
by Arthur Leo Zagat

Three Terror Novelettes:

Honeymoon Coffin
by Ben Judson

Corpses for Witch's Mountain
by Franklin H. Martin

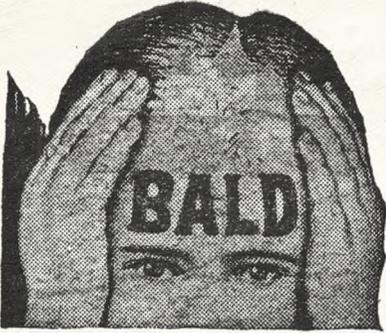
They Dare Not Die!
by Nat Schachner

Plus short masterpieces of eerie fiction, tale of evil lust and hate, of weird midnight rites, stark horror and the dark unknown! . . .

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WHY MEN GO



Science Finds New Way to Remove Germ Cause and Activate Dormant Roots to Grow New Hair.

(Read Free Offer)

A germ called "Flask Bacilla of Unna" gets deep into the scalp skin in many cases of abnormal hair deficiency, causing a most dangerous type of dandruff. It clogs-up pores and hair follicles, causing itchy scalp, falling hair, and prevents dormant hair roots (papilla) from growing new hair. The germ is seldom suspected. Washing and shampooing and use of tonics, ointments and lotions don't remove the cause. They merely cleanse and treat the surface and roll off the outer skin like water rolls off the back of a duck. No wonder baldness is increasing.

Now a new discovery enables people who have dandruff, falling hair, thin hair and baldness to harmlessly remove the congested, thin outer layer of scalp skin. This permits opened pores to breathe in air, sunshine, and absorb a penetrating, stimulating scalp-food to activate the smothered, dormant hair roots and grow new hair. It is the most sensational discovery in the history of falling hair and baldness. It is all explained in a new treatise called "GROW HAIR," showing "anatomy of your hair" and tells what to do. This treatise is now being mailed FREE to all who write for it. Send no money, just name and address to Dermolay Lab., Desk 400-D, No. 1700 Broadway, New York, N. Y., and you get it by return mail free and postpaid. If pleased, tell your friends about it.

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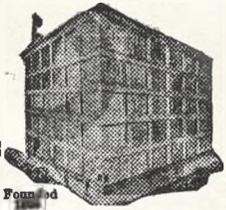
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30x3.50-21	2.40	0.85	0.85
28x4.75-19	2.45	0.95	0.95
28x4.75-20	2.50	0.95	0.95
30x3.00-20	2.55	1.05	1.05
28x4.25-18	2.90	1.15	1.15
28x4.50-19	3.00	1.00	1.00
30x3.25-20	2.95	1.10	1.10
31x3.25-21	3.25	1.10	1.10
28x4.50-18	3.15	1.15	1.15
28x4.50-19	3.35	1.15	1.15
30x3.00-19	3.40	1.15	1.15
31x3.00-19	3.40	1.15	1.15
30x3.00-20	3.45	1.25	1.25
30x3.00-21	3.65	1.25	1.25
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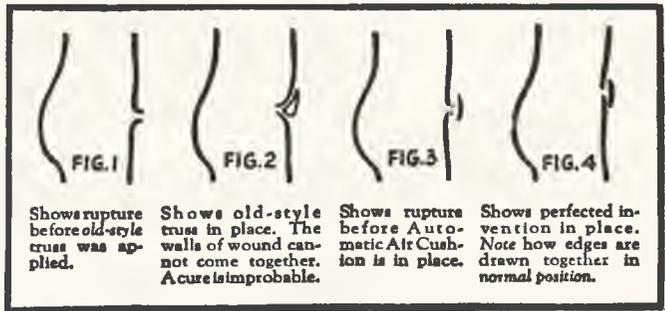
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